

Exploring The Causes of Loneliness from Indian Young Adults Perspective: A Qualitative Study

Siva B^{1*}, Jaimathisa A²

ABSTRACT

Loneliness is an adverse psychological and emotional condition characterised by a desire for intimate connections that one cannot achieve and it is associated with poor health and reduced life expectancy. (Hawkley et al., 2003). This study aims to explore the causal factors of loneliness among young adults. This study used an exploratory qualitative research design. The sample comprised of ten young adults studying in different colleges in Chennai, selected using purposive sampling method. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide for conducting in-depth interviews. The obtained qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis, revealing four key themes and several sub-themes that contribute to individuals' experiences of loneliness. The four main themes are: interpersonal factors, social factors, environmental factors and psychological factors. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of loneliness and highlight the importance of considering individual-level and contextual factors in interventions to reduce loneliness among college students.

Keywords: Loneliness, Young Adults, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis

The longing for interpersonal intimacy stays with every human being from infancy throughout life, and there is no human being who is not threatened by its loss (Reichmann, 1959). Indian young adults navigate a psychological landscape influenced by traditional beliefs, modern ambitions, and socioeconomic intricacies as they begin their scholastic path. College students are those who enrolled in post-secondary education institutions, specifically colleges or universities, pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees. Young adults often face significant challenges during their transition to higher education, including the need for social connection and mental health support. Although it's often thought that loneliness mainly impacts older people, it is actually more common in young adults and less frequent in older adults (Beam & Kim, 2020).

Research into the college student population indicates the high prevalence of loneliness, with some studies showing rates as high as 60% of students experiencing psychosocial issues or conditions such as loneliness (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness is an adverse psychological and emotional condition characterised by a desire for intimate

¹PG Student, Department of Counselling Psychology, University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

²PG Student, Department of Counselling Psychology, University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: August 06, 2024; Revision Received: October 11, 2024; Accepted: October 15, 2024

Exploring The Causes of Loneliness from Indian Young Adults Perspective: A Qualitative Study

connections that one cannot achieve and it is associated with poor health and reduced life expectancy. (Hawkey et al., 2003).

Additionally, several studies have examined the effects of loneliness on individuals' physical, mental, and social well-being, with those experiencing it facing a greater risk of depression, cognitive impairment, dementia, hypertension, and cardiovascular issues (Lee et al., 2018; Mushtaq et al., 2014; Rafnsson et al., 2017). Furthermore, the negative health impacts of loneliness and social isolation are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Loneliness is considered to be a common psychological problem caused by a lack of socialization competence (Arnett, 2007). It is a universal emotion that all individuals have experienced at some point in their lives. Loneliness can cause social suffering, which may prompt a person to pursue social relationships. It is a personal view resulting from a deficiency of intimate interpersonal connections. According to Perlman and Peplau (1981), loneliness is a discomfiting psychological feeling that an individual goes through when his or her social relationships lack some important quantitative or qualitative aspect. It is seen as an unwanted and distressing experience that is a part of one's personality and social experience (Rokach, 2012). In conclusion, loneliness is a subjective, negative experience resulting from the cognitive evaluation regarding the fit between the quantity and quality of the present relationship and the current relationship standard (Gierveld et al., 2006).

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of loneliness among young adults studying in colleges and identify the causes factors associated with them. By gathering qualitative insights, the research seeks to inform the targeted interventions and support strategies that can effectively address the loneliness epidemic among this vulnerable population.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

This study aims to explore the causal factors of loneliness from the perspective of young adults.

Research Question

What are the causal factors of loneliness from the perspective of young adults?

Objectives

To explore the causal factors of loneliness from the perspective of young adults

Design

This study used an exploratory qualitative research design.

Participants

The sample comprised of ten young adults, including five males and five females between the ages of 18 and 25 years. The sample of young adults were college students from different colleges in Chennai, selected using purposive sampling method. The sample size for qualitative interviews (N=10) was determined by the point at which we observed saturation of themes (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants were not selected based on their level of loneliness as we sought to obtain an unbiased sample of young adults.

