

Relationship between Perceived Social Support and Loneliness among Indian College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Social distancing measures were implemented to restrict the transmission of coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. All these restrictions and changes in the daily lives of college students have led them to experience a pervasive and unprecedented sense of loneliness. This has affected their normal socialization for a long time. The present study aimed to assess the levels of loneliness, and its relationship with perceived social support among Indian college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling and convenience sampling techniques were utilized to collect data from the participants. The sample consisted of eighty Indian college students of age 18 years and above. Seventy per cent of the college students were females and the rest of them were males. Two questionnaires were administered which included Multi-Dimensional Perceived Social Support Scale and Loneliness Scale. T-tests, ANOVA and Pearson's Correlation were utilized for data analysis. The results revealed that 30 per cent of Indian college students felt severely lonely, 50 per cent felt moderately lonely and 20 per cent did not feel lonely during the pandemic. A significant difference was found in the loneliness levels between Indian college students who were in a committed relationship and those who were not ($t = 2.029$, $p < .05$). In addition, the college students who were in a committed relationship reported feeling less loneliness as compared to single college students. A significant negative correlation ($r = -.690$, $p < .01$) was also found between perceived social support and loneliness. No significant differences in loneliness levels based on gender and study discipline were found. This study highlights the role of perceived social support, social connections, and social relations in lowering loneliness during times of adversity amidst feeling uncertainty and distress.

Keywords: COVID-19, social distancing, loneliness, perceived social support, college students

COVID-19 emerged in January 2020 and spread fast over the globe within two months. On 11th March 2020, it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020). To restrict the virus's transmission, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the introduction of significant *social distancing* measures which consisted of practices such as staying at home, weekend curfews, avoiding

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social gatherings, remote work and learning. In addition to quarantine and isolation protocols for persons who have been exposed to or infected with COVID-19, social distancing among the general public has also been implemented. All these restrictions and changes in the daily lives of people have led them to experience social isolation, boredom, and a pervasive sense of loneliness and loneliness can further lead people to develop mental health issues.

Loneliness is often felt by people at different points in their lifetimes. Loneliness is a subjective, unpleasant, and emotionally distressing feeling that most, if not all, people go through at some point in their lives (Qualter et al., 2015). It can be distinguished from social isolation as it is a subjective feeling of being alone, which can describe an objective state of the social environments and interactional patterns of individuals (Hwang et al., 2020). There are two kinds of loneliness including social loneliness and emotional loneliness as described by Weiss. According to Weiss (1973), social loneliness can be defined as a lack of close or intimate relationships such as those with a romantic partner, parent, or child, and emotional loneliness can be defined as a lack of close or intimate relationships such as those with a network of peers, co-workers, neighbours, or friends. Loneliness is an unpleasant and subjective feeling and when people feel lonely, it becomes difficult for them to express their emotions and thought in front of other people, including their close relations.

Loneliness can be felt even when the individual possesses quality relationships. Loneliness can be a reaction to a lack of social relationships that one requires, or it can be a reaction to having social relationships that are not intimate or satisfactory enough to meet one's requirements, or they lack sincerity and emotions. (Bhagchandani, 2017). The feeling of loneliness may be experienced by people of all ages, although it is more prevalent among adolescents and young adults (Ponzetti, 1990). Reading, watching TV, using the internet, social activities, going to parties, drinking, and using drugs could be seen not only as signs of loneliness but also as coping strategies used by university students to deal with this unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Some of these are adaptive and some are maladaptive (Yeh, 2002). People who are lonely want to seek human connection, yet their mental state makes it more difficult to connect with others.

