



SOCIAL SUPPORT, SOCIAL ISOLATION, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS.

Haya Lone^{1*}, Aahana Saha²

Abstract:

Objective: This study aims to explore the relationship between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among college students. Social isolation is a potent factor to cause psychological distress among students while social support helps neutralize the psychological distress among the mass population, especially young college students.

Method: Multiple scales such as MSPSS ;(Zimet et al., 1988), REVISED ULCA SCALE (Russel.D) 1996, and Kessler's (k10) (Kessler RC.2002) scale were used and a web survey was administered in Lovely Professional University to 400 students of different department, with 214 students completing the measures in this analysis with a response rate of 53.5 %. The mean age was 22.48 years with an SD of 2.87 years, Range (18 -27 years). The results of these scales were computed to determine the social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among college students.

Result: The results indicated that social isolation was significantly related to psychological distress ($r = .57$, $p < .001$). Social support was also significantly related to psychological distress ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$) and social isolation ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$). The addition of social support significantly improved the model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .14$, $F(1,214) = 36.17$, $p < .001$). The interaction term was also significant ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$), indicating that social support moderated the relationship between social isolation and psychological distress.

Keywords: Social isolation, social support, psychological distress, college students.

^{1*}Master in Psychology, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara.

²Assistant Professor, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara

***Corresponding Author:-** Haya Lone

^{*}Master in Psychology, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara.

DOI: 10.48047/ecb/2023.12.si5a.0260

Introduction:

Social isolation is a profound factor to cause psychological distress among students while social support helps neutralize the psychological distress among the mass population, especially college students. An increase in the number of students living alone is likely to experience social isolation. Social isolation has been found to be a risk factor for psychological distress, particularly in young adults (Cacioppo et al., 2015) while social support is one of the ways in which individuals cope with social isolation and is known to be beneficial for psychological well-being (Thoits, 2011). Young adulthood poses a great challenge to maintain good psychological conditions where the stressors are not limited. College life is no exception. Most of the health indicators do not augur green for college students. The lack of mental health awareness and the social stigma towards mental health problems poses a greater challenge to evaluating the actual data.

Social isolation and social support are two critical factors that can significantly impact an individual's psychological well-being. Social isolation represents a state in which an individual is disconnected from their social relationships due to a variety of physical or geographic barriers, resulting in a lack of social connections and interactions. On the other hand, social support refers to the assistance and resources provided by individuals within one's social network, such as emotional support, practical assistance, and advice. The absence of social support and social isolation has been linked to a host of negative psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness. To mitigate these adverse outcomes, it is essential to comprehend the intricate interplay between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress. Developing effective interventions to promote mental health and well-being among individuals experiencing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive understanding of this complex relationship. Moreover, social support refers to the resources and assistance provided by others in a person's social network. Social support can take various forms, such as emotional support, practical assistance, or informational support. Social support can provide individuals with a sense of belonging, validation, and encouragement, which can help them cope with stressors and enhance their well-being.

Both social isolation and lack of social support have been linked to increased levels of psychological distress. Psychological distress is a broad term that encompasses a range of emotional

and cognitive symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Individuals who experience social isolation or lack of social support may be at higher risk of developing psychological distress, and vice versa. Moreover, psychological distress can further exacerbate social isolation and limit one's ability to access social support, creating a vicious cycle.

Understanding the complex relationship between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress is crucial in developing effective interventions to promote mental health and well-being among individuals experiencing these challenges. College students are a particularly vulnerable population that may experience high levels of social isolation, lack of social support, and psychological distress due to various factors such as academic pressure, financial difficulties, and changes in their social environment. Thus, exploring the existing literature on the relationship between these constructs with a focus on college students can provide valuable insights into effective intervention strategies to enhance their mental health and well-being

Much research has been done in the past to analyze the psychological distress, social isolation, and social support among college students. Emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, Arnett et al., 2014) is a developmental phase between adolescence and adulthood characterized by many transitions and challenging tasks, such as financial self-sufficiency, choices about career and intimate relationships, and preparing the ground for adult lives (Furnham, 2004; Miller, 2017; Schechter et al., 2018).

