

The Role of Social Support in Loneliness among Migrant Workers: A Mini Literature Review

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Abstract :

Loneliness is one of today's global problems, which may cause serious problems, such as poor health, depression or even suicidal behavior. Migrant workers are vulnerable to experiencing loneliness as they relocate and adapt to a new cultural environment. Social support is a key predictor of loneliness and plays an important role in reducing feelings of loneliness. This study aims to summarize and analyze how social support influences loneliness in migrant workers. This study utilizes a mini literature review and follows Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to optimize documentation by implementing clear guidelines to reduce bias and error. The Scopus and PubMed databases were selected for this study due to their extensive indexing and coverage. The results show that the experience of loneliness in migrant workers is influenced not only by the existence of social relationships but also by their qualitative characteristics, including emotional depth and perceived supportiveness. Family-based social support appears to be an important factor, while its impact remains ambivalent. Digital communication can compensate for limitations in face-to-face interactions and play a buffering role in reducing loneliness. These findings emphasize the importance of interventions that enhance social support to reduce loneliness among migrant workers.

Keywords:

Social support, loneliness, migrant worker

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1. Introduction

Loneliness is one of today's global problems, affecting approximately 6 to 16% of the global population, with one in six people experiencing loneliness (Wolters et al., 2023; WHO, 2025). Moreover, people of all ages can experience loneliness, including older people, adolescents, or even younger people (WHO, 2025). Loneliness refers to perceived deficiencies in the quantity, quality, or type of relationships an individual has with others, which can lead to negative emotional experiences and potentially influence the individual's mental and physical health (Russell & Pang, 2016). Loneliness has been linked to factors such as social isolation, depressive symptoms, introverted personality traits, and inadequate social abilities (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018), also smartphone addiction (Hamida et al., 2021). Other studies also found that the environment in which one lives, marital status, living arrangements, and the characteristics of an individual's personal social network are among the most influential factors associated with loneliness (Barjakova et al., 2023). Loneliness may cause serious problems, such as poor health and depression (Akinyemi et al., 2025); suicidal ideation (Pike et al., 2024), or even suicidal behavior (McClelland et al., 2020; Shoib et al., 2023).

Migrant workers are vulnerable to experiencing loneliness as they relocate and adapt to a new cultural environment. A previous study found that the global prevalence of loneliness among migrant workers was reported to be 24.7 % (Salari et al., 2025). Some key factors that may contribute to or worsen social isolation and loneliness include separation from family, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the culture of the host country (Lim et al., 2022). Some types of work can also cause workers to be isolated and experience loneliness, for example, domestic workers or shop assistants (Astuti, 2019). Various studies found that loneliness in workers can lead to poorer task

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completion and increase the intention to leave (Ertosun & Erdil, 2012; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2017). This highlights the need to develop effective strategies to reduce loneliness among migrant workers.

Social support is a key predictor of loneliness and plays an important role in reducing feelings of loneliness (Nashori et al., 2025; Zhang & Dong, 2022). Social support is related to factors causing loneliness, such as loss of social networks and loss of ties with the country of origin. Social support refers to the perception or experience of being cared for, valued, and included within a supportive social network, which positively influences both mental and physical health (Taylor, 2011). Previous studies found that a relationship exists between social support and loneliness, which indicates that individuals who receive greater social support tend to experience lower levels of loneliness (Gondokusumo et al., 2023; Widarti & Marsidi, 2023; Pradnyani et al., 2024). Specifically, migrants with social support networks feel less lonely (Djundeva & Ellwardt, 2020).

Social support exists in various forms. Social support can also be evaluated based on an individual's perceived support from family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). Zhang & Dong (2022) found that perceived social support has a stronger influence on loneliness than other forms of support. Support from friends plays a more significant role in reducing loneliness than support from family and significant others among Chinese migrant populations. Furthermore, Negi et al. (2021) found that family-based social support was ambivalent, as contact with family abroad could either reduce loneliness by providing motivation and emotional strength or intensify it by emphasizing separation, inability to return home, and shame when unable to send remittance. These findings suggest an interesting dynamic in how social support influences loneliness in migrant workers.

Social support is an important factor in overcoming loneliness in migrant workers. Lonely workers can experience poor health, poor task completion, quit their jobs, or even exhibit suicidal behavior. The mental health of migrant workers can affect socio-economic development. Remittances from these workers are crucial for the economic development of their families and their country (Ghosh, 2023). Therefore, the aim of this study is to summarize and analyze how social support influences loneliness in migrant workers. The findings of this study will serve as a basis for enhancing social support to help reduce loneliness among migrant workers.

