

## **EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF LONELINESS IN THE UAE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigated the extent to which isolation, collective connectedness, and relational connectedness shaped the phenomenon of loneliness in the UAE using an Arabic version of the UCLA loneliness scale. The participants were drawn from six populations in the country comprising largely of UAE nationals. Research data was collected by means of a survey and was analyzed using the quantitative method. The findings revealed that the feeling of being isolated was rarely experienced by the participants although the feeling of being relationally and collectively connected was sometimes a part of their experience. The occasional restriction of the individual from being social gregariousness however, appear to be normative when seen against the social and cultural background. The UAE is at the intersection of tradition and modernity but being rooted in tradition serves as a cushion against the insecurity of loneliness as it situates the individual within a gamut of traditional social networks and support groups. The findings reinforce the view that loneliness is both a contradictory and fundamental phenomena of human existence. Even among the happiest people, they can sometimes feel lonely too.

**Keywords:** Loneliness, isolation, collective connectedness, relational connectedness, loneliness scale

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Loneliness has many faces. From a philosophical standpoint, loneliness is an inescapable part of human existence (Arendt, 1962). From a psycho-social perspective, it is a difficult feeling based one's subjective experience of his or her social relationship (Hawkey et al.,2008). This makes loneliness more of an enigmatic phenomenon because there are some reclusive people who don't feel lonely at all while others can experience loneliness even if they are constantly in the company of people. While Coastache (2013) attempted to distinguished solitude from loneliness, he nevertheless concluded that solitude is a necessary condition for loneliness. From the psycho-dynamic perspective, loneliness is an unpleasant experience arising out of the need for intimacy both human and inter-personal. This experience is linked with one's childhood experiences and

personality (Vaarala et al, 2013) which can be traced back to maternal attachments that enable the creation of emotional bond and connection between mother and child (Sønderby, 2013). From the interactionist perspective, loneliness can be social or emotional. Emotional loneliness happens when one lacks close relationships while social loneliness occurs when one is not a part of a social community (Vaarala et al, 2013). From the cognitive perspective, loneliness is linked with personal and situational factors (Peplau and Perlman,1979).

Abarghouei (2015) in her review of phenomenological studies on the lived experiences of people revealed that loneliness is a feeling associated with being rejected, victimized, or ignored. Interestingly, she found that there are those who consider themselves outsiders by choice. Shuster attempted to reconcile the various perspectives by pointing out that loneliness is not just simply the consequence social and economic antecedents on the personality but loneliness needs to be understood as both as a phenomenon “contrary and yet fundamental to every human life” (Shuster, 2012, p. 474). This situates both loneliness and happiness on the same existential plain and implies that happy people can feel lonely too and vice versa. It is based on this premise that this paper investigated the phenomenon of loneliness in the unique context of the United Arab Emirates, now considered the happiest country in the Arab world (UN World Happiness Index, 2017). The big question is, how often do citizens of the UAE feel lonely?

Based on the UN Happiness Index (2017), the United Arab Emirates ranks 21<sup>st</sup> globally in terms of happiness compared to other Gulf countries such as Qatar (rank 35), Saudi Arabia (rank 37), Kuwait (rank 39) and Bahrain (rank 41). It is s among the top ten countries based on twenty one happiness indicators. Globally, the UAE ranks first in terms of its people’s good health; second in terms of satisfaction with economy and trust in the future of its economy; and fourth in terms of satisfaction with living standards and comfort. Becoming the happiest country in the Arab world is the consequence of the initiatives of Shaikh Mohammad Al Maktoum who made happiness a core mission of the federal government thereby elevating happiness as a national policy goal. Based on these considerations, this investigation was done with the end view of understanding the influence of selected demographic factors on the phenomenon of loneliness considering the favorable conditions sweeping the country. The demographic factors included in the investigation were specifically pertinent to age, gender, and marital status of the respondents.

### ***1.1 Age***

More often than not, loneliness is depicted to be an experience felt more by older adults but studies have shown that loneliness is experienced by people of all ages (Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016). From meta-analysis and reviews of extant data, it was found that loneliness levels tend to peak in young adulthood or among those less than 30 years old. This diminishes around middle adulthood and old age or among those from 30 to 65 years old and 65 to 80 years old,

respectively, then gradually increases until about 80 years old (Qualter et al., 2015) hence is depicted as a U-shaped phenomenon (Luhmann and Hawkley, 2016).

