



Urban Loneliness in Surabaya: A Phenomenological Study of Hybrid Social Capital and Mental Health Vulnerability

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Abstract: This study aims to understand urban loneliness in Surabaya and to explain how configurations of hybrid social capital combining offline and online relations shape urban residents' vulnerability to mental health problems. The research employs a qualitative approach, using interpretative phenomenological analysis, through in-depth interviews with a purposively selected number of informants based on age, length of residence, and level of engagement with digital media. The primary theoretical framework applied is Robert Putnam's social capital theory, particularly the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital in the context of urban life. The findings indicate that loneliness does not arise from a quantitative absence of social relations, but rather from the weakened quality of meaningful, stable, and emotionally supportive relationships. The dominance of broad yet shallow social networks strengthens bridging social capital while weakening bonding social capital, leaving individuals socially connected but with few reliable sources of emotional support. Such configurations of social capital render loneliness a structural condition of urban life that contributes to increased vulnerability to mental health disorders.

Keywords: Urban Loneliness, Hybrid Social Capital, Mental Health, Urban Life, Social Relations

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami kesepian perkotaan di Surabaya serta menjelaskan bagaimana konfigurasi modal sosial hibridayang menggabungkan relasi offline dan online membentuk kerentanan kesehatan mental warga kota. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode fenomenologi interpretatif melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap sejumlah informan yang dipilih secara purposive berdasarkan usia, lama domisili, dan keterlibatan dalam penggunaan media digital. Kerangka teori utama yang digunakan adalah teori modal sosial Robert Putnam, khususnya perbedaan antara bonding social capital dan bridging social capital dalam konteks kehidupan urban. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesepian tidak muncul karena ketiadaan relasi secara kuantitatif, melainkan karena

lemahnya kualitas hubungan yang bermakna, stabil, dan suportif secara emosional. Dominasi jaringan sosial yang luas namun dangkal memperkuat bridging social capital tetapi melemahkan bonding social capital, sehingga individu tampak terhubung secara sosial namun minim orang yang dapat diandalkan sebagai sumber dukungan emosional. Konfigurasi modal sosial seperti ini membuat kesepian menjadi gejala struktural kehidupan perkotaan yang berkontribusi pada meningkatnya kerentanan terhadap gangguan Kesehatan mental.

Kata Kunci: Kesepian Perkotaan, Modal Sosial Hibrida, Kesehatan Mental, Kehidupan Urban, Relasi Sosial

Introduction

Loneliness in urban settings is a significant social and mental health problem in modern societies. Urbanization is one of the driving forces of economic development and population growth; however, it also leads to rapid changes in social life structure. The fast pace of life in big cities, characterized by mobility, intense work, and everyday duties, and community fragmentation, often simultaneously weakens social relationships. This structural phenomenon has led to what some sociologists call the "urban paradox," in which citizens can feel lonely despite being surrounded by crowds. Loneliness is increasingly recognized in sociological research, not just as a short-lived individual emotional state but rather as a form of social deprivation that adversely affects mental health and daily functioning. Julianne's research found loneliness to be associated with higher risks of depression, anxiety-related disorders, chronic stress, low quality of life, and early mortality. These statistics imply that loneliness can have as detrimental effects, if not worse, on health and social interaction than traditional health problems such as smoking and obesity.¹ Loneliness can be understood as a social determinant that requires public policy and structural social interventions rather than individual-level interventions.

Loneliness is becoming increasingly prevalent in developing countries experiencing rapid urbanization without adequate social infrastructure. Indonesia represents one of these countries, where changing family structures, increasing individualization of everyday life, and disrupted conventional sources of social support leave individuals at high risk of social

¹ Holt-Lunstad, Julianne. "Social Connection as a Public Health Issue: The Evidence and a Systemic Framework." *Annual Review of Public Health* 43 (2022): 193–213.

vulnerability.² Social stressors in big Indonesian cities are multi-layered: from financial inequality and high degrees of population mobility to work intensity. Although these stressors shape urban life, they also contribute to a loss of community and a sense of belonging among city dwellers. The city of Surabaya was chosen as the empirical context for this study for several reasons. First, Surabaya is one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan cities, with a population of around 3.02 million. Second, the majority of the population of Surabaya is of productive age. Having residents who are mainly in the productive age creates a big-city condition, with high mobility and a high intensity of urban life. These factors increase work pressure, decrease leisure time, and accelerate the pressure to achieve individual financial independence, thereby degrading the quality of social connections and increasing the risk of loneliness.³

Loneliness in big cities is inherently linked to new structural conditions created by urbanization and contemporary demographic trends.⁴ Considering changes in population trends, urbanization, internal migration, changes in household composition, and the increasing number of people living alone, these developments create conditions that may lead individuals to experience social isolation, even in densely populated environments.⁵ Loneliness from this angle is conceptualized not simply as an individualized emotion but as a social symptom created by new opportunity structures and limits of social reciprocity. Limits include a lack of time, of inclusive spaces, and of strong local institutions.⁶ Recent research has shown that population density, residential environments, and diminishing neighborhood relationships are associated with increased loneliness and mental health illnesses in adults. In particular, young adults and those in their productive years, who often navigate competitive work environments and financial uncertainty, face a

² Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia. *Permasalahan Kesehatan Jiwa di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Kemenkes RI, (2021).

³ Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Surabaya. *Kota Surabaya dalam Angka 2024*. Surabaya: BPS, (2024).

⁴ Van de Velde, Cécile. "Sociology of Loneliness: An Introduction." *Acta Sociologica* (2025).

⁵ Bramanwidyantari. "Psychological Features of Urbanicity." *Psikoneo* 4, no. 2 (2022).

⁶ Van Tilburg, Theo G. "The Concepts and Measurement of Social Isolation and Loneliness." *Dalam Social Isolation and Loneliness*, disunting oleh Theo G. van Tilburg. London: Routledge, (2023).

higher risk of loneliness.⁷ Indonesia is no exception to this trend. Recent reports indicate that urbanization in Indonesia will continue to increase, leaving most Indonesians living in urban areas. Along with urbanization come increased risks of mental health issues as well as disparities in social support resources for vulnerable groups.⁸

Digitalization has become one of the many processes that shape how individuals form and maintain social relationships. Indonesia, and in particular the city of Surabaya, has a high rate of internet users, which makes digital interactions part of everyday life for its citizens. Online communities provide people with the opportunity to establish social relationships that are not bound by physical spaces. In this sense, social media and interactions on digital platforms become resources that people can utilize. The quality of these digital interactions has been shown to lack emotional closeness. Online and offline social worlds are not two separate constructs that people shift between. Individuals experience their lives as a combination of both. Social capital is conceptualized as a resource embedded in features of a social network, such as reciprocity and trust. Social capital has been shown to play a significant role in an individual's well-being. Previous studies have shown that offline social capital is strongly related to better mental health outcomes, while online social capital complements individuals who lack face-to-face interactions. However, online interactions do not fully equate to emotional closeness as formed in person. Thus, hybrid social capital and its relationship to loneliness should be understood contextually.⁹

Research on loneliness, social capital, and mental health is abundant; however, several gaps in the current literature will be addressed by this research. First, much of the current research on loneliness is quantitative, limiting the scope of the question. Questions about loneliness delve deep into one's individual experience and social meaning-making. Operationalizing loneliness into a set of quantifiable variables loses the depth of understanding of an individual's lived experience. Second, research focusing on online and

⁷ Šulcová, Jana, et al. "Urbanization, Loneliness and Mental Health Model: A Cross-Sectional Network Analysis with a Representative Sample." *Scientific Reports* 14 (2024).

⁸ Dermawan Purba, Fredrick. "Sociodemographic Determinants of Self-Reporting Mental Health in Indonesia." *Psychological Research on Urban Society* 1, no. 1 (2018).

⁹ Song, Lijun, et al. "Social Capital and Health in the Digital Age: Offline and Online Social Networks." *Social Science & Medicine* 292 (2022).

offline relationships treats them as binaries. In reality, people form relationships both online and offline in their everyday lives. The synergistic effects of hybrid social capital, how online and offline interactions can negatively or positively impact each other and form someone's experience with loneliness, have not been thoroughly researched. Third, there is limited research focusing on urban loneliness in Indonesian cities. Although research on loneliness in Indonesia has examined factors in digital media use that may contribute to loneliness, it has not examined how people living in urban areas experience loneliness day to day or how they interpret the quality of their social relationships. This leads to the question of what it is like to experience urban loneliness and what social factors contribute to mental health vulnerability.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of urban residents regarding loneliness and hybrid social capital in Surabaya. In particular, how do people who live in Surabaya experience and make sense of loneliness in their daily lives? How are changes in offline and online social networks associated with loneliness and mental health? This study will contribute to the field in three ways. First, at a theoretical level, this study bridges gaps within the population sociology and mental health literature by conceptualizing urban loneliness and its relation to hybrid social capital through a phenomenological lens. This study does not treat digital relationships as an external factor in one's social life, but rather as a part of the experience. Second, at the empirical level, this study provides a deeper understanding of loneliness in Indonesian cities that are rarely discussed in Western literature. By taking a phenomenological approach, this study will allow the readers to understand the experiences of those living in Surabaya and how they experience and interpret loneliness. Lastly, at the application level, this study will provide valuable insights for mental health researchers, professionals, and policymakers seeking to inform their work to be more inclusive of social factors present in urban life. By understanding how hybrid social capital shapes the experiences of urban dwellers, we can better assist vulnerable individuals in building strong offline and online communities.

