

Exploring The Factors Influencing The Experiences of Preferred Solitude Among Students Preparing For Competitive Exams

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Abstract

This study examines the factors that influence the experiences of preferred solitude among Indian students preparing for competitive examinations. While this type of solitude is said to give productive experience by enhancing focus, motivation and self-regulation for some individuals, it can also lead to psychologically challenging experiences such as emotional strain, overthinking and loneliness for others influenced by various factors. However there are little studies that examine solitude in the context of competitive exam preparation among students, a population that spends prolonged, self-regulated hours in relative social isolation therefore, the present study employs a qualitative approach which explored students' lived experiences using phenomenological semi-structured interviews of eight competitive exam aspirants (aged 18–30) who scored high on the Preference for Solitude Scale (Burger, 1995). The interview was based on various concepts such as motivation for solitude, personal factors, coping, emotional affects and overall experiences. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, from which five global themes emerged: Motivation (self-determined and non-self-determined) for solitude, Strengths (resilience, optimism and hope), Self-Concept (confidence and self-efficacy), Support (the role of family and peers) and Psychological Experiences (positive affect, negative affect, loneliness and mental health outcomes). Findings show that the self-determined reason for choosing solitude has positive psychological experiences but when solitude come from external pressure, awkwardness, etc, then it led to the feelings of loneliness and other negative experiences but the students' strengths and the social support they have helped them cope with these negative states.

Keywords: Solitude, Motivation, Psychological Strengths, Social Support, Positive Affect, Negative Affect, Loneliness, Mental Well-Being, Competitive Exam Aspirants.

Introduction

Solitude is often described as a state where a person is away from people either physically or even just mentally separated from social interaction. It sometime happens because we choose it by ourselves or sometimes due to outside factors of our lives that push us into it (Burger, 1995). Larson (1990) defined solitude as a state where people are free from immediate social interactions. But on the other hand, Long et al. (2003) proposed that solitude can still be felt or experienced even when others are around us, as long as there is no active social engagement directly with them.

Later on, further refinement was done by Nguyen et al. (2021) who added a bit more clarity by introducing the distinction between private solitude which is more about when someone is physically separate from others. And public solitude, where a person is physically close to others but mentally withdrawn from them. Long et al. explained it by giving an example of eating alone in a crowded restaurant where others may be nearby, but a person can still feel a sense of solitude by being in their own state and not engaging with others' ongoing social cues, activities and expectations.

But, defining solitude has become more complicated in today's time with the rise of digital communication. Technology allows people to engage in parasocial interactions which means making a one sided emotional connections with media figures. This makes it possible to feel socially engaged even when a person is actually physically alone (Campbell & Ross, 2022).

Multiple studies connect solitude with a positive emotional experience (Long & Averill, 2003; Weinstein et al., 2021). In large scale surveys, many people even report that solitude is a source of relaxation for them (Hammond & Lewis, 2016). And this time spend alone for them enhances their creativity, positive mood, emotional regulation, self-awareness (Larson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1983) and even promote self-growth (Long and Averill, 2003). Sometimes solitude also work as a coping mechanism when social interactions become too much get

overwhelming. It helps in providing emotional recovery when there is any interpersonal stress (Birditt et al., 2019). But studies show that there is a great difference in the experiences among individuals as some consistently feel calm when alone, whereas others do not (Lay et al., 2019) which shows that positive solitude is not a universal experience; it greatly depends on several other factors working together like personal traits, motivations and situational factors.

Rationale of the Study

The concept of solitude is a well-known psychological phenomenon, but research in this field has largely focused on the general population or on developmental contexts such as adolescence or old age, or on other aloneness related involuntary states like loneliness or isolation, are studied more extensively and thus very limited attention is given to self-chosen, goal-oriented solitude, especially among students. In India, a large population of students indulge in the preparation of highly competitive examination system where students often engage themselves in a prolonged, self-chosen study routines by frequently spending 6 to 10 hours daily much away from social engagement (Sathee, 2024). During such extended periods, some students prefer solitude which is often considered by themselves as necessary to maintain academic focus and minimize distractions but while this chosen, goal-oriented solitude is expected to bring positive experiences, it may also create psychological challenges to such students. Studies among competitive exam aspirants indicate high levels of academic stress (approximately 65%) and depressive symptoms (nearly 42%) during preparation (Shrivastava & Rajan, 2018). Existing literature suggests that solitude is not inherently harmful or beneficial but it makes individuals experience different emotional and psychological outcomes which depends on individual, interpersonal and environmental factors (Nelson et al., 2021).

Research Objectives

1. To explore the experiences of solitude-preferring students during the phase of competitive exam preparation.
2. To identify the factors influencing students' solitude experiences during the phase of competitive exam preparation.
3. To explore the how students manage their experiences of solitude during this preparation phase.

Methodology

Aim

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the factors influencing the experiences of preferred solitude among students preparing for competitive examinations.

Research Design

The study uses a phenomenological approach with the qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of preferred solitude among students preparing for competitive examinations.

Population

Competitive exam aspirants aged 18-30 and prefer solitude for the preparation.

Sample

The study included 8 competitive exam aspirants aged 18–30 years, shortlisted through the Preference for Solitude Scale as a screening tool by selecting those who scored higher on the scale and then were invited for the qualitative interview.

Inclusion Criteria

- Have been currently preparing for a competitive exam for a minimum period of 6 months.
- Have preferred solitude for this preparation and thus scored high on the Preference for Solitude Scale.
- Have been able to understand and respond in English.
- Have been willing and able to provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

The sample excluded individuals who:

- Have been preparing for regular college exams or non-competitive coursework.
- Have been undergoing treatment for any chronic or terminal physical illness (e.g., cancer, advanced heart disease).
- Have been diagnosed with, or currently undergoing, psychiatric treatment or long-term pharmacological therapy for mental health conditions.