Other studies using more indirect measures however, did not yield equivalent correlation between age and loneliness (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014). This may be due to a number of risk factors such as income levels or health status that can influence how people in different age categories experience loneliness as a function of social relationships (Victor & Yang, 2012). Socio-cultural norms have also been found to influence loneliness as these govern normative expectations which can create a discrepancy with the quantity and quality of social relationships that a person can have (Ayalon, Palgi, Avidor, & Bodner, 2015). Hawkley et al.(2008) reviewed the different factors that have been associated with loneliness throughout the lifespan and have classified these factors as distal and proximal factors. Accordingly, proximal factors are those factors that impact loneliness directly while distal factors are those that indirectly affect loneliness.

On the whole, studies on age differences in loneliness showed mixed results. Hence Luhmann and Hawkley (2016) suggested the further replication of studies on age differences in loneliness using multiple items and indirect measures. It is towards this end that age was considered a factor worth investigating in this paper.

### ***1.2 Sex***

The results of previous studies on sex differences in loneliness showed that men experienced greater loneliness compared to women (Dykstra and de Jong Gierveld 2004). In other studies, women were found to experienced greater loneliness than men (Jakobson & Hallberg, 2005), yet other studies indicated no difference at all between male and female experience of loneliness (Cramer and Neyedley 1998). In a study that included individuals of different ages, loneliness did not significantly differ between males and females on three distinct loneliness domains investigated ( Di Tommaso et al., 2007).

Mandal (2004) pointed to the importance of the traditionally defined roles of males and females in the context of their relationship with others as a factor that can account for the sex differences in loneliness. Also, the need for intimacy which is greater among women than men may affect the quality or quantity of their social relations and ultimately can lead to loneliness if this is not satisfied (Feldman et al. 1998).

The instrument used to measure loneliness had also been found to account for sex differences observed in the findings. In a study by Borys and Perlman (1985) using a single item measure, loneliness was found to be more prevalent among women. In comparison, Nicolaisen and

Thornsen (2014) used multi-item measures of loneliness and found that men were as lonely or even lonelier than women.

The results showed by empirical findings indicated more incongruence and inconsistency in the loneliness between males and females which could be on account of a multiplicity of factors. One source of the variation that has been found common in studies is the manner in which loneliness was measured. In this regard, this investigation used a multi-item measure of the Arabic adaptation of the UCLA loneliness scale.

### ***1.3. Marital status***

Stack (1998) described that being married is robustly associated with lower levels of loneliness. This is supported by findings that identified marriage as a major factor which protects against loneliness. In effect, both married men and women experience lower loneliness in contrast to non-married persons (Ayalon et al. 2013). Victor and Young (2012) found that the effect of marriage on loneliness appear to be more important among older adults as compared to younger married adults which is reflective of the increasing importance of marital status with age. Thwarting the formation of intimate relations and partnership among young adults can however be a source for loneliness (Qualter et al.,2015). This led Luhmann and Hawkley (2016) to deduce that relationship status could be associated with loneliness in all age groups but the strength of the association may increase with age.

An aspect of loneliness associated with partnership status is called romantic loneliness and studies have shown that married individuals or individuals living with romantic partners experienced less romantic loneliness than those who were not in such relationships (Bernardon et al. 2011). Being involved in a romantic relationship was significantly linked to lower levels of romantic loneliness, but the link was not that strong in relation to family and social loneliness (DiTommaso and Spinner,1993). This was supported by the findings of Çeçen (2007) which showed that being in a romantic relationship was related to lower scores on romantic loneliness. The reverse is true among those not being involved in a romantic relationship but was not associated with scores on the family or social loneliness scales.

One factor that may influence the experience of loneliness in relation to marital status is the social support provided by the significant other. Prezza and Pacilli (2002) found that married people had higher support from the significant other than unmarried people. It may be for this reason that married individuals with greater social support tended to manifest lower levels of loneliness compared to single individuals (Zimet et al.,1990). One of the inevitable consequences of marriage is having children in the household. It was found that having no children in the household may be associated with higher levels of loneliness among married couples. While the

presence of children tends to be linked with lower levels of loneliness, parental responsibilities can limit social opportunity that can lead to higher levels of loneliness (Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016).

