GROWING UP SOLO: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE PERCEIVED EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS AMONG ONLY CHILDREN ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Despite the apparent trend of declining global fertility rates and fewer children per household in recent years, only children are still viewed negatively, even theorists labeled them as 'spoiled' and 'maladjusted'. In Philippine society, only children frequently face societal stereotypes that depict them as isolated or emotionally underdeveloped for social interactions from their existential experiences. This research explored the lived experiences of six Filipino only children young adults residing in the Philippines regarding existential loneliness. Data was collected through face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews, and analyzed through coding and thematic analysis techniques. Five major themes and six sub-themes have emerged. The major themes are: Social Connection, Life Purpose, Focused Parental Attention, Coping Strategies to Alleviate Loneliness, and Personality, while the sub-themes are Support Received from Others, Suppressing or Displacing emotions, Engaging in Activities, Tendency to be reserved or Introverted, and Lack of Social Skills. The accounts of most participants indicated the absence of feelings of existential loneliness. It is recommended that future research should focus on identifying strategies that strengthen social engagement opportunities and explore the development and implementation of intervention programs that focus on enhancing only children's social skills

Keywords: Existential loneliness, only children adults, social connection, coping with loneliness

INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of human society, the concept of family size has undergone significant transformations throughout history—from the large families of agrarian societies to the smaller nuclear ones of the modern era. In fact, the global trend of fertility rates falling below replacement levels has become widespread among approximately 122 countries across the income spectrum. The increasing prevalence of single-child families is significantly lower in developing countries, with a reported rate of approximately 7%, compared to developed countries, exceeding 15% (Kozlowski, 2012). In European countries, Portugal has the highest reported rate of single-child families, with approximately 57% of families consisting of single children. Recent data from 2019 shows that 26% of Canadian families, 21% of American families, and 20% of Iranian families had only one child. In Asia, Singapore's 2020 statistics show that 24% of couples had only one child (Foroutan & Bijani, 2020), while the average child per family in the Philippines has significantly dropped to 1.9 from its peak of 4.1 in 1993 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022; Leal, 2024).

The decline in family size and average children per household has psychosocial and economic implications. As fewer siblings are present, the support network for individuals. This fact is reflected in studies as shrinking family sizes play a role in heightening psychological distress and contributing to lower social participation (Teerawichitchainan & Ha, 2024). Moreover, in the family-centered culture of Filipinos, collectivist values are embedded in social life (Morillo et al., 2013) and in this context young adults who grew up as only children may face unique psychosocial challenges. On the other hand, slower population growth has positive implications specifically on relieving pressure on employment and public services leading to less unemployment and improvements in perceived quality of service (find source). Although in the long term, this continuous decline may lead to a shrinkage in the workforce which has sparked anxiety in countries with falling birth rates (Boydell et al., 2023).

Birth order is a known and significant concept in the Philippines that influences the expectations of parents of their children and society of their peers on responsibilities and characteristics that one should possess based on the order of which they were born. In addition to these expectations, birth order contributes to a sense of structure in the family (Martinez, 2023). One prominent theory concerning birth order was developed by Alfred Adler and is known as the Birth Order Theory. The theory posits that the presence or absence of siblings and/or the order in which the child was born has an effect on the individual formation of a person (Adler, 1964 as cited in Horner et al., 2012). Adler viewed birth order as an objective reality and a predetermined place for a person in the existing social structure in the family in the sense that individuals cannot choose what birth order they are born in. Although the theory posits that the order in which an individual is born and whether they are an only child impacts the overall individual (Horner et al., 2012), it is not a sole determinant, in fact, Adler (1964, as cited in Shulman & Mosak, 1977) mentioned that key factors such as parent-child relationship and the psychological position also affect an individual's key traits and personality.

In this era of shifting family demographics, the experiences of Filipino only-children adults provides a lens in examining the intersection of family size and dynamics, birth order, and psychosocial outcomes. This paper investigates how Filipino only-child adults perceive and experience existential loneliness in the context of their social environment. In addition, taking into consideration the information presented, despite the apparent trend concerning global fertility rates and the drop in average children per household, only-children and one-child households are still viewed in a negative light with notions of only-children to be spoiled and

unlikable (Stronge et al., 2019). As reflected in a poll by Gallup, Inc (2023), only 3% of American adults would have a preference or would find having only one child and being a part of a family with only one child ideal.

The stereotypes permeated through society such as those of only children being self-centered, spoiled, and lonely can lead to stereotype threat. Stereotype threat occurs when the negative expectations that arise from existing stereotypes adversely impact an individual's (specifically those part of a stereotyped group, such as only children) performance contrary to their actual ability to perform well (American Psychological Association, 2023). Consequently, the presence of stereotype threat is found to negatively impact psychological and physical well being, (Aronson et al., 2013), motivation, and performance in various settings such as the workplace and the academe (Walton et al., 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Stereotypes relating to only-children imply that children who have no siblings often lack social skills, are self-centered, and are prone to loneliness. Although these notions on only-children have been widespread across different cultures and even implicated on a few psychological theories, there is little empirical evidence that proves these claims (Sissons, 2022). This underscores the importance of addressing such notions and unsubstantiated stereotypes with more robust and rigorous research Moreover, existing qualitative studies on existential loneliness are limited, with others focusing on adolescents (Garnow et al., 2022) and older adults (Sundström et al., 2018; Olofsson et al., 2021; & Larsson et al., 2023); while there is a qualitative study that included young to older adults as their participants, it overlooked existential loneliness—focusing solely on the general concept of loneliness (McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023a). Despite the extensive research about this type of loneliness, the existential and emotional outcomes of growing up as an only-child in adulthood are still not fully understood, especially in the collectivist culture of Filipinos. These findings implicate a gap in knowledge concerning existential loneliness among Filipino only-children adults. These findings highlight the need for studies that explore existential and emotional experiences of Filipino only-children adults which considers their unique cultural context and emphasize familial and other communal values.

