

**The Prevalence of Loneliness among University Students: Analyzing the Intrinsic
and Extrinsic Roots**

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“I’m fine, Mom, don’t worry about it.” I reluctantly said as I was wrapping up a phone call with my mom. By now, it seems almost natural for me to lie about my wellbeing whenever my mom asks how I am. While virtually everyone around me is out enjoying Thanksgiving festivities with their families and friends, I am soaking up cups of green tea in the comfort of my own apartment alone, trying to find the will and motivation to write this paper. I have a confession to make: I feel lonely--and this feeling has lingered on since the start of university. While I was aware that pursuing my higher education 9,000 miles away from my hometown, family, and friends came with sacrifices, no one told me that the journey would be this lonely.

My experience reflects the bigger and more concerning problem faced by countless other university students: loneliness. The American College Health Association (ACHA) conducts a biyearly survey to assess the wellbeing and health of university students across the United States. Their Spring 2021 survey, which studied around 96,000 students across 137 institutions, found that 53% of them felt moderately to severely lonely in the past year (American College Health Association, 2021). Research has also shown that loneliness is directly related to certain mental health disorders such as depression, sleep problems, and physical health disorders such as coronary heart disease and hypertension (Mushtaq et al., 2014). These adverse effects of loneliness are evidently present among today’s university students: Their survey also found that 47.8% of participants had moderate to severe psychological distress and 26.5% of participants were at risk of suicide (Mushtaq et al., 2014). Despite the prevalence, loneliness is rarely brought to attention on university campuses and discussed in scholarly discourse. With this in mind, I

would like to dissect the roots of this problem to understand why loneliness is so prevalent among university students.

I would first like to step back and view loneliness through a biological and evolutionary lens. Humans have survived as a species because we are notoriously skilled in sticking together as a community for protection and safety. Loneliness, which can be characterized by isolation and a withdrawal from social situations, goes against this innate human characteristic and threatens one's survivability. However, Cacioppo et al. (2014) hypothesize that the pain and misery that come from loneliness interestingly did not set early humans back but instead served as a motivator for them to seek companionship in a group to ensure long-term survival (p. 13). This motivating quality of loneliness continues to affect modern humans as we dread and actively try to avoid isolation because, as innately social animals, that feeling threatens our sense of security. Even though the feeling of isolation and loneliness is biologically supposed to act as both a deterrent and motivator for humans, the big question remains: why are university students still so lonely?

Mushtaq et al. (2014) note that adolescents are more vulnerable to loneliness because the "adolescent period is the time of life when being accepted and loved is of such major importance to the formation of one's identity" (p. 1). This finding can be used to assert the fact that loneliness is most often not due to a lack of company--as the dictionaries put it--but is often due to "being without some definite needed relationship or set of relationships" (p. 1). A person can be not surrounded by people at all but feel perfectly content as they enjoy spending time alone. Conversely, a person can be surrounded by a plethora of people but still feel lonely because they lack meaningful and quality relationships that allow them to feel like they "fit in" with the crowd. In other words, a lack of sense of belonging can lead to a sense of isolation and

loneliness. The resulting types of loneliness can be categorized into two: emotional loneliness, i.e. “the absence of an attachment figure” such as a best friend, and social loneliness, i.e. “the absence of a social network” such as a supportive community (Weiss et al., 1973, as cited in Mushtaq et al., 2014, p. 1). These types of loneliness are what seem to be troubling most university students. In a university environment, students often find it hard to find the right people that can provide them the feelings of acceptance and love to complement their identity and make them feel like they belong. While a lack of sense of belonging seems to be a universal phenomenon, different groups of students, particularly first-year students and international students, face this problem differently.

