

## **Loneliness And Health in Emerging Adults in India**

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### **Abstract**

Loneliness is a psychosocial problem that affects individuals' and communities' mental health and well-being. Young adults from developing countries risk developing high levels of loneliness. The current review discusses the characteristics of studies on loneliness among young adults in India. The inclusion criteria of the review included peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, presenting any quantitative evidence on loneliness among young adults in India. Eight articles were identified and categorized under three major themes: loneliness and personality, loneliness and internet usage, loneliness and well-being. Loneliness is not recognized or assessed as a mental health problem in India. This review provides a ground to recognize loneliness as a mental health problem in India. However, most of the studies have small samples and use scales that have been standardized in western settings. Future research with a large sample will provide substantial evidence of loneliness in India.

**Keywords:** Loneliness, Personality, Young adults, India, Review

### **Introduction**

Social connection is an inherent human need, and difficulties in fulfilling this need would be expected to be an aversive experience. However, individuals require more than social contact alone. They must be meaningful and satisfying. Social relationships that lack these properties could be experienced as inadequate. Thus, the perceived quality of social relationships is a separate matter from the material presence or quantity of these relationships, which can lead to the experience of loneliness. Although many definitions of loneliness exist, the most common definition states, "Loneliness is the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively" (Peplau & Perlman, 1981, p.31).

Although loneliness has been studied extensively, some gaps need to be addressed. First, most studies reporting the burden of loneliness were conducted in industrialized nations. A recent study explored loneliness across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness and looked at loneliness across five countries -Austria, Bulgaria, Israel, Egypt, and India (Heu et al., 2021). They found that loneliness is highly culturally dependent, and

findings from one country cannot be used to generalize over others. Second, the stressors of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like India (Grover, 2019) are different. Socioeconomic challenges like high poverty, income inequality, low education, high dependency ratio, lack of transportation, unplanned urbanization, rapid industrialization, and a deterioration in social capital have been affecting the overall well-being and increasing the likelihood of loneliness among the Indian population (Tiwari, 2013). Despite the increasing rate of loneliness in India, particularly among young adults, there is a paucity of empirical research regarding the prevalence or other quantitative indicators of the severity of loneliness in India. Third, most of the studies in India have been carried out on the elderly population (Hossain et al., 2020), but studies have constantly shown that high levels of loneliness are experienced by young adults (Victor & Yang, 2012; Luhnman & Hawkley, 2016; Baretto et al., 2020).

Recently, few reviews have attempted to provide an overview of studies on loneliness in India (Pandit, 2020; Hossain et al., 2020). However, the drawback of such reviews is that neither they focus on a particular age group nor do they provide a detailed account of loneliness among young adults. Therefore the current review aims to identify and discuss the characteristics of studies on loneliness among young adults in India.

## **Method**

### **Study design and search strategy**

The journal articles included in the review were searched systematically, followed by a narrative review of the included papers. This approach is more rigorous than a narrative review as it uses specific systematic search functions to find relevant data. A two-stage design was used to extract relevant papers (Hagan et al., 2014). The initial literature was searched using broad terms in seven databases using advice from the department librarian. PsycInfo, Medline, CINAHL, ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts), Scopus, Social Services Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts. More papers were searched in journals in the departmental library, which were not indexed in the electronic database. These were searched within one week at the end of December 2021.

### **Study eligibility: inclusion and exclusion criteria**

While screening the retrieved citations, we included a citation if it was: a) an empirical study, b) conducted in India, c) published as an article in a peer-reviewed journal, d) focused on young adults, college or university students between the age of 18-29 years and e) the language of the publication was English. In this screening process, we excluded citations that were: a) non-empirical (including letters, editorials, reviews, commentaries, and opinions), b) conducted outside India, c) were not articles published in peer-reviewed journals, and d) not published in the English language.

Eight studies were identified based on the inclusion criteria of the studies (Upmanyu et al., 1994; Nayar & Singh, 2011; Panda, 2016; Shettar et al., 2017; Bhagchandani, 2017; Malhotra

et al., 2019; Mohan & Ravindran, 2020; Nathawat & Gawas, 2020). The studies fall under three major categories.

