

Running Head: LONELINESS IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: CAUSES OF
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LONELINESS

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Abstract

Aims: The current study set out to determine whether loneliness was prevalent in young adults attending undergraduate degrees. This study also aimed to determine the causes of social and emotional loneliness while researching intervention and coping strategies that individuals find helpful when they are suffering from feelings of loneliness. **Method:** The UCLA Revised Loneliness scale was utilised for this study in order to determine if there were significant levels of loneliness in the population ($n = 60$). An independent samples t-test was run to determine if there were significant differences in age categories. A qualitative approach was also taken and to examine the leading causes and coping strategies for loneliness. **Results:** Results showed that there are significant levels of loneliness amongst young people attending undergraduate courses. The results also determined that from the age group 18-26 there are no significant differences in levels of loneliness within this age group. **Conclusion:** Findings of this study provide us with a greater understanding of loneliness and some of the main causes of social and emotional loneliness. This study also provides coping strategies that participants who suffer from loneliness have identified as being helpful. The important findings of this study support recent research in challenging the idea that loneliness is more prevalent in older adults. Acknowledging the causes of loneliness and developing coping mechanisms allows for more detailed intervention methods in order to help those who are suffering from loneliness.

Introduction

Loneliness is and always has been the central and inevitable experience of every man

- Thomas Wolfe

There are times in every person's life where they experience loneliness, however if these feelings are ongoing, they can create a series of more serious mental health problems (Ponzetti, 1990). Humans are hardwired for connections so when we experience feeling of loneliness it is unnatural and causes us to suffer (Kagan, 2009). When dealing with loneliness it is important to understand that loneliness is not about the number of a people a person has around them, but the number of people that person perceives is around them. There could be an abundance of people surrounding you and yet you may feel like you are unable to talk to anyone which can lead to loneliness even though there are people around you.

Loneliness can take many forms and affect people in a variety of different ways including emotional and social loneliness (Ahmed, 2018). Feeling of social loneliness is generally when we feel that there is an absence of a social network surrounding us (Russell, Cutrona, Rose & Yurko, 1984). This can affect our sense of belonging and companionship. Friends and acquaintances can improve our feelings of being a member of a community (Rhodes, 2004). Whereas emotional loneliness is the lack of an emotional connection to people in life. There are often times in life when we feel the need to confide in another person and to be comforted when we are in pain (Bailey et al., 2015), however If there are no emotional connections in life it can leave people feeling empty, alone and unwanted. If these feelings persist it can lead to cases of depression and anxiety (Hsu, Hailey & Range, 1987). Despite how common loneliness is with a high-risk factor it is not seen as a specific mental health condition yet can

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lead to numerous psychiatric and physical disorders (Mushtaq, 2014). A study conducted by Mathews et al., (2018) which consisted of over two thousand participants concluded that 23-31% of participants experienced feelings of loneliness some of the time and a further 5-7% suffered from feeling of loneliness often.

Understanding feelings of loneliness in society is imperative as research has shown that it can have a negative impact on a person's physical and mental health (Goosby et al., 2013). Studies have identified negative health effects such as poor heart health, trouble sleeping and anxious and depressive feelings (Goosby et al., 2013; Patterson & Veenstra, 2010). Through recent years there has been a growing concern on loneliness which has led to an increase in psychological studies in order to understand loneliness, however majority of these studies have focused on the older population, and it widely believed that it is the older generation who suffer the most from loneliness (Uotila et al., 2011; Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008). Due to studies prioritising older generations there is limited knowledge on how loneliness affects younger people and what causes these feelings to arise. Some of the main causes of loneliness in older people is due to the fact that they will be leaving the workforce, living alone, difficulty with transportation and family having moved away (). These factors rarely affect the younger generation; therefore, it is important to discover what is causing loneliness in young people and how to help those who suffer from these feelings.

A study by Achterbergh et al, (2020) shows that in fact it is young people who suffer more from loneliness than any other age group which can lead to an increased risk in depression, self-esteem issues and anxiety. It is crucial that loneliness in younger adults is studied more due to them having a higher prevalence rate for loneliness. In understanding more about loneliness and what are some of the main causes in younger adults it will allow for more focused intervention plans to help aid people who are suffering.

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Several studies that have examined loneliness in younger adults have flagged social comparison as a main contributor to loneliness (Yang, 2016; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011). Social comparison starts at a young age, normally around seven to eight years (Dijkstra et al., 2008). The theory of social comparison was first derived in 1954 which suggested that individuals have the innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others, particularly their peers. This is a common part of life for people of all ages; however, it is most prevalent in young adults (Beam & Kim, 2020). When we compare ourselves to others seldomly it can be beneficial while inspiring and motivating young adults. However, if we are to compare ourselves to others too often it can be extremely harmful and can result in negative thoughts and behaviours, such as envy, regret and lying (Yang et al., 2022). Due to this, young adults who suffer from loneliness and have developed poor self-esteem are more likely to make excessive social comparisons (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993).