Most first-year students enter university straight out of high school as they transition into a new chapter of their lives. This transition often requires them to start a clean slate in a completely new environment, often leaving behind a support system of family and friends that they have grown up with (Jordan, 2019). For these students, starting anew and making meaningful connections with new people can be very daunting and challenging, hence impeding their ability to make friends and causing them to feel lonely. Consequently, it is not uncommon for first-year students to continue latching onto high school friendships throughout their first year as they learn to adjust to their new environment (Shell & Absher, 2019). Catherine, a first year student and a friend of mine at the University of Minnesota, admits that she still regularly talks to her best friends from high school and calls her parents every night. She reasons that she often misses them, considering she spent almost a lifetime growing up with them, and feels like she has not made that many friends in university. The feeling of homesickness, which is the “longing for home and family while absent from them”, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is unsurprisingly very prevalent among first year students because these students often are leaving their homes for the very first time. Being separated from the places and people

that provide these students a sense of belonging can consequently lead to vulnerability and loneliness.

International students, on the other hand, are placed in a peculiar position. In addition to facing the problems faced by local students, they have to adjust to a new set of cultures, norms, and values. Andrea van Niekerk, a former associate director of admission at Brown University and college consultant, wrote in a Quartz article that one of the biggest barriers that international students have to overcome is language barriers. Language barriers make it difficult for international students to converse with local students who do not speak their language (Niekerk, 2017). This, in turn, can impede their ability to form meaningful connections. She also explains how international students can find it challenging to adjust to cultural differences, especially to those originating from countries with opposing ideologies. For example, the openness and freedom of American culture may feel very foreign and odd for students from traditionally conservative countries. She concludes by suggesting that international students usually find their sense of belonging by socializing with other students with the same or similar background because there is a higher chance of cultural alignment, understanding, and relatability. I can clearly see this playing out in my own community. As an Indonesian student studying in a predominantly-white institution (PWI), I have found that my fellow Indonesian friends find comfort in spending time with other Indonesian students. I think this is because the culture and values we were raised with back home are things that cannot be replicated by any local student here and ultimately being able to have a small piece of home in a foreign country is all it takes to find a sense of belonging.

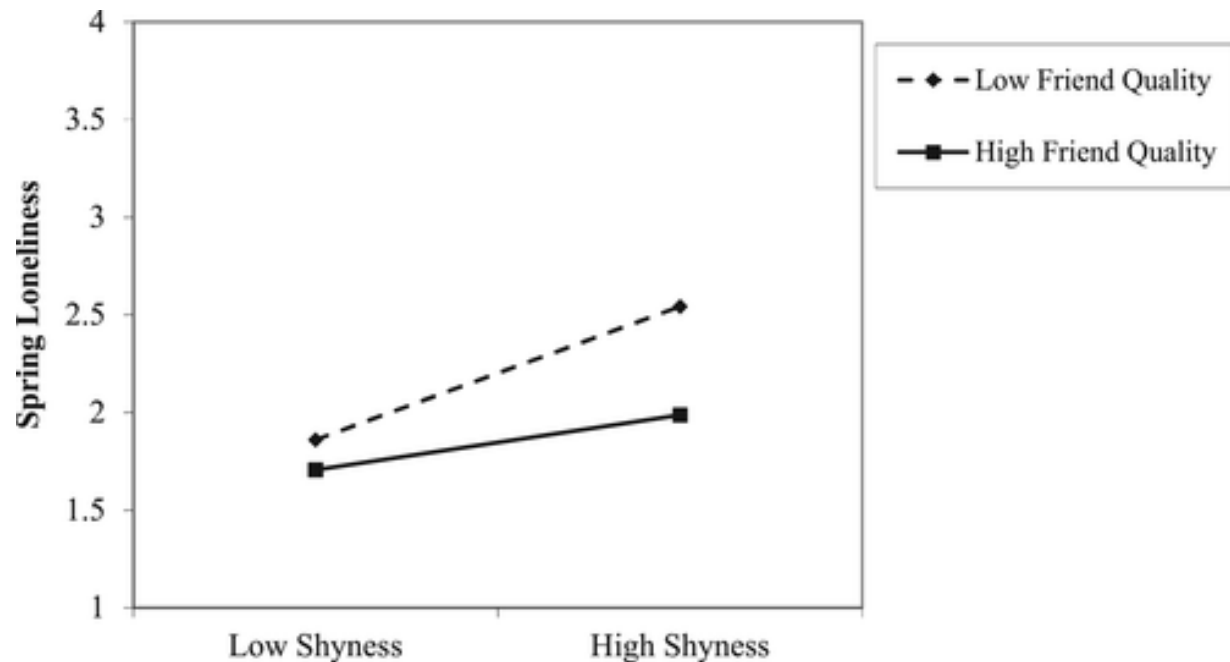
While a student's status may unfairly impact their ability to find their sense of belonging, there are personal traits that can also cause them to feel lonely, regardless of background. One of

