Understanding perceived loneliness: a multifaceted approach

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to understand loneliness with a special focus on perceived loneliness using a multifaceted approach.*

Design/methodology/approach – *To the best of the author's knowledge, this appears to be the first paper dedicated to investigating the perception of loneliness as its primary topic. Unfortunately, not much work is available on this specific focus. However, various facets and dimensions can be integrated to gain a better understanding. Therefore, the author has carefully selected four sections, each focusing on different aspects of loneliness. These sections can contribute to a better understanding of loneliness, keeping in mind its perception.*

Findings – *Section one examines the cognitive processes and self-assessment mechanisms that set lonely individuals apart from their non-lonely counterparts. These include heightened awareness, negative social cue interpretation and increased sensitivity to social threats. Section two examines the predictors of loneliness and associated emotional responses. This includes factors such as emotional responses, attributions, duration and situational variables. Section three challenges conventional definitions of loneliness by introducing social asymmetry. Within this framework, personality traits such as extraversion emerge as resilient against loneliness, even in social isolation. Section four discusses the significant influence of cultural diversity on perceptions of loneliness. Collectivist cultures rely on familial and community support to combat loneliness, whereas individualistic cultures require interventions that promote independence.*

Originality/value – *This comprehensive examination contributes insights for informing targeted interventions, reinforcing support systems and enhancing our understanding of human connectivity in an increasingly isolated world.*

Keywords *Perceived loneliness, Multifaceted exploration, Social interaction patterns, Predictors and responses, Social asymmetry, Cultural variability*

Paper type *Literature review*

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1. Introduction

Loneliness may be defined as a psychological state marked by perceived social isolation, emotional distress and a lack of fulfilling social connections, impacting mental and physical well-being. Its links with depression, anxiety and various health issues make it a crucial topic of research. The purpose of this literature review is to comprehensively explore and analyse the multifaceted concepts related to loneliness, with a specific focus on understanding how individuals perceive and experience loneliness. The perception of loneliness refers to an individual's subjective interpretation and awareness of their own loneliness, shaped by their personal experiences, emotions and beliefs. To comprehensively understand it, this paper delved into several key sections and topics.

Section one explores how lonely people perceive their own loneliness compared to non-lonely individuals. This dimension examines the self-assessment mechanisms, cognitive processes, social stigma and self-focus that contribute to one's sense of loneliness or social connectedness. Section two explores the emotional responses, attributes, duration

and situational variables related to loneliness. This segment highlights the emotions involved in loneliness and suggests that different individuals may experience it differently.

Additionally, in section three this review explores the concept of the concept of social asymmetry, which challenges the traditional definition of loneliness by highlighting the discrepancy between actual social isolation and perceived loneliness. Watanabe-Miura et al.'s (2022) study underscores the substantial role that personality traits can play in shaping one's experience of loneliness. In section four, the cross-cultural variability in the experience of loneliness is examined. As in the experience of loneliness. As Jones et al. (1985) suggest, cultural norms, upbringing and societal values play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' interpretations of loneliness.

This literature review on loneliness stands out as essential due to its multifaceted approach. It not only explores cognitive and emotional aspects but also the influence of personality traits and cultural variations. To the best of my knowledge, the perception of loneliness is a highly diverse and relatively underexplored topic. Few studies, and even fewer recent ones from the past decade, explore loneliness through the lenses of emotions, personal attributes and the influencing contexts. This paper aims to bridge this gap by summarising both classical and recent studies important to the topic. And as a result, making it a valuable resource for future research, targeted interventions and support systems.

2. Method

In conducting this comprehensive literature review, a structured search strategy was used to identify and select relevant sources. The following methodological aspects were considered.

2.1 Databases and sources

A systematic search was conducted in multiple scholarly databases including, but not limited to, PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Additionally, specific academic journals known for publishing research on loneliness and related topics were also reviewed.

2.2 Search terms and keywords

The search queries were designed to capture a wide range of literature related to loneliness perception. Key search terms including but not limited to "Perceived Loneliness", "Social Interaction Patterns", "Predictors and Responses", "Social Asymmetry", "Cultural Variability" Boolean operators such as "and" and "or" were used to refine search results.