Tools

Screening Tool: Preference for Solitude Scale (PSS)

The Preference for Solitude Scale (PSS) was originally developed by Burger (1995) and its psychometric properties were further examined by Cramer and Lake (1998). The scale is designed to assess an individual's tendency to prefer being alone rather than engaging in social interactions. The PSS consists of 12 paired-choice items, where respondents select one statement from each pair that best describes their behavior or preference. The scale assesses three conceptual dimensions of solitude preference, including Need for Solitude, Enjoyment of Solitude and Productivity during Solitude. Scoring is based on assigning one point for responses consistent with solitude preference, resulting in total scores ranging from 0 to 12, with higher scores indicating stronger preference for solitude.

Psychometric evaluation conducted by Cramer and Lake (1998) showed across two independent studies, the exploratory factor analysis showed that the scale has a multidimensional structure, whereas confirmatory analyses supported the stability of the three-factor model and the scale has shown the construct validity through differential correlations with loneliness, self-concealment, self-esteem and social anxiety.

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed by the researcher to explore students' subjective experiences of preferred solitude during competitive examination preparation. The schedule consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to examine participants' perceptions, expectations, personal experiences, emotional outcomes, social influences, preparation-related contextual factors and ways of maintaining emotional stability while engaging in solitude.

Procedure

Data collection began with the researcher introducing themselves and providing a brief explanation of the study's purpose and objectives. Rapport was established to ensure participant comfort, following which informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary, that their responses would remain confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Before proceeding to the main data collection, a pilot study was also carried out on two participants using the initially framed questions of the interview schedule and based on their responses and feedback some minor rewording of the questions were done and the sequence was reorganized to improve flow of the conversation.

Following these modifications, the Preference for Solitude Scale was administered as a screening tool to identify students demonstrating a higher preference for solitude. Eight of these students were then invited to take part in the semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences of solitude during competitive exam preparation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (i) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts; (ii) generation of initial codes across the dataset; (iii) searching for candidate themes by collating related codes; (iv) reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset; (v) defining and naming themes to capture the essence of each; and (vi) producing the final analytic account. Through this process, initial codes were grouped into organising themes, which were then grouped into five global themes.

Results

Thematic Analysis

Global Themes	Organising Themes	Initial Codes
Motivation	Self-Determined	"Its my nature" (P1) "I have an inner feeling for solitude" (P4) "like to be alone." (P6) "giving yourself time." (P7) "it is my recharge." (P8)
	Non-Self Determined	"my parents always wanted me to ignore everything... focus on my studies only" (P2) "don't feel good around people...very low confidence I feel there" (P3) "I stay away from people it's my nature, but it's my compulsion" (P1) "don't like people much" (P2)
Strengths	Resilience	"I don't give up. No matter what condition I am in, I feel like I can do it." (P1) "But then I cope up with things. I take some action and then I get back to normal" (P3) "there is a setback, I feel bad, I feel like it's not happening, it's not going to happen, but then I get recharged" (P8)
	Optimism	"God's watching us. Good will happen. That's what I believe. I don't lose hope." (P1) "being in yourself is only the key to your success" (P4) "should continue what I am doing...will get good results." (P5) "will give my best then at least I will secure then" (P6) "then I think it's okay. I'll have time." (P8)
	Hope	"Even if I lose hope. It will only last for a while. I will be like that from the next day." (P1) "There are many paths ahead" (P5) "I think it's okay. I'll have time." (P8)
Self-Concept	Confidence	"I get confidence. I feel good." (P6) "a sense of capability...gives the strength to fight." (P1) "don't feel good around people...very low confidence I feel there" (P2) "I will have the best life If I have to do everything by myself, you have confidence at things" (P4) "feel little self-confidence about myself." (P7) "because of solitude, there is a lack of confidence." (P8)
Support	Family Support	"My family is supportive, my family is my environment." (P1) "family is very supportive. Especially my father...My sisters supports me... they work as a motivation for me." (P6) "brother left, felt a little weird to live alone." (P7) "I call my dad...don't know why I get such motivation just by calling him." (P8)

Psychological Experiences	Peer Support	"When I don't feel like studying... then it feels like a burden. Why don't I have any friends?...want to talk to someone." (P1) "...competitive feeling with my peers" (P2) "I have a few friends whom I talk to and have a good conversation" (P3) "I don't have any friends left" (P7) "feel like everyone is ahead of me, what if I don't make it, what will I do?" (P8)
	Positive Affect	"get clarity of thoughts and time to know yourself" (P3) "It refreshes me." (P6) "productivity is maintained ...feel better when alone" (P3) "...feels good." (P5) "feels good to be alone." (P8)
	Negative Affect	"reached this age...still, nothing has happened." (P1) "sometimes I feel directionless " (P2) "become very demotivating...a lot of difficulty increase the loneliness.. become very depressed" (P7) "Sometimes I feel that I don't fit in" (P3) "don't have any negativity in my mind when I'm alone." (P8)
	Loneliness	"The sphere around me is very small.. want to talk to someone." (P1) "feel lonely Sometimes" (P3) "that solitude, now, feels like loneliness." (P7)
	Mental Health	"if you don't socialise much, people's expectations are low. So, mental stress is less"(P4) "get over-thinking a lot, going out, I get social anxiety" (P1) "I have some mental issues sometimes" (P2) "external pressure...is a disturbance. Otherwise, I am fine." (P5) "My sleep is good. Everything is fine...want to keep on preparing." (P6) "started feeling a lot of depression, sometimes I feel ...will not be able to do anything." (P7) "My mental health is good. Everything is good." (P8)

Note. P refers to Participant and the number associated with P (i.e. P1, P2 etc.) refers to their ID.

