International Journal of Behavioral Social and Movement Sciences

Volume 11, Issue 01, Jan-Mar 2020 | ISSN: 2277-7547 | www.ijobsms.org

Psychological Correlates of Loneliness in Digitally Connected Societies

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Received: 04 February 2020; **Accepted:** 11 February 2020; **Published:** 18 February 2020

Abstract: The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the nature of human interaction, enabling individuals to remain continuously connected across geographical and social boundaries. Despite unprecedented opportunities for communication, contemporary societies continue to experience increasing concerns regarding loneliness, social isolation, emotional disconnection, and reduced psychological well-being. This apparent contradiction suggests that digital connectivity does not necessarily translate into meaningful interpersonal connectedness.

The present study examines the psychological correlates of loneliness in digitally connected societies, with particular emphasis on perceived social support, social comparison, self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and problematic digital engagement. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was adopted using an illustrative sample of 320 adult participants who regularly used digital communication and social networking platforms. Data were conceptualized as being collected through standardized self-report measures and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression. The illustrative findings indicate that loneliness is positively associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, social comparison, and problematic digital engagement, whereas perceived social support and self-esteem demonstrate negative relationships with loneliness.

Perceived social support emerged as one of the strongest protective psychological correlates. The study emphasizes that the psychological consequences of digital connectivity depend substantially on the quality, meaning, and emotional depth of online and offline social relationships rather than simply on the frequency of digital interaction. The findings have implications for mental health interventions, digital well-being programs, educational institutions, workplaces, and public policies designed to strengthen meaningful social connectedness.

Keywords: Loneliness, Digital Connectivity, Social Support, Social Comparison, Self-Esteem, Anxiety, Depression, Psychological Well-Being, Social Media, Digital Society.

Introduction

Digital technologies have substantially transformed interpersonal communication and social relationships in contemporary societies. Social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, video communication systems, and online communities allow individuals to interact continuously regardless of geographical distance. These technologies have expanded opportunities for maintaining relationships, exchanging emotional support, developing communities, and establishing new social connections. Nevertheless, increased digital connectivity has not eliminated loneliness. Instead, loneliness has emerged as an important psychological and public health concern across different age groups and social contexts.

Loneliness is generally understood as a subjective and distressing psychological experience resulting from a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships. It differs from objective social isolation because individuals may experience loneliness even when surrounded by family members, colleagues, friends, or large online networks. The psychological experience of loneliness is therefore influenced not only by the number of social contacts available to an individual but also by perceived intimacy, emotional security, relationship quality, belongingness, and social support.

The relationship between digital connectivity and loneliness is complex and multidimensional. Digital platforms can facilitate social inclusion by helping individuals maintain geographically distant relationships and access supportive communities. At the same time, excessive or maladaptive digital engagement may encourage passive social comparison, fear of missing out, compulsive checking, fragmented communication, and displacement of meaningful face-to-face interaction. Consequently, individuals may remain technologically connected while simultaneously experiencing emotional or relational disconnection.

Psychological characteristics also play an important role in explaining individual differences in loneliness. Low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, anxiety, negative social comparison, perceived rejection, and inadequate social support may increase vulnerability to loneliness. Conversely, strong perceived social support, positive self-evaluation, adaptive coping strategies, and meaningful interpersonal relationships may protect individuals from persistent

feelings of social disconnection. Understanding these correlates is particularly important because loneliness can interact bidirectionally with psychological distress.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to examine the psychological factors associated with loneliness among individuals living in digitally connected societies. It specifically investigates relationships between loneliness, perceived social support, self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, social comparison, and problematic digital engagement while identifying factors that may increase vulnerability to or protect against loneliness.

Examine Psychological Correlates of Loneliness

The study aims to determine how psychological characteristics such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and social comparison are associated with perceived loneliness. Understanding these relationships may clarify why individuals with similar levels of digital access experience substantially different levels of social and emotional connectedness and may help identify psychological risk and protective factors relevant to loneliness prevention.