Table 1 shows the demographical Information of the Participants (N = 10)

Variables	Groups	Total (n)
Gender	Male	5
	Female	5
Education	Undergraduate	4
	Postgraduate	6
Family type	Joint family	3
	Nuclear family	7
Socio economic status	Lower class	2
	Middle class	5
	Higher class	3

Instruments

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide for conducting in-depth interviews. The questions and probes in the interview guide were framed to explain the quantitative results and to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the causal factors of loneliness. The questions were focused on the general background, personal life, college life and social life of the participants. Based on the above areas of focus, about eight questions were designed.

The questions included in the semi structured interview were as follows:

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. Can you start by telling me a bit about your college experience so far?
3. Can you share any habits or routines that contribute to your sense of satisfaction?
4. What are the challenges you have faced when forming and maintaining friendships?
5. Can you describe a time when you felt like you couldn't express yourself, your feelings, or your issues?
6. What are the changes that you have noticed in your social life?
7. Can you describe a time when you particularly felt distanced others? What were the circumstances surrounding that experience?
8. Can you discuss any lessons or insights you've gained from your experiences?

Procedure

A convenient time for the interview was decided with the participants. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the interview if they decided to do so for any reason after the interview began. They were also asked to inform the researcher if they wished to take a break during the interview. The researcher also reassured the participants about the confidential nature of the interview. The duration of the interviews was 45 minutes to 1 hour. The obtained qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis. The six-step process, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), was followed in the analysis. The recorded interview data were transcribed and verified the text against the audio. The transcribed data was read a few times to get an overall immersion in the data. A thematic map outlining the main themes and sub-themes of the causal factors of loneliness was discussed in the thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A semi-structured interview was conducted to gain clarity and in-depth understanding, and the obtained data was analysed using thematic analysis. No hypothesis has been formulated

due to the exploratory nature of the study. The thematic analysis of the provided data on the causal factors of loneliness reveals four key themes and several sub-themes that contribute to individuals' experiences of loneliness. Each theme sheds light on the complex interplay of various influences that can lead to feelings of loneliness among college students. The four main themes are: Interpersonal factors, social factors, Environmental factors and psychological factors.

Table 2 shows the main themes and subthemes

S. No	Main Themes	Subthemes
1	Interpersonal factors	Challenges in Maintaining Friendships Difficulty in Sharing Issues Relationship Problems Rejection of Feelings by Others
2	Social factors	Social Expectations Pandemic Changes in Social Circle Social Comparison
3	Environmental factors	Family Dynamics and financial stress Academic Pressure Impact of College Experience
4	Psychological factors	Feeling Guilt Coping strategies as a cognitive pattern Low-self esteem

Theme 1: Interpersonal Factors

Challenges in Maintaining Friendships

Participants expressed that they find it to difficult maintain friendship. The statement "*Putting those efforts to maintain that friendship and making it a stable thing (F26)* " reflects the continuous effort required to maintain friendship. Friendships can be affected by many internal and external factors such as external stressors, personal problems, or misunderstandings.

Difficulty in Sharing Issues

Participants were not willing to share their feelings and thoughts with others. They feel that nobody will understand them or they judge them, so they keep their problems with themselves. "*Couldn't go and speak to others because people around me were not mature enough to understand (G17)* " illustrates the thought of finding meaningful and matured individuals to share their thoughts. "*Used to keep issues with myself because others wouldn't understand (J10)* " shows the tendency to internalize their problems within themselves. Some of these results have also been reported in previous studies (Matthews et al., 2022). They reported that participants actively resisted the idea of seeking help.

Relationship Problems

Participants expressed that the problems in relationship also have an impact on their loneliness. "*I feel like even if they speak nice to me right now, they will move away eventually (H14)* " reveals participants fear of abandonment. "*I don't excuse everything about myself to them because it could hurt us if they don't reciprocate (C15)* " shows participants do not want to reveal or share their vulnerabilities to avoid the negative consequences. This finding brings in line with that of some previous studies (Matthews et

al., 2022). They reported in their research that the participants had difficulty trusting people and, in some cases, did not trust anyone and also mentioned that this difficulty trusting people was considered to be a contributing factor to the participants' loneliness.