To better understand the lived experiences of Indonesian citizens, this study will employ phenomenological and qualitative research methods. This study will take on an interpretive approach to phenomenology. Research participants will be exploring their experiences and interpretations of

loneliness within their offline and online relationships, and how it may or may not be tied to mental health. This study was conducted in Surabaya, Indonesia, and included ten participants. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants based on age, years living in Surabaya, and active use of digital media. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online or in person from October to November 2025. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, along with field notes. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. Coding was conducted, and major themes were developed using the conceptual framework of urban loneliness and social capital as a lens. Member checking was conducted to increase the credibility of the data. This study received ethics approval from the institution's Review Board, and all participants' identities will remain confidential.

Urban Loneliness as a Socio-Emotional Experience

The research Findings show loneliness arises not from a sheer lack of contacts but from the lack of social relationships that yield intimacy and care experienced as emotional closeness, being understood, and having spaces that allow us to express ourselves safely. Respondents experience loneliness despite having contact with others in their daily lives. In their view, loneliness is the gap between the positive relationships we desire and the social relationships we have. This relates to how social loneliness is defined as a lack of meaningful relationships, an absence of emotional attachment, and the quality of the relationships people have. Loneliness, then, is not about experiencing solitude but about a state in which our social relationships deteriorate as we do not feel loved, cared for, or noticed. Urbanites are surrounded by others at work, in streets, shopping malls, and on social media, yet feel lonely when they lack enough safe social actors to hear them out, understand the contexts of their lives, and reply with care.

From a phenomenological perspective, loneliness becomes an experience that weaves through our daily lives, beginning with our commute home from work and continuing through the silence of boarding rooms. When we want to tell our story, but there is no one we think is safe enough to listen to us, and how we experience ourselves, others, and the city.¹⁰

¹⁰ Van Manen, Max. *Researching Lived Experience*. London: Routledge, (1990).

Loneliness emerges in moments that may appear trivial yet are deeply meaningful, such as the journey home from work amid the bustle of the town, when many people surround the body. At the same time, the mind is filled with a sense of emptiness, the silence of a boarding house or rented room after a day of activities, or moments when the desire to share one's thoughts becomes intense but is confronted with the reality that there is no one perceived as sufficiently close to confide in. At this point, loneliness no longer comes and goes as a fleeting emotion, but becomes a persistent background of experience that shapes how individuals view themselves, whether they feel valued, cared for, and worthy of love, as well as how they perceive others and the city in which they live. Phenomenology allows us to see loneliness as a state of being. We may exist in spaces with others but feel isolated from the web of significance and intimacy that connects others around us.

These experiences are enmeshed with what it means to live a highly mobile modern life. We are expected to constantly go, deal with busy work hours and traffic, and juggle several social roles at once. In the city, we must keep going. When we wake up, we go to work. After work we go home. In big cities like Surabaya, we also have to deal with traffic and work late hours. Because of this, the relationships we build with others are built on convenience. We associate our coworkers with work, neighborhood acquaintances as fellow enthusiasts of a hobby or professional connection, and people we pass by when we greet each other at our windows and doors. We have less time to build relationships based on mutual understanding and getting to know the other person. High mobility has also led face-to-face interaction to become something we have to schedule and make time for. This makes our encounters shorter, more schedule-based, and task-oriented than relationally oriented. In Surabaya, I observed this when respondents often told me they felt tired after work and wanted to rest in their private spaces, or that they would only talk about technical aspects of life when conversing with someone else. Relationships here become less personal, and we become selective about others, not because we don't desire intimacy, but because the conditions of urban life, long hours, distance, and pressure to be productive, make it challenging for us to maintain emotional connections.

Hence, loneliness in this study is understood not simply as the sadness we experience when alone, but as a social issue stemming from urban life and

from social relationships that lack intimacy and too often become transactional. There are plenty of places to meet others in the city, but most of our social interactions are based on our roles as customers, coworkers, bosses, subordinates, and collegial relationships.¹¹ People surround us, yet we feel lonely. In these busy cities, we feel a lack of space to be ourselves. We sometimes need to pretend to be someone other than ourselves. Loneliness occurs when we constantly exist as students, workers, or whatever others call us, but never feel seen as human beings with fears, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. This aligns with how loneliness is portrayed as a product of modernity, closely correlated with our individualistic lifestyles. No longer tied to traditional communities, we must assume responsibility for our own well-being. As such, we must manage our own lives, identities, and social connections.