Loneliness can negatively affect the health and well-being of individuals. Previous research has reported a negative relationship between loneliness and psychological well-being (Bhagchandani, 2017). According to Tiwari, (2013), when a person is lonely, she or he does not find anyone to spend time with, which increases the chance of developing biological dysfunctions, psychological distress, and behavioural problems. Loneliness and social isolation often co-occur. While loneliness relates to a person's subjective feelings, social isolation is determined by the amount and frequency of social interactions (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). A socially isolated person usually has less contact with friends and family members and less often belongs to groups, such as religious groups and clubs; therefore, the distinction between loneliness and social isolation, is that the term social isolation indicates quantitative isolation, whereas loneliness is more of qualitative isolation (Grover, 2019). A person can enjoy solitude in its essence but feelings of loneliness can cause discomfort. According to Hwang et al. (2020), the impact of loneliness may be substantially exacerbated in persons with pre-existing mental illness, who are frequently lonely and socially isolated before the increased distance from others imposed by COVID-19 pandemic public health precautions. People having mental health issues may face the worse consequences of prolonged loneliness.

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The social isolation brought forward by COVID-19 led people to feel prolonged loneliness. The isolation intended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) may give rise to anxiety, especially for lonely people who often feel lonely when they are alone (Xu et al., 2020). Diehl et al. (2018) revealed that loneliness was prevalent among university students with 32.4% feeling moderately lonely and 3.2% feeling severely lonely. In addition, it was further unveiled that emotional loneliness was more common than social loneliness (Diehl et al., 2018). Hysing et al. (2020) also reported in their study that college and university students frequently experienced loneliness as 14-24% of the students reported that they 'often' or 'very often' felt a lack of companionship, felt left out or felt isolated. In another study, Labrague et al. (2021) have also shown that loneliness was prevalent among Central Philippines college students during the period of mandatory lockdown during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 56.7% experiencing moderate levels of loneliness and 23.6% felt severely lonely. As social distancing measures were implemented, remote learning and online classes were held for full-time regular college students which robbed them of having on-campus interactions which may have resulted in a lack of peer interaction and the feeling of social connection with their batchmates indirectly leading them to feel lonelier.

Gender differences concerning loneliness were not found to be consistent according to previous studies. In a study conducted with Maragheh University students, it was found to be 50.5% of the students reported that they felt moderately lonely and 31.6%, of them, felt severely lonely and sex was found as a predictor (Alaviani et al., 2017). Al Khatib (2012) conducted a research study with 495 UAE undergraduate students, and found that female students' loneliness level was significantly higher than male students; lower self-esteem and lower self-efficacy were found to be associated with high levels of loneliness. Another research with 315 Polish university students, aged between 19 and 25 years also reported that female university students have a lower level of social loneliness and a higher level of perceived social support in comparison to men; relationship status also interacted with gender in predicting perceived social support from significant others and friends (Adamczyk, 2016). However, Suri, Garg and Tholia (2019) revealed in their research with 256 Students, aged between 18-25 years, studying at Jamia Millia Islamia, and Delhi University that male students had higher levels of loneliness as compared to female students. This shows that there are mixed conclusions on gender-based differences in loneliness levels among college students.

Being in a committed relationship can lessen feelings of loneliness among individuals. The findings of a study with a diverse group of participants aged 18 to 54, stated that married people and people living with a significant other experienced less romantic loneliness compared to those not in relationships (Bernardon et al., 2011). Adamczyk and Segrin's (2015) also conducted a research study with 553 Polish young adult participants and showed that individuals in non-marital romantic relationships experience lower romantic loneliness but higher social loneliness than single individuals. Study discipline can also influence loneliness levels among college students. Diehl et al. (2018) found an association between study discipline and social loneliness. It was revealed that students studying the disciplines of the social sciences had higher levels of social loneliness as compared to students from other disciplines (Diehl et al., 2018). Students in the social sciences usually work in small groups and only meet with other students in minor disciplines or during volunteer work at the university, resulting in a small number of peers; in addition, the social sciences have a

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higher share of self-administered learning and writing (Diehl, 2018). This highlights the role of study differences in feelings of loneliness among college students.

