

Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Loneliness among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Young adults frequently encounter social, academic, and professional pressures during periods. Emotional transitional intelligence (EI), the ability to understand and manage emotions, is critical in addressing these challenges, while loneliness can adversely affect mental well-being. This study investigated the relationship between EI and loneliness among individuals aged 18–25, using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test and the Loneliness Inventory Scale. Results indicated a significant negative correlation between EI and loneliness. Gender significantly predicted EI, with females scoring slightly higher, whereas living situation did not. Conversely, living situation significantly predicted loneliness, with hostellers reporting greater loneliness than day scholars. These findings emphasize the value of enhancing EI to mitigate loneliness, particularly among hostellers.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Loneliness, College students

1. INTRODUCTION

The college years are a crucial time of transition, filled with substantial emotional, social, and academic hurdles.(Wood et al., 2018).Many students struggle with identity crisis , grappling with self-discovery and the formation of personal beliefs, values, and goals.(Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018).Students who are exposed to a variety of viewpoints and lifestyles may experience internal conflict as they attempt to balance the need to explore their uniqueness with the need to blend in with their peers(Deng et al., 2022). External pressures, such as high expectations from friends, family, and society, can exacerbate this and cause anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, especially when students find it difficult to achieve these expectations or discover that their own goals differ from those that are placed on them (Merino et al.,2024). Additionally, social isolation remains a pervasive issue for many college students. Despite being surrounded by peers, students often experience loneliness, particularly when they face difficulties in forming meaningful relationships or connecting with others (Zahedi et al., 2022).As students navigate this transformative period, the academic demands of college life, including coursework, deadlines, and extracurricular activities, can significantly impact mental health(Barbayannis et al., 2022). Furthermore, financial stress, including the

burden of tuition, living expenses, and limited access to financial resources, exacerbates these challenges (Nasr et al., 2024). In particular, social isolation and loneliness especially among students transitioning to college or studying in unfamiliar environments can hinder their ability to fully integrate into campus life and develop meaningful connections (Mofatteh, 2020).

Loneliness

According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), loneliness is a subjective feeling of social isolation or being alone despite being surrounded by other people. Loneliness is a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness is not simply being alone, but rather the distressing feeling of perceived social isolation, a gap between desired and actual social connections (Joppich, 2022). This subjective experience has profound biological and psychological impacts, weakening immune function, increasing cardiovascular risks, and contributing to cognitive decline and mental health disorders (Mukherjee et al. 2024). Psychologically, it fosters negative biases and heightened vigilance for social threats. Social and cultural factors, including technological shifts and societal trends, play a significant role, as do life transitions that can trigger or intensify feelings of loneliness (Brandt et al., 2022). Cognitively, loneliness is also linked with abnormal thought processes: the lonely individual can become over sensitive to the possibility of rejection and interpret social contacts as negative or threatening, when, in fact, they are not (Finley & Schaefer 2022). Furthermore, chronic loneliness has a significantly high association with serious physical effects like heightened cardiovascular diseases, breakdowns in cognitive functions, and even early death (Paul et al. 2021)

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the mental processes involved in the recognition, use, understanding and management of one's and other's emotional state required in solving. High emotional intelligence is associated with better mental health, stronger relationships, more effective leadership, and greater overall success in life (Thompkins, 2024). It allows individuals to navigate life's challenges with emotional awareness and regulation, leading to a deeper connection with themselves and others (McGarvie, 2025). Emotional intelligence is not just an innate trait; it is a learnable and cultivable skill that significantly influences one's behavior and interactions (Dampier, 2024). By developing emotional intelligence, people are better equipped to handle conflicts, make thoughtful decisions, and empathize with others, ultimately fostering more harmonious and productive environments in both personal and professional settings (Jain & Ackerson, 2023).

Emotional intelligence plays a vital role in aiding students in overcoming mental health issues stemming from heightened competition and uncertainties (Shengyao et al., 2024). Substantial evidence suggests a direct correlation between emotional abilities and an individual's health and overall well-being (Malinauskas & Malinauskiene, 2020). The prevalent behavioral issues among students, particularly those in the arts faculty with limited career opportunities and technical skills, are exacerbated by escalating competition, societal expectations, and challenges in employment and the economy. (Deng et al., 2022).