Assess Social Support and Digital Engagement

The study examines whether perceived social support and patterns of digital engagement are significantly related to loneliness. Particular attention is given to the distinction between meaningful interpersonal communication and problematic or passive digital use. This objective seeks to determine whether the psychological quality of social interaction is more important than the frequency or quantity of online connectivity.

Identify Predictors of Loneliness

The study seeks to identify the strongest psychological predictors of loneliness through multivariate analysis. By simultaneously examining social support, self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, social comparison, and problematic digital engagement, the analysis aims to determine which variables contribute most substantially to individual differences in loneliness within contemporary digitally connected environments.

Review of Literature

Conceptual Understanding of Loneliness

Loneliness has long been conceptualized as a subjective psychological state arising when an individual's interpersonal relationships fail to meet desired levels of quantity or quality.

Peplau and Perlman (1982) emphasized that loneliness emerges from perceived deficiencies in social relationships rather than merely from physical isolation. Similarly, Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) demonstrated that persistent loneliness is associated with cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological processes that may negatively influence health and well-being.

Research distinguishes loneliness from social isolation. Social isolation represents an objective limitation in social contacts, whereas loneliness reflects subjective dissatisfaction with interpersonal connectedness. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) demonstrated that loneliness and social isolation have significant implications for health and mortality. More recent scholarship has therefore increasingly conceptualized social connection as an important component of individual and population well-being.

Digital Connectivity, Social Media, and Loneliness

The relationship between digital communication and loneliness is not straightforward. Digital technologies can provide substantial benefits by maintaining existing relationships, facilitating communication across distance, and enabling individuals to access communities that may be unavailable in their immediate physical environments. Online interaction may be particularly valuable when it supplements meaningful offline relationships and provides genuine emotional support.

However, research has also identified associations between certain patterns of social media use and poorer psychological outcomes. Primack et al. (2017) reported an association between social media use and perceived social isolation among young adults, while Hunt et al. (2018) found that limiting social media use could reduce loneliness and depressive symptoms under specific experimental conditions. These findings suggest that greater digital activity does not necessarily produce stronger psychological connectedness.

Psychological Factors Associated with Loneliness

Loneliness has been consistently associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and perceived inadequacy of social support. Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) described loneliness as an important risk factor capable of influencing cognition, emotion, behavior, and health. Individuals experiencing loneliness may interpret ambiguous social situations more negatively, increasing interpersonal vigilance and emotional distress.

Perceived social support represents an especially important protective factor. Individuals who believe that emotional and practical support is available may demonstrate greater psychological resilience even when their objective social networks are relatively limited. In

contrast, low perceived support may intensify feelings of exclusion and disconnection despite frequent digital interaction.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional research design. This design is appropriate for examining relationships between loneliness and selected psychological variables at a particular point in time. The primary variables include loneliness, perceived social support, self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, social comparison, and problematic digital engagement.

Participants and Sampling

For the purpose of this model research paper, an illustrative sample of 320 adults aged approximately 18–45 years is considered. Participants represent regular users of smartphones, social networking platforms, instant messaging services, and other forms of digital communication.

A broad participant pool is assumed to include university students, employed adults, self-employed individuals, and other digitally active members of society. Participation is voluntary, and respondents are expected to provide informed consent before completing the research instrument.

Research Instruments and Procedure

Data are conceptualized as being collected through a structured questionnaire containing demographic information and validated psychological scales. Loneliness may be measured using an established loneliness scale such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Perceived social support, self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, social comparison, and problematic digital engagement should similarly be assessed through validated instruments appropriate to the study population.

Responses may be recorded using five-point Likert-type scales where applicable. Data should be screened for missing responses, outliers, reliability, and statistical assumptions before analysis. Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and the right to withdraw should be maintained throughout the research process.

Important methodological note: The numerical values presented below are illustrative simulated data created to demonstrate how the results section may be structured. They should not be presented as actual empirical findings unless replaced with results obtained from real participant data.