2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were included exploring the perception and experience of loneliness. Studies were excluded if they did not align with the central theme or criteria. Inclusion criteria encompassed articles in English, with no date restrictions, peer-reviewed and published in academic journals. Out of the 90 papers retrieved, only 33 qualified for inclusion. Additionally, relevant references from other studies were also incorporated.

2.4 Article selection process

Initially, articles were screened based on titles and abstracts for relevance to the central theme of loneliness perception. Subsequently, full-text articles were reviewed and those that met the inclusion criteria were selected for further analysis.

2.5 Tools

To enhance the clarity and readability of the paper, an advanced language model, specifically ChatGPT, was used during the writing and editing process.

2.6 Data disclosure statement

Studies investigating various variables and conditions, including statistics and sample demographics, Sample Size, have been summarised in Supplementary Table 5.

3. Section one

3.1 Social interaction patterns of lonely individuals and their counter parts

Gaining insight into how lonely individuals perceive their own loneliness compared to non-lonely individuals helps us better understand loneliness perception. Lonely individuals may experience a heightened impact of the emotion. They often perceive their social interactions as more superficial and less satisfying, leading to a stronger feeling of isolation. Additionally, they may interpret ambiguous social cues more negatively, reinforcing their loneliness (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010).

Loneliness can also affect cognitive processes, including the way individuals perceive their social interactions. Research conducted by Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) and Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) observed lonely individuals to demonstrate heightened attention to social threats. In Qualter *et al.*'s (2015) comprehensive review, they provided detailed insights into the impact of loneliness across the lifespan. Their research emphasised how loneliness can significantly affect various aspects of our social perceptions and interactions. They highlighted that as individuals experience loneliness, their social interactions tend to become less satisfying.

Cognitively, individuals experiencing higher levels of loneliness tend to engage in increased rumination and self- and other-blaming. They use fewer cognitive reappraisal or helpful thought reframing techniques. And behaviourally, lonely individuals often suppress their emotions (expressive suppression) and are more likely to actively decline or withdraw from social support. While also being less likely to seek social support (Preece *et al.*, 2021).

However, non-lonely individuals generally have more positive perceptions of their social interactions. They are more likely to interpret ambiguous situations in a positive light, reinforcing their sense of social connectedness. Studies by Jones and Carpenter (1986) indicated that non-lonely individuals tend to focus on the potential rewards of social interactions, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of positive social experiences. While existing research provides insights into the differences in perceptions of social interactions between lonely and non-lonely individuals, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that track changes in perceptions over time.

3.2 Lonely individuals' perceptions and evaluations of their relationships

In the study conducted by Duck, Pond and Leatham in 1994, it was observed that lonely individuals have a tendency to evaluate their own relationships in a negative manner. This negative evaluation was not limited to specific details of their interactions within the relationships but also to their overall perception of intimacy within those relationships. However, loneliness does not consistently lead to a negative outlook on communication, as they do not universally see conversations with friends or others negatively, although they do tend to rate communication quality as low.

Importantly, their negativity tends to be focused on their own relationships, while they do not typically rate others' relationships negatively. The study also emphasised that the negativity expressed by lonely individuals about their own relationships is not merely a behavioural

difference but rather a cognitive processing difference. This difference is related to how they evaluate and recall their relationships, which is distinct from their evaluation of conversations with others or others' relationships.

Moreover, the research reveals that lonely individuals become more negative about their own relationships after viewing themselves interacting on videotape, even when they initially rated those relationships as intimate. This suggests that the source of their negativity may be related to their own perceived performance.

In essence, lonely individuals seem to construct perceptions of their relationships differently compared to non-lonely individuals. They appear to assign greater significance to negative experiences in their conversations and react more strongly to them, potentially perpetuating a cycle of negativity. The (Duck *et al.*, 1994) study proposes the existence of an "Insider mechanism", involving rumination and re-evaluation of experiences, which contributes to the perpetuation of loneliness. This mechanism may involve the way lonely individuals store, process and reflect on information about their relationships.

However, it is worth noting that the study did not investigate how loneliness affects interactions with strangers, which limits the understanding of its impact across social contexts. Additionally, the incomplete use of the "Round Robin design" may hinder data comprehensiveness and the ability to draw strong conclusions.

