

Loneliness in Early Adulthood: The Roles of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the relationship between self-esteem, locus of control, and loneliness in Early Adulthood (18- 35 yrs). A sample of 60 participants (31 males and 29 females) was selected through convenience sampling. Three different measures were used for data analysis. The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Pettijohn Locus of Control scale were administered to each subject individually. The results revealed significant negative correlation between self-esteem and feelings of loneliness ($r = 0.70, p < 0.001$) and also between locus of control and loneliness ($r = 0.56, p < 0.001$). On the contrary, there's a positive correlation between self-esteem and locus of control ($r = 0.67, p < 0.001$). In the study, regression analysis demonstrated that self-esteem accounts for a substantial 49.1% of the variability in loneliness. The low p-value ($p < .0001$) confirmed the rejection of the null hypothesis, highlighting the significant impact of self-esteem on loneliness. Additionally, a significant negative relationship was established between locus of control and loneliness ($R^2 = 0.3197$), with an R^2 value of 32% indicating its explanatory power. The low p-value ($p < .0001$) in this case also rejected the null hypothesis, underscoring the impact of locus of control, albeit with less influence compared to self-esteem. Furthermore, in a multiple regression analysis, self-esteem ($t = -4.642, p < 0.01$) emerged as a significant predictor of loneliness, while locus of control ($t = -1.33, p = 0.189$) did not significantly contribute to the model. The findings also revealed no significant difference in loneliness based on age and gender of the subjects.

Keywords: *Self-esteem, Locus of Control, Loneliness, Early Adulthood*

In the realm of human experience, the innate desire for connection and belonging permeates our lives. This fundamental aspect of our nature becomes particularly salient during the phase of early adulthood, a stage demarcated by Erikson, spanning the age range of 20 to 40 years. This stage of life is characterized by psychological conflicts: intimacy or isolation.

The successful negotiation of this conflict hinges upon the development of trust, a willingness to exhibit vulnerability, and the cultivation of mutually meaningful connections with others. Failure to follow this developmental stage adeptly may engender a profound sense of isolation, giving rise to heightened experiences of loneliness. In essence, loneliness

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boils down to the unpleasant emotions one experiences due to feeling socially isolated, as perceived subjectively. It is often conceived as a form of social pain, serving as a psychological impetus to seek out social affiliations. Loneliness has been acknowledged as a significant public health concern on a global scale (Fakoya et al., 2020) and has been referred to as a widespread global issue (Murthy, 2017).

Despite the concerted international endeavors aimed at enhancing mental health, the specter of loneliness persists, with particular salience in the domain of young adults at large and those residing in non-Western regions. While prior research has primarily centered around loneliness in older adults (De Koning, Stathi, & Richards, 2017; Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, & Pitkälä, 2005), there is an increasing body of evidence indicating that young adults, in particular, are susceptible to experiencing loneliness (Mental Health Foundation, 2010; Office for National Statistics, 2018; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016). Certain psychological variables have been identified as pivotal, predisposing individuals to loneliness, precipitating its onset, or perpetuating its persistence, found throughout the Peplau and Perlman model.

Self-esteem is often characterized as a bridge connecting an individual's ideal self to their real self, fostering positive behaviors (Leary, 1999). High self-esteem, characterized by self-assuredness and self-acceptance, nurtures positive mental health and facilitates the establishment and maintenance of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Conversely, low self-esteem, marked by self-rejection and self-dissatisfaction, acts as a deterrent to social bonding and serves as a harbinger of loneliness. There is a substantial body of evidence suggesting that lower self-esteem is closely associated with increased feelings of loneliness (Loucks, 1974; Cutrona, in press).

Locus of Control, an intrinsic facet of personality, governs the manner in which individuals perceive and attribute control over the events and outcomes in their lives. (Zimbardo, 1985). Individuals endorsing an internal locus of control believe their actions exert direct influence over outcomes, fostering a sense of personal agency. In contrast, those adopting an external locus of control attribute the control of life events to external forces such as luck or fate, diminishing their perceived agency in shaping social interactions and relationships. This external orientation, in turn, can precipitate increased feelings of loneliness. (Rotter 1986, Heinrich & Gullone 2006, Ekwall 2004).