The aim of this study is to determine the levels of loneliness in young adults and determine some of the reasons why people may be feeling this way and also what they feel may help them when they are suffering from loneliness. This study will also delve into both social and emotional loneliness and the differences between the each of these. It is hypothesised that the current study will show that there are significant levels of loneliness in young adults. This is an area of importance as there is little research done on this particular age group and it is important to understand why these feelings may be happening in order to improve quality of life.

Emotional Loneliness

Terms and feelings regarding loneliness have long been associated with those of an older population (Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg & Pitkälä, 2005). However, in recent years loneliness is becoming more apparent in younger adults (Rokach, 2007). A study by (Salimi, 2011) has found that emotional loneliness is more prevalent in males than in females. Emotional loneliness is very broad, and psychologists have been divided for many years on how to define it. The common idea of emotional loneliness is when emotional connections and meaningful relationships are absent from a person's life. Emotional loneliness can be even when you have people around you, you may not have an emotional connection and are unable to confide in them (Weiss, 1973). There are a lot of times throughout our lives when we feel like we need somebody to talk to, but feel like there is no one to confide in.

Women are more known to express their feelings more than men which could lead to males struggling to form meaningful bonds with people in their life (Cretser, Lombardo, Lombardo & Mathis, 1982). This research while substantial only focuses on the gender differences within loneliness. Loneliness has many different predictors some of which being social media, culture, psychical activity and relationships (Mahon et al., 2006). This study has its limitations as it does not factor in any other possibilities on what might be contributing to loneliness within students, such as previous mental health conditions, or stressors in life.

According to a study by Morahan-Martin & Schumacher (2003) loneliness has been increasing associated with social media. There are record breaking numbers of people using all forms of social media which can be enticing for people who are seeking a connection to another person (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Individuals may find this method of communication enticing due to the amount of control it can bring us, we can control the level of intimacy,

dictate our replies and limit face to face interactions. This can be particularly enticing for those who additionally suffer with anxiety. The results of this study suggested that individuals who are lonely had increasing social interactions online for making friends to increase their feelings for companionship (Malik & Coulson, 2010; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). A major conflict is found within this conclusion as it does not accurately address that the lack of body language and physical touch from any type of relationship can cause increasing loneliness over time. This lack of body language can also lead to words that are said being misunderstood or being taken in a manner that was not intended (Malik & Coulson, 2010).

Social Loneliness

Social loneliness has been closely linked to poor mental and physical health. Being alone for long periods of time can lead to serious problems such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse (Weeks et al., 1980, Sundermann et al., 2013, Blai, 1989). Social loneliness is when there is a lack of a social network, including, friends, colleagues and even neighbours (Sen, 1967). A person who is socially isolated may have a few people who they can confide in but may not be around people a lot. Socialising for students can be a big way of relieving stress that accompanies education (Wohn & LaRose, 2014). College is a huge transition in life, and it is imperative that young adults connect with each other during this time. Social loneliness among students in the last year has spiked due to Covid-19. According to a study by (Labrague, Santos & Falguera, 2021) 80% of their study population has felt either moderately or severely lonely. Covid has kept students away from their friends and even some away from their families. Throughout the last year there has been little opportunity to have physical contact with a social network or engage in any activities we had before the isolation period which can lead to an increase in loneliness rates (Killgore et al., 2020).

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Various loneliness reduction interventions have been introduced due to the rise in loneliness rates. A study by Masi et al., (2010) has identified four primary intervention strategies, (1) Improving social skills, (2) Enhancing social support, (3) Increasing opportunities for social contact, and (4) Addressing maladaptive social cognition. This study concluded that the most successful intervention method was addressing maladaptive social cognition. This is when a person's negative thoughts about their own self-worth and how other people perceive them is addressed directly. Low self-esteem has been known to relate to feelings of loneliness (Vanhalst et al., 2013). In adolescence and young adults, it can become increasingly important that we are socially accepted by our peers (East et al., 1987). In these years it can be noticed that young adults will often alter their behaviour and activities among other person attributes in order to fit in with their peer group (Sipersteing et al., 2007). Having a close similarity to your social group can give a person a sense of security and feelings of acceptance. Social acceptance plays an important role in a person's level of self-esteem (Anthony et al., 2007), if an individual feels they are not accepted by their peer groups it can lead to a decrease in their self-esteem, resulting in feeling of loneliness (Saricam et al., 2012). The maladaptive social cognition intervention method can be used to help individuals who suffer with low self-esteem and allow them to accept themselves before loneliness causes significant damage to their mental health (Kyte & Goodyer, 2008).