Review of Related Literature

Personality Theories on Only-Children and Adults

A critical examination of personality theories concerning only children is essential for providing an evidence-based understanding of their psychological development, challenging enduring stereotypes, and contextualizing their experiences within changing familial and cultural dynamics. Psychological theories offer diverse perspectives on the personality and emotional experiences of only-children. G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer and the first president of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2008), viewed being an only-child as a 'disease' in itself proliferating the notion that only-children are spoiled, maladjusted, and antisocial among many other negative characteristics. This belief of Hall is viewed to be a major contributory factor as to why stereotypes on only-children are still prevalent in today's society particularly, and even in the Philippines (Torre, 2023), despite the growing population of one-child households and the scrutiny and differing opinions of scholars in the academe (Pocock, 2015).

Throughout the history of single-children studies, only-children are theorized to differ from individuals who have siblings. This difference is attributed to presumptions that they receive more focused

attention, expectations, and resources from their family members due to the absence of a sibling (Falbo, 1980; Veenhoven & Verkuyten 1989; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Arora & Teotia, 2021; Lo, 2023). One of the prominent theorists who discussed family constellations was Adler (as cited by Feist et al., 2018, pp. 92), theorizing that only borns might develop certain personality traits. The absence of siblings could lead only-children to become self-centered and less inclined to cooperate with other people, often expecting special attention and treatment. They might struggle with forming and maintaining social relationships. Moreover, he also believed that only-children might become socially mature, independent, and self-reliant, possessing a more individualistic and self-sufficient approach to life. However, it is important to mention that Adler also emphasized that this is not universal as many only-children develop a strong sense of relationship and a sense of empathy.

Similarly, the theory of Toman (1961) posited that only-children, especially males, might seek attention and validation from others, often going to extremes to capture it. However, this could hinder their ability to form genuine peer relationships. Female only-children might struggle to understand the perspectives of others, leading to difficulties in social interactions and a tendency towards self-centeredness.

While these theories offer insights into the potential personality traits of children who grow up without siblings, it is noteworthy that they are largely rooted in Western cultural contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the cultural and societal factors that can influence individual development of only-children, specifically their emotional experiences, including feelings of loneliness and its underlying categories.

Loneliness among Only-Children and Adults

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research examining loneliness and its association with unique sibling relationships among individuals across the life span. In a quantitative study conducted by Hayes et al. (2022) on the relationship between social identity, emotion regulation, and loneliness of adults, it was found that there is a significant link between loneliness and social support given. This is likewise reflected in the sibling study of Stocker et al. (2020), indicating that older adults who have close and supportive relationships with their siblings are less likely to experience feelings of loneliness.

The limited resources studying loneliness among only-children adults suggest that this group may be less likely to experience feelings of loneliness, compared to those with siblings. In India, Arora and Teotia (2021) conducted a comparative study between only-children and children with siblings' adjustment and personality, sampling 100 participants who were aged 18 to 25 years (50 only children & 50 children with siblings). Interestingly, the study found that sibling children were higher in the personality dimension neuroticism compared to those without siblings. This implies that they are more likely to easily experience negative emotions such as moodiness, anxiety, depression, vulnerability, and anger. This is consistent with the quantitative findings of Lin et al. (2021) where it was reported that Chinese only-children emerging adults, who were within the age range of 17 to 21 years, experienced less loneliness than those with siblings. These results contradict the stereotype in China that being an only-child is associated with higher levels of loneliness.

Parallel results were found in fewer quantitative studies among only-children adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Shen et al. (2021) found that singleton adolescents reported lower levels of

loneliness than those with siblings. It was suggested that the differing levels of loneliness experienced by only-children and those with siblings could be attributed to the amount of care given by their families during the pandemic. Moreover, Wikle et al. (n.d.), in their quantitative study among adolescents with and without siblings, likewise reported that only-children felt lower levels of loneliness only when they were interacting with their friends and cousins. The findings implied that peer relationships can play a vital role in the emotional well-being of only-children, offering a source of support and connection.

Existential Loneliness

The concept of existential loneliness is rooted in philosophical and psychological thought and is an integral part of empirical work that features a multidimensional model of loneliness. This type of loneliness is implicated in a limited number of studies with existing evidence being primarily focused on older adults and those afflicted with life-threatening illnesses, and conceptualization. In a synthesis of qualitative data on loneliness by Mansfield et al. (2021), the researchers conceptualized existential loneliness as a part of the human condition which makes an individual feel separated from others; an experience of loneliness that is heightened when met by traumatic events, situations, and/or death. In another study by McKenna-Plumley et al. (2023b) on existential loneliness among youth to older adults, the study found major themes that constituted the experiences of participants in relation to existential loneliness: it (existential loneliness) was a deeper form of loneliness; that it was characterized by a sense of disconnection; and cognitive evaluations in the form of existential reflections where the central element is negative emotions.

