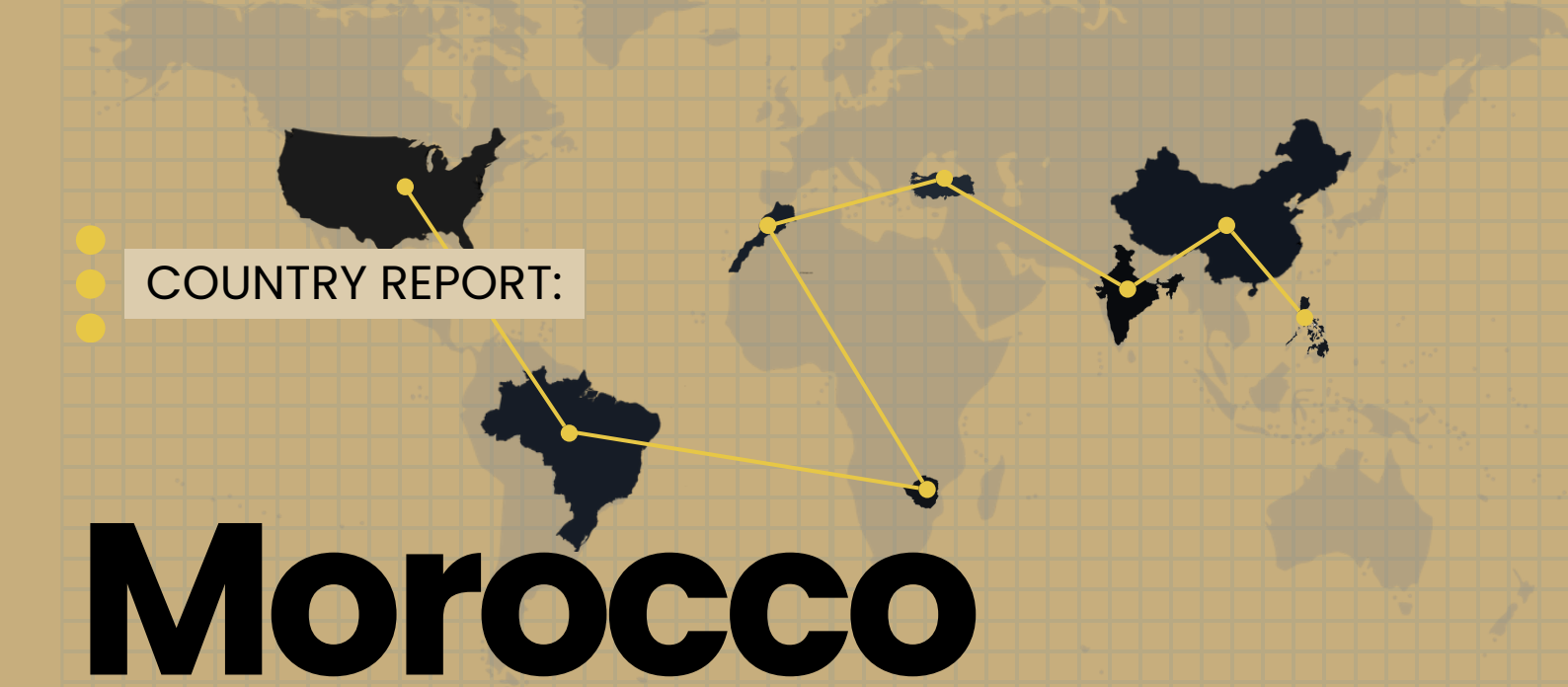




COUNTRY REPORT:

Morocco

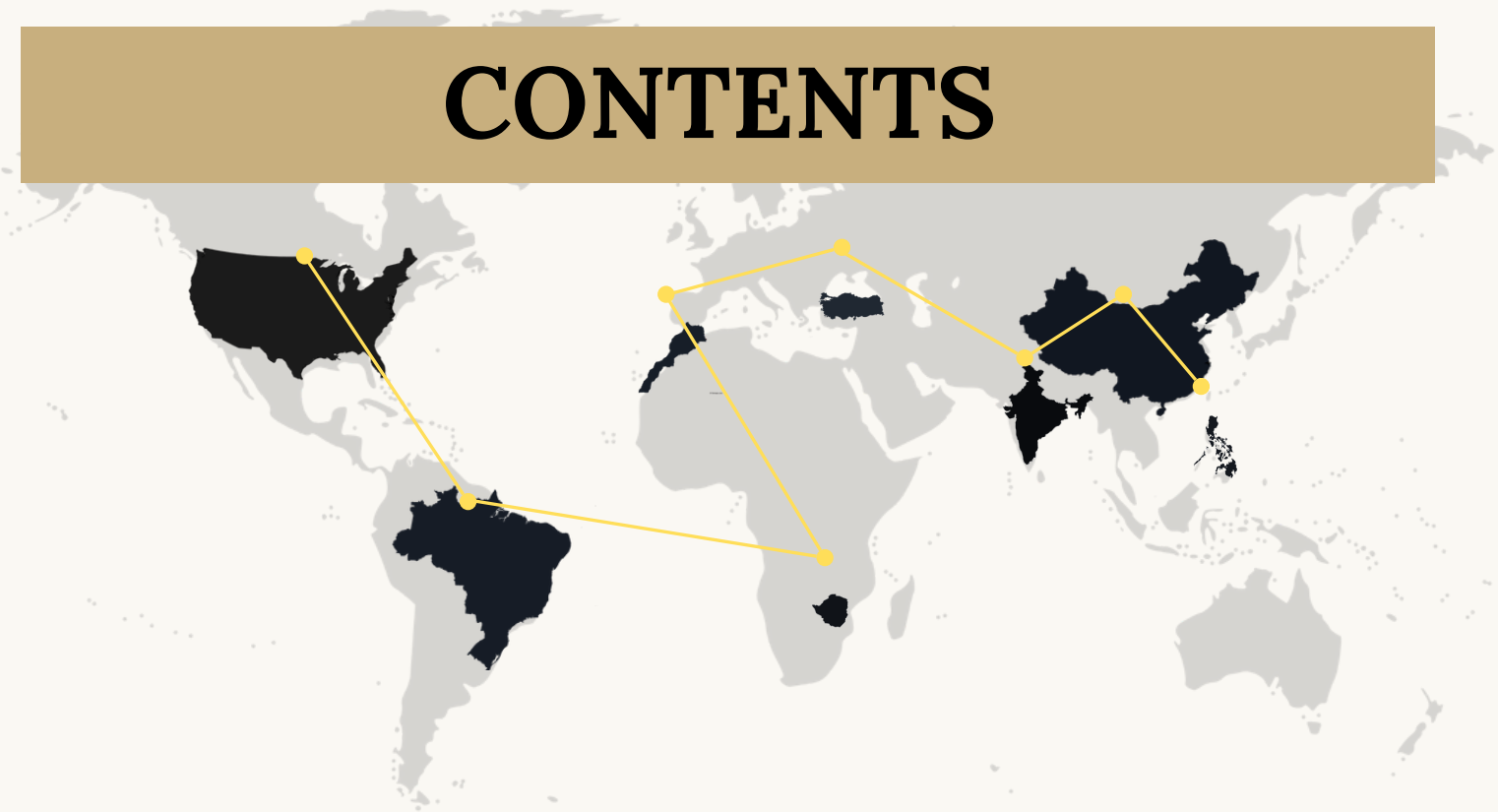


**Hospitality, Ritual,
and Everyday
Belonging in Morocco**

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Annecy Behavioral Science Lab

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A Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

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1. Summary Report

“Since everyone lives under one roof, speaking of loneliness seems to contradict our way of life.”

– participant from Morocco





Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-country qualitative study examining how people across diverse cultural settings conceptualize and experience social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The project engages with eight countries: Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

The goal is to provide actionable insights for monitoring and intervention for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers by highlighting both universal and culture-specific dimensions of social connection, disconnection and loneliness.

In Morocco, social life is anchored in family, extended kinship, and communal ritual, but these same structures can impose heavy expectations. Connection is often defined through emotional closeness and dependability, while belonging is understood through unconditional acceptance and the feeling of being at home. Loneliness is heavily stigmatized, often read as ingratitude or weakness, leading many to endure it silently even within crowded households.

Methodology

The study employed a stratified sampling design and recruited 354 participants aged 18 and older across eight countries. Stratification included age, gender, income, partnership status, loneliness severity, urban/rural residence, and region. Recruitment followed a drift sampling strategy, combining targeted outreach with participant referrals.

Semi-structured interviews (2–3 hours each) explored the individual's social map, functions of their social connections, definition and experiences of social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The interview included a meta-cognitive portion where individuals reflected on how and why they have provided the answers that they have given. Data were then transcribed, translated into English, and de-identified. Country teams conducted inductive coding before iteratively synthesizing results into a shared framework. Thematic coding was supported by qualitative analysis tools (Quirkos, NVivo, Google Sheets).



Analytic Approach

For each interview the whole transcript was first mapped to an analysis summary sheet which summarizes all sections of the interview. Information from these summary sheets were then aggregated together to form the evidence table. Concurrently, each transcript was subjected to a selective line-by-line coding focusing on how individuals experience and conceptualize social connection (including how individuals define social connection, how they characterize good and deficient social connections, and how they define belonging); as well as how they experience and conceptualize disconnection and loneliness (including how the individuals experience and define disconnection, experience and define loneliness, and whether make the a distinction between loneliness and solitude).

For the line-by-line coding, country leads initially inductively coded manuscripts independently of the rest of the team. The codes that were developed then reflected culturally applicable elements. Codes from across all countries were then collated and synthesized, and overlapping or similar codes were integrated.

This synthesis provided the coding framework, which the research team then applied to the full set of transcripts.