Thematic Mapping

On the basis of thematic analysis, thematic mapping was made showing all five global themes, their organizing themes and initial codes (see Figure 1-5)

Figure 1 Thematic Mapping for Global Theme: Motivation

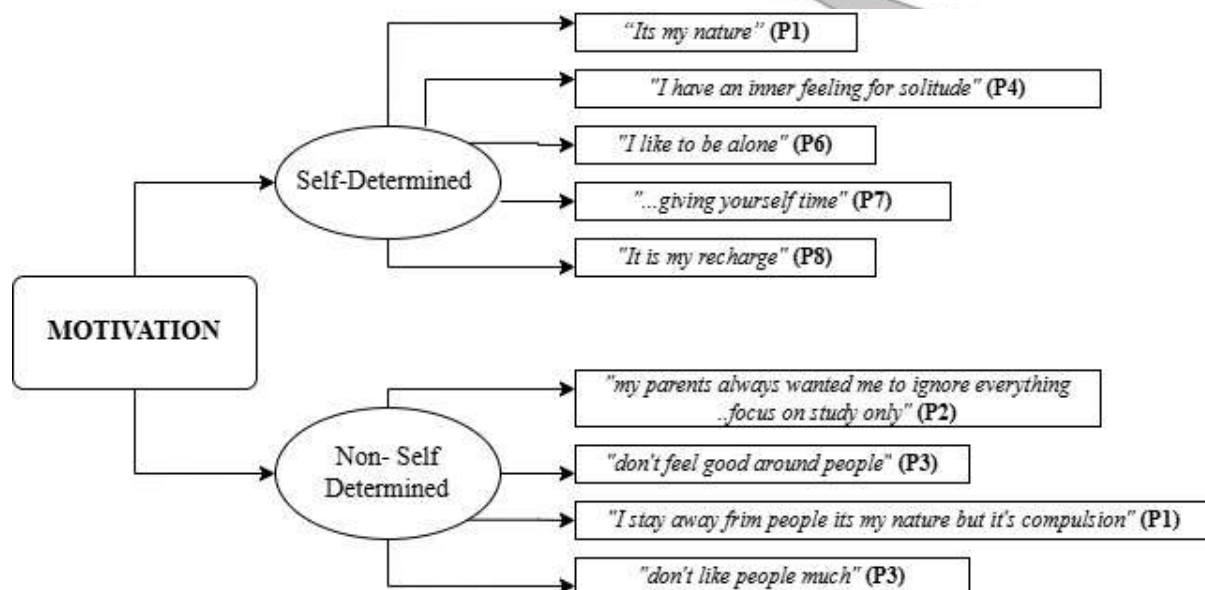


Figure 2 Thematic Mapping for Global Theme: Strengths

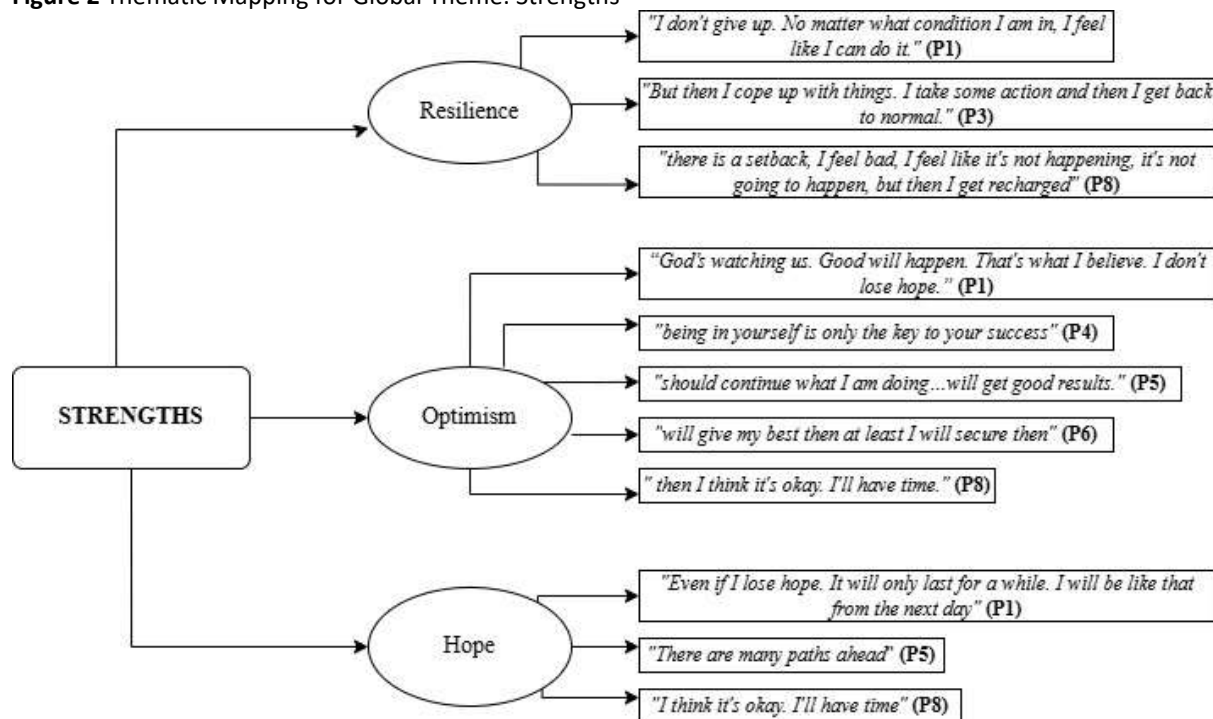


Figure 3 Thematic Mapping for Global Theme: Self-concept



Figure 4 Thematic Mapping for Global Theme: Support

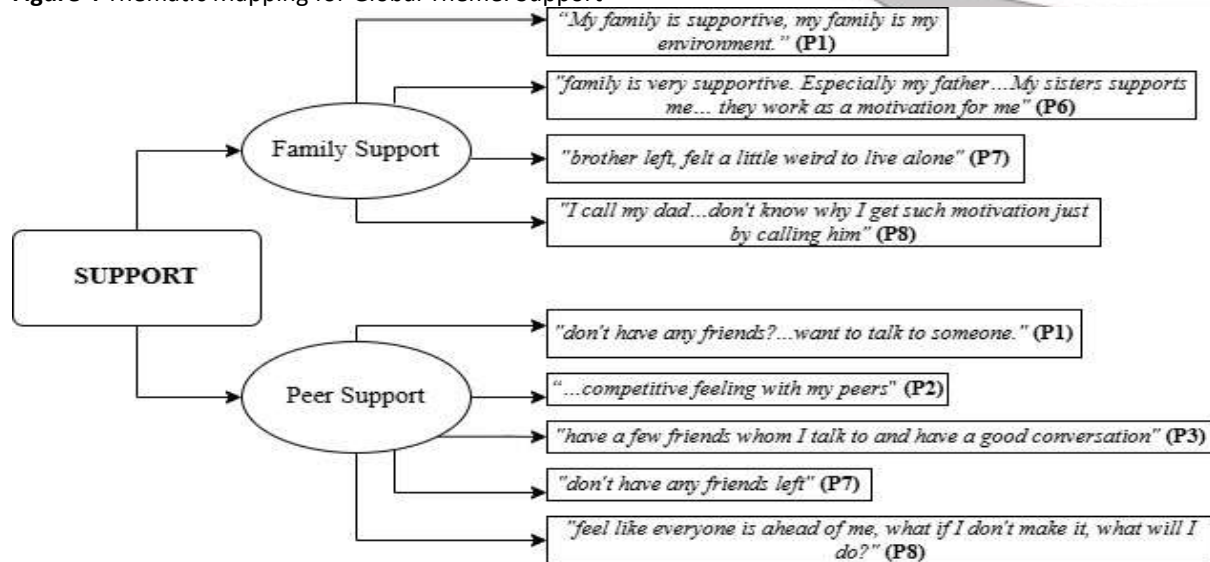
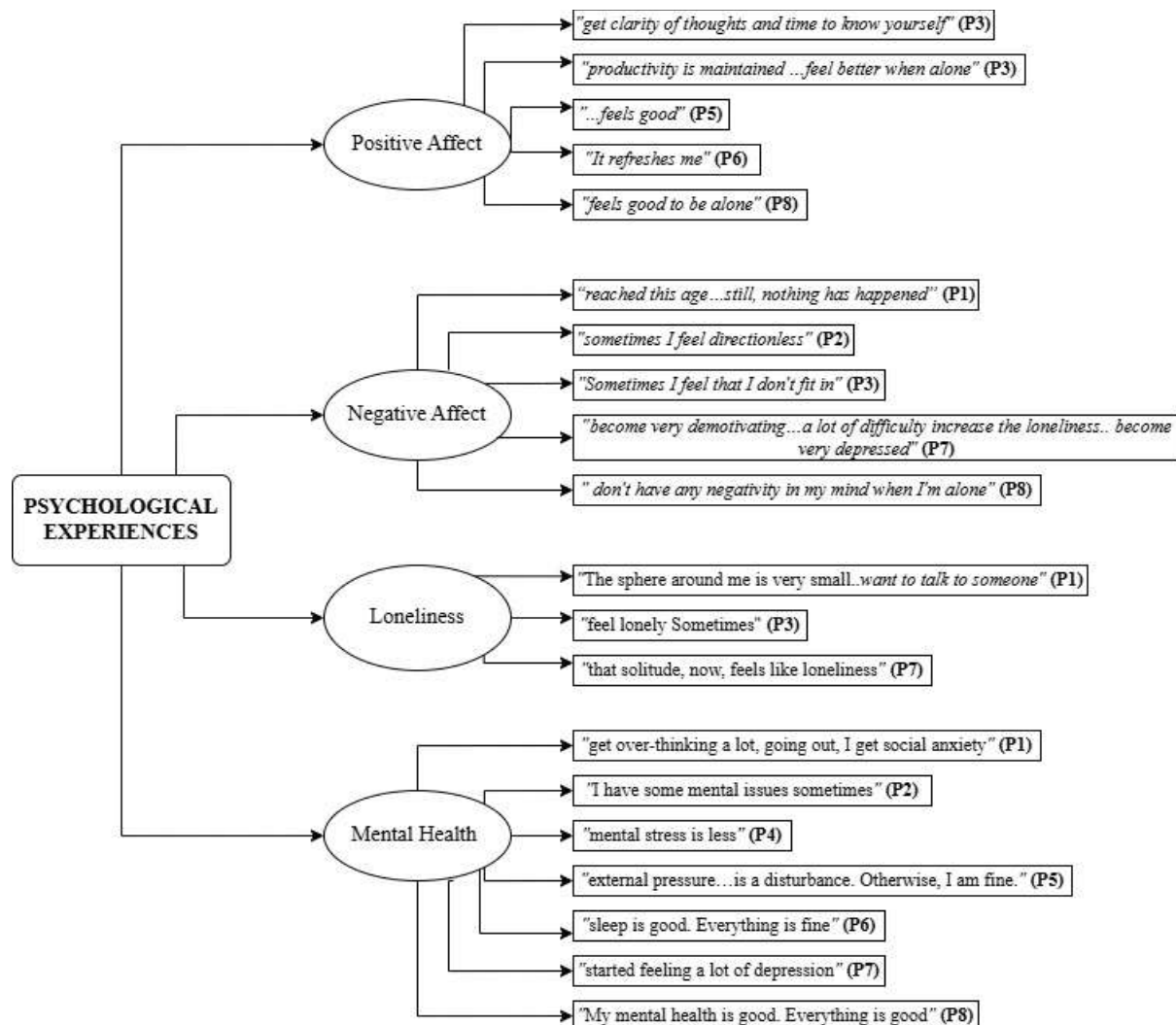


Figure 5 Thematic Mapping for Global Theme: Psychological experiences



Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the factors that influence the experiences of preferred solitude among students preparing for competitive examinations in India. Solitude is defined as the absence of immediate social interaction (Larson, 1990; Long et al., 2003), it has been described in the literature as a state that can either support psychological renewal, self-reflection and focused attention or can contribute to the states of rumination, emotional discomfort and feelings of social disconnection (Coplan et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2021; Beutel et al., 2017). Recent studies have consistently showed that solitude does not have a single, uniform experience but rather it is a subjective and context-dependent experience and thus it has a varied number of experiences and outcomes depending on individual differences and personal and the situational factors (Thomas & Azmitia, 2019; Lay et al., 2019; Cameron et al., 2021).

