



Social Sabotage: Examining the Psychosocial Impact of COVID-19 in College Students

Amber L. Morgan, Ryan P. Hulla PhD, and Angela Liegey-Dougall PhD

Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Arlington

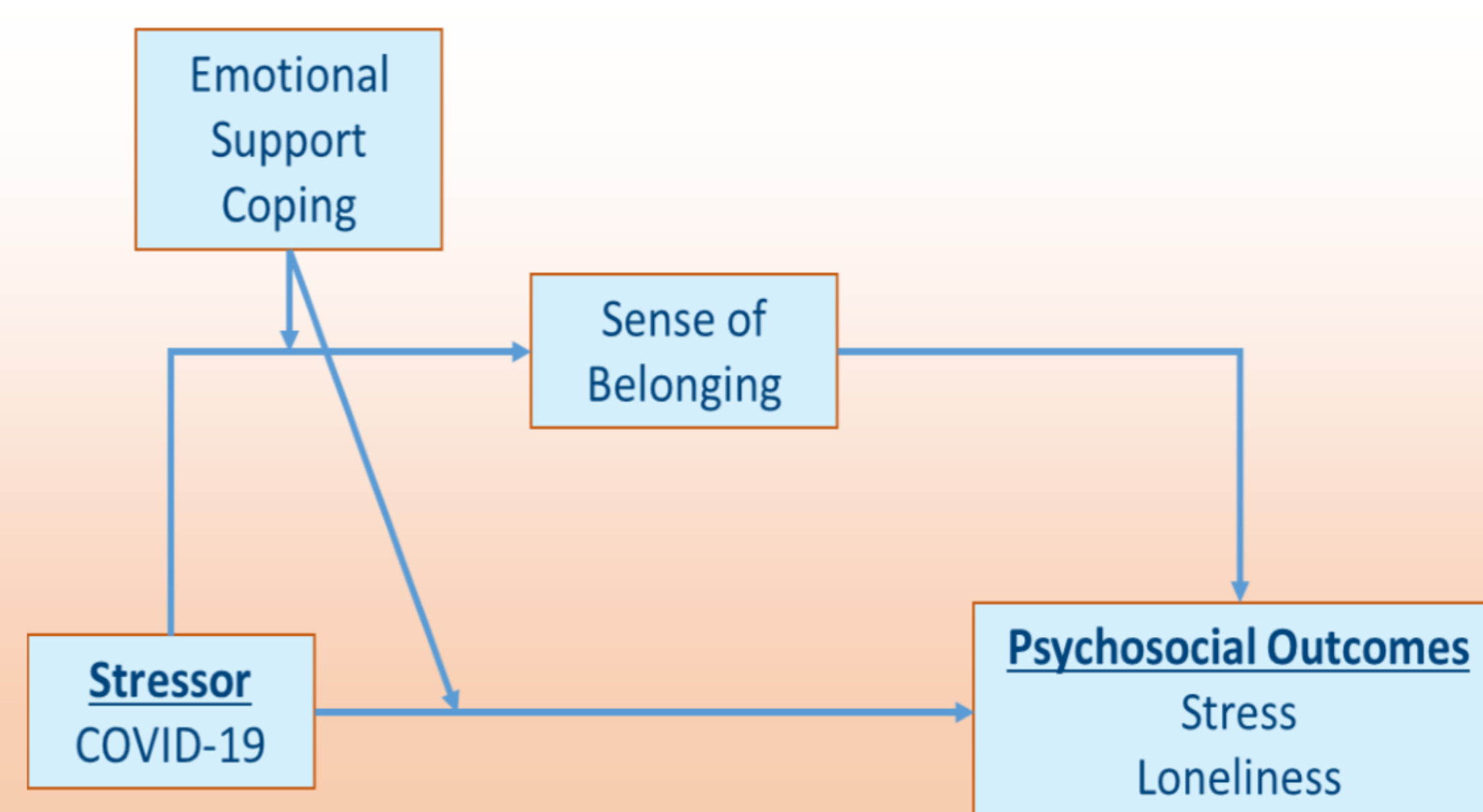
Introduction

- The COVID-19 pandemic created unique challenges for college students (e.g., disruption to degree completion, transitions to online classes, and loss of social interactions).
- Important to examine the impact COVID-19 has had on perceived stress and loneliness through its effect on social belonging.
- Previous research has shown a strong relationship between an individual's sense of belonging and their perceived well-being, loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Hagerty et al., 1996).
- Specifically in college students, a sense of belonging to their school is associated with favorable academic and mental health outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).
- Working students in general, report lower belonging in academic settings and are specifically vulnerable to factors that impact this sense of belonging (Soria & Stebleton, 2013)
- Changes in college students' sense of belonging has been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mooney & Becker, 2021).

