THE EXPERIENCE OF LONELINESS IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract

Culture has been shown to influence the experience of loneliness. Studies have shown that young adults are especially prone to experiencing loneliness. The aim of this mixed-methods study was to investigate if young adults from an individualistic culture experience loneliness differently compared to young adults from a collectivistic culture. Eighty participants from Sweden and 80 participants from India aged 18-30 answered De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS) and Lubben Social Network Scale (LSNS-R) through an online survey which together with additional demographics provided the quantitative data. Six semi-structured interviews (three from each culture) provided the qualitative data, exploring how the participants described their experiences of loneliness and its connection to culture. Young adults from India reported significantly higher levels of social isolation and social loneliness compared to young adults from Sweden. No significant difference was found in emotional loneliness. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data provided a deeper insight into these findings, and the qualitative results are discussed in light of the quantitative. Three main themes emerged: descriptions of loneliness, young adulthood as a stage in life where loneliness might be high, and cultural values that affect the experience of loneliness.

Keywords: loneliness, social isolation, young adulthood, cross-cultural studies.

Abstrakt

Kultur har visat sig ha en påverkan på upplevelsen av ensamhet. Studier har visat att unga vuxna är en åldersgrupp som löper särskilt hög risk för ensamhet. Syftet med denna mixed-methods-studie var att undersöka om unga vuxna från en individualistisk kultur upplever ensamhet annorlunda än unga vuxna från en kollektivistisk kultur. Åtio deltagare från Sverige och 80 deltagare från Indien svarade på De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS) och Lubben Social Network Scale (LSNS-R) genom en webb-baserad enkät, som tillsammans med kompletterande demografisk information resulterade i den kvantitativa datan. Sex semi-strukturerade intervjuer (tre från varje kultur) resulterade i den kvalitativa datan, där deltagarnas egna beskrivningar av ensamhet och dess koppling till kultur utforskades. Unga vuxna från Indien rapporterade signifikant högre nivåer av social isolering och social ensamhet jämfört med unga vuxna från Sverige. Ingen signifikant skillnad sågs i emotionell ensamhet. Tematisk analys av den kvalitativa datan gav en djupare förståelse för dessa resultat, och de kvalitativa resultaten diskuteras i relation till de kvantitativa. Tre huvudsakliga teman framkom: beskrivningar av ensamhet, ung vuxen ålder som en tid i livet där ensamheten kan vara hög och kulturella värderingar som påverkar upplevelsen av ensamhet.

Nyckelord: ensamhet, social isolering, unga vuxna, interkulturella studier.
The experience of loneliness in young adulthood:  
A cross-cultural study

As human beings, we have an innate desire to belong and feel connected with each other. Peter Strang (2014) argues in his book about loneliness and fellowship that this desire to belong is in our genes because we need to belong in order to survive - humans are neither strong nor fast, so without the ability to cooperate with each other we would not survive long. According to Strang, this is also why our bodies give us “warning signals” when the social connection with others is threatened. We feel stressed, uncomfortable, anxious - our bodies are trying to tell us to go back to the safety of the group (Strang, 2014). While social connection is one of the few necessary predictors of well-being (Diener & Oishi, as cited in Ford et al., 2015), research has shown that loneliness is linked with various mental and physical health problems including depression, anxiety, interpersonal hostility and high blood pressure (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens & Cacioppo, 2015). Loneliness is also a known factor in suicide (Mental Health Foundation, 2010). Given the physiological effects that persistent loneliness leaves on our immune system and cardiovascular function, Hawkley and Cacioppo (2007) argue that being lonely is equivalent to being a smoker, in terms of health impact.  

Hays and DiMatteo (1987) define loneliness as a feeling of being cut off and separated from others. Lykes and Kemmelmeier (2014) further define loneliness as a mismatch between one’s desired social networks and the subjective perceptions of them, suggesting that loneliness per definition is a negative subjective experience and does not necessarily have to do with the amount of social interactions available. It is important, here, to make a clear distinction between loneliness and social isolation. While loneliness is a subjective, unpleasant experience stemming from a perceived lack of closeness with others, social isolation refers to the physical, objective lack of people to interact with (Child & Lawton, 2019).  

Weiss (1973) distinguished two dimensions of loneliness in his research. He differentiated between social loneliness, the experience of the absence of a broader, engaging social network, and emotional loneliness, which relates to the absence of an intimate relationship, for example a partner or best friend. Emotional loneliness is characterized by intense feelings of emptiness, abandonment and hopelessness, while social loneliness can be described as a state you may find yourself in when moving to a new place with no friends or family around (Weiss, 1973).  

