



Understanding Loneliness in Young Adulthood: Theoretical Models, Digital Life, and the Indian Context

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Abstract- Loneliness, the subjective distress that arises when a person's social relationships are perceived as deficient in quantity or quality, has emerged as a significant public health concern among young adults. This paper reviews the theoretical foundations of loneliness research, including Peplau and Perlman's cognitive discrepancy model, Weiss's typology distinguishing emotional from social loneliness, and Cacioppo's evolutionary and neurocognitive account of loneliness as a social-threat signal. The review synthesizes empirical evidence indicating that loneliness peaks during emerging adulthood relative to other life stages, and that loneliness levels among young adults have risen over recent decades according to cross-temporal meta-analytic evidence. Particular attention is given to the relationship between social media use and loneliness, where meta-analytic findings indicate that problematic and compulsive use patterns are more consistently associated with loneliness than overall time spent online or the simple distinction between active and passive use. The review then considers loneliness among young adults in India, drawing on systematic review evidence documenting a substantial burden of loneliness across Indian populations and recent empirical work linking meaning in life and thriving to reduced loneliness and enhanced well-being among urban Indian youth. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature, including the need for longitudinal and culturally grounded research beyond urban and student populations, and proposes directions for future research.

Keywords- loneliness, young adults, emerging adulthood, social media, well-being, culture

I. Introduction

Loneliness is broadly defined as the distressing, subjective experience that occurs when an individual's social relationships are perceived as deficient in quantity or quality relative to what is desired. As a subjective rather than an objective state, loneliness is



conceptually distinct from social isolation: a person may be objectively alone without feeling lonely, and conversely may feel lonely while surrounded by others. Although loneliness can be experienced at any point across the lifespan, a substantial body of research indicates that it is particularly prevalent during young adulthood, a period marked by significant social transitions, including leaving the family home, beginning higher education or employment, and renegotiating friendships and romantic relationships.

This review synthesizes the theoretical and empirical literature on loneliness among young adults. It begins with foundational theoretical models of loneliness, including the cognitive discrepancy model, Weiss's typology of emotional and social loneliness, and Cacioppo's evolutionary theory. It then reviews empirical evidence on the prevalence and temporal trends of loneliness among young adults, before examining the relationship between digital and social media engagement and loneliness in this population. The review subsequently considers loneliness among young adults in India, before identifying gaps in the literature and proposing directions for future research.

II. Theoretical Models of Loneliness

The Cognitive Discrepancy Model

One of the most influential theoretical accounts of loneliness is Peplau and Perlman's cognitive discrepancy model, which defines loneliness as the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively. Central to this model is the idea that loneliness arises not from objective levels of social contact alone, but from a perceived discrepancy between an individual's desired and actual level of social relationships. This discrepancy framing helps explain why some individuals with relatively few relationships do not experience loneliness, while others with seemingly adequate social networks nonetheless feel lonely, and it draws attention to the cognitive and attributional processes through which individuals interpret and evaluate their social world (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

Weiss's Typology: Emotional and Social Loneliness

A second influential framework, developed by Weiss, distinguishes between two qualitatively distinct forms of loneliness. Emotional loneliness stems from the absence



of a close, intimate attachment figure, such as a romantic partner or best friend, and is theorized to produce feelings of anxiety and a sense of isolation. Social loneliness, by contrast, stems from the absence of a broader sense of social integration or community belonging, and is theorized to produce feelings of boredom and marginality (Weiss, 1973). Weiss's typology, grounded in an interactionist approach that emphasizes the distinct social provisions of attachment and social integration, has generated substantial empirical research examining whether these two forms of loneliness are indeed subjectively and behaviorally distinct, with some studies finding that emotional loneliness is a stronger predictor of depression than social loneliness, contrary to Weiss's original prediction (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Cacioppo's Evolutionary Model

A more recent theoretical contribution, Cacioppo and colleagues' evolutionary theory of loneliness, conceptualizes loneliness as an adaptive signal that evolved to motivate social reconnection, analogous to how hunger motivates eating (Cacioppo et al., 2006). According to this account, transient loneliness associated with specific life transitions, such as beginning university, may serve an adaptive function by prompting individuals to seek out and form new social bonds. However, when loneliness becomes chronic, it is theorized to trigger a self-reinforcing cycle of hypervigilance to social threat: lonely individuals become biased toward perceiving and remembering negative social information, which in turn fosters social avoidance and pessimistic expectations about interactions with others, eliciting exactly the kind of negative social responses from others that confirm and perpetuate the individual's initial expectations. This model has been particularly influential in explaining why loneliness, once chronic, can be difficult to resolve through increased social contact alone, and why interventions targeting maladaptive social cognition, such as cognitive behavioral approaches, may be necessary components of effective treatment (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Prevalence and Temporal Trends in Young Adult Loneliness

Empirical research consistently identifies emerging adulthood, generally defined as the period from the late teens through the twenties, as a peak period for loneliness relative to other stages of the lifespan. This heightened vulnerability has been attributed to the simultaneous developmental press toward autonomy and the ongoing need for connectedness that characterizes this life stage, alongside the disruption of established peer networks that accompanies the transition out of secondary schooling and the family home. A large-scale preregistered cross-temporal meta-analysis synthesizing



437 independent samples and over 124,000 emerging adults who completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale between 1976 and 2019 found that loneliness levels increased linearly over this 43-year period, corresponding to an increase of more than half a standard deviation, suggesting that loneliness represents a rising, rather than a stable, concern among successive cohorts of young adults, independent of the more recent and well-documented spike in loneliness associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Buecker et al., 2021).

