

LONELINESS AND RELATED FACTORS AMONG VOCATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Keywords: university students, loneliness levels, social support

Abstract: In this study, we aimed to determine the factors affecting the loneliness levels of university students studying at vocational schools and to determine the relationship between the loneliness and social support. The data of this cross-sectional study were collected from students studying at a vocational school of a university in Turkey. Data were collected with the "Data Registration Form", "UCLA Loneliness Scale", and "Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support". As a result of this study a high level of loneliness was determined. This study revealed that the gender, the place of residence, the status of receiving scholarships/loans and the education level of mothers significantly affected loneliness perception levels of the students. Another result of this study was that there was no significant relationship between the total score and subscale scores of the multidimensional perceived social support scale and perception of loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social by nature. The feelings of inadequacy in social relations and individually unsatisfactory social lives can affect lives at different levels, causing isolation from society and feeling lonely.(1,2) Loneliness, which may occur when interpersonal relationships do not satisfy social and personal needs and cause a decrease in terms of social rewards (3,4), is a feeling arising from the difference between the individual's current social relationships and the relationship he/she expects for.(1,5) That is, loneliness is an undesirable experience accompanied by feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness and feeling different from others.(1,2)

Although loneliness can be experienced in every period of life, it is more commonly encountered when important changes occur in life. University is a period in which important changes are experienced in the lives of individuals. During this period, individuals try to cope with the problems brought by university life as well as gaining identity and independence. The social and economic problems experienced can negatively affect the social development of individuals. One of the problems that university students face in this period is loneliness.(3-6)

Social support resources and perceived social support levels are of great importance in solving and preventing loneliness-related problems. The concept of social support includes information support, financial support, socialization and a sense of belonging to a group when faced with a problem. Social support is protective against loneliness, anxiety, and stress.(1,7,8) As a matter of fact, it is accepted that the social support that individuals receive to overcome the problems they feel or experience in terms of both their social and psychological health has a positive effect on the lives of individuals.(9)

This study can be a guide in terms of identifying the factors affecting the loneliness levels of university students at vocational schools and revealing solutions to the problems by

determining the relationship between loneliness levels and social support. Additionally, suggesting solutions to the identified problems can positively affect the both academic and the mental health of the students.

AIM

In this study, we aimed to determine the factors affecting the loneliness levels of university students studying at vocational schools and to determine the relationship between the loneliness and social support.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data of this cross-sectional study were collected from students studying at a vocational school of a university in Turkey. The universe consists of 528 students studying in four different programs (Business Management, Architectural Restoration, Marketing, Tourism and Hotel Management). In this study, we aimed to reach the entire universe without making sample selection. The data were obtained from 483 students and the rate of participation was 91.5%.

Data were collected with the "Data Registration Form", "UCLA Loneliness Scale", and "Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support". The data registration form, which was created by the researchers using the literature, includes questions to determine the individual, socio-demographic, and family characteristics of the students. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale) is a scale used to evaluate individuals' subjective feelings of loneliness. This scale, which was developed by Russell et al. (10) and adapted to Turkish by conducting a validity and reliability study by Demir (11), is a four-point Likert-type scale. There are 20 items in the scale containing 10 positive and 10 negative statements. The lowest score to be taken from the scale is 20, while the highest score is 80. The score obtained from this

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Article received on 12.07.2021 and accepted for publication on 02.12.2021

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one-dimensional scale is accepted as an indication of the intensity of loneliness. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), developed by Zimet et al. (13) and translated into Turkish by testing validity and reliability by Eker et al. (13,14), consists of 12 items and is in seven-point Likert type. It includes three groups regarding the source of social support and the questions of each group consist of 4 items. There are three groups regarding the source of support, each consisting of four items. These are family (items 3, 4, 8, 11), friends (items 6, 7, 9, 12) and significant others (teacher, lover, relative, etc.), (items 1, 2, 5, 10). A high score on the scale indicates high perceived social support.

Data were analysed using SPSS 24.0 statistical package programme. For descriptive findings, categorical variables were expressed as numbers and percentages, while continuous variables were presented as mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values. In order to test the significance of the effect of independent variables in statistical analysis, the Independent Samples T-Test, One-Way ANOVA analysis of variance in parametric conditions and Kruskal Wallis analysis of variance in non-parametric conditions were used. When a significant difference was found between the analysis of variance and the group means, Bonferroni and Tamhane's T2 tests, which are among the post hoc analysis methods, were used to determine the direction of the difference. Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between the level of social support perceived by students and the level of loneliness. In statistical interpretations, the level of significance was accepted as $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

The results regarding the comparison of the loneliness levels in terms of individual and socio-demographic characteristics are presented in table no. 1.