The Meaning of Loneliness in the Everyday Lives of Surabaya Residents

Loneliness among Surabaya residents is inherently a population issue. It is rooted in changes in population and its characteristics, urbanization patterns, and shifting arrangements of social relations in metropolises, instead of being purely a subjective psychological experience. The interview with Rendy, a young male who works as a self-employed entrepreneur in one of the densely populated neighborhoods in North Surabaya, paints a picture of an individual who speaks to many people daily but feels as if no one understands him. Despite living in a crowded place where he seems constantly surrounded by people, he feels his life is emotionally empty.¹² Yanti, a shop attendant in West Surabaya, suffers from loneliness because she works long hours, has friends who are already married, and has no one close to confide in.¹³ In dense urban settings such as Surabaya, these two stories from interview respondents exemplify how factors such as urbanization, population density, and shifts in household living shape objective conditions that can foster loneliness as both a social and emotional condition.

¹¹ Miguel, Cristina, et al. "Urban Loneliness and Social Media Use." *International Journal of Communication* 19 (2025).

¹² Rendy. In-depth interview. October 2025.

¹³ Yanti. In-depth interview. October 2025.

Urbanization in Indonesia has driven the concentration of the working-age population in urban areas. Typically, individuals of working age settle in cities and adopt work patterns that demand substantial time and energy.¹⁴ Young adults and early adulthood - age groups that Rendy and Yanti fall under tend to live far away from relatives, are under economic strain, and live by themselves in relatively small apartment units. Terrence's demographic study shows that in Indonesia, demographic transition and urbanization contributed to later ages of marriage, smaller family sizes, and a higher share of single-person households.¹⁵ These characteristics can compound feelings of loneliness, even when people are statistically around a lot of people. Cities, therefore, act as both "pullers" of workers and migrants while they "break" the relational infrastructure in less-dense settings, centered on familiarity between family members and local community adults.

Phenomenology allows us to examine how demographics shape how urban populations subjectively feel. When Rendy says he has no one to talk to because he is too tired to narrate his story, and those around him listen without understanding, he is articulating that he lacks knowledge from others. He does not have someone who can understand him as a person with a lived experience.¹⁶ Phenomenologically, urban life and the social world that accompanies it are experienced as a lifeworld characterized by a fast-paced tempo, brief interactions, and shallow light conversation. Expressing one's feelings is often regarded as inappropriate or as disturbing others. When Yanti says she has no one to confide in, it is because, outside working hours, she feels her interactions with others are limited primarily to work-related matters, while after hours, many of her colleagues are already married and spend their time with their families.¹⁷ There is a lack of intimate others in Surabaya because urban life conditions social interactions to occur only around specific roles, such as co-workers, customers, bosses, and neighbors, with brief exchanges when you pass each other. Emotional loneliness

¹⁴ Yulianti, Heni. "Transformasi Sosial dalam Konteks Urbanisasi dan Modernisasi di Indonesia." *Jejak Digital* 3, no. 2 (2025): 112–125.

¹⁵ Hull, Terence H., and Valerie J. Hull. "A Second Demographic Transition in Indonesia?" *Journal of Population Research* 39 (2022): 465–490.

¹⁶ Rendy. In-depth interview. October 2025.

¹⁷ Yanti. In-depth interview. October 2025.

happens when individuals are unable to find safe people to listen to their stories.

Social capital can explain why dense social networks are not utilized as people's support system to protect them from feeling lonely. According to Putnam, there are two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital pertains to close relatives and close friends. Bridging social capital consists of one's social network that connects them to other people and resources.¹⁸ Rendy and Yanti demonstrate how thin bonding social capital can be. They both lack individuals with whom they can comfortably bare their emotions in a meaningful way. Despite having relationships with people, they feel their relationships lack depth and do not make them feel understood. On the other hand, their bridging social capital consists of customers, co-workers, and bosses with whom they interact to maintain their source of income. There is little room for emotional intimacy to develop in these relationships. Data collected from the interviews support prior studies, such as research on urban sprawl and social capital in Indonesia, showing that as population density and urban spatial patterns increase, interpersonal trust decreases and active participation in civic organizations declines. Instead, the social capital produced under such conditions is weak and functional.¹⁹ The city becomes a living space where one is surrounded by people they come into contact with daily, but no one they are deeply committed to.

Loneliness among city dwellers, as described by Rendy and Yanti, is also linked to age structure, marital status, and household living arrangements. Yanti says that the people she can talk to are already married, while she is still single. Not only is she working long hours like Rendy, but she also has no one to spend her life with. This narrative showcases the direct effects of shifts in family structure and of transitions through different life stages on social relations. Research on loneliness in the Surabaya metropolitan area found that individuals who live alone, are single, or live far from their families are more prone to loneliness. This is especially true when they lack strong community ties outside their family. Demographically, these individuals are caught between the busy world of work and a community life

¹⁸ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, (2000).

¹⁹ Civelli, Andrea et al., "Urban Sprawl and Social Capital: Evidence from Indonesian Cities," working paper, University of Arkansas, (2021).

revolving around the nuclear family. Additionally, many Surabaya residents experience frequent mobility, rotate shifts with colleagues, and live far from their workplaces, leaving less time to cultivate long-lasting friendships.