Loneliness in young adults is becoming more prevalent in recent years (Green et al., 2001). Both social emotional loneliness has shown to have worsening effects on the mental health of young people if feelings persist (Richardson et al., 2017). Similar studies have demonstrated some of the causes that lead to loneliness however some of the main pitfalls of these studies are that it is done on a smaller sample size than what is needed to provide an accurate result of this research (Russell et al., 1978). These studies also often tend to test one or two variables (Rokach, 2018; Schultz & Moore, 1988), further studies could test a whole

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range of variables in order to provide a more detailed explanation of what causes these feelings. Loneliness is becoming more serious in younger people which calls for a need of more extensive research and an increase in support services for people who suffer from loneliness.

As human beings we are wired to connect with one another and seek a wide range of relationships throughout our lives. Loneliness is something that is experienced by everybody throughout life, however if that feeling persists for a prolonged amount of time it has been found that it can lead to more serious mental illnesses and physical illnesses (West, Kellner & Moore-West, 1986). Although loneliness is not a specific mental health condition it is becoming increasingly recognised the way that loneliness affects a person's physical and emotional health. Loneliness is a widely studied area by psychologists, but this research mainly happens in older adults in later life. **Aim:** The purpose of this study is to focus on loneliness in college students as it is becoming a growing concern where not much research is carried out. By taking a quantitative and qualitative approach it will allow for solid data to be collected while also allowing people to express their feelings in their own words. Majority of previous research has taken a quantitative approach and focused on older adults, by incorporating qualitative data the research will benefit from valid insights of young adults. This study holds significant importance as even today psychologists have not settled upon one definition of loneliness, the causes or the consequences of suffering from loneliness. This study is to determine some of the reasons why college students feel either emotionally or socially lonely and which seems to be the most prevalent. **Hypothesis:** It is hypothesised that a large number of college students will be dealing with feeling of loneliness. There has been some previous work done on studying loneliness amongst university students however this study sets out to determine how many college students feel persistent amounts of loneliness

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and what might some of the causes of this be. This data will also allow to determine some intervention methods that can be established in order to combat and cope with loneliness.

Methodology

Participants

A convenient sampling strategy was put into place in order to gain participants. The study was sent out to participants, and they were contracted through universities and posted on social media along with a small description of what the study was about. A snowball sampling technique also took place as participants were able to send the survey to anyone they thought would be interested and eligible. The independent variable with this study is the level of loneliness with the dependent variable being the age of the participants (young adults). There were originally 64 participants however, 4 of them were excluded due to not fitting the criteria so there was a total number of 60 participants ($n = 60$) who were all undergraduate students between the ages of 18-26. The participants included 31 females and 29 males. These participants were selected as they all met the criteria, and they completed the questionnaire in its entirety.

Design

This study consists of mixed methods approach incorporating both a quantitative and qualitative approach. A cross sectional study design, which is an observational design was incorporated which allowed the researcher to collect data from many different individuals at the same time. This will also allow the researcher to observe the variable without influencing them. This study is a grounded theory which involves the collecting of data from participants in order to develop theories of the causes for students feeling socially and emotionally alone. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was incorporated in coding the themes for the qualitative results. A between participants design was used where the independent variable was age type and the continuous score was total loneliness score.

Materials

Basic materials were used to collect data for this study including a laptop and a questionnaire (Appendix D) created through google forms. This is a mixed method study, so the questionnaire was split into two separate parts. The quantitative section of the questionnaire (Appendix D) consisted of the 20-scale item revised UCLA questionnaire on loneliness. Participants rate each question on a score from 0 (Never) to 3 (Always). The higher the participants scored resulted in higher levels of loneliness. Items 1,5,6,9,10,15,16,19,20 were all reversed scored to keep scoring continuous. The revised scale was used as it is a simplified version to other UCLA loneliness questionnaires. According to Russell (1996) the revised UCLA loneliness scale is a very reliable method in terms of both internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Convergent and construct validity was also proven. The second section of this survey consisted of four open ended questions to be evaluated qualitatively (Appendix D). These questions were constructed in order to gain unfiltered information from the participants about what they feel is causing their loneliness and their opinions on what they intervention methods they feel would help. Since these are open-ended questions there will not be a regular scoring system such as 1-10 instead the data will be analysed and coded accordingly to develop key themes of loneliness.

Procedure

The first step that was implemented in this study was to consider the ethical repercussions of the study that was being proposed. Once the ethical risks were confirmed to be very minimal to none at all the recruitment of participants happened. Any student that wishes to take part in the survey may do so and they were sent a consent form (Appendix B) along with the questionnaire (Appendix D), an information sheet (Appendix A) and a debriefing form (Appendix C) was sent out to the intended target audience through

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convenient sampling and the snowballing technique. Students will be informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up until submission. Participants were sent the survey through a link which they could access. They will also be informed that once the questionnaire has been sent, they will be unable to remove their data as everything is confidential. Along with this there was also some sample questions provided to ensure participants understand what they will encounter in the study. When participants opened the questionnaire, they were given instructions on how to complete the questions. This also allows the participants to make an informed decision on whether they want to take part in the study or not. The questionnaire takes roughly 10-15 minutes so there were no breaks allocated. After the questionnaire is submitted the participants will be thanked for their time and contribution. They will then be presented with a debriefing form and notified that considering this topic may bring up some distressing feelings there will be information regarding relevant people they can speak to or helplines if they feel they need to talk to someone.