these traits that has continued to affect not only university students but the adolescent and young adult demographic is shyness. A 1995 Psychology Today article that served as a follow-up to a 1975 study conducted by Dr. Philip Zimbardo, an American psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, found that 40% of the university students studied considered themselves to be shy and most people now suffer from shyness internally, i.e. they do not visibly display the typical symptoms of shyness (Carducci & Zimbardo, 1995). They were able to characterize people who suffer from shyness as “excessively self-conscious, constantly sizing themselves up negatively, and overwhelmingly preoccupied with what others think of them” (para. 4). Shell and Absher (2019), associate psychology professor and graduate of the University of Virginia respectively, build on this finding by characterizing people who suffer from shyness as having a “high approach motivation and desire to interact with peers, but also high avoidance motivation, which can lead to anxiety or fear of rejection, resulting in avoiding social situations” (p. 388). They continue by explaining how shyness manifests in university students, noting how “these individuals may be interested in forming new friendships and want to engage with others, but could be inhibited by social fears” (p. 388). I believe that these characteristics perfectly describe my thought process. As a shy student who genuinely enjoys making friends, striking up conversations with people is one of the most challenging and daunting things for me to do. When meeting new people, a myriad of thoughts would run through my mind: “Did you just stutter? They’re probably going to hate you for that.”, “Did you just freeze up mid-conversation? They probably think you’re a total weirdo.”, “You just gave them the worst first impression.” These self-deprecating thoughts are the main reason why I rarely make the first move in social situations. My paralyzing shyness forces me to believe that I am not “good enough” for others and whatever I do can unintentionally lead to embarrassment. Ultimately, my feelings are best described by Carducci and Zimbardo: “trapped between two fears: being

invisible and insignificant to others, and being visible but worthless” (para. 5).

Figure 1

Relationship between shyness severity, friendship quality, and loneliness level



Note. The graph shows that students who suffer from higher levels of shyness and have lower friendship quality are prone to feeling more lonely than those who do not. From “Effects of shyness and friendship on socioemotional adjustment during the college transition,” by M. D. Shell and T. N. Absher, 2019, *Personal Relationships*, 26(3), p. 399.

Shell and Absher suggest that shy students who have few meaningful friendships are prone to feeling lonely due to a lack of “variety in the type and amount of social support” (p. 402) they receive (see Figure 1). This characteristic can be particularly apparent in certain groups of students such as first-year and international students. As stated in previous paragraphs, most first-year students have a tendency to focus on high school friendships throughout their first year and consequently may not be mentally comfortable yet in socializing with new people

in a new environment. International students may also frequently feel like they are “out of place” with local students. This is especially true if they cannot comfortably speak the local language or cannot relate to local customs and traditions. As a result, some international students may feel like they will be judged by local students if they act or think in a manner that deviates from local standards, which can make them shy and reduce their confidence in socializing. In both groups of students, shyness affects the variety and quality of social support they receive from people and consequently how lonely they will feel. As an international student myself, I frequently judge myself whenever I interact with locals. Even though I would consider myself to be extremely talkative with my close friends, I am the polar opposite when it comes to talking with local strangers. It can be extremely annoying because I almost always have so much to say in conversations but I have this subconscious fear that locals would judge me for my imperfect English, forcing me to keep my mouth shut to save me from any potential embarrassment. In a free country such as the United States, I also frequently worry whether whatever I say to people can come off as offensive in any manner. As a result, shy students such as myself who suffer from loneliness tend to possess a pessimistic mindset: they can easily blame themselves for being unable to make meaningful relationships with others. Dwelling on pessimistic and self-deprecating thoughts can feed a vicious cycle that amplifies the feelings of loneliness. These types of students tend to think that their shyness is something of their fault and unchangeable, so they can easily overlook coping mechanisms that could potentially alleviate the symptoms of shyness and get discouraged from stepping out of their comfort zone.