Aim of the current study:

- Investigate the effect of COVID-19 on perceived stress and loneliness within college students.
- Analyze the possibility of this effect being mediated by perceptions of social belonging.
- Determine whether these relationship were true for all individuals or only those who relied on emotional support to cope with stressors.

Conceptual Model



Participants and Procedures

- N = 205 working college students enrolled at UTA
- Ages 17-49 ($M = 20.1$); 160 females and 45 males
- Completed online questionnaires about demographics, COVID-19 impact, and psychosocial constructs (stress, loneliness, sense of belonging, coping strategies)

Analyses

- Data was analyzed using PROCESS v4.0 Moderated Mediation Model 8 in SPSS 27,
- Covariates Controlled for include: Gender, Income, University Year Classification, Age, and Work Hours.

Measures

12-item Coronavirus Impact Scale (Stoddard & Kaufman, 2020) :Asked participants to rate how COVID-19 has impacted their life in a variety of areas (e.g., routine, income, food access, health-care and social support access, stress on self and family).

10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983): Participants rated the degree to which they perceived their lives as stressful on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). ($\alpha = .82$)

- Example item: "In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?"

20-item Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980): Measured subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 4 (often). ($\alpha = .91$)

- Example item: "How often do you feel that you lack companionship?"

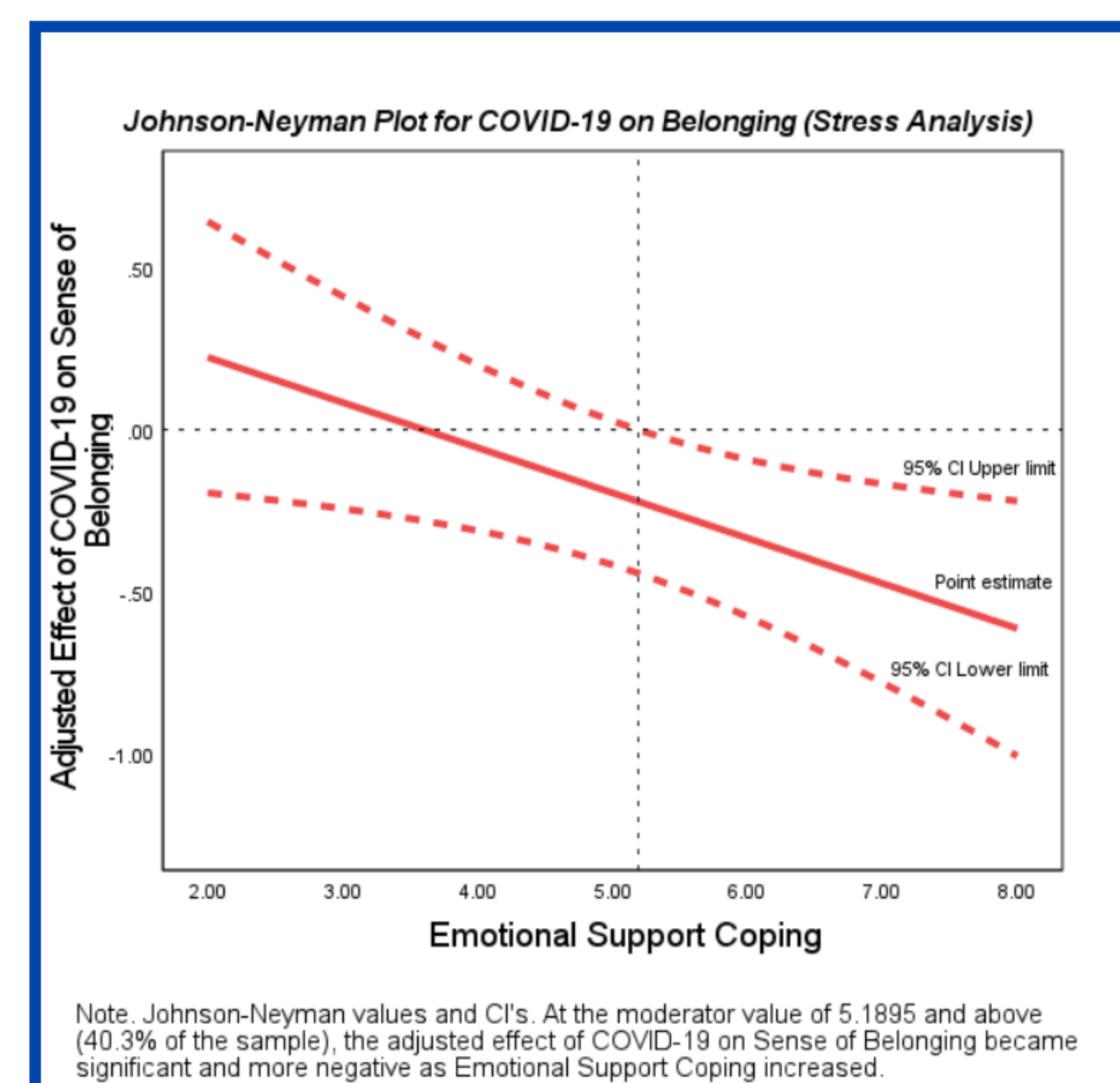
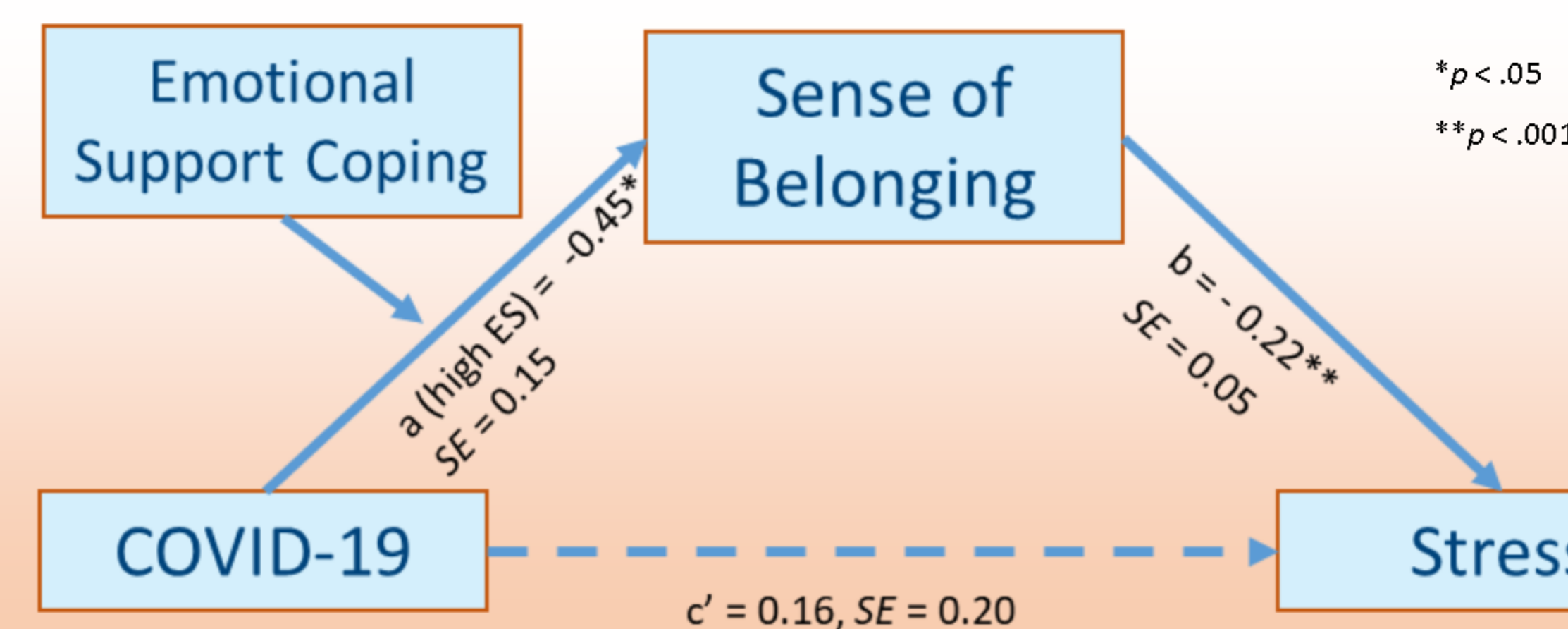
18-item Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM; Ye & Wallace, 2014) Measured participant's perceived belonging to their enrolled school on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). ($\alpha = .87$)

