

Emotional Intelligence and Loneliness Among University Students: A Systematic Review of Psychological and Social Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is a growing concern among university students and is closely linked to a range of negative mental health outcomes. In recent years, emotional intelligence (EI), the ability to recognise, understand, and manage emotions, has been increasingly discussed as a potential protective factor. However, the ways in which EI helps to reduce feelings of loneliness are not yet clearly understood, with existing findings spread across different areas of research. This systematic review brings together current evidence on the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness among university students, with a particular focus on the psychological and social processes that may explain this link. A structured search of peer-reviewed studies was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. The selected studies were analysed to examine both direct associations and indirect pathways, such as the role of social support, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and emotional regulation. Overall, the findings suggest that higher levels of emotional intelligence are consistently associated with lower levels of loneliness. This relationship appears to be shaped by several interconnected factors, particularly students' ability to regulate emotions, build supportive relationships, and develop a stronger sense of belonging within their academic environment. At the same time, the review highlights some inconsistencies in how these constructs are measured and points to a need for more integrative and longitudinal research.

Taken together, this review provides a clearer understanding of how emotional intelligence may help buffer against loneliness in university settings. It also offers useful insights for educators and institutions looking to design interventions that support students' emotional and social well-being.

Keywords:

Emotional Intelligence; Loneliness; University Students; Social Support; Emotional Regulation; Student Well-being; Higher Education; Systematic Review

Introduction

Loneliness has emerged as a growing concern among university students worldwide and is increasingly recognised as an important issue affecting student well-being and academic success. Although university life is often portrayed as a period of social exploration and personal growth, many students experience feelings of social isolation and emotional disconnection during their transition into higher education [1,2]. Research has consistently linked loneliness with a range of adverse outcomes, including depression, anxiety, reduced life satisfaction, poorer academic adjustment, and lower psychological well-being [1–3]. The transition to university frequently involves leaving established social networks, adapting to unfamiliar environments, and developing new interpersonal relationships, all of which may increase students' vulnerability to loneliness [3].

Recent technological and societal changes have further complicated this issue. The increasing use of digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence-driven communication tools has transformed how students interact and maintain social relationships. While these technologies provide new opportunities for connection, scholars have also raised concerns that excessive reliance on digitally mediated communication may reduce meaningful face-to-face interaction and contribute to feelings of social disconnection [4]. As universities continue to adopt increasingly technology-mediated learning environments, understanding the factors that protect students against loneliness has become an important area of research.

One factor that has received growing attention is emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively in oneself and others [5]. Over the past two decades, EI has been associated with a variety of positive psychological and social outcomes, including stronger interpersonal relationships, greater emotional well-being, improved coping abilities, and better psychological adjustment [6,7]. Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are generally more capable of managing emotional challenges, interpreting social cues, and maintaining positive social interactions, suggesting that EI may serve as an important protective factor against loneliness.

Existing studies generally report a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness, indicating that students with stronger emotional competencies tend to experience lower levels of loneliness [6]. However, the mechanisms underlying this relationship remain insufficiently understood. Much of the existing literature focuses primarily on direct associations between EI and loneliness, providing limited insight into the psychological and social processes through which emotional intelligence may influence feelings of social connectedness. Emerging evidence suggests that factors such as emotional regulation, self-esteem, perceived social support, interpersonal competence, and sense of belonging may play important mediating roles in this relationship [8,9]. Nevertheless, these findings remain dispersed across different areas of research and have not been systematically synthesised.

Furthermore, increasing concerns regarding student mental health have heightened the need to identify protective factors that support emotional and social well-being in higher education. Understanding how emotional intelligence may reduce loneliness has practical implications for student support services, counselling interventions, and university well-being initiatives. A clearer understanding of the mechanisms linking EI and loneliness may help institutions develop more targeted strategies for promoting student resilience, social integration, and psychological health.

Therefore, this study systematically reviews existing research on emotional intelligence and loneliness among university students. Specifically, the review examines both the direct relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness and the psychological and social mechanisms that may explain this association. By synthesising current evidence, the review seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional intelligence contributes to students' social and emotional well-being and to identify directions for future research and intervention development.

1.1 Research Questions

This review is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness among university students?
2. What psychological mechanisms explain the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness?
3. What social mechanisms explain the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness?
4. What methodological trends, limitations, and research gaps exist within the current literature?

