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Qualitative Article

Lost in Bangkok: The Phenomenology of Urban Loneliness Among Young Adult Men in the City

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Abstract

Background/problem: Loneliness is a growing public health concern, influencing mental health, social well-being, and overall quality of life. In Thailand, government agencies increasingly focus on urban populations.

Objective/purpose: This qualitative, existential-phenomenological study (investigating lived experience) explored how young adult men in Bangkok experience loneliness, highlighting personal, cultural, and environmental influences.

Design and Methodology: Nineteen men (aged 22–30 years) with severe loneliness, as indicated by the Thai De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale, participated in the in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using a whole-part-whole method, member checking, and reflexivity, interpreted through embodied cognition, a theory that cognitive processes are grounded in bodily interactions with the environment.

Findings: Results indicate that loneliness emerges as an emotional and bodily disconnection from self, others, or the environment, shaped by physical sensations, emotional suppression and circumstances of urban living. Six themes were identified: (1) loneliness as an ongoing embodied interaction with the world; (2) urban landscapes amplifying loneliness; (3) loneliness arising from unmet personal and social expectations; (4) disconnection from meaningful shared experiences; (5) feeling of diminished self-worth and identity; and (6) loneliness as a necessary tool for living.

Conclusion and Implications: These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of loneliness, which can be both debilitating and transformative. Interventions must address embodied and socio-environmental dimensions, particularly considering gender-specific masculine norms. Interventions may include urban design that fosters communal engagement, culturally attuned counseling to promote emotional expressiveness and social connection, and mindfulness-based practices to cultivate resilience and well-being.

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Loneliness represents an escalating global concern (The Guardian, 2023), prompting several nations to establish dedicated ministries of loneliness to counter growing social disconnection. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes loneliness as contributing to mental health disorders, substance use, and economic burden (World Health Organization, 2025). Despite increased attention, research frequently conflates loneliness with social isolation (Asante & Tuffour, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2023), neglecting that solitude doesn't necessarily equate to loneliness, while socially integrated individuals may experience profound disconnection. Men, particularly, may underreport loneliness due to cultural expectations of emotional stoicism (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). Understanding loneliness requires a gender-sensitive

approach, as the pathways of loneliness may significantly differ across genders. According to Lim et al. (2020) social expectations often discourage men from expressing vulnerability and making them more at risk of hiding their loneliness. Additionally, in the context of Thailand, Bangkok serves as the capital and primary economic hub. The city's rapid urbanization characterized by vertical living and fragmented spaces, prioritizes efficiency over meaningful face-to-face interaction. This situation, particularly following COVID-19's intensification of social restrictions and digital dependence, potentially exacerbating loneliness. Post-pandemic study indicated that approximately 39% of surveyed populations in Thailand reported psychological distress stemming directly from pandemic-induced social isolation (Kasatpibal et al., 2023). Navigating Bangkok's landscape presents a unique challenge for young adults, who must often manage grueling daily commutes and competitive work environments while living far from their provincial family support networks. This specific urban dynamic provides a critical context for exploring their lived experiences of loneliness.

Bangkok serves as a prime example of the urban, where rapid technological advancement and high-density living inversely correlate with meaningful connection, fostering profound loneliness in a crowd. Within this hyper-urbanized context, young adult men remain a significantly overlooked demographic in loneliness research (Barreto et al., 2021), as traditional masculine norms often suppress their emotional vulnerability (Kaewjanta & Rungreangkulkij, 2022). Addressing this critical gap, this study explored the lived experience of loneliness among young adult men in Bangkok through an existential-phenomenological lens. Our original contribution lies in examining how embodied cognition, social expectations, and urban contexts physically and spatially shape their experience of disconnection. To achieve this, our approach draws on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) conceptualization of the body as embedded in social and spatial worlds, utilizing Dahlberg et al.'s (2008) reflective lifeworld research methodology to maintain openness while bridling preconceptions.

Literature Review

This section synthesizes the theoretical and empirical literature on the phenomenon of loneliness, utilizing existential-phenomenology and embodied cognition as the guiding frameworks. The review is organized into three main domains: conceptual foundations, theoretical backgrounds, and related multidisciplinary studies. Together, these sections illustrate the complex interplay between bodily experiences, cultural norms, and urban environments, setting the stage to explore the critical gap concerning the lived experiences of young adult men in Bangkok.

Conceptual Foundations of Loneliness

This section explores the fundamental concepts underlying loneliness, beginning with its varied definitions and progressing to the multifaceted biological, psychological, and environmental causes that contribute to this complex phenomenon.

Definition of Loneliness

Definitions of loneliness vary widely, with some researchers characterizing loneliness as simply the state of solitude, while others describe it as a negative feeling stemming from perceived absence of physical connection or deficiencies in the quantity or quality of social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). Alternative perspectives frame loneliness as a sense of disconnection from what one values most (Tiwari, 2013). Limptchalerm's (2009) review identified at least 13 distinct conceptualizations encompassing emotions, feelings, experiences, perceptions, and cognitive processes. These definitions range from narrow focuses on social relationships to broader interpretations that blur boundaries between loneliness and related concepts like solitude. Importantly, loneliness isn't universally negative. Dahlberg et al. (2007) demonstrated that in certain contexts, it can facilitate personal growth and development.