Recognizing and cultivating emotional intelligence can serve as a valuable resource for mitigating these challenges and promoting mental well-being among students (Shengyao et al., 2024)

Current research highlights a notable gap in understanding the relationship between loneliness and emotional intelligence, particularly among college students. While existing studies often examine these variables independently, there is a lack of comprehensive research that considers how demographic factors such as gender (male and female) and living arrangements (hostellers vs. day scholars) interact with these psychological constructs. This gap is even more pronounced in the specific context of Kerala, where no localized studies have explored the interplay between loneliness and emotional intelligence among college students. As a result, potential cultural and regional influences remain largely unexamined. To address this research void, the present study proposes to test several hypotheses: there is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness among college students; gender and living situation have no significant influence on emotional intelligence or loneliness; and there are no significant differences in emotional intelligence and loneliness between male and female students or between day scholars and hostellers.

2. METHODS AND MATERIAL

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a quantitative research design, specifically a correlational design, to investigate relationships between variables. Quantitative research, by its nature, involves the collection and analysis of numerical data to identify patterns, calculate averages, make predictions, test causal relationships, and generalize findings to broader populations. In this particular correlational approach, the researchers aimed to understand how variables interact without any direct control or manipulation. The research was conducted among 200 young adults aged 18 to 25, all of whom were college students in Kerala. To ensure a representative sample, the participants included an equal number of hostellers and day scholars, with a breakdown of 98 females and 102 males. The primary inclusion criterion was being a college student in Kerala within the specified age range. Conversely, the exclusion criterion for the study was any college student who held a part-time job. The sample's frequency and percentage distribution based on gender and living situation is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Split up of participants based on living situation Table 1

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Frequency
Gender			
Male	98	49	49
Female	102	51	100
Living Situation			
Day Scholars	100	50	50
Hostellers	100	50	100

Measures

Questionnaires were used in this study as a tool. The data collection of the study was done via an online platform that is through google forms

The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT)

The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT), also known as the Assessing Emotions Scale, is a 33-item self-report instrument developed by Schutte and colleagues in 1998 to measure general Emotional Intelligence (EI). Based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) EI model and closely related to the EQ-I model, the SSEIT assesses EI through four sub-scales: emotion perception, utilizing emotions, managing self-relevant emotions, and managing others' emotions. Participants respond to the 33 items using a 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) Likert scale. Schutte and her colleagues reported a high reliability score of 0.90 for their emotional intelligence scale, indicating it's generally reliable for both adults and adolescents. However, the "utilizing emotions" sub-scale demonstrated poor reliability. The SSEIT (SSRI) showed a moderate correlation (0.51) with other measures such as self-rated EI, the Big Five EI scale, and life satisfaction, but exhibited a weak correlation (below 0.20) with measures of well-being, which was its lowest outcome.

Loneliness Scale

Developed by Meenakshi and Krishnan in 2008, a specific loneliness scale was designed to assess feelings of emptiness and isolation among undergraduate students. This inventory classifies students into three distinct levels of loneliness: low (scores 36 and below), moderate (scores 37-49), and high (scores 50 and above), with a clear interpretation that higher scores indicate greater loneliness. The average score range for this scale is 37 to 89, and scores can also be converted into percentiles using a provided table for further interpretation across different groups. Regarding its psychometric properties, the tool demonstrated reliability with a Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) of 0.72 for half of the test. Its validity was comprehensively established through multiple methods, including expert review for content validity, item-level testing for effectiveness, and comparison with other measures for concurrent validity. Furthermore, the scale exhibited a strong ability to differentiate between individuals experiencing high versus low loneliness, further supported by a strong correlation of 0.85 between the tool's scores and ratings from department heads, affirming its high validity.

Procedure

The population selected for the study consisted of college students, focusing on emotional intelligence and loneliness. A sample of 200 was taken from Kerala, with 100 day scholars and 100 hostelers. The survey was conducted through google forms. The instructions were well explained. Consent was given to participate in the survey, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. After giving the consent forms, a variety of social demographic data including name, gender, age, qualification was gathered using a personal data sheet. The google form consisted of 3 sections in total. One among them was the section to collect the necessary demographic details of the participants. The second section included a questionnaire of 33 questions. (The Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test). The third section

included a questionnaire of 19 questions (Loneliness Inventory). After collecting the 200 samples from the participants, the data were entered into an excel sheet where the scoring were done. The questionnaires were scored according to the instructions. Reverse scoring also were done and the sum was then calculated. Here, the data analyzes the relationship between day scholars and hostellers among college students.