2. Methodology

2.1 Review Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology to synthesise existing evidence on the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and loneliness among university students. A systematic review was considered appropriate because it enables the comprehensive identification, evaluation, and synthesis of empirical research in a transparent and replicable manner [10]. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure methodological rigour and reporting transparency [11].

The review specifically focused on studies examining the association between emotional intelligence and loneliness, as well as the psychological and social mechanisms that may explain this relationship. Particular attention was given to factors such as emotional regulation, self-esteem, social support, sense of belonging, and interpersonal competence.

2.2 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of peer-reviewed research in psychology, education, mental health, and social sciences.

The search included studies published between January 2010 and December 2025. This period was selected to capture contemporary research on emotional intelligence and student well-being within higher education contexts.

The search strategy combined keywords related to emotional intelligence and loneliness using Boolean operators. The search terms included:

("emotional intelligence" OR "emotional competence")

AND

("loneliness" OR "social isolation" OR "social connectedness")

AND

("university students" OR "college students" OR "higher education students")

Additional manual searches were conducted through reference lists of relevant articles to identify studies not captured through the database search.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and consistency, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

1. Examined emotional intelligence as a primary variable.
2. Investigated loneliness, social isolation, or related constructs.
3. Focused on university or higher education student populations.
4. Employed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research designs.
5. Were published in peer-reviewed journals.
6. Were written in English.
7. Were published between 2010 and 2025.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused on school-aged children or non-student populations.
2. Examined emotional intelligence without addressing loneliness or social well-being.
3. Were conference proceedings, dissertations, editorials, or book reviews.
4. Lacked sufficient methodological information.
5. Did not provide empirical findings relevant to the review objectives.

2.4 Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the four stages recommended by the PRISMA framework: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion [11].

Initially, all records identified through database searches were imported into a reference management system and duplicate records were removed. The remaining studies were screened based on titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the review objectives.

Studies meeting the initial criteria proceeded to full-text review. During the eligibility stage, articles were assessed against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only studies directly examining emotional intelligence and loneliness among university students were retained for the final review.

The complete selection process was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram.

2.5 Data Extraction

A structured data extraction form was developed to ensure consistency across studies. Information extracted included:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Country or study context
- Research design
- Sample size and participant characteristics
- Emotional intelligence framework or measurement instrument
- Loneliness measurement instrument
- Psychological and social variables examined
- Key findings
- Study limitations

The extracted data facilitated comparison across studies and supported the identification of recurring themes and mechanisms.

2.6 Data Analysis

The selected studies were analysed using thematic synthesis [12]. This approach enabled findings from diverse methodological traditions to be integrated systematically.

The analysis focused on three major areas:

1. Direct relationships between emotional intelligence and loneliness.
2. Psychological mechanisms linking emotional intelligence and loneliness.
3. Social mechanisms linking emotional intelligence and loneliness.

Recurring patterns, methodological trends, and research gaps were identified and synthesised to provide a comprehensive understanding of how emotional intelligence may function as a protective factor against loneliness among university students.

3. Emotional Intelligence And Loneliness: Direct Relationships

The relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and loneliness has attracted growing scholarly attention over the past decade, particularly within university student populations. As students navigate academic demands, social transitions, and increasing psychological pressures, emotional competencies appear to play an important role in shaping their ability to

establish and maintain meaningful social connections. Across the studies reviewed, a consistent pattern emerges: higher levels of emotional intelligence are generally associated with lower levels of loneliness among university students [13–15].

Emotional intelligence is commonly understood as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively in oneself and others [5]. These competencies may help individuals navigate social situations more successfully, communicate effectively, and respond adaptively to interpersonal challenges. Consequently, students with stronger emotional intelligence are often better equipped to build supportive relationships and develop a greater sense of social connectedness, reducing their susceptibility to loneliness [16].

The literature consistently reports moderate to strong negative correlations between emotional intelligence and loneliness. Students who demonstrate higher levels of emotional awareness and emotional regulation tend to report lower levels of perceived social isolation and emotional loneliness [17]. Emotional intelligence appears to provide individuals with resources that facilitate both emotional adjustment and social integration within university environments. In contrast, students with lower levels of emotional intelligence may experience greater difficulties interpreting social cues, managing interpersonal conflicts, and forming satisfying relationships, thereby increasing their vulnerability to loneliness [18].

