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Authors

Jung, Estela

Chung, Jeein

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Rethinking Loneliness: A Perspective on Norm Deviation Beyond the Collectivism-Individualism Framework

Estela Jung and Jeein Chung

Korea University, South Korea

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The degree to which cultures differ in experiencing loneliness has been studied in depth by researchers. This literature proposes a novel approach to conceptualizing loneliness by introducing the idea of norm deviation and how deviating from normative standards leads to loneliness. When individuals perceive themselves as deviating from normative standards, their basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, or relatedness, as outlined in self-determination theory—may go unmet. This unmet need can, in turn, foster feelings of loneliness. Building on this theoretical framework, the present review explores how social support and SDT-related processes may moderate the relationship between norm deviation and loneliness. While social support is well known to mitigate loneliness, this research focuses on the source and nature of support, offering a more nuanced view of its role. Finally, to better understand how norm deviation is experienced across cultural contexts, this review highlights the value of incorporating qualitative research methods. Such approaches can capture cultural nuances and lived experiences often overlooked in quantitative loneliness research.

Keywords: loneliness, norm deviation, culture, social support, self-determination

Introduction

Loneliness is the subjective distress felt from an undesired absence of mutual understanding and connection with others, which can lead to further issues like impaired cognitive function (Van Staden, & Coetzee, 2010; Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2021). Despite its subjective nature, loneliness is a universally experienced phenomenon. The prevalence of loneliness for adolescents ranged from 9.2% to 14.4% depending on all countries around the world, while for adults, the rate increased to 24.2% (Surkalim et al., 2022). While loneliness has been linked to serious mental and physical health risks, including depression, cardiovascular issues, and premature mortality, this paper instead focuses on examining the underlying psychological and social mechanisms that shape the experience of loneliness (Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2019; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Hawkley et al., 2009; Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2010; Caspi et al., 2006). Understanding these mechanisms is essential for effectively addressing loneliness and, in turn, reducing the risk of related health conditions.

Existing studies on loneliness have primarily focused on understanding the nature of loneliness, its negative psychological and social consequences, and the personal and social factors influencing it. In particular, numerous studies have attempted to compare experiences of loneliness across collectivistic and individualistic cultures, often using quantitative measures such as surveys (Barreto et al., 2021; Özdemir, & Tuncay, 2008; Taniguchi, & Kaufman, 2022). Individualism is a culturally based construct, which emphasizes independence, self-orientation, and personal achievement. In comparison, collectivism centers itself on interdependence, group harmony, prioritizing the needs of others of the self (Schermer et al., 2023). However, analyzing loneliness through the lens of individualism and collectivism places relatively little emphasis on how individuals perceive and internalize the cultural norms of their society. This internalization involves not only adopting and interpreting these values, but also embedding them into one's self-concept, guiding behavior and shaping expectations within social relationships. Even within the same culture, the impact of cultural norms can vary significantly among individuals. Therefore, we argue that when examining diverse experiences of loneliness, it is essential to consider not only the collectivist/individualist cultural framework but

also other relevant variables including norm deviation, social support, and self-determination.

