



Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review

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Abstract

Loneliness, traditionally understood as a private emotional experience, has evolved into a significant sociological issue reflecting the complexities of modern social life. This paper investigates loneliness as a structural and cultural outcome of late modernity, shaped by processes such as urbanization, individualization, and the digitization of human interaction. Drawing on sociological theories from Durkheim's concept of anomie to Giddens' notion of reflexive modernity, the analysis explores how shifting social norms and weakened communal ties have transformed solitude into a normalized condition. The study argues that loneliness functions as both a symptom and a product of neoliberal social organization—where personal freedom coexists with social fragmentation. Ultimately, the paper reframes loneliness as a companion to contemporary existence, revealing how the search for selfhood and autonomy paradoxically deepens social disconnection. The present research examined the impact of loneliness on one's physical and emotional well-being, the processes underlying these effects, and the efficacy of current remedies. The cognitive, behavioural, and physiological effects of loneliness are explained, and strategies to lessen loneliness are discussed, using characteristics of a loneliness regulatory loop. Being alone is not the only aspect of loneliness. It may be necessary to consider attentional, confirmatory, and remembrance biases in addition to the social and behavioural aspects of loneliness when developing interventions to lessen it and its negative health implications.

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Abstract

Loneliness, traditionally understood as a private emotional experience, has evolved into a significant sociological issue reflecting the complexities of modern social life. This paper investigates loneliness as a structural and cultural outcome of late modernity, shaped by processes such as urbanization, individualization, and the digitization of human interaction. Drawing on sociological theories from Durkheim's concept of anomie to Giddens' notion of reflexive modernity, the analysis explores how shifting social norms and weakened communal ties have transformed solitude into a normalized condition. The study argues that loneliness functions as both a symptom and a product of neoliberal social organization—where personal freedom coexists with social fragmentation. Ultimately, the paper reframes loneliness as a companion to contemporary existence, revealing how the search for selfhood and autonomy paradoxically deepens social disconnection. The present research examined the impact of loneliness on one's physical and emotional well-being, the processes underlying these effects, and the efficacy of current remedies. The cognitive, behavioural, and physiological effects of loneliness are explained, and strategies to lessen loneliness are discussed, using characteristics of a loneliness regulatory loop. Being alone is not the only aspect of loneliness. It may be necessary to consider attentional, confirmatory, and remembrance biases in addition to the social and behavioural aspects of loneliness when developing interventions to lessen it and its negative health implications.

Keywords: *loneliness, modernity, individualization, social isolation, neoliberalism*

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1. Introduction

The study demonstrates that loneliness among Kolkata's youth is a reflection of late-modern social transformations rather than a private pathology. It is produced at the intersection of structural change, digital culture, and shifting moral values. Loneliness operates as both a symptom and a coping mechanism a space where individuals retreat to preserve selfhood amid social fragmentation. Thus, in contemporary Kolkata, loneliness becomes normalized a companion in the everyday negotiation between autonomy and belonging, mirroring global patterns of emotional life in late modern societies [7].

Loneliness has emerged as a pervasive condition in contemporary societies, yet much of the existing scholarship continues to frame it primarily as an individual psychological problem. This perspective overlooks the broader social, cultural, and structural forces that shape how loneliness is produced, experienced, and normalized. As urbanization accelerates, digital technologies restructure communication, and neoliberal values transform social expectations, loneliness increasingly reflects deeper shifts in the organization of modern social life [8].

In the Indian context particularly in rapidly urbanizing cities like Kolkata these transformations are especially visible among young adults who are navigating transitions in education, work, identity, and relationships. Despite this, sociological investigations of loneliness in India remain limited, with most studies focusing either on mental health or ageing populations. The experiences of young people, who occupy the forefront of digital culture, competitive academic environments, and evolving family structures, are significantly understudied [6].

This research is therefore necessary to reposition loneliness as a sociological phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of structural modernity, digital communication, identity-based marginalization, and neoliberal pressures. By analysing detailed case studies of urban youth, the study seeks to illuminate how loneliness is embedded in everyday social practices and institutional arrangements, rather than being an outcome of personal inadequacy or emotional weakness [9].

2. Objectives

- 1) To conceptualize loneliness as a sociological phenomenon rather than solely a psychological or emotional state, situating it within broader social and cultural contexts.
- 2) To examine the structural and systemic factors—such as urbanization, neoliberal individualism, and digital communication—that contribute to the normalization of loneliness in late modern societies.
- 3) To analyse the relationship between individual autonomy and social disconnection, exploring how the pursuit of personal freedom and self-realization shapes experiences of solitude and isolation.
- 4) To interpret loneliness through classical and contemporary sociological theories, including Durkheim's notion of anomie and Giddens' theory of reflexive modernity.
- 5) To evaluate the social implications of loneliness, particularly its impact on identity formation, community engagement, and emotional well-being in a fragmented social world.