On the whole, the dynamics of how age, sex, and marital status influence loneliness still appear not to be fully understood in the light of a multiplicity of factors that can influence or relate to these variables. The bottom line is that the experience of loneliness is highly personalized but situated in specific historical and cultural contexts hence the need for more contextualized studies on this phenomenon is in order.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **Method:**

This paper is a quantitative investigation that used the survey as the strategy for data collection and the questionnaire as the main data gathering tool.

### **Participants:**

The participants in the survey comprised 1403 UAE nationals who were recruited from six populations in the country and grouped according to the three variables of the study. The random selection of the participants ensured the variety of attributes according to the variables investigated.

### **Instrument**

The Arabic version of UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3; Russell, 1996) adapted by Daswqee (1998) was used in this study. The UCLA loneliness scale is a 20 item Likert-type scale in which responses ranged from 1 (never) to 4 (always). The scale includes 9 positively worded items (1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, and 20) and 11 negatively worded items ( 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, and 18 ) randomly distributed throughout the scale. The data generated from the scale were processed using weighted means to reflect the extent of loneliness experienced by the respondents. The positively stated items were reverse-scored and the weighted means were interpreted using an interval scale with qualitative equivalents:

Mean Range	For items negatively stated	For items Positively stated
3.25 – 4.00	Always (A)	Never (N)
2.50 – 3.24	Sometimes (S)	Rarely (R)
1.75 – 2.49	Rarely (R)	Sometimes (S)
1.00 – 1.74	Never (N)	Always (A)

The UCLA loneliness scale was particularly adopted in the investigation because the scale’s reliability was found to be high with alpha coefficients ranging between 0.89 to 0.94 for samples of students, nurses, teachers, and elderly (Russell, 1996). Test-retest reliability in adult samples was likewise high (0.73). The scale’s criterion-related validity was supported by strong correlations with other measures of loneliness such as the NYU Loneliness Scale and the Differential Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996).

**Procedures:**

The participants were asked to respond to the items of the Arabic version of the UCLA loneliness scale. The wordings of the scale were semantically contextualized which allowed the participants to individually relate to the questions asked. The questionnaires were administered by trained students of the United Arab Emirates University who were available to assist the participants whenever required. The questionnaires were immediately retrieved by the student assistants after these were answered by the respondents.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results show the phenomenon of loneliness among the participants based on a three-factor taxonomy conceptualized by Hawkley, Browne, and Cacioppo (2005). The antecedent factors associated with feelings of loneliness were categorized into Isolation (I), Relational Connectedness (RC), and Collective Connectedness (CC). Isolation is the individual’s feeling of being alone and rejected. Relational connectedness pertains to social loneliness while Collective Connectedness is associated with group affiliation and belongingness. Table 1 shows the general phenomenon of loneliness in the study population.

**3.1. Feelings of loneliness among the participants**

Accordingly, the results show from the individual stand points of the participants that they rarely felt being alone and rejected but sometimes felt that their interests were not shared by others

(M=2.57, SD=0.81). In terms of their group affiliation, they sometimes felt that they were in tune with people around them (M=1.75, SD=0.74); were part of a group of friends (M=1.76, SD=0.88); had a lot in common with people around them (M=2.06, SD=0.82), and felt that they were friendly and outgoing (M=1.71,SD=0.81). This may be so because they sometimes felt that there are people who they don't feel close to (M=1.85, SD=0.78) or that they sometimes lacked companionship (M=2.07, SD=0.89). The participants also sometimes felt that there are people who they can talk to (M=1.91,SD=0.85); turn to (M=1.99,SD=SD=0.85); or understand (M=2.17,SD=0.84)