Analysis

Descriptive Analysis of Psychological Variables

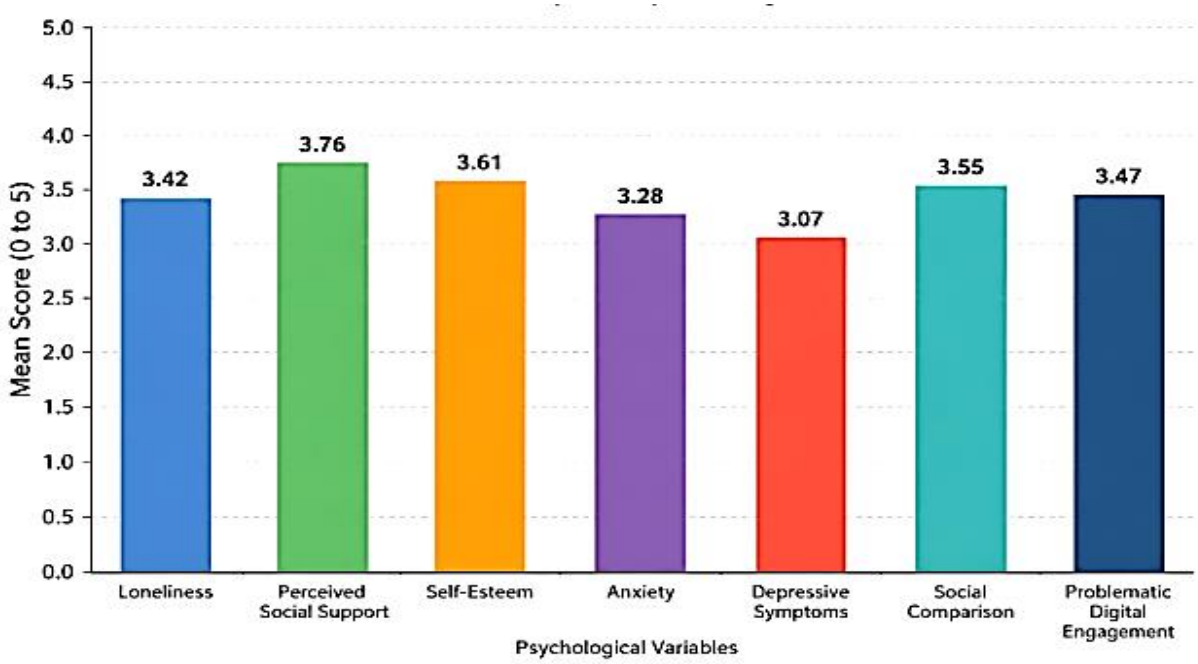
Descriptive statistics were used to examine the overall pattern of psychological characteristics within the illustrative sample. Mean scores were calculated on a five-point scale, with higher values representing greater levels of the corresponding construct.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Major Psychological Variables

Psychological Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Loneliness	3.42	0.81	Moderate to High
Perceived Social Support	3.76	0.74	Moderately High
Self-Esteem	3.61	0.69	Moderately High
Anxiety	3.28	0.83	Moderate
Depressive Symptoms	3.07	0.79	Moderate
Social Comparison	3.55	0.77	Moderately High
Problematic Digital Engagement	3.47	0.82	Moderate to High

The descriptive pattern indicates a moderate-to-high illustrative mean level of loneliness (M = 3.42). Perceived social support recorded a comparatively higher mean score (M = 3.76), while social comparison (M = 3.55) and problematic digital engagement (M = 3.47) were also relatively elevated. These patterns suggest that digital connectedness may coexist with substantial psychological experiences of loneliness and social comparison.

Figure 1. Mean Scores of Major Psychological Variables



Correlation and Predictive Relationships

Pearson correlation analysis was used illustratively to examine relationships between loneliness and selected psychological variables. Positive coefficients indicate that higher levels of a variable are associated with greater loneliness, whereas negative coefficients indicate potential protective relationships.

