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# The Relationship between Loneliness and Psychological Distress among Young Adults

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***Abstract:*** ***The purpose of the present study is to assess the relationship between loneliness and Psychological distress among young adults. The study also assesses whether there are significant difference in gender with respect to loneliness and psychological distress. A sample of 100 young adults (50 males, 50 females) aged between 18-25 years participated in the study. The UCLA Loneliness Scale Revised Version 3 designed by Russel D. (1996) and the Kessler Psychological distress Scale (K10) developed by Kessler R. (2003) were used to measure the variables in the study. Pearson's correlation coefficient and independent sample t-test were used for statistical analysis of data. The findings indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults. There was no significant difference between loneliness and psychological distress among males and females. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.***
***Keywords: Loneliness, Psychological distress, Young Adults***

## I. INTRODUCTION

Young adults are individuals who have transitioned from adolescence to adulthood but are still in their early stages of adulthood. The age range for young adults is typically between 18 to 29 years old, although this may vary depending on cultural, social, and legal contexts. This period of life is often characterized by significant changes and transitions, including starting higher education, entering the workforce, moving away from home, establishing personal relationships, and developing a sense of identity and purpose. Young adulthood is also a time when individuals may be exploring their values, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as navigating new challenges and responsibilities. Young adulthood is a critical stage in the developmental trajectory of individuals, as experiences during this period can have long-lasting effects on their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Therefore, understanding the challenges, opportunities, and needs of young adults is essential for promoting positive development and well-being.

There are many factors that can contribute to young adults' loneliness and psychological distress. They are social isolation, trauma or abuse, mental health conditions, relationship problems, lack of purpose or direction, cultural or societal factors, academic or career-related stress. Young adults who lack social support or feel disconnected from others may be at higher risk for these problems. Young adults who have experienced trauma or abuse in their lives may struggle with feelings of loneliness and psychological distress. Mental health conditions like anxiety and depression can make it difficult for young adults to connect with others and feel a sense of belonging. Issues in romantic or familial relationships can contribute to feelings of loneliness and psychological distress. Lack of purpose or direction; young adults who are unsure of their goals or who lack a sense of purpose may struggle with feelings of loneliness and depression. Cultural or societal factors; young adults who feel marginalized or excluded due to their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation may experience higher rates of loneliness and psychological distress. Academic or career-related stress; young adults who are under a lot of pressure to succeed academically or professionally may experience high levels of stress and anxiety, which can contribute to feelings of loneliness and depression.

The term "loneliness" describes a state of distress or unease brought on by a sense of seclusion. Due to a lack of social connection, it produces emotional suffering (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Modern people are becoming increasingly lonely, and it has been discovered that about one third of people in industrialised nations experience loneliness (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). Loneliness is complex and is unique to every person. It might lead to emptiness and make someone feel unwelcome. It is state of mind where an individual craves human connections, but the individual find himself unable to connect with those around him. Mental health is significantly impacted by loneliness. Being alone is a serious health issue that has been linked to a number of detrimental mental and psychological effects. Evidence has shown that loneliness is a major risk factor for stress, depression, anxiety, and suicide, all of which have the potential to aggravate pre-existing mental and psychological problems. (Holmes et al., Lim et al.,2020).

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An experience that is subjective and accompanied by unpleasant depressive and anxious feelings is referred to as psychological distress. The emotions can have a toll on a person's normal level of functioning in day-to-day activities. This state of mind can influence an individual to hold a biased outlook of the environment and self. While Psychological disorders are long lasting, psychological distress is transient and it is related to specific stressors which trigger it. Psychological distress is transient and it is related to specific stressors which triggers it. When the stressor is removed, psychological distress decreases.

It is the result of significant life issues such transitions (Jia & Loo, 2018), crises, and disasters. It can also be caused by minute stresses such daily inconveniences, environmental stressors, and organisational stressors (Aldwin et al., 2014). The severity of psychological distress differs for each individual as it is related to a person's internal life. It is predicated on their individual subjective perspective of the outside environment. There are various pressures that might lead to psychological burnout. These stressors include the loss of a loved one, divorce, failure to attain a goal and relocation. When an individual is unable to cope with the pressure of a stressor (internal or external) that individual succumbs under the stress. This may cause feelings of anxiety, sadness, sleeping problems and many other effects.