Data Analysis

This study employed various statistical techniques, including mean, standard deviation was calculated. Specifically, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, Regression Analysis and independent sample t-test used to examine the objectives of the study. All data were analysed using SPSS version 25.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2

Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Loneliness

Variable	1	2	Mean	SD
Emotional Intelligence	1		118.07	15.49
Loneliness	-.387**	1	152.49	10.71

Note: ** $p < .01$, two-tailed

Table 2 indicates that there is a significant negative medium correlation between emotional intelligence and loneliness. ($r = -.387, p = 0.01$) indicating an increase in one factor causes a decrease in another Since 33 there is a significant correlation between the two variables, the research rejects the null hypothesis.

Table 3

Predictors of Emotional Intelligence

Variables	t-value	Beta	Sig.
Gender	3.097	6.685	.001
Living Situation	-.021	-.046	.983

Note: $p < 0.01$

Table 3 indicates the independent prediction of each variable within the study. The results indicates that gender significantly predicts emotional intelligence ($t = 3.097, p < 0.01$). However, the living situation of college students does not significantly predict their emotional intelligence. Since gender significantly predict the emotional intelligence Therefore, the hypothesis is partially supported.

Table 4***Predictors of Loneliness***

Variables	t-value	Beta	Sig.
Gender	2.453	3.528	.015
Living Situation	4.039	5.42	.001

Note: $p < 0.01$

Table 4 indicates the independent prediction of each variable within the predictors of loneliness. The results indicate that living situation is a significant predictor of loneliness in college students in contrast, gender did not significantly predict the outcome. Thus, the hypothesis was only partially supported, as only one of the variables showed a significant effect.

Table 5**Gender differences of Emotional Intelligence and Loneliness**

Variable	Gender	M	SD	t-value	p-value
Emotional Intelligence	Male	114.50	17.76	-3.136	.002
	Female	121.18	12.48		
Loneliness	Male	50.14	9.42	-2.972	.003
	Female	54.53	11.37		

Note: $p < 0.01$

Table 5 presents the gender differences in emotional intelligence and loneliness among college students. The results indicate that females ($M = 121.18, SD = 12.48$) had slightly higher emotional intelligence than males ($M = 114.50, SD = 17.76$), as evidenced by a t-value of -3.136 and a p-value of .002. This finding suggests that female college students possess greater emotional intelligence than male college students. Similarly, a significant difference in loneliness was found based on gender ($t = -2.972, p = .003$), with females ($M = 54.53, SD = 11.37$) reporting higher levels of loneliness than males ($M = 50.14, SD = 9.42$). In contrast, emotional intelligence and loneliness were significant. Gender shows the significant difference, with the hypothesis being partially supported.

Table 6***Differences based on living situation***

Variable	Living Situation	M	SD	t-value	p-value
Emotional Intelligence	Day Scholar	117.66	16.81	-.431	.667
	Hosteller	118.60	13.69		
Loneliness	Day Scholar	49.71	11.62	-4.396	.000
	Hosteller	56.07	8.15		

Note: $P < 0.01$

Table 6 presents the differences in emotional intelligence and loneliness based on the living situations of college students. The results indicate that hostellers ($M = 118.60, SD = 13.69$) have slightly higher emotional intelligence

than day scholars ($M = 117.66, SD = 16.81$), but this is not evidenced by a significant t-value ($-0.431, p = .667$). Similarly, a significant difference in loneliness was found based on living situation ($t = -4.396, p = .000$), with hostellers ($M = 56.07, SD = 8.15$) reporting higher levels of loneliness than day scholars ($M = 49.71, SD = 11.62$). In contrast, Hostellers experienced significantly higher levels of loneliness compared to day scholars, whereas emotional intelligence is not a significant predictor of living situation.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the relationship between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and loneliness, focusing on the ability to understand and to regulate emotions in oneself and in others. Emotional Intelligence is vital for managing negative emotions and promoting well-being (Brackett et al. 2011). Statistical analysis confirmed a weak negative correlation between EI and loneliness, aligning with Zysberg's (2012) findings. The study suggests that emotional intelligence might not fully prevent loneliness, as individuals with varying EI levels still engage in necessary social interactions, reducing feelings of isolation. Additionally, research by (Utz et al. 2013) supports that social support reduces loneliness. The study draws on Mayer and Salovey's framework, emphasizing that EI helps with emotional regulation, self-awareness, and understanding others, ultimately fostering emotional growth and better interpersonal relationships, contributing to overall well-being.