Social support can aid in alleviating feelings of loneliness among individuals. Individuals benefit from social support throughout their lives, but it is especially important during periods of significant social change, such as the transition to adulthood (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Previous literature has described perceived social support as people's perception of the amount and quality of help or social support they can get from their relationships and social contacts (Dour et al., 2014). According to research, higher levels of social support from family, friends, and a significant other were all linked to lower levels of loneliness (Segrin & Passalacqua, 2010). Previous studies have shown that social support is an important variable in lowering loneliness (Bernardon et al., 2011; Deniz et al., 2005). In a study conducted by Yildiz and Karadas (2017) with 398 undergraduate students in Turkey, it was found that loneliness has a negative significant relationship with perceived social support, self-esteem and life satisfaction. This highlights the role of quality social relationships and social connections in curbing feelings of loneliness in people, especially college students.

Social distancing measures were implemented to restrict the virus's transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic. All these restrictions and changes in the daily lives of college students have led them to experience a pervasive and unprecedented sense of loneliness. This has affected their normal socialization for a long time. Although it has been stated that loneliness is becoming more prevalent, few research studies have looked at this over time (Cacioppo et al., 2015). With this, it may have become particularly difficult to reconnect with others given the restrictions on in-person social gatherings (Luchetti et al., 2020). Because of the pandemic-induced restrictions college students were physically unable to go to their college and interact with their peers and/or friends, which may have increased their feeling of loneliness. And it is well established that prolonged feeling of loneliness is associated with negative and detrimental effects on both physical and psychological health, well-being and quality of life of individuals (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Richard et al., 2017; Świtaj et al., 2018). Therefore, it is of value to find out the level of loneliness among college students during the pandemic. So, the purpose of the current study is to see the level of loneliness among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and to explore its relationship with perceived social support during the times of the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To study the relationship between perceived social support and levels of loneliness among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives of the study

- To assess the levels of loneliness among Indian college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To assess the gender-based differences based on the levels of loneliness among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To assess the differences based on the relationship status on the levels of loneliness among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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- To assess the differences based on the study discipline on the levels of loneliness among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To study the relationship between perceived social and loneliness among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sample

Purposive sampling and convenience sampling were used to collect data from participants. The sample consisted of eighty Indian college students. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students with 18 years and above age participated in the study. Seventy per cent of the participants were females, and thirty per cent were males. The data was collected in February 2022.

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study.

- **Multi-Dimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MSPSS):** This 12-item scale with a seven-point scale ranging from 'very strongly disagree' to 'very strongly agree' was developed by Zimet et al. in 1988. It includes three subscales consisting of FA (family), FR (friend), and SO (significant other). For each subscale, there are four items which aid in measuring social support from three sources, including, family, friends, and a special person. The overall perceived social support score is the sum of the scores on all 12 items. A higher score on this scale implies higher levels of perceived social support. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha value of .88 as found in the preliminary study of Zimet and his colleagues with university students. The test-retest reliability of MSPSS was discovered to be .85.
- **Loneliness Scale:** The 6-item Loneliness Scale was developed by Gierveld and Tilburg in 2006. It can be used to assess loneliness levels in college students. The participants can respond with a 'yes,' 'more or less,' or 'no' to each item. 'Yes' and 'more or less' responses are given 1 point each, whereas 'no' is given 0 points. The scores range in this scale range from 0 to 6, in which a range of 0 to 1 is considered not lonely, 2 to 4 is considered moderately lonely, and 5 to 6 is classified as severely lonely. The scale has good predictive validity, as evidenced by its high correlation with mental disorders and physical health, and it has a reliability value of 0.76.

