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# YOUNG ADULTS DEALING WITH LONELINESS AT UNIVERSITY

*Loneliness is a phenomenon that occurs across the lifespan, having consequences for both physical and mental health. This article reports a study focussing on university students' perceived loneliness. The findings from the thematic analysis of online contributions to relevant forums highlight that loneliness affected the students' experience by influencing their psychological wellbeing, social identity and academic performance.*





*Both loneliness and social isolation have contributed to poor mental health, difficulties when coping with stress, and academic burnout, which can negatively impact a student's overall experience within Higher Education*

Attending university is a significant period of life for many young adults, presenting new opportunities for change and independence, which may represent a positive change. However, this transition also includes a variety of new structural and social challenges such as living in an unfamiliar location and not knowing others in the area, which may lead to the risk of loneliness (Diehl et al. 2018). Previous research highlights how the transition to university may be challenging for some students and can be characterised by feelings of loneliness (Kerrigan, Thomas & Orne, 2020). Both loneliness and social isolation have contributed to poor mental health, difficulties when coping with stress, and academic burnout, which can negatively impact a student's overall experience within Higher Education (Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015). Similarly, due to the recent Coronavirus pandemic and university teaching moving online, social isolation and loneliness has become more prevalent. This has had a negative impact on students' mental health, whilst increasing their stress levels (Savage et al. 2020).

During the transition to university, students leave established relationships behind and are expected to establish new ones (Dill & Anderson, 1999) – something that has been known to elicit considerable personal stress and tough educational challenges (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Succeeding this, parental attachments have shown a correlation with loneliness during the transition to university. Securely attached individuals develop intimate social relationships and are therefore less lonely. Equally, those with avoidant or ambivalent attachments displayed high amounts of loneliness (Wiseman et al. 2006). Another developmental aspect of loneliness in young adults is the prominence of romantic relationships. The association between personal satisfaction with intimate relationships and loneliness revealed that students who were content with their partner, reported lower levels of loneliness (Flora & Segrin, 2000).

### Defining loneliness

Definitions surrounding loneliness have varied due to different theoretical orientations. Weiss (1973) conveys loneliness as a conventional response from individuals when they are deprived of definite relationships and offers two categories: emotional loneliness and social isolation. Emotional loneliness derives from the absence of intimate relationships and can lead to feeling anxious or frequently seeking others to provide companionship. Whereas, social isolation occurs when individuals cannot identify their social network, whereby they are part of a friendship group and share common interests with others.

Perlman and Peplau (1981) define loneliness as a social deficit that expresses itself in four distinct factors: motivation, affective factors, behavioural factors and social problems. Firstly, an individual's motivation may fluctuate when they feel lonely, whereby isolated individuals feel motivated to seek new friendships but lack motivation towards tasks. Secondly, affective factors imply that loneliness is an unpleasant emotional encounter linked to unhappiness, depression and/or anxiety. The next classification incorporates behavioural factors such as exhibiting physical indications of anxiety, including disturbed eating. Lastly, social problems are considered the final outcome of loneliness, underlining the association between illness, alcoholism and suicide (Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

More recently, Hawkey and Cacioppo (2010) introduced a 'Model of Loneliness', implying isolated individuals view the world as an intimidating environment, anticipating more negative social exchanges. They reported that perceived social isolation is associated with feeling insecure, causing unconscious hyper-vigilance for danger within society. When lonely individuals have negative expectations about shared interactions, they consciously distance themselves from others, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### Understanding loneliness

The relationship between social interaction and the influence on both physical and mental health has been widely researched. The physical implications of loneliness range from headaches, nausea, sleep disturbances and intensified cortisol levels to poor immune system and mortality. Moreover, there are numerous mental health conditions associated with loneliness including depression, with individuals feeling more pessimistic or helpless (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Loneliness is a serious risk factor for engaging in poor health behaviours such as smoking, increased alcohol consumption and decreased engagement in exercise (Cacioppo *et al.* 2002). Nonetheless, social support presents positive repercussions for psychological wellbeing and health behaviours such as irregular diet, sleeping patterns, exercise, smoking, and alcohol intake (Cohen *et al.* 2004). This occurs as practical information is conveyed to the lonely individual, helping them to maintain their health behaviours.

The relationship between social skills, self-esteem and shyness have been found to increase the possibility of loneliness. Deficits in social skills including lack of assertiveness, self-consciousness and difficulty in initiating conversations have contributed to feelings of loneliness. These discrepancies create barriers when building friendships, attending parties, initiating social activities, and participating in a group setting (Jones *et al.* 1982). Perlman and Peplau (1981) argue that shy individuals avoid interaction or feel anxious when communicating with others, hence displaying inadequate social skills during a social setting. This results in fewer friendships and difficulty maintaining current relationships. Shyness can produce minor outcomes including feeling awkward or embarrassed, whereas major consequences include low self-esteem and the onset of depression or anxiety (Dill & Anderson, 1999).

