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**“Distance above is distance nevertheless”: Untangling
loneliness, avoidant attachment and self-reliance in
international students.**

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Table of contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1. Theoretical framework: loneliness, avoidant attachment, and self-reliance.	5
1.1 Types of loneliness in international students.....	5
1.2 Coping strategies and isolation.....	7
1.3 Loneliness as a regulatory loop involving maladaptive social cognition.....	9
1.4 Adult attachment and loneliness.....	11
1.4.1 Loneliness “triggering” attachment system.....	12
1.4.2 Attachment system “triggering” loneliness.....	14
1.4.3 Self-reliance in young adults and students.....	15
Chapter 2. Empirical illustration: narratives of self-reliance in international students.	18
2.1 The desire for connection and the internal wall.....	19
2.2 Self-reliance as a value.....	20
2.3 Emotional suppression and prohibition on sharing.....	21
2.4 Devaluation of attachment.....	22
2.5 The positive model of self.....	23
Discussion.....	24
Conclusions and implications.....	25
References.....	28

Abstract

International students are at heightened risk for loneliness and social isolation, yet the internal psychological mechanisms that sustain this isolation remain underexplored. This thesis examines loneliness among international students through the lens of adult attachment theory, arguing that self-reliance, understood as a deactivating strategy characteristic of avoidant attachment, constitutes a significant barrier to connection and help-seeking. The thesis integrates research on types of loneliness in student populations, cognitive regulatory models of isolation, and adult attachment styles, with particular attention to the dismissing-avoidant orientation. Drawing on the concept of compulsive self-reliance and related concepts from other theoretical traditions, the thesis proposes that the paradox of students who desire connection yet actively withdraw from it is best understood within an attachment framework. To illustrate this, qualitative narratives are analyzed from international students who participated in a psychosocial group intervention at the University of Padua. Analysis of session transcripts reveals recurring patterns of emotional suppression, devaluation of attachment, and the explicit identification of self-sufficiency as a personal value and definition of well-being. The discussion addresses implications for intervention design, advocating for approaches that target maladaptive affect regulation and the internalized equation of need with weakness. Self-compassion and interdependence are proposed as promising directions for future research and practice.

Keywords: loneliness, international students, avoidant attachment, self-reliance, deactivating strategies, social isolation

Introduction

It is widely believed that young adults are a particularly vulnerable group, insofar as they are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, from dependence to autonomy, and from a fragmented, unstable sense of self to an integrated identity (Erikson, 1963) that they will be both developing and relying upon throughout their lives. These are turbulent waters, and even more so for those who have chosen to leave their countries to study abroad and pursue their professional paths in an international environment. There is a growing body of scientific literature that acknowledges their unique difficulties and opportunities. On one hand, international students grow significantly as individuals during

their stay abroad, gaining intercultural knowledge and becoming more sensitive to diversity (Sobkowiak, 2019), as well as more flexible, adaptive, and self-aware (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012). On the other hand, studying away from home is associated with linguistic barriers, cultural shock, housing and financial difficulties, and one of the biggest challenges turns out to be loneliness and social isolation (Bilecen et al., 2023).

Loneliness is an experience that all age groups succumb to, and it is difficult to find a person who has never faced it — but young adults, students in general and international students in particular, are found to be especially prone to it (Berry, 1997; Kim & Abreu, 2001, cited in Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Loneliness as a challenge for students and its prevalence are well-documented, and institutions are designing interventions to help mitigate its effects on well-being (Cipolletta et al., 2024). The literature also mentions the specific ways in which students cope with the experience of loneliness: some try to socialize and stay busy, always looking for events and opportunities; some turn to religious practices in search of support. One of the common consequences of loneliness is isolation (Wawera & McCamley, 2019). In a way, isolation can be conceptualized as a *natural* consequence of feeling lonely. However, the psychological mechanism underlying the *maintenance* of isolation in international students is not closely investigated, and the phenomenon of isolation as an active process in which the affected person is both the target and the agent is not widely discussed.

When talking about loneliness or isolation, we are more inclined to think in terms of causes and circumstances — or, as Robert Weiss (1973) put it, of “situational theories” that look for “defective situations” (p. 71). It is enticing, for example, to see loneliness as solely a result of a lack of social support, or of losing close ties with family members while moving away from home, or any other life experiences affecting the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships. These factors are no doubt influential, but by focusing solely on the “objective” characteristics of circumstances we might overlook the essence of loneliness as a deeply subjective, internal experience — one that has a cognitive-affective dimension and possibly some regulatory mechanisms that prevent a person from feeling closely connected to others even in the presence of people who could provide that connection.

The present thesis aims to look more closely at isolation and loneliness among young adults, and international students in particular, as a self-maintaining, vicious loop in which a person can simultaneously desire connection and avoid it as part of a protective

mechanism. The thesis argues, first, that loneliness and social isolation are not necessarily a natural consequence of a socially unfavorable context, but rather a process that may be maintained by a psychological mechanism of self-reliance — one that can be understood as a deactivating strategy of avoidance within adult attachment theory. Second, it presents an analysis of narratives of several international students at the University of Padua who participated in a mutual support group as part of a project aimed at increasing well-being and reducing social isolation. Qualitative data were collected, transcribed, and interpreted within the proposed attachment framework. Finally, practical implications for future student group interventions are discussed.

Chapter 1. Theoretical framework: loneliness, avoidant attachment, and self-reliance

In their book on loneliness, Peplau and Perlman (1982) give at least twelve different definitions of loneliness, drawn from psychologists with various backgrounds and perspectives. They broadly cluster them into three categories: cognitive approaches (p. 5), which focus on people's perceptions and evaluations of their social networks; social reinforcement approaches (p. 5), which view social relations as a particular class of reinforcement that can be “deficient” in lonely people; and social needs approaches (pp. 4-5), which place emphasis on the inherent human need for intimacy. Although the approaches supplement each other and are in no way mutually exclusive, this thesis will focus on the latter — the social needs perspective — which is exemplified by the definition of loneliness as “the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy” (Sullivan, 1953, p. 290, cited in Peplau & Perlman, 1982). This view is supported by the works of Sullivan, Weiss, and, crucially, Bowlby, whose work on social needs and attachment will be discussed further.