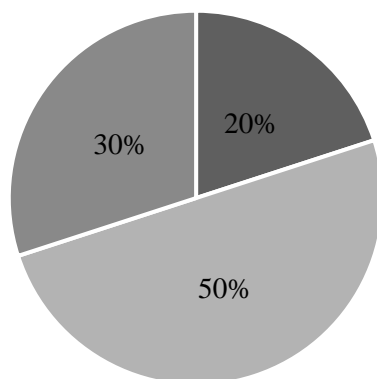
Procedure

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, it was not possible to collect data individual-to-individual. Therefore, the data was collected with the aid of Google forms. A consent form was attached to the beginning of the Google form, in which participants were briefed about the survey and were asked to provide consent for their voluntary participation in the current study. After the consent form, there were three sections of Google forms, consisting of a demographic questionnaire, a Multi-Dimensional Perceived Social Support Scale, and a Loneliness scale followed by separate instructions for each scale. Participants were also asked about their study discipline, consisting of humanities, commerce, and science. The form was circulated through different social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and LinkedIn. The form was filled out by college students all over India. After the data collection, the scores for each participant were calculated for each scale. Based on the objectives and hypotheses of the current study, statistical data analysis was performed by utilizing SPSS.

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RESULTS

Figure 1: Pie chart depicting loneliness among college students in India during the COVID-19 pandemic



■ Not lonely ■ Moderately lonely ■ Severely lonely

Figure 1 has shown that 30 per cent of Indian college students felt severely lonely, 50 per cent felt moderately lonely and the rest of the Indian college students did not feel lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Independent samples t-test of gender on loneliness

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	d.f.	P
Loneliness	Male	24	3.1250	1.91816	-.040	78	.968
	Female	56	3.1429	1.81337			

Table 1 has shown that there is no statistically significant difference between male (M = 3.1250, SD = 1.91816) and female (M = 3.1429, SD = 1.81337) college students in India on loneliness during the pandemic, $t(78) = -.040$, $p = .968$. The results are not statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2: Independent samples t-test of relationship status on loneliness

	Relationship Status	N	Mean	SD	t	d.f.	P
Loneliness	Single	68	3.3088	1.83056	2.029	78	.046
	Committed	12	2.1667	1.58592			

Note: $P < .05$.

Table 2 has shown that there is a statistically significant difference between single (M = 3.3088, SD = 1.83056) and committed (M = 2.1667, SD = 1.58592) college students in India on loneliness during the pandemic, $t(78) = 2.029$, $p = .046$. The results are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

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Figure 2: Bar graph depicting differences based on relationship status on loneliness among college students in India (N=80)