Loneliness in young adulthood

Most research on loneliness have focused on the elderly population (De Koning, Stathi & Richards, 2017; Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg & Pitkälä, 2005). The elderly might indeed be the most common representation of social isolation, due to the growing risk of losing mobility to seek out new relationships and at the same time losing partners and peers through sickness and death. Even so, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that young adults are especially prone to experiencing loneliness (Mental Health Foundation, 2010; Office for National Statistics, 2018; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016). Luhman and Hawkley (2016) studied loneliness across the life span and found that young adults and the oldest old were the age groups reporting the highest levels of loneliness. The authors further concluded the sources of loneliness in old age to be well understood, suggesting future research to focus on understanding the sources of loneliness in the younger population. One source, as suggested by Diehl and Hilger (2015), may be the transition from a school environment to adult life. The authors also discuss how the seeking of independence and individualization from family and childhood relationships creates an evident risk to the experience of loneliness.
Loneliness and its connection to culture

Loneliness is experienced by all human beings at some point of our lives, regardless of one’s culture (van Staden & Coetzee, 2010). Culture does, however, play an important role when it comes to how we perceive and experience the world. Segall, Lonner and Berry (1998) reviewed the interplay between psychology and culture, and concluded that culture should be central, not peripheral, when it comes to psychological research and theories. Regarding research on loneliness, some researchers stress the importance of not only focusing on individual factors and lack of social contacts, but also on the community surrounding the individual (Rokach, Orzech, Cripps, Lackovic-Grgin & Penezic, 2001). The authors discuss how loneliness can be an expression of the individual’s relationship to the community, and since the way people’s social relationships are organized differ across different cultures, different perceptions and coping strategies will occur in different cultures.

Researchers have made efforts to find meaningful dimensions to describe differences between cultures. One commonly used dimension is individualism-collectivism (IC). IC is a societal characteristic which describes to what degree people are integrated into groups. In individualistic cultures ties between members are loosely composed, meaning you are only expected to take care of and look after yourself and your immediate family. Some of the key components in the individualistic culture are the right to privacy, to emphasize the “I” before the “we” and the expectation of having an own opinion. In collectivistic cultures you are from birth integrated into strong cohesive in-groups often consisting of the extended family (uncles, cousins etc), which will protect you and care for you in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 2011). Most important for loneliness, cultural dimensions such as IC include ideals and norms about social relationships, which may influence the actual social engagement as well as perceived discrepancies between ideal and actual social engagement. Lower social engagement seems to be a structural risk factor for loneliness (de Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, as cited in Heu, van Zomeren and Hansen, 2019), and perceived discrepancies between ideal and actual social engagement can as mentioned earlier be seen as a definition of loneliness in itself. In a culture with higher social expectations on relationships, one may experience a greater discrepancy between ideal and actual social engagement, and a greater loss if one is not so socially engaged, as compared to in a culture with lower social expectations. Hence, individuals from different cultures will have different expectations upon them regarding how they should be socially embedded, what types of relationships they should establish, and even how close they should feel to specific others (Heu et al., 2019).

Research on Culture and Loneliness

Even though the negative impacts of loneliness are felt regardless of the culture in which it occurs (Rokach et al., 2001), studies have concluded culture to have an impact on the way loneliness is experienced and coped with in different cultures. van Staden and Coetzee (2010) reviewed the literature on how culture and loneliness are connected and concluded that cultural values and meaning shape the experience of loneliness, in that they create different expectations of relationships and social connectedness. For example, while being alone is valued and encouraged in some cultures, others have a more negative take on it. Likewise, cultures that promote the importance of romantic relationships seem to shape the experience of loneliness and closeness accordingly. In a study from 2008, US students reported higher levels of romantic loneliness than Korean students, which supported the idea that in some individualistic cultures, loneliness is more about personal romantic expectations, whereas in some collectivistic cultures, loneliness is more about social approval (Seepersad et al., as cited in van Staden & Coetzee, 2010). The only study conducted on loneliness in a young population
in India, to the authors knowledge, was a comparison between American and Indian adolescents. American female adolescents reported significantly higher levels of loneliness than Indian female adolescents, while no difference was found in the male respondents. (Medora, Woodward & Larson, as cited in Roux & Connors, 2001). Lykes and Kemmelmeier (2014) examined loneliness as a function of cultural values in 22 European countries, and found levels of loneliness to be higher in collectivistic societies compared to individualistic societies, but that societies differed in what predicted loneliness. Lack of interactions with family was more linked to loneliness in collectivistic cultures compared to individualistic cultures, whereas lack of interactions with friends and having a confidant was more linked to loneliness in individualistic societies. Somewhat inconsistent with these results, Heu et al., (2019) found that higher levels of collectivism in five European countries was related to lower degrees of loneliness. However, they looked at individual-level collectivism, which means the subjective perception of the self or one’s social environment as collectivistic or individualistic. Hence, their study compared individuals within the same cultures as opposed to individuals from different cultures. Their study also confirmed the hypothesis that individualism indeed implied lower social embeddedness. Their hypothesis that collectivism would imply higher discrepancies between ideal and actual social embeddedness and therefore a risk for loneliness, was not confirmed. In a study from Rokach et al., (2001), Canadians scored significantly higher than Croatians on all five factors recognized within the 82-item questionnaire on loneliness that they filled in. The authors made no direct connection to IC, but discussed how the North American culture, where individual achievements and competitiveness is emphasized, may encourage loneliness. The experience of loneliness was concluded to be significantly affected by cultural heritage.