Several studies suggest that specific dimensions of emotional intelligence may be particularly relevant in explaining loneliness. Emotional regulation, for example, consistently emerges as one of the strongest predictors of lower loneliness levels [19]. Students who are able to regulate negative emotions effectively may be less likely to withdraw socially when experiencing stress, rejection, or interpersonal difficulties. Similarly, empathy and social awareness appear to support relationship-building by enabling individuals to better understand and respond to the emotional needs of others [20].

The reviewed literature also indicates that the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness remains significant across different cultural and educational contexts. Studies conducted in Asia, Europe, North America, and the Middle East generally report similar findings, suggesting that emotional intelligence may function as a relatively universal protective factor against loneliness among university students [21]. However, cultural norms regarding emotional expression and social interaction may influence the strength and nature of these relationships.

In addition to traditional university settings, recent research has begun to explore this relationship within increasingly digital and technology-mediated environments. The growing use of online learning platforms and digital communication technologies has altered the ways students interact and maintain social relationships. Some studies suggest that emotionally intelligent students may adapt more effectively to these environments by actively seeking social support, maintaining meaningful online interactions, and managing feelings of isolation more successfully than their peers [22]. Nevertheless, evidence in this area remains limited and warrants further investigation.

Despite the overall consistency of findings, several methodological limitations should be noted. Most studies rely on cross-sectional survey designs, making it difficult to determine causal relationships between emotional intelligence and loneliness. While higher emotional intelligence is associated with lower loneliness, it remains unclear whether emotional competencies reduce loneliness directly or whether reduced loneliness contributes to the

development of stronger emotional skills over time [23]. Longitudinal studies remain relatively scarce, limiting understanding of how these relationships evolve throughout students' university experiences.

Furthermore, substantial variation exists in how emotional intelligence and loneliness are conceptualised and measured across studies. Researchers employ different EI frameworks and assessment instruments, while loneliness is often measured using various versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale or related measures [24]. These methodological differences may contribute to variations in reported effect sizes and complicate comparisons across studies.

Overall, the evidence reviewed strongly supports the existence of a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness among university students. Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence generally report lower levels of loneliness, suggesting that emotional competencies may serve as important protective factors during the university years. However, understanding the mechanisms through which emotional intelligence influences loneliness requires further examination. The following sections therefore explore the psychological and social processes that may explain this relationship.

4. Psychological Mechanisms Linking Emotional Intelligence And Loneliness

While the negative relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and loneliness is relatively well established, understanding the mechanisms underlying this relationship remains an important area of inquiry. The literature suggests that emotional intelligence may not reduce loneliness directly but rather operates through a range of psychological processes that influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to social experiences. Among the most frequently identified mechanisms are emotional regulation, self-esteem, coping strategies, and psychological resilience [25].

4.1 Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation emerges as one of the most consistently reported mechanisms linking emotional intelligence and loneliness. Emotional regulation refers to an individual's ability to monitor, manage, and modify emotional responses in ways that are adaptive and contextually appropriate [19]. Students who possess stronger emotional regulation skills are generally better able to cope with negative emotions such as sadness, rejection, anxiety, and frustration.

Loneliness is often accompanied by heightened emotional distress and negative cognitive interpretations of social experiences. Individuals experiencing loneliness may become increasingly sensitive to perceived rejection, withdraw from social interactions, or engage in maladaptive thought patterns that reinforce feelings of isolation [26]. Emotional intelligence may help interrupt this cycle by enabling individuals to recognise these emotional responses and regulate them more effectively.

Several studies suggest that students with higher emotional intelligence are less likely to engage in rumination, emotional avoidance, or catastrophising when confronted with interpersonal difficulties [27]. Instead, they are more likely to adopt adaptive emotional regulation strategies that facilitate recovery from negative experiences and encourage continued social engagement. Consequently, emotional regulation appears to function as an important protective factor against loneliness.

4.2 Self-Esteem

Self-esteem represents another important psychological mechanism linking emotional intelligence and loneliness. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their own worth and value [28]. A substantial body of research indicates that lower self-esteem is associated with higher levels of loneliness, while individuals with stronger self-esteem tend to experience greater social confidence and interpersonal satisfaction [29].