The Interaction between self-esteem and locus of control plays a crucial role in either exacerbating or alleviating loneliness. Low self-esteem combined with an external locus of control can create a cycle of negative self-perception and social isolation, as individuals may blame themselves for social difficulties, reinforcing loneliness.

To explore these dimensions an extensive review of literature was conducted to understand if self-esteem and locus of control have a significant influence on loneliness of adults within 18-35 years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a global survey on loneliness revealed that 40% of young adults aged 16 to 24 often felt lonely, compared to 29% of adults aged 65–74 and 27% aged 75+. Similarly, a study conducted in October 2020 by Making Caring Common found that 36% of respondents reported feeling lonely frequently or almost all the time in the prior four weeks, with 61% of those aged 18 to 25 reporting high levels of loneliness. These feelings

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of loneliness often led to a sense that no one genuinely cared about them and could create a self-defeating cycle where individuals withdrew due to fear of rejection, further exacerbating their loneliness and social anxiety (Weissbourd, 2021).

One potential source of loneliness for adults, as suggested by Diehl and Hilger (2015), could be the transition from a school environment to adult life. This transition often involves seeking independence and individualization from family and childhood relationships, which can increase the risk of loneliness.

Gender differences in loneliness have been extensively studied, but the results have often been inconclusive. Some studies suggest that male students are lonelier than female students because female students generally possess better attachment skills and are more socially and emotionally adept (Deniz, Hamarta & Ari, 2005; Yang, 2009). Others find the opposite, with female students experiencing greater loneliness (Anderson, Horowitz, & French, 1983; Page & Cole, 1991). There are also studies that report no significant gender differences in loneliness (Al-Kfaween, 2010; Archibald, Bartholomew, & Marx, 1995; Knox, Vail-Smith, & Zusman, 2007; Weiss, 1973). Some researchers, like Thomas Kubistant (1977), suggest there may be inherent sex differences influencing loneliness, while others, including Woulff (1975), Mishara (1974), and Loucks (1974), found no such differences. Cecilia Solano (1980) even reported mixed results, with gender differences appearing on one psychological scale but not on another.

The existing literature on loneliness in relation to locus of control is limited. Locus of control is a complex concept, and individuals are not entirely internal or external; it depends on the specific situation and their generalized expectations (Rotter, 1975). A study examined the connections between loneliness, college academic achievement, and locus of control using a sample of 97 subjects from Oregon State University, found no significant relationship between locus of control and feeling of loneliness. This finding aligns with Sadler's (1974) theory that loneliness is something that can unexpectedly happen to individuals, and they may have little control over it.

Some research suggests that as individuals become more internal in their locus of control, they may experience decreased loneliness (Rubin, 1979; Rubinstein, Shaver & Peplau, 1974). An internal locus of control has been associated with a preference for closer proximity to others and greater popularity, which can facilitate communication and relationship-building, potentially reducing feelings of loneliness (Tolor, 1978; Nowicki & Roundtree, 1971; Nowicki & Blumberg, 1975).

However, explicit research specifically focusing on the relationship between loneliness and locus of control has been scarce. A study by Nerviano and Gross (1976) on individuals in an alcoholism treatment program found no correlation between locus of control and loneliness, suggesting that loneliness can occur independently of one's sense of control over events in their life.

The connection between loneliness and low self-esteem is a well-established finding in loneliness research. Lonely individuals often experience feelings of worthlessness, incompetence, and unlovability (Moore & Sermat, 1974; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1979; Wood, 1994).

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Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980) found a negative correlation of $-.49$ between scores on the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory, a measure of social self-esteem. Rubenstein and Shaver (1980) conducted a large-scale survey and found that self-depreciation, including feelings of stupidity and shame, was a common correlate of loneliness for males, while feeling unattractive was the most common correlate for females. Sermat (1983) found that lonely individuals scored lower on the self-regard, self-actualization, and inner-directedness subscales of the Shostrom Personal Orientation Inventory. Eddy (1961) discovered a significant correlation between loneliness and the discrepancy between a person's actual and ideal self-concepts.