1.1 Types of loneliness in international students

Loneliness is widespread, and it becomes more so as the tension between Western values of independence, individuality, competition, and uninvolvement, on one side, and the basic human needs for dependence on others and community (Slater, 1970, cited in

Peplau & Perlman, 1982), on the other, grows increasingly acute in the digital age. It is therefore unsurprising that young people, and particularly students socialized into these cultural norms, are experiencing difficulties with loneliness. While the transition from high school to university inherently carries a risk of isolation for all students (Diehl, 2018), research consistently indicates that international students are significantly more susceptible to loneliness than their local peers (Bilecen et al., 2023; Wawera & McCamley, 2019). This vulnerability is a critical concern, as loneliness serves as a well-documented risk factor for adverse health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and diminished well-being (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2009).

The literature identifies several multifaceted drivers of loneliness within the international student population. Among them are structural and personal barriers, whereby feelings of isolation are often exacerbated by language barriers, financial stress, perceived discrimination, and the challenges of adjusting to a foreign cultural environment (Bilecen et al., 2023; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Beyond these, the loss of established networks is considered one of the most significant factors. According to Weiss (1973), who distinguished between emotional and social types of isolation, there are two different “losses” an individual may experience: the “lack of a truly intimate tie (usually with spouse, lover, parent, or child)”, which leads to emotional loneliness, and the lack of “a network of involvements with peers of some sort, be they fellow workers, kinfolk, neighbors, fellow hobbyists, or friends”, which leads to social loneliness. The distinction is crucial, as these two types are conceptually unequal, measured differently, and, importantly, tackled in different ways. Social loneliness can be addressed through access to an engaging social network, while emotional loneliness can only be “remedied by the integration of another emotional attachment or the reintegration of the one that had been lost” (Weiss, 1973). Furthermore, it is impossible for an individual to compensate for one type of deficiency with a surplus of the other. In other words, a person who is feeling emotionally isolated cannot find solace by surrounding themselves with people; conversely, a person who lacks community cannot alleviate it by relying more heavily on close relationships.

Weiss himself identifies college students who relocate as a population particularly vulnerable to both types of loneliness: on one hand, the young person leaves behind their parents, the primary attachment figures with whom they (hopefully) had a close emotional tie, and on the other, they leave behind the social relations that constituted a community for them. More recent research supports this claim. Sawir et al. (2008), for instance, report that

international students in Australia experience both kinds of loneliness, and introduce an additional dimension, “cultural loneliness”, triggered by the absence of a familiar cultural environment. Interestingly, Diehl et al. (2018) found that among international students, emotional loneliness is more common than its social counterpart. They suggest this is because the majority of students are socially well-integrated — they go to parties, participate in sports, and have people to chat with — but these connections are superficial enough to lack an emotional component.

1.2 Coping strategies and isolation

How do international students cope with loneliness? Three overlapping kinds of coping strategies have been identified (Sawir et al., 2008). The first is focused on the augmentation of social relationships and the ability to engage in them. Elturki et al. (2019), for instance, mention several strategies that students commonly resort to in overcoming cultural and academic obstacles, such as utilizing university resources (e.g. a gym), joining student organizations, and seeking language support. Students look for opportunities to engage with others in different settings, seek out social events, and try to stay aware of activities that might prove fruitful in establishing new friendships. Studies do show that a more substantial social support and frequency of activities undertaken with others are associated with lower levels of loneliness and depression, and higher satisfaction with life (Cipolletta et al., 2025, Cipolletta et al., 2022, Diehl et al., 2018). However, although trying not to be objectively isolated is an adequate measure to take, it has long been clear that simply being immersed in social life does not lead to a decrease in loneliness — quantity does not linearly translate into quality, which is of equal, if not greater, importance. In a study on loneliness among international students in Australia, Sawir et al. (2008) investigated the correlation between social networks and feelings of loneliness. They begin by noting that one would expect those reporting higher levels of loneliness to have fewer social networks. Nonetheless, they found the opposite: those who reported loneliness or isolation had a higher incidence of networked relationships than those who did not, and more of those reporting loneliness (60%) than those who did not (51%) had close friends in Australia. Their conclusion is twofold: the presence of networks does not eliminate loneliness, and the absence of them does not necessarily produce it. Networking, as they put it, is not a “panacea”.

The second kind of coping strategies refers to seeking help, “often of a professional

or institutional kind”, and this is where institutional interventions and counselling or therapeutic support come into play. However, some studies show that the availability of help does not necessarily mean that students will take advantage of it. Zhou and Zhang (2014) report that 37% of international students in their study felt uncomfortable approaching service staff for help. Wawera and McCamley (2019) found that 30% of students who are aware of available services decide not to use them, citing what some described as “social anxiety” and fear of approaching others. Their findings highlight a paradox: although the majority of students are aware that support is available and do make use of it, the prevalence of loneliness among international students remains very high — 72% in their study.

The third type of coping strategy is defined as ways “in which the lonely student works directly on himself or herself to self-manage loneliness”. This primarily refers to work on the emotions, cognitions, and appraisals associated with loneliness, but may also include a return to faith and religious practices. Some authors (Andre, 199; Rokach & Brock, 1998, as cited in Sawir et al., 2008) see these reflexive strategies as a form of “positive solitude” that promotes self-awareness and confidence and provides individuals with an opportunity to get to know themselves better. Nevertheless, this can also shade into self-distancing behavior, whereby a student “retreats into a closed inner self” (Sawir et al., 2008). Wawera and McCamley (2019), for instance, found that when asked directly, students sometimes describe loneliness as a “positive feeling” that can push them to “improve in positive ways”, while simultaneously perceiving it as a negative emotion. In terms of coping, most of their participants talked about isolating themselves, staying at home and doing something comforting, or distracting themselves from their feelings. Sawir et al. (2008) echo this, noting that “loneliness can trigger a withdrawal from social relations in an effort to contain the pain, reinforcing social isolation” (p. 154). Moreover, several researchers observe that individuals who possess social networks and still feel lonely tend to keep these feelings to themselves: they “are not inclined to provide intimate disclosures [...] because they believe that friends will respond critically” (Hamid & Lok, 2008, as cited in Bilecen, 2023). This avoidant, self-isolating behavior — where a student withdraws both physically and emotionally — extends not only to friendships, but also to the relationships students tend to need and miss the most: those with their families. Zhou and Zhang (2014) note that some international students frequently mention feeling homesick and lonely, yet do not reveal this to their parents, because, as one participant describes it, “it's awkward to say 'Mom, I miss you.'”