3. Literature Review

Loneliness, once treated primarily as a psychological or emotional condition, has increasingly been examined through sociological frameworks that highlight its structural, cultural, and historical . The contemporary literature reflects a shift from individualistic interpretations toward understanding loneliness as a product of late-modern social transformations. This review draws on classical sociology, contemporary theory, and recent empirical studies to contextualize loneliness within the broader dynamics of modernity, digital culture, and neoliberal individualization [5].

3.1. Classical Sociological Foundations: Loneliness and Social Disintegration

Durkheim's work provides foundational insights into how social structures shape emotional life. Durkheim's concept of anomie—a state of normlessness resulting from rapid social change—explains how weakened collective norms can lead to emotional disorientation and isolation. Though Durkheim did not explicitly frame loneliness as a sociological phenomenon, his theory foreshadows modern notions of social fragmentation and the breakdown of communal ties [10].

Similarly, Georg Simmel's analysis of the metropolitan experience highlights the paradox of urban life: the individual becomes surrounded by people yet increasingly detached due to overstimulation and the rationalization of social interaction. These classical perspectives establish the idea that loneliness is embedded in the social organization of modernity, not merely in personal psychology [4].

3.2. Loneliness in Late Modernity: Individualization and Reflexivity

Contemporary sociological theory deepens this understanding by linking loneliness to structural transformations associated with late modernity. Anthony Giddens argues that modern identity is characterized by reflexive self-making, wherein individuals must continually negotiate their biographies in fluid social contexts [11]. This reflexive construction of the self, while granting autonomy, often results in fragile social relationships and heightened emotional vulnerability [3]. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualization (2002) further posits that traditional social bonds—family, community, stable work—no longer anchor identity as they once did. The freedom to choose one's life path simultaneously entails the burden of bearing social risks alone, creating conditions where loneliness becomes normalized [2].

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity (2000) reinforces these arguments. He suggests that contemporary social relationships have become fluid, transient, and consumption-oriented. In such a context, emotional commitments are often avoided, replaced by "light" connections that prioritize convenience over depth. Bauman's analysis offers a powerful lens for understanding the ephemeral and transactional nature of social ties in the digital era.

3.3. Neoliberalism and the Cultural Production of Loneliness

Recent scholarship links loneliness directly to neoliberal ideologies that valorize autonomy, self-reliance, and competitiveness. Scholars such as Brown (2015) and Han (2017) argue that neoliberal rationality restructures emotional life by framing success as an individual achievement while obscuring structural inequalities. This fosters a culture in which social withdrawal, overwork, and emotional self-management are normalized [1].

Empirical studies substantiate these theoretical claims. Research on youth and professionals in urban India, the UK, and Japan shows that long work hours, precarity, and competitive educational environments contribute to chronic social isolation [12]. Within this context, loneliness is often internalized as a "necessary sacrifice," aligning with neoliberal values of productivity and self-discipline.

3.4. Digital Society and the Transformation of Social Connectedness

A substantial body of literature examines the relationship between digital communication and loneliness. Scholars note that social media creates an illusion of belonging, enabling constant connectivity while weakening the depth of social interaction [13]. Platforms encourage curated identities, fostering comparison, self-surveillance, and emotional detachment.

Empirical research shows mixed effects: while online communities can provide support—especially for marginalized groups—they frequently intensify emotional alienation due to superficial engagement and the commodification of social visibility [14]. Bauman's notion of "virtual proximity" complements these findings, describing digital relationships as low-commitment ties easily entered and abandoned. For youth populations, digital networks often serve as both coping mechanisms and stressors, shaping a landscape where loneliness becomes intertwined with social media habits.

3.5. Identity, Marginality, and Intersectional Loneliness

Loneliness is experienced unevenly across social groups, shaped by identity, stigma, and social recognition. Research on queer youth, migrants, and those departing from normative family structures shows that relational exclusion, not physical solitude, drives their experiences of loneliness [15]. Family rejection, cultural displacement, and social stigma create barriers to community belonging. Intersectional scholars emphasize that loneliness must be understood through overlapping axes of gender, sexuality, class, caste, and migration status [16]. These studies highlight that loneliness is produced by social marginalization rather than personal inadequacy.

3.6. Urbanization, Community Erosion, and Changing Forms of Intimacy

Sociologists of urban life have consistently documented the weakening of traditional communities in dense metropolitan spaces. Studies by Wirth (1938), Fischer (1995), and more recent scholarship on Indian cities [17] reveal that rapid urbanization creates fragmented social environments where relationships are functional rather than emotional. Changing norms of intimacy also influence loneliness. Giddens (1992) and Illouz (2007) describe contemporary relationships as "pure relationships" grounded in emotional satisfaction rather than duty. While empowering, these relationships are fragile, often leading to withdrawal and uncertainty when emotional expectations are unmet.