A study assessed the relationship between loneliness and psychological symptoms. They found that there existed a significant relationship was between loneliness and low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Jackson & Cochran, 1991). (Lee, et al., 2001) looked at the connection between psychological discomfort, dysfunctional interpersonal behaviour, and social connections. The result of the study revealed that the participants who were less socially connected exhibited higher dysfunctional interpersonal behaviours and higher level of psychological distress. A study that looked at the connection between loneliness and psychological distress in those over the age of 65. It was found that psychological distress was higher in older adults who were lonelier. It was also found that the older adults who were not familiar with neighbours were more prone to depression. (Ayis and Ebrahim,2006). The functioning of students who travelled to Rome for higher education in 2007 was investigated, along with their levels of loneliness, psychological discomfort, and overall well-being. The study concluded that students who were lonelier had higher levels of psychological distress and they exhibited lower levels of functioning generally. (hunley, 2009).A study on connection between loneliness and thirdyear students' psychological wellbeing. The result of the study revealed that it was positive, showing that two subscales of psychological well-being (depression and a sense of positive well-being) affect loneliness significantly (Lovina & Anda, 2011). A study assessed the relationship between loneliness and individual dimension of distress were examined.

The findings showed a substantial relationship between depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and loneliness.Loneliness was not subs tantially correlated with any other characteristic of misery. Other dimension of distress was not significantly related to loneliness. (Judy & Susan, 2012). A study with participants from the Swiss based health survey assessed the relationship between loneliness and physical and mental health. The result of the study revealed that the participants who were lonelier showed more physical and mental ailments like diabetes, depression, stress, high cholesterol levels. It was found that loneliness was associated with most lifestyle factors such as smoking significantly. (Richard, et al., 2017). A research study conducted to assess the relationship between social isolation, depression and psychological distress among older adults. This study was subjective to extended family members and friends. Results indicated that social isolation from extended family and friends was associated with depressive symptoms and increased levels of psychological distress. (Taylor, et al., 2018). A recent research study was done to assess the relationship between social isolation and loneliness and social support and psychological distress. The results indicated that the group that was most socially isolated and lonely was found to have higher levels of psychological distress when compared to the participants of other experimental groups. (Menec, et al., 2020).

### *A. Research Questions*

*1)* Is there a relationship between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults?
*2)* Is there a difference between males and females in their loneliness?
*3)* Is there a difference between males and females in their psychological distress?

## II. METHODOLOGY

### *A. Objectives*

*1)* To assess the relationship between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults.
*2)* To assess the difference between males and females in their loneliness.
*3)* To assess the difference between males and females in their psychological distress.

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*B. Hypothesis*

$H_o1$: There is no significant relationship between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults.
$H_o2$: There is no significant difference between males and females in their loneliness.
$H_o3$: There is no significant difference between males and females in their psychological distress.

*C. Research Design*

Quantitative Research design is used in this study.

*D. Sample*

The study used a descriptive survey method for data collection to assess the relationship between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults. The sample consisted of 100 participants aged between 18-25 years (50 males and 50 females).The participants were students and working professionals in different industries from Karnataka and Kerala. The data was collected using a convenient sampling technique.

## III. TOOLS USED

*A. UCLA Loneliness Scale Revised Version 3*

UCLA Loneliness scale revised version 3 developed by Russel D. (1996) is a 20- item scale designed to measure feelings of loneliness and as well as social isolation. Each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes) to 4 (Often). Items no 1,5,6,9,10,15,19 and 20 are reverse scored and a total score is calculated. Higher scores indicate increased levels of feelings of loneliness and social isolation in the subject. It is a very reliable scale with the co-efficient alpha ranging from .89 to .94. Convergent validity and construct validity was well specified and supposed by significant measures.

*B. Kessler Psychological distress Scale (K10)*

Kessler Psychological distress Scale (K10) developed by Kessler R. (2003) is a 10-item scale that was developed to measure psychological distress based on the past 4 weeks. Each item is rated on a five- point Likert scale ranging from 1 (None of the time), 2 (A little of the time), 3 (Some of the time), 4 (Most of the time) to 5 (All of the time). A total sum of the scores is obtained and higher scores indicate higher severity of mental disorder. This scale has a strong reliability with the Cronbach's alpha equal to .88. The validity of this scale was found to be good.