One such factor is the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as deviating from the norms of their respective cultures—that is, the degree of norm deviation. The more individuals perceive themselves as deviating from their cultural norms, the more likely they are to experience unmet basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn can lead to loneliness (Heu, 2023; Heu et al., 2021; Hemberg et al., 2022; Nielsen, Nielsen, & Lasgaard, 2024; Kirwan et al., 2023). These needs are central to psychological frameworks such as self-determination theory (SDT), which emphasizes the role of need satisfaction when fostering psychological well-being and regulated behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, when an individual's needs are satisfied, they are more likely to thrive; otherwise when unmet, they are more vulnerable to negative emotional states, such as loneliness. Importantly, norm categories—such as behavioral or emotional norms—and the social consequences of norm violations vary across cultural orientations, for instance, in the degree of tolerance for norm deviations (Stamkou et al., 2019; Mu et al., 2015). In collectivist cultures, emotional restraint and behaviors that promote group harmony are often expected, and deviating from these norms (e.g., expressing negative emotions) typically results in social disapproval or exclusion. In contrast, individualist cultures tend to place greater value on personal expression and autonomy, making norm violations in such contexts less likely to result in severe social penalties. Prior research also indicates that individuals who identify strongly with their cultural group are more susceptible to the influence of that group's norms (Jetten et al., 2006; Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). They may be more likely to internalize or strive to embody culturally valued behaviors, which may result in stronger emotional reactions (e.g., guilt, shame), when perceiving themselves as deviating from those norms. How one navigates through social relationships and interprets experiences like loneliness can be affected by heightened sensitivity. Collectively, these studies substantiate that cultural norms differ across societies and that individuals interpret and respond to these norms differently. Therefore, to capture the multifaceted nature of loneliness, it is essential to examine both cultural-level and individual-level normative frameworks, rather than relying solely on dichotomies such as individualism versus collectivism.

Social support is another key factor to consider, as it directly influences basic psychological needs outlined earlier in this paper. The current review posits that both social support and unmet satisfaction of these needs play a role in the relationship between norm deviation and loneliness. While previous studies have predominantly emphasized the beneficial effects of social support on loneliness relatively few have addressed the possibility that social support may not always mitigate loneliness, depending on the cultural and contextual circumstances (Vasileiou et al., 2019; Bauer & Rokach, 2004; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2019; Spek, 2024). Evidence suggests that from whom and how social support is received—both of which are shaped by cultural norms—significantly impact the fulfillment of basic psychological needs (Lin & Kingminghae, 2014; Rodrigues, Gierveld, & Buz, 2014; Van Veen, 2013). This perspective implies that not all forms of social support are equally beneficial, suggesting the existence of both effective and less effective types of social support, depending on the cultural and contextual factors. This review adopts a more nuanced perspective, considering both the positive and potentially adverse effects of social support on loneliness.

Overall, while previous research has predominantly conceptualized loneliness through the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism, this study critically examines these frameworks, highlights their limitations, and introduces a more nuanced approach by examining how perceived norm deviation, basic psychological need satisfaction, and the quality of social support interact to shape experiences of loneliness across cultural contexts.

1. Loneliness and Culture

Loneliness has been classified and conceptualized in various ways in past studies (Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; McKenna-Plumley, Turner, Yang, & Groarke, 2023). This highlights the complexity of loneliness and emphasizes the need for a framework that incorporates not only individuals' emotions, but also broader cultural and social dynamics that shape how loneliness is experienced and interpreted. Researchers such as Heu et al. (2019) have emphasized that loneliness does not simply result from being socially isolated in a physical or objective sense. Similarly, Van Staden and Coetzee (2010) highlight the importance of distinguishing between the experiences of loneliness and solitude, as well as related but distinct concepts like social isolation and withdrawal. These perspectives collectively suggest that loneliness is not a straightforward construct but rather an intricate psychological experience that is shaped by both internal perceptions and nuanced distinctions from conceptually similar states. Recognizing this complexity is crucial, as it underlines the need to approach loneliness not merely as a matter of social quantity, but of subjective quality and interpretation.

A variety of individual-level factors have been linked to loneliness, including personality traits and social skills. Individuals with anxiety, shyness, low self-esteem, or an external locus of control tend to be more prone to loneliness (Doman & Le Roux, 2010; de Jong Gierveld, 1998). While these personal characteristics are important, they do not fully explain the variability in how loneliness is experienced across different populations. Cultural factors, in particular, offer a critical lens for understanding how norms, values, and social expectations shape perceptions of loneliness. The present research focuses on these cultural dimensions, which may moderate or amplify feelings of loneliness in ways that go beyond individual traits.