Studies comparing urbanization and loneliness across countries also find that people living in urban areas are more prone to loneliness than those in rural areas. The reasons are similar to those described above. The higher population density in cities like Surabaya forces individuals to live in tight quarters with little privacy, experience greater noise levels, and face financial stress. To some individuals, it is easier not to foster direct and close relationships with neighbors to protect themselves. Research has found that loneliness in cities is not only due to a lack of closeness with others; some urban dwellers also feel their existence goes unnoticed. Rendy's expression that no one could understand how he lives, and Yanti's explanation that she slowly felt alone while living in a big city, showcase the existential loneliness some individuals feel.

Loneliness in Surabaya is when populations, types of social capital, and phenomenological experiences intersect. Characteristics of urbanization, population age, and density shape individuals' opportunities to feel lonely. They do so by creating an objective living environment that limits the communal ties we know from less-dense populations. Although one lives in a heavily populated area, the fragility of social capital in the city, both bonding and bridging, leaves individuals with a lack of emotional connection to others and alternative communities. Rendy and Yanti's stories are subjective experiences of how individuals feel about life in the city. They feel tired all the time and no one they can trust with their stories. Loneliness, in this case, is not an individualized problem but a symptom of how our demographic makeup is functioning.

The Reconfiguration of Social Capital in Urban Life

The findings regarding changes in the social capital configuration in Surabaya indicate not only a shift in social relationship patterns but also a transformation in urban social life at a more fundamental level. Interview results from respondents show that loneliness does not stem solely from a sudden feeling of having no friends; instead, urban loneliness arises from how urban social life shapes relationship patterns and from how the population is distributed across urban environments. Riz, a young doctor living in West

Surabaya, explained that he knows many people but doesn't know who to turn to for serious help when needed. "Ironically, living in a big city, you can know so many people, but have so few reliable friends," he said.²⁰ While he seems successful, sociable, well-connected, and works in a respected profession, his appearance and demeanor alone do not paint a different picture; his personal life does. Upon further examination of his private life, one sees that his relationships lack emotional depth. A study of loneliness among adults found that loneliness is common among lonely individuals. Loneliness usually does not occur because someone has no friends or relationships at all, but because their relationships are shallow, feel temporary, and cannot offer the feeling of being able to express themselves freely or honestly around that person. In this regard, research conducted in Surabaya has found further evidence that urban loneliness reflects the constitution of social capital in urban settings.

Robert Putnam's social capital theory helps to explain the societal structures observed in the field. Connecting the experienced reality back to social theory, Robert Putnam's conceptualization of social capital can be applied to analyze this social phenomenon. Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital. Bonding social capital is defined as close-knit, intimate, and trusting relationships, such as those with immediate family members and close friends. Bridging social capital encompasses social networks that help people access new information, opportunities, and social mobility by connecting different social groups.²¹ As an example, Riz's story illustrates substantial bridging social capital. Through his work, professional communities in his field, and other social networks, he knows many people. However, when he encountered problems that required help with emotional matters or non-technical issues, his network felt empty because he had no one close enough to contact comfortably. This is an example of what happens when bridging social networks expand while bonding social capital remains weak. The more people broaden their networks, the smaller the circle of trust they feel safe in. These data show that bridging social capital can be highly beneficial for advancing a career, obtaining services, and gaining access to

²⁰ Riz. In-depth interview. November 2025.

²¹ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, (2000).

new economic opportunities. However, having weak social ties does not make a person immune to loneliness.²²

This paradox is not simply due to city dwellers' lifestyle choices. It is strongly associated with demographic trends and patterns of urbanization. As urbanization in Indonesia increased, people in their productive years flocked to cities like Surabaya for jobs that require long hours, high mobility, and flexible housing. Individuals move to the town, often live alone or with one other person in small units and are physically distant from the extended family that would have provided casual emotional support in previous generations. While these conditions allow someone to meet and network with large numbers of people (bridging social capital), they restrict someone's ability to form close interpersonal relationships. Factors necessary for bonding relationships to create, such as stable housing that allows prolonged, repeated contact with the same people, the development of routines, and spaces to share life experiences on a day-to-day basis, are no longer guaranteed. Demographic trends in Indonesia show that age at marriage is increasing, people are living in smaller households, and a growing number of adults are living alone. These conditions anonymize individuals' lives and increase their risk of emotional loneliness, even when they may never feel alone.²³

Through social-phenomenological lenses influenced by Alfred Schutz, we can understand how these structural forces are translated into the lifeworld by noting that individuals make sense of social life through reciprocal relationships that validate them as subjects, rather than as objects playing specific social roles or functions. When Riz mentions that he has friends but no one he can truly confide in when he needs help, it shows that others in his life exist to him as coworkers, patients, and contacts rather than as potential friends who know him and are part of his inner, private life. This highlights how loneliness can arise when there is a disparity between one's expectation of intimacy (i.e., wanting to have one or two people with whom they can have intimate conversations) and what their current social circle can

²² Claridge, Tristan. "Functions of Social Capital: Bonding, Bridging, and Linking." *Social Capital Research* (2018).