Results

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Statistics

The below data has been collected from a group of 60 participants ($n = 60$). 51.7% of the participants were female ($n = 31$) and 48.3% were males ($n = 29$). The participants were split into two age groups 18-20 which accounted for 36.7% ($n = 22$) of the study population and 21-26 which accounts for 63.3% of the study population ($n = 38$). Descriptive statistics were collected from all 20 questions on the loneliness scale questionnaire. The means, standard deviations, median, and range have all been obtained in regards to the 20 continuous variables relating to loneliness and the results are indicated in table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for all continuous variables ($n = 60$)

Variable	Mean (95% Confidence Intervals)	Median	SD	Range
InTune	1.17 (.95 – 1.39)	1.00	.847	3
Lack CS	1.68 (1.45 – 1.92)	2.00	.911	3
NOICTT	1.47 (1.22 – 1.71)	2.00	.947	3
IDNFA	1.73 (1.51 – 1.96)	2.00	.861	3
IFPOAGOF	1.03 (.78 – 1.29)	1.00	.991	3
ALICWPAM	1.12 (.89 – 1.34)	1.00	.865	3
NLCTA	1.62 (1.39 - 1.84)	2.00	.865	3

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IAIAS	1.75 (1.53 – 1.97)	2.00	.836	3
IAAOP	1.27 (1.02 – 1.51)	1.00	.936	3
PIFCT	.85 (.65 – 1.05)	1.00	.755	3
FLO	1.73 (1.47 – 1.99)	2.00	1.006	3
SRAS	1.68 (1.40 – 1.97)	2.00	1.097	3
NRKMW	1.77 (1.51 – 2.02)	2.00	.981	3
IFO	1.82 (1.57 – 2.06)	2.00	.948	3
FCSWIWI	.98 (.77 – 1.19)	1.00	.813	3
PWRUM	.98 (.76 – 1.20)	1.00	.854	3
UHBSW	2.33 (2.10 – 2.56)	3.00	.896	3
PAMBNWM	1.72 (1.47 – 1.96)	1.00	8.96	3
PICTT	.90 (.67- 1.13)	1.00	.896	3
TAPICTT	.97 (.74 – 1.19)	1.00	.863	3

Inferential Statistics

An independent samples t-test was carried out to investigate the differences between age groups and total loneliness score. Group 1 consisted of participants aged 18-24 ($n = 22$) and Group 2 consisted of individuals ages 21-26 ($n = 38$). The analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the age group 1 ($M = 31.05$, $SD = 11.24$) and age group 2 ($M = 26.95$, $SD = 12.81$) on total loneliness scores $t(58) = 1.248$, $p = .217$. This suggests that there is no immense difference in between these two age groups and the total loneliness score

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and that the loneliness score does not differentiate between the ages of 18-26. Loneliness scores for each age group were normally distributed as assessed by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p > .000$). Homogeneity of variances was not violated, as assessed by Levene's Test for Equality of Variances ($p = .450$), therefore no further test was needed.

Qualitative Results

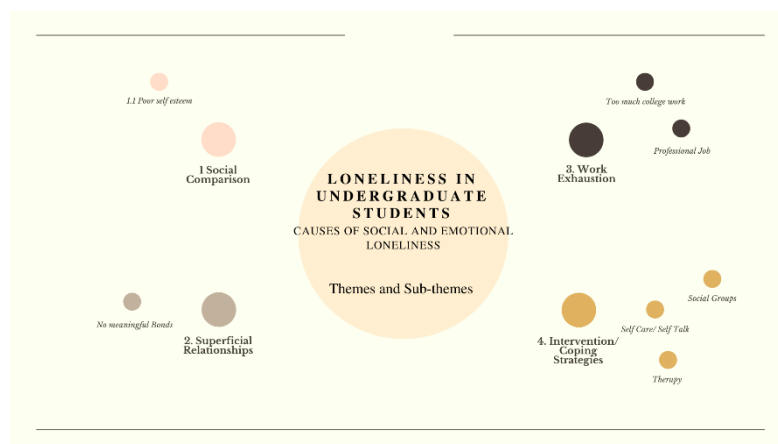


Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

This section explains the qualitative analysis of the participants personal responses. Employing the methods of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, three main themes have been identified: poor mental health, superficial relationships, work exhaustion. Poor self-esteem will be discussed as related subtheme under mental health. Intervention and coping strategies have also been identified in what these participants feel would be of greatest benefit to them when they are suffering from loneliness. Relevant quotations are provided to support the findings. Figure 1 shows a mind map (Appendix E) of the main themes and subthemes.