To summarize the argument so far: international students suffer from multiple types of loneliness, and one of the most marked is emotional loneliness. Emotional loneliness can be remedied by the support provided by strong ties with family members and friends. Emotional support is particularly crucial in reducing feelings of loneliness (Cotterell, 2007; Morelli et al., 2015, as cited in Bilecen, 2023), and international students benefit substantially from supportive close relationships (Beech, 2015; Diehl et al., 2018, as cited in Bilecen, 2023). However, as noted above, students: a) do not necessarily feel less lonely in the presence of social networks; b) do not always resort to seeking institutional or psychological help, even when it is available; and c) when it comes to self-managing distress, tend to withdraw and isolate themselves, not opening up, not sharing, not self-disclosing. Why might this be? Some studies suggest it is due to the stigma and taboo placed on loneliness (Bilecen et al., 2023), which is a compelling argument from a social psychological perspective, but does not offer a psychological mechanism, nor does it explain why some people overcome the taboo and self-disclose while others do not. On the whole, research on loneliness among international students does not seem to focus on the “why” of isolation in terms of internal, psychological mechanisms, as opposed to external, social ones. The need for greater consideration of the barriers preventing students from engaging with social activities and available services is widely recognized (Wawera & McCamley, 2019). But what are these barriers in the first place?

1.3 Loneliness as a regulatory loop involving maladaptive social cognition

Self-isolation as not a simple antecedent or consequence of loneliness, but a self-perpetuating process that maintains this psychological state, has been noted and investigated more closely by authors addressing the experience in general (not necessarily focusing on students, as the research presented above does). Loneliness in all populations is seen as leading to an increase in isolation, where an individual finds themselves in a vicious cycle of becoming more and more “segregated into [their own] 'constricted' space” (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Several prominent researchers of a cognitive inclination view the phenomenon as a regulatory loop, in which the barriers lie in the realm of appraisal and reappraisal of social information. According to Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009), evolutionary biological frameworks suggest that while loneliness once functioned as a survival-driven deterrent against social fragmentation, in contemporary settings it often triggers implicit hypervigilance, a subconscious sensitivity to social threats. This state

facilitates cognitive biases whereby individuals disproportionately attend to and remember negative social stimuli, leading to behavioral confirmation processes that reinforce their perceived isolation. Physiologically, chronic social threat surveillance overactivates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and disrupts sleep, eventually culminating in diminished executive function, systemic physiological dysregulation, and increased mortality. In other words, in their model of the loop, perceived social isolation leads to hypervigilance of social threats, which leads to confirmatory biases, which leads to negative social interactions and affect, which in turn leads back to perceived social isolation. Thus, “loneliness is related to [...] weaker motivations to approach good social outcomes”, it contributes to a “downward spiraling of negative affect”, and eventually leads to a situation in which “lonely individuals focus on themselves, their needs, and their preservation in negative circumstances” and “push away the very people to whom he or she most wants to be close” (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). Cacioppo and Hawkley conclude that “lonely individuals may view themselves to be passive victims in their social world, but they are active contributors through their self-protective and paradoxically self-defeating interactions with others”. Accordingly, they suggest that interventions should target maladaptive social cognition, promoting cognitive-behavioral approaches that help identify automatic negative thoughts and seek disconfirming evidence, rather than measures targeting social support directly (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

What seems to be missing from the otherwise elegant model of the loop by Cacioppo and Hawkley — as from the more sociological explanations of the mechanism of loneliness in terms of the tension between the desire to approach and self-disclose and the norms and taboos prohibiting self-disclosure — is the consideration of why some individuals seem to benefit from engaging in social networks, attending interventions, or contacting services, and some do not. The undeniable, and arguably even universal, presence of both maladaptive cognitions and societal normative pressure does not explain the variance in people's responses to the problem. If the loop is there, why do some people get out of it more easily than others? Why does work on cognitions not always bear results, as agreed upon by the same theorists and manifested by the fact that existing social cognitive therapies have a small effect overall relative to the meta-analytic mean effect of over 300 other interventions (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010)? This thesis attempts to answer this question by stepping back from the cognitive perspective briefly outlined above and turning to the “social needs” perspective, mentioned at the beginning of this text, which Peplau and Perlman broadly define as one of the three possible approaches to the

conceptualization of loneliness: one that includes, in particular, a dynamic perception of loneliness from the point of view of adult attachment theory.

1.4 Adult attachment and loneliness

Attachment theory, as conceptualized by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), posits that humans possess an innate biological drive to form affectional bonds with primary caregivers to ensure protection and “felt security” (as cited in Bartholomew, 1990; Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Mary Ainsworth (1978) operationalized this theory by identifying distinct patterns of infant behavior through the “Strange Situation”, categorizing children as secure, anxious-resistant, or avoidant based on their ability to use a caregiver as a “secure base” for exploration and comfort (as cited in Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Bowlby (1973) argued that these early experiences are internalized into “internal working models”, defined as cognitive-affective mental representations of the self and others, which serve as templates for perceiving and responding to social environments throughout life. In adulthood, these models manifest as characteristic attachment styles that reflect an individual's degree of comfort with intimacy and autonomy. From Bowlby's categorical perspective, attachment is thus classified into three primary orientations: secure attachment is the functional confidence in a primary figure's emotional availability, utilizing them as a secure base (a reliable source of support used to restore emotional equilibrium during distress); anxious attachment is defined by a perceived inability to handle challenges independently, which triggers a heightened desire for proximity and support despite the inconsistent responsiveness of attachment figures; avoidant attachment, finally, is characterized by a fundamental mistrust of others and a defensive emphasis on autonomy and independence, a strategy employed to preemptively neutralize the emotional pain of anticipated rejection. Bartholomew (1990) refined this by proposing a four-category model based on the valence of these internal representations: a positive or negative “model of self” and a positive or negative “model of other”. There, the *secure attachment* is characterized by positive models of self and others; the *preoccupied attachment* — by a negative model of self and a positive model of others; and *fearful-avoidant attachment* — by negative models of self and others (pp. 163-165).