These different cultural backgrounds influence how people view the world and what their values are (Jetten, Postmes, &

McAuliffe, 2002). Such cultural differences also affect how loneliness is experienced and interpreted. The degree, frequency, and experience of loneliness may be shaped by cultural contexts with different expectations regarding social relationships. Much of the literature in cultural psychology has focused on the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, people are typically viewed as individuals separate from others, with personal achievement, competitiveness, and impersonal social relationships being highly valued (Ostrov, & Offer, 1978). In contrast, individuals in collectivistic cultures are viewed as deeply interconnected with others and typically have access to a broader network of relationships and social support (Taniguchi, & Kaufman, 2022). For example, in cultures that emphasize the importance of romantic relationships, individuals are more likely to feel loneliness when they fail to meet those cultural expectations (Seepersad et al., 2008). US students reported having higher levels of romantic loneliness than did Korean students, suggesting that romantic expectations have a greater impact on one's loneliness in the United States (Van Staden, & Coetzee, 2010).

Heu and colleagues (2019) conceptualized the idea that cultural contexts differently shape individuals' experiences of loneliness by introducing the concept of social embeddedness, which refers to the extent to which individuals are expected to be integrated into and maintain close ties within their social groups. Different cultural systems, such as individualism and collectivism, promote different expectations regarding social embeddedness (Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2019). Specifically, they proposed that individualistic cultures tend to emphasize personal autonomy and have less demanding expectations for maintaining close social ties, whereas collectivistic cultures impose stronger expectations for individuals to maintain interconnected and supportive relationships within their groups. In other words, loneliness can result from discrepancies between individuals' ideal levels of social embeddedness and their actual experiences.

Building on this conceptualization, it is essential to examine how the experience of loneliness differs across collectivistic and individualistic cultural contexts. However, past research has produced mixed findings regarding which cultural contexts—collectivistic or individualistic—are associated with greater experiences of loneliness. Some studies have suggested that individualistic cultures, such as those in North America, are more strongly associated with loneliness (Ostrov & Offer, 1978), while collectivistic cultures are linked to lower levels of loneliness (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2022). For example, Bauer and colleagues (2004) found that Czech students, supported by strong family and friendship networks characteristic of their cultural context, were better protected against loneliness compared to Canadian students. Conversely, other research has revealed the opposite trend. For instance, Lykes and Kimmelmeier (2014) found that individuals from more collectivistic cultures reported higher levels of loneliness. Given that collectivistic cultures place a high value on interpersonal connections, the loss of these ties may be particularly distressing, thereby intensifying feelings of loneliness (Lykes & Kimmelmeier, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2004).

However, it is important to acknowledge that these findings may partly reflect cultural differences in the reporting of loneliness rather than true differences in loneliness experiences. In some collectivistic cultures, admitting to feelings of loneliness may be socially undesirable, potentially leading to underreporting. This highlights the need to consider not only cultural values such as collectivism and individualism but also other sociocultural factors that may influence both the experience and expression of loneliness.

Furthermore, interpreting loneliness experiences solely through the collectivistic/individualistic cultural framework fails to sufficiently account for individual differences within a given culture. For example, in a study conducted with Turkish university students, 60.2% reported experiencing loneliness during their transition to university life (Özdemir & Tuncay, 2008). While Turkish culture is traditionally characterized by strong norms of interdependence, this finding suggests that cultural norms alone may not uniformly protect individuals from loneliness. Instead, it may reflect individual differences in the extent to which people internalize and prioritize interdependent relationships. In particular, individuals who place greater importance on close interpersonal bonds may experience heightened loneliness when they encounter situations, such as moving away from family support systems, that challenge their cultural expectations of social connectedness. This individual-level variability may partly explain the mixed findings regarding loneliness levels across collectivistic and individualistic cultures. In other words, prior research may have overlooked the diverse ways individuals internalize and respond to cultural norms.