Table no. 1. Comparison of students' loneliness levels in terms of individual and socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristics (n=483)		n (%)	UCLA Loneliness Score Mean±SD	p
Age	≤20	231 (47.8)	54.44±5.09	0.412
	≥21	252 (52.2)	54.03±5.81	
Gender	Female	262 (54.2)	54.94±5.11	0.002*
	Male	221 (45.8)	53.39±5.78	
Grade	1 st grade	175 (36.2)	54.39±5.31	0.615
	2 nd grade	308 (63.8)	54.13±5.57	
Place of residence	With family	63 (13.0)	52.27±5.87	0.001*
	With friends	156 (32.3)	53.66±5.89	
	Alone	60 (12.4)	55.02±4.85	
	Dormitory	204 (42.2)	55.03±5.00	
Place of childhood	City	225 (46.6)	54.32±5.43	0.402
	Town	199 (41.2)	53.90±5.71	
	Village	59 (12.2)	54.97±4.77	
Perception of income	My income does not cover my expenses	236 (48.9)	54.54±5.68	0.245
	My income covers my expenses	226 (46.8)	54.01±5.28	
	My income is more than my expenses	21 (4.3)	53.00±5.12	
Scholarship	No	216 (44.7)	54.72±5.19	0.028*
	Yes	267 (55.3)	53.62±5.75	
Perception of health	Well/ very well	342 (70.8)	54.06±5.31	0.367
	Moderate	124 (25.7)	54.81±5.72	
	Bad / very bad	17 (3.5)	53.41±6.84	
Any diagnosed disease	No	399 (82.6)	54.87±5.22	0.238
	Yes	84 (17.4)	54.09±5.52	

* $p < 0.05$

As seen in table no. 1, the mean loneliness score of the students was 54.2 ± 5.5 , which can be interpreted as a high level of loneliness perceptions among students. According to the data, the loneliness perception levels of female students were significantly higher than those of male students, the loneliness perception levels of students living alone or in the dormitory were significantly higher than those staying with their families, and the loneliness perception levels of students who do not receive scholarship or loan support were significantly higher than those who receive scholarship or loan support. On the other hand, the loneliness perception levels of the students did not differ significantly in terms of age, grade, place of childhood, income, health status perception, and any diagnosed illness.

The results of the comparison of the loneliness levels of the students in terms of familial characteristics are presented in table no. 2.

Table no. 2. Comparison of students' loneliness levels in terms of familial characteristics

Characteristics (n=483)		n (%)	UCLA Loneliness Score Mean±SD	p*
Father's education level	Primary school and below	147 (30.4)	53.86±4.99	0.727
	Middle school	137 (28.4)	54.28±5.71	
	High school	137 (28.4)	54.31±5.70	
	University	62 (12.8)	54.77±5.60	
Mother's education level	Primary school and below	244 (50.5)	55.60±5.32	0.010*
	Middle school	133 (27.5)	54.42±5.57	
	High school	83 (17.2)	54.48±4.85	
	University	23 (4.8)	52.47±5.64	
Father's employment status	Unemployed	37 (7.7)	55.19±6.18	0.274
	Worker	107 (22.2)	53.48±5.13	
	Public officer	44 (9.1)	54.73±6.28	
	Self-employed	155 (32.1)	54.68±4.95	
	Retired	140 (29.0)	53.89±5.79	
Mother's employment status	Unemployed	356 (73.7)	54.51±5.42	0.227
	Worker	61 (12.6)	53.93±5.59	
	Public officer	10 (2.1)	52.10±4.93	
	Self-employed	18 (3.7)	51.83±4.98	
	Retired	38 (7.9)	52.47±5.59	
Perception of family economic status	Rich/very rich	153 (31.7)	53.78±5.32	0.419
	Moderate	287 (59.4)	54.38±5.44	
	Poor/ very poor	43 (8.9)	54.81±6.19	
Parents' marital status	Together	404 (83.6)	54.31±5.25	0.446
	Divorced/ died	79 (16.4)	79±53.80	
Family type	Nuclear family	361 (74.7)	54.24±5.54	0.927
	Extended family	122 (25.3)	54.19±5.29	
Father's attitude	Indifferent	48 (9.9)	55.06±5.76	0.400
	Protective	257 (53.2)	54.41±5.25	
	Democratic	92 (19.0)	53.95±5.47	
	Authoritarian	86 (17.8)	53.51±5.94	
Mother's attitude	Indifferent	10 (2.1)	51.90±4.40	0.202
	Protective	329 (68.1)	54.55±5.38	
	Democratic	75 (15.5)	53.57±5.30	
	Authoritarian	69 (14.3)	53.72±6.13	
Siblings	Yes	432 (89.4)	54.21±5.48	0.821
	No	51 (10.6)	54.39±5.46	