2. Methods

This study utilizes a mini literature review to identify, summarize, and analyze how social support influences loneliness in migrant workers. Mini Review can be used to summarize the most important concepts related to a topic while reporting the most relevant and current findings (Elfar, 2014). The limited number of eligible studies identified through the initial systematic search indicated that the topic remains underexplored. Therefore, this study was reframed as a Mini Review to allow a more flexible analysis of the existing literature. This study follows Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to optimize documentation by implementing clear guidelines to reduce bias and error (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA 2020 can improve transparency and the overall scientific rigor of research.

The Scopus and PubMed databases were selected for this study due to their extensive indexing and coverage. Specific search strings were developed for each database to identify relevant records. These search strings used the Boolean operator AND, combined with carefully selected keywords to target studies focusing on social support and loneliness in migrant workers.

The string used in Scopus was (“social support”) AND (“loneliness”) AND (“migrant worker”) at the “article title/abstract/keywords” field. The same string is also used in PubMed at “search” field. Both searches were conducted in early November 2025 with a range period of 2015 to 2025 to identify the most recent articles.

The eligibility of the articles for this study follows the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which have been determined. The inclusion criteria include studies that mention social support and loneliness in migrant workers. The language was limited to English and published between 2015 and 2025. The population other than migrant workers were excluded. Other types of documents, such as theses, books, and conference abstracts, are also excluded.

The selection process consisted of three stages. In the first stage, duplicate studies were identified and removed. In the second stage, titles and abstracts were screened for compliance with the inclusion

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criteria. In the third stage, the full texts of the shortlisted articles were examined to evaluate their relevance and overall quality.

Each stage of the selection procedure was documented following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, with a systematic record of the number of studies' identifications, exclusions, and inclusions. This rigorous procedure is intended to ensure transparency in data screening. The overall procedure is summarized and visually represented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

3. Results

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram for the systematic review process. At the initial identification stage, 44 articles were retrieved from two databases, namely Scopus with 26 articles and PubMed with 18 articles. Before proceeding to the screening stage, several articles were eliminated, including four duplicate articles, two non-English articles, and one article with an inappropriate document type, leaving 37 articles for the screening process. At this stage, 31 articles were excluded for not meeting the criteria, resulting in six articles for which full texts were sought. Two articles could not be retrieved, leaving only four articles for the eligibility assessment. One article was excluded because it did not establish a causal relationship between social support and loneliness. Ultimately, a total of three studies met all the criteria and were included in the systematic review.