The Swedish Culture

Sweden is a relatively small country, with a population of about 10 million (Statistiska centralbyrån [SCB], 2019). It is a country high in individualism, which is characterized by valuing autonomy and placing one’s personal goals above those of others (Hofstede, 2001). Individualism index (IDV) measures the extent to which cultures insist on individual or collective relationships (Hofstede, 1980), and a comparison with 76 other nations using IDV ranked Sweden as 13-14 most individualistic (Hofstede, 1997). Between a half and one million Swedes could be considered socially lonely (Brülde & Fors, 2015) and coherently SCB report that about 4% of Swedes are socially isolated (2019). Sweden has been called “the loneliest country in the world” (Passanisi, 2016). The cold Nordic country where 1.8 million people live alone representing 39.2% of all households and 17.8% of the total population (SCB, 2019) may be somewhat deserving of that claim. There are some misconceptions about the Swedish loneliness, though. In the European Social Survey Sweden seems to be one of the least lonely countries in Europe (Brülde & Fors, 2015). The quantity and quality of friendship relations in Sweden also seems to be better off than some other European countries. Brülde and Fors (2015) suggest that this may be because Sweden is a country with strong individualistic values, and it is easier for Swedes to choose their social company which in turn could lead to better relationships.

The Indian Culture

India is a vast country, with a population of over 1.3 billion (World Bank Group, 2019). A study from 2008, administering a scale aiming to measure IC on four different countries, confirmed the hypothesis that India can be considered a collectivistic culture (Sivadas, Bruvold & Nelson, 2008). Prakash (2004) further conclude that India is very much a collectivistic
society, where moral issues are based on religious and philosophical conceptions of justice, social responsibilities towards others and social duties. The individual is not known for their personal achievements but rather within the context of their family, caste, place and within other interpersonal roles and relationships (Prakash, 2004). The research on levels of loneliness in an Indian context is scarce, but in 2016, a survey was conducted to examine the attitudes, anxieties and aspirations of Indians aged 15 to 34. Of the 1622 young Indians from 19 different states who answered the survey, 8% reported feeling lonely very often (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2017).

Summary

As loneliness has been linked to severe health issues and the prevalence of loneliness among young adults seem to be higher than average, it is important to broaden the research on this subject (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Office for National Statistics, 2018). Furthermore there is an evident gap in the research on how young adults from different cultures experience loneliness. Since general levels of loneliness have been suggested to differ between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Heu et al., 2019; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014), this study aim to expand the research on loneliness by deepening the understanding of the experience of loneliness in young adulthood in two different cultures. More specific and similarly to already conducted research (Brülde & Fors, 2015), the concepts of emotional and social loneliness is used to broaden the understanding of loneliness, and the relationship between loneliness and social isolation is examined. What is unique with this study is the cross-cultural comparison between an individualistic culture (Sweden) and a collectivistic culture (India), and the mixed-method approach which may give a more in depth view of this issue.

Aim of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is to investigate if young adults from an individualistic culture experience loneliness differently compared to young adults from a collectivistic culture. In order to investigate this, two research questions were formed.

1. Is there a difference between young adults from a collectivistic culture and young adults from an individualistic culture in reported:
   a) social isolation?
   b) emotional loneliness?
   c) social loneliness?

2. How is loneliness described by young adults living in a collectivistic culture and young adults living in an individualistic culture?

Method

Participants

Three hundred and sixty-five participants were recruited through snowballing and social media. Thirteen participants were excluded because they did not live in or had not been raised in India or Sweden. One participant was excluded who did not fit in the age criteria, which was set at 18-30 to include young adults. More Swedish than Indian people completed the survey, so in order to get a fair comparison between the groups, the first 80 Swedes who completed the survey were included. In total 160 participants were included in the study. The average age of
the 160 participants was 25.3 years and 50% were men and 50% women. Table 1 outlines the demographics for age, gender, occupation, relationship status and living situation for the two groups separately.

Six participants also participated in a qualitative interview, three from India and three from Sweden. The Indian participants were part of the original group, whereas the Swedish participants were recruited through notes put up in the university. Their names used in this thesis are made up.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Live alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>(70%)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(30%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(31.3%)</td>
<td>(58.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>(30%)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(70%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(55%)</td>
<td>(43.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 80 in both samples. Relationship = "Are you in a romantic relationship?"

Design

A mixed-methods, cross-sectional approach was chosen for the thesis to enable a more in-depth view of the issues explored. The overall purpose of a mixed-methods study is to offer an insightful understanding of a complex social phenomenon, and to bring context to the quantitative results with the qualitative component (Greene, 2008).

Quantitative data. A survey was administered to young adults representing both the Swedish and the Indian culture, which resulted in quantitative data. The data was analysed using the statistic program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants from each group to further strengthen the thesis and to answer the second research question. The interviews were recorded and encoded while transcribed, and the data was then analyzed through thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) to find common topics and themes and to provide a deeper insight into young adults’ own experiences of loneliness. Quotes were extracted to give meaning to the understanding of the themes. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research and emphasizes on finding, analysing and interpreting common patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data is not representable for the whole group but can give a deeper understanding of how loneliness can be experienced in two different cultural contexts.