* $p < 0.05$

When the findings in table no. 2 are examined, the loneliness perception levels of the students whose mother's education is primary school or below was significantly higher than those whose mothers have a university level education. However, it was determined father and mother's employment status, father's education level, family's economic status, parents' being together, family type, presence of siblings, and parents' attitudes towards the child did not significantly affect the loneliness perception levels of the students.

The results regarding the relationship between multidimensional perceived social support and the level of loneliness are presented in table no. 3.

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Table no. 3. The relationship between multidimensional perceived social support and loneliness level

Variable	UCLA Loneliness Score	Family	Friends	Significant others	Mean±SD	Min. – Max.
UCLA Loneliness Score	-				54.23±5.47	35-66
Social support of family	.181	-			22.72±5.75	4-28
Social support of friends	.217	.624	-		21.58±6.24	4-28
Social support of significant others	.710	.499	.447	-	20.18±7.42	4-28
Total social support	.430	.061	.056	-.017	64.48±16.00	12-84

According to the findings given in table no. 3, no significant relationship was found between the total score and subscale scores of the multidimensional perceived social support scale and the loneliness perception level of the students.

DISCUSSIONS

As a result of this study, which aims to determine the factors affecting the loneliness level of university students studying at vocational schools and to determine the relationship between the loneliness levels and social support, a high level of loneliness was determined. Similar results were obtained in the study of Eskin (15) with high school students which revealed that 65% of the students felt lonely. In the study carried out by Bulvar (16) on university students, a high level of loneliness was found in 15.5% of the sample. Similarly, Odacı (17) found that 48.8% of university students experienced loneliness. Similar results obtained in different studies can be interpreted as an indication that many university students experience loneliness despite the fact that the university environment is quite suitable for developing close relationships and friendships.

This study revealed that the gender, the place of residence, the status of receiving scholarships/loans and the education level of mothers significantly affected loneliness perception levels of the students. When the relevant literature is examined, whether the loneliness levels differ significantly by gender is not certain. While some research suggested that loneliness levels differed significantly according to gender (18,19,20), some others showed that gender did not significantly affect loneliness levels.(16,21,22,23) The difference in the results of the research can be explained by the difference in the samples. Unlike the results of our study, Buluş (16) concluded that the loneliness levels of university students did not differ significantly in terms of the places of residence.

Another result of this study was that there was no significant relationship between the total score and subscale scores of the multidimensional perceived social support scale and perception of loneliness. In the study conducted by Oğuz and Kalkan (24), there was a negative and significant relationship, albeit low, between the level of loneliness experienced by teachers in their professional life and the social support they perceived. The difference in the research results can be explained by the difference between the samples.

CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, we identified that university students had a high level of loneliness perceptions. Based on this result, increasing the social support provided to university students can contribute to reduce or eliminate the feelings of loneliness. In addition, students' participation in activities aiming to improve their social relations and skills can also help to overcome those

feelings. Students can strengthen their social relations and skills through participating in activities in societies, clubs, festivals, excursions, and various sporting events. Additionally, students' gender, place of residence, scholarship/loan status, and education level of mothers affected their loneliness perception levels. Accordingly, it can be suggested to make positive discrimination for female students in order to solve the psycho-social problems in eliminating the sense of loneliness. Socio-economic support can be provided to solve the social problems that affect the perception of loneliness to students who cannot find scholarships/loans or stay alone/dormitory. Similar studies may be conducted with students from different universities and faculties. In addition, further qualitative studies may be conducted for in-depth examination of the reasons for the loneliness levels of university students.

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