The available qualitative explorations on existential loneliness throughout the decade is relatively scarce, with only four of them easily accessible to academic inquiries. In a qualitative study in 2018, Sundström et al. discovered that health care professionals observed that 'frail' older adult patients aged 75 years or older often exhibited signs of existential loneliness. This manifested in various ways, including difficulties in communication, unmet needs, privacy concerns, and a reluctance to discuss existential issues due to fear. Moreover, the results of this study is substantiated in a more recent inquiry examined by Larsson et al. last year, identifying existential loneliness among 'frail' older adults aged 75 years or older.These individuals reported suffering from illness, care, and the challenges of aging in various care settings.

Despite the existing literature on existential loneliness presented above, there is an evident scarcity of research specifically contextualizing such a topic on Filipino only-children across the age spectrum of adulthood. While a singular study has examined this topic among Filipino senior high school students, the full paper remains inaccessible, hence the necessity to pursue the present study.

Theoretical Background

Theoretical Framework

Adlerian theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the potential impact of being an only child on individual development, particularly to social relationships and emotional experiences. Alfred Adler's emphasis on social interest and the role of birth order in shaping personality aligns closely with the inquiry of how being an only child might influence one's sense of belonging and connection to others.

Key aspects of Adlerian theory that are relevant to this study include social interest and birth order. Social interest is a fundamental human drive that motivates individuals to connect with others and contribute to the community. Only children, without the immediate influence of siblings, might face unique challenges in developing strong social bonds and cultivating a sense of belonging. While the concept of birth order provides insights on its influence on personality traits and social behaviors. As the only child, individuals may experience a unique set of dynamics within their family, which could shape their attitude toward social relationships (Horner et al., 2012).

Research Questions

The study primarily examined only children adults and their perceived existential loneliness. Specifically, the researchers sought to answer the following research questions:

- What lived experiences do Filipino only-child adults identify as distinct from those with siblings, particularly within the context of Filipino family values, social expectations, and cultural norms?
- What are the contributory factors that lead to the perceived absence or presence of existential loneliness in only children adults?
- How do only-child adults cope with or manage experiences of existential loneliness?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design that utilizes a phenomenological approach in the observation, collection, and interpretation of data. This research design is employed to allow the participants of the study to describe their internal realities which will provide in-depth insight into how their unique circumstances contribute to their perceptions. Qualitative research designs involve collecting non-numerical data to explore and explain experiences, phenomena, or concepts (Bhandari, 2023). Moreover, phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that examines individuals' lived experiences in the world (Neubauer, 2019). As qualitative phenomenological research seeks to understand and find meaning behind individuals' experiences, this type of research design is ideal for uncovering and examining the subjective perceptions of only children adults towards existential loneliness.

Participants and Study Sites

The target population for this study consisted of individuals who met the following eligibility criteria: they must be 18 years old or older, be Filipino citizens residing in the Philippines, and be only children—defined as having no biological, step-, or half-siblings.

To identify participants, the researchers employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research. This method was chosen to ensure that all participants met the specific inclusion criteria relevant to the study's objectives. By intentionally selecting individuals with firsthand experience of being an only child in the Philippine cultural context, purposive sampling allowed for the in-depth exploration of unique lived experiences and perceptions of existential loneliness. A total of six participants were included in the study, consisting of five females (P1, P2, P3, P4, & P6) and one male (P5), all between the ages of 20 and 22. The sample size was deliberately kept small to align with the standards of qualitative and phenomenological research, which emphasize depth over breadth (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994, as cited in Collins et al., 2006). This size allows for rich, detailed narratives while remaining manageable for rigorous thematic analysis.

The semi-structured interview was carried out using two methods: face-to-face interactions and online sessions conducted through the

Zoom application. Ensuring a comfortable setting for the discussion, three participants (P1, P2, and P6) were interviewed in person in a conducive area at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran - Manila that was convenient for both the researchers and the participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in empty classrooms, chosen for their privacy, quietness, and familiarity to participants. These controlled academic settings minimized distractions and helped create a safe and comfortable environment, fostering openness and reflective dialogue during the interviews. Because of scheduling difficulties encountered by both the researchers and participants, three interviews (P3, P4, and P5) were conducted using the aforementioned online application as an alternative method.

Research Instruments

Before the conduct of the main data gathering process, the researchers conducted a preliminary data collection to screen willing participants' eligibility in participating in the study (*see Appendix E*). Through Google forms, the link and its corresponding QR code for the pre-selection part was posted on both the researchers' Facebook and Instagram accounts, including details such as the consent form, eligibility criteria, and affirmation of the participants' rights to data privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Along with these ethical considerations, the GForms also contain sections allowing potential participants to indicate their demographics, contact details, and preferred interview date, time, and location.