**Table 1. The Feeling of Loneliness Experienced by the Participants**

<b>Items</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>How often do you feel...</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Feeling</b>
CC1	“in tune” with the people around you	1.75	0.74	S
CC5	that you are part of a group of friends	1.76	0.88	S
CC6	you have a lot in common with people			
CC9	around you	2.06	0.82	S
I11	like an outgoing and friendly person	1.71	0.81	S
I12	left out	1.84	0.87	R
I13	that your social relationships are not			
I14	meaningful	1.95	0.9	R
I15	no one really knows you well	2.44	0.87	R
I16	isolated from others	2.15	0.93	R
I17	Shy	2.48	0.96	R
I18	that people around you are not with you	2.49	0.89	R
I2	that your relations are not meaningful	2.33	0.89	R
I3	that there is no one you can turn to	2.31	0.91	R
I4	Alone	2.16	0.93	R
I7	that you are no longer close to anyone	2.24	0.93	R
I8	your interests are not shared by others	2.57	0.81	S
RC10	that there are people you don't feel close to	1.85	0.78	S
RC15	that you lack companionship	2.07	0.89	S
RC16	that there are people who understand you	2.17	0.84	S
RC19	that there are people you can talk to	1.91	0.85	S
RC20	that there are people you can turn to	1.99	0.85	S

A: always; S: sometimes; R=rarely; N=never

The results indicate that the participants, in general, felt rarely being isolated, alone, or rejected as individuals. This shows that they generally accepted when in the company of others. However, they sometimes experienced social value in their dyadic friendship relationships. This indicates that their friendship relationships are not always that strong. Furthermore, they sometimes experienced collective identity or belonging to a group. In general, the feeling of loneliness among the participants can be more on account of relational connectedness and collective connectedness rather than isolation.

**3.2. Loneliness according to age**

Table 2 shows the comparative experiences of teenagers and elderly relative to feelings of collective connectedness, isolation, and relational connectedness. In terms of collective identity and belongingness to a group, both teenagers and the elderly always felt that they were outgoing and friendly but sometimes felt that they were in tune with people around. Comparatively, teenagers felt that they were always part of a group of friends (M=1.61) and in tune with people around them (M=1.72) while the elderly sometimes felt that they did so (M=2.08). While teenagers only rarely felt that they had a lot in common with people around them (M=2.02), the elderly sometimes felt that they did (M=2.22).

**Table 2. Feelings of Loneliness According to Age**

No	Items <i>How often do you feel...</i>	Teenagers		Elderly	
		Mean	Feeling	Mean	Feeling
CC1	“in tune” with the people around you	1.72	A	1.8	S
CC5	that you are part of a group of friends	1.61	A	2.08	S
CC6	you have a lot in common with people around you	2.02	R	2.22	S
CC9	like an outgoing and friendly person	1.67	A	1.58	A
I11	left out	1.86	R	1.9	R
I12	that your social relationships are not meaningful	1.88	R	2.03	R
I13	no one really knows you well	2.42	R	2.46	R
I14	isolated from others	2.01	R	2.21	R
I17	Shy	2.68	S	2.11	R
I18	that people around you are not with you	2.48	R	2.42	R
I2	that your relations are not meaningful	2.21	R	2.63	S
I3	that there is no one you can turn to	2.16	R	2.34	R
I4	Alone	2.02	R	2.28	R
I7	that you are no longer close to anyone	2.13	R	2.2	R

I8	your interests are not shared by others that there are people you don't feel close to	2.53	S	2.67	S
RC10	that you lack companionship	1.85	S	1.76	S
RC15	that there are people who understand you	2	S	2.17	S
RC16	that there are people you can talk to	2.11	S	2.15	S
RC19	that there are people you can turn to	1.78	S	1.72	A
RC20		3.15	R	3.12	R

A: always; S: sometimes; R=rarely; N=never

Generally, both groups of teenagers and elderly rarely felt being alone, isolated or rejected. They, however, sometimes felt that their interests were not shared by others and there are people that they were not close to. Also, the elderly sometimes felt that they had a lot in common with people around them (M=2.22) but which was rarely felt by the teenagers (M=2.02). In terms of relational connectedness, both teenagers and elderly sometimes felt that they lacked companionship and the presence of people who understood them. Both groups were likewise in agreement that they rarely felt that there were people that they can turn too. The elderly always felt that there are people they can talk (M=1.72)to but teenagers only sometimes felt this (M=1.78)