At the same time, more recent qualitative and mixed-methods research complicates a purely deficit-based picture of young adult loneliness. Comparative research examining social well-being and social ill-being across the adult lifespan found that although social ill-being, including loneliness, is elevated among emerging adults relative to older adults, social well-being remains high for both groups, suggesting that young adult loneliness often coexists with meaningful social connection rather than reflecting an absence of relationships altogether. This body of work suggests that young adult loneliness may be better characterized by the instability, unpredictability, and lack of relational permanence and routine that accompanies frequent life transitions, rather than by outright social deprivation (Hall et al., 2025).

Social Media Use and Loneliness

Given the centrality of digital platforms in the social lives of contemporary young adults, considerable research attention has focused on the relationship between social media use and loneliness. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis examining this relationship among adolescents and young adults found that problematic, compulsive social media use showed a moderate and consistent positive association with loneliness, whereas the simple amount of time spent on social media showed only a small, though statistically significant, association. Notably, this meta-analysis found no significant difference between active use, such as posting and direct interaction, and passive use, such as browsing or scrolling, in their association with loneliness, a finding that complicates an earlier, simpler hypothesis that passive consumption is uniquely detrimental (Feng et al., 2026). These findings suggest that the compulsive, addictive quality of engagement, rather than the sheer volume of time spent online or the specific behavioral mode of use, is the dimension of social media engagement most robustly linked to loneliness among young people.



The relationship between problematic social media use and loneliness is likely bidirectional rather than strictly causal in one direction: young adults experiencing loneliness may turn to social media as a compensatory strategy to fulfill unmet social needs, while excessive or compulsive engagement may in turn displace face-to-face interaction and reinforce feelings of isolation, consistent with theoretical accounts proposing a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between loneliness and problematic internet use (Nowland et al., 2018). This bidirectional framing has important implications for intervention, suggesting that efforts to reduce loneliness through modifying social media use alone may be insufficient without also addressing the underlying social needs and vulnerabilities that drive compulsive engagement in the first place.

Loneliness Among Young Adults in India

A systematic review synthesizing empirical evidence on loneliness in India found a substantial overall burden, with a pooled prevalence of 41 percent across studies conducted in the country, and identified aging, family structure, marital status, religious practice, group membership, educational attainment, income, and psychological attributes as key correlates of loneliness across the Indian population. Although this review found that loneliness burden was somewhat higher among elderly Indian participants than among younger participants, it nonetheless confirmed that loneliness represents a significant psychosocial concern across the Indian lifespan, including among younger cohorts, and highlighted a scarcity of methodologically rigorous, population-representative research specifically focused on Indian youth and young adults relative to research on older populations (Hossain et al., 2020).

More recent Indian empirical research has begun to address this gap by directly examining loneliness among urban Indian youth alongside protective psychological resources. A study employing structural equation modeling with a sample of urban Indian youth aged 18 to 30 examined the relationships among meaning in life, loneliness, thriving, and well-being, and found that a stronger presence of meaning in life was associated with reduced loneliness, while the experience of thriving was positively associated with social, emotional, and psychological well-being; loneliness itself was found to be significantly negatively associated with all three well-being domains (Chhajer et al., 2024). These findings position the cultivation of meaning in life as a potentially valuable psychological resource for combating loneliness and its adverse consequences for well-being among urban Indian young adults, and point



toward the value of educational and mental health interventions that help young people identify and pursue personally meaningful activities and goals as a strategy for addressing loneliness in this population.

IV. Gaps in the Literature and Directions for Future Research

Despite growing research attention, several gaps remain in the literature on loneliness among young adults. First, much of the global evidence base, including cross-temporal trend data, derives predominantly from Western samples, and although recent Indian research has begun to address this gap, further population-representative and longitudinal research is needed to establish reliable prevalence estimates and trends specifically for Indian young adults, as distinct from adolescent and elderly populations. Second, existing Indian research on youth loneliness remains concentrated in urban and student populations, leaving loneliness among rural, semi-urban, and non-student young adults comparatively understudied, despite the differing social structures, family arrangements, and community contexts these populations may experience. Third, much of the literature linking social media use to loneliness remains correlational and cross-sectional, limiting the ability to establish the direction of causality between problematic engagement and loneliness; longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to clarify this relationship. Finally, further research is needed to test culturally specific pathways to loneliness reduction among Indian young adults, including the roles of family obligation, religiosity, and collectivist social structures, which may shape both the risk factors for and protective resources against loneliness in ways that differ from the individualist Western contexts in which foundational loneliness theories were developed.

V. Conclusion

Loneliness represents a theoretically well-developed and empirically significant construct with particular relevance to young adults, a population identified across multiple lines of evidence as being at heightened risk relative to other life stages. Foundational theoretical models, including the cognitive discrepancy model, Weiss's typology of emotional and social loneliness, and Cacioppo's evolutionary account, together provide a rich framework for understanding both the subjective experience and the self-perpetuating cognitive mechanisms of loneliness. Empirical evidence indicates



that loneliness among young adults has risen over recent decades and remains closely, if complexly, tied to patterns of social media engagement, with problematic and compulsive use emerging as a more consistent correlate than time spent online alone. Evidence from India further indicates a substantial burden of loneliness across the population, while highlighting meaning in life and thriving as potentially valuable psychological resources for reducing loneliness and supporting well-being among urban Indian youth. Continued attention to longitudinal, culturally grounded, and demographically diverse research will be essential for building a more comprehensive understanding of loneliness during young adulthood and for informing effective prevention and intervention efforts.

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