Emotional intelligence may contribute to healthier self-esteem through increased self-awareness and self-acceptance. Individuals who understand and manage their emotions effectively are often better able to develop positive self-perceptions and maintain confidence when facing social challenges [30]. In contrast, difficulties in emotional processing may contribute to self-doubt, insecurity, and heightened sensitivity to social rejection.

Several studies reviewed suggest that self-esteem partially mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness. Students with higher emotional intelligence often report greater self-esteem, which in turn reduces feelings of social inadequacy and promotes stronger social connections [31]. This finding suggests that emotional intelligence may protect against loneliness not only through emotional management but also through fostering a more positive sense of self.

4.3 Coping Strategies

The ability to cope effectively with stress and adversity represents another pathway through which emotional intelligence may influence loneliness. University students encounter a variety of academic, social, and personal challenges that can generate emotional strain and feelings of isolation. How students respond to these challenges may significantly influence their experiences of loneliness.

Emotionally intelligent individuals tend to employ more adaptive coping strategies when confronted with stress [32]. Such strategies may include problem-solving, seeking social support, positive reframing, and emotional expression. These approaches are generally associated with better psychological adjustment and stronger interpersonal functioning.

Conversely, students with lower emotional intelligence may be more likely to rely on maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance, withdrawal, denial, or emotional suppression [33]. These responses can limit opportunities for social interaction and exacerbate feelings of loneliness over time. The literature therefore suggests that coping style serves as an important mechanism connecting emotional intelligence with social and emotional well-being.

4.4 Psychological Resilience

Psychological resilience refers to the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, stress, or challenging life circumstances [34]. Resilience has gained increasing attention within higher education research due to growing concerns about student mental health and well-being.

The reviewed studies indicate that emotional intelligence contributes significantly to resilience by enabling individuals to manage emotional challenges more effectively and

maintain psychological stability during difficult periods [35]. Students with higher emotional intelligence are often better able to recover from social setbacks, adapt to new environments, and maintain optimism despite adversity.

This relationship is particularly relevant during the transition to university, where students frequently encounter unfamiliar social environments and disruptions to established support networks. Emotionally intelligent students may be more capable of viewing these challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as threats, reducing the likelihood that temporary social difficulties develop into persistent loneliness [36].

Emerging evidence suggests that resilience may function as both a mediator and protective factor within the emotional intelligence–loneliness relationship. Students with higher emotional intelligence tend to demonstrate greater resilience, which in turn supports social adjustment and reduces feelings of isolation. Although this area remains relatively underexplored, the findings highlight resilience as an important avenue for future investigation.

4.5 Summary of Psychological Mechanisms

Taken together, the evidence suggests that emotional intelligence influences loneliness through multiple interconnected psychological pathways. Emotional regulation helps students manage negative emotions and maintain social engagement. Self-esteem supports confidence and positive self-perceptions in social situations. Adaptive coping strategies enable students to respond constructively to interpersonal challenges, while psychological resilience strengthens their capacity to recover from setbacks and adapt to changing circumstances.

These findings suggest that emotional intelligence functions not simply as a personal trait but as a psychological resource that supports emotional adjustment and social well-being. Understanding these mechanisms provides a stronger theoretical foundation for explaining why emotionally intelligent students tend to experience lower levels of loneliness and offers important implications for intervention design within higher education settings.

5. Social Mechanisms Linking Emotional Intelligence And Loneliness

While psychological factors help explain how emotional intelligence (EI) influences loneliness, social mechanisms provide an equally important perspective. Loneliness is fundamentally a social experience, characterised not merely by the absence of social contact but by dissatisfaction with the quality and meaningfulness of interpersonal relationships [37]. The literature reviewed suggests that emotional intelligence contributes to lower levels of loneliness through several social pathways, including perceived social support, sense of belonging, interpersonal competence, and relationship quality.

5.1 Social Support

Perceived social support is one of the most frequently identified mechanisms linking emotional intelligence and loneliness. Social support refers to the emotional, informational, and practical assistance individuals receive from family members, friends, peers, and significant others [38]. Numerous studies have demonstrated that students who perceive higher levels of social support tend to experience lower levels of loneliness and better psychological well-being [39].

