

Always connected, yet still alone

BY all appearances, today's youth are more socially connected than ever before, what with the proliferation of digital technologies and rise of online culture. So why is it that despite constantly being connected so many young people report feeling lonely?

Founder of mental health portal Relate Malaysia and clinical psychologist Dr Chua Sook Ning says these feelings of loneliness among young people aren't consistently linked to the number of hours spent on social media.

What matters more is the nature of those online connections, she explains, as being active on social media does not always translate into meaningful social connections.

Many young people end up with numerous online interactions that don't lead to deeper relationships or offline support, which can leave them feeling emotionally unfulfilled despite being constantly connected, Chua says.

"Research shows that people who feel lonely often have more online friendships that don't carry over into their offline lives.

"This lack of offline connection is linked to lower relationship quality and satisfaction.

"So while they may be interacting online, it does not necessarily ease their loneliness," she says.

She points to a 2024 study of university students in China, which also found a bi-direc-

tional link between problematic social media use and loneliness.

Problematic social media use is defined as excessive use that negatively affects functioning and psychological well-being.

"Essentially, those who are lonely tend to use social media in more problematic ways, which in turn worsens their loneliness," she says.

Dr Azree Nazri of Universiti Putra Malaysia says the dangers of loneliness is that it burdens both the body and mind.

Neuroscience has shown that the brain processes social rejection in the same way as physical pain, activating the same neural circuits, he says.

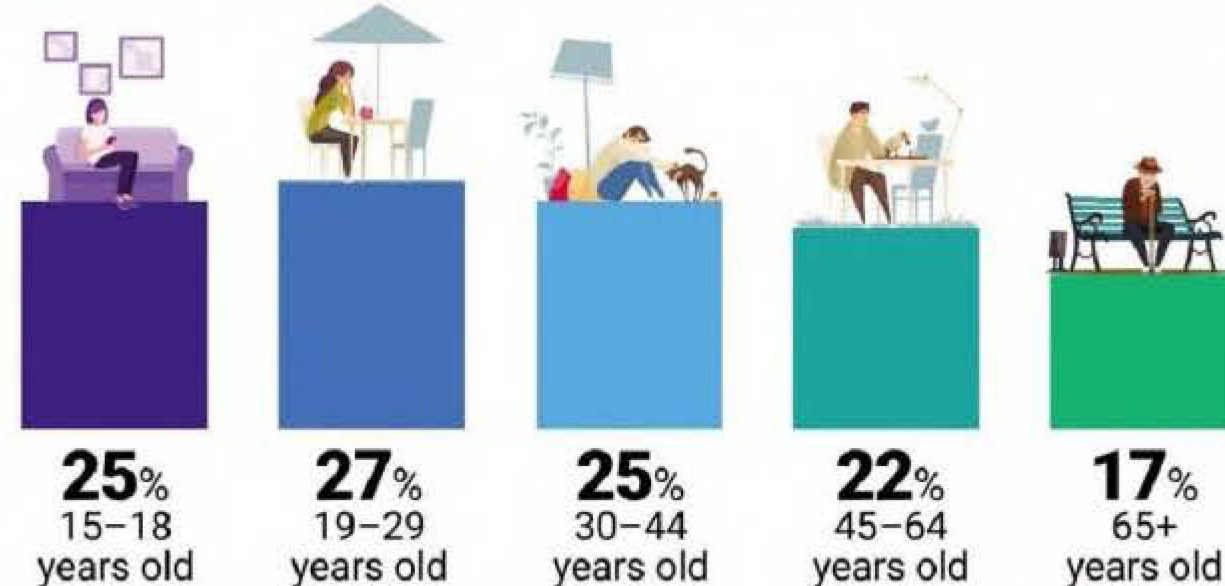
"Chronic loneliness elevates cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone, which in turn weakens immunity, disrupts sleep, raises risks of cardiovascular disease and accelerates mental health decline," says Azree, who is also a research fellow with Harvard Medical School.

Some studies have even equated the long-term health effects of loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, he says.

Psychologically, social connection is also fundamental, he says, pointing to theories like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which places love and belonging directly above physical safety, while attachment theory explains how early childhood bonds shape emo-

Loneliness across age groups

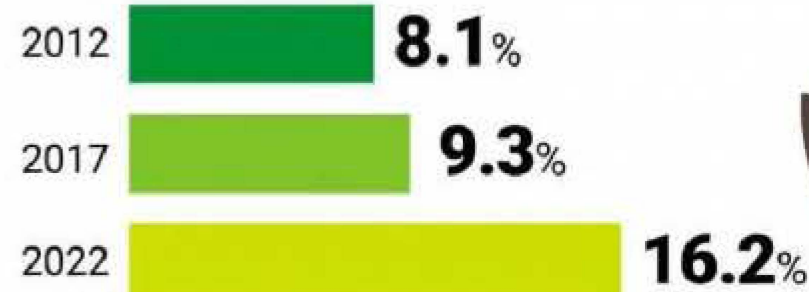
Percentage of people who report feeling fairly or very lonely



Source: Gallup and Meta, 2022-2023 Global Survey

Loneliness among youths in Malaysia

Prevalence of loneliness among secondary school students



Source: National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS)

TheStargraphics

tional regulation and social behaviour for life.

This is why, Chua says, it is important to help young people recognise the difference between surface-level interaction and genuine connection.

"At the same time, we also need to create more accessible and appealing opportunities for social engagement, especially for those who find it difficult to connect with others," she says.

For young people, especially when they're still shaping their identity and figuring out

their place in the world, any sense of emotional struggle can be seen as a flaw, so such internal struggles like loneliness are frequently kept hidden.

Chua says this silence can compound the problem, making young people feel not only alone, but ashamed for feeling that way in the first place.

"Talking about our inner world isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of courage and the beginning of greater emotional understanding, both of ourselves and others."