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview. The researchers developed a set of questions based on the research objectives, which focused on uncovering the experiences of only children on existential loneliness, the factors that contribute to the presence or absence of feelings of existential loneliness, and their coping strategies in dealing with these emotions (*see Appendix C*). The interview included 11 main questions with additional/follow-up questions based on the participants' responses, allowing the participants. Once finalized, these questions were reviewed and validated by a research expert to ensure their relevance and validity in gathering the necessary information. This interview guide facilitated a structured yet flexible conversation that allowed the participants to share their personal insights, experiences, and reflections in a comprehensive manner. The follow-up questions were intended to probe deeper into responses, depending on cases of yes or no answers, ensuring that all pertinent aspects of their experiences are fully examined.

Data Gathering Process

To recruit participants, the researchers utilized social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram, by posting digital publication materials containing a Google Forms link and its corresponding Quick Response (QR) code. Social media was chosen as the primary recruitment method due to its wide accessibility, popularity among the target age group (20–22 years), and its effectiveness in reaching a broad yet specific audience within a short period. This method was particularly beneficial in identifying individuals who met the eligibility criteria—Filipino only-child adults residing in the Philippines—while maintaining participant autonomy and voluntary consent.

The Google Form served as both a recruitment and screening tool. Interested individuals were first presented with a comprehensive informed consent form, outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality provisions, and the right to withdraw at any point. Only after acknowledging and agreeing to the consent terms could participants proceed. The form then collected basic demographic information, contact details, and preferences for interview scheduling, including date, time, and preferred mode (face-to-face or online).

Once the target sample size was reached, eligible participants were contacted via Facebook Messenger or email to finalize interview arrangements. Three participants (P1, P2, and P6) chose to participate in face-to-face interviews conducted in empty classrooms, selected for their quiet, familiar, and distraction-free environment. The remaining three participants (P3, P4, and P5) opted for online interviews conducted via Zoom, allowing for flexibility and inclusivity regardless of geographical limitations.

All interviews followed a semi-structured format, providing a balance between consistent guiding questions and the flexibility to explore emerging themes in depth. To establish rapport, the researchers began each session with a brief personal introduction, an explanation of the interview process, and casual conversation to create a relaxed and respectful atmosphere. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, reassured of the confidentiality of their responses, and reminded that there were no right or wrong answers. This approach fostered trust and openness, which are essential in qualitative, phenomenological research. The interview questions were designed to explore three core areas: (1) the participants' unique experiences as only children, (2) the presence or absence of existential loneliness, and (3) the strategies used to cope with or manage such feelings. Follow-up and probing questions were posed to clarify and deepen understanding based on each participant's responses.

To conclude the interviews, the researchers conducted a debriefing session to address any emotional discomfort that might have arisen during the discussion. Participants were reminded that the interview was not a clinical diagnostic session and were encouraged not to self-diagnose based on the topics covered. This final step aimed to uphold ethical standards and minimize any psychological risks associated with reflecting on personal emotional experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study is committed to adhering to ethical standards in academic research by prioritizing the confidentiality, anonymity, and well-being of all participants. Prior to continuing their participation, all participants were asked to carefully review and acknowledge their understanding of the informed consent written in the GForms. In terms of face-to-face interviews, the participants were provided with a clear explanation of the interview process and assured that their responses would be treated with utmost confidentiality. This step is essential to ensure that participants will be fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks before deciding to participate.

All personal information provided both in the preliminary data collection and the actual interview, including demographic data collected at the time of the study, were treated with strict confidentiality. Pertinent data like audio and video recordings, as well as transcriptions were stored in a Google drive folder that only the researchers have access to. Likewise, to ensure the anonymity of participants, the researchers used codes in place of identifying information (e.g., P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, & P6). All data will be permanently deleted upon completion of the study.

Moreover, participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. The researchers reserve the right to discontinue an interview if any discomfort or distress arises between the interviewer and the participant. While the study

poses minimal risks, there is a slight possibility that participants might self-diagnose mental health conditions after answering the interview questions. As the researchers highly discouraged such a tendency, this was checked during the debriefing process after the interview to ensure that the participants will not misinterpret their responses.

Furthermore, a reflexivity journal (*see Appendix D*) was maintained throughout the research process to aid researchers in being aware of potential biases and how they might influence the study's outcomes. This journal documented thoughts, assumptions, and decision-making processes, before, after, and during the conduct of the data collection process.

Data Analysis Plan

After all interviews were transcribed, the researchers listened to the recordings and read the transcripts multiple times to accurately understand the participants' responses. Afterwards, relevant passages (phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) were highlighted as codes, which were then grouped based on recurring themes. The researchers analyzed these themes to understand their significance in the study. Finally, a thematic map was created to illustrate the essence of existential loneliness and its interconnections with other factors (*see Appendix A*).

FINDINGS

Focused Parental Attention

Parental attention is the attention a parent/s gives to their offspring and is an attitude that involves monitoring overall developments in the child (Lestari, 2020). Participants described similar experiences in the increased parental attention they receive from their parents with statements highlighting how this could either be beneficial or disadvantageous.