Rejection of Feelings by Others

Participants were getting discouraged when they are feeling shut down or unheard from others. "*Couldn't continue speaking about feelings because people stopped seeing things or taking bigger than myself (B11)*" indicates a resistance to share their feelings due to fears of being misunderstood. "*People weren't able to understand the issue, they were like this is nothing big (A24)*" reflects the frustration of having one's feelings unvalidated or neglected by others.

Theme 2: Social Factors

Social Expectations

Societal expectations from friends, family can create pressure to participants meet certain standards or behave in specific ways. "*These societal expectations, and the pressure they put over me is not valid. (B16)*" shows the pressure to conform to society's' expectations, even if the expectations conflicts with participants personal values.

Pandemic

Pandemic was also an important period which caused changes in social dynamics and routines in people's life and it may have strained friendships or made it difficult to form new connections. "*I think the pandemic was a trigger on a lot of people. (I25)*" reflects the impact caused by the pandemic.

Changes in Social Circle

Personal growth can lead to shifts in environment or social circles, requiring individuals to adapt to new settings and involves forming connections with new set of people. "*Before I was with a different set of people, now I am with a different set of people (F18)*" indicates the change of social circles and the need to adapt to changes in relationships and forming new connections.

Social Comparison

Comparing oneself to others can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially when it seems like peers are achieving their goals. "*Because, you know, you feel left out because you're the only one not doing it (A17)*" reflects the experience of comparing oneself to others and feeling inadequate. There are certain other studies that have reported similar results (Matthews et al., 2022). They observed that participants often compare themselves unfavourably to others. Fardghassemi, S., & Joffe, H., (2022) reported in their study that there was a sense of comparison in terms of feeling behind or not changing while everyone else is improving themselves.

Theme 3: Environmental Factors

Family Dynamics and Financial Stress

Participants described the pressure and expectations imposed by their families as factors that affected their mental health. "*It's like you'll never be good enough as your brother (G18)*" shows the impact of comparisons to siblings which creates feelings of inadequacy to the individuals. Matthews et al., (2022) reported that approximately half of the participants referred to strained relationships within the family and they mentioned that these tended to involve conflict or tension between the participant and a parent or sibling.

Academic Pressure

Academic demand, combined with personal standards, can create significant pressure to do well academically which may impact participants social life. "*My academic demands are very, very high compared to other people (E19)* " highlights the pressure to excel academically. This finding brings in line with that of some previous studies (Fardghassemi, S., & Joffe, H., 2022). They observed that young adults either directly expressed their sense of pressure or indirectly indicated they were suffering from it.

College Experience

Adjusting to new environments in college can be challenging and may lead to feelings of isolation. "*Initially it was tough because I couldn't accept the ideologies of other people (C9)* " reflects the challenges of adjusting to new place. This finding brings in line with that of some previous studies (Matthews et al., 2022). They found that the participants had experienced difficulty leaving the education system or moving to a new educational setting.

Theme 4: Psychological Factors

Feeling Guilt

Self-blame or feeling as a failure may lead to feelings of guilt and impacts mental health. "*There were many instances where I didn't get any answers. So, I used to blame myself and felt so much guilt (B28)* " shows the participants tendency to blame themselves as feeling guilt as a result.

Coping Strategies as a Cognitive Pattern

Participants mentioned that they use coping strategies such as distraction or avoidance to get relief from their loneliness. It may provide temporary relief but can hinder long-term emotional growth and problem-solving. "*I encourage to distract myself from the thoughts and most of the times work I sleep it off I take a break I go outside get some fresh air so that I'm not thinking (A19)* " reflects the use of distraction and avoidance as coping mechanisms to manage overwhelming thoughts or emotions.