**Table 3. Difference in the Feeling of Loneliness According to Age**

Dimensions	Teenagers		Elderly		t	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Collective						
Connectedness	1.755	0.0332	1.920	0.0818	2.570	0.3753
Isolation	2.216	0.0756	2.295	0.0574	2.085	0.48041
Relational						
connectedness	2.178	0.3117	2.184	0.3181	2.306	0.98692

The result of the t-test in Table 3 showed that there was no significant difference between teenagers and the elderly in relation to their feeling of collective connectedness,  $t=2.57, p>.005$ ; isolation,  $t=2.087, p>.005$ ; and relational connectedness,  $t=2.31, p>.005$ . The results indicate that the feeling of loneliness was not age-specific. The feeling of loneliness is not influenced by being a teenager or adult. Teenagers and the elderly alike experience the same feelings relative to isolation, collective connectedness, and relational connectedness.

**3.3. Loneliness according to sex**

Table 4 shows the comparative response of males and females relative to the various causal factors of loneliness. In terms of collective connectedness, both males and female always felt that they were part of a group of friends. Both groups sometimes felt that they were in tune with people around them and sometimes felt that they had a lot in common with other people. While the males felt that they were always outgoing and friendly (M=1.70), females only sometimes felt that way (M=1.84).

**Table 4. Feelings of Loneliness According to Sex**

No	Items <i>How often do you feel...</i>	Females		Males	
		Mean	Feeling	Mean	Feeling
CC1	“in tune” with the people around you	1.82	S	1.75	S
CC5	that you are part of a group of friends you have a lot in common with	1.74	A	1.64	A
CC6	people around you	2.12	S	2	S
CC9	like an outgoing and friendly person	1.84	S	1.7	A
I11	left out that your social relationships are not	1.92	R	1.75	R
I12	meaningful	1.99	R	1.91	R
I13	no one really knows you well	2.65	S	2.31	R
I14	isolated from others	2.34	R	1.99	R
I17	Shy that people around you are not with	2.7	S	2.19	R
I18	you	2.69	S	2.15	R
I2	that you lack companionship	2.46	R	2.04	R
I3	that there is no one you can turn to	2.44	R	2.08	R
I4	Alone	2.33	R	1.83	R
I7	that you are no longer close to anyone	2.56	R	1.93	R
I8	your interests are not shared by others that there are people you don't feel	2.66	S	2.4	S
RC10	close to	2	S	1.79	S
RC15	that you lack companionship that there are people who understand	2.21	S	1.88	S
RC16	you	2.4	S	2.07	S
RC19	that there are people you can talk to	2.07	S	1.84	S
RC20	that there are people you can turn to	2.33	S	1.93	S

A: always; S: sometimes; R=rarely; N=never

In terms of isolation, males and females alike rarely felt being left out; isolated from others; being alone; or being no longer close to anyone. They also rarely felt that they lacked companionship. They however sometimes felt that their interests were not shared by others (M=2.66). Comparatively, males sometimes felt that no one really knew them well (M=2.31) while females rarely experienced this feeling (2.65). Likewise, males sometimes felt shy (M=2.70) and that they were no longer close to anyone (M=2.56) while females rarely experienced these feelings (M=2.19). Generally, males and females alike sometimes experience relational connectedness.

**Table 5. Difference in the Feeling of Loneliness According to Sex**

Dimensions	Females		Males		t	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Collective relatedness	1.880	0.0274	1.772	0.0250	2.446	0.384255
Isolation	2.430	0.0731	2.052	0.0396	2.100	0.001518
Relational connectedness	2.202	0.0284	1.902	0.0114	2.364	0.01214

The t-test in Table 5 revealed that males and females did not significantly differ in collective connectedness,  $t=2.44, p>.005$  and relational connectedness,  $t=2.36, p>.005$  but differed significantly in the feeling of isolation,  $t=2.10, p<.005$ . This indicates that collective connectedness and relational connectedness were not sex-specific, however, the feeling of isolation was influenced by the sex of the individuals who experience this feeling. Regardless of sex, the feeling of social loneliness and belongingness to a group remained the same whereas the feeling of isolation differed between males and females where females felt more isolated compared to males.