In sum, loneliness is a complex and context-dependent psychological experience, shaped not only by individual traits or levels of social interaction but also by subjective interpretations of social expectations and norms. This complexity highlights the importance of considering how deviations from perceived social norms—rather than mere social absence—may play a critical role in the development of loneliness, a topic further explored in the following section.

2. Norm Deviation and Loneliness

Cultural norms regarding social relationships (e.g., the expected frequency of visiting one's parents) emerge from shared beliefs and values within social groups (Li & Van den Steen, 2021; Nyborg et al., 2016). They play a crucial role in understanding loneliness because they influence how individuals navigate and assess their social relationships (Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2021; Gampe & Daum, 2018), behaviors (Heu, 2023; Brauer & Chaurand, 2010), and evaluations of themselves (Heu, 2023;

Brauer & Chaurand, 2010). For example, in cultures with more stringent norms regarding familial visits, the frequency of visiting one's parents once a week may be perceived as either insufficient or excessive (Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2021). This is because individuals may experience greater expectations from interpersonal relationships or heightened sensitivity to deviations from established relationship norms (Kinias et al., 2014; Mooji, 2022; Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2021; Schermer et al., 2023). Throughout the paper, the influence of norm deviation on loneliness and possible mechanisms will be discussed.

Heu and colleagues (2021) assert that there are two types of norms, namely, culture-level norms and individual-level norms. Culture-level norms usually "describe more objective social realities and are what is done by, or should be done according to, most cultural members". On the contrary, individual-level norms refer to "internalized norms or individual perceptions of shared norms, which may or may not reflect social realities" (Heu et al., 2021, p. 65). Culture-level norms are associated with a greater risk of loneliness compared to individual-level norms (Heu et al., 2021). However, individual differences should not be overlooked, even if a culture has restrictive norms and shows high loneliness on a cultural level, this does not imply that every individual in this culture will show high loneliness (Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2021). Thus, both cultural and individual-level norms should be considered.

Not everyone adheres to social norms. Norm adherence depends on the content of the norm and who follows it (Heu, 2023). While collectivist cultures have shown to adhere more to behavioral norms, individualist cultures show higher adherence to emotional norms (Vishkin et al., 2023), highlighting how cultural orientation shapes norm adherence. Additionally, reaction to norm violations vary across cultures, indicating cultural norms are perceived differently depending on cultural context (Stamkou et al., 2019; Mu et al., 2015). Past research has shown that individuals who show higher identification to a culture or in-group are more likely to conform to the group's norms and self-stereotype themselves in line with them (Jetten et al., 2006; Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). These studies demonstrate that how people interpret and respond to social norms varies depending on both the type of norm - such as emotional versus behavioral - and individual factors like the degree of identification with one's culture.

The importance of differentiating cultural and individual level norms have been discussed, along with how norm adherence depends on one's culture and identification with it. Although research examining the association of these concepts with loneliness is limited, there have been efforts to explore this connection. Heu (2023) proposed the framework of Norm Deviations and Loneliness (NoDeL), suggesting that deviating from normative standards may lead to loneliness by triggering negative psychological states, such as feelings of unfulfilled relational needs. In line with this, qualitative studies observing loneliness experiences report that participants often felt lonely when they failed to meet normative expectations (Heu et al., 2021; Hemberg et al., 2022; Nielsen, Nielsen, & Lasgaard, 2024; Kirwan et al., 2023). Previous research has also shown that following culturally appropriate patterns of emotions contributes to psychological well-being, emphasizing the importance of cultural fit for mental health (De Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2015). Additionally, it is well established that normative standards and cultural values shape social expectations (Luhmann, Buecker, & Rüsberg, 2023) and that discrepancies between expectations and reality contribute to loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Lee 2024; Van Staden & Coetzee, 2010; Heinrich & Gullne, 2006). By extension, cultural mismatch - deviating from culturally expected norms - may lead to negative psychological outcomes such as loneliness, as supported by qualitative findings on norm deviation and loneliness.