In this study, loneliness is defined as a subjective, context-bound experience of perceived disconnection. Drawing on existential-phenomenology, we foreground how loneliness is lived and felt in

the body, and via embodied cognition, how bodily experiences both shape and reflect one's sense of connection to self, others, and environments.

Causes of Loneliness

The origins of loneliness are multifaceted, driven by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and environmental factors (Altschul et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2020). Biologically, it functions as an adaptive evolutionary signal with heritable sensitivities to social pain (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Psychologically, personality traits influence an individual's vulnerability, while external disruptions, such as relocation or bereavement, sever established social networks (Kaewpijit et al., 2018), highlighting loneliness as a dynamic collision between internal landscapes and external realities.

Theoretical Background

Understanding loneliness demands a multidisciplinary approach. However, much of the existing research frames loneliness primarily as a psychological or social deficit, often overlooking the fundamental role of direct, lived experience. This study, therefore, adopts a different theoretical stance, grounding its inquiry in phenomenology and embodied cognition. These perspectives posit that loneliness is not merely an abstract mental state but a deeply embodied experience that is felt, perceived, and lived through the body's interaction with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Integrating both frameworks is essential for this study: phenomenology uncovers the subjective meaning of this social disconnection, while embodied cognition explains how it translates into physical sensations (Barsalou, 2008). Together, they bridge the gap between abstract emotional distress and concrete bodily reality, offering a holistic understanding of urban loneliness. By shifting the focus from abstract definitions to the tangible, bodily experience of being lonely, this research seeks to move beyond the conceptual ambiguities that have characterized the field.

The Phenomenological Lens: Loneliness as a Lived Experience

Drawing from the phenomenology, this study approaches loneliness not as an isolated psychological defect, but as a subjective and relational lived experience. This perspective emphasizes the lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) as the central vehicle through which we experience the world. Therefore, loneliness is not a feeling contained within the mind, but a tangible state that reorganizes our entire bodily orientation to our environment, relationships, and personal history. Brief experiences of loneliness can feel prolonged, while extended periods of solitude might pass quickly if perceived as enriching. This perspective highlights loneliness as profoundly context-sensitive, shaped by bodily perceptions, social interactions, and existential dimensions.

Embodied Cognition: Accessing Loneliness Through the Body

Building on this phenomenological foundation, the framework of embodied cognition provides the scientific lens to understand how the body is so central to this experience. It posits that our cognitive and emotional processes are grounded in our body's sensory and motor systems (Barsalou, 2008). We can therefore access and understand loneliness more deeply by exploring these bodily signals, a process known as interoception, the perception of the body's internal state (Craig, 2009). This framework explains why abstract feelings of disconnection manifest as concrete physical metaphors, such as feeling heavy or feeling cold, which are inextricably linked to the body's social thermoregulation systems (Inagaki & Human, 2020). These somatic manifestations are not merely metaphorical; rather, they signify a literal neurobiological overlap where the brain processes social isolation akin to physical deprivation, evoking neural craving responses similar to physical hunger (Tomova et al., 2020).

Related Studies

Past research on loneliness has integrated diverse theoretical approaches and methodologies spanning multiple disciplines. Psychological studies have identified personality as a significant mediator of loneliness, with individuals showing higher emotional stability and extraversion typically reporting lower loneliness levels (Altschul et al., 2021). Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has emerged as an effective

intervention by directly targeting the maladaptive thought patterns that perpetuate loneliness (Masi et al., 2011).

Neurobiological investigations have revealed significant associations between loneliness and specific brain structures and functions. Research has demonstrated correlations between loneliness and structural alterations including variations in gray matter volume and white matter integrity as well as modified activity in the prefrontal cortex, insula, amygdala, hippocampus, and posterior superior temporal cortex. Functional MRI studies have further linked loneliness with altered activation within attentional and visual networks and the default mode network (Spreng et al., 2020).

Recent research highlights the complexity of loneliness among young adults across diverse contexts. In Western urban settings, Fardghassemi and Joffe (2022) found that in poorer areas of London, socio-economic pressures, lack of safe community spaces and feeling disconnect are primary causes of loneliness in young adults. Furthermore, in examining intervention strategies, Shah and Househ (2023) reviewed that young people need support system that fit their needs, using digital tools while still offering genuine emotional connection. Conversely, when examining cross-cultural differences, Barreto et al. (2021) highlight that while young men in individualistic Western cultures report high vulnerability to loneliness, those in Eastern cultures where collectivist values social harmony and interdependence, rapid urbanization intensely disrupts traditional support networks. Young men in highly urbanized Asian environments must face the isolating physical infrastructure of cities while bearing the psychological weight of fulfilling rigid social expectations. These comparative studies highlight a critical contextual gap, reinforcing the rationale for exploring how Thai urban infrastructure and culture shape embodied experience of loneliness.

Overall, while current literature acknowledges that loneliness is shaped by environmental and cultural forces, significant gaps remain in how this phenomenon is empirically investigated. First, there is a distinct lack of studies applying an embodiment perspective to understand the lived reality of loneliness, as most research continues to prioritize cognitive-behavioral or social deficit models (Masi et al., 2011; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Second, the existing body of work is predominantly Western-centric, highlighting a critical scarcity of phenomenological research situated within the Thai or broader Asian context (Barreto et al., 2021). Finally, there is a notable gap in qualitative studies focusing specifically on young adult men, who are often overlooked due to cultural barriers to emotional disclosure (Kaewjanta & Rungreangkulkij, 2022; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). Recognizing these gaps, this research aims to explore how young adult men in Bangkok perceive and describe their experiences of loneliness, specifically examining how their bodies and minds navigate unique urban and cultural pressures. By doing so, this study provides three key contributions: theoretically, it advances the literature by integrating phenomenology with embodied cognition to conceptualize loneliness as a physical and mental phenomenon; methodologically, it utilizes a qualitative approach to capture deeply personal lived experiences rather than mere psychological deficits; and contextually, it offers novel empirical evidence from a non-Western, hyper-urban setting, shedding light on the specific vulnerabilities of young men in Thailand.