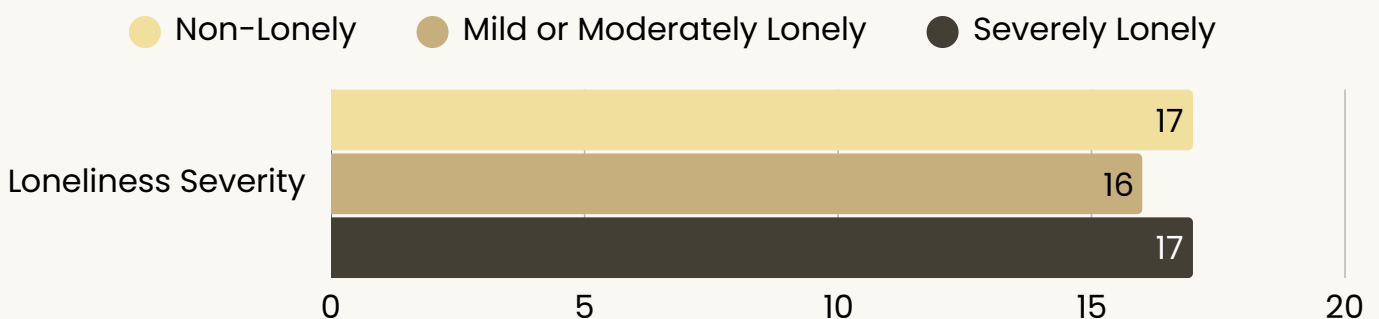
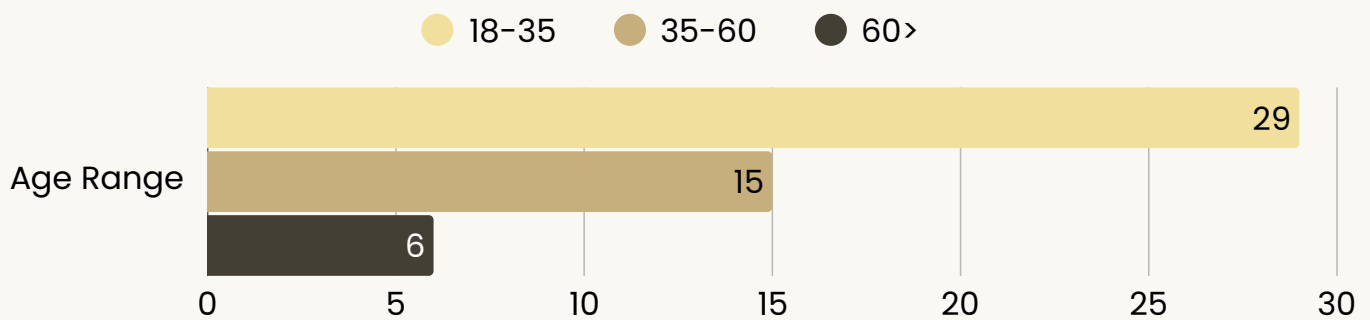
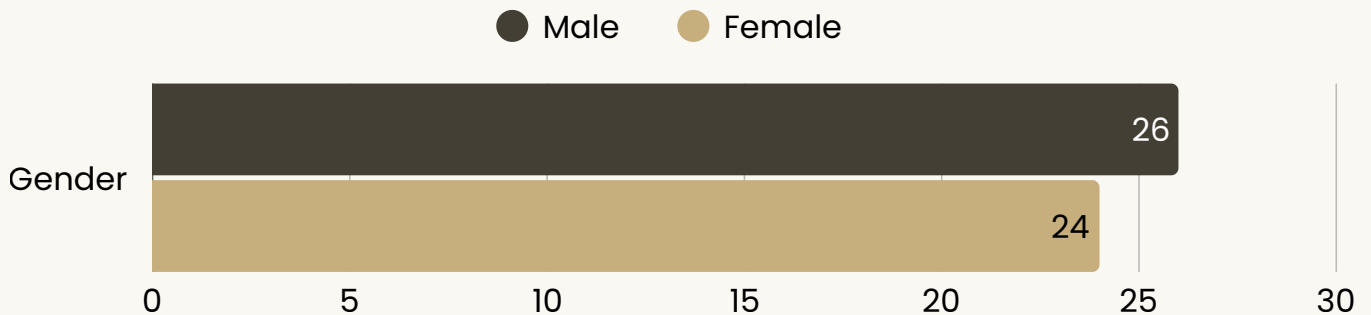
For example, the code [Emotional depth / superficiality] were used for responses that indicate the depth or superficiality of the emotional connection such as when one participant mentioned "People could be extroverted but still lonely if they don't really connect on a deeper level." Codes are not mutually exclusive, and transcript portions can be coded with multiple applicable codes

Codes were clustered as to whether they referred to the characterization of the relationship (e.g., "closeness/depth", "duration"), the interaction (e.g., "frequency of interaction", "reciprocity of interaction"), the function of the interaction (e.g., "instrumental support", "emotional support"), the perceived characteristics of the other (e.g., "availability", "trustworthiness"), or one's self state (e.g., "satisfaction", "obligation"). The full list of codes can be found in the project OSF. The team met weekly to refine the codes, clarifying provisional definitions and applicability of the codes to instances in the data.

Sample Demographics Overview

Participant Profile Summary

 Total Sample: 50



*Loneliness severity was determined during sampling using a single item from the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D): "During the past week, have you felt lonely?" Responses were categorized as: Non-lonely: ≤1 day, Mild/Moderate: 1-4 days, Severe: 5-7 days.

Summary of Select Findings

Key Social Categories

In Morocco, connection is rooted in family and extended kinship, where parents, siblings, and cousins serve as primary sources of care and identity. Friends and neighbors add important layers of everyday support, while religious practice links individuals not only to Allah but also to deceased loved ones and the wider community. Communal gatherings, rituals, and humor are central to how Moroccans create and sustain belonging.

Challenges and Quality of Connection

While family and community are strong, they can also impose heavy expectations. Emotional needs are often overlooked, and mental health struggles dismissed. Cultural stigma around vulnerability makes it difficult to openly share distress, leaving people to cope alone. Even within bustling families or neighborhoods, participants described feeling unseen or emotionally unsupported.

Definitions of Connection and Belonging

Belonging in Morocco is tied to family rites, communal rituals, and religious faith. Practices such as post-funeral gatherings,

neighborhood celebrations, and collective prayer reinforce unity, even as individuals struggle with private emotions. For many, connection means stability and continuity through shared values, not just emotional closeness.

Cultural Specificity

Moroccan culture places high value on togetherness, but this also makes loneliness difficult to admit. To be lonely is often perceived as selfish or ungrateful, since families are expected to provide constant support. Religious practice and communal life offer strong anchors, but when these ties falter, individuals may feel doubly isolated — both from others and from cultural ideals. Humor and shared struggles often soften these pressures, becoming entry points to connection.

Disconnection and Loneliness

Loneliness in Morocco is experienced primarily as an inner state of sadness, emptiness, and lack of belonging. Participants often describe feeling submerged, unseen, or cut off, even in the presence of others. Because stigma discourages disclosure, many endure silently, cycling between moments of

Summary of Select Findings

deep withdrawal and fragile reconnection through prayer or solitary activities.

Implications

Measurement in Morocco would benefit from reflecting the central role of family, ritual, and spirituality, while also capturing the silence imposed by stigma. Tools must account for how cultural expectations to appear “connected” obscure loneliness, making it harder to detect.

Policies and interventions should work to reduce stigma, normalize mental health struggles, and strengthen safe spaces for disclosure.

Recognizing the buffering capacity of rituals, humor, and faith can provide entry points for interventions that resonate culturally while addressing hidden suffering.



Summary of Research Questions

This study was guided by a shared analytic framework and research questions* across eight participating countries:

SOCIAL MAPPING

- What are common social categories among the target population?
- Which social categories typically fulfill which social functions among the target population?
- What are common challenges/burdens of social connection among the target population?

SOCIAL CONNECTION

- Definition of social connection: how does the target population define social connection?
- Characteristics of a good (and deficient) social connection: what makes for a good social connection for the target population?
- What is the typical frequency, duration and magnitude of feelings of social connection among the target population?
- What is the physiology of social connection among the target population?
- What are facilitators and barriers to initiation of social connection among the target population?
- What are the facilitators and barriers to maintenance of social connection among the target population?
- Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of social connection among the target population?
- What else does the target population feel connected to?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS

- Experiences of disconnection: What are the experiences of disconnection among the target population?
- What is the typical frequency, duration and magnitude of disconnection among the target population?
- Definition of disconnection: How do the target population define disconnection?
- Experiences of loneliness: What are the experiences of loneliness among the target population?
- What is the physiology of loneliness among the target population?

- What is the typical frequency, duration and magnitude of loneliness among the target population?
- What are the effects of loneliness among the target population?
- How does the target population cope with loneliness?
- What factors affects loneliness for the target population?
- Definition of loneliness: How do the target population define and explain loneliness?
- Definition of loneliness: What/do the target population make a difference between loneliness and solitude?
- How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?
- Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of loneliness among the target population?

Summary of Project Resources



Project OSF

This project's materials are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at <https://osf.io/p3msu>, to ensure transparency, and accessibility.

- **Interview Guide:** A copy of the interview guide containing the questions asked across 8 countries
- **Deidentified Transcripts:** Interview transcripts (anonymized) from all participating countries
- **Ethics:** Documentation of institutional ethics approvals, consent processes, and ethical safeguards
- **Evidence Tables:** Verbatim transcript portions and summarized information per participant across different research questions
- **Codebook:** The codebook contains the codes, provisional code definitions and transcript portion examples across different research questions
- **Country Reports:** Country reports from the analysis of within-country data in Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Türkiye, the United States, and Zimbabwe.
- **Main Publication:** Pre-print of the publication that features the cross-country comparisons across the global project.

DOI

- <https://doi.org/10.54224/32560>



Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

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2. Analysis Report

“in Morocco admitting loneliness can sound ungrateful. 'You have family, food, a roof. What else do you want?’”

– participant from Morocco



What are common social categories among the target population?

Across the Moroccan sample, participants organize their social world around five recurring categories: immediate family, a romantic partner, close friends, classmates or coworkers, and neighbors or the wider community. This template appears with striking consistency across age groups, loneliness severity levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Family anchors every participant's social map, almost without exception. Parents — and in many cases siblings — are named first and interacted with most frequently, typically on a daily basis. Participants turn to family members for financial support, health-related help, and everyday logistical needs. As P15 put it plainly, "For emotional or financial help I go to my mom or sister. For general advice or support I rely on my best friend". A romantic partner, where present, occupies a distinct and elevated position — often described as the primary outlet for emotional disclosure, intimate advice, and daily connection. P1 describes her partner as the person she tells "every day, like on a daily basis," knowing "the details of the details,". P2 similarly describes her partner as the person who provides "everything that I want, even the things that I didn't know I wanted and I needed". The partner's role absorbs functions — emotional anchoring, reciprocal disclosure, daily care — that in more traditional Moroccan social life would rest with family.

Friends form the next ring, but several participants describe this circle as small and, for some, unreliable. P5 reports having just two close friends; P19 also names exactly two; P50 reflects that "I'd say I have two friends I'd still call 'close'" after decades of adult life. P2 captures a common frustration: "I can be available all the time, and the other person knows that, but they're only on and off. If they're busy, they drop communication... It raises questions about

reciprocity". Coworkers and classmates appear across the sample but are generally kept at a professional distance, described as useful for task-related information or occasional socializing but not trusted for deeper support. Neighbors are valued for polite exchange and community goodwill, particularly during holidays or crises, but rarely cross into emotional support territory.

Beyond these five categories, a small number of participants surface genuinely distinct social configurations worth noting. P6 explicitly includes online friends made through Discord as a meaningful and lasting category: "My longest friendship started online, and it is real support. We talk and play games together. Some of them have become real-life friends". P10 maps his social world into five concentric rings — family, close offline and online friends, situational friends, international online friends, and acquaintances — treating online relationships as a full tier rather than a supplement. P26 mentions a shelter manager as a recurring relational figure alongside bandmates — an occupational and creative network absent in most other maps. P1 also names her cat explicitly within her social map, placing the animal alongside her parents as part of her "small family". These exceptions are rare — the basic five-category template holds across the sample — but they suggest that for a minority of participants, digital networks and non-human bonds carry genuine relational weight.



Which social categories typically fulfill which social functions among the target population?

Across the Moroccan sample, participants do not treat social categories as interchangeable — each is activated for a distinct type of need, producing a layered functional architecture that holds with remarkable consistency across age, gender, and loneliness severity.