### Results

**Table 1:** Summary of studies included in the review

Authors	Aim	Sample	Design and Measure of Loneliness	Results
<b>Upmanyu et al. (1994)</b>	To Investigate the prevalence and personality correlates of loneliness among university students.	183 male, final-year post-graduate university students (aged 20–25)	Cross-sectional, Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale	Findings showed that loneliness was structurally unrelated to anxiety, neuroticism, or social desirability.
<b>Nayar and Singh (2011)</b>	To investigate the relationship of loneliness with personality dimensions of young adults	100 students, 50 males, and 50 females, with a mean age of 22.2 years and SD 0.66	Cross-sectional, Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale	Findings show significant relationships between loneliness and extraversion, neuroticism, anxiety, and locus of control.
<b>Panda (2016)</b>	To examine the personality traits and the feeling of loneliness among college students.	60 college students (30 male and 30 female) between the ages of 21 and 24.	Cross-sectional, Perceived Loneliness Scale	Openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were significantly associated with university students' feelings of loneliness.
<b>Shettar et al. (2017)</b>	To see the relationship between the severity of Facebook addiction and the experience of loneliness	100 post-graduate students in Southern India.	Cross-Sectional, UCLA Version 3	Small to moderate relationship between Facebook addiction and loneliness.
<b>Bhagchandani (2017)</b>	To study the relationship between loneliness and psychological health.	101 college students, 51 males and 49 females. Age range: 18-22.	Cross-Sectional, Revised UCLA loneliness scale	Findings show a strong inverse association between loneliness and psychological well-being. Also, no gender differences were found.
<b>Malhotra et al., 2019</b>	To investigate risk behaviour and outcomes among young adults	836 young men aged 18-24 from rural Haryana. Mean (SD) age of 20.6 (1.9) years	Cross-sectional, Loneliness: A self-perception of being	28.6% of young men reported feeling lonely. Also, loneliness showed an inverse relationship to age, education,

			alone and isolated.	marital status, and monthly family income.
<b>Mohan and Ravindran (2020)</b>	To study the relationship between loneliness, problematic internet use, and health behaviours	212 students aged between 18 and 25 (71 males, 141 females). The mean age of the sample was 19.53 (SD =1.399).	Cross-sectional, UCLA three-item questionnaire	A significant relationship was found between loneliness and problematic internet use, various religions, alcohol and high loneliness, and tobacco users, and highly problematic internet use.
<b>Nathawat and Gawas (2020)</b>	To study addiction severity and gender differences in personality traits and loneliness.	200 students (100 boys and 100 girls)	Cross-sectional, University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (Version 3)	28% were not addicted, 57% had a mild addiction, and 15% had a moderate to severe addiction and a significant relationship between loneliness and internet addiction.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the current review was to discuss the characteristics of studies on loneliness among young adults in India. Eight studies were identified based on the inclusion criteria of the studies (Upmanyu et al., 1994; Nayar & Singh, 2011; Panda, 2016; Shettar et al., 2017; Bhagchandani, 2017; Malhotra et al., 2019; Mohan & Ravindran, 2020; Nathawat & Gawas, 2020). The studies fall under three major categories.

### **Loneliness and Personality**

The relationship between loneliness and personality has been explored in three studies. In one of the first published studies of loneliness in India, Upmanyu et al. (1994) aimed to understand the prevalence and personality correlates of loneliness experienced among 183 male, final-year post-graduate university students (aged 20–25 years) in India. The study findings showed that loneliness was structurally unrelated to anxiety, neuroticism, or social desirability.

The second study focuses on the relationship between loneliness and personality (Nayar & Singh, 2011). The authors aimed to investigate the relationship of loneliness with personality dimensions of young adults. One hundred students, 50 males, and 50 females, with a mean age of 22.2 years and SD 0.66, were administered the revised UCLA –Loneliness Scale. The results obtained provided support for the hypotheses proposed in the study. Sixty students scored highly on loneliness, and significant relationships were found between loneliness and extraversion, neuroticism, anxiety, and locus of control.