To elaborate on this hypothesis, it is important to consider two key components: social support and basic psychological needs. As we will examine further, social support plays a critical role in fulfilling these basic needs and when such support is lacking - often as result of cultural mismatch - these needs may go unmet. This suggests that the deprivation of frustration of basic psychological needs contributes to the experience of loneliness.

3.1 Social Support

Social support is defined as the perceived and actual availability of social resources provided by people who we value or rely on (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010; Sarason et al., 1983) and affects loneliness. Its influence is so profound that deprivation of a supportive social network is categorized into a unique form of loneliness, termed social loneliness (Van Staden & Coetzee, 2010). Several studies have observed that social support alleviates loneliness (Vasileiou et al., 2019; Bauer & Rokach, 2004; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2019; Spek, 2024). A study examining the relationship between mortality rate and loneliness in different countries found that although Mexico and South Korea were both categorized as collectivist countries, South Korea showed a higher mortality rate (Park & Zhu, 2024). Researchers discussed this finding by emphasizing social support may have played a critical role. Mexico showed a lower socio-economic status compared to South Korea. "Due to scarcity of resources, people with lower SES must depend on others for survival", leading to more engagement in social networks and exchange of prosocial behaviors (Park & Zhu, 2024, p. 799). Past research has shown that higher household income was associated with less social contact and more time alone (Bianchi & Vohs, 2016), supporting the researchers' claim. Therefore, the researchers concluded that while both Mexicans and Koreans experienced high levels of loneliness, strong social support among Mexicans acted as a protective factor against mortality, whereas Koreans, despite similar loneliness levels, showed higher mortality rates. These findings highlight the influence of social support, emphasizing its role in not only buffering loneliness, but meeting individual's basic psychological

needs. To further elaborate on our hypothesis, researchers focused on two interrelated components, social support and basic psychological needs, which proposes that social support facilitates the satisfaction of those needs. If they are unmet, individuals are more likely to experience loneliness.

However, the benefits of social support appear to manifest selectively under certain circumstances. A study observing loneliness and exchange of social support among Dutch and Spanish adults showed contradictory results regarding the aftermath of instrumental social support (Rodrigues, Gierveld, & Buz, 2014). For Spanish adults, who place greater emphasis on interdependence, instrumental social support significantly mitigated loneliness. This is likely because of their stronger emphasis on family relationships, leading to expectations of receiving support from family members. When these expectations were unmet, it resulted in heightened feelings of loneliness. In line with these results, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2019) showed higher interdependence leads to believing social ties are more desirable; thus reducing loneliness when receiving social support.

However, the opposite pattern was observed among the Dutch sample. Dutch adults, who value independence more highly, perceived instrumental social support as undermining their independence, which negatively influenced their loneliness. Instead, emotional social support was shown to be more effective in addressing loneliness within this sample (Rodrigues, Gierveld, & Buz, 2014). Related to this, past research revealed a negative relationship between expectation of emotional support from family in times of need and loneliness, which was stronger among individualistic countries (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2022). Individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in the various types of social norms they prioritize, in which individualistic cultures emphasize emotional norms, whereas collectivistic cultures underscores behavioral norms (Vishkin et al., 2023). As a result, emotional support tends to have greater influence in impacting individualistic cultures, as emotional expressions are deemed more culturally relevant. In contrast, collectivistic cultures place greater value on instrumental support, aligning with their emphasis on observable and socially visible behaviors. Summarizing the findings from Taniguchi and Kaufman (2019, 2022), Rodrigues et al. (2014) and Park and Zhu (2024), people from individualist cultures, which place greater value on emotional norms, tend to benefit more from emotional social support, whereas those from collectivist cultures, where behavioral norms are prioritized, find instrumental social support more effective. Thus, the aftermath of social support is shaped by an individual's cultural norms and whether the support aligns with those norms.