Research Questions

1. How do young adult men in Bangkok perceive and describe their lived experiences of loneliness?
2. In what ways do bodily experiences, social expectations, and urban contexts shape the phenomenon of loneliness for this demographic?

Method

Design

This study adopted a qualitative, existential-phenomenological design guided by reflective lifeworld research (RLR) (Dahlberg et al., 2008). This design allowed to explore the nuanced lived experiences of loneliness without reducing them to mere symptomatology, aligning closely with our goal of capturing the complex, subjective essence of loneliness as it naturally unfolds within individuals' lived realities. The

openness and reflective rigor inherent in the RLR helps prevent premature conceptual closure, enabling deeper exploration of nuanced existential experiences.

Setting

All interviews were conducted in Bangkok during December 2023 to January 2024, either face-to-face in private settings or via secure video conferencing depended on participant convenience and comfort. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained through the assignment of pseudonyms, secure storage of all data in password-protected files, and restricted access limited to authorized researchers.

Sampling Procedures

Participants were recruited through social media advertisements specifically targeting men aged 20–30 in Bangkok who self-identified as lonely. Interested individuals were asked to complete the Thai version of the De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale (DJGLS), selected due to its proven reliability and validity in measuring both emotional and social dimensions of loneliness, making it suitable for nuanced qualitative research (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006). The screening was necessary to ensure that all participants possessed the relevant lived experience required for this phenomenological study. It is important to note that the DJGLS was not employed for quantitative data analysis. Rather, it served as a strict criterion for purposive sampling, guaranteeing that only individuals who met the threshold for experiencing loneliness were selected for in-depth interviews. Out of 29 respondents who completed the screening, 19 respondents met the criteria for severe loneliness and consented to in-depth interviews.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Participants in this study were young adult men aged 22–30 residing in Bangkok who reported moderate-to-severe loneliness. All participants demonstrated the capacity to provide informed consent and engage in detailed interviews about their experiences. Those with severe psychiatric conditions requiring immediate clinical intervention were excluded from the study, as were those unable to provide informed consent or meaningfully participate in in-depth interviews. This careful selection process ensured participants could safely and effectively share their lived experiences of urban loneliness while maintaining ethical research standards.

Participants

Nineteen participants (Pseudonyms A1 to A19) completed interviews lasting 60–90 minutes each. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 30 years (Mean age = 25.66 years). Regarding marital status, 5 participants were single, and 14 were in relationships. Educationally, 16 participants held bachelor's degrees, and 3 participants were pursuing or holding postgraduate degrees. In terms of employment, 4 participants were unemployed, and 15 were either employed in the private sector or enrolled in higher education. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection ceased at 19 participants when sufficient depth and variation of lived experiences were achieved. At this point, additional interviews did not yield new significant insights, themes, or variations in participants' experiences of loneliness.

Interview Questions/Tools

The study employed a semi-structured interview that was designed based on the theoretical frameworks of existential phenomenology and embodied cognition. To ensure the appropriateness and trustworthiness of the instrument, the preliminary questions underwent an expert checking process. A panel of two experts in psychology and qualitative research reviewed the protocol. Based on their qualitative feedback, minor adjustments were made to the phrasing of certain questions to facilitate deeper exploration of the participants' lived experiences prior to data collection.

Interview began with casual conversations about participants' daily lives to establish rapport, before delving into their personal understanding and experiences of loneliness. This included exploring how they

defined and described their lonely feelings, examining specific moments or periods when these feelings were most intense, and investigating the physical and emotional manifestations of loneliness in their lives, including what triggered these experiences. Examples of guiding questions included: “Could you please describe a particular event or experience of loneliness? When and how did it occur, and what thoughts and emotions arose?” Additionally, questions focusing on bodily experiences were asked, such as: “How do you experience loneliness through your five senses?”

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the whole-part-whole method (Dahlberg et al., 2008), beginning with multiple readings of each transcript to gain an initial open understanding of the data as a whole. In the parts phase, the text was divided into meaning units, segments that captured the essential qualities of the participants’ lived experiences of loneliness. These units were compared for similarities and differences, allowing for the emergence of descriptive meanings that were subsequently clustered into subthemes. To achieve a final synthesis, these parts were recontextualized into a new whole: a coherent essence that represents the overarching structure of the phenomenon. Throughout this analytical movement, the researcher maintained a bridled stance, documented through reflexive memos, to consciously delay premature conclusions and ensure that personal pre-understandings did not overshadow the phenomenon as it presented itself.

Data Rigor

Credibility was enhanced through rigorous member checking procedures. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and transcripts were subsequently shared with participants to confirm accuracy. In line with reflexive lifeworld research, member checking was utilized to certify the accuracy of transcripts, not for interpretation. Verified transcripts were then systematically organized and managed in Excel files stored securely on a password-protected personal computer to ensure data confidentiality and security. Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic coding, where participants’ identities were anonymized by assigning pseudonyms, ensuring confidentiality throughout the reporting process.