Within this framework, the fourth type of attachment — the *dismissing (or dismissing-avoidant)* style — is characterized by a positive model of self but a negative model of others. The positive model of self, in Bartholomew's account, is not simply high

self-esteem in the conventional sense: it is better understood as a *defensive* self-sufficiency, a way of maintaining a sense of personal worth and invulnerability precisely by distancing oneself from the evaluations and availability of others. As Bartholomew explains, this positive self-image is actively constructed in the face of rejection by attachment figures: a way of maintaining self-worth and developing a model of the self as “fully adequate and hence invulnerable to negative feelings which might activate the attachment system” (Bartholomew, 1990, p. 164). Over time, the strategies used to defend against the awareness of attachment needs become so ingrained as to operate automatically and largely outside of awareness. The negative model of others, correspondingly, is the internal representation of attachment figures as fundamentally unreliable, unavailable, or rejecting. Rather than producing distress — as it does in the fearful-avoidant type, who holds the same negative view of others but also a negative view of the self — in the dismissing individual it produces something closer to indifference. Others are expected to be unavailable, so their unavailability is anticipated and discounted in advance, rather than experienced as a painful surprise. Thus, unlike “fearful” individuals, dismissing adults defensively derogate the importance of close relationships and emphasize absolute self-reliance (Bartholomew, 1990; Sagone et al., 2023).

1.4.1 Loneliness “triggering” attachment system

Although the attachment framework has been most widely applied to explain behavior in interactions with family members and romantic partners, in the most intimate settings, this paradigm, and the specific type of insecure attachment it describes, the dismissing-avoidant (or simply avoidant) seems particularly relevant to the discussion of loneliness, as it represents almost exactly the type of behavior that Cacioppo and Hawkley described as self-protective and “paradoxically self-defeating”. From the point of view of the attachment perspective, there is nothing paradoxical about the behavior of a dismissing adult, who was taught by early experience that it is safer to avoid being attached to others and to try to fulfill their needs for closeness on their own. For instance, even before the avoidant type was conceptualized by Bowlby and Ainsworth — and later seen to be applicable to adult relationships, potentially extending over the life span — Weiss wrote about a specific subgroup of lonely people who seem to isolate themselves physically and emotionally within a constricted space as a coping mechanism. In 1973, he wrote: “Among

the lonely many grit their teeth and attempt to see it through all by themselves. There may appear to them and to others to be more dignity in this and less risk of new rejection and humiliation. Yet this is an acceptance of isolation [...]. Some go as far as they can with this; they withdraw from others physically as well as emotionally, sequester themselves, and as far as is possible live alone with their loneliness.” (Weiss, 1973, p. 192).

The practical reason why loneliness and isolation can trigger the manifestation of avoidant patterns is that loneliness is a highly stressful state that affects well-being and, from current evolutionary, psychodynamic, and cognitive perspectives, inherently presents a threat to survival that all humans are wired to avoid. Accordingly, one of the staples of adult attachment theory is that the attachment system and the appropriate internal working models are activated especially in times of heightened threat or need (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). During times of need — when individuals are “in pain, lonely, or demoralized” (p. 11), when they are separated from attachment figures — adults, although autonomous and independent, still benefit from seeking and receiving help from others with whom they have a close connection. In this view, the combination of sources of threat and the absence of access to attachment figures “triggers the highest level of attachment-system activation” (p. 11). It would therefore be reasonable to hypothesize that the stressful and psychologically taxing circumstances of moving away from parents, friends, and community, circumstances that most international students face daily, would naturally activate the attachment system in these young adults, which is also manifested in their profound homesickness, their longing for connection with parents, and their efforts to call and stay in touch as much as possible (Sawir et al., 2008; Bilecen et al., 2023; Wawera & McCamley, 2019).

How people deal with the stress induced by loneliness and with the activation of the attachment system depends greatly on their attachment type. A securely attached person knows that in times of distress they can cope partly on their own and partly with the assistance of friends, partners, and family; and crucially, “part of what is learned and represented in this script is that interpersonal closeness and support for autonomous functioning are mutually sustainable” (Mikulincer & Shaver, p. 13). Conversely, anxious or avoidant individuals do not possess this script and adopt “secondary attachment strategies” that closely resemble the famous fight-or-flight responses of physiological psychology (Cannon, 1939, as cited in Mikulincer & Shaver) and are currently understood as rules of affect regulation (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Anxious individuals, in an attempt to manage stress, might disproportionately rely on others (the hyperactivating strategy) feeling that

they cannot manage it on their own. Meanwhile, avoidant individuals do the opposite, the *deactivating strategy*: they withdraw, self-isolate, and rely heavily on themselves. As individuals mature and gain greater agency, deactivation evolves from simple behavioral avoidance into more sophisticated representational and cognitive maneuvers. Specifically, this process becomes anticipatory through two primary mechanisms: the selective exclusion of distress-inducing information that would typically trigger attachment needs, and the cultivation of relational schemas that explicitly devalue or dismiss the significance of caregiving and support (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). In Mikulincer and Shaver's (p. 20) words: "In such cases, a person learns to expect better outcomes if signs of need and vulnerability are hidden or suppressed, proximity-seeking efforts are weakened or blocked, the attachment system is deactivated despite a sense of security not being achieved". This is also echoed by Peplau and Perlman (1982), who argued fifty years ago that denial of dissatisfaction with relationships and devaluing their importance constitute one of the three major coping trajectories. Finally, more recent research has found that deactivation strategies frequently present in avoidant individuals include high self-reliance, aloofness, emotional distance, alienation from others, and inhibition of the desire for attachment and attachment-related thoughts (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007; Fraley & Marks, 2011, as cited in Sagone et al., 2023). Furthermore, people with avoidant attachment tend to show lower well-being, higher psychological rigidity, and lower resilience, and often struggle to manage their interactions with others while reporting less self-acceptance (Sagone et al., 2023).