About a century and a half ago, House, Landis, and Umberson published a landmark review of prospective epidemiological studies of social isolation in humans. They reported that social isolation was a significant risk factor for broad-based morbidity and mortality—a finding that subsequent research has confirmed. What was especially surprising was that social isolation was as strong a risk factor for morbidity and mortality as smoking, obesity, sedentary Lifestyle, and high blood pressure. Amidst loneliness may emerge alcoholism (Åkerlind and Hörnquist, 1992), depression (Cacioppo et al., 2003), social anxiety (Kearns et al., 2015), cognitive decline, and even suicidal ideation (Wilson et al., 2007). Moreover, loneliness may exacerbate obesity, elevate blood pressure, and hasten mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Amidst loneliness may emerge alcoholism (Åkerlind and Hörnquist, 1992), depression

(Cacioppo et al., 2003), social anxiety (Kearns et al., 2015), cognitive decline, and even suicidal ideation (Wilson et al., 2007). Moreover, loneliness may exacerbate obesity, elevate blood pressure, and hasten mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Psychological distress is prevalent among college students, with studies reporting that approximately 30% of college students experience significant psychological distress (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

The consequences of these problems are likely to be significant and lasting, as mental disorders in early adulthood are associated with alcohol and substance abuse (Angst, 1996; Weitzman, 2004), academic success (Kessler, Foster, Saunders, & Stang, 1995), and future employment and relationships (Ettner, Frank, & Kessler, 1997; Kessler, Walters, & Forthofer, 1998).

Social support can act as a protective factor and alleviate psychological distress. Social support refers to the help and assistance provided by family, friends, and other social networks. Social support can be both emotional and instrumental. Emotional support includes providing love, care, and empathy, while instrumental support refers to providing tangible assistance such as financial support or help with daily tasks (Cobb, 1976).

The purpose of this research is to study the analyze the relationship between social isolation and psychological distress experienced by the students of lovely professional University, Phagwara, Punjab India, and the social support experienced when they go through such mental health issues. This study shall help the concerned authorities to have an overview and detailed information about the mental health of the students and help them create a sustainable mental health environment.

Review of Literature:

Social isolation, social support, and psychological distress are important factors that affect the well-being of college students. There is a substantial body of literature that has examined the relationship between these three variables.

Studies have consistently found that social isolation is associated with increased psychological distress among college students. Social isolation refers to the subjective feeling of being alone or disconnected from others. It can be caused by a variety of factors, such as living away from home, being introverted, or experiencing discrimination. Several studies have found that social isolation is associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety among college students (Liu & Mustapha, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017; Verger et al., 2010).

On the other hand, social support has been found to have a protective effect on psychological distress. Social support refers to the resources that individuals have available to them through their social networks, such as emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support. Several studies have found that social support is associated with decreased symptoms of depression and anxiety among college students (Gore et al., 2019; Lerner et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2021). Social support can be provided by family members, friends, and peers, and can be particularly important for college students who may be experiencing a stressful transition period.

In addition to social isolation and social support, there are other factors that may influence the relationship between these variables and psychological distress. For example, personality traits such as extraversion and neuroticism may moderate the relationship between social support and psychological distress (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Furthermore, cultural factors may also play a role in the relationship between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among college students (Moriarty & Matthes, 2019).

Overall, the literature suggests that social isolation is associated with increased psychological distress among college students, while social support is associated with decreased psychological distress. It is important for universities and colleges to recognize the importance of social support for the well-being of their students and to provide resources and programs that can help students develop and maintain social connections. Further research is needed to better understand the complex relationships between these variables and to identify effective interventions that can improve the mental health of college students.