Results

The analysis of the lived experiences of young adult men in Bangkok revealed six major themes that illuminate the multifaceted nature of loneliness. While participants’ personal histories and social backgrounds varied, their narratives reflected shared dimensions of the phenomenon. The following sections present each theme in detail, supported by direct quotes from the participants to ground the findings in their lived reality: (1) loneliness as an ongoing embodied interaction with the world; (2) urban landscapes amplifying loneliness; (3) loneliness arising from unmet personal and social expectations; (4) disconnection from meaningful shared experiences; (5) feelings of diminished self-worth and identity; and (6) loneliness as a necessary tool for living.

Theme 1: Loneliness as an Ongoing Embodied Interaction with the World

Participants consistently portrayed loneliness not as a purely emotional state but as a lived, bodily experience influenced by both internal processes and external stimuli. This is consistent with phenomenological notions of the lived body, where bodily awareness and sensory perception are intertwined with the individual’s sense of self and environment.

Subtheme 1.1 Changes in Bodily Sensations and Interoception

Many reported distinctly physical manifestations of loneliness, from temperature fluctuations to muscle fatigue or “heaviness,” often centered in the chest or abdomen. For instance, Participant 11 shared, “I feel cold around my torso, you know. One thing I like to do is press my hands together, kind of like hugging my chest. It makes me feel better.” Similarly, Participant 19 described a sense of emptiness and a craving for physical pressure: “It feels sort of hollow in my chest, near my head. I’m not really cold, but I do want to wrap myself in several layers of blankets. The snuggler it is, the better I feel.”

Subtheme 1.2 Altered Auditory Perception

Participants often described everyday sounds becoming distant, muffled, or receding to the “background” in lonely moments. For Instance, Participant 2 described a sense of auditory detachment: “All the sounds around me turn into this faint echo, like a soft soundtrack, but it doesn’t fully enter my ears and it’s just echoing away instead of actually hitting me.” Similarly, Participant 7 shared, “Everything around me goes completely silent. I just lie there on the bed, doing nothing. It’s so quiet that I don’t even hear my mom knocking on the door.”

Subtheme 1.3 Distorted Sense of Time

Loneliness can distort one’s perception of time. Participants also described a significant distortion in their perception of time during episodes of loneliness. For instance, Participant 7 noted how time seemed to expand: “When I’m lonely, it feels like hours have gone by, but in reality, it’s sometimes not even five minutes.” In contrast, Participant 14 experienced an opposite effect, stating, “Time speeds up. The lonelier I am, the faster it seems to go.”

Subtheme 1.4 Heightened Vigilance and Negative Bias

Several participants described hypervigilance toward social cues, interpreting neutral or even positive events in a negative light. This means that lonely individuals can become highly sensitive to perceived social threats. Participant 10 articulated this cognitive shift in detail:

When I see two people talking, if I’m not lonely, I’ll think, ‘They seem so happy!’ and feel something positive from it. But once loneliness kicks in, even something positive seems negative. It’s like I become more sensitive in a negative way, and anything can feel lonely as everything turns black-and-white or takes on a negative tone. (Participant 10)

This negativity bias also extends to personal interests and situational awareness. Participant 7 noted, “When I’m lonely, even the things I used to like suddenly become things I don’t like anymore,” while Participant 8 shared a similar sense of heightened perception: “When I’m lonely, I become extremely aware of myself and the situation around me, it’s all so vividly clear.”

Subtheme 1.5 Strategies for Somatic Soothing

To counteract their embodied distress, many participants relied on bodily coping strategies e.g., warm showers, wrapping in blankets, or self-hugging. For instance, Participant 19 described how physical pressure provides a sense of security: “When I’m lonely, a physical gesture like hugging a pillow really calms me. It’s not a complete fix, but at least I feel some comfort.” Similarly, Participant 11 used self-touch to manage the sensation of fragmentation, stating, “I press my palms together or cross my arms over my chest. It’s like I’m trying to hold myself together physically.”

Overall, these subthemes reflect how loneliness can be a profoundly physical event, resonating with existential-phenomenological frameworks that place the lived body at the center of human experience.

Theme 2: Urban Landscapes Amplifying Loneliness

Participants uniformly linked their loneliness to particular facets of urban living in Bangkok, where everyday routines inadvertently foster isolation.

Subtheme 2.1 Dead Spaces in Urban Design

Several participants likened some city infrastructures crowded yet impersonal train platforms, sprawling malls, or cramped apartments to “dead spaces” lacking genuine interaction. Participant 1 captured this sense of mechanized isolation during a daily commute, stating: “You scan your card alone, ride the train alone, and no one talks to each other. We’re all just in our own zone, which makes the city feel even lonelier.”

Subtheme 2.2 Lockdowns period and Remote Work

COVID-19 restrictions further magnified loneliness by limiting in-person contact and disrupting social routines. Participant 9 reflected on the emotional intensity of this period, stating: “During COVID, it was... the loneliness was beyond words. It was like... I felt lonely, I felt... like I had to... constantly fight everything on my own throughout that time.” For others, the shift to digital platforms created a sense of academic and social alienation. Participant 15 shared, “Online classes cut me off from the normal college experience. Days blurred together, and I hardly saw my friends. That took a toll on my mental health.”