Measures

Social isolation. To measure social isolation Lubben Social Network Scale (LSNS-R) was used. The LSNS-R is designed to measure perceived social support from friends and family, and has been used extensively in the literature (Vilar-Compte, Vargas-Bustamante...
LSNS-R consists of two subscales, asking the same six questions with regards to family and relatives for the family subscale as with regards to friends for the friends subscale. Sample items are “How many relatives do you see or hear from at least once a month?” and “How many friends do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?”. It uses a 6-point Likert Scale ranging from 0 (least connected) to 5 (most connected). The total score is the sum of all items and ranges from 0 to 60, with a higher score indicating higher social engagement, and hence lower social isolation. LSNS-R has adequate internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of .78 (Lubben, Gironda & Lee, 2002). The LSNS-R correlates with mortality, depressive symptoms and overall physical health (Lubben, 1988). Although LSNS was developed for use among elders, studies have demonstrated that the LSNS can be reliably used among younger populations as well (Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014).

**Loneliness.** To measure social and emotional loneliness De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS) was used. It is an 11-item test developed in 1985, built on Weiss’s research about loneliness as a concept of two components. Sample items are “I miss having a really close friend” (emotional loneliness subscale) and “There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems” (social loneliness subscale). It uses a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 0 (none of the time) to 4 (all of the time). DJGLS is one of the most frequently used measures of loneliness. The strength of the instrument is that it can be used both as a measurement of the complete loneliness scale, as well as emotional loneliness and social loneliness separately (De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985; De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999). DJGLS has adequate internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of .86 and has been tested for construct validity (Grygiel, Humenny & Rębisz, 2016). Since the emotional loneliness subscale consists of 6 items and the social loneliness subscale consists of 5 items, the mean score per item has been used to measure emotional and social loneliness in the present study (see table 3).

An additional question was added as a direct and time-limited measure of loneliness (in contrast to DJGLS which does not include the word lonely or have a time restriction), asking how often within the past two weeks the individual had felt lonely, using the same 5-point Likert Scale. The direct measure of loneliness was strongly correlated with the total score of the DJGLS, \( r(158) = 0.76, \ p > .01 \). In addition to the two standardized scales, the survey also collected information about occupation, living arrangements and relationship status, since they are socio-demographic characteristics commonly associated with loneliness.

**Qualitative results: descriptions of loneliness.** A semi-structured interview guide was constructed to provide a deeper understanding of how loneliness is understood and described by individuals from the two groups. The interview was structured in four main sections: understanding of loneliness, thoughts on loneliness and young adulthood, thoughts on loneliness and culture and one’s own experience of loneliness. The questions asked in the interview were based on theoretical understanding of loneliness.

**Ethical considerations**

The participants were informed about the aim of the thesis and that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. They were informed about the possibility to discontinue any time they wanted without having to give a reason, and that their information would not be disclosed to any unauthorized people. When it comes to the interviews, the participants were informed about the aim of the thesis and the aim of the interview, and that any information that might reveal to the reader who they are would not be used. They also got the chance to read the thesis before it was published it to make sure we had understood them correctly and not included any quotes they felt uncomfortable with. The audio files were deleted when the transcriptions were done and the transcriptions were deleted once the thesis was submitted.
Meanwhile, the files were kept in a safe place where none else could access them. The participants were informed about this as well.

Results

Social isolation

Table 2 compares the mean scores of LSNS-R and the two subscales Family and Friends. As measured by LSNS-R, the Indian population reported significantly higher levels of social isolation compared to the Swedish population. When separating the two subscales, no significant difference was found in the friends subscale but the Indian sample had significantly less contact with their families and relatives compared to the Swedish sample. The two subscales were significantly correlated in the Indian, \( r(78) = .46, p < .01 \), but not in the Swedish sample.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31.32</td>
<td>11.20</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>36.31</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-3.33</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>&lt;.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>13.35</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>17.09</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-4.18</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>&lt;.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>17.98</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>19.22</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-1.33</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Using independent t-test, the Indian and the Swedish samples were compared on mean score on the Lubben Social Network Scale and the subscales Family and Friends.

*\( p < 0.01 \)

Emotional loneliness

Table 3 compares the mean scores per item on DJGLS and the two subscales emotional and social loneliness separately. There was no significant difference in emotional loneliness between the two groups. Emotional loneliness and social loneliness was strongly correlated in the Indian sample \( r(78) = .51, p < .01 \), and in the Swedish sample \( r(78) = .82, p < .01 \).

When comparing those in a romantic relationship with those not in a romantic relationship, no significant difference was found in the Indian sample. In the Swedish sample, singles (\( M = 3.04, SD = 1.12 \)) scored significantly higher on the direct measure of loneliness during the past two weeks compared to those in a romantic relationship (\( M = 2.40, SD = 1.12 \)), \( t(78) = 2.42, p < .01 \).

Social loneliness

The Indian sample scored significantly higher on social loneliness compared to the Swedish sample (See table 3). Social loneliness was moderately correlated with the family
subscale of LSNS-R in the Indian sample, $r(78) = .47$, $p < .01$, and in the Swedish sample, $r(78) = .38$, $p < .01$. Social loneliness was strongly correlated with the friends subscale of LSNS-R in the Indian sample, $r(78) = .75$, $p < .01$, and moderately correlated in the Swedish sample, $r(78) = .49$, $p < .01$.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>T-test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeJong</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeJongSoc</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeJongEmo</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Using independent t-test, the Indian and the Swedish samples were compared on mean score per item on the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale and the subscales social and emotional loneliness.