1.4.2 Attachment system “triggering” loneliness

Hence, the separation and sense of being isolated from others presents a threat to the individual, activating the attachment system in international students; and those with an avoidant orientation might try to deactivate it by withdrawing even further, thus perpetuating the cycle of loneliness. However, the relationship between loneliness and attachment might not be so unidirectional, and some research supports the assumption that insecure attachment itself can make individuals chronically vulnerable to loneliness. In their book on attachment in adulthood, Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) summarized dozens of studies examining correlations between attachment and loneliness, noting that all those which found a correlation report an inverse one: the less secure the attachment, the more loneliness. Moreover, both anxious and avoidant orientations are associated with

loneliness, though through different mechanisms. Attachment-anxious individuals tend to exaggerate their needs for love, intensifying the psychological pain of missing relationships. Conversely, avoidant individuals often attempt to deny these needs, reinterpreting their social disconnection as boredom or irritation to avoid admitting dependence. Despite these defenses, empirical evidence suggests that avoidant individuals still experience significant loneliness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), yet their defenses substantially prevent them from seeking help: individuals higher in avoidance are less likely to seek support in response to increased stress (Collins & Feeney, 2000), to seek counseling (Lopez et al., 1998, as cited in Vogel & Wei, 2005) or professional help (Feeney & Ryan, 1994, as cited in Vogel & Wei, 2005); they also tend to deny their distress, perceive less social support (Vogel & Wei, 2005), and are prone to rejection sensitivity and hostility (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

1.4.3 Self-reliance in young adults and students

What seems particularly important in the attachment perspective is the attention to, and acknowledgement of, the changes in self-concept to which avoidant attachment eventually leads. More precisely, individuals' strategies ultimately culminate in a psychological orientation Bowlby (1973) described as "compulsive self-reliance", whereby individuals come to see themselves as strongly autonomous and independent from others. This deactivating strategy, and its cognitive-affective characteristics, is not accounted for, for example, within the cognitive regulatory loop described earlier, yet seems crucial to understanding the psychological processes accompanying loneliness. If a person holds negative biases about social interactions and avoids getting attached to others, they will naturally place more focus on themselves. If they avoid dependence, they will emphasize independence; if they do not rely on others, they will be exceedingly reliant on themselves. Moreover, as the research above suggests, self-reliant individuals are more likely to protect their independence to the extent of downplaying their need for affiliation. Self-reliance, whether we choose to call it compulsive or not, is, I would argue, one of the most relevant deactivation strategies potentially present in those international students who do not seem to engage in social networks, do not reach out to services for help, and tend to avoid approaching others and self-isolate.

There is indeed evidence that avoidance and self-reliance in particular are readily

employed by young adults. First of all, there is relatively little research on attachment as related to social needs in students specifically, but what exists has used the framework's methodology to examine affect regulation and differences in social support among student populations. In their study "Attachment in Late Adolescence: Working Models, Affect Regulation, and Representations of Self and Others" (1988), Kobak and Sceery found that the “dismissing” group of first-year college students represented their relationships with others as less supportive than either the “secure” or “preoccupied” (anxious) group, where attachment was measured with the Adult Attachment Interview. Dismissing students also reported more loneliness than the other groups. The authors conclude that dismissing students had a bias towards not acknowledging negative affect, whereby the “lack of acknowledgement of distress on measures related to perceptions of self fits with a pattern of 'compulsive self-reliance'”.

Secondly, there is research showing a link between self-reliance and reduced help-seeking intent among young adults. It does not explicitly view self-reliance as part of avoidant attachment — as this is an area where a unified approach has not been achieved (Meadley et al., 2024) — but is nonetheless in accordance with the findings presented earlier that show that insecure attachment is associated with reluctance to seek help. Thus, it is widely acknowledged that young adults are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems and constitute one of the groups most unwilling to look for help; a very prominent barrier to this is self-reliance, which is also variously referred to in the literature as survivalist, profound, extreme, and excessive self-reliance (Hung & Appleton, 2016; Lenkens et al., 2019; Choo & Marszalek, 2018, as cited in Meadley et al., 2024). Studies report that self-reliance is a risk factor in facilitating supportive relationships (Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Ishikawa et al., 2023), particularly among young at-risk adults (Lenkens et al., 2019), adults out of foster care (Hung & Appleton, 2016; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and suicidal adolescents (Labouliere et al., 2015). Furthermore, a sample of young adults described maladaptive self-reliance as associated with stress, burnout, avoidance, unwillingness to seek help, and social disconnection (Meadley et al., 2024). Extreme self-reliance in particular was “discussed in relation to insufficient trust in others and high levels of trust in oneself” (p. 1732), which is precisely how it is conceptualized in the attachment literature.