This link between self-esteem and loneliness appears to be reciprocal. Low self-esteem, along with related factors such as shyness and a reluctance to take social risks, can contribute to loneliness. Simultaneously, individuals with low self-esteem may attribute social "failures" or a lack of social contact to themselves, reinforcing their negative self-opinion.

The reasons for this association between loneliness and low self-esteem have not been precisely specified in the literature. Some theories suggest that perceptions of discrepancies between one's real self and how others view them play a significant role. Eddy (1961) found strong support for this idea, with loneliness being strongly correlated with discrepancies among different aspects of self-concept, including actual self, ideal self, and how others see the individual (reflected self). However, not all studies have found consistent support for these perceptions as the sole cause of loneliness. In conclusion, the connection between loneliness and low self-esteem is a multifaceted one, with evidence suggesting that it can be both a cause and a consequence of loneliness. This relationship highlights the complex interplay between psychological factors and social experiences in shaping an individual's feelings of loneliness and self-worth.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence of self-esteem and locus of control on feelings of loneliness among adults aged 18 to 35.

Hypotheses

This study assessed the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no relationship between one's degree of loneliness and self-esteem.
2. There is no relationship between one's degree of loneliness and locus of control.
3. There is no relationship between one's locus of control and self-esteem.
4. There is no significant impact of self-esteem on one's degree of loneliness.
5. There is no significant impact of locus of control on one's degree of loneliness.
6. There is no significant impact of self-esteem and locus of control on one's degree of loneliness.
7. There is no difference between one's degree of loneliness and one's age.
8. There is no difference between one's degree of loneliness and one's gender.

Participants

The study comprised a sample of 60 adults, including 31 males and 29 females, within the age group of 18-35 years.

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Materials

- Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: This 20-item self-report questionnaire, developed by Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), was used to measure levels of loneliness.
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: A 10-item scale by Rosenberg (1965) assessed global self-esteem, measured on a 4-point Likert scale.
- Locus Of Control Scale: A 20-item true/false test based on Pettijohn's concept of locus of control (Pettijohn, I) was used.

Data Collection

Data collection utilized self-administered standard questionnaires. Participants were briefed about the study's purpose, and questionnaires were explained in detail. The subjects had the option to participate online or offline, ensuring data privacy and confidentiality.

Scoring

- The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale used a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from "Never" (1) to "Often" (4).
- The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Locus of Control Scale used Likert-scale responses (Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4) with reverse scoring for specific items.

Variables

- Dependent Variable: Loneliness
- Independent Variables: Self-esteem, Locus of control, Age, Gender

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using a Descriptive Survey method. It involved data collection through self-administered questionnaires, facilitating the assessment of relationships between variables without experimental manipulation.

Sampling Requirements and Research Setting

Convenient sampling was employed to collect data from 60 participants aged 18-35. The study did not depend on a specific setting but was conducted based on the convenience and availability of subjects.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of Sample (60) Age-wise and on basis of sex.

Parameters	N	%
<i>Age(yrs)</i>		
18-21	20	33.33
22-25	17	28.33
26-30	16	26.67
31-35	7	11.67
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	31	51.67
Female	29	48.33

The study sample consisted of 60 adults, ensuring a balanced distribution across age groups. Approximately 33.33% of participants fell within the 18-21 years age group, 28.67% in the 22-25 years group, 26.67% in the 26-30 years group, and 11.67% in the 31-35 years group.

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Gender distribution was nearly even, with 51.67% male and 48.33% female participants (Table 1).

Table 2: ANOVA comparison of loneliness by age

Sources of variation	df	Sum of Square	Mean Square	F statistic	p value
Between group	3	624.25	208.08		
Within group	56	8159.15	145.70		
Total	59	8783.40	148.87	1.4282	0.2442

The test yielded a p-value of 0.2442 (for $\alpha=0.005$), indicating that the differences in loneliness among age groups are not statistically significant. Consequently, I accepted the null hypothesis, which postulates equal average loneliness levels among different age groups (Table 2).