*p < 0.01

How is loneliness described by young adults living in an individualistic culture and young adults living in a collectivistic culture?

The qualitative data provide another light to these findings, and some insight into young adults’ personal experiences of loneliness. Three main themes emerged from the four categories covered in the interviews (see figure 1).
Figure 1: Categories, themes and codes

**Theme 1: Descriptions of loneliness.** Loneliness was described as “not finding the right people to talk to” (Prishuk), “the feeling that you don’t have anyone to talk to or connect with” (Priyanka), “not having anyone to consort with on your free time” (Jonas) “the feeling of not having anyone to get support from” (Sofia), “not building any deep relationships” (Oskar) and “when you are not fully there in your environment” (Arjun).

Not finding the right person to talk to on the right subject, like probably if you have some issues with your work and you speak to your parents on that and they might be very anxious, ‘oh you should leave your job’ and ‘oh you shouldn’t go there and work’, and probably that’s not the right advice that you want, or probably that’s not the right person that you wanna speak to. Probably someone, your classmates, probably they are the right people to talk to. So finding the right person to talk to, talk the right subjects, if you don’t find that, then you are lonely. (Prishuk)

Regarding their own experiences of loneliness, Jonas and Sofia described it like this:

I have friends where I come from but not here. I guess it’s partly positive because I can decide over my free time, I can do what I want but it feels like it would be nice if I had someone here to consort with, that I could be close with, like a friend to hang out with on the weekends, or a partner. (Jonas)

I can feel lonely even when I’m around people. It’s usually because maybe I’m thinking about something that I don’t want to tell anyone, or if I feel that nobody understands what I would like to say or what I feel. And often that I kind of, in a negative way, am different from other people. And that I can’t ask for help because there is nobody that would understand. Or that I don’t dare to ask for help. Because I’ve always had people around me, so I haven’t really experienced this social loneliness. It’s more emotional for me. (Sofia)
Regarding the reason behind his experience of loneliness, Jonas described it like this:

I am a quite self-critical person so I blame myself pretty much, many people have more social qualities, a bit more extravert, I’m a kind of person, a bit more introvert and think it’s difficult with big groups, I like smaller groups, one or two people, then I feel comfortable. So it’s pretty much that, there are requirements to have some social qualities, I want to get better at that but it’s hard.

**Theme 2: Young adulthood as a stage in life where loneliness might be high.** All six participants agreed that young adulthood is a stage in life where loneliness might be high. Some explained this as a consequence of feeling lost and not knowing what you want to do with your life, and others referred to the living situation of moving away from your hometown or family, or that others move and you stay. Priyanka described how moving away from your hometown can cause loneliness.

So I know many of my friends moved out of their hometowns to start jobs or anything in a new place. Which means starting from scratch, building a social support system is hard. And new roommates and moving from your family with everything. More number of people are leaving their home states and living in new places which means building support systems gets harder... And that is a source of loneliness.

Arjun described how not being able to relate to others created a feeling of loneliness when he was younger, and how traveling gave him new perspectives.

I felt pretty lonely when growing up in my hometown. Because for me I couldn’t relate to most of the youth around me. Maybe they had a different lifestyle, they had a different idea of being and I couldn’t relate to that because I have a very… I don’t know, yeah I was different. And I think that is really something that urges me to travel. [...] Now I’m back in my hometown, I’m planning to come up with a movement festival, to share all these learnings, to create an environment, to create a culture that ‘yes, let’s come together’, you know, and play. Because that’s something that I missed while growing up. And I felt lonely.

Sofia described how trying to figure out who you are and what you want to do with your life can cause loneliness.

For me personally, and my friends that I’ve talked to, this age or, young adults, kind of feel like, maybe you don’t know what you want to do with your life, or who you are or what you want to work with or study, what you like. And then when you graduate from high school maybe you lose your friends, maybe they travel or move or so. At least I feel, I mean I felt pretty lonely when graduating from high school, when I was 19. [...] But I think it’s pretty common that you feel lonely because maybe you question what you want to do with your life. At least if you don’t talk to anyone about it.

**Theme 3: Cultural values that affect the experience of loneliness.** When it comes to how culture and loneliness is connected, different cultural values were mentioned by the Indian and the Swedish participants. While the Indian participants talked about family values, a competitive environment in academics and that the culture is changing with their generation, the Swedish participants talked about wanting to blend in, that you should be independent and how social media can contribute to loneliness.
Prishuk described how the competitive environment in university might cause loneliness, if you don’t do well.

And probably academics in general, that is where I find people are facing loneliness in India. Because it’s rigorous. It’s competitive. So you kind of feel left out from the entire group if you don’t do really well in academics. It’s not as collective as somewhere else. If you do your masters in two years you kind of are regarded in the group but if you extend your master’s to third or fourth year, kind of like feel left out. Probably people won’t talk to you that much. So I feel loneliness in that place.