## IV. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The results were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. IBM SPSS 2.0 software was used to analyze the collected data. Among descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation were used; among the inferential statistics independent sample t-test and Pearson's correlation method was used to test the hypothesis.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed hypothesis-wise as follows.

*1) $H_0 1$:* There is no significant relationship between Loneliness and Psychological distress among young adults.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson correlation between Loneliness and Psychological distress among young adults.

| Variables | N | M | SD | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Loneliness | 100 | 46.94 | 8.70 | - | .518** |
| 2.Psychological distress | 100 | 27.41 | 8.36 | .518** | - |

**p<0.01 level (2- tailed)

An analysis of Table 1 shows that the mean score for loneliness is 46.94 and psychological distress is 27.41. In terms of standard deviation, the score for loneliness is 8.70 and 8.36.

It means that the spread of scores away from mean is apparently more for loneliness, suggesting that there is more variation for loneliness among young adults. To see whether there is a relationship between the two variables, the scores were subjected to Pearson's correlation co-efficient. The results yielded a strong positive correlation (r=.518), which is significant at 0.01 level, which indicates that, as loneliness increases, psychological distress increases. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults.

The above results are consistent with the literature. Many studies have found a positive association between loneliness and psychological distress. A similar study conducted by Lovina & Anda (2011) revealed that there is positive correlation between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults and a study conducted by Judy & Susan (2012) also revealed that there is a significant association between loneliness and interpersonal sensitivity (low self-esteem) and depression.

*2)* $H_0$2: There is no significant difference between males and females in their loneliness.

Table 2
Significance of difference between males and females in their loneliness using independent sample t-test.

| Loneliness | N | M | SD | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Males | 50 | 46.94 | 8.78 | .00 | 1.00 |
| Females | 50 | 46.94 | 8.70 | | |

*P>0.05

An analysis of Table 2 shows that the mean score for loneliness is 46.94 for males and 46.94 for females, with corresponding standard deviation of 8.78 and 8.70, respectively. It means that the spread of scores away from mean is more among males in comparison to females for loneliness. The calculated "t" value for loneliness between the two groups is .00 with corresponding "p" value of 1.00, which is statistically not found to differ significantly. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This indicates that there is no significant difference between males and females in their loneliness.

On the contrary to above results, the study conducted by conducted by Russell, Cutrona, Rose and Yurko (1984) found that women were more likely to report loneliness than men, and that this difference was particularly pronounced among unmarried individuals. And also a recent research has shown that men who are socially isolated or have smaller social network may be more likely to experience loneliness (Cornwell & Waite, 2009).

*3)* $H_0$3: There is no significant difference between males and females in their psychological distress.

Table 3
Significance of difference between males and females in their psychological distress using independent sample t-test.

| Psychological distress | N | M | SD | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Males | 50 | 28.10 | 7.88 | .82 | .41 |
| Females | 50 | 26.72 | 8.84 | | |

*P>0.05

An analysis of Table 3 shows that the mean score for psychological distress is 28.10 for males and 26.72 for females, with corresponding standard deviation of 7.88 and 8.84, respectively. To see whether the obtained mean difference is true of the population the scores were subjected to "t" test. The calculated "t" value for psychological distress is .82 with corresponding "p" values of .41, which is statistically not found to differ significantly. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This indicates that there is no significant difference between males and females in their psychological distress.

In the line with the above results, the study conducted by Kessler et al (2005) found that women had higher rates of anxiety and mood disorders than men. Similarly, a meta- analysis by Piccinelli and Wilkinson (2000) found that women had a higher prevalence of common mental disorders than men.

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## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are drawn based on the research questions raised.

*1)* There is a significant relationship between loneliness and psychological distress among young adults.
*2)* There is no significant difference between males and females in their loneliness.
*3)* There is no significant difference between males and females in their psychological distress.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS

The results of present study showed positive correlation between loneliness and psychological distress. These results will aid in the diagnostic process in mental health facilities to assess psychologically distressed patients. The insignificant gender difference in levels of loneliness and psychological distress will also aid in the understanding that men and women experience similar levels of loneliness and psychological distress; though the source and causes of such problems may differ. This emphasizes the equivalent importance of mental health issues in both the genders. Thus, individuals of both genders must be given equally appropriate care for treatment of their mental health issues regarding loneliness and psychological distress.