- Example item: "I can really be myself at this school"

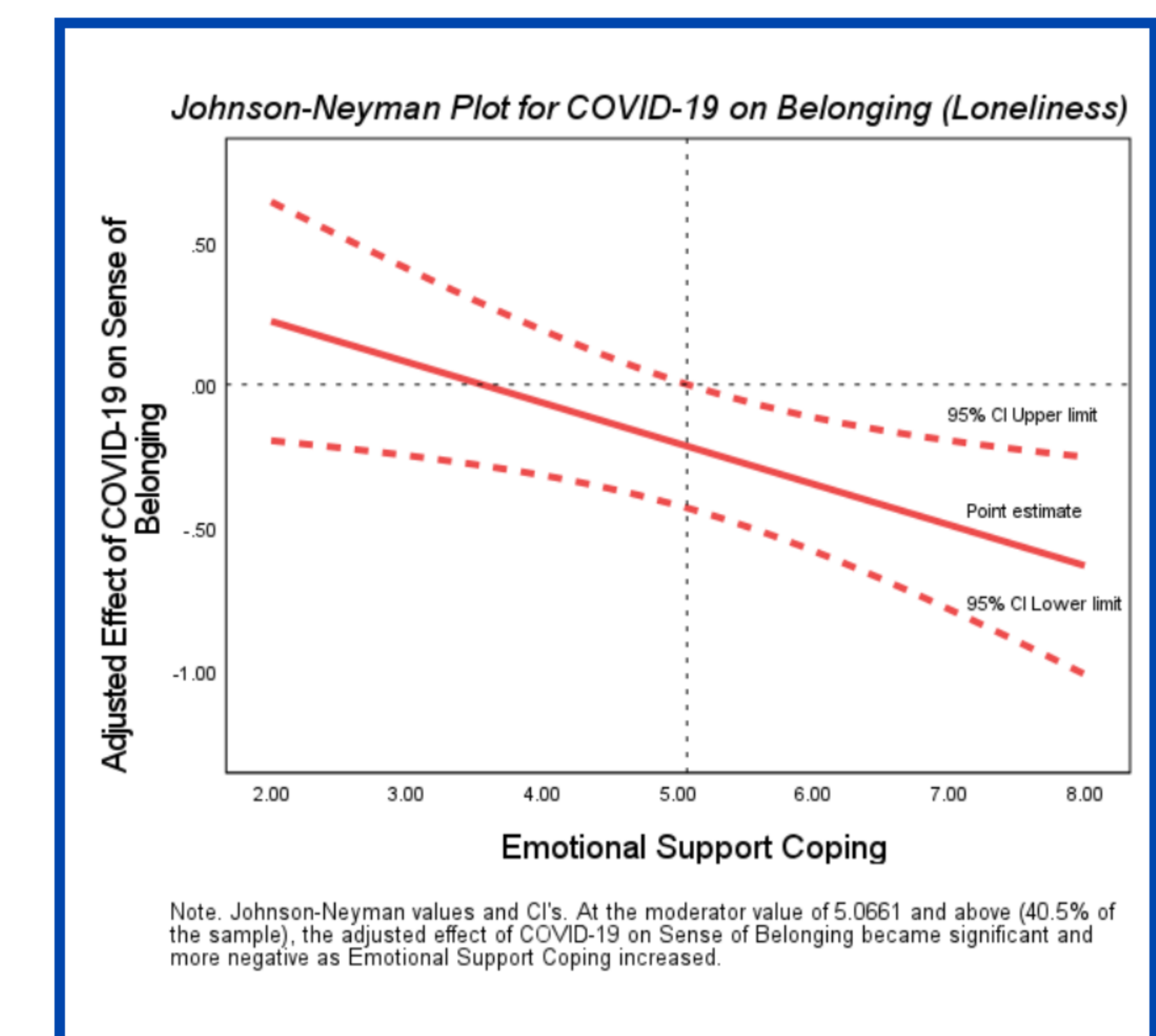
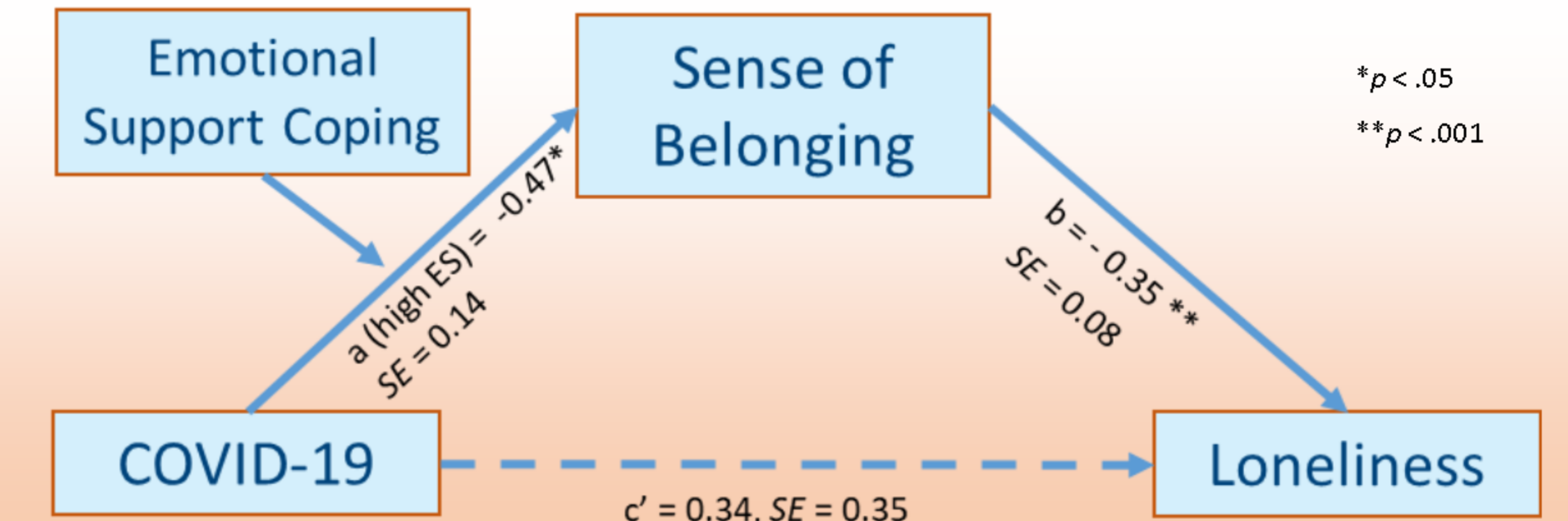
2-item Emotional Support Subscale from the 28-item Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) Measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (I haven't been doing this at all) to 4 (I've been doing this a lot). ($\alpha = .79$)

- Items: "I've been getting emotional support from others." and "I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone"

Results: Stress



Results: Loneliness



Discussion

Given recent changes in social interaction, it was deemed important to examine the impact COVID-19 had on stress and loneliness within college students. The current study did just that and found the following:

- COVID-19 had a significant impact on the stress and loneliness responses of college students.
 - A sense of belonging explained the relationship between COVID-19 and loneliness and stress but only for those who reported relying on emotional support for coping.
- Overall, this study indicates individuals who rely on emotional support during stressful times, may have worse psychosocial outcomes (higher perceived stress and loneliness) from a stressor, such as COVID-19, due to the impact on their sense of belonging.

Limitations and Future Directions

- Sense of Belonging was assessed using the Perceived Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM). Thus, the construct focused on belonging specifically to one's school. Sense of belonging to alternative environments might provide a broader view of these relationships.
- All participants were working students and due to the relationship between working status and a sense of belonging, these results cannot be generalized to all college students.
- Future research should focus on role of other coping strategies, whether any of these strategies are able to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, and any academic or health outcomes resulting from increased stress and loneliness due to COVID-19.

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