Priyanka described how the family can be a buffer for loneliness, and how being able to reach out to her family helped her feel less lonely.

If you are part of a community with tightened family, it is easier to reach out to your family and say ‘I like to do this’ or just being around or living with other people, sometimes that can just help. If you are doing everything on your own and there’s that sense of you have to deal with all your issues, whatever problem you are facing, you have to deal with it on your own, versus you can reach out to a family or a community that can help you, it does make a difference.

Arjun described how living with his family was a buffer for loneliness, while at the same time the strong influence of the family could limit him and make him feel lonely.

So, okay, I come from a big family, like a joint family. So while growing up we were 10 members at home. So that was not lonely for sure. It’s just that the culture within that family or home can define so much for how you perceive things or what you, you know, your sense of reality [...] It’s just that I feel like in my family, it’s hard for my family to accept that okay, I grew up in a certain way, or, you know.. Or my lifestyle. How I behave and what I do. [...] So, let’s say, if I had a desire to do a certain thing, which is me taking my cycle or my motorbike and going on a long journey, but my grandfather or my mum wouldn’t be comfortable with that. And I would feel ‘Ok, if you don’t feel comfortable, sure, I won’t go’. [...] But what I’m doing is, I’m not following my truest calling, and that would make me feel lonely.

Prishuk talked about how the culture in India is changing from a collectivistic society to a more individualistic society, and how that might create loneliness for some time.

We are closely moving towards an individualistic society. At least we are pushing towards that. That’s the aspiration. So this transition from a collective society where you are kind of like, living with too many people in a very big house, now we are moving to a small apartment, a small house where two people are staying, you and your spouse, you and your roommate... So we’re moving, at least we are pushing towards an individualistic society. So this transition will create a turbulence and probably people might feel lonely for a very small amount of time, and they might get used to it after some time.

Prishuk also mentioned how arranged marriages might create anxiety in relationships.
You know, relationships are hard. You need to give a lot to the relationship, to your girlfriend and boyfriend, it’s not as smooth as it is. And in India it’s not just the boy and girl getting married, it’s also your parents, I mean the girl’s parents and the boy’s parents kind of agreeing for your marriage and all that, so that might give a little bit of mental health issues.

All Swedish participants described a norm that you should be independent, and how that might be connected to loneliness.

It feels like we are following this individualistic way, and that you keep to yourself and you stick to your stuff and I stick to mine. [...] I don’t know how long this view has been here but it’s there, and I think it contributes to a kind of loneliness. [...] I think that alone is not strong (alone is strong = Swedish proverb). And that you need someone to get help from, it can be anything in life, so I think this independence is for better or worse. (Jonas)

Sweden is quite individualistic. And I’m from Stockholm so I think Stockholm is even more individualistic, there it is like, when you’re on the subway, you don’t talk to anyone, you just sit there with your phone, everyone is in their own world. But like I said I also think social media is a big part of it, you think that you come closer to people because you write with them, and because you publish things, showing what you’re doing, but it’s not so common to publish if maybe something bad has happened in your life, you only publish the good things. Then maybe you think that everyone else is doing so great. And since you don’t share that with anyone, you feel lonely. And then I also have the perception that in Sweden there’s this get-by-on-your-own-mentality, it’s a bit like that, each person on their own. (Sofia)

It’s hard to reach out to people. I feel personally, I don’t know if this is the typical Swedish experience, but I feel that it’s a lot… You stay within your group and want to blend in. [...] It’s different when we were kids compared to now. Now we have all these norms that we have to follow. Again, like you can’t really talk to people on the bus, for example. So that’s something that we have. In our culture. (Oskar)

Sofia also described how not wanting to bother others held her back from reaching out to others and ask for help.

You don’t want to be pushy, or like, you don’t want the other person to think that you are this needy person who can’t get by on her own… But it’s mostly that I don’t want to bother other people.

Oskar also talked about how social media can contribute to loneliness, by not building up to something truly meaningful.

There are probably like 100 persons reacting to your status or liking your pictures or so. But what does it do, in the end? They’re just zeros and one’s on a screen. Sure, someone might mention it later and it might be something to talk about. But when you look at it in the long run, is it really something that builds up… What should I say, a sense of community?
Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate if young adults from an individualistic culture experience loneliness differently compared to young adults from a collectivistic culture. The research questions are discussed under separate headlines based on both quantitative and qualitative results, followed by a discussion of limitations and conclusions.