Subtheme 2.3 Free Time and Post-Routine Periods of Lonely People

When people finish their daily office-hour routines or face social situations that limit face-to-face interactions, they often experience a sense of emptiness and purposelessness. Participant 3 described this transition as the primary trigger for their distress: “When the routine ends... there’s nothing we can do, or no friends to talk to, or no activities we need to do... that’s when it starts.” Similarly, this lack of social direction was echoed by Participant 19, who shared, “When I’m free, I feel like I should go out but don’t know where... don’t know who to invite for activities. I just don’t know what to do next.”

Subtheme 2.4 Weather, and Daily Rhythms

Participants often identified specific times of day, such as twilight or late evening, and particular weather patterns, as significant triggers that heightened their sense of loneliness. Participant 17 described the emotional weight of these temporal transitions, stating: “Sunset in the city brings a kind of heaviness, like the day is ending, and I realize I’m facing another night by myself.”

Together, these environmental and temporal conditions illustrate how loneliness is intertwined with their physical surroundings. The urban context, characterized by specific daily cycles and impersonal spaces, appears to intensify their sense of anonymity and limit opportunities for spontaneous face-to-face connection.

Theme 3: Loneliness Arising from Unmet Personal and Social Expectations

Many participants experienced loneliness when reality fell short of their idealized expectations whether in professional goals, relationships, or social milestones.

Subtheme 3.1 The Sense of Lacking

Participants commonly conceptualized loneliness as a profound sense of lacking or incompleteness. This experience was often described as a yearning for something that was once present but has since vanished, or an undefined void that disrupts the perceived normalcy of life. Participant 4 reflected on this sense of loss, stating: “Loneliness is, uh... something that makes us feel we’re missing something in life. Something that was once there but disappeared.” Similarly, Participant 11 shared, “Loneliness makes us feel incomplete, like a song missing its lyrics. Why do we only have the melody? We want lyrics... lyrics that would make this song complete.”

Subtheme 3.2 Self and Social Relationship Expectations (SRE)

Participants pinpointed core social needs, such as intimacy, support, proximity, and shared enjoyment, as essential for well-being. When these needs went unmet (for instance, lacking a confidant to share personal triumphs or hardships), loneliness surfaced powerfully. Participant 14 described this as a painful realization of perceived insignificance within a social circle: “I expect close friends to be there for me like I am for them. When I reach out and no one responds, it’s more than disappointment. It’s a hollow feeling of not mattering.” This sentiment of relational imbalance was also echoed by Participant 18, who shared, “We’re always there for them, but when... like when we need them, they’re not always there for us. That’s what makes us feel lonely.”

Subtheme 3.3 Cultural Scripts and Gender Norms

Traditional ideas of masculinity inhibited open expressions of loneliness. Participant 5 highlighted how both societal norms and media portrayals shape this internal conflict: “Men aren’t ‘supposed’ to get

lonely. We're expected to handle stuff on our own. And Japanese manga always have these cool characters saying 'everyone needs friends, don't be alone - if you're alone, you'll become a villain.'

These unmet expectations function like "internalized social contracts." When these contracts remain unfulfilled, participants interpret it as a personal failing or a breakdown in belonging, triggering loneliness.

Theme 4: Disconnection from Meaningful Shared Experiences

This theme underscores that loneliness can persist even for those who are socially active, so long as qualitative aspects of interpersonal engagement are lacking.

Subtheme 4.1 Absence of Deep Emotional Sharing

Loneliness was further defined as a state of realizing that one cannot reach others when seeking connection, whether to vent negative emotions or to share positive experiences. This inability to connect creates a profound sense of isolation and incompleteness, leaving a void that remains unfilled by inanimate surroundings. Participant 1 emphasized this distinction, noting, "We don't connect with objects or places like that. Both living and non-living things." Building on this, Participant 10 highlighted the lack of emotional outlet as a core driver of their distress: "I feel lonely because I feel like I can't tell my stories to anyone... there's no space for me to share what I feel."

Subtheme 4.2 Alienation from Society and Environment

When one cannot share or have meaningful interactions with people as expected, it leads to feelings of alienation from their current state, both from people and surroundings. Participant 7 reflected on this perceived isolation, questioning their place within the social fabric: "Am I some kind of strange anomaly in this society, in the place where I am, and that's why I can't fit in with others?" This feeling of being an outsider was further articulated by Participant 9, who struggled to describe the sensation of ontological mismatch:

When... a human being... feels that they... (thinking) are not... worthy. What do you call that? What's the word? It's... it's... not blending in as one with... the world around them. Like being a color that... doesn't match the colors around them, something like that. (Participant 9)

These findings support existential views emphasizing that meaning is co-created in relationships, and lacking this co-creation fosters a deep sense of disconnection.

Theme 5: Feelings of Diminished Self-Worth and Identity

Beyond lacking connection with others or external objects, participants described loneliness as a profound state of internal disconnection. This experience involved a sense of alienation not only from society but also from their own sense of self. When unable to meaningfully engage with their surroundings, participants began to question their intrinsic value and existence, reporting feelings of being unimportant, unnoticed, or lacking a clear identity. These perceptions of diminished self-worth were consistently reflected in the participants' narratives.