The study found that gender significantly predicts emotional intelligence, with females scoring higher in emotional awareness and empathy, aligning with previous research (Fischer et al. 2018; Petrides & Furnham, 2000). However, the students' living situation did not significantly affect their emotional intelligence, contradicting studies suggesting environmental factors impact emotional development (Schutte et al., 1998). As a result, the study's hypotheses were only partially supported, highlighting gender's role in emotional intelligence development while suggesting that living situation may not be a key factor. Future research could investigate other variables like cultural background or personality traits.

A study by Sultana et al. (2019) found that ethnicity and family structure significantly impact loneliness, with students from nuclear families reporting higher levels of loneliness than those from joint families. Similarly, hostellers experience greater loneliness than day scholars, likely due to the increased social interaction and support available in their home environment. This aligns with Durkheim's (1897) social integration theory, which suggests that lack of social bonds increases loneliness. College students living away from home, particularly in hostels, face more social isolation, while those living with family receive more emotional support, reducing loneliness. The study found no significant effect of gender on loneliness, indicating it is more influenced by external factors like social support and coping strategies. The findings highlight the importance of living arrangements in predicting loneliness, suggesting that universities implement support systems to help students, particularly those living away from home.

The study found significant gender differences in emotional intelligence and loneliness among college students. Female students scored slightly higher in emotional intelligence than males, particularly in

empathy and emotional regulation, aligning with previous research (Petrides & Furnham, 2000; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). However, female students also reported higher levels of loneliness, supporting prior studies that suggest females may experience more loneliness due to emotional sensitivity and social expectations (Pagan 2020; Rokach, 2000). Recent studies, such as Gap Interdisciplinarity (2024), highlight increased loneliness in female students post-pandemic, though Bhaskaran and Anakha (2023) noted that males might experience greater loneliness in certain contexts. These mixed findings emphasize the need to consider contextual factors when addressing loneliness among college students.

The study by Kuyel, Kocak, and Pala (2017) looked at how emotional intelligence (EI) affects social adjustment and loneliness in college students. They found that living situation (whether students live at home or in a hostel) is a stronger predictor of loneliness than emotional intelligence. According to Lazarus and Folkman's model, coping strategies have a bigger impact on emotional intelligence than living situations. Both day scholars and hostel students face different stresses but develop similar coping strategies, like family support or friendships, which help them manage emotions. As a result, emotional intelligence affects both groups in the same way, with no significant difference between them.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions.

A study found that college students with higher emotional intelligence (EI) tend to feel less lonely, so helping students improve their emotional skills could reduce loneliness and improve well-being. Female students generally have slightly higher EI than males, and although gender doesn't strongly predict loneliness, females reported feeling a bit lonelier, which may need special support. Students living in hostels feel lonelier than those living at home, even though their EI is a bit higher, showing loneliness is complicated. To help, universities should offer programs to build emotional skills, organize social events, provide counseling, and create peer support, especially for hostel residents.

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the research relied on self-reported measures, which could be subject to response biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-evaluation. It's possible that participants over reported or unreported their levels of emotional intelligence and loneliness. Secondly, the sample size in this study was small, limiting the generalizability of the results to the wider population. Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional design makes it difficult to establish a causal relationship between the variables. Finally, the study sample was restricted to young adults attending colleges in Kerala, which limits the applicability of the findings to other age groups, geographical areas, or cultural contexts. To determine if similar trends apply to other populations, future research should consider a more diverse sample.

Future research on the relationship between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and loneliness among college students should consider longitudinal designs to establish causal links. Studies could explore additional mediating variables, such as coping strategies, social support, and personality traits, that may influence both EI and loneliness. Expanding the sample to diverse demographics would improve the generalizability of findings. Research could also investigate cultural and institutional differences in the

dynamics of EI and loneliness. Examining specific EI dimensions (e.g., emotional regulation, empathy) in relation to loneliness, particularly across living situations, would help tailor interventions.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study highlights a clear inverse relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness in young adults aged 18 to 25. Gender influences emotional intelligence, while living situation impacts loneliness levels. Notably, hostellers tend to feel lonelier than day scholars, indicating the need for targeted emotional intelligence interventions in hostel settings to help alleviate loneliness and promote emotional well-being.

Declarations

Consent to Participate: Each participant in the current study gave their informed consent before voluntary participation. In addition, participants have briefed on the nature of the study, assured that all data collected would be kept confidential, and that participation was purely voluntary without remunerating.

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