In India, among the students preparing for competitive examination, the concept of solitude is especially relevant as studies show that students often spent prolonged periods, typically 6 to 10 hours daily, in self-regulated and socially non interactive study environments (Sathee, 2024). In such periods, it sometimes become a practical necessity for such students to choose a goal oriented solitude for their preparation period where such type of solitude is expected to increase their concentration, reduce their distractions and improve their academic focus (Pang & Ruch, 2019). However, the same chosen and goal-oriented solitude can sometime expose the students to psychological vulnerabilities. Research among competitive exam aspirants had shown higher levels of academic stress and depressive symptoms (Shrivastava & Rajan, 2018, as cited in Gupta et al., 2025) which created a clear contradiction that the same voluntary and goal-directed solitude that strengthened discipline and productivity for some students could simultaneously lead to loneliness, emotional strain and reduced functioning for other ones (Coplan et al., 2021; Lay et al., 2020).

Because of this variability, it became important to understand how students actually experienced their goal oriented preferred solitude during competitive exam preparation and equally important was to understand the factors that influenced these solitude experiences. Prior research showed that many such factors interact to determine whether solitary time becomes restorative and peaceful or stressful and overwhelming (Nguyen et al., 2018; Lay et al., 2019).

It was also important to understand how students dealt with their emotional or academic challenges of solitude like many aspirants developed personal strategies like self-regulation, structured routines, positive thinking, or taking short breaks to maintain a balance and for others, emotional support from family or friends worked as an important factor against the negative experiences of solitude. Researches have shown that coping strategies help in preventing the negative effects of prolonged solitude and help individuals maintain motivation and well-being (Cameron et al., 2021; Coplan et al., 2019) thus exploring these strategies helped in understanding how students adapted and what helped them remain mentally healthy during such demanding preparation periods.

With little research on solitude in the population of competitive exam aspirants, the qualitative approach was followed in order to comprehensively understand the experiences of solitude among the students in the competitive exam preparation context.

The present study was conducted through semi-structured interview which was designed to explore students' lived experiences of preferred solitude during competitive examination preparation. The interview schedule was developed around key variables identified in the literature are related to the solitude and its experiences which includes solitude motivation, emotional experiences, study-related pressures, environmental conditions, social support, coping strategies and the perceived benefits and challenges of solitude among such students. The goal was to understand not only why students chose solitude but also how they experienced it and what psychological processes influenced those experiences.

Interviews were conducted individually with eight participants, all of whom were students actively preparing for competitive examinations.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, the responses were coded, compared and organized into meaningful concepts. From this process, five global themes emerged i.e. Motivation, strengths, self-concept, support and psychological experience, each having their several further organizing themes and initial codes.

Global Theme 1 Motivation: The first global theme was motivation which referred to the reasons why students engaged in preferred solitude during their competitive examination preparation. Two broad organizing themes for the global theme motivation were identified which included Self-Determined Motivation and Non-Self-Determined

Motivation, each showed different psychological processes and emotional consequences. These two motivations showed the dual nature of solitude as described in research which shows that people experience solitude as either beneficial or negative according to their personal motivation (Nguyen et al., 2018; Coplan et al., 2019).

Organizing theme 1 Self-Determined Motivation: The first organizing theme within Motivation was Self-Determined Motivation which included students' voluntary and internally driven reasons for choosing solitude. Participants described solitude as a natural inclination, a personal comfort zone, or a meaningful psychological state. The participants made the following statements about their experience:

"It's my nature" (P1)

"I have an inner feeling for solitude" (P4)

"Like to be alone" (P6)

"Giving yourself time" (P7)

"It is my recharge" (P8)

These responses showed that solitude was experienced as autonomous and intrinsically motivated and such students tended to describe solitude as energizing, peaceful and personally meaningful which aligned with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that behaviors that are done with personal choice, interest and internal satisfaction contribute to better psychological functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and thus how these participants' have defined their solitude as a state of "recharge" or "giving yourself time" showed the similarity with how Long et al. (2003) had defined the restorative solitude which they say that it supports one's emotional regulation, give them a cognitive clarity and help them to do self-reflection.

Weinstein, Przybylski and Ryan (2012) also showed that when solitude is chosen autonomously by oneself then those individuals report a higher level of calmness in themselves with improved mood and also having a sense of authenticity, just like in this study where too students who had defined their solitude positively have appeared to comparatively have a greater emotional stability and academic focus during their preparation which is also consistent with studies which show that the self-chosen solitude is indeed associated with reduced stress (Lay et al., 2020; Coplan et al., 2021).

Organizing theme 2 Non-Self-Determined Motivation: The second organizing theme is the non-self determined motivation for solitude among such students which shows that they engaged in solitude due to external pressures or internal discomfort rather than a true self-chosen or intrinsically motivated preference for solitude. Many of them said they feel pressured by parents, society, or lack of confidence, their quotes are:

"My parents always wanted me to ignore everything... focus on my studies only" (P2)

"Don't feel good around people... very low confidence I feel there" (P3)

"I stay away from people, it's my nature, but it's my compulsion" (P1)

"Don't like people much" (P2)

These quotes suggested that preference for solitude among these students was not a voluntary option but it was rather conditioned by fear, difficulty, or pressure. Such motives are consistent with controlled types of motivation in SDT where behaviour is driven by obligation, fear of evaluation or external demands. Students such as P3 withdrawing from interaction with people showed evidence of avoidant or fear based withdrawal which is quite common to social withdrawal literature (Asendorpf, 1993; Coplan and Rubin, 2010). When solitude occurs from lack of confidence or discomfort around people then it is more likely to be related to negative affect, rumination and psychological strain (Coplan et al. 2019).