The approaches utilised to manage loneliness are also worth noting. Befriending schemes, group therapy sessions and psychological therapies have been successful in adjusting self-defeating beliefs (Griffin, 2010). Recently, there has been growing research surrounding the internet being used as a support system. Kim *et al.* (2009) reported the intention for individual's internet use was to relieve psychological problems including loneliness and depression by offering interaction and a sense of community.



### Gaining the student experience

This qualitative study analysed online, public forum posts, composed by university students and graduates, which were retrieved from: TheStudentRoom.co.uk, SocialAnxietySupport.com and MentalHealthForum.net. The students engaging in the discussions, identified themselves as feeling lonely during their present or former experiences at Higher Education. Similarly, these forums encouraged students to offer advice and support to others in a comparable situation. No demographic data including age or gender was obtained from the forums. However, the participating posts included reference to moving to university after their school years, qualifying them as young adults, which was the focus of this study. A total of 100 posts were collected for the data analysis within seven public forum threads, varying between four and 797 words in length. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then used to classify three significant themes within the data: psychological wellbeing, social identity and academic performance.





*Students described that since attending university their mental health had deteriorated, as they felt alone or unsupported throughout this period. The forums depict university as overwhelming, with several students finding it difficult to cope with the responsibilities*

### Psychological wellbeing

The effect on students' mental health was the most widespread outcome of loneliness declared in the forums. The two predominant mental health conditions were depression and anxiety. Students described that since attending university their mental health had deteriorated, as they felt alone or unsupported throughout this period. The forums depict university as overwhelming, with several students finding it difficult to cope with the responsibilities, as expressed by a contributor: "I had lost my mind, crying all the time, scared I was making others feel miserable... I have never been so down in my life like I had the first few months since September."

However, various students appraised their university services to manage loneliness and support mental health. This included speaking to course leaders, counsellors, or academic support workers to alleviate stress and provide guidance. Alternative indications implicated joining available societies, offering a cohort of peers with similar interests. Similarly, using online forums helped students manage their loneliness, providing endless support for others to evaluate. Social media, such as Facebook groups, provided opportunities to connect with peers and information regarding university events, helping students integrate and communicate with unfamiliar peers. Those who utilised these methods confirmed their psychological wellbeing had improved and feelings of loneliness had reduced.

The forum comments also identified loneliness as having a negative effect on students' self-perception, largely constructed from the response of others. Various posts highlighted certain individuals believing they did not fit in at university, explaining they considered themselves different from their peers, during lectures or in their student accommodation. Whilst students felt this way, it coerced them to behave in a certain manner that did not represent their true self. This behaviour was justified by addressing how being themselves could result in peers disliking them, suggesting a lower self-concept: "I feel like if I be myself they'll think I'm an idiot but I don't want to act like something I'm not either." These features highlight how loneliness can contribute to a low self-concept for students who presume they are different to their peers.

The forums also identified the relationship between lonely students and binge eating or drinking, smoking and sexual relationships with strangers. Firstly, alcohol, food and tobacco were recognised as coping methods to ease stress or help forget about circumstances at university. Secondly, consuming excessive alcohol and smoking was an acknowledged attempt to fit in with peers who had different interests, as admitted by one student: "I didn't feel THAT drunk so I kept going ... I knew I was drunk really and I should stop but I couldn't. I drank more than I normally drink in a fortnight... so I binged on a takeaway on the way home." Notably, students who used smoking, drinking or sexual relationships to alleviate feelings of loneliness also described subsequent discontent.



*Students experienced varying levels of loneliness depending on their relationships with significant others, including family, friends and partners. Students without a partner or close family relationships reported feeling unsupported and found the transition to university challenging*

#### Social identity

Students wrote about loneliness altering their sense of self, based on their involvement with different social groups. In some cases, loneliness became a barrier for students trying to develop friendships with peers. These included physical barriers such as not leaving their house, attending social events or lectures. Alternatively, mental barriers comprised of students believing they had different interests to others and that they did not know how to form friendships or initiate conversations with new people: *"I had friends, but nobody I felt really close with... I felt left behind, like I didn't know how to form that connection with someone... at all!"* Both physical and mental barriers resulted in further loneliness as individuals isolated themselves more and avoided opportunities to build new friendships.