Theme 1: Social Comparison

If we compare ourselves to others too often it can often result in negative feelings about ourselves which can reduce our self-esteem.

When I see others having closer relationships than I do it makes me feel lonely when I realise that I don't have many close relationships where I can be vulnerable.

This participant is witnessing other people having stronger relationships than then they have experienced, whether it is friendships, romantic or a family relationship, which has resulted in their feelings of loneliness.

When I'm looking on social media and I see so many people looking better than I do or doing better stuff than me like travelling or being around a lot of people it makes me feel lonely like I will never have that and it seems so far out of reach.

Social media is notorious for creating bad mental health particularly amongst younger adults. This participant seems to constantly be seeing others on social media having a better life than them and making it seem so easy. A number of other participants also mentioned that "I can't help but compare my life to other on social media and when I see people my age it makes me feel like I am not doing enough". Another participant spoke about how comparing themselves to others on social media made them feel lonely and like they had nobody around that would understand or that they could talk to

Sometimes I compare myself to people on social media and when I see everything, they have that I don't like a lot of

friends or good looks it makes me feel terrible and like I

have nobody to talk to”.

This participant identified that seeing people online portraying features and lifestyles she is envious of makes them feel alone, possibly due to feeling like a particular lifestyle is very hard to achieve when others make it look so easy. One participant describes their experience with social comparison as,

“I always feel really bad about myself when I see what my friends

and people my age are doing and have when I feel like I don’t have

much... sometimes I end up lying about the things I’ve done or places

I’ve been to impress people.”

Negative social comparison can result in low self-esteem. This participant discusses how their self-esteem has declined due to comparing themselves to people around them.

Participants discussed how poor they feel when they compare themselves to others and how continuous social comparison has affected their self-esteem levels “I feel so bad about myself and don’t know why I can’t achieve that life”.

Theme 2: Superficial Relationships

Many participants identified that many of their relationships are superficial or “fake”, “most of the relationships I have are only surface level”. One participant said that,

Even though I tend to have a lot of people around me and go out a

lot, I feel like I can’t talk to any of them or be myself... it’s like we

only hang out to have something to do but no one really knows each

other.

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This participant discusses the angle of superficial friendships just being for ‘show’ or to ‘have something to do’. The participants relationships seem to be lacking an emotional connection. Another participant disclosed that,

I think the reason I feel emotionally lonely at times is because the people who I choose to spend time with don’t know me well and I sometimes feel like I can’t talk to them about things or be honest about the things I like doing in case they judge me.

This participant expresses that she feels emotionally lonely by not having many relationships with a deeper connection. Their superficial relationships allow them to have people around them but no one they can connect too “I go out with ‘friends’ a lot but we don’t really know each other” , “I just feel fake when I am with friends”

All my friends do is gossip about other people and discuss shallow things that I am not interested in... I only really spend time with them so I have friends but they all feel so superficial and I still end up feeling lonely even when I am with them”

Even though this participant is surrounded by people they still feel lonely, and their relationships appear to lack depth. This participant acknowledges that while they have people around them it is still possible to feel lonely. “I feel more alone when I am with people where there is no connection”, “Being around people and having no emotional makes me realise how lonely I really am”, these participants identify that having superficial relationships only amplifies their feelings of loneliness.

Theme 3: Work Exhaustion

Multiple participants have mention “too much college work to go out”, “I can’t find a balance between my college work, my job and going out” this indicates a struggle amongst young people to develop a healthy work/ social life balance.

I feel like I never get to go out and see people anymore... I have too much work to do for college and a part time job that takes up so much time and when I do have free time, I find I am so tired I just want to relax or catch up on sleep

The participant expresses that the amount of work to do for college can be overwhelming and hard to manage and when you add a job on top of that – as most college students would have, it can become too much to handle. Young adults are exhausted with the influx of work coming their way and struggle with a health balance to also have a social life.

I mainly text and call my friends now when I want somebody to talk to because I don’t have a lot of free time... I go to college all day and have so many assignments so I find it hard to get out for long and when I do I am constantly worrying about all of the work I have to do.

From this response it is suggested that the amount of college work is causing high levels of stress within this participant, they do not have a lot of down time and when they give themselves some time off college work is still constantly on their mind. Some responses have said “After finishing an assignment I just go to sleep because I’m so tired after”, “I am so tired going to college and work, even on the weekends are constant and I dread the next

week”, “I have no time for friends because I am so tired with all the work I have”, these participants all seem to be physically and mentally exhausted due to college work and professional jobs they have. Social loneliness is particularly at risk here since they have a hard time meeting up with people and are too exhausted whenever they have spare time.