Social isolation. The Indian sample reported significantly higher levels of social isolation compared to the Swedish sample. When separating the two subscales of LSNS-R, the difference was significant for the family subscale but not the friends subscale. This suggests that young adults in India have less contact with their families but not friends, compared to young adults in Sweden. Considering how many of the Indian sample who lived with their families (of the 85% who lived with other people, 60% reported living with their family), this is quite a surprising result (in the Swedish sample, only five percent reported living with their family). However, when looking at all six questions of the family subscale individually, no significant difference was found in the first question, asking how many relatives one see or hear from a least once a month. The differences were found in questions asking not only about the quantity of relationships, but also the quality, for example “How many relatives do you feel at ease with that you can talk about private matters?” and “How many relatives do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?” Hence, it seems to be in the depth of the relationships rather than the amount of relationships where there is a difference. This might suggest that young adults in India feel less supported and close to their families compared to young adults in Sweden. Since collectivistic cultures have been defined by their stable family bonds (Hofstede, 2011), this can still be considered quite a surprising result. On the other hand, some researchers suggest that people in collectivistic cultures engage less actively in acquiring and maintaining close relationships than people in individualistic cultures, due to lower levels of relational mobility - freedom to choose relational partners based on preference (Kito, Yuki & Thomson, 2017). The strong influence of the family and the expectation to listen to the opinions of the family is another characteristic mentioned by Hofstede (2011) of a collectivistic culture. Considering Arjuns description of how his family didn’t accept his lifestyle, and Prishuk mentioning how the family might not be the right people to talk to if you have an issue at work (since they might worry), another possible explanation might be that young adults in India feel less accepted by their families. Or, as in Prishuk’s case, worries might be kept more to oneself in order to spare the collective (the family in this case) from worrying, which might reinforce the feeling of loneliness. This would explain the lower scores on questions asking about the quality of family relationships. Another possible explanation for this result might be that the questions have been interpreted differently or, if we should follow Heu, van Zomeren and Hansens (2019) hypothesis, although not confirmed, that different expectations on social relationships can cause different perceived discrepancies between ideal and actual social embeddedness. Perhaps the Indian participants felt a higher pressure to feel a strong connection to their families, and therefore scored lower on LSNS-R, due to the feeling of not feeling close enough to certain family members.

Emotional loneliness. There was no significant difference in reported emotional loneliness when comparing the two groups. When looking at table 3, we can see that the Swedish sample scored higher on emotional loneliness compared to social loneliness, whereas the opposite is true for the Indian sample. This suggests that loneliness experienced by young adults in Sweden tend to be more emotional than social. This may be explained by existing norms and expectations in the two different cultures. Young adults in Sweden might experience emotional loneliness more than social loneliness because the culture promotes romantic relationships more than social approval, as suggested by van Staden and Coetzee (2010). When comparing those in a relationship with those not in a relationship, no difference was found in
the Indian sample whereas singles in Sweden reported higher levels of loneliness than those in a relationship, which supports this idea. Jonas talked about how not being in a relationship contributed to his feelings of loneliness, whereas Oskar expressed that since he was in a relationship, “one would think that you should feel pretty close to someone”, as though he had less right to feel lonely being in a relationship.

It can be assumed that the strong individualistic values existing in Sweden according to Hofstede (1997) and our Swedish interviewees, gives young adults in Sweden a bigger freedom than their Indian counterparts when it comes to deciding who they want to be friends with and choosing a romantic partner - what Kito, Yuki and Thomson (2017) call relational mobility. Perhaps this freedom is both for better and for worse. The quantitative results suggest lower degrees of overall loneliness, so it might be a buffer for loneliness, yet this freedom might also explain why the loneliness experienced by young adults in Sweden seems to be more emotional than social. If it is assumed to be your own responsibility to not feel lonely, it might be easy to think that there is something wrong with you if you for example don’t have a partner or if you feel lonely despite having a partner - which might reinforce the feeling of emotional loneliness.

**Social loneliness.** The Indian sample reported significantly higher levels of social loneliness, compared to the Swedish sample. There could be multiple reasons behind this outcome. One interpretation of the result could be that the Indian sample reported higher levels of loneliness mostly due to a relatively smaller social network compared to the Swedish sample. On the other hand this might be questioned by the fact that no significant difference was found in the friendship subscale of social isolation, which indicate that the quantity and quality of the social network regarding friendships were the same in both samples. Further analysis revealed that there was a correlation between social isolation and social loneliness in the Indian sample. In the Swedish sample, the correlation was only moderate. This might suggest that there are cultural differences in play, which aligns well with earlier research stating that cultural values shape the way we experience loneliness (Hofstede, 2011; van Staden & Coetzee, 2010). For instance, some researchers have suggested loneliness in collectivistic cultures to be related to social approval to a higher degree than in individualistic cultures (Seepersad et al., as cited in van Staden & Coetzee, 2010). If we assume that people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to be lonely if they lack social approval, it is possible to give some explanations to the results of this study. Even though there was no difference in reported social isolation regarding friendships, there are reasons to believe that it is more socially acceptable in an individualistic society to lack a certain amount of social interaction, and therefore a smaller social network may not affect the experience of loneliness to the same degree as in a collectivistic society. This becomes evident especially considering one of the key ingredients in a collectivistic culture suggested by Hofstede (2011) - the expectation to belong to a strong cohesive in-group. In similarity with earlier reasoning in this thesis, the ideal social situation in India might be that you have a strong in-group of friends and family who take care of each other. In Sweden, even though it is desired to have a broad social network, you are not dependent on it in the same way and it might be more acceptable to be on your own. Therefore, the discrepancy between the ideal social isolation and perceived social isolation may indeed be lower in Sweden than in India. Another possible explanation to these results, as mentioned in the discussion on social isolation, is that Swedes might have been more able to choose their own social environment due to individualistic norms and relational mobility (Kito, Yuki & Thomson, 2017). This explanation is concurrent with what Brülde & Fors (2015) discussed as a possible hypothesis why Swedes sometimes experience less loneliness than people from more collectivistic (European) societies.