In an increasingly digitized world, the internet and the media have added a layer of complexity to the problem. As stated in previous paragraphs, humans have learned to actively avoid loneliness because they threaten our sense of security. The internet is a modern example of

what humans have relied on in order to avoid the threatening effects of loneliness since it provides something that no other platform can: an instant and risk-free sense of connection. For a lot of students, connecting with other students with a click of a button behind a screen can seem like a simple solution to alleviate their loneliness. However, as they become habituated to connecting through the internet, they are subconsciously raising their expectations on the quality and number of connections they need to make to feel not lonely and content (Katz, 2020). One of the most popular internet features that is mediating this connection among university students is social media. For them, social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram, allow them to show the world what life looks like through their eyes. However, people tend to show their most “socially-diverse, positive self-view to others when online” which in turn, “gives individuals an increase in self-esteem, but a decrease in self-control” (Wilcox & Stephen, 2012, as cited in Halina, 2019, para. 5). This can easily make social media a deceptive platform for students: students who suffer from loneliness are conditioned to falsely believe that everyone but them are socially thriving, which can further exacerbate and stigmatize their feeling of loneliness. The enticing point-based systems of social media sites such as likes, comments, and followers not only help bolster its deceptive facade but cause people to become addicted to it as engaging with these systems causes our brains to release happy hormones such as dopamine and oxytocin (Seiter, 2016). As a result, an over-reliance on social media can feed a self-inforcing cycle that dissociates students from the real world. However, social media can actually be leveraged to alleviate one’s loneliness when used appropriately. Thomas et al. (2020), psychology professors at Northumbria University, assert that university students who show their “liminal self, the desire to edit and reinvent [themselves] online,” (p. 7) on social media actually reported experiencing more loneliness than those who show their authentic self. They note how these types of people

display a higher level of “social capital”, which “refers to both the resources that are accumulated through social relationships and the ability to draw on them for support” (Coleman, 1988, as cited in Thomas et al., 2020, p. 2). They explain that one’s social capital can be increased through making meaningful relationships and finding a community, which supports Mushtaq et. al’s theory of “sense of belonging” playing a determinant role in one’s level of loneliness. However, Thomas et al. do not thoroughly explain why showing one’s authentic self can lower one’s loneliness. I hypothesize that showing one’s authentic self on social media, even if it deviates from the ideal standards, allows them to embrace their own “weaknesses” and be vulnerable. Consequently, this can free them from unrealistic and unhealthy social expectations and make them feel more comfortable with their own social situation. It also allows them to meaningfully connect with others without having to put on a facade. All of which can contribute to lower levels of loneliness. In addition to social media, I believe that popular media plays a substantial role in perpetuating unrealistic expectations of university life. Cinematic landmarks that revolve around university life can instill glamorized and unhealthy expectations into the minds of millions of high school students. For example, the movie “Animal House” can perpetuate the idea that partaking in Greek life involves unavoidable continuous fun and that people involved in it drink and party everyday. Students enamored in these types of movies can face disappointment when they enter university and realize that the reality of university life does not align with their expectations. They eventually will realize that Greek life is not made for everyone (despite how fun the media depicts it to be), that students cannot party every day and maintain a 4.0 GPA simultaneously, that freshmen friendships will most likely not last throughout university, among other things.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented changes that exacerbate the loneliness problem in a unique manner. To curb the spread of the virus, public health measures that separate people from each other, such as social distancing and quarantines, have been enforced in virtually every aspect of daily life. In particular, schools have transitioned from face-to-face learning to online learning. One of the downsides of this transition is an increase in the level of loneliness among students. In a study of 303 university students in the Philippines, Labrague et al. (2021) found that 56.7% of them felt moderately lonely and 23.6% of them felt severely lonely during the course of the pandemic. They concluded that these students “reported higher levels of emotional loneliness than social loneliness” (p. 6). By looking back at how these types of loneliness are defined in Mushtaq et al.’s article, we can reasonably infer that, during the course of the pandemic, university students have been more prone to lacking an “attachment figure” such as a best friend that they can rely on for emotional and social support. They suggest that the increase in general loneliness can be attributed with two main reasons: university students and young adults are most affected by public health measures, which impedes their ability to connect with their friends or make new friends (Matthews et al., 2016, as cited in Labrague et al., 2021), and university students were less likely to implement loneliness coping strategies in their lives than older people, which allows the negative psychological effects of loneliness to manifest more intensely. However, Weiss et al. do not elaborate why emotional loneliness is more prevalent among university students than social loneliness is during the pandemic. I hypothesize that while having a socially-supportive group of peers can be very alleviating for people affected by social distancing measures, people have started to prioritize quality over quantity in terms of friendships. This can be because maintaining multiple friendships is especially hard in a now-socially isolated world. Creating one meaningful and