Panda (2016) examined personality traits and the feeling of loneliness of post-graduate university students. The NEO Five-Factor Inventory-3 (NEO-FFI-3) and the perceived loneliness scale (Jha, 1997) were administered to 60 college students (30 male and 30 female) between the ages of 21 and 24. Three of the Big Five personality traits: openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, were significantly associated with university students' feelings of loneliness. However, there were no noticeable differences between male and female post-graduate university students regarding loneliness or the Big Five personality traits.

### **Loneliness and Internet Usage**

Young adults are most exposed to the usage of the internet. The second category of studies focused on the relationship between loneliness and the severity of internet usage, such as Facebook. The first study by Shettar et al. (2017) aimed to see the relationship between the severity of Facebook addiction and the experience of loneliness among 100 post-graduate students in Southern India. They reported a small to moderate the relationship between Facebook addiction and loneliness. Similarly, Mohan and Ravindran (2020) explored the relationship between loneliness, problematic internet use, and health behaviours among 212 students aged between 18 and 25 years. A significant relationship was found between loneliness and problematic internet use. A key finding showed that differences in loneliness between various religions were obtained. Moreover, the analysis revealed a significant

relationship between alcohol users and high loneliness, tobacco users, and highly problematic internet use.

The third study by Nathawat and Gawas (2020) examined the severity of addiction and gender differences in personality traits and loneliness and the relationship between internet addiction, personality traits, and loneliness. A sample of 200 students revealed that 28% were not addicted to the internet, 57% had a mild addiction, and 15% had a moderate to severe addiction. The results of an F-test revealed that students with varying degrees of internet addiction had significantly varied levels of two personality traits (neuroticism and extraversion) and a loneliness measure. Moreover, correlation analysis showed a positive and substantial relationship between loneliness and internet addiction, although other personality traits showed a negative relationship. The correlation between neuroticism and loneliness was positive and significant.

### **Loneliness and Well-being**

The third category of studies focused on the relationship between loneliness and well-being. A study by Bhagchandani (2017) examined how loneliness affects the psychological health of 101 college students. The study's conclusions showed a strong inverse association between loneliness and psychological well-being. Additionally, there was no significant difference in loneliness or psychological well-being between men and women.

The second study by Malhotra et al. (2019) investigated risk behaviour and outcomes among 836 young men aged 18-24 from rural Haryana, India. The prevalence rate of loneliness was found to be 28.6% of young men reported feeling loneliness in the past year, which was higher than a similar school-based student health survey in India which reported 7.4% of youth experiencing loneliness in the past year (Parashar, 2007). A potential reason for such high levels of loneliness among young adults is that young adults in this age group face several uncertainties regarding their future, academics, and financial status. Moreover, the absence of parental support or romantic relationship problems could be a possible explanation that is more prevalent, which could be the possible explanation behind the high burden of loneliness in young adults. Additionally, loneliness showed an inverse relationship to age, education, marital status, and monthly family income. Age and loneliness significantly affect current substance use, and among health-related behaviours, loneliness directly affects premarital sexual activity.

One of the limitations of studies on loneliness in India is that most of the studies use the UCLA Loneliness scale, and its subsequent versions have been used. As Anderson (1999) pointed out, these scales have often been designed to capture the experience of loneliness among American and European populations. When administered in countries such as India without proper psychometric considerations, it leads to uncertainty of whether or not these scales have been understood in the same way across nationalities. Another limitation of the studies is that the sample size in most of the studies is very small. So the inference drawn from these studies may not be inadequate. More studies are required to address the existing drawbacks.

## Conclusion

Loneliness is not recognized or assessed as a mental health problem in India. The National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-16) reported varying burdens of mental health issues with little emphasis on loneliness (Murthy, 2017). This review provides a ground to recognize loneliness as a mental health problem in India. However, future research with a large sample and longitudinal designs will be better able to provide substantial evidence to the systems accountable for the health and well-being of its people to conceptualize and design measures to address loneliness among young adults in India.

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