> "...you don't have to compete for attention because all of your parents' attention is on you." (P1)

> "It's like you're used to having all the attention to yourself, like you're the only one being cared for." (P2)

> "...since I'm an only child and I'm really the only one my mom and dad are focused on… like I said, they're very strict to the point that they don't allow me to go outside that familiar neighborhood… they always read the chat messages on my phone." (P3)

> "...even though I'm an only child, it's like, I was showered with love and the attention was all on me, it wasn't divided, so yeah, it's good, but sometimes it gets lonely." (P5)

> "The pressure from my parents is focused solely on me." (P6)

Personality

Personality encompasses the lasting traits and behaviors that define an individual's distinctive approach to life. It includes core characteristics such as major traits, interests, motivations, values, self-perception, skills, and emotional tendencies (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.).

Tendency to be reserved or introverted

This sub-theme reflects the predisposition of participants toward preference for solitary or small-group interactions, and a cautious approach to social engagement.

> "I'm not that outgoing since I said I'm an introvert, so I'm more into cultivating a small circle of friends..." (P4, on describing their relationship with their peers)

> "Back then, people used to tell my parents, 'Oh, P1 is quiet, just sitting in a corner, always reading.'" (P1)

> "Because I also met someone who surprised me, turns out they're an only child too. But they're super extroverted. That's really our biggest difference." (P3)

> "As for me, I'm a very reserved person, like, I only choose certain people I can share things with." (P5)

Lack of Social Skills

The lack of Social Skills sub-theme is characterized by difficulty in forming relationships, feelings of isolation, and challenges in navigating social settings. The majority of the participants stated that they had difficulty socializing and attributed this lack to limited interactions they had as an only child.

> "Since I didn't really have anyone to talk to or practice my communication or social skills with, I had a hard time, especially in elementary school, making friends." (P1)

> "With my peers, actually, I really struggle to socialize—to make friends and all that, unless they were the ones who approached me, because even though I had cousins, I still didn't really know how to interact with others." (P2)

> "...maybe I'm just very particular about the people I face, so sometimes, I find it hard to communicate. It's like it takes time to build a connection with other people." (P5)

> "It's difficult because I don't know how to approach them or how to open up to them." (P6, on the extent of difficulty when connecting with peers).

Life Purpose

Life purpose is defined as the main aim in an individual's life that serves as a primary motivator and guide that influences attitude and behavior, as well as the creation of meaning for one's existence (Leonard & Kreitzer, 2024). The majority of the participants identified a clear sense of purpose while others stated that they are still having difficulty identifying theirs.

> "It's like one thing that would make me feel complete, or that I've accomplished something, is if I become a source of happiness for other people." (P5)

> "My purpose is to pursue my dreams and give back

to my parents." (P1)

"I really don't know what my purpose in life is." (P2)

"My sense of purpose is more on helping other people or understanding them." (P4)

"Even though that plan is laid out, I'm still struggling. Because it's more like. I keep questioning myself, 'Can I really do this?' and 'Am I really sure this is my purpose in life?'" (P3, on their plans to be a mental health professional)

Social Connection

The first major theme that emerged in the participants' responses is Social Connection. Social Connection is the interpersonal closeness between individuals that results in a sense of being supported and belonging through social relationships and finding relatedness in other people (Van Bel et al., 2009; Chuter, 2020). This theme encompasses two subthemes: the support received from others and understanding received from others.

Support Received from Others

Support received from others is the first subtheme for social connection wherein support is defined as a form of aid or encouragement that could either be practical or emotional (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024). The participants' statements highlight their experiences on the support they receive from their peers, friends, and family.

"...they help me and encourage me to pursue the things that would help me not just stay inside my shell... and for me to get out once in a while" (P1)

"I can say that the way they support me is okay... I get the feeling that they try to meet me halfway like they try to understand me as long as I try to understand them as well." (P2, on the support they received from their peers)

"The support and understanding from them is different because when it comes to friends, I feel much more comfortable opening up to them compared to my parents." (P3)

"They're fully supportive. There are times when, of course, we've been through different experiences, so they don't always understand the things I'm currently busy with, but they always try to be supportive, and they always try to motivate and comfort me whenever things get heavy." (P4, on the support they receive from their parents)

"Sometimes they bring up the fact that I'm an only child, so when they mention that, I tend to feel their support even more, like sometimes they treat me like a sibling." (P5, on the support they receive from their peers)

"Maybe it's because I'm an only child, so their focus—their support, is all on me. And maybe because we have a good relationship, we talk regularly, and their support feels strong." (P6)

Understanding Received from Others

A sense of understanding between individuals is established when one is able to consider the perspective of the other and relate with them. This sub-theme encapsulates the feeling of participants wherein they

describe the degree to which they feel that others can or cannot relate to them through the presence or absence of shared experiences or similar sentiments.

"It's like I don't totally feel 100% that I really belong. There are times when I feel like no one will truly understand me." (P2)

"There's no judgment no matter what happens. Sometimes, they're even the ones who say, 'Oh, I've gone through that too. This happened to me as well. Turns out we're the same.' But it's not in a way that you're comparing experiences, it's more about validating that, 'I understand how you felt because something similar happened to me too.'" (P3 on their relationship with friends)

"...another reason is that I got to know more people who understand me. I guess I've developed a sense of belonging with my friends, with my classmates." (P4)

"I feel like people who are also only children can relate to me more." (P5)

Coping Strategies in Alleviating Loneliness

Coping strategies pertain to the actions or mechanisms employed (either cognitive or behavioral efforts) that aim to reduce distressing emotion/s or help an individual adapt to situations associated with these emotions (Holahan et al., 2007). Statements from participants focused on how they cope with negative affect, particularly loneliness. This theme encompasses two subthemes: suppressing or displacing emotions and engaging in activities.