Family carries a diverse functional load, but its role is primarily material and logistical but may not necessarily be emotionally intimate. Parents are the default for financial emergencies, health crises, and practical decisions. P2 draws the line precisely: "if I need something that's tangible, something that is a serious need, like if you're sick or something, I go to my parents, because at this stage in my life, they're the ones who can help me with that". P8 goes to her father specifically "mainly for money issues, solving problems or when I'm confused". P17 frames it similarly: "Dad is my go-to for money issues or a quick, clear decision; my sister is better for personal matters". Crucially, many participants explicitly exclude family from their emotional circuit — P1 notes she would not "voice my emotional problems" to parents; P30 describes his family as tending to "minimize emotional stuff". Although not universal, it marks a clear pattern, particularly among younger participants, of splitting material and logistical reliance on family from emotional disclosure routed elsewhere.

Romantic partners, where present, are the primary site for emotional disclosure, intimate advice, career guidance, and daily-life sharing. . P1 describes her partner as the person she tells "every day, like on a daily basis," rating satisfaction at "99%... that's the healthiest I can be with someone". P2 explicitly routes career support exclusively through her partner: "if I need help

with my studies or help with my career life, I would definitely go to my partner and only my partner, because he has more experience". P21 captures the functional hierarchy in a single crisp line: "Emotional support: fiancé or best friends. Financial help: my parents. Academic advice: my supervisor. Everyday tips — anything from make-up to job leads — I ask the girls". For older participants, this anchoring role intensifies: P50 describes his wife as "calm, perceptive, and has a way of making me feel safe even when I don't know what I need," adding that "for emotional support, I mostly rely on my wife... I suppose I want to be reminded that I'm not alone in what I'm feeling". The partner's functional distinctiveness lies in its integration across different types of support: it is the one category that routinely holds emotional, informational, practical, and relational functions at once for Moroccan participants.

Friends are tapped primarily for socialization, mood management, and domain-specific advice, but rarely for material or high-stakes support. Shared activities, such as cafés, beach walks, gaming, mall trips dominate descriptions of friend interactions. P13 puts this pointedly: "For energetic trips, roller coasters at Sindibad, the mall, I go with school friends or colleagues". P39 describes her two close friends as "often checking in with each other, whether it's planning to meet up or just sending silly memes to lift each other's spirits" — a balance of "fun and support". Yet within the friend category, many participants are highly deliberate about which friend serves which function. P10 describes routing differently by need: "if I need technical advice, I ask the friend who works in that field. For emotional or interpersonal issues I go to the 'wise old man' in the group... I am not looking to vent, I want solutions or at least solid brainstorming". P17 similarly draws on "a listening ear from a few friends, and hands-on help from that one practical friend. No one is the full package, but I'm learning that's normal". The main friction, reported across multiple participants, is inconsistency: P2 describes friends as "only on and off — if they're busy, they drop communication," raising "questions about reciprocity"; P29 adds that while friends care, he doesn't

always "feel seen fully".

Coworkers and classmates occupy a predominantly professional and informational role. P1 keeps most coworker relationships "very professional"; P32 reports colleagues are "cordial, but I'm not very close with anyone apart from one colleague. Most of the time we just keep it professional. "; P27 describes colleagues as people who "share tools, coffee, inside jokes about printers that jam at the worst moments. After hours, though, we each vanish to our own lives". However, this category contains meaningful exceptions. P31 notes that because he is single and lives alone, "my work circle ends up being my daily company". P25 routes domain-specific needs through work contacts: "Grandma for life advice, coworker [name] for clinic drama, cousin [name] for rent stress". And P46, reflecting on his retirement, notes that "some former colleagues became lifelong friends. In Morocco, when someone shares bread with you, it means something. We're not just coworkers, we're part of each other's story" suggesting that colleague ties can deepen over time into something relationally richer, particularly in older cohorts.

Neighbors hold the thinnest and most variable functional role. For most urban participants the relationship is limited to greetings: P38 describes exchanges as "polite," adding that "everyone stays behind their doors" in newer apartment buildings; P37 calls his neighbor relationship "cordial, not close"; P50 characterizes neighbor ties as "polite, but not particularly close". Yet among older participants and those in smaller, rural towns, neighbors perform genuinely supportive functions. P46 says simply: "when I was sick last winter, it was my neighbor Fatima who brought me soup. We may not talk every day, but there's a deep sense of responsibility toward each other". P43 describes a neighbor who "has become like family... she's the first to knock if she sees my curtains haven't opened". P41, elderly and largely isolated, identifies "the neighbor's daughter" as one of only a handful of remaining social contacts, dropping off groceries weekly. These cases

suggest that neighbor functionality is strongly conditioned by age, rurality, and the availability of other social categories; and may become a primary support tier when other categories thin out.



What are common challenges and burdens of social connection among the target population?

Distinct challenge themes saliently emerge across the data: intergenerational communication gaps, emotional expression difficulties, inconsistency and reciprocity failures in friendship, geographic and structural distance, the burden of obligatory relationships, and culturally specific boundary violations.

Intergenerational communication gaps are the most consistently named challenge within family relationships. Younger participants describe feeling emotionally close to parents while simultaneously feeling unable to share certain things with them. P2 describes it plainly: "there's a huge gap in the way I'm thinking and the way my parents think. There's a big gap in emotion expression". P20 frames it as a boundary negotiation: "With family the hardest part is setting boundaries. My parents still see me as their child, so when my newer outlook clashes with theirs it can hurt". P11 articulates the same tension: "The biggest challenge is mentality. When you read and research, your outlook changes — you can't go back to old ways of thinking, and that gap hurts... I try to accept surface conversations in the street, but repeated small-talk can still sting". Even among partnered, older participants this pattern holds: P36 notes his family relationships hover around "60 to 70 percent on most days. There's warmth, but also distance. Some things I keep to myself because I don't want to worry them, or because I know they won't fully get it".

Inconsistency and reciprocity failures in friendship are the dominant challenge in the category of friendship. P2 identifies this as a persistent source of dissatisfaction: "I can be available all the time, and the other

person knows that, but they're only on and off. If they're busy, they drop communication... It raises questions about reciprocity". P18 reports a related experience — gossip, exclusion from group work, and feeling that classmates "judge me" without cause. P13 describes a painful structural version of this: spending the summer with her partner meant that when classes resumed, "my friends had bonded with new circles. When I tried to hang out, their inside jokes and references went over my head. I retreated to my dorm room... and for a while I felt I had no friends at all". P29 captures a subtler form of relational breakdown, not of explicit abandonment but emotional distance: "people know the version of me I've shown them, but I've changed. I want to talk about things that matter to me now, my fears, my growth, but it feels like some people are stuck with my past self. I guess I'm craving emotional renewal, but I don't know how to ask for that".

The burden of obligatory relationships is a culturally specific challenge that several participants name explicitly — the pressure to maintain ties not out of genuine connection but out of familial or social duty. P10 puts it analytically: "Culturally there's a sense of duty: you must visit family because they're family. People don't always examine it; they just do it. Whether that's good or bad depends on the case — sometimes problems get swept under the rug because 'that's how it's done'". P25 describes forced family visits as occasions where she goes on "airplane mode" internally — politely present but entirely disengaged. P17 captures the disconnection that forced visits produce: "if I'm forced to visit my family member, I would feel disconnected, just sit there without interacting". P31 extends this to friendships: "Friends expect availability. Family expects loyalty even when it's toxic. It's hard to set boundaries without being labeled cold or arrogant". These accounts reflect a broader Moroccan cultural pattern in which social connection is not entirely elective — participating in certain relationships is socially mandatory, and failing to do so carries reputational cost.

Boundary violations and cultural over-intrusion form a final, distinctively

Moroccan challenge theme. Multiple participants describe the double-edged nature of Moroccan communal closeness — valued in principle but experienced as intrusive in practice. P1 articulates it as a structural feature: "It's really something unique about social connection in Morocco is that we don't respect the boundaries... everyone feels like they should be involved in your life. Like, that comes from neighbors, from strangers in the streets... it's like a big family, which is not always a positive thing". P21 frames it more specifically: "personal space is fuzzy here. Neighbours comment on your grocery bags, distant cousins ask about salary — everyone feels entitled to be part of your storyline. It can feel warm, but it can also feel intrusive". P19 adds a gendered dimension: cross-sex friendships are structurally complicated because they "are often seen as a fast path to dating or sex" — making platonic mixed-gender ties socially suspect and difficult to maintain without misinterpretation. Together these accounts suggest that the very communal warmth that makes Moroccan social life rich also generates friction — over-involvement, unwanted scrutiny, and the collapse of private emotional space — that participants must actively manage.

Geographic and structural distance functions as an amplifier of all other challenges — particularly for younger participants who have moved cities for study or work, and for older participants whose social networks have geographically dispersed. P14 states it most directly: "Distance is the biggest, since I move almost yearly, no one stays physically close... once I move away the connection fades even if the bond was strong". P10 frames it structurally: "when you're young, school gives friendships twelve years of shared routines... once that structure disappears the friendship often disappears with it". 23 captures the cumulative emotional weight of relocation: "since moving away from home city it hits harder here. New streets, new faces, the accent's different — easy to slip into 'What am I doing here?'. For older participants like P50, distance takes a different form — most peers have either moved abroad, aged out of active socializing, or died, leaving the social map dramatically thinner than it once was.

Definition of social connection — how does the target population define social connection?

Definitions of social connection cluster around a small, tightly interrelated set of concerns — feeling emotionally bonded to another person, feeling genuinely heard by them, trusting them, and experiencing that care as bidirectional. Structural and behavioral dimensions of connection (how often people meet, what roles they occupy, what practical functions they serve) are largely absent from how Moroccans define the concept. The overall picture is of a sample that defines connection almost entirely through felt relational quality rather than through what people do together or how frequently they are in contact.



Emotional bond and being seen as the definitional core. The most universally present element across Moroccan definitions is the felt quality of

the bond itself — a sense of being seen, known, and emotionally registered by another person. P34 articulates it with particular precision: "it's when you feel seen. Not just when someone talks to you, but when you speak and they actually hear you, understand you. It's the difference between being in a room full of people and still feeling alone, and being with just one person who makes you feel like you matter." P40 frames it as an invisible relational thread: "social connection is the invisible thread that binds you to people — it's that feeling of being seen and accepted." P39 extends this: "it's when you feel seen, supported, and emotionally safe, even if you're not speaking all the time. It's really about emotional closeness and feeling like you matter to someone." P41, the sample's most isolated participant, reduces the definition to its most elemental form: "social connection is someone remembering you exist. Someone calling without needing something. It's when you hear your name spoken kindly, not just as a formality." What these definitions share is that connection is located in the experience of being witnessed ; not just in the act of interacting.

Reciprocity as the structural rule. A second major strand treats connection not as a passive state but as an active, bidirectional exchange that must be maintained by both parties. P22 gives it its clearest formulation: "social connection means feeling anchored to other people, having relationships where you both give and receive care. It's knowing there's someone who'll answer your call at 2 a.m. and vice versa." P2 grounds this in a broader social logic: "it's how important it is to be there for people, because you will need them back, because that's how society works." P50 states it in terms of mutual attention: "having people around who care about you and whom you care about — not just seeing people, but being seen by them."