Emotional intelligence appears to facilitate the development and maintenance of supportive social networks. Individuals with higher EI are generally more effective at recognising the emotional needs of others, communicating empathetically, and responding appropriately during interpersonal interactions [40]. These abilities help foster stronger social relationships and increase the likelihood of receiving support during periods of stress or difficulty.

Several studies suggest that perceived social support partially mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness [31]. Students with stronger emotional competencies often report larger and more satisfying support networks, which in turn reduce feelings of social isolation. This finding highlights the importance of emotional intelligence not only in managing personal emotions but also in facilitating access to valuable social resources.

5.2 Sense of Belonging

Another important mechanism identified in the literature is sense of belonging. Sense of belonging refers to the perception of being accepted, valued, and included within a social group or community [41]. Within university settings, belongingness has been associated with improved psychological well-being, stronger academic engagement, and lower levels of loneliness [42].

The transition to university frequently requires students to establish new social identities and integrate into unfamiliar communities. Students who struggle to develop a sense of belonging may experience feelings of alienation and social disconnection. Emotional intelligence may facilitate belongingness by enhancing social awareness, empathy, and interpersonal communication skills, all of which support positive social integration [43].

Research suggests that emotionally intelligent students are often better able to navigate social situations, build friendships, and establish meaningful connections with peers. These experiences contribute to a stronger sense of belonging within the university environment and help protect against loneliness [44]. Consequently, belongingness appears to function as an important intermediary factor through which emotional intelligence influences students' social and emotional well-being.

5.3 Interpersonal Competence

Interpersonal competence represents another significant pathway linking emotional intelligence and loneliness. Interpersonal competence refers to the skills necessary for initiating, maintaining, and managing social relationships effectively [45]. These skills include communication, conflict resolution, empathy, active listening, and relationship maintenance.

Individuals with higher emotional intelligence typically demonstrate stronger interpersonal competencies because they are better able to understand emotional cues, interpret social situations, and adapt their behaviour to different interpersonal contexts [46]. Such abilities facilitate positive social interactions and increase the likelihood of developing meaningful and satisfying relationships.

Several studies indicate that interpersonal competence mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness. Students who possess stronger interpersonal skills

generally experience greater social acceptance, higher friendship quality, and lower levels of perceived social isolation [47]. Conversely, deficits in interpersonal competence may contribute to communication difficulties, relationship conflicts, and increased loneliness.

5.4 Relationship Quality

Beyond the quantity of social interactions, the quality of interpersonal relationships also plays a critical role in understanding loneliness. Research consistently demonstrates that loneliness is more closely related to the perceived quality of social relationships than to the number of social contacts an individual possesses [48].

Emotional intelligence appears to contribute positively to relationship quality by promoting empathy, trust, emotional responsiveness, and effective communication. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence are often more capable of understanding the perspectives of others, managing interpersonal disagreements constructively, and maintaining emotionally supportive relationships [49].

Within university contexts, relationship quality may be particularly important during periods of transition and adjustment. Students who develop strong, supportive friendships often report lower levels of loneliness and greater emotional well-being. The literature suggests that emotional intelligence contributes to these positive outcomes by strengthening the interpersonal processes that underpin healthy and satisfying relationships [50].

5.5 Summary of Social Mechanisms

Overall, the evidence suggests that emotional intelligence influences loneliness through multiple interconnected social mechanisms. Social support provides emotional and practical resources that reduce feelings of isolation. Sense of belonging strengthens social integration and promotes feelings of acceptance within university communities. Interpersonal competence facilitates effective social interaction and relationship formation, while relationship quality enhances the emotional value of social connections.

Together, these mechanisms help explain why students with higher levels of emotional intelligence consistently report lower levels of loneliness. Rather than influencing loneliness directly, emotional intelligence appears to operate through a network of social processes that foster meaningful interpersonal connections and strengthen students' sense of social belonging. These findings highlight the importance of considering both emotional and social dimensions when designing interventions aimed at reducing loneliness among university students.

6. Methodological Trends, Research Gaps, And Future Directions

The growing body of literature examining emotional intelligence (EI) and loneliness among university students has contributed valuable insights into the emotional and social factors influencing student well-being. However, the systematic review also reveals several methodological patterns, limitations, and gaps that continue to shape the development of this field. Identifying these issues is important for strengthening future research and advancing understanding of how emotional intelligence may protect students against loneliness.