The forum posts also indicated that students who felt lonely had distorted beliefs about other social groups. Those who experienced loneliness, also presumed they were the only ones who felt this way, viewing peers as being part of large social groups, making socialising more intimidating, as illustrated here: *"I feel like making friends this far into second semester will be really hard because everyone already has their friendship groups."*

Students experienced varying levels of loneliness depending on their relationships with significant others, including family, friends and partners. Students without a partner or close family relationships reported feeling unsupported and found the transition to university challenging. Whereas those who openly confided in their families or had a significant other, felt that this reduced lonely periods. Students within content relationships felt unconcerned about establishing friendships, inferring their partner took priority over possible loneliness. Similarly, when partners or family came to visit often, it helped reduce loneliness: *"I'm on my own every night, if it weren't for my boyfriend coming down every so often I'd of lost my mind because I don't have any friends here or at home anymore..."*

#### Academic performance

Numerous individuals discussed how loneliness had an effect on their academic performance during university. Students stated that, when feeling alone, they procrastinated more whilst preparing for assignments, avoided studying and completing coursework. Those who delayed assignments chose to avoid lectures and study at home. Consequently, students lacked interaction with peers and the opportunity to interact with others. One reason for procrastination suggested individuals could not balance the demanding workload whilst participating in activities they found enjoyable. Therefore, students were unmotivated to study or considered their efforts pointless: *"I'm definitely lonely and it makes me question why I go to school since I seem to feel so lonely and put off work so much."*

Students also wrote about feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of university, causing them to feel permanently exhausted for two reasons. Firstly, students who felt anxious about their social, academic and financial circumstances, explained they could not sleep and then felt exhausted the following day. Secondly, students reported feeling drained by the constant workload and their newly found independence. Students who could not confide in their family, found it exhausting to balance all their commitments and to find time to socialise: *"Even when I want to socialise or just relax... I am way too tired to do so. It's really wearing me out."*

Loneliness was found to have both a positive and negative effect on students' results. On the one hand, the posts described students' coursework being incomplete due to postponing studying and feeling depleted. Then, if students received a bad mark, their efforts decreased for future assignments. Lonely students also acknowledged not having networks to help with their academic concerns or workload. Similarly, numerous students purposely avoided attending lectures due to feeling uncomfortable when sitting alone. On the other hand, the forums illustrated loneliness as having a positive effect on grades at university, as it distracted students from their reality. Several posts focused on how individuals used their time alone to complete their coursework, allowing them to overlook their social situation and focus on their workload. Others agreed that loneliness aided their motivation whilst completing their studies, since it kept them busy during lonely periods: *"The school work is fine, there's a lot of it, but it keeps me distracted from the fact that I have very few friends..."*

Loneliness affected the students' experience by influencing their psychological wellbeing, social identity and academic performance. The results illustrate that when loneliness had a negative impact on students' psychological wellbeing, it led to their social identity and academic performance declining for several reasons



However, loneliness also presented ways to improve psychological wellbeing, having positive effects on social identity and academic performance. Students who focused their attention on assignments when they felt alone, confirmed that their grades improved. Receiving higher grades enhanced individuals' motivation and self-esteem, thus resulting in a positive self-concept and optimistic relationship with significant others. Similarly, students who took control of their loneliness by seeking help from the university services or using the internet to communicate with others, found their loneliness decreased whilst their psychological wellbeing and social identity increased (Kim *et al.* 2009). This demonstrates that loneliness can have a positive effect on certain features of the student experience at university.

### Understanding the student experience

The aim of this study was to consider the various features of students' experience at university that were predisposed due to their perception of loneliness. This study discovered loneliness affected the students' experience by influencing their psychological wellbeing, social identity and academic performance. The results illustrate that when loneliness had a negative impact on students' psychological wellbeing, it led to their social identity and academic performance declining for several reasons. Primarily, suffering from mental health conditions includes symptoms such as tiredness and motivational deficiency (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). This added to students' previous exhaustion from their workload and consequently they lost further motivation when completing assignments. Comparably, receiving bad grades meant students considered themselves as failures, contributing to their poor psychological wellbeing, self-concept and participation in risk taking behaviours (Cacioppo *et al.* 2002). Individuals possessing a lower self-concept formed more barriers when developing friendships and had distorted belief about others because they consider themselves different (Jones *et al.*, 1982). Lastly, academic performance can affect the relationship between students and their significant others, as parents felt disappointed when students did not obtain good grades. Therefore, loneliness was highlighted as having a negative effect on several students' psychological wellbeing, academic performance and social identity.

### Practical implications of this study

These findings have implications for practice, highlighting the importance of online befriending schemes at universities. Employing online befriending schemes within universities, might provide students who feel too anxious to join societies an alternative way to meet new peers. Once individuals feel more confident, they can progress from socialising online to meeting their new friends in person. Thomas (2012) recognises an effective example of befriending schemes within the University of Sheffield, aiming to support the transition to university, reduce withdrawal and enhance students' sense of belonging and community. Secondly, psychological interventions such as group therapy sessions may be valuable for some students within their university as talking therapies encourage the development of self-acceptance and relating to others (Griffin, 2010). This encourages students to meet new people who may be in a similar situation to them, also making the individual aware of others experiencing related challenges. Additionally, this increases the chances of managing loneliness, as social support has been found to play a major role on levels of loneliness. This paper recognises both the positive and negative effects loneliness can have during young adults' experience at university and aims to outline practical implications that can be implemented to support students further.

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### Keywords

Loneliness; Higher Education; Social Support; Academic Performance; Psychological wellbeing