Spontaneity and ease as a minority but consistent strand. A smaller group of participants define connection through felt ease and immediacy rather than necessarily through depth or durability. P10 names it directly: "it's the 'click' — I can't define it logically, but when it happens I know the conversation

will go somewhere. It rests on mutual understanding and respect." P26 puts it more compactly: "feeling somebody gets your weird jokes without you explaining. And you get theirs." Similarly, for P47: "feeling grounded through your relationships — knowing you have people you can rely on, joke with, or even debate things with. It's not always deep, but it's real."

What is absent from Moroccan definitions. Several dimensions of social connection that might be expected do not appear. Contact frequency is essentially uncoded — no participant defines connection as "staying in touch regularly" or "seeing someone often." Practical functions of relationships (giving advice, helping with tasks, providing material support) are also absent from definitional responses; Moroccans do not define what connection is through what it provides. Shared activities and socialization are similarly absent. This pattern of absences is itself revealing: it confirms that for Moroccan participants, connection is not a function, a habit, or a structural role but a felt relational state whose presence or absence is known immediately and subjectively.

Characteristics of a good (and deficient) social connection — what makes for a good social connection among the target population?

Across Moroccan participants, characterizations of a good social connection draw on a wide but coherent set of relational qualities.

Emotional safety and non-judgement is the most widely named quality of a good connection: the felt permission to be imperfect, unguarded, and fully present without fear of how one will be received. P37 articulates this as the defining condition: "a good connection is one where we both feel safe being our messy, unfiltered selves, without fear of being 'too much' or 'not enough'."

P32 states its logical inverse: "Because without [emotional safety], even being with someone can feel lonely." P35 articulates the existential cost of its absence: "when you can't be yourself, you're always performing. And that's lonely in a different way."

Trust and honesty are also treated as foundational qualities needed for a good social connection. P1 is categorical: "trust and honesty come in the first place...if you don't have trust, then you have nothing. If you don't have honesty, then you have nothing." P6 states it simply: "Trust first of all — knowing you can rely on each other, enjoying time together, and being able to listen and share feelings." P38 reaches for the Arabic concept of *ikhlas*: "just one word — *ikhlas* (sincerity). I want pure-hearted people. No show-offs, no jealousy, no one who pretends to care just to gossip later." P11 gives honesty a specifically Moroccan linguistic grounding: "in Darija we talk about *ṣdaq* but not merely 'not lying,' but speaking plainly and showing one's real intentions. That level of clarity builds genuine connection."



Reciprocity and mutual effort constitute a third salient cluster – the understanding that good connection requires active, bidirectional investment from both parties. P22 frames it as a mutual availability pact: "knowing there's someone who'll answer your call at 2 a.m. and vice-versa." P2 makes the maintenance logic explicit: "you need to have consistency, you need to have the will to maintain the social connection, you want to be there. It shouldn't come as like, a task; it should come naturally... If any of those parts aren't mutual, I feel that social connection will fall apart or will become, at some point, just acquaintances." P17 states the bilateral rule: "A connection can last indefinitely if both parties keep showing up; it can also die the minute one side stops." The same failure repeats across P36, P43, and P49, each independently describing the weariness of being "often the one who initiates check-ins" in connections that turn one-sided.

Responsiveness – attending to another's actual needs, wants, and preferences – emerges as a fourth distinct quality, separable from both emotional safety and simple availability. P45 gives it its most precise formulation: a good connection is someone who "remembers your silence – who notices when your 'I'm fine' sounds different." P41, for whom connection has contracted dramatically, defines the whole of good connection through this lens: "it's when someone remembers your name without looking at their phone. When they ask how you are – and mean it. When they let you speak, even if you speak slowly. It's dignity, really."

Emotional depth over superficiality is one of the most consistent codes across the Moroccan sample. Participants across all ages distinguish between connections that go somewhere and connections that stay on the surface, and treat depth as the marker of genuine relational value. P10 draws this distinction over time: "In middle and high school I thought liking the same niche hobby, say anime, was enough. Over time I realised those ties were flimsy... A real connection rests on something deeper than shared entertainment." P3 describes wanting "connection with your circle – that

person needs to be there to listen and support, not just surface talk." P34 describes the pain of depth's absence in his current relationships: "we speak in rehearsed patterns — 'how are you,' 'did you eat.' It's surface-level, and I don't feel safe enough to go deeper."

Boundaries and respect appear as an interconnected pair that Moroccan participants name with particular cultural specificity. Good connections are reported to be those in which limits are recognized, communicated, and respected — and deficient ones are often characterized precisely by their violation. P1 names boundaries explicitly alongside trust, honesty, and consistency as equal maintenance requirements. P17 names them as a paired condition with listening: "real listening... clear boundaries...genuine care." P15 describes boundary management as effortful but essential: "Defining and respecting boundaries, treating each category appropriately, is challenging and takes energy, but the effort is worth it." P12 uses boundaries as a protective tool: "Before I commit to a relationship I set clear limits and make sure our purposes match." Notably, several participants identify the absence of boundaries as a Moroccan cultural feature; P1 reflects that "It's really something unique about social connection in Moroccans is that we don't respect the boundaries...everyone feels like they should be involved in your life,"



and P23 echoes it: "families expect you to show up, no RSVP — that warmth feels nice, but it can cross lines; privacy is a fuzzy concept." This makes boundaries a culturally contested quality rather than a universally accepted one.

Love, affection, and positive affect appear as the felt experiential dimension of good connection — what good connection actually feels like from the inside. P8 describes it with characteristic directness: "I thought of my good connections and what makes them special— love, help and caring." P1 reaches for an evocative sensory metaphor: "it feels like more than minds... like the souls are meeting somewhere." P25 names the immediate physical relief: "lighter shoulders, easier breathing." P41 gives it a dignity frame: "a good connection gives you back a sense of dignity."

Disclosure and the sharing of emotions is named by some participants as both a feature of good connections and a precondition for them. P2 is explicit: "expressing how you feel, because we are humans at the end of the day, and we need to feed on feelings and emotional energy." P17 describes the ideal as "someone who knows me well enough to gauge when to listen and when to act, without over-soothing me with 'it's going to be okay.'" P9 elaborates: "A good connection includes emotional support, care, and really listening to each other. Being present — not just asking, but really wanting to hear what the other person has to say" The flip side — selective or withheld sharing — is described by multiple participants as a signal that a connection has not yet earned full trust, rather than as deficient in itself. P26: "I'd share if it got heavy, but I'd probably test the waters first, to see if the listener is safe."

Compatibility, shared interests, and shared characteristics appear as facilitators that lower the cost of connection rather than as defining qualities. P10 distinguishes their limited role clearly: "A superficial shared interest isn't enough — if that's all we have, the relationship stalls." P26 identifies shared projects as deepening connections that are already good: "My strongest

friendships all have long talks and shared projects — that mix just works." P43 describes how a shared activity (painting class) became the occasion for a genuine connection to form organically, but attributes the quality of the connection to the ease and warmth that followed, not the shared activity itself.

Feeling used, selfishness, and not-related-to-instrumentality emerge as a meaningful negative code. Several participants explicitly name the use-and-discard dynamic as a feature of bad connection. P38: "I used to try, but I always ended up feeling invisible or worse, used." P50: "Sometimes, I've seen people treat relationships more as a means to an end — people help each other but often with expectations attached. It's not always about genuine connection." P11 frames it from the opposite direction, noting that relationships with people who "expect things you can't give — money, time, favours, you face tension" tend to sour when you refuse. The positive formulation appears explicitly in P6's definition ("Feeling close, understood and loved by others... When we are there for each other without expectations") and implicitly throughout descriptions of what makes connection feel genuinely good.

Conflict resolution appears in a small number of participants as a quality that distinguishes lasting connections from fragile ones. P14: "I enjoy the time we share and try to resolve conflicts — I'd only end a relationship over serious betrayal, otherwise challenges are just part of life." P16 favors direct communication: "I like communication, so I address issues directly." P25 uses a domestic metaphor: "I'd rather patch the roof than abandon the house." Harmony — the absence of chronic conflict — is also named but more neutrally, as something that results from other qualities (trust, honesty, boundaries) rather than as a quality in itself.



Virtual connections occupy a specific and nuanced position. They are present across many participants (P10, P17, P20, P24, P27, P30, P33, P37, P40, P43) but consistently evaluated against the same depth criteria as in-person connections rather than dismissed categorically. P40's decade-long online friendship is treated as among her strongest. P30 left an online community precisely because it "started feeling a bit performative — everyone was just curating a version of themselves." P17 describes virtual friendships as "sometimes feel easier than in-person ones because boundaries stay clear." The common thread is that what matters is depth, authenticity, and consistency and not necessarily the medium.

Definition of belonging — what is 'belonging' for the target population?

Across the Moroccan sample, belonging is defined with striking consistency as centered on psychological safety and the freedom to be unfiltered; it is consistently distinguished from mere connection and has a clear spatial

and relational specificity (most strongly felt in family, rarely in institutional settings).

Psychological safety and the freedom to be unedited form the definitional core across the widest range of participants. P38 captures it in embodied terms: "Belonging, for me, means being part of something where I don't have to perform. It's when I can show my flaws and still be accepted — like when my voice trembles, or I forget to smile, or I say something silly, and nobody judges me or mocks me afterward". P17 distills the same idea to a single phrase: "belonging means feeling 100 percent myself, with nothing edited out". P21 reaches for a metaphor: belonging is "being allowed to exist unedited. It's the space where no one counts your flaws or your successes — you just fit, the way a key fits its own lock". P37 frames it as the absence of social filtering: "With my family... I don't have to monitor my words or adjust my tone — they know my patterns. Outside of that, belonging feels elusive. I often catch myself editing how I talk or behave around others".

The home metaphor is the most recurring anchor image, P1 states it directly: "Belonging is like, it feels like being home... just being yourself, you don't look for perfection... these people who just love me the way I am". P11 echoes it: "if I say I belong, I belong to home — it's a space where I feel comfortable, not under repressive pressure". P50 locates it in shared history and ritual: "I remember sitting back and thinking, 'this is what it means to belong', not because you're alike, but because you share a thread of something deep".

Being counted in automatically, a sense of unconditional inclusion without having to ask — emerges as a third distinct thread. P23 articulates this most vividly: "Belonging...hmm. It's like when you don't have to double-check if you're invited, you know? The group just counts you in. You open the chat and they already dropped, 'We're meeting at seven, see you there,' no need to ask. Same at home — if there's good news or bad news you hear it first,

you don't discover it on Facebook two days later. That feeling — automatic, no explaining yourself — that's belonging for me". P45 reaches the same idea through presence: belonging means "someone saves you a seat without needing to ask. It's when people miss you, not out of politeness, but because your presence matters to them".

Shared values and purpose constitute a fourth cluster, more prominent among participants embedded in work or civic life. P12 describes it as alignment: "belonging comes from believing in the group's values; if I share those values, I belong". P4 grounds it in institutional purpose: "at work, belonging means my role matches the organization's goals. With family or a friend group, it means we share the same connection and value one another equally". P27 locates it in a moment of creative validation: "first critique session in design night class. I showed a risky poster, silence for a second, then applause. My shoulders dropped; I thought: 'Okay, I belong here'".