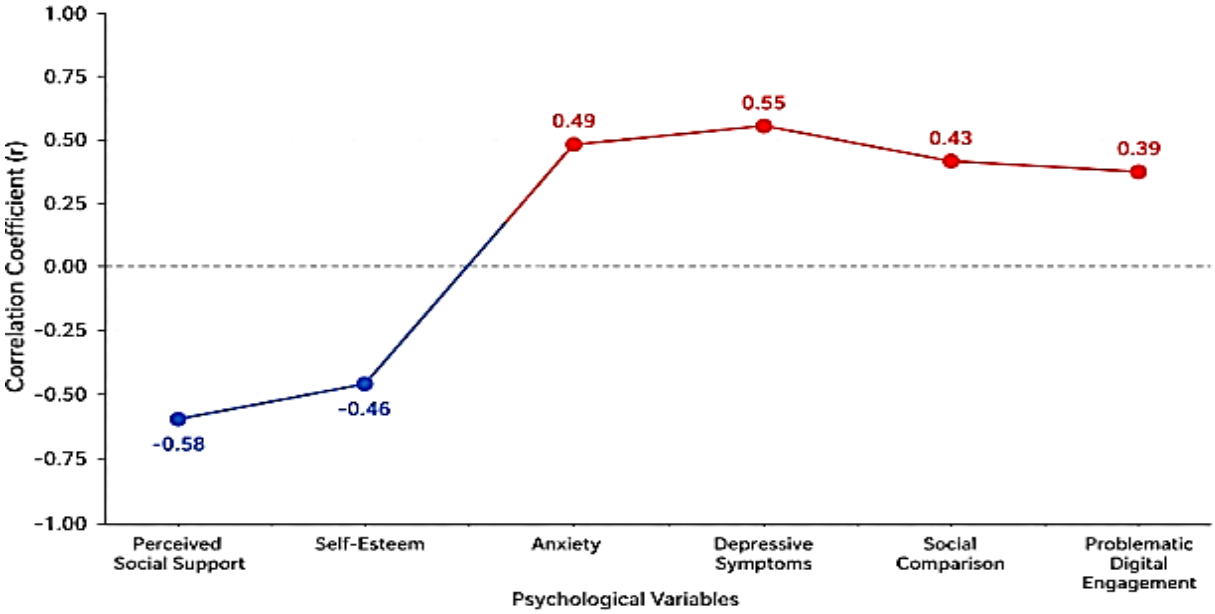
Table 2. Illustrative Correlations with Loneliness

Predictor Variable	Correlation with Loneliness (r)	Direction	Significance
Perceived Social Support	-0.58	Negative	$p < .001$
Self-Esteem	-0.46	Negative	$p < .001$
Anxiety	+0.49	Positive	$p < .001$
Depressive Symptoms	+0.55	Positive	$p < .001$
Social Comparison	+0.43	Positive	$p < .001$
Problematic Digital Engagement	+0.39	Positive	$p < .001$

The illustrative correlation analysis suggests that perceived social support has the strongest negative relationship with loneliness ($r = -0.58$), indicating that individuals perceiving greater social support may experience lower loneliness. Depressive symptoms demonstrate a comparatively strong positive association ($r = 0.55$), followed by anxiety ($r = 0.49$).

Self-esteem is negatively associated with loneliness (r = -0.46), while social comparison (r = 0.43) and problematic digital engagement (r = 0.39) demonstrate positive relationships. Collectively, these patterns suggest that loneliness may reflect an interaction between emotional distress, self-perception, social cognition, and relationship quality.

Figure 2. Psychological Correlates of Loneliness — Line Graph with Markers



In the line graph should display predictor variables on the horizontal axis and correlation coefficients ranging from -1.0 to +1.0 on the vertical axis. A horizontal reference line at zero can distinguish protective negative associations from positive risk associations. Perceived social support shows the strongest protective relationship, while depressive symptoms demonstrate the strongest positive association with loneliness.