Intervention/Coping Strategies

Many of participants identified similar coping strategies they turn to when they are suffering from loneliness and many intervention methods they believe would be useful, “When I feel lonely sometimes a self-care routine makes me feel better like washing my face or showering”, “Taking care of myself and making positive comments to help keep me positive”, “Ever since covid I have been inside a lot so sometimes even putting on jeans instead of tracksuit bottoms makes me feel better”. These responses suggest even simple forms of self-care and positive self-talk can increase a person’s mood. These participants disclose that when they are feeling lonely it can be beneficial for them to feel better personally.

An additional number of participants mentioned that having a social group tailored to them would help them feel less lonely, “Maybe if there were social groups for people who are lonely or struggle to make friends” “Meeting people who share the same interests”, “Having events or meetings where people also feel lonely”. A popular coping strategy that has been identified is the use of social events, particularly events aimed at those who are also struggling with loneliness.

Other participants who are suffering from stronger feelings of loneliness have suggested professional intervention methods, “Sometimes when it gets really bad I feel like I might need to see a therapist”, “When I feel lonely for long periods of time my mental health starts to deteriorate so I seek professional help and over time it helps me overcome it”.

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Participants feel that when loneliness becomes unbearable and effects our health professional help would be beneficial and can provide them with help.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the causes of loneliness in young adults in third level education. This study also set out to discover some of the intervention methods or coping strategies would best benefit them when suffering from loneliness. The current study examined some of the most common causes of loneliness amongst young adults who are attending college. Due to research on loneliness focuses mainly on older adults this study set out to provide a greater understanding of loneliness in the younger populations. This study found that there was no significant difference in loneliness in young adults aged between 18-26. However, when gearing directly from young adults it is apparent that levels of loneliness in young adults is high through these ages. From a close examination and detailed coding of the results it became clear that the most common reasons for loneliness in this population was social comparison, superficial relationships and work exhaustion. This along with coping strategies such as self-care, social groups and at times professional help. These findings accepted the initial hypothesis that there would be significant loneliness levels in college students. Intervention and coping strategies were implemented as further research to aid in the treatment of loneliness once discovering the causes. All of the qualitative results indicated that on some level every participant has experienced a period of loneliness and each participant offered an example of what they find helps them in these times.

The current study has suggested that loneliness levels are high amongst young adults, both socially and emotionally. A recent study by Beam & Kim, (2020) has also examined the possibility that that loneliness may be more prevalent in young adults rather than in the older population. The current study which shows elevated levels of loneliness in young adults may be of benefit to cross examine these feelings before and after the Covid-19 pandemic to see if these feeling of loneliness were present before-hand. With previous research beginning to take more focus on loneliness in this population it is becoming more apparent that this is a

rising issue. Various studies (Beam & Kim, 2020; Lee et al., 2020) have suggested that particularly since the pandemic loneliness levels amongst young adults have soared. This may be an additional area for further study to see if young college students have been negatively impacted by the isolation aspects of the pandemic. Young people particularly tend to have a lot on their plates that requires them to be out of the house and interacting with others, such as college, work and social events. With this virtually taken away due to the pandemic the rates of loneliness have been growing in the last two years.

There were three major themes relating to the causes of loneliness identified in this study, social comparison, superficial relationships and work exhaustion. A study by Yang (2016) presented similar to the current study that supported the idea that social comparison, particularly through the use of social media results in higher levels of loneliness. Various other studies have also reported similar findings, individuals tend to compare themselves to the people they see online which can significantly increase loneliness (Dibb & Foster, 2021). A study by Lim and Yang, 2019 also presented with results that supported earlier research in the current study that in excessive cases of social comparison it can lead to high levels of envy.

The second major theme that was identified in the current research was superficial relationships that contributed to the feelings of loneliness, particularly emotional loneliness as individuals feel they would have no one to confide in. A study conducted by Peets & Hodges, 2017 supported the current study by identifying individuals who have relationships that have authenticity have a greater chance of being less lonely. The current research alluded to superficial relationships making people feel more alone even if they are surrounded by people. From previous research it is evident that loneliness is not about the amount of people around you, but how many people you perceive to be around you (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010).

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The final theme identified in the current research was work exhaustion. This research closely linked work exhaustion to high levels of loneliness. Along with the current research, previous research has also highlighted the effects of work exhaustion on loneliness. A study by Ofei-Dodoo et al., (2021) showed results that burnout was associated with loneliness and other mental health symptoms. The amount of work and pressure college students are under is grossly underestimated, between college, most having some kind of professional job, the pressure to attend social event all the while working towards their future is enough pressure to result in work exhaustion (Galbraith & Merrill, 2012; Pisarik, 2009). In the current study the trouble of finding a healthy work–social life balance was brought to attention. Young adults feeling like they have no time to connect with people and when they have free time being too tired to do anything can result in fast burnout resulting in individuals developing feelings of loneliness.