Thirdly, closely related conceptualization of self-reliance can be found in Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory (PCT), which has been employed to understand the reluctance to rely on others and even tested on students, in particular (Cipolletta et al.,

2022). Within PCT, dependency is not framed as the opposite of autonomy, but rather as something that is distributed: the concept of *dispersion of dependency* refers to the extent to which a person draws on a variety of resources when in need, as opposed to concentrating their dependencies on very few people or, at the extreme, on themselves alone (Kelly, 1955; Chiari et al., 1994). This reframing repudiates the culturally dominant idea that healthy development entails a linear movement from dependence toward autonomy; instead, “an adult is dependent too, but he extends his dependency discriminatingly to more people, to more things, and to institutions” (Kelly, 1955, p. 461, as cited in Chiari et al., 2023). Low or undispersed dependency — where a person allocates their reliance predominantly to themselves — is this a result of what Chiari and others call a “*personal dependency path initiated by guilt*”, whereby a person anticipates further invalidation and construes others as “authoritative, dogmatic, and unable to understand” (Chiari et al., 1994, p. 21). For instance, a pioneering study by Cipolletta et al. (2022) on international students at the University of Padua found that those who reported lower well-being and higher psychological distress tended to show precisely this pattern of undispersed dependency, relying on a smaller number of resources and concentrating their dependencies on themselves or on a single significant other. Importantly, higher dispersion of dependency was associated with greater perceived social support and lower distress, suggesting that the capacity to distribute one's reliance across multiple others is not only a structural feature of one's social network, but a meaningful psychological orientation with consequences for well-being.

Finally, some studies emerging in just the past two years also refer to the concept of excessively relying on oneself as “hyper-independence”, operationalizing and measuring it through self-developed questionnaires, and finding it to be moderately-to-highly present in students (Gustin et al., 2025), correlated with attachment avoidance and internalized shame (Pal & Hasan, 2025), and associated with childhood trauma (Askaree et al., 2025). Nonetheless, although abundantly present in media and people's self-evaluations in recent years (Saner, 2026), the concept of hyper-independence remains largely undefined in contemporary psychological research.

To conclude this part, the attachment framework has proven useful and appropriate for understanding loneliness as a dynamic experience involving both a) the life circumstances that render people vulnerable (by activating an attachment system that then has to be managed) and b) the attachment orientation itself, which can theoretically predispose adults to disconnectedness and withdrawal. The literature has indeed shown that

avoidant attachment in particular can manifest in adults through reduced help-seeking intent, increased social isolation, and what can be broadly called maladaptive self-reliance, which is especially prominent in young adults and students. Drawing on this body of research — on the prevalence of loneliness in international students, on their tendency to withdraw as a coping strategy, on avoidant attachment in young adults, and on self-reliance as both a growing trend in the modern individualistic Western world and a specific trait in many adults striving for complete independence — this thesis argues that one of the barriers preventing international students from forming meaningful relationships in a new environment is the deactivating strategies of avoidant attachment in general, and excessive self-reliance in particular. The following chapter will present narratives of international students participating in a mutual support group at the University of Padua targeting social isolation, and interpret these narratives within the attachment framework, with a specific focus on themes of independence and self-reliance. Importantly, the aim is not to speculate about the internal working models of all international students or to claim that they all possess a neatly labelable attachment pattern, but rather to support a framework within which self-reliant tendencies in young people can be usefully understood.

Chapter 2. Empirical illustration: narratives of self-reliance in international students

The narratives presented in this chapter were collected during an in-presence psychosocial group intervention for international students enrolled at the University of Padua, consisting of six weekly sessions. A blended intervention very similar in content and context to this one is presented in detail by Cipolletta et al. (2024). The group brought together a small number of participants (eight in total, with two people dropping out after the second and the third sessions), who met regularly under the facilitation of a therapist, engaging each week with a different theme: from well-being to coping strategies, interpersonal relationships, and the concept of home. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative excerpts discussed below are interpreted not as diagnostic material but as illustrative narratives: windows into psychological orientations that the preceding theoretical chapters have prepared us to recognize. Names have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality.

2.1 The desire for connection and the internal wall

The tension between wanting closeness and resisting it surfaced early, sometimes before participants had found words for it themselves. After a paired conversation exercise in the first session, Jenny described her partner Jack in terms that capture the central paradox of this thesis:

“He feels isolated, and he wants to get along with people, but he feels [internal] resistance [to do so].”

Emma, who was active across several sessions, made a similar tension visible from her own experience. She described a sustained, deliberate effort to not be alone:

“And like, I know personally, I'm really not good with loneliness. So, like, I've made a very solid effort to, like, go out and meet people and like join groups and do stuff. I found an improv group that meets on Wednesdays. [...] Yeah, it's been going for about a month. And so, like, I've met a lot of people through that. I met a couple of people in my classes...”

And yet, after enumerating her efforts, she trailed off: “But still... It's weird, yeah.” Something unnamed persists underneath the activity. As discussed in the previous chapter, simply being immersed in social life does not address emotional loneliness (Weiss, 1973; Sawir et al., 2008 and others), which a gap Emma seems to sense without being able to fully articulate.

Sasha described a related experience of involuntary contraction:

“And when I come here, in my university, I suddenly feel [...] the introvertness, again. Because I somehow realize that it's the situation, of course, making me on and off introverted [...]. Because at my home, where I lived with people from my own country, I was extroverted. But when I get into the class, [...] I get introverted.”

Sasha experiences her own social self as context-dependent in a way that feels outside her control. The environment itself seems to trigger a withdrawal, maybe because unfamiliar social settings are implicitly read as unsafe.

2.2 Self-reliance as a value

In several participants, self-reliance is not merely a behavioral tendency but a consciously held position, something they describe as part of who they are, and who they want to be.

This was most clearly articulated by Laura. When the group was asked in the third session what “feeling well” means to them, some participants mentioned connection and good relationships. Laura offered something different:

“I would say, [...] *being emotionally independent* [...] for example, it can be a relationship with the person and a kind of relationship that doesn't really give me a bad feeling of worrying, of ‘what if’, ‘what's going to happen?’, ‘why did it happen?’. Meaning that, *regardless of the relationship I have with a person, I feel good. I don't emotionally depend on a person.*”

When the facilitator reflected this back and asked if she would define it as emotional independence, Laura confirmed: “Yes.” For Laura, independence is her definition of well-being itself. The theoretical framework discussed earlier would recognize this as a feature of the dismissing-avoidant orientation: the devaluation of attachment needs to the point where their absence is reframed as health (Bartholomew, 1990).