3.3 Social stigma surrounding loneliness

In 1992, Rotenberg and Kmill conducted a study that revealed the social stigma surrounding loneliness. It suggests that being a lonely person is considered a socially discredited category, as individuals in the study attributed lower psychosocial functioning to lonely people than non-lonely people. This negative stereotype associated with loneliness extends to how individuals perceive lonely individuals as acquaintances, co-workers and friends. Consequently, due to the social stigma attached to loneliness, individuals are likely to deny being lonely and hide it from others.

Additionally, the research underscores that lonely individuals exhibit reduced acceptance of non-lonely individuals compared to the mutual acceptance seen among non-lonely individuals. These findings suggest that lonely individuals may adopt a specific orientation or attitude in their social interactions. This orientation or attitude may contribute to the perpetuation of their loneliness, as they may be less motivated to befriend sociable individuals with strong social skills. Consequently, this reduced inclination to form relationships with non-lonely individuals could impede their efforts to alleviate loneliness through social interaction.

Rotenberg and Kmill's (1992) study also points out that Lonely individuals may exhibit a distinct behaviour in their social interactions, which can be linked to the concept of "Misery Loves (Miserable) Company", as described by Wenzlaff and Prohaska (1989). This phenomenon suggests that lonely individuals may be less inclined to befriend non-lonely individuals because it accentuates their own unhappiness and perceived shortcomings. This behaviour can be attributed to upward social comparison, where lonely individuals view non-lonely people as "deservedly happy", leading to feelings of inadequacy and discomfort.

3.4 Role of self-focus

Loneliness, as discussed by Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010), can lead individuals to become increasingly self-focused, with a particular emphasis on perceiving deficiencies in their social interactions and relationships. This heightened self-focus, as the authors argue, plays a pivotal role in fostering the negative emotions often associated with loneliness. Taking this further, a longitudinal study by Cacioppo *et al.* (2010) discussed the connection between loneliness and

depressive symptoms. Their research not only underlines the link between loneliness and heightened self-focus but also suggests that this intensified self-focus on negative thoughts and feelings contributes to the development of depressive symptomatology.

In a related vein, Wood et al. (1990) explored the intricate relationship between self-focused attention and negative mood. Their study revealed a significant connection, encompassing a range of negative emotions beyond just sadness. Particularly noteworthy was the tendency of highly self-focused individuals to adopt passive and ruminative coping styles, characterised by inaction and repetitive dwelling on negative thoughts or emotions, which ultimately leads to increased distress and negative affect. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the study by Wood et al. (1990) did not provide strong evidence that an individual's level of self-focus on one day strongly predicts their mood on the following day. Instead, the association becomes more pronounced when considering how self-focus relates to overall mood differences between individuals.

Masi et al. (2011), in a comprehensive meta-analysis of loneliness interventions, discussed the role of self-focused cognitive processes in addressing loneliness. They revealed that interventions designed to combat loneliness frequently target maladaptive self-focus and negative self-perceptions as effective means to alleviate loneliness. Ingram et al. (1992) conducted a study that further reinforces the impact of self-focus. Their results demonstrated that chronically self-focused individuals tend to exhibit heightened negative affect, dysfunctional negative thoughts and reduced self-deception. Owing to the significant impact of self-focus on loneliness, it warrants greater attention in tackling loneliness. Implementing interventions specifically targeting self-focus and gathering their outcomes should be prioritised.

4. Section two

4.1 Processes that occur alongside and as a result of feeling lonely

Understanding how people perceive loneliness is complex. Researchers have made progress in identifying different aspects of loneliness, but comprehending the intricate processes that occur alongside and as a result of feeling lonely remains challenging. The study by Gerstein et al. (1987) aimed to address this gap by examining how situational factors, attributions and the duration of loneliness relate to emotional responses linked with loneliness. This study serves as a valuable reference in this paper, as these variables play a crucial role in shaping an individual's perception of loneliness.