**3.4. Marital status**

Table 6 shows that married and single participants alike sometimes experienced collective connectedness except for the fact that the married participants felt that they were always outgoing and friendly (M=1.63) while the single participants only sometimes felt that they were such (M=1.75). Married and single participants alike also expressed that they rarely experienced being isolated. Comparatively, the married participants revealed that they never felt being left out (M=1.73) while the single participants expressed that they rarely experienced this feeling (M=1.89). The married and single participants alike sometimes experienced relational

connectedness except for the feeling that there are people who they can turn to which was rarely felt by married and single participants alike

**Table 6. Feelings of Loneliness According to Marital Status**

No	Item	Married		Single	
		Mean	Feeling	Mean	Feeling
CC1	“In tune” with the people around you?	1.68	S	1.73	S
CC5	You are part of a group of friends?	1.79	S	1.74	S
CC6	A lot in common with people around	2	S	2.1	S
CC9	You feel outgoing and friendly?	1.63	A	1.75	S
I11	You feel left out?	1.73	N	1.89	R
I12	Relationships are not meaningful?	1.93	R	1.96	R
I13	No one really knows you well?	2.22	R	2.49	R
I14	You feel isolated from others?	2.05	R	2.19	R
I17	You feel shy?	2.29	R	2.39	R
I18	People not with you?	2.47	R	2.45	R
I2	Lack companionship?	2.31	R	2.35	R
I3	No one you can turn to?	2.29	R	2.33	R
I4	You feel alone?	2.08	R	2.2	R
I7	You are no longer close to anyone?	2.17	R	2.2	R
I8	Your interests are not shared by others	2.62	S	2.56	S
RC10	Feel close to people?	1.75	S	1.83	S
	Find companionship when you want				
RC15	it?	2.04	S	2.15	S
RC16	People who really understand you?	1.95	S	2.11	S
RC19	There are people you can talk to?	1.8	S	1.94	S
RC20	There are people you can turn to?	3.23	R	3.06	R

A: always; S: sometimes; R=rarely; N=never

The t-test in Table 7 revealed that there was no significant difference between the married and single participants relative to the feeling of collective connectedness,  $t=2.45, p>.005$  isolation;  $t=2.36, p>.005$ ; and relational connectedness  $t=2.36, p>.005$ .

**Table 7. Difference in the Feeling of Loneliness According to Sex**

Dimensions	Married		Single		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Collective relatedness	1.775	0.0269	1.830	0.0324	2.446	0.667688
Isolation	2.196	0.0609	2.273	0.0445	2.085	0.439412
Relational connectedness	2.154	0.3752	2.218	0.2382	2.306	0.859572

This indicates that the feelings of being alone or rejected, belonging to a group, and experiencing social value in their relationships were not dependent on their marital status. Regardless of marital status, the participants' experience of isolation, collective connectedness, and relational connectedness did not significantly vary.

### **3.5. Discussion**

The study made use of the Arabic version of the UCLA loneliness scale to explore the phenomenon of loneliness for an indigenous sample extracted from six populations in the UAE. While a number of investigations focused on validity, stability, or factor structure of the scale, this study focused on the substantive aspects generated by the scale to answer the question on how often do the research participants experience loneliness.

The inferential statistics showed that almost all the dimensions of loneliness were not discriminated on the basis of age, sex, or marital status with the exception of the dimension of isolation which was influenced by the sex of the participants. The results generally show no difference in terms of how often loneliness was experienced by the participants. Therefore, the results do not support the findings of other studies showing a difference in loneliness on account of age, sex, and marital status.

It is at this point that the descriptive findings find value in understanding the phenomenon of loneliness in the UAE. The findings indicate that the respondents rarely experienced loneliness on account of the dimension of isolation measured by how often the respondents felt lonely on account of themselves, others, and their social relationship. It has to be understood that the UAE is a collectivist society. (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2016) cited the high scores of the UAE in Power Distance based on Hofstede's dimensions of national culture which shows that hierarchy and distinct power roles are valued and that existing inequalities are accepted. The authors further cited the low scores of Emiratis on the dimension of Individualism which shows that the social group to which one belongs to is given greater importance and value compared to

the individual although there is equal concern for the care & welfare of others. The group-oriented culture in the UAE also puts much focus on the family which is characteristically very cohesive and extended in structure (Al Khazraji, 2009). Personal relationships mediated by interpersonal communications are therefore very much emphasized in the UAE. Such prevailing conditions account for why the participants rarely felt that they were shy, alone, isolated from others, or left out. This also explains why the participants rarely felt lonely on account of being close to anyone, personal interest not shared by others, or others not being with them. They also rarely felt that their social relations were not meaningful because the value placed on personal relationships and the possible effect of modernization influenced Emiratis on how to socialize (Al Khazraji, 2009).