Laura returned to this theme during a scenario exercise in the fourth session, when participants were asked to imagine feeling jealous of a friend who spends time with others and to share what they would feel in this situation:

“I would say... [I would feel] interdependence. I would feel this, which I hate by the way — I hate to depend on other people.”

When the observer asked her what emotion is connected to the feeling of “dependence” for her, she answered: “*Insecurity*”. The sequence is telling: dependence produces insecurity, and self-reliance is a safer solution.

Jack also named self-reliance explicitly, though his account was more conflicted. In the fourth session, he described the paradox at the heart of his own experience with striking clarity:

“What helps me most is [...] social interactions. But it's most problematic when it comes to social interactions, because I can reflect in the moment and I can see that it

helps... And then I start to hate myself [for] what is happening. *I hate it when I see that that's what's helping me.*"

He went further:

"I should be the one to calm myself down. I feel like I am giving power to other people. [...] It's more like weakness."

Jack experiences dependence on others as shameful, as evidence of a flaw. He even names it himself: "Sometimes I feel like there is too much *hyperindividualism* inside of me." This is close to excessive self-reliance: the need not merely to be autonomous, but to need no one.

2.3 Emotional suppression and prohibition on sharing

Running through the sessions is a recurring pattern of suppressed negative affect: not just the avoidance of closeness, but an active effort to not show, and not share, distress. Several participants described this with considerable self-awareness.

Tom stated it plainly in the third session:

"I always believed that complaining and sharing your problems is... that sharing your negative thoughts is complaining, and this is very bad. Now, because of this, it's hard for me to share something negative with you..."

Mark's account across the sessions shows a more elaborated version of the same orientation. He described being no longer able to cry:

"I have gotten to a point where I can't cry, even if I try."

And a settled familiarity with isolation:

"I feel lonely, but comfortable with it. I have learned to be by myself. I have always been by myself."

He mentioned feelings of anger he used to experience, but denied feeling them anymore. The progressive flattening of affect that Mark describes — the comfort with loneliness, the disappearance of anger — is consistent with what Mikulincer and Shaver

(2016) describe as the avoidant person's commitment to keeping attachment-related affect out of awareness.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in Mark's narrative concerns his relationship with his father:

"One day my father told me, it was a long time ago, he told me: 'Son, you're not talking to me. I don't know what's going on in that head of yours'. And I said: 'If I tell you, you're not going to be able to solve anything. I'm adding to your problems'."

The logic here is characteristic: sharing distress with an attachment figure is reframed as a burden rather than a legitimate need. The need itself is quietly disqualified.

Similarly, Mary, in the final session, put it simply:

"I now know that there are a lot of things I keep bottling up... I don't let out my feelings [...] I don't get attached to people much."

She arrived at this recognition within the group itself (in particular, during the time when participants were sharing what they have realized thanks to the group experience), suggesting that the shared space offered her some access to something she had not previously brought to the level of explicit awareness.

2.4 Devaluation of attachment

Another pattern, related to but distinct from suppression, is the active devaluation of attachment, the cognitive move of dismissing the importance of close relationships before they can disappoint.

Sasha described this vividly when reflecting on an exercise in which participants placed people in their personal "solar system". "Solar system" was an individual exercise, where participants reflected on their close ones in a visual form: they were asked to place family members, friends, and all other people that feel close to them on "orbits", that were drawn around a small sphere that represented themselves. In this manner, visual proximity of a person's name on an "orbit" would reflect the emotional proximity between the participant and the individual in question. Reflecting on this experience, Sasha shared:

"When I think about putting people in my solar system, honestly, I feel [there is] no one there. No one close to me, no one knows me like I do, no one understands me..."

Why I feel this way – they never understand, and it [starts] an argument, and then I’m like: ‘Ok, let’s go, let’s stop’; [I tell them that] ‘You don’t need to understand me’.”

Sasha begins with loneliness — no one close, no one who truly understands her — and then she describes foreclosing the attempt and instructing others that their understanding is not required. The need for understanding is declared unnecessary.

Mark, responding to the same scenario of a jealous friend, said he would not be surprised if his closest friend chose to spend time with others, and added: “*Everyone leaves.*” The negative model of others is central to the dismissing orientation: others are expected to be unavailable, so their unavailability is met not with distress but with detachment.

Laura's vision of her future home, drawn in the fifth session, carried the same logic:

“But I did write ‘no attachment’ on the future [home]... Or, if I attach, to be respectful enough towards myself to detach, if needed, with not much pain.”

Attachment is permissible, but only provisionally, and only with an exit already planned. What is absent from this picture is the possibility of an attachment one would not need or want to leave — that is, a secure one.

2.5 The positive model of self

As presented in the previous chapters, Bartholomew's (1990) four-category model of attachment distinguishes the dismissing-avoidant orientation not only by a negative model of others, but by a corresponding positive model of self, a defensively maintained sense of self-worth. This feature does not emerge uniformly across the group's narratives, and it would be an overstatement to claim it as a consistent pattern. However, in a few participants it is visible, and where it does appear it tends to surface at the moments when the negative model of others is most activated, that is, in the face of rejection or misunderstanding.

Mark would be the clearest example. He started to describe a romantic rejection in the fourth session:

"There was this girl in our classroom. She's Italian, pretty, and dresses like a fashion model. But she's easy to talk to. She's kind, she's not like anyone else. And I was certain that she didn't have anyone [...] I asked her to, you know, start a relationship and she suddenly backed up her story and said she has someone..."

Immediately after sharing this, his account shifted register:

"I pity them. The people who don't bother themselves to get to know me. I pity them because they miss a lot. I pity them because they are superficial, choosing other people..."