## VIII. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A few suggestions for research in future include in gathering a large sample as it will increase validity of data and help in arriving at better conclusions. The study can be expanded to other age groups including children, adolescents and older people. The study can be conducted manually to reach out to those who do not have a social media account. Other demographic variable such as socioeconomic status, occupation can enhance the effectiveness of this study.

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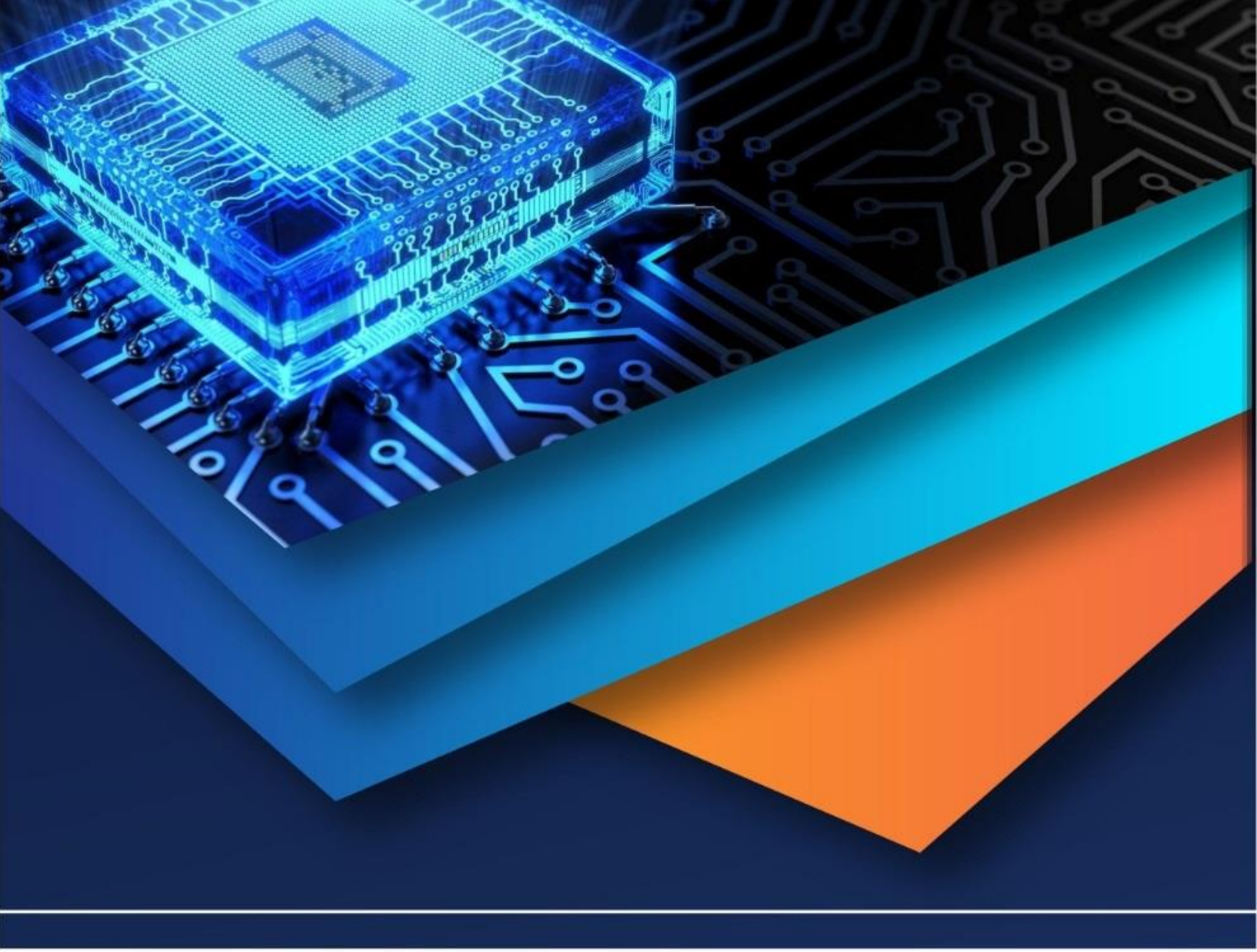
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