Research Gap:

One potential research gap for the topic of social support, social isolation, and psychological distress among college students is the need to further explore the role of individual differences in the relationship between social support, social isolation, and psychological distress. This could include examining how personality traits, coping strategies, and other individual factors moderate the relationship between social support, social isolation, and psychological distress among college students. Additionally, there may be a need for more research on the impact of cultural factors on social support and isolation among college students from diverse backgrounds, as well as longitudinal

studies that examine the changes in social support and isolation over time and their impact on psychological distress among college students. Finally, there may be a need to investigate the effectiveness of interventions tailored to the unique social isolation and social support needs of different subgroups of college students, such as those living alone, international students, or students with disabilities.

Methodology:

Research design: To quantify the data, descriptive statistics and correlations were conducted to analyze the data. The data was collected via a questionnaire administered through a web survey.

Sample: Random sampling was used for this study. A total of 214 subjects ranging from the age group 18-27 years were taken for the present study from different departments of Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India.

- Male and female subjects have been taken from the age group 18-27.

- All subjects were pursuing a graduate or undergraduate degree.
- The subjects belonged to different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.
- No subject was taken below 18 or above the age of 27
- No subject was taken without an active student status.
- Only two genders were taken, the rest were excluded.
- No minor was taken for this study.

Scales Used:

1. K10 Scale for Assessing Psychological Distress:
2. Revised ULCA SCALE For measuring social isolation
3. MSPSS for measuring social support

Result:

The table below shows the categories of gender and the percentage of individuals from each gender group who participated in the research.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	88	41.12%
Male	126	58.87%
Total	214	100%

The mean score for age was ($M = 22.48$), the standard deviation was ($SD = 2.87$) and the coefficient of variable was ($CV = 0.12$).

K10 Scale Results

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Degree of Distress
10 – 19	112	52.3%	Low
20 – 24	66	30.8%	Mild
25 – 29	20	9.3%	Moderate
30 – 50	17	7.9%	Severe
Total	214	100%	

The mean score of the K10 scale was ($M = 20.8$), the standard deviation was ($SD = 5.16$) and the coefficient variable was ($CV = 0.24$). The

minimum and maximum score obtained was 12 and 30, respectively.

Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale Results

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Degree of Loneliness
20 – 24	56	26.1%	Low
35 – 49	128	59.8%	Moderate
50 – 64	28	13%	Moderately High
65 – 80	2	1%	High
Total	214	100%	

The mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness scale was ($M = 39.7$), the standard deviation was ($SD = 8.7$) and the coefficient variable was ($CV =$

0.22). The minimum and maximum score obtained was 23 and 67, respectively.

MSPSS for Measuring Social Support Results**Sub Scale: Significant Other**

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Support Perceived
1 – 2.9	9	4.2%	Low
3 – 5	143	66.8%	Medium
5.1 – 7	62	28.9%	High
Total	214	100%	

Min = 2.25, Max = 6.00. Mean= 4.49, SD = 0.64. CV = 0.144.

The above table shows the scores of the Significant Other, subscale of the MSPSS, which measures social support. The mean score for this subscale

was 4.49, with a standard deviation of 0.64. The coefficient of variation (CV) was found to be 0.144, indicating moderate variability in the scores.

Sub Scale: Family

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Support Perceived
1 – 2.9	8	3.7%	Low
3 – 5	140	65.4%	Medium
5.1 – 7	66	30.8%	High
Total	214	100%	

Min = 2.75, Max = 6.00. Mean= 4.47, SD = 0.66. CV = 0.149

The above table shows the scores of the Family subscale of the MSPSS, which measures social support. The mean score for this subscale was 4.47, with a standard deviation of 0.66. The coefficient

of variation (CV) was found to be 0.149, indicating moderate variability in the scores.