Belonging vs. connection is a distinction the sample draws with remarkable consistency and specificity. P2 draws it explicitly: "you can have social connections but not feel belonging... there's no awkwardness when you sit with those people, you don't feel like an outsider". P46 offers the most memorable formulation: "Social connection is like shaking hands; belonging is like sharing a meal and not watching the clock. You can feel connected to many people — neighbors, colleagues — but still feel like you don't have a home base. Belonging is slower, deeper. It stays with you". P43 maps the same territory: "connection is the interaction, the chatting, the exchanging of updates. Belonging goes deeper — it's being rooted. You can have a social connection with someone you see at the market every week, but belonging is when you can knock on someone's door at 10 p.m. if you need help, and know they'll answer with love, not surprise". P50 adds nuance: "I can feel connected without feeling safe. But when I feel like I belong, I feel held". P23 reaches for an infrastructure metaphor: "connection is like Wi-Fi — maybe strong, maybe drops. Belonging is the cable under the floor, always plugged"

Relational specificity and the narrow radius of belonging. Across the sample, belonging is almost universally located within a very small circle — most often immediate family, occasionally one or two close friends, rarely workplace or institutional settings. P38 states it plainly: "I've only felt it fully at home, with my mother and sisters... outside of that, I don't know if I've ever truly belonged. Most of the time, I feel like I'm borrowing space" (P38). P17 and P21 both say they have only felt belonging with immediate family. P35 reports she "doesn't feel she belongs anywhere in particular." P45 says she hasn't "belonged in any space since my early twenties." P41 says he hasn't felt it "in a long time." This pattern is not uniformly negative, for many participants it reflects a genuine preference for depth over breadth, but it suggests that belonging is an experience most Moroccans reserve for a very small inner circle, and that its extension to institutional or civic life is relatively rare.

Codes that rarely or never appear in this sample include belonging based on virtual or online community, belonging grounded in national or civic identity (P2's national pride comment is the closest but frames it as connection rather than belonging), and belonging as a default or ambient state. The collectivist cultural script — often assumed to produce wide-radius belonging — appears to generate obligation and communal participation more than genuine felt belonging for most participants, particularly younger ones.



What are culture-specific aspects of social connection among the target population?

Moroccan participants consistently describe the Moroccan social landscape as shaped by ritual-based connection, a hospitality ethic that extends to strangers, the mandatory nature of sociality, a pervasive availability expectation, and a pattern of obligatory relationships maintained out of duty rather than genuine closeness. Each of these features is both celebrated and critically examined within the sample, producing a nuanced picture of Moroccan social connection as simultaneously warm and coercive.

Ritual and collective ceremony as the infrastructure of connection. The most frequently named cultural vehicle for social connection is shared ritual, particularly meals, religious observances, and life-cycle events. P1 frames this as Morocco's defining social glue: "what is unique about social connection is that in Morocco is how we stick to those like smallest cultural components, traditional components — like how we still like on Friday, we still cook couscous, how we gather together for the smallest occasions". P21 extends this across the calendar: "Our bonds feel woven into daily rituals — Friday couscous, spontaneous mint-tea visits, collective joy during football or Eid. Even strangers share a cultural shorthand". P11 describes village-level ritual calendars: "extended families meet every 13 Sha'ban and 10 Ramadan — we cook together and celebrate; weddings also create new connections with in-laws". P26 captures the spontaneity within this ritual structure: "doorbells are optional. Relatives show up unannounced with oranges, stay for tea — instant gathering" and the network functions as "a safety net: you fail an exam, ten cousins call; you land a job, the same ten show up with cake".

Hospitality as a cultural script. Warmth toward strangers and guests is one of the most consistently named markers of Moroccan social distinctiveness. P8 states it plainly: "hospitality — families host guests warmly and share food and homes.". P14 frames it as an extension of a national identity: "people are friendly, curious and generous; hospitality and a sense of community rooted in religion make it easy to talk to anyone... we share whatever we have — food, time, help". P37 identifies humor as hospitality's partner: "even if we're guarded emotionally, we'll make you feel physically at home. Food, generosity, showing up for people — those things still matter deeply here... We'll joke in the middle of chaos, and somehow that makes the heaviness



more bearable". P17 echoes: "we turn even dark moments into jokes, which breaks tension and bonds strangers fast. Hospitality matters too — welcoming newcomers, sharing food, rallying around anyone in trouble". However, several participants draw a critical distinction between hospitality toward outsiders and social texture within the community. P38 notes the asymmetry directly: "with foreigners we're super warm and welcoming... but with each other, we're more suspicious. Still, during weddings or funerals, something shifts... that kind of spontaneous generosity — that's the real Morocco, I think.

But it fades fast once the event ends". P32 agrees: "there's a surface-level warmth, definitely. Hospitality is strong, but deeper bonds take time. Sometimes people act close, but it doesn't always translate into real presence when you need them".

The mandatory nature of sociality. A culturally specific and contested feature of Moroccan social life is that connection is not fully elective; participation is socially required in ways that many participants describe as both familiar and stifling. P1 articulates this most sharply: "Moroccans don't know the notion of introverts...if you are someone who likes to spend time alone or want to be alone, you will be called autistic, or you have some kind of disease. The more you are socially connected, the more you are seen as a good person... it's like one of the main panels of Moroccanness". P21 echoes with equal precision: "it's almost a test of good character... 'the more connected, the better.' Being sociable is linked to warmth, hospitality, even patriotism. People who prefer quiet are often misunderstood, tagged as strange or aloof. Social connection isn't just valued; it's expected". P28 identifies the consequence for loneliness: "we live in a collectivist culture, so when someone feels lonely, it's almost taboo — it contradicts the image of community. People hide it better here". P31 puts the paradox starkly: "we're a collectivist society, so people assume you're always surrounded by family, always supported. That makes hidden loneliness even more common, and more shameful. **You're never alone, but you can be completely unseen**".

Availability as the primary measure of relational worth. Across the sample, being available — physically present when called upon — is the dominant cultural metric by which relationships are evaluated. P1 states the expectation directly: "in our culture it's 'you should be there whenever I need you.' That's how we define whether like someone is worth it or not, like a social connection is strong or not. We don't take into consideration what the other person is going through...we just expect them there when we want them to be there". P23 describes availability expectations across all

relationship categories: "family wants availability — if your aunt calls at midnight because the Wi-Fi died, you go. Friends expect you to defend them in public even if they're wrong, then scold them in private. Community — neighbours assume they can borrow sugar and life advice in one knock. Sometimes heavy, sometimes beautiful". P40 reaches for a local concept: "people expect woujoud fi lwaqt — to be present when it counts. In families, that might mean dropping everything for a cousin's wedding. In friendships, it's being there at 2 a.m. when someone's heartbroken". P22 describes it as an on-demand quality: "family expects availability on demand. Friends expect loyalty but forgive lateness". P27 condenses the same idea: "Family expects you to show up: weddings, funerals, Friday couscous. Presence equals love". P20 offers perhaps the most compact cultural summary: "a Moroccan would sum it up this way: when you need someone, they show up, and when they need you, you show up. That mutual reliability defines a real connection here".

Obligatory relationships and the "ride-or-die" paradox. Alongside the availability ethic sits a widely noted tendency to maintain relationships out of duty rather than genuine closeness. P10 describes this as an unexamined cultural reflex: "there's a sense of duty — you must visit family because they're family. People don't always examine it; they just do it. Sometimes problems get swept under the rug because 'that's how it's done'". P50 describes extended family events as largely performative: "they feel more like social obligations. We see each other at weddings, funerals, Eid... we smile, we talk, we play our roles. But if you took away the blood connection, I'm not sure those relationships would hold". P3 introduces and simultaneously complicates the "ride-or-die" frame: "most Moroccan relationships carry a 'ride-or-die' expectation — you prove closeness by crossing boundaries. Among male friends there's heavy banter that often goes too far, yet the harsher the jokes, the more it signals we're like brothers... From the outside the bond can look toxic or superficial, but everyone still sticks together". P3 also names the downside explicitly: "Our 'ride-or-die' ideal

of friendship comes with toxicity, crossing boundaries, mixing loyalty with mind-games. Some people stay in friendships just to avoid being alone". P33 identifies the performance dimension of collective togetherness: "what's unique is the performance of togetherness. Family gatherings, social traditions, shared meals — they're all rich, but sometimes they serve as a cover. You can be surrounded and still feel like nobody sees you. That contrast creates a special kind of quiet pain".

Taken together, these five features produce a portrait of Moroccan social connection that is simultaneously abundant and constrained, rich in ritual, hospitality, and collective warmth, yet organized around availability demands and obligatory participation that can make genuine emotional presence feel elusive even within ostensibly close relationships. The most critical participants in the sample are not rejecting Moroccan social culture but describing its internal tension: the gap between the warmth on display and the depth that often fails to follow.



What else does the target population feel connected to?

Beyond their interpersonal networks, Moroccan participants report a meaningful range of non-human and non-relational connection sources. These fall into five broad categories: sacred space and faith, place and physical environment, music and the arts, animals and nature, and objects carrying personal memory. Each category has a distinct character and appears with different frequency across the sample.

Faith and prayer is the most widely mentioned non-human connection source and appears across both non-lonely and severely lonely participants – though the quality of that connection differs considerably between them. P11 draws an explicit boundary: "prayer also connects me, though that's a symbolic link to the divine rather than a social one". P13 describes prayer as a reliable emotional reset: "prayer calms me instantly – it reminds me I'm never truly alone". P6 links faith directly to loneliness relief: "reading the Qur'an or praying helps me feel connected to God – that eases loneliness". P20 frames it most broadly: "Faith gives me the strongest sense of connection – prayer calms the soul and links me to everything around me". P23 puts it in pragmatic terms: "it's like a reset button, not a hang-out".

Place and physical environment forms the second major category, particularly places loaded with family history and sensory memory. P1 describes her family's house in another city as a mental refuge: "this house that we have, the family house... I would just like imagine myself there. So that's a place where I feel connected". P41 returns repeatedly to the sensory landscape of his home village: "I often picture my village in [region], the olive trees swaying, my mother humming Qur'an verses while kneading dough – those memories, those smells, are my refuge". For several participants, it is

specifically the intersection of place and memory that produces connection.

Music and the arts is a third non-human connection source, mentioned by a scattered but notable minority. P2 describes music as a constant: "music has been one of the constants in my life ever since I discovered it... the idea of creating something makes me feel so connected to the human race. When I watch a good movie or read a good manga, it makes me feel connected to humans in a weird way". P42 frames it intergenerationally: "music, absolutely. I listen to old Moroccan ballads or Nina Simone, and I feel connected to generations before me". P35 reaches for music and walking at night when human connection fails: "sometimes music helps. Or walking at night when the streets are quiet — I feel more connected to myself in those moments than I do with most people".

Animals and nature is a fourth category, smaller but present across both younger and older participants. P7 describes a felt sense of cosmic connection through the natural world: "nature, animals. I like watching how an animal lives, there's something peaceful. Trees just moving — makes me feel connected to the universe" P1 names her cat as a genuine relational source: "my cat... He makes me feel so connected. Animals in general make me feel so connected... they can never harm you if you don't do them bad. So I feel connected to animals". P5 echoes with characteristic simplicity: "my cat. Playing with her or buying her toys always lifts my mood". P35 finds nature specifically restorative in its absence of social demand: "I felt calm, not connected to people, but to something larger. Nature makes the silence feel less threatening".