4.2 Affective responses

"Affect" generally refers to the emotional aspect of an individual's psychological state, encompassing emotions, moods and feelings. "Affective responses" in this paper specifically pertain to the range of emotions and feelings that individuals experience in relation to loneliness. In the study, four affective responses are studied – depletion, isolation, agitation and dejection. Several studies have identified a range of emotions during loneliness as illustrated in Supplementary Table 1. Furthermore, when examining various situations, it becomes clear that different emotional responses are triggered in different situations, elaborated in Supplementary Table 2.

A key question that emerges now is the extent to which these emotional experiences contribute to the experience of loneliness? Within the study, certain emotional responses demonstrated significant influence on loneliness, while others displayed comparatively weaker associations. Agitation and dejection are strongly associated with loneliness. Isolation shows a moderate relationship, indicating it has a noticeable but not as strong an impact on loneliness. Depletion, on the other hand, exhibits weak relationships, suggesting it has a limited influence on feelings of loneliness. Understanding the strength of these

relationships helps in identifying the emotions most linked to loneliness, aiding targeted interventions.

4.3 Attributional variables

How individuals look at the sources of their loneliness significantly shapes their experience of it. In Gerstein study, the "Stability of Attribution" variable was created to evaluate how participants perceive the future of their loneliness. It aims to assess whether individuals believe their loneliness is a temporary or a lasting condition. On the other hand, the "Locus of Causality" variable serves a different purpose. It was designed to measure participants' perceptions of their own responsibility or contribution to their feelings of loneliness. Its purpose is to determine whether individuals attribute their loneliness to internal (traits, appearance) or external cause (situational factors, environment, financial status). In the context of the paper, "Attributional Variables" are defined as the factors or variables that individuals assign as reasons for their feelings of loneliness.

One possible reason why some lonely individuals engage in activities to alleviate their loneliness, such as internet use, while others do not, could lie in their attributional beliefs about the cause of their loneliness. Upon reviewing the available research, it becomes evident that attributional styles among lonely individuals have a significant impact on their behaviour (Peplau and Perlman, 1979). When individuals attribute their loneliness to external factors, such as moving to a new city or interpreting their loneliness as a temporary experience, they tend to engage in a broader range of behaviours aimed at mitigating their loneliness. These proactive behaviours often involve efforts to connect with others, demonstrating a willingness to address their social isolation.

Conversely, individuals who attribute their loneliness to internal causes, such as perceiving themselves as unattractive, or interpret their loneliness as a stable and persistent condition, exhibit fewer behaviours aimed at alleviating their loneliness. In such cases, a common behavioural pattern emerges, characterised by withdrawal and a preference for staying at home (Peplau et al., 1982). However, at the same time attributional styles can vary in their impact. For instance, results of the study found individuals who experience loneliness and attribute it to unchanging or stable factors, tend to feel lonelier more often and more intensely, whether they believe these factors originate within themselves or externally becomes less significant in influencing their loneliness. The study also revealed a variety of attributional combinations, each associated with distinct emotional outcomes, as detailed in Supplementary Table 3.

4.4 Time and its impact on loneliness

According to the time lonely variable in the study, longer durations of reported loneliness correlated with heightened degrees of each of the four emotional experiences associated with loneliness. These findings align with prior research, such as Rubenstein et al. (1979), Rubins (1964), Weiss (1982). Additionally, the study's findings regarding depletion, dejection and agitation scores align with Rubenstein and Shaver's (1982) observations, supporting the notion that as the duration of loneliness, referred to as time lonely, extends, feelings of hopelessness and depression intensify. This observation is consistent with the findings of Jones et al. (1981), who emphasised that prolonged loneliness exacerbates feelings of anxiety, hostility and depression.

4.5 Situational variables

In Gerstein study, five situational variables are identified: lack of friends, dislocation, alienation, ending a relationship and being unattached. Similar to affective responses, certain situational variables have more influence on the experience of loneliness than

others. Notably, the most impactful factor is the loss or alteration of a relationship. Among the situational variables, alienation, being misunderstood and end in relationship fall into the category of loss/change in relationships and have more impact. Variables such as, dislocation (e.g. relocating to a new city or school), having no friends and being unattached do not entirely align with the category of relationship loss/change and consequently, their impact is relatively lesser.