Sub Scale: Friend

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Support Perceived
1 – 2.9	8	3.7%	Low
3 – 5	142	66.3%	Medium
5.1 – 7	64	29.9%	High
Total	214	100%	

Min = 2.25, Max = 6.75. Mean= 4.50, SD = 0.67. CV = 0.149

The scores of the Friend subscale of the MSPSS, which measures social support. The mean score for this subscale was 4.50, with a standard deviation of 0.67. The coefficient of variation (CV) was found to be 0.149, indicating moderate variability in the scores. The minimum score obtained was 2.25, while the maximum score obtained was 6.75.

Discussion:

The present study investigates the relationship between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among college students. The study employed multiple scales to measure social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among 214 students at Lovely Professional University. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between social isolation and psychological distress, indicating that social isolation can lead to increased psychological distress in college students. Moreover, social support was found to be significantly related to lower psychological distress, suggesting that it has

a buffering effect on psychological distress in college students.

The study's results highlight the Importance of social support as a protective factor against psychological distress among college students. The findings suggest that providing social support to students can potentially help reduce psychological distress, especially in those experiencing social isolation. Therefore, it is essential to design and implement interventions that promote social support among college students.

One notable aspect of the study is that it points out the increasing number of students suffering from psychological distress compared to previous studies. This is a concerning trend that needs attention from policymakers, universities, and mental health practitioners. The study's findings provide insights into the need for proactive measures to prevent and address psychological distress among college students.

Stress is a natural part of life that can have both positive and negative effects on individuals. The effect of stress is two-fold: when it is minimal and perceived positively, it can lead to positive consequences like increased motivation and improved performance (Kumari & Garcia, 2012; Bankston & Min, 2000), but when stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, it can have adverse effects such as ill-health, academic incompetence, difficulty in interpersonal relationships and depression (Stevenson & Harper, 2006; Dhakal, 2013; Blonna, 2005; Campbell & Svenson, 1992).

Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore the relationship between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among college students. The study used multiple scales to measure social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among 214 students from different departments at Lovely Professional University. The results showed a significant relationship between social isolation and psychological distress, as well as between social support and psychological distress and social isolation. The study found that social support played a crucial role in moderating the relationship between social isolation and psychological distress.

In conclusion, the study highlights the negative impact of social isolation on the psychological well-being of college students and the importance of social support in reducing psychological distress. The findings emphasize the need for interventions that address social isolation and provide social support to improve the psychological well-being of college students. The study's results could inform the development of interventions and policies aimed at addressing social isolation and promoting social support to improve the mental health of college students.

Limitations:

However, the study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. For instance, the study's sample was limited to students from a single university, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the study relied on self-report measures, which may lead to social desirability bias and affect the reliability of the results. Future research could employ a larger and more diverse sample and use objective measures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social isolation, social support, and psychological distress among college students.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments:

I'd like to offer my gratitude and appreciation to all respondents for their cooperation throughout data collection and great contribution to this study.

REFERENCES:

- Åkerlind, I., & Hörnquist, J. O. (1992). Loneliness and alcohol abuse: A review of evidences of an interplay. *Social science & medicine*, 34(4), 405-414.
- Angst, J. (1996). Comorbidity of mood disorders: a longitudinal prospective study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 168(S30), 31-37.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). A Theory of Development Erikson, EH (1989). *Identitas dan Siklus*, 469-480.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Hawkley, L. C., & Berntson, G. G. (2003). The anatomy of loneliness. *Current directions in psychological science*, 12(3), 71-74.
- Cobb, S. (1976). Social support as a moderator of life stress. *Psychosomatic medicine*, 38(5), 300-314.
- Denton, D. A., McKinley, M. J., Farrell, M., & Egan, G. F. (2009). The role of primordial emotions in the evolutionary origin of consciousness. *Consciousness and cognition*, 18(2), 500-514.
- Dhakal, S. (2016). An assessment of academic stress among students of bachelor's level. *Psychol Stud-J Cent Dep of Psychol*, 2(2), 12-15.
- Furnham, A. (2004). Education and culture shock. *Psychologist*, 17(1), 16.
- Hefner, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2009). Social support and mental health among college students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79(4), 491-499.
- House, J. S., Landis, K. R., & Umberson, D. (1988). Social relationships and health. *Science*, 241(4865), 540-545.
- Ibrahim, A., Esena, R. K., Aikins, M., O'Keefe, A. M., & McKay, M. M. (2015). Assessment of mental distress among prison inmates in Ghana's correctional system: a cross-sectional study using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. *International journal of mental health systems*, 9, 1-6.
- Kearns, A., Whitley, E., Tannahill, C., & Ellaway, A. (2015). Loneliness, social