Two broader observations warrant emphasis. First, the non-human connection sources in this sample are not substitutes that participants resort to when people are unavailable, many describe them as complementary forms of connection with their own distinct quality. P11's "symbolic link to the divine," P42's sense of being "connected to generations before me" through

music, and P37's emotional touchstones all suggest that Moroccan participants hold a relatively expansive conception of what can be a source of felt presence. Second, the intensity of these connections scales with social isolation: for participants like P41 and P35, whose human networks have nearly dissolved, faith, nature, and place take on a primary rather than supplementary role — becoming the main available channels of feeling seen, grounded, or part of something larger than oneself.

Experiences of disconnection — what are the experiences of disconnection among the target population?

Across the Moroccan sample, disconnection is experienced predominantly through five related elements: being physically present but mentally elsewhere, a semi-involuntary behavioral withdrawal from others, a deeper settling into isolation, the experiences of betrayal or misrecognition, and — especially for the most severely disconnected — a perceived state of chronic invisibility. Experiences that involve explicit conflict, active repair attempts, or formal relationship endings are largely absent from the narratives of the Moroccan participants.

Being present without being there. The most universally described experience across all 50 participants is the split between physical and emotional presence — occupying a space while being somewhere else entirely. P1 defines it precisely: "it's not being present at all — disconnection is being surrounded by people, but feeling that you're not really seen or you don't really matter. To be there and not there, to be inside your head." P17 describes her internal signal: "midway I caught myself picturing being home alone watching YouTube. That's my signal I'm disconnected — mentally exiting while still physically present." P37, at a professional reception: "I was

surrounded by people talking, laughing, sharing opinions. And I just... zoned out. My body stayed, but my mind left. When the noise outside doesn't match how I feel inside, I know I'm disconnected." P29 describes it during a family gathering: "I smiled when someone looked at me, but inside I was just counting the minutes until I could leave the room." This experience is not restricted to the most isolated participants. It appears consistently across the severity spectrum.

Withdrawal. When the internal sense of disconnection intensifies, participants describe pulling back behaviorally: from messages, plans, social spaces, and sometimes people they care about, in ways they often describe as involuntary or instinctual. P28 states it plainly: "I withdraw. I stop replying to texts, cancel plans, just go into my own shell." P24 describes his sequence: "first instinct? I ghost people. I'll see the phone ringing and flip it face-down. Then I numb out, scroll reels, binge the trashiest reality show I can find." P45 describes the guilt loop this creates: "I'll get a message and think 'I'll respond when I'm in a better mood.' But the better mood doesn't come, and the thread dies. Then I feel guilty, and that guilt makes me withdraw more."

Forced social interactions constitute a specific and reliable withdrawal trigger. P17 names it directly: "if I'm forced to visit my family member, I would feel disconnected... just sit there without



interacting." P25 echoes it: "any forced family visit where the talk is marriage, marriage, marriage — I sit polite, but inside I'm on airplane mode." The cultural weight here is significant: in a context where social participation is morally obligatory, being physically present but emotionally absent is the form disconnection readily takes.

Isolation. Distinct from the process of withdrawal, isolation describes its outcome as a state of minimal engagement with social others. P41, in old age, describes himself as "a ghost in the hallway" among his neighbors and, more painfully, "a ghost in my own family" at gatherings where people "ask about my health, then go back to their phones or debates I don't follow." P34 describes their thinking as "when you're disconnected for long enough, it's easy to believe you're just not meant for closeness." P22 describes a past period in which he coped with disconnection by skipping classes and isolating further, setting off a cascade that "took months to catch up."

Betrayal and sudden rupture. Several participants describe disconnection arriving as a consequence of something said or done that could not be unsaid or undone. P27 describes a single sentence from a friend that caused complete emotional shutdown: "one sentence, and I felt a metal shutter slide down between us. Conversation kept going, but I was outside the building." P40 describes trust rupture as "an emotional amputation" that then rippled outward to people not even involved in the original hurt. P7 describes a sudden shock from an unexpected word producing instant disconnection: "when someone I considered close suddenly said something that shocked me, it made me feel instantly disconnected."

Grief, misunderstanding, and the failure of being reached. A distinct strand involves disconnection not from indifference or betrayal but from the impossibility of being fully understood in one's actual state — particularly during grief. P43's account is the most developed: "after my husband passed away, even surrounded by well-meaning people, I felt like I was

speaking from a different place and they couldn't quite hear me. They wanted to comfort me, but grief has its own language." P28 describes emotional misattunement triggering active withdrawal: "I felt misunderstood, like my emotions weren't being taken seriously. That made me want to disconnect completely." P20 draws the implicit comparison: grief for her grandmother resurfaces as disconnection precisely when she can't find someone who can relate, but "because many friends have also lost loved ones, we can relate and it passes more quickly"; implying that shared understanding is what distinguishes recoverable from sustained disconnection.



Drifting apart and value misalignment. A more subtle form of disconnection involves the gradual drift of emotional depths among individuals.. P2 describes it: "I felt I'm growing apart from a person, that we're no longer on the same wavelength." P34 describes it with his sister: "we used to confide when we were teenagers, but now we're both adults, living in different places, and we've grown apart." P12 describes value misalignment as his primary disconnection trigger: traveling with people whose mentality differs leaves him "disconnected because we don't share the same outlook."

Metaphoric expressions. The Moroccan sample's language for disconnection is unusually vivid. P38: "disconnection feels like walking through life half-visible, like people see your shape but not your soul." P47: "you're rarely alone physically, but emotionally? You can vanish in plain sight." P34: "floating through my days without really touching anything or anyone." P33: "it's when you're surrounded by people, yet feel like a ghost in the room." P19: "it's like watching life in third-person. Nothing interests me, and I wish I could vanish." P40: "it was like flipping a switch and watching the light vanish."

Definition of disconnection — how does the target population define disconnection?

Across all 50 Moroccan transcripts, definitions of disconnection cluster into four distinct but overlapping framings: disconnection as an internal state of non-presence, disconnection as a relational failure of resonance or recognition, disconnection as the deliberate or gradual stepping away from someone, and for a subset of the participants, disconnection as a form of self-protective agency.

Definition of disconnection — how does the target population define disconnection?

Being there without being present. The most universally shared definitional frame positions disconnection as a state of internal absence — occupying a space physically while being emotionally elsewhere. P1 develops this most fully: "Disconnection is being surrounded by people, but feeling that you're not really seen or you don't really matter... it means to be there and not there, to be inside your head... it's not living in the moment, it's not being present at all." P21 condenses it to a single line: "being physically present but mentally absent — people see you, but you're somewhere else in your head." P15 reaches for the interpersonal version: "a moment when I feel no one is beside me, even if they're physically present." P5 frames it through the body's impulse to leave: "Being somewhere and wishing the moment would end, wanting to escape because I'm not comfortable." P25 gives it a running inner commentary: "you're in a room, people chatting, music on, but your brain's whispering, 'Can we leave now?' You're half-there, half plotting an escape."

Relational mismatch and the failure of resonance. A second major definitional thread frames disconnection not as a self-directed state but as the felt gap between two people — a failure of something flowing between them. P33 is the most articulate: "disconnection is a lack of emotional resonance... it's about feeling that what you share isn't landing with others, that you're not being mirrored back." P7 frames it as an unmet need: "You might talk to ten people a day but still feel like nobody really gets you." P22 gives it its starkest form: "realising the person across from me might as well be a stranger, even if we share blood or a name tag."

The deliberate or gradual stepping away. A third definitional cluster



emphasizes the temporal dimension: the fact that connection was once present and is now absent, either through active disengagement or slow drift. P10 insists on the active quality: "to me it is a conscious decision to step away from someone or something. If the separation just happens gradually I would call that forgetting, not disconnection." P27 states "it's that voice saying, 'No need to call anyone; conversations are optional.'" This quiet withdrawal captures the low-grade, everyday form of disconnection that several participants describe.

Disconnection as self-protective agency. A fourth definitional frame, held by a small but distinct minority, treats disconnection not as something painful that happens to a person but as something they have chosen — or learned to choose — as a means of preserving self-worth. P6 states it directly: "disconnection can be good — I don't need people. I give myself value. It makes me brave." P18 echoes it: "it's a kind of bravery, proving I don't need others to feel valued. Sometimes that's good; other times it hurts." P38 holds the same view but with more ambivalence: "Sometimes I tell myself it's a kind of strength, like I'm showing that I don't need validation. But most of the time, it just hurts. Disconnection feels like walking through life half-visible, like people see your shape but not your soul." This definitional frame appears

exclusively among participants who have experienced sustained social rejection rather than transient disconnection, and it seems to function as a protectively a way of making meaning out of an experience that would otherwise just be purely painful.

Experiences of loneliness — what are the experiences of loneliness among the target population?

Loneliness in the Moroccan sample is predominantly experienced as a felt absence of emotional recognition — being present, possibly surrounded by others, yet fundamentally unseen or unheard. Several interrelated experiential patterns emerged across the 50 transcripts, organized here by the most and least prevalent codes.

Loneliness as internal drowning and darkness. The most dominant experiential pattern, particularly among severely lonely participants, was loneliness described through metaphors of submersion, darkness, and self-estrangement. P4: "Loneliness is drowning in thoughts, nothing makes sense, you feel no one will genuinely listen, and the darkness keeps building." P8: "It's like being in a dark place, no sense of belonging, only bad thoughts, emotionally and physically alone." P44 extended the same underwater register: "Loneliness, for me, is when your inner world feels too big to carry alone, but too heavy to hand to anyone. Like you're underwater, and the surface is right there, but everyone else is walking past like nothing's wrong. You're drowning, and it's silent." P1's account was the most elaborate — she described loneliness at its most acute as producing a fracture between two selves: "you're voiceless because you're underwater — you can't speak, you can't hear, and you can't see... the most lonely is when you detach from yourself. When you can't connect with yourself."

That's the most like when you split into two." This self-estrangement — loneliness as estrangement not just from others but from one's own prior self — appeared in several participants. P40 named the self-directed cruelty that accompanies it: "when I'm lonely, everything turns inward and sour. My mind starts saying, **'You're alone because no one wants you.'**" For P19, this had become a baseline condition: "Every day. Loneliness doesn't leave; it just sits there."

Being surrounded yet alone. Cutting across all severity levels, the most frequently described paradox was feeling lonely while physically surrounded. P7: "loneliness isn't just about being alone. It's when you need someone — not just physically, but emotionally — and they're not there... That feeling, that your inner world isn't accessible to anyone — that's loneliness." P40 provided perhaps the starkest account: "I once attended a school celebration where all my favorite people were there — my sister, friends, even teachers I admire.



But I had just gone through something deeply personal I hadn't told anyone about. I remember smiling and laughing while internally begging for someone to see that I wasn't okay. It felt like being locked in a glass box while the world moved around me. I've never felt lonelier than in that room full of love." P38 described the performance this requires: "the worst part is pretending not to care." P31 framed it as structural misalignment: "isolation isn't always physical. It's the

mismatch between your inner world and the external one." P36: "loneliness for me is a heavy quiet. Sometimes I'm just tired, mentally tired, from trying to connect and not feeling anything real come back." P45 gave it its most culturally specific form: "loneliness is being next to people but feeling like they're speaking through a wall. You nod, you smile, but deep down, you feel like your voice wouldn't matter even if you screamed."