Discussion

Loneliness Despite Continuous Connectivity

- The findings illustrate an important paradox of contemporary society: individuals may remain continuously connected through digital technologies while still experiencing substantial loneliness.
- Digital contact should not automatically be equated with emotional closeness, belongingness, intimacy, or meaningful social support.
- The quality and reciprocity of interpersonal interaction appear more psychologically significant than the numerical size of an individual's online network.
- Passive digital consumption may provide exposure to other people's social lives without creating genuine interpersonal participation.

Psychological Risk and Protective Factors

- Higher depressive symptoms and anxiety were positively associated with loneliness, suggesting a close relationship between emotional distress and perceived social disconnection.
- Lower self-esteem may increase vulnerability to loneliness by influencing self-perception, expectations of rejection, and confidence in social interactions.
- Perceived social support demonstrated the strongest negative association with loneliness, highlighting its potential protective role.
- Interventions addressing loneliness should therefore focus not only on increasing social contact but also on strengthening supportive, trustworthy, and emotionally meaningful relationships.

Implications for Digital Well-Being

- Social comparison and problematic digital engagement may contribute to loneliness when technology use becomes passive, compulsive, or psychologically disruptive.
- Digital well-being interventions should encourage purposeful communication, active participation, balanced technology use, and meaningful offline relationships.
- Educational institutions and workplaces may benefit from programs that promote peer support, community participation, interpersonal communication, and psychological literacy.
- Technology platforms should consider design features that support meaningful interaction rather than maximizing engagement duration alone.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant or financial support from any public, commercial, governmental, or not-for-profit funding agency. The study was prepared independently for academic and research purposes. No external funding source influenced the conceptualization, methodology, interpretation, preparation, or presentation of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the preparation, interpretation, or presentation

of this research. The study was conducted and reported in accordance with principles of academic integrity, transparency, and responsible research practice.

Future Research

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to clarify the direction of relationships between loneliness and psychological variables. Cross-sectional studies can identify associations but cannot determine whether anxiety, depression, and problematic digital engagement increase loneliness or whether loneliness itself contributes to these psychological outcomes. Longitudinal studies could examine changes in digital behavior and loneliness across different developmental stages.

Further studies should distinguish among different forms of digital engagement. Active communication, private messaging, video interaction, online communities, passive scrolling, short-form video consumption, and algorithmically recommended content may have substantially different psychological consequences. Research should therefore move beyond total screen time and examine the purpose, quality, emotional context, and interpersonal meaning of digital behavior.

Future research should also investigate cultural, socioeconomic, occupational, and generational differences. The meaning of social connectedness varies across cultural contexts, and patterns observed among university students or young adults may not generalize to adolescents, older adults, remote workers, migrants, or marginalized communities. Mixed-method research combining quantitative scales with interviews could provide deeper insight into how individuals subjectively experience loneliness despite extensive digital connectivity.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the multidimensional nature of loneliness in digitally connected societies. Technological connectivity has dramatically increased opportunities for interpersonal communication, yet access to digital networks does not necessarily ensure psychological connectedness. Loneliness appears to be associated with the quality of interpersonal relationships and with psychological factors including social support, self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, social comparison, and patterns of digital engagement.

The illustrative findings particularly emphasize the protective importance of perceived social support. In contrast, depressive symptoms, anxiety, social comparison, and problematic digital engagement may contribute to increased vulnerability to loneliness. These

relationships demonstrate that interventions should extend beyond simply increasing opportunities for communication. Effective strategies should strengthen meaningful relationships, psychological resilience, self-esteem, emotional support, and healthier patterns of digital interaction.

Ultimately, digitally connected societies require a more human-centered understanding of social connection. Technology can strengthen relationships when it facilitates authentic communication, reciprocity, belonging, and emotional support, but it may intensify feelings of disconnection when interaction becomes passive, comparative, compulsive, or superficial. Addressing loneliness therefore requires coordinated attention from mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, communities, researchers, families, and technology designers.

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