- relations and health and well-being in deprived communities. *Psychology, health & medicine*, 20(3), 332-344.
13. Kessler, R. C., Foster, C. L., Saunders, W. B., & Stang, P. E. (1995). Social consequences of psychiatric disorders, I: Educational attainment. *American journal of psychiatry*, 152(7), 1026-1032.
 14. Kessler, R. C., Walters, E. E., & Forthofer, M. S. (1998). The social consequences of psychiatric disorders, III: probability of marital stability. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 155(8), 1092-1096.
 15. Kessler, R. C., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S. L., ... & Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological medicine*, 32(6), 959-976.
 16. Khazem, L. R. (2018). Physical disability and suicide: recent advancements in understanding and future directions for consideration. *Current opinion in psychology*, 22, 18-22.
 17. Kumari, R., & Gartia, R. (2012). Relationship between stress and academic achievement of senior secondary school students. *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research (AJMR)*, 1(3), 152-160.
 18. Lee, J. Y. (1975). *The problem of Paul's understanding of the historical Jesus in critical study. A historico-critical study of the Jesus-Paul problem in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century*. University of St. Andrews (United Kingdom).
 19. Lerner, R. M., Dowling, E. M., & Anderson, P. M. (2003). Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 172-180
 20. Mahanta, D., & Aggarwal, M. (2013). Effect of perceived social support on life satisfaction of university students. *European Academic Research*, 1(6), 1083-1094.
 21. Miller, J. M. (2017). Young or emerging adulthood: A psychoanalytic view. *The psychoanalytic study of the child*, 70(1), 8-21.
 22. Northern, J. J., O'Brien, W. H., & Goetz, P. W. (2010). The development, evaluation, and validation of a financial stress scale for undergraduate students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(1), 79-92
 23. Rahn, R. N., Pruitt, B., & Goodson, P. (2016). Utilization and limitations of the American college health Association's National College Health Assessment instrument: a systematic review. *Journal of American College Health*, 64(3), 214-237
 24. Richardson, T., Elliott, P., & Roberts, R. (2013). The relationship between personal unsecured debt and mental and physical health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical psychology review*, 33(8), 1148-1162.
 25. Ross, S. E., Niebling, B. C., & Heckert, T. M. (1999). Sources of stress among college students. *College student journal*, 33(2), 312-312.
 26. Russell, D., Peplau, L. A., & Ferguson, M. L. (1978). Developing a measure of loneliness. *Journal of personality assessment*, 42(3), 290-294.
 27. Russell, D. W. (1996). UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, validity, and factor structure. *Journal of personality assessment*, 66(1), 20-40.
 28. Schulte, M. T., & Hser, Y. I. (2013). Substance use and associated health conditions throughout the lifespan. *Public health reviews*, 35(2), 1-27.
 29. Stevenson, A., & Harper, S. (2006). Workplace stress and the student learning experience. *Quality assurance in education*, 14(2), 167-178.
 30. Umberson, D. (1987). Family status and health behaviors: Social control as a dimension of social integration. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 306-319.
 31. Wilson, R. S., Krueger, K. R., Arnold, S. E., Schneider, J. A., & Kelly, J. F. Barnes, Bennett, DA (2007). Loneliness and risk of Alzheimer disease. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 64(2), 234-240.
 32. Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of personality assessment*, 52(1), 30-41.