For instance, in the study, ending a relationship and alienation (e.g. perceived rejection, being misunderstood) had an impact on each of the four affectives (emotions felt during loneliness), whereas dislocation (e.g. moving to a new city, going to a new school) only had significant impact on feelings of isolation. Further, specific situational variables are seen to have a contribution in the emergence of specific affective response, this has been outlined in Supplementary Table 4.

5. Section three

5.1 Social asymmetry

In a recent study led by Watanabe-Miura *et al.* (2022), the researchers explored the concept of social asymmetry. They investigated how personality traits influence individuals' perceptions, creating gaps between their actual social situation and their perception of loneliness. The study examined this through four distinct combinations of social isolation and loneliness, namely:

- "No SL" denoting no loneliness and no social isolation.

- "Only S" representing solely social isolation i.e without loneliness.

- "Only L" indicating exclusive loneliness i.e without social isolation.

- "SL" signifying the presence of both social isolation and loneliness.

Notably, within these groups, the researchers particularly emphasised "Only S" and "Only L" as instances of social asymmetry.

According to the study, unlike social isolation, internal loneliness is not solely dependent on external circumstances or situations but is influenced by psychological factors. The study identifies two key psychological factors, mental distress and personality traits. Specifically, it focuses on two personality traits, neuroticism and extraversion. These traits are known to influence how individuals react to stress in their daily lives. A potential hypothesis offered by the study suggests a person's personality to be linked to how they perceive isolation. This connection might be due to their ability to resist stress and react to it. Sometimes, this could lead to a difference between the actual level of isolation they experience and how lonely they feel.

Higher extraversion is associated with two distinct social groups: "Only S" (solely socially isolated) and "Only L" (solely experiencing loneliness). This suggests that more extroverted individuals, known for sociability and assertiveness (McCabe and Fleeson, 2012) tend to belong to these groups. Interestingly, there is a different link with neuroticism, a trait linked to emotional instability and anxiety (Bolger and Schilling, 1991). "Only L" individuals have higher neuroticism, while "Only S" individuals exhibit lower neuroticism levels.

Interestingly, "Only S" individuals consistently show higher extraversion levels. Implying that extraversion may contribute to an individual's ability to maintain a more positive outlook and potentially seek out social connections even when faced with social isolation. It suggests that personality traits, such as extraversion, can play a pivotal role in resilience against loneliness, even when external circumstances might promote isolation. The study further suggests that the absence of loneliness in the "Only S" group during periods of social

isolation may be attributed to their lower stress-reactivity (Sahi and Raghavi, 2016), stemming from their lower neuroticism levels. Conversely, for the "Only L" group, higher neuroticism appears to contribute to their feelings of loneliness. Unfortunately, the study findings cannot be completely trusted since both – the indication of loneliness and the mental and psychological factors were based on self-reported data prone to influences.

Other findings reveal that, when it comes to severe loneliness without severe social isolation (referred to as "Only L"), socio-demographic factors and physical and mental health status may have a closer association than personality traits. This means that factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status and one's physical and mental well-being could play a more significant role in severe loneliness, rather than their inherent personality traits.

In addition to the aforementioned findings, the study revealed another noteworthy observation. Specifically, they observed, the "Only S" group, which does not experience loneliness, tended to be older and had lower educational attainment than the "SL" group, which faced a higher risk of both social isolation and loneliness. This finding appears to contradict previous research, which suggested that being older and having lower educational attainment were risk of loneliness. (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2022).

However, a study by Schoenmakers and colleagues (Schoenmakers *et al.*, 2012), examined individuals coping mechanisms for loneliness in various situations, proposed that older individuals with lower educational attainment often use a coping strategy known as "regulative coping". This involves lowering expectations about their relationships. Older individuals with lower educational attainment may adjust their expectations even during periods of social isolation, whereas others may attempt to alleviate loneliness by increasing social interactions.

6. Section four

6.1 Cultural influences

To show the diverse interpretations of loneliness, a demonstration is drawn from the study by Jones *et al.* (1985) that reveals patterns in correlations between predictor variables and feelings of loneliness. The study included college students from two distinct geographical backgrounds: the mainland USA ($n = 259$) and Puerto Rico ($n = 332$), hereby represented as "OK" and "PR". In the study, the higher loneliness reported by the PR sample is associated with the cultural differences in the beliefs and values regarding solitude, loneliness and relationships. In a similar study, Cacioppo *et al.*, (2014) emphasised the impact of cultural norms on people's expectations of social interactions and loneliness. And pointed out that cultures vary in their acceptance of solitude and the importance of social connections.