6.1 Methodological Trends in Existing Research

A dominant trend within the reviewed literature is the extensive use of quantitative research designs. Most studies employ cross-sectional survey methods to investigate associations between emotional intelligence, loneliness, and related psychological or social variables [51]. Statistical techniques such as correlation analysis, multiple regression, structural equation modelling, and mediation analysis are commonly used to explore direct and indirect relationships among constructs.

While quantitative studies have established a consistent negative association between emotional intelligence and loneliness, they often provide limited insight into the lived experiences of students. Comparatively few studies employ qualitative approaches such as interviews, focus groups, or narrative inquiry. Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how students personally experience loneliness and how emotional competencies influence their day-to-day social interactions.

A smaller number of studies utilise mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative findings with qualitative insights. These studies provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional and social processes and may offer valuable directions for future research. Given the complexity of loneliness as both a psychological and social phenomenon, mixed-methods approaches appear particularly well suited to this field.

6.2 Measurement Issues

Another important issue concerns the measurement of emotional intelligence and loneliness. The review identified considerable variation in the instruments used to assess both constructs.

Common emotional intelligence measures include:

- Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue)
- Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)
- Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT)
- Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i)

Similarly, loneliness is most frequently assessed using various versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, although some studies employ alternative measures of social isolation, belongingness, or social connectedness [24].

While these instruments generally demonstrate acceptable reliability and validity, differences in theoretical frameworks and operational definitions create challenges for comparison across studies. Some measures conceptualise emotional intelligence as a personality trait, while others view it as a cognitive ability. Likewise, loneliness may be treated as a unidimensional construct or divided into emotional and social dimensions. These inconsistencies contribute to variations in findings and complicate efforts to build a coherent evidence base.

6.3 Limitations of Current Research

Several recurring limitations emerge across the reviewed studies. First, most investigations rely heavily on self-report questionnaires. Although self-report instruments are practical and widely used, they are susceptible to social desirability bias, response bias, and subjective

interpretation [52]. Students may overestimate emotional competencies or underreport loneliness due to social stigma associated with feelings of isolation.

Second, the overwhelming majority of studies employ cross-sectional designs. This limits the ability to establish causal relationships between emotional intelligence and loneliness. Although higher emotional intelligence is consistently associated with lower loneliness, it remains unclear whether emotional intelligence reduces loneliness directly or whether lower loneliness contributes to the development of stronger emotional competencies over time [53].

Third, much of the existing literature focuses on students from Western countries or specific cultural contexts. Research from Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other developing regions remains comparatively limited. Cultural differences in emotional expression, relationship formation, and social expectations may influence both emotional intelligence and loneliness, highlighting the need for more culturally diverse research.

6.4 Research Gaps

The review identifies several significant gaps that warrant further investigation.

One major gap concerns the limited number of longitudinal studies. University life is characterised by substantial social and emotional transitions, yet relatively little research examines how emotional intelligence and loneliness evolve over time. Longitudinal studies would provide greater insight into developmental processes and allow stronger conclusions regarding causality.

Another gap relates to intervention research. While numerous studies demonstrate associations between emotional intelligence and loneliness, relatively few evaluate interventions designed to strengthen emotional intelligence and reduce loneliness among university students. This limits understanding of how emotional competencies can be developed through educational and psychological programmes.

The emergence of digitally mediated communication and artificial intelligence technologies presents another area requiring further attention. Increasing reliance on social media, online learning, and AI-supported interactions may alter students' experiences of loneliness in ways that remain insufficiently understood. Future studies should explore how emotional intelligence influences social connection within increasingly digital environments.

Additionally, there is limited research focusing on vulnerable student populations, including international students, first-year students, students with disabilities, and students from minority backgrounds. These groups may face unique social and emotional challenges that increase vulnerability to loneliness and warrant targeted investigation.

6.5 Future Research Directions

Based on the findings of this review, several recommendations for future research are proposed.

First, researchers should prioritise longitudinal studies that examine changes in emotional intelligence and loneliness throughout students' university experiences. Such studies would provide stronger evidence regarding causal pathways and developmental processes.

Second, greater attention should be given to intervention-based research. Programmes designed to enhance emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and emotional awareness may offer practical strategies for reducing loneliness and improving student well-being.

Third, future research should adopt more diverse methodological approaches. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies can provide deeper insight into students' emotional experiences and the contextual factors that shape loneliness.