Engaging in Activities

This sub-theme pertains to the ways individuals combat loneliness by actively involving themselves in purposeful or enjoyable tasks. Engaging in activities serves as a distraction from feelings of isolation, provides opportunities for personal fulfillment, and can create pathways for social interaction. All the participants mentioned or stated their experiences on engaging in activities to cope with feelings of loneliness.

"...I try to talk to my friends or check in on my family to see how they're doing... I play games, finish my to-be-watched, or read." (P1)

"...I invite my friends to hang out. It's like I cling to my friends, or sometimes to my cousins or my uncles and aunts... I just joke around with them or ask them to go out with me, just so I can get that feeling off my mind."

"The thing I really do, although it's also unhealthy, is study. I just pour everything into studying." (P3)

"if I'm alone I can spend it doing self-care" (P4)

"...I approach my friends, like I'll invite them, 'Hey, let's go out,' something like that, because I feel lonely." (P5)

"My way of coping is reading, or watching my favorite shows, or listening to music so I don't dwell on it too much." (P6)

Suppressing or displacing emotions

This sub-theme reflects the tendency of the participants to manage loneliness by avoiding or redirecting their emotional experiences rather than directly addressing the root causes of their feelings. It involves behavior where emotions tied to loneliness (e.g. anger) are either minimized, ignored, shifted toward other outlets.

"I don't really pay attention to it, so what happens is it kind of builds up, and there are times when I just explode, like… you know what I mean? Like I suddenly break down because of it." (P2)

"I feel like all the people I'm close to are also busy with school, so of course I don't want to, in a way, bother them, so yeah, I end up having a hard time expressing what I'm feeling." (P1)

"One of the things I noticed, and actually my mom and my current friends noticed it too, is that I've become easily irritable, like I get angry quickly." (P3)

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Filipino only children adults and how these realities contributed to the presence or absence of feelings of existential loneliness among them. Interestingly, the accounts of most participants indicated the absence of feelings of existential loneliness as they navigate adulthood as only children. This result aligns with existing literature, which argued that only children may not live through higher levels of loneliness associated with feelings of isolation.

The findings on focused parental attention and personality resonate with existing personality theories. Falbo (1980) and Veenhoven & Verkuyten (1989) theorize that only children differ from those with siblings in terms of personality and that this difference is due to the increased resources and more focused attention they receive from their parents and other immediate family members. Although the emergent themes on the lack of social skills and tendency to be reserved of the participants may be related to the theory that only children may be less inclined to work with others (Adler as cited in Feist et al., 2018, pp. 92), more recent empirical research on personality differences between only children and those with siblings suggest that only children has comparatively lower neuroticism than those with siblings.

Furthermore, existing loneliness research on adults states that social connection and social support affects the level of loneliness of adults and plays a significant role reducing it (Hayes et al., 2022; Stocker et al., 2020). These findings are connected with the theme of social connection which encompasses the presence of support and understanding received from others (peers, family, friends, and other only children).

Furthermore, finding meaning in life and existential reflection are two components of existential loneliness that differentiate it from normal loneliness, as implicated in the qualitative studies of Olofsson et al. (2021) and McKenna-Plumley et al. (2023b). In comparison, the identified theme on purpose in life contains existential implications as it encompasses the accounts of participants which highlighted their reflections on their purpose and their identity in connection to the world and is related to the perception of the presence or absence of existential loneliness in the participants.

Recent research underscores the relationship between social support and loneliness. Hayes et al. (2022) identified a significant connection between social identity, emotion regulation, and loneliness, suggesting

that strong social support systems can alleviate feelings of loneliness. This evidence is reflected on the participants' responses. For example, P1 mentioned, *"…tinutulungan naman nila ako at ine-encourage nila ako na i-pursue 'yung mga bagay na parang, para 'di lang ako mag-stay sa shell ko… lumabas din ako,"* and P4 added, *"…other reason din kasi: I got to know more people na, na naiintindihan ako, gan'yan. Siguro nagkaroon na rin ako ng sense of belonging with my friends, gan'yan, with my classmates,' among other similar responses.* This perspective is corroborated by Lin et al.(2021), which reported that only children experienced lower levels of loneliness than their counterparts with siblings. Likewise, Wickle et al. (n.d.) suggested that only children experience reduced feelings of loneliness when engaging with peers and cousins, emphasizing the importance of extensive social networks.