The quantitative results of the present study give some support to the notion that social isolation affect people’s subjective loneliness to different degrees in an individualistic society
compared to a collectivistic society. The qualitative results shed light towards this notion as well. All Swedish participants talked about norms of being independent, which could be considered both as a positive and a negative aspect of loneliness. The Indian participants described loneliness generally in negative terms with less nuances. Swedes attributed their own loneliness more to their own effort and struggle of socializing while in India it was more explained by circumstances of work or location and in one occasion by sheer luck. An interpretation of this could be that while both samples might experience the same degree of social isolation regarding friends, the impact of social loneliness gets less severe in the individualistic culture as a) social isolation might have more positive associations, and b) the potential of change lies within the individual.

**How loneliness is described.** The descriptions of loneliness given by the six participants shared similarities with each other and did not differ much from the definition of loneliness mentioned in the beginning of this thesis. No general difference was found between Indian and Swedish participants when it comes to describing the word loneliness, or one’s own experience of loneliness. Participants from both Sweden and India talked about loneliness as a feeling of not being understood (Sofia and Priyanka), and not finding anyone to talk to or spend time with (Jonas, Priyanka and Prishuk). All six participants agreed that young adulthood is a stage in life where loneliness might be high, and different explanations were given for this. Hence, the experience of loneliness in young adulthood seems to be somewhat similar in the two cultures investigated in this thesis, and the differences seem to be found more in when and for what reasons one feels lonely.

When it comes to how loneliness might be connected to culture, different views were given by the Swedish participants and the Indian participants. The Swedish participants all talked about how the norm that you should be independent affected them. Sofia talked about how she felt that she didn’t want to bother anyone else by reaching out for help, and Jonas talked about how he felt that he couldn’t live up to the high demands of social skills required to make friends. Oskar talked about how he felt that he would be frowned upon if he would talk to a stranger on the bus, and that it is hard to reach out to people. Without being asked directly, all Indian participants mentioned their families, both as a buffer for loneliness and also that the strong influence of the family may be something limiting in one’s life. Arjun mentioned how he sometimes had to sacrifice his ‘true calling’ in order to not worry his family, and Prishuk mentioned how arranged marriages may create anxiety, since not only two people need to like each other for a relationship to happen, but the parents also need to agree. In conclusion, the experience of loneliness seems to be affected by culture for both the Swedish and Indian participants, in different ways. This is concurrent with what the quantitative results in this study suggests.

**Limitations**

In this thesis an assumption is made that people raised in a particular country have aligned to the norms and lifestyle of that cultural context and are therefore viable to be described as a representative sample of that culture. For example the dimensions of IC are assumed to be different between the two samples with reference to their cultural representation. This might be a naive approach as we know the individual differences are evident in all cultural contexts and there is a risk that the presumed collectivistic sample is of a more individualistic nature within the country, especially on the basis that India is such a vast country which arguably moves in the direction of a more individualistic way of life in some areas. This is pointed out by Prakash (2004), who states that since India is comprised of various religions, each are associated with a unique culture and thus differing in cultural expectations.
**Methodological considerations.** Another point is of course that 80 participants is a very small number to represent young adults from the countries chosen as representation. The Indian participants who answered this survey could for example have been people who have less contact with their families than the average young Indian adult. Since the survey was web-based and shared on social media and through snowballing, it was not possible to control that the participants gave honest answers, which on the other hand often is the case in survey-based research. Furthermore, cross-cultural research are always complicated, and there are a number of issues that could be addressed. For one, friends and family might not have the same psychological meaning in different cultures which would mean that you are ultimately not measuring the same constructs. This is considered in this thesis by trying to use only measurements that have been used in cross-cultural research. The authors understanding of the construct might, however, be biased towards a certain definition.

**Conclusions and future implications.** Altogether the quantitative and qualitative results lean towards one conclusion: there are some differences in the way young adults from collectivistic and individualistic cultures experience loneliness. The Indian sample reported less contact with their family even though they lived together with their family to a higher degree. This could be explained by different family values and the expectations to be close to one’s family. No difference was found in reported emotional loneliness between samples. The Swedish sample reported higher degrees of emotional than social loneliness which could suggest that the emotional aspect of loneliness is more important in Sweden than the social. This could be explained by individualistic norms which promotes romantic relationships over social approval. The Indian sample reported higher levels of social loneliness which could be explained by collectivistic values such as social approval, social expectations and less freedom to change their social network. The qualitative results suggest that there are differences between the groups in the way young adults experience cultural aspects of loneliness. The norm of independence was stronger in Sweden while family values were stronger in India. Some different outlooks on the causes of loneliness was discussed as well. The results of this study could indicate some guidelines in future research and implementations. It may for example be useful information when developing new psychometric tools to measure loneliness in different cultures and might be important factors to consider when implementing interventions to combat loneliness amongst young adults from different cultural backgrounds.
Reference list