Table 3: Comparison of loneliness by gender.

Gender	Number of cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value	P value
Male	31	41.58	11.70		
Female	29	44.72	12.72	0.9972	0.3228

Table 3 further investigates gender differences in loneliness. By conventional statistical criteria, the observed differences are not deemed statistically significant with a p-value=0.3228 (for $\alpha=0.005$), leading me to retain the null hypothesis. This implies that, according to the data, gender did not emerge as a significant factor influencing loneliness in the study.

CORRELATION

Table 4: Pearson Correlation 'r' for Relationships between self-esteem, locus of control and loneliness.

	Self-esteem	Locus of Control	Loneliness
Self-esteem	1	0.67881 p<0.0001	-0.70071 p<0.0001
Locus of Control	0.67881 p<0.0001	1	-0.56543 p<0.0001
Loneliness	-0.70071	-0.56543	1

**If $p < .05$ the relationship is statistically significant; if not the relationship is not significant.*

The data reveal a moderate negative correlation between self-esteem and loneliness, suggesting that higher self-esteem corresponds to lower loneliness scores. Another moderate negative correlation emerges, indicating that a stronger internal locus of control associates with lower levels of loneliness. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected in both cases. The data also portray a moderate positive correlation between self-esteem and locus of control, suggesting that higher self-esteem aligns with a stronger Internal locus of control and vice versa. This correlation contradicts the null hypothesis (Table 4).

REGRESSION

Table 5: ANOVA Table for Simple Regression for Loneliness with Self-esteem.

Source of variation	df	Sum of Square	Mean Square	R ²
Regression	1	4312.6988	4312.6988	
Residual	58	4470.7012	17.081	
Total	59	8783.4	148.8712	0.491

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Regression analysis between self-esteem and loneliness revealed an R^2 value of 0.491, signifying that self-esteem explains 49.1% of the variability in loneliness. The low p-value ($4.754e-10$) rejects the null hypothesis, underlining the substantial impact of self-esteem on loneliness (Table 5).

Table 6: ANOVA Table for Simple Regression for Loneliness with Locus of control.

Source of variation	df	Sum of Square	Mean Square	R ²
Regression	1	28081.79	28081.74	
Residual	58	5975.226	103.0211	
Total	59	8783.4	148.8712	0.3191

There was significant negative relationship was established between locus of control and loneliness, which means internal locus of control is directly proportional to low degree of loneliness. The R^2 value was calculated at 0.3197, indicating that locus of control orientation explains 32% of the variability in loneliness. A low p-value (0.000002511) rejects the null hypothesis, signifying a significant impact of locus of control on loneliness, albeit with less explanatory power (Table 6).

Table 7: ANOVA Table for Multiple Regression for Loneliness with Self-esteem and Locus Of.

Source of variation	df	Sum of Square	Mean Square	R ²
Regression	2	4447.3165	223.658	
Residual	57	9336.0835	76.071	
Total	59	8783.40	148.871	0.5063

Multiple linear regression analysis collectively considered the impact of Self-Esteem, Locus of Control, and Loneliness, yielding an R^2 value of 0.51, indicating a significant collective effect (Table 7). However, when examining individual predictors, Self-Esteem ($t = -4.642$, $p < 0.01$) was identified as a significant predictor of loneliness, while Locus of Control ($t = -1.33$, $p = 0.189$) did not significantly contribute to the model (Table 7).

DISCUSSION

In 1959, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann characterized loneliness as a distressing experience that people will go to great lengths to avoid. Loneliness is recognized as a significant public health challenge due to its strong associations with negative health outcomes, morbidity, and an elevated risk of mortality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, younger individuals reported higher levels of loneliness, with rates four to five times higher than older age groups. In a study involving US young adults aged 18–35, loneliness was prevalent in 43% of the sample. Research with adolescents and young adults consistently links loneliness to mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. However, few studies have explored how loneliness may affect young people's perceptions of positive outcomes such as life satisfaction, despite existing evidence of negative associations between loneliness, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. Additionally, there is a lack of research investigating the potential role of personal protective factors like self-esteem in the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction.