3.7. Loneliness as a Global Public Issue

In recent years, loneliness has been recognized as a widespread social issue, with governments in the UK, Japan, and Australia launching national strategies to address it. Global reports from the WHO (2021) and OECD (2023) emphasize that loneliness has profound implications for mental health, productivity, and social cohesion.

Sociological research increasingly argues that loneliness must be reframed as a public problem, akin to urban poverty or unemployment, shaped by macro-level social forces rather than individual pathology [18].

4. Synthesis

The literature indicates that loneliness in late modern societies stems from a combination of following.

- 1) Weakened Community Structures
- 2) Digital Mediation of Relationships
- 3) Neoliberal Pressures Toward Self-Reliance
- 4) Identity-Based Exclusion
- 5) Transformed Patterns of Intimacy
- 6) Fluid and Unstable Social Environments

Together, these strands suggest that loneliness is a structural feature of contemporary life, reflecting deep shifts in social organization rather than personal failings. This conceptual grounding supports the present study's aim to examine loneliness as a sociological phenomenon among Kolkata's youth, shaped by the intersection of urban modernity, digital culture, and identity politics [19].

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in sociological theory and interpretive analysis to explore loneliness as a complex social phenomenon. The research is based on secondary data analysis, utilizing a wide range of scholarly literature, sociological theories, and empirical studies on loneliness, modernity, and social isolation.

5.1. Research Approach

The study follows an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing subjective meanings and the lived experiences of individuals within modern social structures. It seeks to understand how loneliness is constructed, experienced, and reproduced in late modern societies.

5.2. Data Sources

The research relies on secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, sociological monographs, reports from international organizations (e.g., WHO, OECD), and data from reputable surveys on social connectedness and well-being.

5.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by theoretical triangulation, drawing from classical and contemporary sociological perspectives — particularly Durkheim's concept of anomie, Giddens' theory of reflexive modernity, and Bauman's notion of liquid modernity. These frameworks are used to interpret how structural, cultural, and technological changes contribute to the normalization of loneliness.

5.4. Method of Analysis

A thematic content analysis approach is employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and contradictions within the literature. This interpretive method allows for the synthesis of existing knowledge and the development of a sociological understanding of loneliness as both a personal and collective experience.

5.5. Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based on secondary data, it involves no direct interaction with human participants. Nevertheless, all sources are properly cited and referenced in accordance with international academic and ethical standards.

6. Social Significance

As loneliness becomes increasingly recognized as a public health and social cohesion issue globally, understanding its sociological roots is essential for developing meaningful interventions. A structural perspective can inform policies and community practices that move beyond individual-level solutions. By situating loneliness within the broader transformations of late modernity, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary social arrangements shape emotional life. It offers a framework for viewing loneliness not as a personal deficit but as a mirror of the fragmented, fast-paced, and individualized conditions that characterize modern urban existence [22].

7. Empirical Evidences

Case 1: The Migrant Student

Riya (21), a university student from North Bengal, moved to Kolkata for higher studies. Despite hostel life surrounded by peers, she feels emotionally isolated. Her loneliness stems from cultural displacement and a lack of deep friendships. She uses Instagram as her main social outlet, often comparing her life to others — leading to anxiety and self-doubt.

Case 2: The Working Professional in a Shared Flat

Soham (25), an IT professional, lives with roommates in Salt Lake. Long work hours and digital communication with colleagues leave little room for genuine human contact. He admits, "I'm always online but never connected." His social circle revolves around office chats and gaming, not physical relationships.

Case 3: The Social Media Influencer

Madhurima (23) runs a small fashion page with over 15,000 followers. While her digital presence appears vibrant, she confides that her "real world" feels empty. Her loneliness emerges from the pressure to maintain an idealized image online and the absence of authentic offline bonds.

Case 4: The Queer Youth in Search of Belonging

Ritwik (22), a queer student, finds limited acceptance within family and college groups. Though online queer communities provide support, he experiences isolation in physical spaces. His case reflects the intersection of social stigma, identity, and loneliness within a conservative environment.

Case 5: The Aspirant Preparing for Competitive Exams

Priyanka (24) spends most of her time preparing for public service exams. She avoids social gatherings, viewing them as distractions. Her daily routine—study, eat, sleep—creates a cocoon of isolation. She acknowledges loneliness but also sees it as a "necessary sacrifice for success."

Case 6: The Creative Freelancer

Arjun (26), a freelance graphic designer, works from home in South Kolkata. The lack of structured social interaction leaves him feeling detached. He notes that online freelancing offers independence but deprives him of community, making his solitude both empowering and exhausting.