The second aspect to the current research suggested some intervention or coping strategies for individuals who are suffering from loneliness. The most common strategies the current study produced are self-care, social groups, particularly those tailored for individuals who are suffering from loneliness, that way everybody would have an understanding of each other and lastly professional help. These methods have also been supported by previous research. While the current study suggested simple methods of self-care such as washing your face or wearing clothing that makes a person feel good or a confident, a study by Deguma et al., (2021) suggested that self-care can be beneficial for feelings of loneliness, however this study mentioned methods such as meditation. The current study did not produce a significant amount of these results however it is seen as a promising method of self-care to aid in loneliness.

Encouraging people who are feeling lonely to seek companionship seems to be a common suggestion amongst previous research (Haslam et al., 2022; McWHIRTER, 1990),

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however the present study has developed something that not many previous studies have suggested, this is to create groups that are tailored to those who are going through loneliness, individuals may feel more comfortable being social and speaking to other is they know others feel the same.

Lastly the sample population in the current study identified obtaining professional help, such as therapy as a beneficial coping strategy when dealing with loneliness. A variety of previous research made mention to therapy as an effective tool for helping those who suffer from loneliness (Cacioppo et al.,2015; Kall et al., 2020). Therapy gave give a person a safe space to go and someone to talk to while receiving the help they need. An interesting study by Gibley et al., (2007) noted the positive effects of animal-based therapy which is something that was not mentioned in the current study. An animal may give an individual something to spend time with and have by their side when they are feeling lonely. It may also be beneficiary for social loneliness to have a pet who needs to get outside like a dog, this may encourage an individual to go out outside as the animal needs it and can initiate bonds to other people who have pets.

Future Research: The current study has shown high levels of loneliness amongst young adults, however the primary research on loneliness is focused on older adults. For future research it would be beneficial to put more of an emphasis onto younger age groups. By identifying and acknowledging the causes of loneliness, it can aid in developing techniques to help reduce loneliness and develop more effective measures to deal with it when people are suffering from these feelings. It might also be considered to do further research into the theme of work exhaustions as it is not one that would have been predicted. It is underestimated just how much work young people have between full time education and with majority having at least part-time jobs. This along with any personal issues or responsibilities a person may have, it can be very overwhelming and burn-out is very likely.

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Future research might also include comparing age populations. Due to it being of high belief that loneliness is more prevalent in older adults it would be beneficial to compare a sample of older adults and a sample of younger adults and compare their levels of loneliness and the causes to examine whether there are any significant differences in what causes loneliness over time. Lastly, another line of promising research for the future might be to look further into intervention methods and coping strategies for people who suffer with loneliness. In doing this it allows for more details coping strategies to be implemented which will overall increase a person's quality of life.

Limitations and Strengths: The current research presented with good information however, there have been some limitations to the study. Firstly, the sample size was quite small and a study that is testing something as broad as a loneliness scale would benefit from a much larger population. The current study also lacked in some key demographic evaluations such as gender. Gender can be seen as important when researching loneliness as males and females experience these feelings differently, future studies may benefit from taking gender into account and incorporating it into their studies. It is also noted that this study lacked an appropriate age range for studying the difference in age categories. Further studies may find it useful to examine a population with a wider age range which would also allow for an examination into younger and older adults simultaneously. Lastly this study presented open-ended questions in a questionnaire to participants, while some people may feel more comfortable opening up if they don't feel people looking or listening to them majority of the participants were likely to give much less detailed answers. If this study conducted their qualitative questions in the form of a face-to-face interview it would have prompted the participants to talk more therefore giving more information about their feelings and experiences. Speaking directly to participants also would have been beneficial as it would allowed for the interviewer to direct the conversation in a certain way and prompt for more

information on a certain topic if they found it to be of relevance. It would also allow for a much longer and detailed conversation allowing the researcher to gain more from the participants rather than a few one-word answers. These limitations hindered the study in some areas and future studies would benefit from taking implementing these changes in order to make a stronger study.

Having said that, while there may have been some limitations there are also some key strengths that have been implemented within this study. For example, having these studies aim focus on younger adults allowed for a direct look into what is causing loneliness in young college students. This also allowed for direct knowledge on what those who suffer from loneliness feel helps them the most when they are suffering. This can be very important information as not all methods work on every person and seeing such a variety pointed this out and raised awareness to this fact. However, this question also raised several reoccurring themes which can allow for further evaluation on how to incorporate these techniques. Lastly, by dividing the questionnaire up and incorporating open-ended questions it gave unique information that a complete quantitative approach may not have given.

Implications: Comparing the current study with prior research the results are overall consistent with each other, that loneliness levels are high amongst young adults and appear to be continuously growing. The current study has implications towards practice, theory and subsequent research. The theory that older people suffer more from loneliness is starting to change towards younger adults suffering more from loneliness and this can be further proved through future research focusing on comparing ages between levels of loneliness. This may also interfere with how loneliness is approached particularly in younger adults. By raising awareness individuals may be more likely to ask for help and receive and will prompt others to learn more about the causes and effective coping strategies.