supportive relationship is often the only thing that people need to alleviate the mentally-draining effects of isolation, as was the case for me.

Even as schools are slowly transitioning back to face-to-face learning, loneliness continues to be a prevalent problem among university students. Among other things, the mandatory use of masks blocks people from seeing others' faces and a ubiquitous fear surrounding the virus prevents students from socializing like they did before the pandemic (Laskowski, 2021). A year (or more) of online learning and social distancing has rendered most students mentally unprepared in physically socializing with people and making new relationships.

The stigma surrounding loneliness is also one of the biggest reasons why loneliness continues to prevail and thrive in today's university students. As explained in previous paragraphs, loneliness goes against a human's innate desire to be social and belong. When people are aware that they are lonely, they tend to feel abnormal or shameful for not conforming to human nature. This shame associated with loneliness is the main reason why most people rarely admit that they are lonely. Griffin (2010) wrote in a report for the Mental Health Foundation that our society's romanticisation of self-reliance has also played a role in propagating this stigma. He supports his assertion by providing a statistic from a study of 2,256 people in the UK: 11% of lonely participants "have sought help for feeling lonely" and 30% of them "would be embarrassed to admit to feeling lonely" (p. 21). The romanticization of self-reliance stems from the belief that being vulnerable and opening up one's emotions makes someone weak. Additionally, Griffin found that most loneliness admissions are often only made possible by the help of mental health professionals such as psychologists. The question now is how the stigmatization of loneliness particularly plays out among university students. Kerr & Stanley (2021) found that "college students stigmatized others described as lonely and reclusive" (p. 6),

i.e. participants associated lonely students as “less warm and competent” (p. 6) than non-lonely students. This finding suggests that students themselves are partly responsible for causing loneliness to be so stigmatized in university campuses. The negative characteristics associated with lonely students deter non-lonely students from approaching and socializing with them, which lets lonely students continue to feel lonely and can also indirectly confirm these students’ pessimistic beliefs about themselves.

To explain why loneliness is so prevalent among university students requires a multifaceted answer. A sense of belonging is one of the most crucial factors in determining how a student perceives loneliness, with different groups of students facing distinct challenges. Internal and external factors, some within the control of students while some not so much, also play substantial roles. However, further research needs to be conducted on how loneliness particularly affects underrepresented groups of students, such as those with disabilities, and whether the roots of loneliness are the same throughout different cultures. As loneliness continues to be an increasing trend among university students, actions need to be enacted before it takes a toll on the wellbeing of future students. In particular, I am recommending change from the two main parties involved: students and universities. Lonely students need to understand that being vulnerable and willing to step out of their comfort zone is the first step in tackling loneliness internally. Universities have the responsibility of destigmatizing the topic of loneliness throughout the student body and fostering an inclusive campus environment that makes everyone feel like they belong. Universities need to implement personalized strategies which align with the distinct needs of the student body. Most importantly, both students and universities need to work together in order to collectively tackle loneliness, with new research continuing to inform us how modern science can provide unique and innovative perspectives into this problem.

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