Fourth, cross-cultural research should be expanded to examine how emotional intelligence and loneliness operate across different cultural and educational settings. Understanding cultural influences will contribute to the development of more inclusive and globally relevant theoretical frameworks.

Finally, researchers should investigate the role of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, social media, and virtual learning environments, in shaping students' experiences of loneliness and social connection. Such research is likely to become increasingly important as higher education continues to evolve in response to technological change.

Overall, while substantial progress has been made in understanding the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness, significant opportunities remain for further investigation. Addressing these methodological limitations and research gaps will strengthen future scholarship and contribute to more effective strategies for supporting student emotional and social well-being.

7. Conclusion

This systematic review examined the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and loneliness among university students, with particular attention to the psychological and social mechanisms that may explain this association. As concerns regarding student mental health and well-being continue to grow globally, understanding factors that protect students against loneliness has become increasingly important. The findings of this review suggest that emotional intelligence serves as a meaningful protective factor, helping students navigate the emotional and interpersonal challenges commonly experienced during university life.

The evidence reviewed consistently demonstrates a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness. Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence generally report lower levels of perceived loneliness and social isolation. This finding was observed across diverse educational and cultural contexts, suggesting that emotional intelligence may function as a relatively robust predictor of students' social and emotional well-being.

The review further revealed that the relationship between emotional intelligence and loneliness is shaped by several important psychological mechanisms. Emotional regulation emerged as one of the strongest explanatory factors, enabling students to manage negative emotions, cope with interpersonal difficulties, and maintain social engagement during challenging situations. Self-esteem also plays an important role, as emotionally intelligent students tend to develop more positive self-perceptions and greater confidence in social interactions. In addition, adaptive coping strategies and psychological resilience appear to strengthen students' capacity to respond effectively to stress, transition, and social challenges, reducing their vulnerability to loneliness.

Beyond these psychological processes, the review identified several social mechanisms that help explain how emotional intelligence influences loneliness. Students with stronger emotional competencies are generally better able to establish supportive social networks, develop a stronger sense of belonging, and maintain high-quality interpersonal relationships. Emotional intelligence also contributes to greater interpersonal competence, facilitating effective communication, empathy, and relationship management. Together, these social resources help create meaningful social connections that protect against feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Despite the overall consistency of findings, the review also identified important methodological limitations within the existing literature. Most studies rely on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships. Furthermore, considerable variation exists in the conceptualisation and measurement of both emotional intelligence and loneliness. Research from non-Western contexts remains comparatively limited, and relatively few studies have examined intervention-based approaches aimed at strengthening emotional intelligence to reduce loneliness among university students.

The findings of this review have several practical implications for higher education institutions. Universities increasingly recognise the importance of supporting student well-being beyond academic achievement alone. The evidence suggests that emotional intelligence development may represent a promising avenue for reducing loneliness and promoting social integration among students. Programmes that enhance emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, communication skills, and resilience may contribute to stronger interpersonal relationships and improved psychological well-being. Student support services, counselling centres, orientation programmes, and co-curricular initiatives may all benefit from incorporating emotional intelligence development into their practices.

From a theoretical perspective, this review contributes to the literature by synthesising fragmented evidence across psychological and social domains and proposing a more integrated understanding of the emotional intelligence–loneliness relationship. Rather than viewing loneliness solely as a social phenomenon, the findings highlight the interplay between emotional competencies, psychological adjustment, and social functioning. Emotional intelligence appears to influence loneliness through a network of interconnected psychological and social pathways that collectively shape students' experiences of belonging, connection, and well-being.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal and intervention-based studies to better understand causal relationships and identify effective strategies for reducing loneliness among university students. Greater attention should also be given to culturally diverse populations and the role of emerging technologies, including social media and artificial intelligence-mediated communication, in shaping contemporary experiences of loneliness.

In conclusion, this review demonstrates that emotional intelligence is an important resource for protecting university students against loneliness. Through its influence on emotional regulation, self-esteem, resilience, social support, belongingness, and interpersonal competence, emotional intelligence helps students develop the emotional and social capacities needed to thrive within higher education environments. As universities continue to address growing concerns surrounding student well-being, fostering emotional intelligence

may represent an important component of comprehensive strategies aimed at promoting healthier, more connected, and more resilient student communities.

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