Subtheme 5.1 Sense of Invisibility

Several participants expressed a profound sense of being unnoticed or insignificant within their social environments. This feeling of invisibility often led to a yearning for recognition and a stable sense of identity. Participant 2 articulated this struggle to find a place among others:

My loneliness has turned into wanting to be Someone instead. Because we're not a point of interest at all, it makes us very lonely... I feel like, well, I'm not important. I'm not important enough, or rather, we don't have an existence among those people. (Participant 2)

Similarly, this perceived lack of existence extended to a disconnection from one's own life narrative. Participant 12 described this void, stating, "The emptiness of loneliness feels like we... we don't exist anywhere. We're not part of anyone's story, not even our own story. We don't... have an existence... anywhere at all."

Subtheme 5.2 Questioning Personal Significance

Perceiving an absence of meaningful roles fueled doubt about one's identity and place in the world. Participant 1 described this existential anxiety, noting: "The more I felt lonely, the more I wondered if I had any real purpose. That's a scary road to go down." This sentiment was reinforced by Participant 5, who highlighted the internal fragmentation caused by loneliness, stating, "The feeling that I have no value, the feeling that I'm different from others, feeling alienated."

The loneliness that comes from being unable to connect with the world, or even with oneself, reflects an existence that is not rigidly predetermined, but rather is constructed and shaken through interactions between the individual and the world as both actor and recipient of action.

Theme 6: Loneliness as a Necessary Tool for Living

Despite the predominantly negative connotations of loneliness, participants acknowledged that not all loneliness is destructive. In certain contexts, it functioned as a catalyst for personal insight or adaptive change.

Subtheme 6.1 Loneliness is a Tool for Self-Reflection and Growth

Loneliness often served as a "warning signal," indicating a critical deficiency in participants' lives. It functioned as an internal alarm system, alerting individuals to engage in self-reflection when essential connections or aspects of their lives were missing. Participant 6 described this as a restorative process, allowing for a return to emotional safety: "When we feel lonely and isolated, it's like it makes us feel we can come back to heal ourselves in a safe zone where we're okay, we're here, we're happy, thinking with ourselves." Similarly, Participant 2 noted how this discomfort could act as a catalyst for personal development, stating, "I'm learning that being alone isn't always bad if it pushes me to grow or do something meaningful."

Subtheme 6.2 Loneliness Must Be Accepted and Lived With

Participants conceptualized loneliness as an inherent mechanism of being human, suggesting that it cannot be permanently eliminated. Instead, the experience fluctuated, temporarily decreasing when connections were restored, yet remaining an integral part of the self that could be unearthed or buried over time. Participant 12 reflected on the importance of acknowledging this internal state, viewing it as a form of self-care:

I think in terms of eliminating loneliness erasing it or trying to ignore it. It's not something we should do at all. I think loneliness is a part of ourselves that is a form of love that we... think, for ourselves. If we try to erase it, pretend not to see it, or act like it doesn't exist, I think that's more like... denying ourselves. (Participant 12)

Similarly, this persistent nature of loneliness was described as a cycle of visibility and concealment by Participant 1, who stated, "Well, loneliness occurs all the time, but it's like, it's like ups and downs. As for how to handle it... if you ask whether I handle it, I think it's more like I bury it."

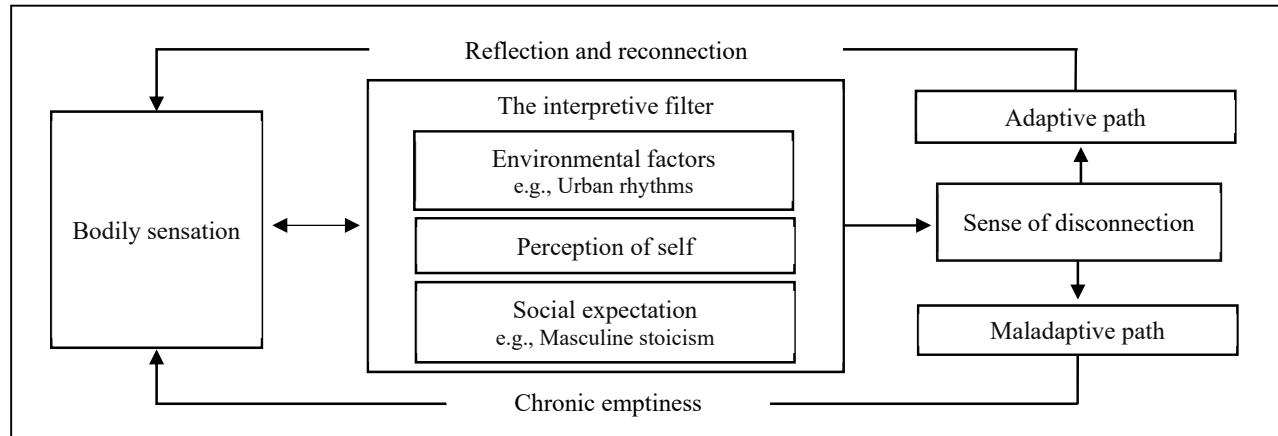
Synthesis of the Six Components of Embodied Loneliness

As illustrated in Figure 1, the model operates as an intersecting, dynamic loop rather than a simple linear progression. It originates in (1) bodily sensations, triggered by altered interoception and physical shifts like chest heaviness. Rather than merely passing through, these physical experiences actively collide with, and are structurally moderated by, (2) the interpretive filter. This filter comprises the specific friction between isolating environmental factors (e.g., Bangkok's post-routine temporal emptiness), negative perception of self, and rigid social expectations (e.g., Thai masculine stoicism). This intense mediation results in a profound (3) sense of disconnection from one's environment, society, and identity. Crucially, this state serves as (4) the adaptive signal, prompting a critical divergence. Acknowledging this signal, often by engaging in mindful awareness of these bodily states, triggers the adaptive path, fostering self-reflection, emotional stabilization, and the restoration of personal agency. Conversely, suppressing this signal due to

cultural or environmental barriers forces a maladaptive downward spiral. This traps the individual in chronic emptiness that continuously feeds back into the lived body, structurally amplifying the initial bodily distress and perpetuating the cycle.