The contempt here appears to be not simple frustration but a reordering of the situation: the person who was rejected becomes, in this account, the one possessing something of value that others are too limited to recognize. The negative model of others (superficial, not worth depending on) is paired with an implicit elevation of the self. Mark then softened: *"I can't exactly blame her, but it still hurts sometimes."* The hurt that breaks through is significant; it suggests that the inflation is a posture adopted *against* something rather than a settled belief. As has been noted by several attachment theorists, the positive self-models of avoidant individuals tend to be less stable than those of securely attached people, they require maintenance, and they are accompanied by self-criticism and perfectionism just beneath the surface (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

It is worth noting that not all participants' narratives reveal this feature, which is a limitation of the current illustration. Jack, for instance, couples his self-reliance with explicit self-criticism. He hates that he needs others, and this self-directed judgment sits closer to the fearful-avoidant position than to the dismissing one. Tom's suppression of distress reads more like shame than like self-elevation. Thus, this characteristic of the dismissing style might be less pronounced or absent when the participants are not directly asked to reflect upon their self-image or when other orientations may be at play.

Discussion

The narratives presented in the preceding chapter were produced by a small group of international students participating in an intervention, which is a context explicitly designed to invite openness, vulnerability, and connection. What is striking is not that self-reliant and avoidant orientations were present in this group, but that they remained so visible even within that context. The group setting, in other words, illuminated them.

Taken together, the narratives cohere around a pattern that the theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapters would lead us to expect. The participants describe loneliness and social disconnection not as something that drives them toward others, but as something that tightens their withdrawal from them. Jack resents the fact that social contact helps him and treats his own need for it as a personal failure. Laura defines psychological well-being as emotional independence and has already planned the exit from any future attachment. Mark has grown comfortable with isolation and no longer experiences the anger or grief that might otherwise motivate a search for connection. Tom has internalized a rule that sharing distress is a form of complaint. These cohere around the conceptualizations of the deactivating strategies of avoidant attachment: a learned orientation in which attachment needs are suppressed, minimized, or reframed as weaknesses, and in which self-sufficiency is elevated to the status of an identity.

This pattern has a double significance in the specific context of international students. First, as the literature reviewed in the opening chapters makes clear, these students are navigating conditions — separation from attachment figures, cultural unfamiliarity, linguistic barriers — that objectively place high demands on the attachment system. For those with a deactivating orientation, however, this activation is met with suppression rather than expression, and the result is the “paradoxical self-defeat” observed by Cacioppo and Hawkley. Second, the narratives suggest that self-reliant orientations do not merely make connection harder to find, but they make connection harder to want. Laura does not simply lack close relationships; she has constructed an account of herself in which not needing them is a virtue. This cognitive-affective dimension of self-reliance, the reframing of need as weakness, of dependence as insecurity, and of intimacy as risk, can be precisely what makes it resistant to interventions that target only the external conditions of isolation.

Conclusions and implications

This thesis set out to examine loneliness and social isolation in international students through the lens of adult attachment theory, with a specific focus on the deactivating strategies associated with avoidant attachment, and, in particular, on self-reliance as a psychological orientation that may maintain isolation even in the presence of available social support. The qualitative narratives presented in the preceding chapter offer an illustration, not a proof, of this framework. They suggest that for at least

some international students, the barriers to connection are internal: a learned orientation that treats need as shameful, dependence as dangerous, and self-sufficiency as the only safe ground.

The argument this thesis has developed across its chapters can be summarized as follows. Loneliness in international students is well-documented, prevalent, and associated with significant harm to well-being. The literature identifies emotional loneliness — the absence of a close attachment figure — as particularly acute in this population. Students' common responses to this loneliness (social withdrawal, reluctance to seek help, emotional self-management) are consistent with what attachment theory describes as deactivating strategies: behavioral and cognitive maneuvers designed to suppress attachment needs and protect the individual from the anticipated pain of rejection or unavailability. Compulsive self-reliance, the endpoint of this process, is particularly relevant here: it is empirically associated with reduced help-seeking intent, greater social disconnection, and it appeared, in its explicit, self-reported form, in the narratives of several participants in the group under study.

Several implications follow from this analysis, both for future research and for the design of interventions aimed at reducing loneliness and social isolation in international student populations. The first is attending to the internal dimensions of isolation. The existing literature on loneliness interventions tends to focus on increasing access to social networks, providing informational support, and reducing structural barriers — all of which are necessary but, as the analysis in this thesis suggests, may be insufficient for students whose orientation toward connection is itself ambivalent or avoidant. If seeking help is experienced as evidence of weakness or failure, then the availability of help does not remove the barrier to using it. Future interventions may therefore need to address self-reliance by attending to the affect regulation strategies that shape how students respond to those opportunities. Secondly, one promising direction, supported by empirical evidence, is the cultivation of self-compassion as a mediating resource. Choo and Marszalek (2019) found that the relationship between self-reliance and reduced well-being was mediated by self-compassion — particularly by its elements of self-kindness, mindfulness, and the reduction of felt isolation. Importantly, they note that their findings suggest the potential utility of self-compassion interventions for avoidant attachment styles, not only for anxious ones, which is the population more typically targeted by such approaches. The capacity to treat oneself with kindness in moments of need may provide an internal bridge between the self-reliant orientation and the possibility of reaching

outward. Finally, alongside self-compassion, I would argue that the concept of interdependence, understood not as dependency but as the normal, growth-promoting reliance on others in the navigation of life's demands, deserves greater attention in both research and intervention design. Propp, Ortega and NewHeart (2003), who wrote about youth transitioning out of foster care but ended up articulating a principle with broader reach, propose interdependence as an alternative to the dominant cultural framework of self-sufficiency. They drew on Stiver's (Stiver, 1991 as cited in Propp et al, 2003) definition of interdependence as counting on others as a process that is not only normal but that enhances and empowers the individual. The task that interventions face is partly a cognitive and relational one: to offer participants a framework in which needing others is neither shameful nor a sign of inadequacy, but simply part of what it means to be a person navigating a difficult transition.

The balance this thesis points toward is not the elimination of independence but the restoration of what Bartholomew (1990) described as the equilibrium between autonomy and intimacy that the dismissing orientation distorts. A person can be autonomous and still capable of reaching out; self-reliant in many respects and still able to acknowledge need. Self-reliance taken too far is, in the end, just a more dignified name for loneliness, but as Weiss observed, “distance above is distance nevertheless” (p. 232).

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