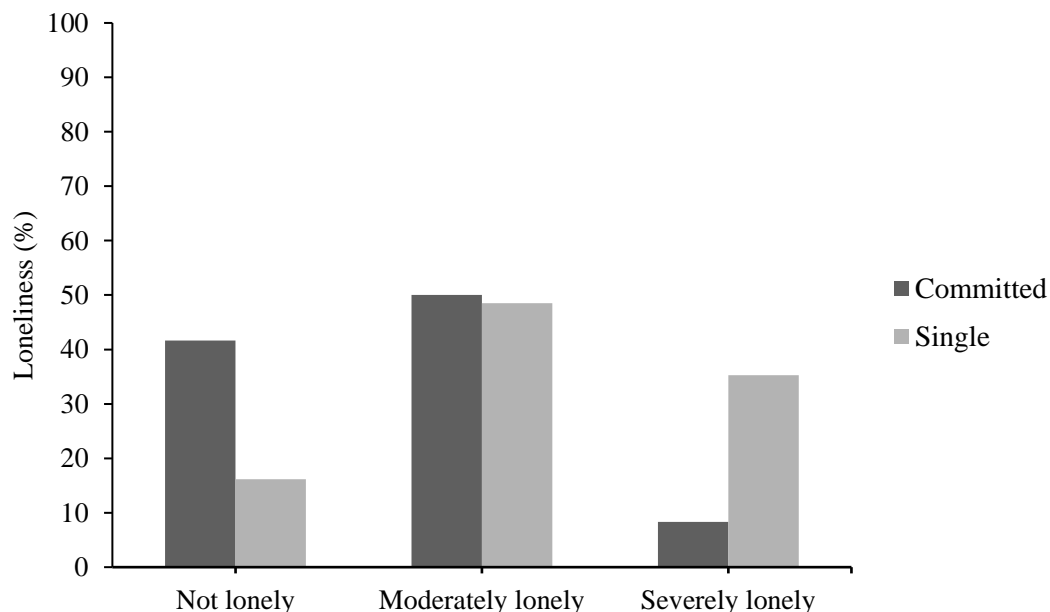


Figure 2 has shown that 8.33 per cent of Indian college students in a committed relationship felt severely lonely, 50 per cent moderately lonely and 41.67 per cent did not feel lonely during the pandemic. On the other hand, 35.29 per cent of Indian college students who were single felt severely lonely, 48.53 per cent felt moderately lonely and 16.18 per cent did not feel lonely. From this, it can be inferred that Indian college students in committed relationships felt relatively less lonely as compared to those who were not in a relationship during the pandemic.

Table 3: One-way ANOVA of study discipline groups on loneliness

Study Discipline	N	Mean	SD	F	P
Humanities	23	3.1304	1.98413	.026	.975
Commerce	18	3.2222	1.39560		
Science	39	3.1026	1.95737		

Table 3 has shown that there is no statistically significant difference between Indian college students studying humanities (M = 3.1304, SD = 1.98413), commerce (M = 3.2222, SD = 1.39560) and science (M = 3.1026, SD = 1.95737) on loneliness during the pandemic, F = .026, p = .975. The results are not statistically significant at p<.05.

Table 4: Pearson’s correlation for levels of perceived social support and loneliness among Indian college students

	Loneliness		
	r	P	N
Perceived Social Support	-.690**	.000	80

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 indicates that there is a significant negative correlation between perceived social support and loneliness (r = -.690, p<.01).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to see the level of loneliness among Indian college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and to explore the relationship between perceived social support and loneliness during the times of the pandemic. The results of the study showed that loneliness was highly prominent among college students in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was in congruence with the findings of Labrague et al. (2021). Because of the pandemic-induced restrictions, regular students were not able to attend offline classes and may have experienced a lack of social connection with their peers which has led them to feel lonelier.

The current study did not find any association between gender and loneliness. This finding was in agreement with a study conducted by Gul (2017) which found that there was no difference between male and female students' loneliness. Other research studies have also stated that the levels of loneliness do not differ by gender (Ilhan, 2012; Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015; Diehl et al., 2018). On the other hand, it was revealed that single college students experienced higher levels of loneliness in comparison to college students in a committed relationship, which is in line with the research conducted by Diehl et al. (2018). Being in a committed relationship helped college students in lessening their feelings of loneliness.

No significant difference was found in loneliness levels between arts, commerce and science college students which are in congruence with Diehl et al. (2018) in which it was revealed that emotional loneliness did not differ by study discipline and no significant differences were reported in emotional loneliness levels between students from social sciences, medical or healthcare, sport sciences, law and other differences. There is a dearth of literature regarding the association between study discipline and loneliness and this aspect requires further exploration.

A significant negative correlation was found between perceived social support and loneliness. This highlights that even during times of adversity and uncertainty brought forward by the pandemic, quality social relations and social connections can help in alleviating the feelings of loneliness among individuals, particularly college students. Xu et al. (2020) have stated that perceived social support protects lonely persons in daily life as well as during unexpected calamities. Overall, it can be said that perceived social support from significant others and friends can aid in reducing the negative effects of loneliness.

A few limitations were found in the study. Due to pandemic-induced restrictions, remote learning and online classes started, and classes were held virtually which might have reduced the feeling of connectedness among college students to their peers. The data was obtained in online mode through Google Forms, which has reduced our control over other confounding variables such as the participant's state of mind and mood. Several additional pandemic-related variables could have also influenced the results.

The current research can be utilized to compare the loneliness levels among college students in India during the pandemic and post-pandemic times. Future research on loneliness levels among college students in India with a larger sample size would offer more clarity. Other research methods such as qualitative research methods can also be used to study the rich experiences of students who feel lonely, to explore what factors have caused them to feel lonely as well as the coping strategies they generally use to relieve the feeling of loneliness

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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