Likewise, as P2 described facing pressure because of parents corresponds to the concept of external regulation where behaviour is executed only because of externality. Prior studies indicate that isolation for academic competence due to parental pressure increases stress, self-doubt and emotional exhaustion among Indian competitive exam aspirants (Gupta et al., 2025; Deb et al., 2015). As a result, a stressful solitude may become draining rather than helpful.

P1's statement, "it's my nature, but it's my compulsion", shows the ambiguous feelings often found within mixed-motivation solitude. Here, students internalize pressure from exogenous forces, but still experience distress. Lay et al. (2019) also found that people with partially controlled motivations experience solitude as restrictive and exhausting in nature.

Therefore, the non-self-determined motivation led to a form of solitude that was heavy, obligatory and psychologically heavy, increasing vulnerability to negative emotion. Students who viewed their solitude as natural,

internally driven, meaningful, or “it’s my nature” or “solitude is my recharge” expressed an autonomous, intrinsic orientation toward solitude. The students used solitude as a helpful psychological state to calm themselves, maintain attention, regulate emotion and display resilience. On the other hand, students whose solitude originated from pressure, avoidance, or external sources such as parents telling them to “shut everything out and study” or having low levels of social confidence, displayed a controlled, non-self-determined kind of solitude. This kind of motivation led to emotional strain along with more loneliness and stress and more rumination.

Global Theme 2 Strengths: The second global theme Strengths refers to internal psychological resources students relied on during their time of preferred solitude whereas preparing for competitive examinations. This theme is directly related to the integrated aim of the research which is to find out which internal factors that help students cope with experiences of solitude during their preparation. Also, why it is that some students experience solitude in a positive manner despite being under academic pressure. Students’ resilience, optimism and hope enabled them to cope up with these pressure, stay focused and maintain emotional equilibrium.

Organizing theme 1 Resilience: The students’ ability to bounce back, remain stable when under stress and deal with common challenges thrown up by studying alone during an exam forms the organizing theme resilience. Many participants characterized themselves as having a strong inner capacity to bounce back quickly.

For example:

P1 expressed, “I don’t give up. No matter what condition I am in, I feel like I can do it.”

P3 similarly noted, “But then I cope up with things. I take some action and then I get back to normal.”

P8 added, “There is a setback, I feel bad... but then I get recharged.”

Change in feelings is common for students in solitude, but usually, they bounce back rather than stay in those feelings. This corresponds with the Resilience Model by Richardson (2002) which states resilient people undergo disturbances and internally recovers because of their strengths and learnt coping strategies. The participant’s sayings are also reflective of Luthans et al.’s (2007) Psychological Capital where the researchers described resilience as a major concept in this model which helps an individual adapt positively in a successful manner.

Based on a research finding resilience is essential in academic contexts: self-study. Martin and Marsh (2006) assert that resilient students exert high effort and persistence in the face of academic stress. This results in better performance and reduced emotional exhaustion. These findings also extend previous solitude research. According to Lay et al. (2019), students with high resilience are less likely to spend time alone indulging in loneliness or withdrawal and are more likely to find it an experience of growth.

Organizing theme 2 Optimism: The organizing theme optimism signifies in students the ability to maintain a positive outlook regarding their future and the belief that their efforts will lead to success one day. Participants constantly showed confidence in solutions despite uncertainty or a temporary setback.

The responses include:

P1: “God’s watching us. Good will happen. That’s what I believe. I don’t lose hope.”

P4: “Being in yourself is only the key to this success.”

P5: “Should continue what I am doing... will get good results.”

P6: “Will give my best then at least I will secure success.”

P8: “Then I think it’s okay. I’ll have time.”

Seligman’s Theory of Learned Optimism (1990) states that people who expect future good things interpret the obstacles that beset them as temporary and manageable rather than a permanent failure. Having a positive mindset helps one persist better, feel good or emotional wellness and cope well in difficult academic contexts. Students with a positive attitude toward solitude employ it for self-reflection and achieving goals rather than for rumination (Nguyen et al., 2018).

According to positive psychology theories, there is an assertion that optimistic individuals are more likely to feel motivated, regulate their emotions better and use adaptive strategies when things get difficult (Peterson, 2000). The participant’s belief in achieving success someday helped them remain consistent in studies and stop solitude from turning into emotional fatigue.

Organizing theme 3 Hope: This organizing theme captures the participants' belief that effort and perseverance would lead to progress and that, despite feeling blocked, there were possibilities at the other end. Hope is the dynamic force that inspires them to keep going.

Participants shared:

P1: "Even if I lose hope, it will only last for a while... I will be like that from the next day."

P5: "There are many paths ahead."

P8: "I think it's okay. I'll have time."

Hope, in Snyder's Hope Theory (2002), consists of two components i.e. Agency and Pathways. Agency refers to the belief that one can initiate and sustain action toward goals and Pathways refers to the belief that alternative routes exist for achieving goals. The participants' statements clearly express the two components. P5's remark about "many paths" shows an example of pathways thinking. P1's speedy return to a positive outlook shows powerful agency.

Research has also shown that being hopeful leads to better academic performance, more motivation and less stressful (Snyder et al. 2000). Hopeful individuals in solitude research specifically were found to use this time for planning or goal-clarification rather than avoidance or disengagement (Buchholz, 2020).

Moreover, hope functions as a protective factor for loneliness and negative affect (Gallagher et al., 2018) and is especially relevant as aspirants of competitive exams are at a greater risk of being emotionally charged. Optimism or hopefulness that "things will be fine" contributed to resilience and engagement even when solitude was difficult.

The global theme of Strengths suggests positive experience of solitude among aspirants was strongly influenced by their internal psychological resources. The existence of resilience, optimism and hope allowed the students to manage their emotions, be persistent and see solitude as a reason for growth.