Not being seen or witnessed. Closely related but distinct, many participants described loneliness specifically as the experience of going unwitnessed — being present without registering. P35: "it's the sense that you don't matter to anyone in that moment. Like you could disappear and no one would notice." P36: "It's a sense that your presence doesn't really matter. That if you disappeared for a while, no one would notice." P38 described this at university: "No one checks in on me, no one asks if I made it home safely, no one notices if I miss class." P50: "There were times when I was in a room full of people, and I still felt like no one could actually help me. I might be going through something heavy, and I'd look around and realize no one there really saw it." P37 described a version specific to giving care without receiving it: "being there for others but having no one to be there for you in return. That's a particular kind of loneliness."

Activity engagement as an experiential response. Across the sample, loneliness frequently prompted distraction behaviors — scrolling, watching series, writing, walking, praying — as coping responses that were described as part of the experience rather than separate from it. P3: "I sometimes watch something that doesn't use my brain just to not have to think about anything. That's how I stop myself from drowning." P2 described writing as how she got through her deepest period of loneliness. P50 described writing and music as creating "a space where I could feel less alone." P6 described prayer as easing loneliness. These strategies were described as partially effective — reducing intensity without resolving the underlying state.

What is the physiology of loneliness among the target population?

Loneliness is consistently described not as a purely emotional state but as one that manifests in the body — in the chest, the stomach, the sleep cycle, the appetite, and the nervous system. Physiological descriptions cluster into five main categories: somatic weight and chest constriction, sleep disruption, appetite and weight effects, nervous system arousal and hypersensitivity, and emotional numbness or cognitive fog. A small number of participants also offer unusually vivid or medically grounded accounts that stand out within the sample.

Somatic weight and chest constriction is the most universally recurring physiological metaphor. P3 describes loneliness as "heavy on the chest and on the guts — you question your value: 'Nothing I do matters, so do I matter?'". P22 describes the same sensation precisely: "Mentally it's like static on a radio, lots of fuzzy thoughts, no clear signal. Physically my chest feels tight, as if I'm holding a deep breath I can't release". P23 locates loneliness in the chest and in internal voice: "heavy in the chest. Brain starts whispering, 'Maybe nobody needs you'". P25 reaches for a visceral image: "Kind of a sinking stone in the stomach, plus this echo in the head: 'Who's gonna care if you crash tonight?'". P35 elaborates the full somatic cascade: "It's a weight. Mentally, it's like a fog, everything slows down and even simple tasks feel pointless. Physically, I get this tightness in my chest, like I can't breathe deeply. Sometimes it turns into exhaustion. I could sleep for hours and still wake up tired. It's not always dramatic, but it chips away at me". P41, among the most isolated participants in the sample, describes it as ongoing physiological bracing: "Mentally, it's like a constant ache that doesn't know where to land. Physically... my chest tightens, like I'm bracing for something that never comes. My hands tremble more, my body feels heavy. Even the air

feels thicker".

Sleep disruption is among the most frequently reported physiological effects, with participants describing nights fractured by racing thoughts, insomnia, or restless circulation of regrets. P3 notes "Nights are the worst; sleep gets difficult. During the day my routine stays sharp, almost stricter, because structure helps". P27 says of prolonged loneliness: "it's like depression, you cry, can't sleep, sometimes can't eat". P29 describes sleep collapse concurrent with broader social disruption: "my sleep's been really inconsistent. I skip meals sometimes, not on purpose, just... everything feels



delayed... nights are the worst, it's when everything catches up with me". P41 opens his interview with it embedded in daily routine: "I usually wake up around 7 because I can't sleep much these days... the evenings stretch. I go to bed early, but I don't sleep well". P42 explicitly names "insomnia" alongside chest tightness. P19 describes sleep and mood disruption as the primary day-to-day toll: "it still hits my mental health, sleep and mood, and it ruins my focus on daily tasks".

Appetite and weight effects appear most acutely in severely lonely participants. P1's account is the most medically documented: loneliness during her MA produced daily crying, appetite loss, significant weight loss, and physical exhaustion, eventually leading to a doctor visit where her iron

deficiency was linked by the physician to depression — a rare instance in the sample of loneliness cascading into a formally identified health problem. P5 reports "loss of appetite and significant weight loss" during her loneliest period. P9 notes that loneliness "can lead to weight loss" through self-blame and rumination. P13 describes skipping meals and sleeping excessively "just to pass the time" during her most isolated period. P35 describes a pit-like sensation: "it's like a pit in my stomach. I can't eat or focus. It fades after a while, but always leaves a trace".

Nervous system arousal and hypersensitivity constitute a fourth physiological cluster, particularly vivid in participants who describe loneliness triggering an acute intensification of sensory experience. P40 describes: "I become hypersensitive, sounds bother me, people's voices feel like sandpaper, and I retreat. That's also when I make poor decisions, cut ties too quickly, misread texts, imagine insults that weren't there". P17 reports "a gray weight on my chest... slight emotional numbness. At times, I'd get dark thoughts and some kind of void". P4 describes an internal spiral: "When loneliness hits, I start thinking about my father's death... it magnifies everything until I believe I shouldn't exist, that someone else could live my life better". P19 describes the somatic urgency as: "It's like my whole body wants to escape".

Emotional numbing and cognitive fog form a fifth cluster, appearing across all severity levels as loneliness's quieter physiological signature. P36 describes it as "a heavy quiet... mentally tired, from trying to connect and not feeling anything real come back" — echoed almost identically by P49: "Loneliness for me is a heavy quiet. It's like being surrounded by silence even in noisy places. Sometimes I'm just tired, mentally tired, from trying to connect". P7 names it through a recognition failure: "you might talk to ten people a day but still feel like nobody really gets you. That gap between what you need emotionally and what you're actually receiving — that's what builds loneliness".

Uniquely vivid or medically grounded accounts surface in three participants. P8's is the most alarming: "Very badly. Back then I even had heart-attack-like symptoms. I couldn't focus on study or taekwondo and stopped talking for a month and a half"— the only account in the sample where loneliness produced symptoms severe enough to be retrospectively framed as cardiac-adjacent. P1's account of iron deficiency diagnosed in the context of depression — with the physician drawing the causal link — represents the sample's sole intersection between loneliness and formal medical contact. P41 stands out for the cumulative physical dimension: joint pain, sleep failure, blurred vision, and trembling hands are described as coinciding with near-total social isolation in old age — the body aging into loneliness as much as being damaged by it.

Together, these accounts establish that for Moroccan participants, loneliness is a whole-body experience — felt in the chest, the gut, the sleep cycle, the appetite, the nervous system, and the capacity to think clearly. The physiological vocabulary is consistent enough across participants from different backgrounds and severity levels to suggest a shared somatic template for loneliness, one that goes well beyond mood and lands squarely in the body as a physical burden to be carried.

What are the effects of loneliness among the target population?

The effects of loneliness across the Moroccan sample map onto a consistent gradient organized by severity. Severely lonely participants describe multi-system disruption across mental health, physical health, daily functioning, and interpersonal behavior; moderately lonely participants report episodic but bounded effects, primarily mood-related; and non-lonely participants describe negligible or fleeting effects that self-resolve quickly. Each category

of effect is addressed in turn.

Mental health is the most universally reported domain of loneliness impact, and it varies sharply by severity. At the acute end, P18 states directly:

loneliness leads to depression, anxiety, and self-hate". P4 describes a spiral: "When I feel lonely, many negative thoughts pile up until I start feeling worthless. If the loneliness keeps building, it turns depressive — that's why I try to stop it early". P4's most severe episodes go further: "it magnifies everything until I believe I shouldn't exist, that someone else could live my life better" (P4). P19's loneliness is chronic enough to define his mental baseline — it "doesn't leave, it just sits there" every day. P40 describes episodes where "loneliness flares up, carrying frustration and anger. I become hypersensitive... I make poor decisions, cut ties too quickly, misread texts, imagine insults that weren't there". Among moderately

lonely participants, mental effects are present but bounded. P6 reports internalizing guilt: "I beat myself up mentally, telling myself I should be stronger or more outgoing. This can lead to me crying frequently. That kind of guilt can really weigh on you, resulting in hopelessness" P2 describes episodes of past emotional collapse that now manifest more mildly as "moments of detachment". Non-lonely participants report minimal or no mental health impact from transient disconnection — P12 recovers "quickly," P15 experiences loneliness as "intense but brief, gone the same day".



Weight and appetite effects are concentrated among the most severely lonely. P1's extended loneliness episode produced appetite loss and significant weight loss P5 reports "loss of appetite and significant weight loss" during her loneliest period. P9 notes loneliness "can lead to weight loss" through self-blame and rumination. P35 describes a pit-like sensation that directly suppresses eating: "it's like a pit in my stomach. I can't eat or focus". P29 skips meals during extended loneliness periods, though not deliberately: "everything feels delayed". Moderately and non-lonely participants generally report stable weight.

Sleep is the most widely reported physiological consequence after mood, and it cuts across severity levels though with different intensities. P3 notes that "nights are the worst; sleep gets difficult" during loneliness. P27 describes prolonged loneliness as resembling depression: "you cry, can't sleep, sometimes can't eat". P42 names "insomnia" explicitly, alongside chest tightness and circling thoughts. P41 opens his interview describing broken sleep as a daily reality: "I usually wake up around 7 because I can't sleep much these days". P35's loneliness "doesn't always go away when I sleep — it waits for me the next morning". Among non-lonely participants, sleep is largely unaffected.

Mood effects are the most universally present across severity levels, though they differ in nature and duration. At the severe end, P19 experiences persistent low mood with nine-out-of-ten intensity; At the moderate level, P27 describes going "mute for a day or two — no jokes, no WhatsApp voice notes". P36 describes "a heavy quiet... mentally tired from trying to connect". Among non-lonely participants, mood dips are mild and situational — P10 describes "a passing wave of boredom rather than a lasting mood"; P12 "bounces back quickly."

Day-to-day activities are disrupted in proportion to severity. P1's extended loneliness episode halted her activities entirely: "I couldn't do my activities, I

couldn't enjoy going out with my friends". P35 describes daily life in a sustained state of loneliness: "I wake up late, skip breakfast, drag myself to work... I sometimes sit with the TV on just for the noise, but I don't really watch". P43 describes isolating for "a month and a half" after losing a close friend. P21 let her health "slide until she became anemic" during a particularly isolated period. Moderately lonely participants describe reduced productivity — P4 interrupts loneliness actively to prevent functional decline; P29 loses focus and spends evenings scrolling rather than studying. Non-lonely participants report minimal disruption to daily routines.

Hurting the self surfaces across several participants.. P1 describes the most explicit and severe instance: "it happened to me that one night when I started slapping myself just to feel, I would punch myself. I would, I would hurt myself just to feel the wake up... back then it felt good to feel something happening to you". P50 acknowledges past self-harm: "In my younger years, loneliness hurt me a lot. It even led to moments of self-harm, though I rarely talk about that". P2 reports that past loneliness "led to me feeling hurt, and also hurting myself physically". P23 describes minor self-directed behavior: "some slaps to the face to wake myself up and snap out of it, but nothing extreme". P24 reports ideation without action: "dark thoughts, especially about inflicting pain to myself, like I could punch myself to wake up".