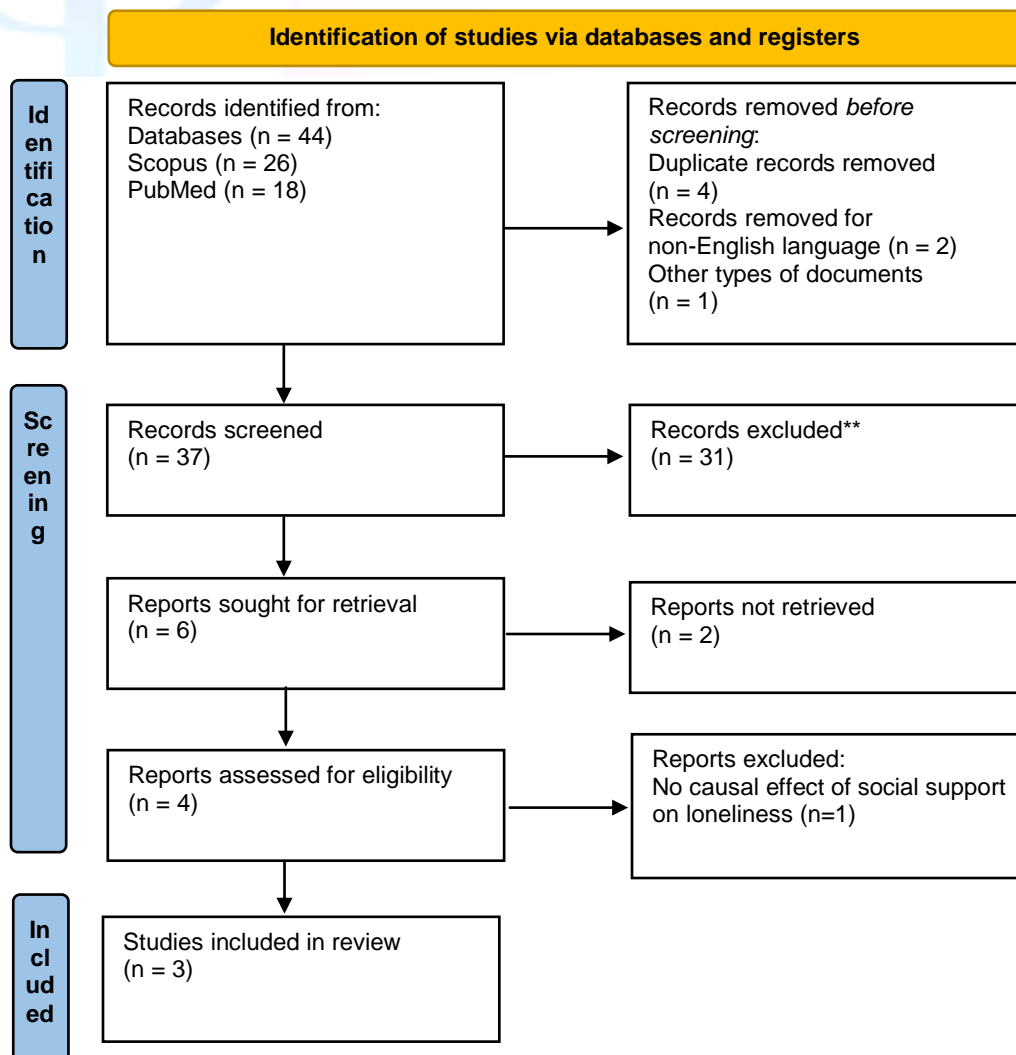


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow diagram

The main characteristics of the three studies included in this review are shown in Table 1. One study was conducted in the United States (Negi et al., 2021), one study was conducted in Singapore (Wong et al., 2023), and one study was conducted in China (Zhong et al., 2016). Studies were conducted through 2016-2023. The minimum sample size was 23 migrant workers, and the maximum sample size was 1.979 migrant workers, with mean ages ranging from 30 to 41.6 years.

Table 1. Characteristics of Reviewed Studies/Main Findings

| Authors | Country | Sample Characteristics | Key Findings |
|---|---------------|---|---|
| Negi, N.J.; Siegel, J.L.; Sharma, P.B.; Fiallos, G. | United States | 37 participants Mean Age = 41.6 years | Social relationships among workers were mainly instrumental and situational, lacking trust and emotional intimacy, and therefore ineffective in meeting emotional needs or reducing loneliness. Family-based social support was ambivalent, as contact with family abroad could either reduce loneliness by providing motivation and emotional strength or intensify it by emphasizing separation, inability to return home, and financial or emotional strain. |
| Wong, M.C.P.; Tan, C.S.; Chan, A.Y.; Khaled, N.; Hasan, M.T.; Panchapakesan, C.; Tripathi, S.; Afsana, K.; Lwin, M.O.; Chen, M.I.- C.; Hildon, Z.J.-L. | Singapore | Quantitative: 175 participants Qualitative: 23 participants Mean age = 30 years | Social support networks, including digital contact with family/friends and solidarity among dorm residents, played a protective role in reducing loneliness. |
| Zhong, B.; Xu, Y.; Jin, D.; Zou, X.; Liu, T. | China | 1.979 participants Mean age = 40 years | Lower perceived social support increases the likelihood of experiencing loneliness. Participants with low family support had 80% increased risk of loneliness. Participants with few friends/significant others had 50% increased risk of loneliness. |

4. Discussion

The aim of this study is to summarize and analyze how social support influences loneliness in migrant workers. Comparatively, differences in methodological approaches across the three studies result in distinct characteristics of findings. The study in China employed a quantitative approach, enabling the identification of strong and statistically measurable effects of loneliness (Zhong et al., 2016). In contrast, the study in the United States, using a qualitative approach, revealed more complex and ambivalent experiences of loneliness (Negi et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the study in Singapore adopted a mixed-method approach, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis by combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods, thereby capturing the contextual and situational dynamics of loneliness (Wong et al., 2022).

In terms of job type, there are differences in the dynamics of loneliness experienced by migrant workers across contexts. In the study conducted in the United States, generally participants are day

laborers in the informal sector with high levels of uncertainty. However, the loneliness they experience is not solely influenced by job instability, but also by structural factors such as illegality status, which causes social exclusion, disconnection, racism, and dehumanization. (Negi et al., 2021). In China, based on the study, migrant workers in the service sector may have relatively more formal work structures, including security guard, cleaner, housekeeper, restaurant waiter, shop assistant, porter, repairman, foot-bath massagist, nursing worker, and hotel waiter, yet they still face limitations in social integration due to institutional barriers such as the hukou system, as well as high working hours (Zhong et al., 2016). Meanwhile, in Singapore, migrant workers primarily employed in the construction sector and residing in centralized dormitories. However, they experience restrictions on social freedom, particularly during COVID-19 measures, intensify isolation and hinder meaningful social connectedness (Wong et al., 2022).