Figure 1

Embodied Loneliness Model



Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Main Results

The six major themes identified in this study collectively form a conceptual model illustrating that loneliness is not merely an absence of social ties, but a dynamic state deeply rooted in embodied, psychological, and contextual dimensions. At its core, the essence of this phenomenon reveals that loneliness is an emotional, affective, and bodily experience of being disconnected from the world, other people, objects, or even oneself, leading to a sense of nonexistence. While it is often perceived as a negative state arising from personal and social factors, loneliness is also an experience essential to being human. Participants' narratives align closely with existential-phenomenological perspectives (Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlberg et al., 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), emphasizing that loneliness arises when individuals experience profound disconnections within their lived bodies from their environment, relationships, or internal expectations. Specifically, the participants' sense of self-disconnection, feeling like a song missing its lyrics or an anomaly, provides a contextual extension of Seemann's (2023) concept of stunted emotion. While Seemann describes this as a general state of alienation, our findings suggest that for young Thai men, this stunted state is characterized by a profound loss of internal agency and a questioning of one's existential value. This internal void suggests that loneliness is not just a social deficit but a crisis of the self-narrative. This existential imbalance supports previous phenomenological research that positions loneliness as inherently subjective and context-sensitive, contingent upon personal meaning, bodily perceptions, and relational experiences.

This study confirms yet expands upon earlier psychological findings (Altschul et al., 2021; Masi et al., 2011) by highlighting how personality traits and cognitive patterns indeed influence loneliness but must be understood within broader embodied and environmental contexts. Participants vividly described loneliness through physical sensations such as bodily coldness, heaviness, disrupted interoceptive awareness, distorted sense of time which align with neurobiological perspectives linking loneliness to altered bodily and neural processes (Spreng et al., 2020). Specifically, these physical experiences are consistent with research showing that social pain may disrupt interoceptive processes and bodily self-perception, potentially involving pathways such as the anterior insula (AI) (Lieberz et al., 2021). Literature indicates that the AI plays a role in interpreting internal signals, such as heartbeat and body temperature, as indicators of emotion. When the AI malfunctions, emotional processing becomes distorted. For example, individuals may feel physically cold and interpret this sensation as social isolation. These experiences are

consistent with findings that physical coldness may prompt feelings of loneliness, leading people to rely on physical warmth as a substitute for social connection (Bargh & Shalev, 2012; Inagaki & Human, 2020). Furthermore, because abnormal AI functioning is also linked to time perception (Craig, 2009), this neurobiological link may help explain why individuals in our study experienced a distorted sense of time and feeling that a period of loneliness either drags on endlessly or rushes by more quickly than it truly does.

This embodied cognition viewpoint supports and extends previous neurobiological research (Cacioppo et al., 2014) by revealing how physical manifestations of loneliness actively shape the individual's emotional and cognitive states rather than passively reflecting them. Moreover, the findings highlight that loneliness is a subjective experience deeply embedded within situated cognition, indicating that individuals interpret their loneliness based on specific environmental contexts and interactions, aligning with the idea that cognitive processes are inherently tied to the situational contexts in which they occur.

In the Thai context, loneliness surfaces powerfully when core social needs such as intimacy, support, proximity and fun are unmet, particularly when individuals lack someone to share in personal (Akhter-Khan et al., 2024). However, Traditional ideas of masculinity inhibit open expressions of this loneliness (Borys & Perlman, 1985), and local gender norms significantly worsen the isolation, as Thai society still expects men to be tough and self-reliant. Consequently, young Thai men feel pressured to hide their distress (Kaewjanta & Rungreangkulkij, 2022). Compared to Western youth who often link loneliness to urban or economic issues (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022), Thai men tend to internalize their struggles because asking for help is seen as a weakness. Ultimately, this cultural expectation prevents meaningful emotional sharing.