Low Self-esteem

Low self-esteem mentioned that they have feelings of self-doubt, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities and self-worth. "*I just feel like I'm not good enough (E16)* " highlights lack of confidence in oneself. Matthews et al., (2022) also observed signs of low self-worth in many cases in their qualitative study of loneliness. They noted that participants tended to use self-deprecating language.

The current study supplements to the existing literature, using qualitative methodology to examine the causal factors of loneliness from young adults' perspective. Interpersonal factors, social factors, environmental factors and psychological factors were the four main themes that emerged as the causes of loneliness among college students. The thematic analysis of the data pertaining to the determinants of loneliness unveils an interplay among social, environmental, psychological, and interpersonal elements that collectively contribute to the occurrence of loneliness among individuals. By comprehending these themes and the dynamics that underlie them, it is possible to devise interventions and support systems that effectively tackle the complex characteristics of loneliness while also fostering social connectedness and overall well-being. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of loneliness and highlight the importance of considering individual-level and contextual factors in interventions to reduce loneliness among college students.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations of the study. The study utilized only qualitative method and the sample size was small. The participants were only from specific geographical location. Future studies may address these research gaps by utilizing mixed method research and by including participants from diverse populations.

CONCLUSION

Thematic analysis identified four key themes contributing to the subjective experience of loneliness among college students, including interpersonal factors, social factors, environmental factors and psychological factors.

REFERENCES

- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child development perspectives, 1*(2), 68-73
- Beam, C. R., & Kim, A. J. (2020). Psychological sequelae of social isolation and loneliness might be a larger problem in young adults than older adults. *Psychological trauma: Theory, research, practice, and policy, 12*(S1), S58.
- Fardghassemi, S., & Joffe, H. (2022). The causes of loneliness: The perspective of young adults in London's most deprived areas. *Plos One, 17*(4), e0264638.
- Gierveld, J. J., Tilburg, T., & Dykstra, P. A. (2006). The Cambridge handbook of personal relationship: Loneliness and social Isolation. *Cambridge: Cambridge University Pers.*
- Hawkey L C, Burleson M H, Berntson G G, Cacioppo J T. (2003) Loneliness in everyday life: cardiovascular activity, psychosocial context, and health behaviors. *J Pers Soc Psychol. Jul;85(1):105-20.*
- Hawkey, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 40*(2), 218-227.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS medicine, 7*(7), e1000316.
- Lee, E. E., Depp, C., Palmer, B. W., Glorioso, D., Daly, R., Liu, J., ... & Jeste, D. V. (2019). High prevalence and adverse health effects of loneliness in community-dwelling adults across the lifespan: role of wisdom as a protective factor. *International psychogeriatrics, 31*(10), 1447-1462.
- Matthews, T., Fisher, H. L., Bryan, B. T., Danese, A., Moffitt, T. E., Qualter, P., Verity, L., & Arseneault, L. (2022). This is what loneliness looks like: A mixed-methods study of loneliness in adolescence and young adulthood. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 46*(1), 18–27.
- Mushtaq, R., Shoib, S., Shah, T., & Mushtaq, S. (2014). Relationship between loneliness, psychiatric disorders and physical health? A review on the psychological aspects of loneliness. *Journal of clinical and diagnostic research: JCDR, 8*(9), WE01.
- Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). Toward a social psychology of loneliness. *Personal relationships, 3*, 31-56.
- Rafnsson, S. B., Orrell, M., d'Orsi, E., Hogervorst, E., & Steptoe, A. (2020). Loneliness, social integration, and incident dementia over 6 years: Prospective findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, 75*(1), 114-124.
- Reichmann, F. F. (1959). Loneliness. *Psychiatry, 22*(1), 1-15.
- Rokach, A. (2012). Loneliness updated: an introduction. *The Journal of psychology, 146*(1-2), 1-6

Acknowledgment

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Siva, B. & Jaimathisa, A. (2024). Exploring The Causes of Loneliness from Indian Young Adults Perspective: A Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4), 210-217. DIP:18.01.022.20241204, DOI:10.25215/1204.022