Global Theme 3 Self-Concept: The Self-Concept refers to how students perceive themselves, their capabilities as well as inner strengths when preferably in solitude. For the participants, self-concept was central to how they interpreted and acted on studying alone.

Solitude had a big impact on the self-esteem of all participants but not equally. Some students view solitude as a positive state which gave them strength and made them feel capable; whereas, some students feel lesser confidence and more self-doubt due to a prolonged sense of isolation.

For example, it was mentioned by a number of respondents that solitude made them confident and made them strong. P6 shared, "I get confidence. I feel good."

Similarly, P1 stated that solitude created "a sense of capability... gives the strength to fight."

P4 expressed an even stronger belief in self-reliance, saying, "I will have the best life if I have to do everything by myself, you have confidence at things."

These quotes indicate that solitude is a resource that promoted autonomy, self-efficacy and psychological empowerment for some students. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), satisfying the need for autonomy strengthens intrinsic motivation, competence and well-being.

Some participants showed that long periods of spending time alone made them less confident.

For example, P2 noted, "don't feel good around people... very low confidence I feel there," indicating that solitude made social interactions harder and increased self-doubt.

Similarly, P7 admitted, "feel little self-confidence about myself," and P8 further added, "because of solitude, there is a lack of confidence."

The experiences show a different psychological pathway in which solitude is linked with withdrawal, avoidance, or reduced social contact. Studies have shown that solitude caused by fear, pressure and avoidance of social discomfort decreases confidence and strengthens negative self-evaluations (Coplan et al., 2019; Lay et al., 2020). According to Avoidant Motivation Theory (2002), any behavior which is motivated by the feeling of avoidance is associated with decreased perception of one's competence and increased self-criticism. This was similar to participants feeling a decline in confidence.

This contrasting idea under the same theme shows that different levels of solitude influenced self-concept in two opposing directions depending on the type of motivation and emotional preparedness. Students who chose solitude for self-discovery or concentrating found it empowering and competence-enhancing. In contrast, people

who are made to be alone due to their discomfort in social situations and emotional overstrain feel limited and lose their confidence in solitude.

In addition, the diverse experiences of confidence show Cooley's Looking-Glass Self principles (Cooley, 1902) like students who felt in charge and self-reliant when alone developed a positive internal image of themselves whereas avoiding social events or feeling detached created a more brittle self-image, leading to less confidence.

The findings also are related to Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy that shows people build up confidence through successful mastery experiences. Students who used solitude to build greater focus and score better results like being previously qualified in any such exams experienced solitude as a mastery context. On the contrary, students who spent their time being alone without structure or engaged in rumination during their alone time did not gain mastery experiences and had reduced efficacy.

Global Theme 4 Support: The fourth of the global theme, Support deals with family members and peers' role in affecting students' emotions, motivation and adjustment during solitary studying experiences. This theme shows the more general psychological and social environment surrounding the students. Specifically, supportive relationships strengthen positive experiences of solitude whereas the absence or inconsistency of support creates feelings of burden, insecurity, or emotional strain.

Organizing theme 1 Family Support: Family support emerged as a central organizing theme, with participants frequently emphasizing the importance of emotional encouragement, reassurance and the sense of belonging provided by family members and many students have described their families that keeps them emotionally stable during intense preparation.

P1 expressed this by stating, "My family is supportive, my family is my environment." Similarly, P6 stated, "My family is very supportive. Especially my father... my sisters support me... they work as a motivation for me."

The role of family support family support is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In particular, autonomy-supportive environments meet basic psychological needs for are relatedness and competence. When these needs are satisfied, people become more self-determinedly motivated. Of the students, their families helped build their motivation for self-chosen solitude in reference to reducing emotional pressure and feeling more capable and confident in their preparation.

Attachment approaches also aid in understanding these experiences. When caregivers are emotionally available and responsive then according to the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), a secure attachment forms which helps in emotional regulation through stressful tasks.

P8's statement, "I call my dad... don't know why I get such motivation just by calling him," shows this idea which suggests that even minimal emotional connection offered reassurance made them feel more capable of handling study-related stress.

In the same way, in the absence of support or close presence of family members emotional discomfort in solitude could happen in as P7 shared, "My brother shifted, felt a little weird to live alone" which is consistent with the Social Support Factoring Model (Cohen & Wills, 1985) which says that a support from one's close ones are important to deal with one's stress and its effects.

Organizing theme 2 Peer Support: Peer support as an organizing theme had a different and mixed responses from the participants as compared to the family support which was stable across most of the participants and provided them a consistent reassurance during their preparation whereas the peer support was described as mixed, different, or even absent for some of the participants which also showed a significant impact in their emotional experiences of loneliness.

Some of the participants wished to have someone by their side with whom they could talk to and they claimed that they do not get this support from their peers. P1 said, "When I don't feel like studying... then it feels like a burden. Why don't I have any friends?... want to talk to someone." which shows that when in this journey of prolonged study hours along with very few interactions it made them feel forced into solitude than being a choice. Other respondents reported a feeling of competition with peers like when P2 shared, "...competitive feeling with my peers," show that competitive peer climates can increase pressure, self-doubt and social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Some students even said that they have some supportive peers as P3 noted, "I have a few friends whom I talk to and have a good conversation," which shows that how even a small but still good peer connections can work as a

good factor for maintaining a positive psychological state even in intense solitude. However, experiences of peer loss or emotional distance were also evident. P7 showed, "I don't have any friends left," whereas P8 expressed fears linked to peer comparison: "Feel like everyone is ahead of me, what if I don't make it, what will I do?" These descriptions are consistent with the Socio-ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which stresses that immediate social relationships such as peers effectively act as a microsystem. This therefore influences psychological functioning. The misalignment or competition among colleagues impacted on the way students made sense of their solitude. Theory attempts to understand that humans have a need to form and maintain interpersonal bonds with other humans. The need is also known as the need to belong. Failing to meet this need can cause more emotional distress.