Furthermore, the findings underscore urban environmental factors as significant loneliness amplifiers, explicitly highlighting how the physical and social landscapes of Bangkok, along with the hour following daily routines exacerbate feelings of isolation. This insight both supports and deepens earlier observations on urban loneliness (Imrie, 2017), providing concrete examples of how urban infrastructure and modern lifestyle patterns in Bangkok intensify disconnection, corroborating Rokach's (2012) study discussing how after-work hours can lead to a temporary loss of social anchor. Interestingly, while Rosenthal (1984) originally framed seasonal loneliness within the context of climate-induced changes in high-latitude regions, our data reveals a unique urban-temporal variant in Bangkok. The heightened loneliness reported during twilight or rainy weather in the city is not merely a biological response to light but is intertwined with the urban rhythm, wherein the end of a workday and the onset of rain symbolize a forced retreat into impersonal, cramped spaces. This suggests that in a mega-city like Bangkok, seasonal triggers are reconstructed by the interaction between weather and urban infrastructure. Additionally, the study challenges simplistic assumptions about social connectivity by demonstrating that even individuals with active social networks may experience profound loneliness if meaningful emotional connections remain elusive aligning closely with phenomenological arguments that prioritize the quality and depth of interpersonal interactions over mere social presence (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Crucially, this research highlights a paradoxical yet critical aspect of loneliness as a catalyst for self-reflection and growth. While previous literature often framed loneliness negatively, as a problem needing resolution (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Masi et al., 2011), this study contributes a nuanced view that loneliness can serve as an existential alarm, prompting individuals to reassess and recalibrate their psychosocial environments and internal states (Mushkevych, 2022). From an existential standpoint, moments of profound isolation provide a necessary space for individuals to confront their authentic selves and construct personal meaning. By embracing solitude rather than resisting it, participants transformed loneliness from a struggle into a foundational state for self-reflection. Viewing loneliness as an inherent mechanism of being human, a cyclical experience that cannot be permanently eliminated but must be understood, allowed participants to shift from denying the self to healing the self within their safe zones. By implicitly drawing on these intertwined perspectives, participants were able to reclaim agency, transforming loneliness from a purely negative symptom into a potentially instructive human experience.

By integrating these diverse perspectives, the emergent holistic model articulates loneliness not simply as a deficit to overcome, but as a complex, multidimensional human phenomenon capable of fostering deeper self-understanding and meaningful reconnections with oneself and the world.

Overall, our findings provide a contextual extension of the interactionism model (Bhanthumnavin, 2015). as a powerful lens for understanding urban loneliness in Thai men. We observed that enduring psychological traits attract participants to loneliness when they face situational factors like Bangkok's crowded streets and rapid city life. At the heart of this framework is the mechanical interaction: cultural expectations of masculine stoicism collide with personal desires for meaningful connection, amplifying feelings of isolation. These interactions give rise to negative psychological states stress, emptiness which in turn diminish social drive and distort the perception of supportive cues. By mapping our themes onto the model's four dimensions (situational factors, psychological traits, their dynamic interplay, and resultant psychological states), we demonstrate how Interactionism comprehensively captures the embodied, context-bound, and culturally nuanced experience of loneliness in Thailand's urban environment.

In summary, this study contributes a multifaceted novelty to the existing literature. Contextually, it uncovers the specific 'urban-temporal' triggers of loneliness unique to Bangkok's infrastructure and the cultural expectations of Thai masculine stoicism. Theoretically, the findings bridge neurobiological pathways of 'embodied experiences' with existential frameworks of self-reflection and meaning-making. Methodologically, the research captures the hidden voices of young Thai men, revealing that their loneliness is a profound state of self-disconnection rather than a mere social deficit.

Limitations

While these findings enhance our understanding of loneliness in urban Thai men, several methodological and theoretical limitations should be noted. The purposive sampling and online self-identification process may have excluded individuals without digital access or those who experience loneliness differently. The reflective lifeworld research approach, while offering depth, depends on participants' verbal articulation and researchers' interpretive openness, which may influence data generation. The study's existential-phenomenological framework also narrows its generalizability to other theoretical paradigms. Finally, the demographic focus on Bangkok-based men, aged 20–30 years, limits transferability to other populations and contexts. These limitations reflect the inherent boundaries of lifeworld-oriented qualitative research.

Implications for Behavioral Science

From a behavioral science perspective, conceptualizing loneliness as an embodied experience necessitates interventions addressing both cognition and physical sensations. Given the Thai context, practitioners should integrate somatic-focused therapies with the Buddhist Psychological Model (Grabovac et al., 2011). This culturally syntonetic approach guides young men to observe physical symptoms (e.g., coldness, heaviness) with non-judgmental acceptance, fostering emotional regulation without forcing them to verbalize distress, effectively bypassing barriers of masculine stoicism. Furthermore, interventions must address "urban-temporal" triggers by assisting individuals in restructuring routines during high-risk periods, such as utilizing community third spaces during post-work twilight. Ultimately, institutional screenings should assess somatic complaints and social withdrawal as early behavioral indicators, providing holistic support that seamlessly bridges internal bodily awareness with external environmental management.

Conclusion

Loneliness, as experienced by young adult men in Bangkok, is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon deeply intertwined with bodily sensations, social ideals, and urban environmental influences. While chronic loneliness poses risks to mental and physical health, participants also highlighted how loneliness can serve as a reflective tool, prompting critical self-examination and a renewed quest for meaningful interaction. These insights underscore the importance of holistic, context-sensitive strategies that address existential, embodied, and socio-environmental dimensions. Particularly, considering the gender-specific nature of this phenomenon, interventions must address traditional Thai masculine norms to promote emotional

expressiveness supporting individuals in navigating loneliness and harnessing its potential for personal growth and transformation.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Human Research Ethics Committee of Srinakharinwirot University (SWUEC-662132, 07/11/2023). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Declaration of Generative AI: The authors would like to acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, specifically Gemini 3.1 Pro, solely for the purpose of language editing and grammatical refinement to improve the readability and fluency of this manuscript. The AI tools were not used to generate data, analyze results, or construct the core theoretical arguments. The authors take full responsibility for the final content and integrity of the published work.

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