Allied to power distance is also the concept of social distance. The power distance profile of the UAE which shows asymmetry in power can also produce an asymmetric experience of social distance (Magee & Smith, 2013). This reinforces the hierarchical nature of the society which is an accepted reality in the UAE. Hence the participants only sometimes felt being in tune with others; being part of a social group, or having a lot in common with others. Social distance on account of the hierarchical structure of relationships can also explain why the participants sometimes felt that there are people they are not close to; people who do not understand them; and people they could depend on.

Teenagers and the elderly alike felt that they were always being outgoing and friendly. This is quite expected because being hospitable and friendly is typical among the Arab traits. This trait was not also discriminated by the sex of the participants. The feeling of both male and female teenagers that they are always part of a group of friends can be on account of the extended family ties that expose the young not only to members of the family but also to the tribe. Their opportunity to be with a group of friends is also reinforced by the fact that almost all teenagers are of school-age. The school environment has a culturally heterogeneous composition that reflects the multi-cultural plurality of the UAE. The elderly males and females however only sometimes feel that they were part of a group of friends. This may be on account of the concentration of older males and females on work or family which restricts them from social circulation.

Being in tune with people around is sometimes felt by males and females of all ages although the feeling of having a lot in common with other people is rarely felt by younger females compared to older males who sometimes feel this. It is possible that the cultural diversity typical of the UAE can account for such a situation. In the UAE, about 19% are UAE nationals and the rest are expatriates (Hills & Atkins, 2013).

Married and single participants share the similar feelings across the different indicators in the scale. What was notable, however, was that married females reported never feeling left out. These findings reflect on the current image of Arab women who were previously stereotyped as oppressed and uneducated (Al Marzouki, 2004) but now portray a picture of women in progress (Sukuraman, 2013). In the UAE, there are more females enrolled in college compared to males and there are indications that females are outperforming the males in the area of academics. This indicates that females face the same opportunities as males in terms of exposure in the context of the academic environment (Ridge, 2009).

The results support the findings of an earlier study done in the context of tertiary education in the UAE that found no significant difference between males and females in terms of loneliness (Al Khatib, 2012). Ageing had often been associated with loneliness due to factors such as work pressure, health problems, or social isolation (Sharma & Dube, 2015). This was not however observed in the study as the elderly rarely felt isolated as individuals and only sometimes experienced social and relational connectedness. Again, this can be attributed to strong family ties and the respect for the elderly. In contrast to western countries, the older people in the UAE are paid more attention to by family members. Older people are pre-disposed to a number of diseases which can be a risk factor for loneliness but the impact of health problems can be cushioned by free healthcare by the best healthcare system in the UAE. While there is a tendency of elderly people to be sometimes alone, this does not mean that they are necessarily lonely.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This investigation looked into the extent to which loneliness was experienced by an indigenous sample of participants in the UAE using an Arabic version of the UCLA loneliness scale. The extent of isolation, collective connectedness, and relational connectedness of the sample was measured to determine the phenomenon of loneliness. The findings revealed that being isolated was a rare condition experienced by the participants although they felt they were relationally and collectively connected at times. The occasional restriction of the individual from being social gregariousness, however, appear to be normative when seen against the social and cultural background. The UAE is at the intersection of tradition and modernity but being rooted in tradition serves as a cushion against the insecurity of loneliness as it situates the individual within a gamut of traditional social networks and support groups. The phenomenon of loneliness in the UAE only goes to affirm the philosophical view that it is both contradictory and fundamental phenomena. Therefore, even among the happiest people, they sometimes can feel lonely too. This investigation was largely based on a deductive approach that limits the findings to portraying the general attributes of the population. It is recommended that studies using the inductive approach can further contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of

loneliness by surfacing out what truly constitutes loneliness as a lived experience and an inescapable aspect of the human condition.

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