A probable explanation for the differing outcomes of social support lies in the adverse effects of cultural norm deviation. The loneliness felt by the participants in Rodrigues and colleagues' study (2014) can be attributed to a mismatch between normative expectations of social support and the support they perceived as instrumental social support had different consequences on loneliness depending on cultural orientation: Dutch adults, who valued independence, experienced greater loneliness when receiving instrumental support, as they perceived it as undermining their autonomy. This demonstrates how the method in which social support is given significantly shapes its psychological outcomes. For social support to be effective, it must align with the recipient's cultural expectations. Lin and Kingminghae (2014) showed social support from peers with the same nationality had stronger effects alleviating loneliness among international students compared to support from those with different nationalities. Co-national ties mitigated loneliness when students perceived a stronger cohesive feeling with their fellow colleagues. These findings support our argument that cultural adherence influences the experience of loneliness, emphasizing the importance of "who" provides social support. Therefore, both the manner and the source of social support can either mitigate or exacerbate its impact.

Building on this, it is important to consider which psychological processes are activated by the discrepancy between expected and perceived social support, and how these processes contribute to influencing the experience of loneliness. Self-determination theory may offer an explanation for this phenomenon.

3.2 Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of attainment of basic psychological needs for personality development and behavioral self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The three basic psychological needs forming the basis of self-determination theory are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2012). Basic psychological needs frustration refers to when an individual's basic psychological needs are not satisfied and contributes to mental ill-being (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013; Ferrand & Martinent, 2021). The influence of basic psychological need frustration is universal (Chen et al., 2014) and it is connected with loneliness. Past research has shown basic psychological needs frustration is associated with higher levels of loneliness (Karababa & Tayli, 2020; Chen et al., 2014; Saricali & Guler, 2022). Additionally, individuals reporting higher needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence were more likely to report loneliness when these needs were unsatisfied (Lenny, Doleck, & Bazalais, 2019).

Social context affects how the basic psychological needs are satisfied, one of them being the presence of social support. Krabbenborg and colleagues (2017) demonstrated homeless young adults who perceived higher social support reported higher autonomy, relatedness, and competence, which eventually lead to better quality of life. Other studies have also shown social support fostered basic psychological needs (Ryan & Solky, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; King, Haw, & Wang, 2024).

Culture also influences the satisfaction of these needs. Heu and colleagues (2021) proposed the culture-loneliness framework

asserting “loneliness can thrive whether cultural norms about social relationships are lenient or restrictive”. Lenient norms encapsulates a broader range of acceptable social behaviors and relationships, which allow individuals greater autonomy towards how they connect with others (e.g., freedom in maintaining social ties). However, restrictive norms enforce more rigid expectations in how relationships are created and maintained, which may limit one’s personal choice by prioritizing obligations (e.g., family, community). Typically, individuals seek agency and relatedness but how these are satisfied depends on the cultural environment (Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2021). A moderate amount of restrictiveness fosters both agency and relatedness, eventually preventing excessive isolation of any type. People with lower levels of perceived autonomy who live in highly restrictive cultures tend to experience greater loneliness, which is an effect that connects to broader evidence suggesting that individuals in more restrictive countries report higher levels of loneliness (Heu et al., 2021; Mooji, 2022).

The impact of cultural restrictiveness can also be understood through the concept of value internalization. According to the self-determination theory, it is not the value themselves, but the degree to which they are internalized that predicts well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Internalizing the satisfaction of basic psychological needs fosters self-regard, self-regulation, vitality, and feelings of connectedness (Ryan & Solky, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2010). However, the ease of internalization varies by cultural orientation. People in vertical societies, which are characterized by hierarchy and control, experience greater difficulty internalizing autonomy values compared to those in horizontal societies (Deci & Ryan, 2012), and as noted earlier, vertical societies report higher levels of loneliness (Goh et al., 2023). Building on these findings, it is proposed that cultures with stricter attitudes toward norm deviations may hinder the internalization of basic psychological needs, thereby contributing to the elevated loneliness observed in these environments.