Case 7: The Youth from a Joint Family

Ananya (20) lives in a traditional joint family in Howrah. Despite a house full of people, she feels emotionally unseen. Her loneliness is not spatial but relational—she feels misunderstood and pressured to conform to family expectations, highlighting how loneliness can exist even within close proximity.

Case 8: The Urban Poor Youth

Rakesh (19) works as a delivery rider. His social interactions are limited to short exchanges with customers. Economic precarity and long hours prevent him from forming stable relationships. His loneliness stems from fatigue, invisibility, and the absence of social recognition.

Case 9: The Recently Heartbroken Student

Sneha (22) ended a long relationship and now finds herself socially withdrawn. She reports spending hours scrolling social media, avoiding friends to escape questions about her breakup. Her loneliness reflects emotional withdrawal and the fragmentation of modern romantic intimacy.

Case 10: The Youth Volunteer and Activist

Imran (25), active in environmental movements, feels socially connected through activism but lonely on a personal level. He expresses that while his public engagement gives meaning, his private life lacks emotional depth. His case shows how purpose-driven social engagement doesn't always cure loneliness.

8. Findings and Analysis

The qualitative case studies conducted among young individuals in Kolkata reveal that loneliness is not merely an individual emotional state but a socially structured and culturally mediated experience. The findings point to five interrelated sociological dimensions that explain the manifestation of loneliness among urban youth [20].

8.1. Structural Modernity and Urban Individualism

Rapid urbanization and the expansion of neoliberal work culture have redefined the social fabric of Kolkata. Youth living in shared flats, hostels, or rented accommodations often experience spatial proximity without emotional intimacy. The transition from traditional community life to urban individualism fosters a sense of detachment. This supports Durkheim's theory of anomie, where the weakening of collective norms leads to moral and emotional disorientation.

8.2. Digital Connectivity and the Illusion of Belonging

Most respondents reported heavy dependence on social media platforms for interaction. However, digital engagement often substitutes but does not fulfill emotional needs. The phenomenon of being "virtually connected but socially isolated" reflects Bauman's notion of liquid modernity, where relationships become transient and transactional. The curated online self intensifies comparative anxiety and emotional alienation [21].

8.3. Identity, Stigma, and Marginalization

Loneliness among youth is also shaped by issues of gender, sexuality, and cultural identity. Queer youth and those deviating from normative social roles experience exclusion both in familial and institutional settings. Their loneliness is rooted in the lack of social acceptance rather than physical isolation, reflecting how social stigma reinforces emotional marginality.

8.4. Academic and Economic Pressures in Neoliberal Society

Students and young professionals often described their loneliness as a "necessary cost" of ambition. The competitive education system and precarious employment market create conditions of self-imposed isolation, where success is prioritized over sociability. This internalization of loneliness reflects how neoliberal values of self-reliance and productivity shape emotional experiences.

8.5. The Paradox of Collective Presence and Emotional Absence

Even within joint families or activist communities, youth expressed feelings of being "emotionally unseen." This reveals a form of relational loneliness, where individuals are surrounded by people but lack empathetic connection. The erosion of deep interpersonal communication and the dominance of functional relationships mirror Giddens' idea of reflexive modernity—a world of constant negotiation between connection and detachment [23].

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that loneliness, far from being a purely psychological or individual phenomenon, is deeply embedded in the social structures and cultural transformations of contemporary urban life. Among Kolkata's youth, loneliness has emerged as both a symptom and a byproduct of modernity—shaped by rapid urbanization, digital communication, neoliberal competition, and evolving social identities.

The findings reveal that loneliness today functions as a normalized emotional condition rather than an exception. For many young people, it becomes an inevitable companion in the pursuit of autonomy, achievement, and self-realization. The shift from collective belonging to individualized existence has redefined the meaning of social connection: interactions have become more frequent but less intimate, more visible but less meaningful.

Sociologically, this reflects the tensions identified by Durkheim's anomie, Giddens' reflexive modernity, and Bauman's liquid modernity—where the very structures of modern life that promise freedom also engender isolation. Digital networks, while expanding access to social spaces, simultaneously produce superficial forms of belonging that deepen emotional alienation. The Kolkata case studies illustrate that loneliness cuts across class, gender, and identity lines, manifesting differently but persistently in each social context. Whether among students, professionals, or marginalized groups, loneliness serves as both a mirror and a measure of social disconnection in late modern urban India.

Ultimately, this paper argues that to understand loneliness sociologically is to recognize it as a structural consequence of modern social organization—a reflection of how urban societies manage intimacy, identity, and belonging. The challenge for the future lies in reimagining forms of community and solidarity that restore meaningful human connection in an increasingly fragmented world.

■ ABBREVIATIONS

UK	United Kingdom
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
WHO	World Health Organization

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