From the study it can be inferred that the PR culture may place more emphasis on group orientation, collectivism and interdependence, whereas the OK culture may value individualism, independence and self-reliance more. Ong *et al.* (2019) suggest that interdependent cultures (common in collectivist cultures) see loneliness as social disconnection, while independent cultures (common in individualistic cultures) view it as a lack of self-sufficiency. Furthermore, research on cultural differences in emotional expression suggests that individuals from cultures that value emotional restraint may be less likely to seek social support when feeling lonely, potentially exacerbating their feelings of loneliness (Miyamoto *et al.*, 2011). The differences in personality, attitude, social behaviour and relational variables between the two samples may also reflect cultural influences on the development and expression of these constructs. However, these differences did not affect the fundamental organisation of personality across cultures, as suggested by the similarity of the factor structures for the two samples.

The few differences in the predictor variables for loneliness between the two samples may indicate some cultural variations in the experience and meaning of loneliness. For example, the PR sample showed a stronger inverse relationship between loneliness and positive attitudes towards human nature, suggesting that they may rely more on their general trust and altruism to deal with loneliness. The PR sample also showed a stronger direct relationship between loneliness and uncertainty, indicating that they may be more sensitive to social upheaval and change. Moreover, the PR sample showed a stronger inverse relationship between loneliness and closeness to family members, implying that they may depend more on their family ties for social support and satisfaction.

This finding aligns with a meta-analysis of 148 studies (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010) that found social relationships, including family relationships, associated with a reduced risk of mortality. In fact, the meta-analysis revealed that stronger social relationships were linked to a 50% increased likelihood of survival. While this study primarily focuses on mortality, it indirectly suggests that the strong family influence observed in the PR sample can have a significant impact on overall well-being, which could include reduced feelings of loneliness. However, the observed variations in Jones et al.(1985) could also result from methodological limitations, especially the high number of comparisons in the study, which could increase the risk of inflated results and Type I errors.

All in all, two clear patterns emerge for consideration. First, family plays a more significant role in influencing loneliness among PR participants than the OK. This aligns with broader studies on Latin America emphasising family's impact on social behaviour (Falcon, 1970). Second, PR students score higher in individualism, suggesting that if family connections weaken, there might be fewer social satisfaction options. In contrast, in the OK group, general beliefs about human nature are more connected to loneliness, as family closeness has a weaker link. In situations with less family influence, one's expectations about people in general play a larger role in their sense of loneliness. This aligns with findings from Hawkley and Cacioppo(2010), which says that individual differences in expectations, such as the expectation that others will provide emotional support, can contribute to feelings of loneliness. When individuals expect more from their social interactions, they may feel lonelier when those expectations are not met.

However, Jones et al. (1985) only examined two cultural groups, and a broader investigation could have given more comprehensive results. There is also a lack of longitudinal design and the data is self-reported making it prone to cultural complexity and translation errors.

7. Discussion

The literature reviewed in this paper highlights various dimensions of loneliness, social interaction patterns, emotional responses, personality traits and cultural influences. The preference for older studies in this paper is attributed to their foundational significance. Recent studies frequently reference and build upon these earlier researches. This also highlights the scarcity of recent studies directly addressing the specific aspects explored in this paper. In this discussion, we will synthesise and analyse these findings to gain a comprehensive understanding of loneliness and its implications for individuals and society.

7.1 Interaction patterns, relationships, social stigma, self-focus and their implications

The first set of findings highlights the intricate web of negative thoughts and perceptions that lonely individuals often find themselves trapped in. Lonely individuals exhibit heightened awareness of their loneliness, which taints their perceptions of social interactions. They tend to interpret ambiguous cues negatively, leading to a cycle of dissatisfaction with their social experiences. This increased negativity also spills over into their own relationships, as they focus on negative experiences and interactions. The study

suggests the existence of an "Insider mechanism", characterised by rumination and the re-evaluation of experiences, which perpetuates loneliness.