²³ Hull, Terence H., and Valerie J. Hull. "A Second Demographic Transition in Indonesia?" *Journal of Population Research* 39 (2022): 465–490.

offer. Since there is only enough room for some parts of someone's life to be shared with others, people tend to fill their inner circles with those who are considered productive, not troublesome, and don't have "messy" social issues. In urban environments, there is also pressure always to appear as if you have it together, are busy contributing to society, and are "doing well". Because of this, people emotionally distance themselves from others and do not cultivate deep relationships that involve the vulnerable side of being human.

Hybrid Social Capital

Hybrid social capital among Surabaya's residents represents the organizational pattern of their social relationships, which simultaneously comprises the offline and online realities in which they live. Offline describes the physical life individuals experience face-to-face with others, and online involves life in digital media or internet-mediated activities. The everyday lifeworld can no longer be clearly separated into offline and online realms. Instead, lived realities become integrated into a single, non-separable social experience. According to Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory, the lifeworld is a process by which individuals give meaning to their experiences with others, reflectively and intersubjectively, based on pre-existing knowledge and a stock of interpretive patterns built from everyday-life interactions. Respondents' use of WhatsApp, social media, and other online communities goes beyond a mere technical tool for sending messages to one another. Interacting on these digital platforms also becomes part of a meaningful structure in which they seek connectivity, belonging, and recognition from others beyond their physical proximity. When Robby, a 37-year-old living in Central Surabaya, says that WhatsApp groups and social media keep him connected with his friends so he can meet new people online and not feel completely alone in life, this statement shows how online relationships are integrated into a broader "we" relationship, a sense of belonging to a community even without physical presence.²⁴

From the perspective of Robert Putnam's social capital theory, this finding demonstrates that bridging social capital is strengthened by digital applications that help individuals expand their loose networks, enabling them to reach more people and gain information. Meanwhile, close emotional

²⁴ Robby. In-depth interview. November 2025.

connections do not necessarily increase as individuals' social networks grow. Interviews also reveal limitations of online interactions in fulfilling individuals' desires for fuller emotional presence. Fara, a 34-year-old woman who has resided in Surabaya for over 8 years, mentioned that chatting helps her feel less lonely; however, there are things she cannot fully express or share through online messages.²⁵ Phenomenologically speaking, based on Alfred Schutz's concept of phenomenology, Fara's experience implies that there is a qualitative distinction between face-to-face meetings which allow individuals to physically feel others' presence and read their body language, tone of voice, and conversation rhythm versus digital-mediated communication (online) where one is unable to physically sense another's body language, tone of voice, and rhythm in conversation.

Online communication carries its own form of meaningfulness. Conversation is quick and short, often leaving things open to interpretation. As a result, individuals are unable to express profound emotional experiences over digital media. Social capital in online contexts also shows that although social media allows individuals to build bridges and connect with more people, it is the quality of connection, not the quantity of communication, that determines whether social relationships can help individuals overcome loneliness. Fara's experience echoes the paradox of online communication. People may be connected to others and receive alerts on their phones, yet the level of intimacy in the conversation is not enough to satisfy one's need to feel heard.

Feelings of emotional anxiety also arise when individuals perceive social media as spaces that are significant yet vulnerable to social judgment and the inability to feel others through typed letters emotionally. Elly, who is 30 years old, says: "Sometimes I want to talk about many things, but if I type it in the chat, I feel like I'm doing too much. So, I usually hold myself from telling others what problems I feel."²⁶ This quote can be interpreted within Schutz's theory by understanding that meaning is constructed within the lifeworld. Individuals think about how others may interpret their actions and thus determine what is acceptable or not in social interactions. They may fear being judged as too vulnerable or oversharing.

²⁵ Fara. In-depth interview. November 2025.

²⁶ Elly. In-depth interview. November 2025.

Feelings of overindulgence illustrate how cultural norms, typifications, and socially acceptable standards for others are internalized as shared knowledge, shaping how individuals censor their emotions on digital platforms. Other research on loneliness and social media use in Indonesia has yielded similar results, concluding that a dense social media presence does not necessarily improve individuals' feelings of isolation. Some individuals experience heightened feelings of insecurity and judgment when using digital apps, leading them to be more secretive about what they share online.²⁷ Online social networks provide the technical capacity for individuals to stay connected; however, they are subjectively experienced as both fragmented and fragile due to fear of social judgment.