Further supporting this result, studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown similar trends. Shen et al. (2021) found that only children reported lower levels of loneliness compared to those with siblings, attributing this to increased family support during challenging times. In the present study, P4 stated, *"Full support naman sila. There are times na parang s'yempre magkaiba kami ng pinagdaanan, minsan hindi nila naiintindihan 'yung mga bagay na busy ako at the moment pero they always try to be supportive and they always try to motivate me and parang to comfort me whenever nagiging mabigat na rin 'yung mga pinagdadaanan."* Aside from this, P5 also shared, *"Siguro nga kasi only child lang ako so 'yung focus nila—support nila, nasa'kin lang. And siguro nga, dahil maganda 'yung relationship namin, regularly kami nakakapag-usap, 'yung support nila is parang strong."*

While several participants disclosed feelings of general loneliness as part of their daily experiences as only children, all of them have demonstrated notable adaptability in managing these emotions as they grow older. They have developed a variety of coping strategies that are effective for them on an individual basis. Common among these approaches are engaging with friends, watching shows, reading, studying, practicing self-care activities, and listening to music. These activities provide them with outlets for connection and personal fulfillment, helping to alleviate such a feeling.

However, it is important to note that half of the participants adopted less constructive coping strategies. These individuals tended to suppress their feelings of general loneliness by minimizing or ignoring their emotions, or by diverting their attention toward other activities. This approach may offer temporary relief, but it can also hinder their ability to confront and process their feelings in a healthy manner. Overall, while the participants exhibit a range of adaptive responses to loneliness, the presence of negative coping mechanisms among some—aside from appearing to be alarming—highlights the complexity of their emotional experiences.

Lastly, another significant finding to highlight is the presence of existential loneliness as derived from the responses of two female participants, P2 and P3. This feeling appears to stem from their negative life experiences with their parents, which have profoundly impacted their emotional well-being and personal existential realities. For both P2 and P3, the dynamics of their parental relationships have contributed to a sense of isolation that transcends general feelings of loneliness. Their experiences reveal a deep-seated longing for connection and understanding that they feel has been unfulfilled due to these adverse experiences. *"Nararamdaman ko lang siya kapag siguro may problema ako or… lalo na ngayon na parang hindi okay 'yung nanay at tatay ko, so parang, alam mo 'yon, nakakaramdam ako ng lungkot, 'yung parang feeling ko salo ko 'yon, salo ko lahat, parang wala rin akong mapagsabihan, naiipit ako, hindi ko alam kung anong dapat kong gawin, kasi nga, since ako lang, ako lang 'yung naiipit."* P2 associated the state of her existence with her familial struggles of carrying the burden of

struggling alone, *"...Alam ko pa rin sa sarili ko talaga na parang... hindi siya kumpleto and hindi na siya magiging kumpleto,"* concluding the interview as they described their sense of connectedness with others.

Similarly, P3 shared that their negative interactions with their parents, specifically with their mother, have fostered feelings of isolation, reinforcing their sense of existential loneliness. Growing up as an only child, their mother developed hyper-focused parental attention, mentioning, *"Nung nag-annulled 'yung biological father ko and 'yung mom ko... doon siya naging much more stricter... since only child nga ako and babae ako, 'yung mom ko, 'yung pagka-strict niya, umabot to the point of extreme so hindi na ako pinapalabas, binabasa lagi ;yung chat messages sa phone...medyo pressuring din on my end kasi nga gusto nila na sobrang palagi akong nagsisimba every single—every Sunday..."* This illustrates how unresolved issues with parental figures can lead to a more profound and existential sense of isolation. *"It feels very lonely, kasi isa pa, 'yung expectations ng family ko, 'yung iba kasi sa kanila, gusto nila na after ko grumaduate, gusto, ako naman 'yung magbibigay sa kanila. After ko maging, makakuha ng trabaho, 'yung salary, 'yung half salary, majority of them, mapupunta sa kanila, 'yung investment, 'yung gano'n. E mag-isa lang ako, so hindi ko alam kung uunahin ko ba 'yung sarili ko, uunahin ko ba 'yung pangarap ko, o uunahin ko ba sila,"* describing her conflict with determining their purpose in life as the only child of their parents.

Evidently, both P2 and P3 faced significant life events that challenged their existential perceptions among themselves. This indicator reflects the available literature on the existential loneliness experienced by older adults, regardless of birth order. All these notable qualitative studies discovered the presence of such a phenomenon on older adults who are encountering critical life experiences, including migration, frailty, illness, and the complexities of caregiving, all of which are exacerbated by the challenges of aging in different care environments (Sundström et al., 2018; Larsson et al., 2023; & Olofsson et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that the nature of existential loneliness as a deeper form of loneliness characterized by a sense of disconnection to others appears to occur during or after significant life events.

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, particularly on the participants' demographics. First, the sample is predominantly female, with only one male participant. This imbalance in the participants' sex may introduce bias, as the emotional experiences and familial dynamics may differ between men and women, potentially affecting the study's equal representation of the perceptions of both. Second, the participants were all young adults, ranging in age from 20 to 22 years old, which may reflect only the experiences of individuals from the early adulthood stage. Third, the majority of participants (five out of six) reside in Metro Manila, with only one participant living in another region of the country. This geographical concentration could limit the study's relevance to only children adults from rural areas, where cultural, social, and economic factors may differ significantly. These demographic factors may limit the generalizability of the findings.