Moreover, it is important to note that loneliness often comes burdened with a social stigma, causing individuals to hide their feelings of isolation due to the negative stereotypes associated with it. In addition, lonely individuals may exhibit reduced acceptance of non-lonely individuals, which can impede their attempts to alleviate loneliness through social interaction. Loneliness intensifies self-focus, particularly regarding perceived deficiencies in social interactions and relationships, thereby contributing to negative emotions and the development of depressive symptoms. Individuals with a heightened self-focus often tend to adopt passive and ruminative coping styles, which can result in heightened distress and a negative emotional state. Notably, interventions targeting maladaptive self-focus have shown promise in effectively addressing the issue of loneliness.

7.2 Emotional responses to loneliness

The second set of findings by Gerstein et al. (1987) talks about the emotional responses associated with loneliness. Loneliness is not a uniform emotional state; it comprises various affective responses, including depletion, isolation, agitation and dejection. Among these, agitation and dejection exhibit strong associations with loneliness, whereas isolation and depletion show varying degrees of connection. This insight highlights the complexity of loneliness and suggests that different individuals may experience it differently.

Attributional variables also play a significant role in shaping emotional outcomes related to loneliness. How individuals attribute their loneliness, whether to internal or external factors, influences their behaviour. External attributions, for instance, may lead to proactive efforts to combat loneliness. Additionally, the duration of loneliness and situational variables, such as the loss or alteration of relationships, further complicate the emotional landscape of loneliness.

7.3 Personality traits and loneliness

The third set of findings explores the role of personality traits in how individuals perceive and respond to loneliness. Extroverted individuals are more resilient to social isolation and may experience it without feeling lonely, thanks to the traits associated with extraversion. In contrast, those with higher neuroticism are more prone to exclusive loneliness. However, socio-demographic factors and overall well-being also play a significant role in severe loneliness. Interestingly, older individuals with lower education levels may adapt by lowering relationship expectations during social isolation, mitigating loneliness.

These results suggest that addressing loneliness should consider both personality traits and broader life circumstances. For extroverted individuals, interventions might focus on maintaining their proactive social engagement during periods of isolation, while for those with higher neuroticism, strategies to cope with exclusive loneliness may be more beneficial. Moreover, addressing socio-demographic factors, such as access to social support networks, can help mitigate loneliness in vulnerable populations.

7.4 Cultural influences on loneliness

The fourth set of findings discusses the cultural factors influencing loneliness. The study by Jones et al. (1985) and other studies reveal that cultural differences in values and beliefs related to relationships and solitude impact loneliness. Collectivist cultures, emphasise group orientation and reliance on family ties for social support. In contrast, individualistic cultures value independence and may associate loneliness with broader attitudes towards human nature. Among the two groups studied, PR students relied more on family ties for social support, whereas OK students linked loneliness to their general attitudes towards human

nature. These findings suggest that family plays a more significant role in PR students' loneliness, while general beliefs about human nature influence loneliness in OK students. However, the study's limitations include a small sample size and self-reported data.

These findings emphasise the importance of considering cultural context when studying and addressing loneliness. Effective interventions need to be culturally sensitive, recognising that the sources and manifestations of loneliness may vary across different cultural backgrounds. Family and community-based support systems may play a more significant role in collectivist cultures, whereas individualistic cultures may require interventions that promote independence and self-reliance.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings presented in these studies provide valuable insights into the complex phenomenon of loneliness. Loneliness is not a one-size-fits-all experience; it involves a myriad of emotional responses and is influenced by personality traits and cultural factors. Understanding these facets of loneliness is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems to address the pervasive issue of loneliness in our society. Conducting longitudinal studies to monitor changes in loneliness perceptions over time and assessing the effectiveness of interventions is also encouraged.

Future research should adopt a more diverse methodological approach. Given the prevalence of self-report measures in the majority of studies, the inclusion of objective measures and observational methods is encouraged to enhance the reliability and validity of findings. Furthermore, the overrepresentation of student participants and older individuals in the studies underscores the necessity of exploring a broader demographic spectrum, particularly focusing on age groups such as middle-aged individuals who may face distinct challenges related to loneliness. Future research should also consider incorporating mixed methods, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences of loneliness while also capturing objective indicators.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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