The study explored the connection between self-esteem and loneliness and discovered a significant negative correlation, aligning with prior research by Mahon et al. (2006), Creemers et al. (2012), Kong & You (2013), and others. This correlation suggests that individuals with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to feeling criticized and rejected,

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contributing to loneliness. This aligns with theoretical models proposed by Peplau et al. (1982). Low self-esteem was linked to increased loneliness, and feeling lonely was associated with decreased self-esteem. This suggests a self-reinforcing cycle where low self-esteem and loneliness perpetuate each other, contributing to ongoing maladjustment. This finding suggests that a vicious circle between low self-esteem and loneliness might be at work that maintains and reinforces both forms of maladjustment. Although this study supports almost all of the writer's predictions, the relative strength of the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness was disappointing. The results of some individuals' scores were also quite unexpected. It was observed that even if an individual had high self-esteem, they might still have high scores on the loneliness scale. This shows that variables other than self-esteem might be the cause of prevailing loneliness in a person.

The study aligns with the research of Nerviano and Gross (1976), which states that the locus of control and loneliness are not correlated. It suggests that loneliness can be a condition that occurs independently of one's sense of control. This supports Sadler's (1974) theory that loneliness is something that unexpectedly occurs in our lives (p. 272), meaning we have little to no control over it. While this perspective is not commonly held, its feasibility appears more likely based on this research. Further investigation into this aspect is also justified.

The Initial prediction regarding the relationship between locus of control and loneliness was based on their known connections with other personality traits. Previous research has shown that internally motivated individuals tend to handle anxiety more effectively (Watson, 1967; Platt, 1968; Joe, 1971; Strassberg, 1973; Donovan, 1976). Loneliness often involves feelings of anxiety (Moustakas, 1961; Bradley, 1969; Weiss, 1973; Gaev, 1976; Schultz, 1976). Therefore, it was logical to expect that individuals with an internal locus of control orientation might better cope with loneliness. Similarly, self-esteem is a significant factor in resolving loneliness (Cutrona, Russell & Peplau, 1979), and individuals with an internal locus of control tend to have a more positive self-view (Ziller et al., 1969; Fitch, 1970; Epstein & Komorita, 1971; Fish & Karabenick, 1971; O'Leary et al., 1974; Gordon, 1977). Thus, it was hypothesized that there would be a relationship between these two constructs. However, the investigation did not support this hypothesis. This suggests that measuring these personality characteristics as separate entities might overlook their combined impact. Locus of control orientation and feelings of loneliness may not be entirely distinct within an individual. When studied in isolation, their true influence on a person's well-being might be diluted. In essence, these personality factors may not pose significant challenges individually, but their combined effects may have gone unnoticed. Self-esteem emerges as a pivotal factor in mitigating feelings of loneliness, aligning with previous research. However, the relationship between locus of control and loneliness appears more nuanced, with locus of control alone not significantly predicting loneliness.

The study did not support sex differences in regards to loneliness, despite the common observation that young adult males often report higher levels of loneliness than females. While my results do not definitively refute this possibility, they underscore the need for further empirical exploration of gender-related differences in loneliness.

Furthermore, the current analysis did not reveal significant differences in the degree of loneliness among age groups. A one-way ANOVA test aimed at assessing the influence of age groups on loneliness. The initial hypothesis suggested that young adults aged 18-25 might experience heightened levels of loneliness due to environmental changes, higher

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education pursuits, employment transitions, instability, and self-fulfillment challenges. However, these findings did not align with the data, emphasizing the need for more extensive research in this area.

Limitations and Suggestions

In future research endeavors, it is advisable to target a larger and more diverse sample size to enhance the reliability of findings. It's essential to acknowledge that participants' emotional states during response collection may have influenced their answers, which is an aspect beyond our control. The use of scales not specifically standardized for the Indian population presents a noteworthy limitation. Future studies might benefit from employing instruments that are more culturally aligned with the context. Additionally, for a more comprehensive understanding of loneliness, future investigations could consider incorporating additional variables, such as employment and relationship status.

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Conflict of Interest

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