Conclusion: The current study found that loneliness levels were high amongst young adults and the leading causes of social and emotional loneliness in undergraduate students was social comparison, superficial relationships and work exhaustion. The key coping strategies that were developed from this study were self-care, social groups and therapy. Majority of these themes and methods have been researched before and has revealed to be significant with the findings of this study. However, previous research has highlighted some themes and coping strategies that have not come to attention in this study which would be useful to use in further research. This study has significantly supported the set-out hypothesis and has produced relevant causes of social and emotional loneliness amongst undergraduate students. As outlined there has been some limitations to the study which should be considered for any further research and some key strengths that should be observed. An important finding in this study and from previous research to observe when studying loneliness is that people can feel completely lonely even if they are not physically alone.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Information Sheet

Title of Research Project

Loneliness in Undergraduate Students: Causes of Social and Emotional Loneliness

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part in this research study, please take time to understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require more information.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to determine some of the leading causes of both social and emotional loneliness in college students. By conducting this research, it will allow for a greater understanding of the predictors of loneliness. This can then result in the development of more coping mechanisms and support systems for people who suffer from loneliness in college life.

What do I have to do?

If you wish to participate, please read the consent form thoroughly and sign off. It is also important to think about the line of questioning in this survey as it is linked to mental health which may be triggering for some individuals. If you do wish to continue you can send your consent form and a link with the questionnaire will be sent to you.

Will my taking part in this research be kept confidential?

Yes. The survey response will be strictly anonymous, and I will have no means to identify individuals who complete the online survey questionnaires. This participant consent form will be kept completely confidential and will be disposed of appropriately after the study.

Contact for further information.

If you have any further questions, please contact me at x19304443@student.ncirl.ie. Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

I hope you will help me in my completion of my Research Project by participating in this survey.

Appendix B – Consent Form

Dear Participant:

Thank you for this opportunity and for taking the time to learn about my research. It is believed that college students are suffering more and more with loneliness. The aim of this study is to determine the main causes for loneliness in students. Please read this consent form fully before proceeding to take the questionnaire.

- I understand that even if I participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without having to provide a reason.
- I have the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask any questions I might have.
- I understand that the participation involves answering questions based on mental health and it may be upsetting. EG:// Are there many times you have thought about self harm due to being lonely?
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I understand that my personal information will not be used.
- I understand that any information I give in this study will be treated confidentially and will only be used in a professional manner.

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- I understand that in any of the results my identity will remain anonymous.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities – they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that any information I give will be discarded of appropriately at the end of the study.
- I understand that under the freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage.
- I understand that I am able to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further information.

Leah Ward Undergraduate Psychology Course, x19304443@student.ncirl.ie, (academic supervisor)

Tick the box if you give consent to this study. _____

Appendix C – Debrief Form

Thank you for participating as a research participant in the study concerning the loneliness of undergraduate students. This study is investigating the causes of social and emotional loneliness in college students.

Again, I thank you for your participation in this study. Your participation has given a great help to determining the causes of loneliness. This research hopes to provide useful results in order to provide better coping mechanisms and resources for those who suffer from loneliness.

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If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to ask the researcher at this time (Leah Ward – x19304443@student.ncirl.ie).

In the event that you feel psychologically distressed by participating in this study, we encourage you to contact - Mental help Ireland – 1800 247 247, 1800 80 48 48, or 1890 474 474

Thank you again for your participation.

Appendix D – Loneliness Survey

Qualitative

QUESTION 1 What makes you feel isolated or withdrawn from the people in your life?

QUESTION 2 What do you think contributes to your feeling of emotional loneliness?

QUESTION 3 What do you think contributes to your feelings of social loneliness

QUESTION 4 What coping strategies do you feel help you when you have feelings of loneliness? (What do you think would make you feel more connected to people?)

UCLA LONELINESS SCALE (Quantitative) – Scored ‘Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often’

1) I feel in tune with the people around me.

2) I lack companionship.

3) There is no one I can turn to.

4) I do not feel alone.

5) I feel part of a group of friends.

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- 6) I have a lot in common with the people around me.
- 7) I am no longer close to anyone.
- 8) My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me.
- 9) I am an outgoing person
- 10) There are people I feel close to.
- 11) I feel left out.
- 12) My social relationships are superficial.
- 13) No one really knows me well.
- 14) I feel isolated from others.
- 15) I can find companionship when I want it.
- 16) There are people who really understand me.
- 17) I am unhappy being so withdrawn.
- 18) People are around me but not with me.
- 19) There are people I can talk to.
- 20) There are people I can turn to.

Appendix E