The first finding indicates that social relationships among workers were mostly instrumental and situational, lacking trust and emotional intimacy, which limited their effectiveness in fulfilling emotional needs and reducing loneliness. Family-based social support showed an ambivalent role, as contact with family abroad could reduce yet also intensify feelings of loneliness. For some participants, maintaining contact with family members abroad provides emotional strength and motivation. In contrast, such contact intensifies feelings of loneliness by reinforcing awareness of physical separation, inability to return home, and unmet familial obligations, particularly the inability to send remittances (Negi et al., 2021). These findings suggest that, although migrant workers are not socially isolated, the low emotional depth of these relationships prevents them from fulfilling emotional needs, allowing loneliness to persist. This finding supports an earlier study showing that loneliness is more strongly related to deficiencies in relationship quality than frequency or quantity of interactions (Peng & Roth, 2025).

The next finding showed that lower perceived social support was associated with a higher likelihood of loneliness, with individuals reporting low family support facing an 80% increased risk and those with low support from friends or others experiencing a 50% increased risk of loneliness (Zhong et al, 2016). These findings were proven by further meta-analysis study that proclaim support from friends played a more significant role in reducing loneliness than support from family and significant others among the migrant population (Zhang & Dong, 2022). However, other studies also found that high-quality and supportive family relationships contribute to lower levels of loneliness (Reyes & Reyes, 2023; Heshmati et al., 2021). This suggests that family relationships are particularly important in addressing loneliness among migrant workers.

The last finding indicates that broader social support networks, including digital communication with family and friends as well as solidarity among dormitory residents, functioned as protective factors against loneliness (Wong et al., 2023). This result implies that social support is not restricted to direct face-to-face interactions, but can also be obtained through online or digital means. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that internet use facilitates reaching others and enhances both the quantity and quality of communication, helps the respondent feel more connected to friends and family, and also makes them feel less isolated (Cotten et al., 2013).

These findings strengthen previous theories that loneliness in migrant workers can occur due to a lack of meaningful social support, unfulfilled needs for belonging, or stress due to emotional strain (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981). Therefore, this study implies a need to shift the focus of interventions from quantity to the quality of social support by prioritizing emotionally meaningful relationships rather than increasing social interactions. Programs that foster trust, peer mentoring, and reciprocal emotional support are likely to be more effective than informal or purely recreational activities. In addition, strengthening community-based support structures through dormitory or workplace-based programs that promote solidarity and collective identity may serve as protective buffers against loneliness by enhancing emotional connectedness through facilitated group discussions or peer support groups. Support for transnational family relationships is also critical, as policies that enable affordable communication, flexible leave arrangements, and financial security can reduce ambivalence and role strain, allowing family-based support to function as a protective resource rather than a stressor. Finally, loneliness among migrant workers should be understood as a structural and social issue rather than solely an individual psychological concern,

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underscoring the importance of integrating mental health services with broader social support interventions to improve overall well-being.

5. Conclusions

The experience of loneliness in migrant workers is influenced not only by the existence of social relationships but also by their qualitative characteristics, including emotional depth and perceived supportiveness. Family-based social support appears to be an important factor, while its impact remains ambivalent, as contact with family abroad could reduce yet also intensify feelings of loneliness. Digital communication can compensate for limitations in face-to-face interactions and play a buffering role in reducing loneliness.

Enhancing social support to help reduce loneliness among migrant workers can be achieved through interventions that focus on fostering emotionally meaningful relationships and strengthening community-based support, rather than simply increasing social contact. Supporting affordable and flexible communication with families can reduce ambivalence in family relationships. Furthermore, loneliness should be addressed as a structural and social issue, integrated with mental health and social support services.

A constraint of this study is the restricted availability of research on social support and loneliness among migrant workers within the selected databases, which may have limited the comprehensiveness of the findings. Further research should utilize systematic review with a broader and higher-quality database to strengthen the robustness and generalizability of the results. In addition, longitudinal designs are necessary to observe the dynamics of relationships among variables more comprehensively over time, allowing for a more accurate understanding of causal directions. Research should also develop experimental intervention approaches to test the effectiveness of designed interventions in improving social support. Furthermore, cross-country comparative studies are important to explore differences in cultural, social, and economic contexts that may influence research outcomes, thereby providing a more comprehensive and globally applicable understanding.

6. CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Fath Yustia Hendrawan: Conceptualization, literature search, data analysis, writing, and editing. **Fuad Nashori:** Validation, proofreading, and reviewing the manuscript for clarity, accuracy, and consistency, ensuring the quality of the final version of the paper.

7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest or personal relationships that may have influenced the work reported in this paper.

8. Declaration of Generative AI and Assistive Technologies in the Writing Process

The research ideas and concepts were developed independently by the author. The authors utilized Google Translate and ChatGPT as assistants in the translation process, including word selection and grammar checking. In addition, AI was also used as an assistant to identify relevant articles for this research.

9. Funding

The authors independently financed this study and did not receive any funding from external sources.

10. Ethical Approval

This study utilized mini literature review design and did not include human participants or the collection of primary data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. However, all data were obtained from publicly available sources, and the study adhered to ethical standards in research, including proper citation, avoidance of plagiarism, and accurate reporting of findings.

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