The findings of the study impact clinical and social work practice, as well as the understanding of existential loneliness in Filipino only child adults. It contributes to research on loneliness, only children, and the role of birth order in collectivist cultures, enriching future work in developmental psychology, social psychology, and cross-cultural studies. Moreover, they provide valuable insights for psychological practice and interventions. Since most participants did not experience existential loneliness due to strong support systems and effective coping strategies, mental health professionals can focus on strengthening these networks in therapeutic approaches. Encouraging healthy family dynamics, fostering positive peer

relationships, and developing coping skills can help mitigate psychological practice and interventions. Since most participants did not experience existential loneliness due to strong support systems and effective coping strategies, mental health professionals can focus on strengthening these networks in therapeutic approaches. Encouraging healthy family dynamics, fostering positive peer relationships, and developing coping skills can help mitigate loneliness in only children. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of communication, empathy, and shared understanding within families and society.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the existing scarce literature on existential loneliness by providing a nuanced understanding of how only children navigate feelings of loneliness in adulthood. The findings challenge established views and theories on the personality of these individuals, including the primary contributor to the prevalent stereotypes even in Philippine society today: G. Stanley Hall's negative characterization of them as "maladjusted"— among many other negative characteristics. It indicates that only children adults have adequately adapted to their unique familial circumstances through a range of coping strategies, particularly in managing and alleviating feelings of loneliness, which have helped them navigate potential challenges related to social isolation. This suggests the need for a broader theoretical framework that considers the complexities of familial and social contexts in shaping an individual's sense of connection to the world. Furthermore, the study may inform future research exploring the psychological well-being of only children, offering new avenues for investigating the interactions among cultural, familial, and personal factors in influencing the experience of loneliness and related existential concerns.

In consideration of the findings of this study, several recommendations for institutions are proposed to strengthen the support systems for only children adults and mitigate their emotional struggles. Educational institutions can integrate mental health programs, counseling services, and social engagement opportunities to help young adult students develop effective coping strategies and reduce feelings of isolation. Likewise, government agencies and non-profit organizations' family-centered programs can focus on enhancing parent-child relationships and supporting individuals who may lack traditional family structures, such as those raised by extended family or caregivers. By engaging these societal institutions, a comprehensive practical approach can be created based on the findings of this study.

For future studies, several key areas are suggested for future exploration. First, studies are recommended to use a more diverse sample that includes only children from various stages of adulthood, ensuring both men and women from different regions of the Philippines are equally represented. This would enhance the generalizability of the findings and impart a broader understanding of the presence or absence of existential loneliness across different demographic groups. Additionally, future research should consider sampling participants from middle adulthood (ages 30 and above), as individuals in this age group may experience significant existential events, such as a quarter-life or mid-life crisis, which could influence their experience of loneliness. Moreover, given that some participants reported significant loneliness during their teenage years, future research is advised to investigate existential loneliness among only children adolescents. Adolescence is a critical time of transition, and exploring the phenomenon during this period could offer valuable insights into its early onset.

Additionally, incorporating a quantitative approach using standardized instruments to measure the presence of existential loneliness would allow for more objective data, complementing qualitative findings. Aside from these, future research is encouraged to also examine how specific family dynamics, such as the quality of

parent-child relationships and the presence or absence of parents, contribute to such a type of loneliness. It is essential to explore how individuals raised in non-traditional family settings, such as those cared for by extended family members or without parental figures, experience loneliness differently. Finally, future researchers are urged to explore the development and implementation of intervention programs that focus on promoting social support networks for only children.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceived existential loneliness of Filipino only-child adults through the lens of their lived experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers sought to understand how being an only child within the Filipino cultural context may shape their emotional and psychological experiences, particularly in relation to feelings of isolation or disconnection. Through this inquiry, the researchers identified five major themes that highlighted different aspects of their social and emotional worlds: Social Connection, Life Purpose, Focused Parental Attention, Coping Strategies to Alleviate Loneliness, and Personality. Within these broad categories, six sub-themes emerged, including Support Received from Others and Understanding Received from Others under Social Connection; Suppressing or Displacing Emotions and Engaging in Activities under Coping Strategies; and Tendency to Be Reserved or Introverted and Lack of Social Skills under Personality. Key findings reveal that many participants experienced challenges in social interactions, which they linked to their upbringing as only children with limited sibling interaction. Their reflections on life purpose showed variability, with some expressing a clear sense of direction while others acknowledged uncertainty or ambiguity. Participants described a range of coping strategies to manage loneliness, from engaging in activities to emotionally suppressing or displacing difficult feelings. Focused parental attention was viewed ambivalently, providing both support and pressure. Additionally, personality traits such as introversion and limited social skills appeared common, suggesting familial environment influences.

Aside from the key findings mentioned above, the participants of the study share unique experiences that constitute being a Filipino only child adult and are affected by similar factors that impact their overall perception of existential loneliness. These factors are represented in the study through themes and subthemes. Importantly, the analysis indicates that existential loneliness is not an inherent experience for Filipino only-child adults. Most participants did not report persistent feelings of existential isolation, and those who did linked such feelings to significant life events—such as trauma or the COVID-19 pandemic—rather than their status as only children. This suggests that existential loneliness among this population is situational rather than a direct consequence of being an only child. The study underscores the complexity of their experiences and highlights the need to consider cultural, familial, and contextual factors rather than relying on stereotypes. Overall, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Filipino only-child adults and challenge assumptions that they are predisposed to loneliness or social maladjustment.

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