Global Theme 5 Psychological Experiences: The fourth global theme, Psychological Experiences, refers to how students emotionally and mentally experienced their preferred solitude during competitive exam preparation. This theme shows the internal psychological reactions that emerged when students engaged in prolonged solitary study which includes positive affect, negative affect, loneliness and their overall mental health.

Organizing theme 1 Positive Affect: Many participants described solitude as a state that helped them feel more focused, refreshed and good like P3 said that solitude helped them "get clarity of thoughts and time to know yourself," whereas P6 said, "It refreshes me." Participants also showed that studying in solitude enhances their productivity like P3 said, "productivity is maintained... feel better when alone," and P5 and P8 said that solitude simply "feels good."

These statements show the self-determined nature of solitude of the participants where individuals choose to be alone for the sake of one's own appeal or for some certain goal which also directly corresponds with Nguyen et al. (2018) and Thomas & Azmitia (2019) research which finds that solitude of one's own choice enhances emotional clarity, self-reflection and psychological restoration just in the same way the participants has described that also align with findings from positive psychology which suggest that reflective solitude supports creativity, meaning-making and enhanced self-awareness (Lay et al., 2019).

Organizing theme 2 Negative Affect: On the other side, some participants also described their comparatively negative experiences within their preparation phase like P1 said, "reached this age... still, nothing has happened," P2 shared, "sometimes I feel directionless," and P7 described solitude becoming "very demotivating... increasing loneliness... very depressed," whereas P3 mentioned, "Sometimes I feel that I don't fit in." which show that the demanding nature of this exam has made them feel self-doubt and frustration which altogether influence their frustration with their being in solitude as well which means that solitude which is prolonged has a greater chance of being influenced by external factors especially in such a pressured environment and these experiences align with research which shows that solitude which is especially under pressure can trigger negative emotional states such as rumination, self-criticism and insecurity (Coplan et al., 2019). Competitive exam aspirants has to face high expectations too which can increase these emotional risks and students preparing alone for extended periods are vulnerable to internal comparisons and fear of failure and these factors are well known in increasing one's negative affect (Beutel et al., 2017; Shrivastava & Rajan, 2018).

Organizing theme 3 Loneliness: Feelings of loneliness had also emerged strongly within the participants' experiences as P1 expressed, "The sphere around me is very small... want to talk to someone," P3 similarly mentioned, "feel lonely sometimes," and P7 shared, "that solitude, now, feels like loneliness." Studies emphasize that solitude and loneliness are not the same but they can indeed overlap when any internal or external stressor increases (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010) which in this context can be understood as when the self-chosen solitude loses its purpose or becomes associated with academic pressure, it begins to resemble loneliness. Weiss's Theory of Loneliness (1973) which distinguishes emotional loneliness (lack of close emotional connection) and social loneliness (lack of interaction) many aspirants have experienced both because they were physically alone for long hours as well as they also lacked meaningful emotional connections during this phase.

Organizing theme 4 Mental Health: Varied mental health experiences were reported by participants during their time of preparation in solitude, and it was found that for some of them, the stress was actually reduced by solitude because the social expectations to them were low as compared to others which is reflected in P4's words, "if you

don't socialise much, people's expectations are low... so mental stress is less." However, anxiety, overthinking and emotional difficulties were experienced by others as can be seen in P1's statement that "I get over-thinking a lot... going out, I get social anxiety," and a similar experience was shared by P2 "I have some mental issues sometimes," and a far more severe form of emotional distress was narrated by P7, who said, "started feeling a lot of depression... feel I will not be able to do anything." Meanwhile, stable mental health was reported by several other participants, and this can be seen in P6's statement that "My sleep is good... everything is fine," as well as in P8's affirmation that "My mental health is good. Everything is good."

These differing outcomes are seen to correspond with the Dual-Process Model of Solitude (Coplan et al., 2019), through which it is explained that mental health can either be protected or worsened by solitude, depending on individual differences, emotional regulation abilities and the surrounding social environment, so that solitude was experienced as mentally protective by those students who had stronger coping resources or clearer study goals, whereas it was experienced as emotionally straining by those who were more vulnerable to anxiety or who had poorer self-efficacy.

A further connection can be drawn between these mental health experiences and the Diathesis Stress Model (Zubin & Spring, 1977), according to which personal vulnerabilities are said to interact with stressors such as academic pressure so as to influence overall mental health outcomes, and it was in this way that emotional challenges were intensified for some aspirants by long hours of isolation, repetitive routines and uncertainty regarding results.

It was found that mental health outcomes in solitude were not uniform but varied a great deal, and this was taken to mean that emotional well-being during solitary study is shaped by psychological capital, coping strategies and the support a student feels they have around them.

Several theoretical, practical and educational implications can be drawn from these findings, particularly for competitive exam preparation, since it was shown that goal-oriented, preferred solitude in this setting cannot simply be labelled positive or negative, but instead its effect depends on what is motivating the student, the psychological strengths they bring with them and the support systems available to them.

Career counselors, educators and psychologists who work with such students who are preparing for competitive examinations can use these findings in such interventions which can help such students in enhancing their psychological strengths and help students identify and thus come out from the non-self-determined solitude so that they can move toward more meaningful and self-determined form of solitude and this can guide practitioners too in identifying students who are at risk of negatively affected mental health.

As the perceived social support was found to play such a significant role in promoting well-being, it follows that families, teachers and mentors need to stay actively involved in the emotional journey of students who are preparing for competitive exams, even while those students are studying largely alone. Emotional support can be sustained through interventions such as family psychoeducation, mentor-mentee programs and structured peer interaction, so that students still feel emotionally held even when solitude is their chosen mode of study, and environmental factors like living conditions, academic pressure and the competitiveness of the surrounding climate can also be monitored by institutions, so that non-self-determined solitude is not unintentionally made worse.

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