Social networks are fragmented because individuals cannot fully give or receive emotional presence through online interactions. Digital relationships are fragile because individuals may feel connected to others but still experience loneliness, fear, anxiety, or vulnerability while using social media. Due to this paradox, online networks are perceived as something that can at once be there for an individual but also go away at any given moment if a technology failure occurs. Hence, the hybrid social capital experienced by respondents in Surabaya is depicted as both productive and fragile. Digital social networks are productive because they allow urbanites to adapt to their limited time, the physical distance between friends, and the energy required for face-to-face socializing. Online applications enable individuals to communicate and feel part of social networks despite their busy lives.

Research on social media has also found that social media can strengthen weak ties. Weak ties help find new information, jobs, and resources that close contacts may not know about. While digital social networks are productive and can help people stay connected, they are fragile because if interactions are not rooted in face-to-face relationships that are repeated and consistent over time, online connections allow for broad-level closeness. They do not guarantee that individuals will have someone to rely on emotionally when they feel pressured or are going through tough times. Putnam describes two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital focuses on social networks that allow individuals to build broad relationships. Bonding social capital focuses on

²⁷ Fakhri, Nurfitriany, Rahmadiani Vira, and Sahril Buchori. "Beyond Virtual Proximity: Loneliness in the World of Social Media." *Journal of Digital Society* (2025).

close relatives, friends, and people with whom individuals have strong connections, whom they can rely on for emotional support and care. In relation to the findings of this study, hybrid social capital demonstrates how technology has allowed Indonesians to build bridging social networks by joining chat groups, sharing hobbies online, meeting people through applications, and feeling connected to others on social media. However, bonding social capital may not necessarily strengthen, as individuals may not have as many close emotional ties with the contacts they meet online.

This dichotomy between bridging and bonding relationships can help explain why individuals living in highly connected urban contexts can still experience loneliness. Mark Granovetter states that although weak ties are strategically better for connecting others from different social groups and providing new information, they are not meant to provide long-term, enduring emotional support.²⁸ Supportive of Granovetter's theory, recent studies on digital technology have found that although social media can help individuals feel connected to others, it can also make them feel lonelier. If most of someone's interactions are brief greetings, liking posts, or short comments, people may feel disconnected from others despite the convenience of technology for chatting or messaging.²⁹ In conclusion, when too much emphasis is placed on online interactions, the lifeworld that individuals experience from hybrid social capital can be information-rich yet intimate-poor. Relationships are lived out through spoken words, but eventually boiled down to brief conversations that end without the experience of truly understanding others. Technology allows Indonesians to feel connected to others; however, if warm, emotionally supportive bonding relationships do not supplement online networks, people are at risk of feeling lonelier and more emotionally depleted than before, living in a city with millions of people yet feeling alone.

Networked Individualism and the Paradox of Social Connectivity

The social relation configurations among urbanites observed in this research have displayed signs of networked individualism becoming further evident. Social relations among Surabayans are structured around individuals

²⁸ Granovetter, Mark S. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–1380.

²⁹ Fakhri, Nurfitriany, Rahmadiani Vira, and Sahril Buchori. "Beyond Virtual Proximity: Loneliness in the World of Social Media." *Journal of Digital Society* (2025).

being at the center of different social networks that tend to be looser and more fragmented across various contexts, rather than being part of a stable community that used to predominantly stem from one's neighborhood, local organization, house of worship, or other. Social lives are no longer experienced as one community but rather various separate "social circles" of relationships with coworkers, online friends, people met through hobbies or activities, and "utility friendships". Henceforth, many informants, such as 26-year-old Jihan, who works in the creative industry, have many friends but feel that these people only know certain aspects of who she is.³⁰ This experience is consistent with the notion of networked individualism. Networked individualism posits that rather than being integrated into a single overarching community, people operate at the center of various loose and fragmented networks.³¹

Understanding Jihan's and other informants' experiences through the lens of Alfred Schutz's phenomenology, it becomes clear that their mundane realities are constructed through overlapping social relationships at varying levels of distance, where experiences of warmth and intimacy, or we-ness, are more sporadic and situational rather than given.³² Cities are lived through as if questioning who is a part of "we" and who is just "they". As such, many social relationships that urbanites experience only reach the level of acquaintance or utility and do not form a we-relationship, which can cultivate feelings of togetherness. Many respondents have had to become selective about whom they can trust enough to support them when trying to find someone to talk to about private matters, realizing that having lots of friends is not always synonymous with being friendly enough for them to share their most private emotions with.

Analyzing the data using Robert Putnam's concepts of social capital, we see that this leads to predominantly bridging social capital.³³ Networks divide into different contexts, such as coworkers, online friends, and people

³⁰ Jihan. In-depth interview. November 2025.

³¹ Rainie, Lee, and Barry Wellman. *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

³² Schutz, Alfred. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (1967).

³³ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, (2000).

they're familiar with from taking classes. This helps them broaden their networks when working or looking for job opportunities online. However, when they want to spend time with someone or need support during tough times, they often feel they have no one. The lack of overlapping social networks and predominantly bridging social capital prevents the get-through function from being established during personal crises. In Surabaya, having many acquaintances but no close friends and relatives suggests that the city's social environment cultivates broad but shallow bridging social capital, which contributes to urban loneliness.