A research in organizational psychology has demonstrated that people with higher person-organization fit report higher levels of autonomy, relatedness, and competence need satisfactions (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). Researchers explain that the alignment between employees’ and organizations’ values enables organizations to provide the resources needed for employees to satisfy their psychological needs. Expanding on this study, it is proposed that individuals’ alignment with cultural norms and psychological needs shape the experience of loneliness. As previously discussed, the adherence to culturally endorsed values play a crucial role in meeting basic psychological needs, and aligning with these cultural values and norms has been consistently shown to mitigate loneliness. Therefore, when individuals experience norm deviation, it is likely to lead to need frustration, ultimately resulting in greater loneliness.

The positive association between need satisfaction and psychological well-being is universal. Deci and Ryan’s study (2012) demonstrated autonomy-supportive contexts satisfy autonomy needs, leading to higher well-being regardless of cultural orientation. Other research has shown need-supportive teaching was positively associated with well-being regardless of cultural, economical, and political contexts (King, Haw, & Wang, 2024). Therefore, loneliness research should focus on whether the social support provided meets the culturally drawn expectations of the individuals. Then, researchers should observe how the mismatch or concordance between perceived and expected social support exacerbates or fosters self-determination. We emphasize cultural research on loneliness should not focus on which culture experiences higher loneliness, rather they should investigate the impact of norm deviation on loneliness research along with the moderating and/or mediating effects of social support and self-determination.

Discussion

Recent research on loneliness has been overly focused on determining which culture experiences more loneliness. This review aimed to propose that loneliness derives from unmet satisfaction of basic psychological needs induced by norm deviation and mismatch of expected and received social support, which have been supported by the studies presented throughout the literature.

Each culture has different cultural and social norms (Li & Van den Steen, 2021; Nyborg et al., 2016) and the extent to which individuals adhere to these influences their psychology including loneliness experiences (Heu et al., 2021; Hemberg et al., 2022; Nielsen, Nielsen, & Lasgaard, 2024; Kirwan et al., 2023; De Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2015). Individualistic cultures show higher adherence to emotional norms while collectivistic cultures show more adherence to behavioral norms (Vishkin et al., 2023). Additionally, individuals conform to a group’s social norm the more they identify with the culture or in-group (Jetten et al., 2006; Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). These results support that adhering to a cultural norm depends on the interaction between the individual and the culture.

To better understand the relationship between norm deviation and loneliness, it is important to examine how social support and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs influence loneliness. Past research has shown that emotional support exerts a greater influence in individualistic cultures, whereas instrumental support has a stronger impact in collectivistic cultures (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2014; Park & Zhu, 2024). These findings align with those of Vishkin et al. (2023), who reported that individuals from individualistic cultures tend to adhere more to emotional norms, while those from collectivistic cultures adhere more to behavioral norms. Therefore, when the type of social support aligns with an individual’s culturally

influenced needs, it tends to be more effective in alleviating loneliness.

When individuals do not deviate from cultural norms and the social support they receive aligns with what they expected, their basic psychological needs may be better satisfied, which in turn can alleviate loneliness. Although there is limited research directly examining the influence of norm deviation and mismatches between expected and received social support on loneliness, studies in organizational psychology have shown that individuals with higher person–organization fit report greater satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). Furthermore, past research has demonstrated that frustration of basic psychological needs is associated with higher levels of loneliness (Karababa & Tayli, 2020; Chen et al., 2014; Saricali & Guler, 2022). Building on these findings, it can be proposed that norm deviation and unmet social support contribute to the frustration of basic psychological needs, which in turn leads to increased loneliness.