One respondent, 36-year-old Malik, who has lived in Surabaya for 7 years, said he feels he can talk to anyone. But when he was asked about who he could talk to for long hours about his problems, he paused and said that although he has many relationships, he is not sure if he has someone he can speak to about significant matters.³⁴ Analyzing this through Schutz's framework, it highlights how moments like these contrast the realities of living in a city where one is almost always reminded of being connected to others through text-chat groups, work-groups, friends who are online, yet feeling emotionally empty due to not having someone with whom you can fully interact in an "I and You" manner. Looking at this through Robert Putnam's theory, this can be attributed to a lack of strong bonding social capital. Individuals may have many contacts and people they see often, but they do not have strong, trusted networks they can rely on for serious matters. Social capital exists, but only to the extent of having people to exchange information with and receive minor support from, but not enough to meet people's emotional needs or depend on for long-term compassion.

Through the lens of networked individualism, people are caught up in a world where they are more socially and digitally connected than ever before. However, they can still feel lonely because their relationships lack closeness, repetition, and trust. The social makeup of Surabaya showed that residents can feel lonely even when surrounded by many people. It is less about not having people around and more about how the quality of interpersonal relationships and social capital assemble to shape feelings of isolation.

³⁴ Malik. In-depth interview. November 2025.

Loneliness and Mental Health Vulnerability

Loneliness in this study can be understood as a demographic issue arising from the structure of urban populations, rather than a purely psychological difficulty stemming from personal failure. Survey results from Surabaya, a metropolitan city characterized by high population density, rapid mobility, and long-hour work schedules, indicate that our social interactions are becoming less intimate, more casual, and more oriented toward economic goals. We still experience loneliness even though we are surrounded by thousands of people in the city. Phenomenologically, using Alfred Schutz's terminology, city dwellers face various "role expectations" as employees, citizens, family figures, students, etc., and norms of social independence shape the social knowledge they use to navigate their daily lives. In a demographic where many residents are migrants or young families with geographically dispersed kinship networks, the experience of living in the city is characterized by a decline in intimate relationships and close interactions. Individuals meet many people, but few of these relationships develop into a "we" that can be relied upon for emotional support.

Upon reflection, this is strongly correlated with changes in family living arrangements, the rise of nuclear families living in smaller living spaces, and the weakening of social and emotional community ties that were once sources of social capital, such as neighborhood ties and community associations, leading to the loss of social capital built on kinship and communal closeness. Robert D. Putnam argues that as our "bonding" social capital diminishes and our connections with fellow citizens weaken, our ability to care for one another, socialize, and support one another when we are vulnerable also diminishes. Loneliness then increases, and the risk of mental health problems increases when living in densely populated areas.³⁵ Another study on social interactions and mental health in urban environments found that people living in environments with low levels of trust, low social support, and low community involvement had higher levels of stress, loneliness, depression, and anxiety.³⁶ In Surabaya, high mobility, work-related challenges, and

³⁵ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, (2000).

³⁶ Kawachi, Ichiro, and Lisa F. Berkman. "Social Ties and Mental Health." *Journal of Urban Health* 78, no. 3 (2001): 458–467.

shifting values and norms within families and communities create a culture of loneliness. Therefore, we cannot discuss mental health without addressing the demographics that shape it.

Conclusion

Loneliness in urban Surabaya is revealed as a problem experienced by many as part of the demographic conditions created by urbanization and shifting socio-demographic trends, rather than simply a product of individual psychology. Factors such as density and mobility, fast-paced work schedules, and diminished community ties place people (especially productive-age groups and migrants) in situations in which they are surrounded by many others with whom they lack intimate, secure relations. As a result, loneliness is redefined as a deficit between one's desire for comforting social connections and those that tend to be temporary, goal-oriented, and superficial. This study also found that changes in the size and composition of urban residents' social networks have led to a transformation of social capital into a network of connections that grows through professional, communal, and digital associations. In contrast, networks of close, interdependent ties continue to deteriorate. This has given rise to hybrid forms of social capital (offline and online) that can have both positive and negative consequences. Online communication maintains feelings of connectedness and expands social networks but is insufficient as a substitute for emotional support due to the rapid, impersonal nature of digital communication and the risk of public evaluation.

This new social reality aligns with networked individualism, in which people may have numerous network contacts across various contexts but few stable, truly intimate ones. Loneliness in Surabaya is also strongly associated with poor mental health. Weak emotional support and diminished social capital make people more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and mental distress. Ultimately, the problem of loneliness and its impact on mental health is revealed not as an individual problem, but as a sociodemographic issue that must be addressed by increasing available social support and creating space for more emotionally engaged relationships, both offline and online, through healthier digital communication.

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