Conclusion

While this paper highlights the impact of norm deviation, basic psychological needs, and social support on loneliness, further investigation is necessary to understand how these findings can translate into practical, individualized interventions. For instance, even if norm deviation is shown to exacerbate loneliness, additional research is needed to determine how norm deviation can be addressed or adjusted to develop interventions aimed at alleviating loneliness. This paper relies heavily on theoretical frameworks that connect cultural norms, self-determination theory, and loneliness, which may limit the generalizability of its claims. To confirm the validity of the hypotheses presented throughout the literature, future studies must comprehensively examine the various factors influencing norm deviation (e.g., social support) and their interplay. More specifically, research should first examine the norms that exist within each culture and the consequences of norm deviation through qualitative studies, such as interviews. Later, they should empirically test these through quantitative studies, like surveys. This allows researchers to quantify the relationship between the extent of norm deviation and loneliness experiences. Such research will be critical for designing holistic approaches that not only enhance theoretical understanding but also ensure practical applicability in addressing loneliness.

Further research should investigate the psychological mechanism behind loneliness and an effective way to do so is using qualitative studies. To mention some examples, papers written by Heu et al. (2021), Hemberg et al. (2022), and Kirwan et al. (2023) applied qualitative research methods to collect data about individuals' loneliness experience. For research examining subjective emotional experiences such as loneliness, qualitative methods can offer deep insights—especially when the relationships between variables, such as the link between norm deviation and loneliness, remain ambiguous. Questionnaires tend to not sufficiently consider aspects of different cultures as they are centered to Western cultures (Heu et al., 2021). Therefore, these surveys fail to reflect the true experiences of people with non-Western backgrounds as their responses are limited to Western-based perspectives. However, qualitative research helps compensate for these limitations by studying the latent aspects of the unexplored cultures and capturing the personal experiences with norm deviation more precisely. For instance, interviews allow researchers to identify which cultural norms exist and what are the social and psychological consequences arising when deviating from them. These cannot be observed when using quantitative methods alone because individuals cannot share their own experiences. Therefore, relying on qualitative study methods, such as interviews, to reveal how norm deviation instigates loneliness from a cross-cultural perspective may provide meaningful insights on how to approach this issue.

Although qualitative studies offer valuable insights, they also present certain limitations. These research methods' findings are difficult to generalize due to typically smaller sample sizes compared to quantitative research. Consequently, achieving statistically significant conclusions can be more challenging. Therefore, qualitative research should be used to establish a foundational framework for understanding cultural norm deviation and loneliness, and then be reinforced and tested through quantitative methods which cover up these drawbacks.

In addition to these methodological considerations, this literature review itself has certain limitations. First, there is a lack of empirical research directly examining the relationship between norm deviation and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, particularly in the context of loneliness. As a result, this literature review had to draw upon adjacent fields, such as organizational psychology, to infer these connections (e.g., research on person–organization fit and need satisfaction). While these studies provide a useful foundation, they may not fully capture the cultural or interpersonal nuances specific to norm deviation in social or cross-cultural contexts. This reliance on indirect evidence limits the specificity and applicability of the conclusions drawn in the review.

Moreover, while this review emphasizes the role of norm deviation in loneliness and critiques the dominant focus on the individualism–collectivism paradigm, it does not account for other contributing factors. Important variables such as social structure of a culture, age of an individual, and the influence of social media may also play significant roles in shaping experiences of loneliness and should be considered in future investigations.

Although these limitations exist, this paper contributes to research on loneliness from a cross-cultural perspective by proposing a new approach. It draws on a range of supporting studies that vary in methodology (qualitative and quantitative) and sample background. Additionally, it introduces several psychological theories, such as self-determination theory and the norm

deviation and loneliness framework, effectively connecting past knowledge with this new perspective. This framework is especially relevant in today's increasingly multicultural world. As societies become more culturally diverse, it becomes less feasible to categorize individuals strictly as collectivist or individualist when designing interventions for loneliness. Therefore, this proposed framework may offer a more nuanced and flexible approach for addressing loneliness across diverse cultural contexts.

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