Hurting others is also documented, primarily taking the form of emotional withdrawal that damages relationships. P20 describes projecting pain onto those closest: "when the loneliness is deep, I sometimes snap at my sister or rashly cut off a friend, then realise I projected my pain". P35 acknowledges: "I've hurt people without meaning to by pulling away. I get quiet or detached, and they probably think I don't care. I've lost a couple of friendships that way". P27 notes that her silence damages relationships: "my shutdown hurts feelings even if that's not my goal". P40 describes cutting ties too quickly and misreading others' intent during lonely periods.

Duration of effects scales reliably with loneliness severity. Severely lonely participants describe effects that last months or become near-permanent: P1's episode lasted "four or three months"; P19's loneliness "doesn't leave"; P34 describes chronic disconnection over years. Moderately lonely participants report episodes lasting days to weeks: P50 describes past loneliness lasting "one to three nights, occasionally up to three weeks"; P3's waves last "two or three days"; P27 goes "mute for a day or two." For less lonely participants, effects resolve within hours: P4 notes "sometimes just an hour or even minutes"; P22 says recent episodes are "brief because I actively interrupt them"; P15 experiences loneliness as "intense but brief, gone the same day." Non-lonely participants describe negligible or instantaneous recovery (e.g., P12, P10).

How does the target population cope with loneliness?

Moroccan participants draw on a layered set of strategies when loneliness strikes, combining social outreach with solitary activity, spiritual practice, and digital activity. The strategies are rarely used in isolation; most participants describe an implicit sequence or toolkit they move through. Importantly, coping patterns differ meaningfully by severity: severely lonely participants often describe strategies that are passive, avoidant, or only partially effective, while moderately and non-lonely participants tend to employ more active, socially-oriented approaches with quicker resolution.

Family is the first resource named by the largest share of participants, but its availability and effectiveness vary considerably. P20 calls a friend rather than naming her loneliness directly: "I remind myself the loneliness is just over-thinking. Then I call a friend, chat about anything — no need to announce 'I feel lonely.' By the end of the conversation we're laughing and I

forget it". P17 names family as her most reliable option despite its limitations: "Mostly through journaling. Otherwise, either binge a series, call family, or invite someone for coffee. Family works best — they don't always grasp the details but they listen without judgment". P13 called her mother in tears during her most isolated period: "strong enough that I called my mother in tears, which I rarely do". P43 reaches for her sister: "a short call to my sister or inviting a neighbor for tea can shift everything". However, family is not universally helpful. P24 explicitly rules them out: "Family, not really. Mum worries too quick, brother changes the topic". P40 draws a sharp boundary: "I have emotional walls with my parents — I protect them from my darkness. My sister gets the real version of me".

Friends and community are the second most commonly cited social resource, used obliquely rather than through direct disclosure. P20's strategy of calling a friend without mentioning loneliness is representative. P40 does the same: "I reach out to a friend — not to declare I'm lonely, but just to talk about something mundane, what they cooked, a podcast, anything. Usually the laughter sneaks back in, and that small moment makes me feel part of the world again". P24 has a friend who functions as a circuit-breaker: "Best way is to text [my friend], 'Hey, my brain's noisy.' He usually fires back a voice note singing off-key — breaks the spell". P21 uses a structured walk: "I leave the house and walk along the seafront — seeing strangers reminds me the world is larger than my thoughts. By the time I'm home, the heaviness has thinned out". Community in the formal sense — neighborhood, mosque, volunteer groups — features less as a direct coping strategy than as a background resource that some participants draw on indirectly.

Professional help is rare, negatively regarded, and associated with failed experiences where it was attempted. P24 tried a psychiatrist: "I saw a psychiatrist once, got pills, felt like a zombie, quit after a month". P44 reports similarly: "I tried professional help once, a psychiatrist, but the medication didn't sit right with me, and I didn't feel truly heard. I haven't tried again

since". P40 has considered it but held back: "as for professionals, no. I've considered it, but something stops me — fear, maybe, or a belief that I should handle things myself". The barriers are both practical (medication side effects, cost, stigma) and cultural — the expectation of self-reliance and the sense that disclosing loneliness to a professional would be an admission of failure. No participant in the sample reports a positive ongoing relationship with a mental health professional as a loneliness coping resource.

Technology features across virtually all severity levels, primarily as distraction rather than connection. P24 describes an escalating sequence: "first instinct? I ghost people. I'll see the phone ringing and flip it face-down. Then I numb out, scroll reels, binge the trashiest reality show I can find — something where nobody's dying or heartbroken, just people yelling about who stole the chicken. If it's late, I knock myself out with sleep". P4 similarly shuts down and reaches for content: "I shut my mind off — sleep, listen to music, watch reality shows, anything that requires zero critical thinking". P44 describes late-night scrolling: "on nights when I feel lonely, I scroll endlessly. I'll go down a YouTube hole or watch people redecorate their kitchens at 3 a.m. It's not restful, just distracting". Technology-as-distraction is acknowledged by most participants as effective in the short term but not



restorative. However, a smaller number do genuinely use technology for connection: P20 uses social platforms to reach friends; P10 substitutes a new online gaming community when an old one no longer meets his needs.

Religion and spirituality is the most consistently described source of genuine, as opposed to merely distracting, comfort — particularly when other coping channels are unavailable or exhausted. P6 names it directly: "reading the Qur'an or praying helps me feel connected to God — that eases loneliness". P1 describes talking to God as the only entity that she feels truly knows her internal state during her worst period. P24 reaches for prayer without formal words: "some nights I lay out the prayer mat — no set words, just talk: 'Ya Rab, I'm struggling.' Sometimes that's enough, sometimes I still feel hollow after". P15 turns to religion rather than technology or people when self-reflection isn't enough: "if I need help beyond that, I turn to [religion] rather than to people or technology". P43 frames her faith as giving shape to the loneliness rather than eliminating it: "prayer, reflection, even just lighting a candle at dusk — it brings me back to center. I don't always ask for the loneliness to go away, but I ask for strength to walk through it with grace. That's enough". P35 reaches for prayer as a last resort after other strategies fail: "if things feel too heavy, I try to pray. It helps sometimes, but not always. Mostly I just wait for it to pass". This last quote is significant, for the most severely lonely, even spirituality is not reliably effective.

Substances are not reported as a coping strategy by any participant. No one describes using alcohol, cannabis, or other substances to manage loneliness. This is one of the most consistent absences in the data and likely reflects both religious norms around alcohol and the overall framing of coping as a matter of self-discipline and social resourcefulness rather than chemical relief.

Activities form a large and varied category spanning physical exercise, creative expression, cooking, baking, and structured solitary engagement.

P21 uses cooking: "I cook a complicated recipe, step by step, so my mind has something gentle to follow. Then I leave the house and walk along the seafront". P43 bakes: "I bake more when I'm feeling low – it's both a comfort and a way to care for others". P23 takes a bus to a coastal town for fresh air. P42 walks, calls someone, or writes it out: "I've learned to meet it with action – take a walk, call someone, write it out". P2 describes writing as her primary historical coping mechanism: "I'd write down how I felt and everything I was going through. That was my coping mechanism. Also listening to music and watching stuff...expressing myself through writing truly got me through those moments". P29 uses music and journaling: "I put on music, usually something instrumental, no lyrics.

Then I lie down and let my mind drift. Sometimes I scroll through photos or journal a little". P39 journals in cafés: "Some of my happiest, most peaceful moments have been while journaling alone in a café or walking through a quiet neighborhood with my headphones in". P17 uses journaling as her primary tool, with social options as backup: "mostly through journaling. Otherwise, either binge a series, call family, or invite someone for coffee".

Activities tend to be used both as immediate distraction and as a means of gentle re-engagement with the self – a stepping stone back toward social contact.

Work and structure appear as secondary coping strategies, particularly among participants who describe loneliness as filling the space that work empties. P3 describes his daily routine becoming "almost stricter" during lonely periods because structure helps contain the nights. P10 immerses himself in a research project – "swapping one activity for another solved the problem". P30 notes that loneliness doesn't take hold when he is engaged: "I haven't felt lonely this month. Even when I'm alone, I've been engaged – writing, biking, reading". P44 notes that purposeful work reframes solitude:



"Back then, I had a clear direction. I knew what I was working toward, and solitude felt like focus, not absence". Work as coping is most effective among non-lonely and mildly lonely participants; for the most severely lonely, work disruption is itself a symptom of loneliness rather than a remedy.

Other notable strategies include naming the feeling explicitly. P44 describes this as a recent development: "even just naming the feeling helps: 'This is loneliness. This will pass'". P32 consciously shifts focus: "when I feel something like loneliness, I don't let it grow — I shift my focus". P25's strategy involves a calibrated escalation: one walk, one phone call, or meeting friends; if it persists beyond three weeks, changing the environment entirely: "I never let myself sit in it for more than three weeks".

What factors affect loneliness for the target population?

Across the Moroccan sample, loneliness is not attributed to a single cause but to an interlocking cluster of personal, relational, situational, and cultural factors. These can be organized into five broad domains: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal and relational dynamics, life transitions and acute stressors, structural and societal conditions.

Intrapersonal factors internal psychological states and personality dispositions are among the most consistently cited across participants. P1 offers the most developed account: "it can start with insecurities if it's from within yourself. If you are insecure, if you're not confident...insecurity makes you live inside your head... Insecurities make you feel very lonely because you will have people. You will have a lovely partner. You will have people who love you, but you are toxic to yourself". P40 traces the developmental root: "I think it starts early. If your voice wasn't heard as a child, if you were dismissed or scolded for needing attention, you grow up unsure whether you deserve care. You start keeping things inside. Add perfectionism, fear of judgment, and a culture that values resilience over vulnerability, and you've got a perfect recipe for chronic loneliness". P20 describes the cognitive mechanism: "Waves of overthinking hit me, sometimes several times a day. I spiral into self-criticism and believe no one will ever truly relate". P18 names introversion and shyness directly as barriers: "introversion and shyness — they stop people from reaching out and make them withdraw". P25 echoes this: "shyness — brain goes blank, words tangle".

Interpersonal and relational dynamics form the second major factor category, covering everything from value mismatches and unmet expectations to betrayal and the failure of friendship reciprocity. P10 frames

loneliness as fundamentally about disappointed expectation: "Loneliness involves unmet expectation... when I'm alone with no expectation of company, there is no problem, just solitude". P31 identifies value misalignment as the core mechanism: "Isolation isn't always physical. It's the mismatch between your inner world and the external one. When your thoughts or values feel out of sync with the people around you, that's when loneliness creeps in". P12 cites betrayal as a sudden-onset trigger: "A sudden shock can push someone into loneliness — discovering a friend's betrayal, for instance". P2 adds poor social selection as a factor: "In general, picking the wrong people to be in your life can cause loneliness... Sometimes if you're open-minded and hang out with one crowd, or you're too religious for another crowd, obviously you end up not being close to them". P25 summarizes the pattern: "Wrong company, or none."

Life transitions and acute stressors are the most commonly named precipitating factors for the onset of significant loneliness episodes. Geographic relocation appears repeatedly. P33 situates her most formative loneliness realization in a move: "after moving to [City A], I understood it as the absence of someone who truly hears me". P47 recalls university's first year: "I had just moved to a new city, and everything felt out of sync — different slang, no familiar faces. Took a while to find my people". P46 names relocation as a classic trigger: "sometimes it's circumstantial, like moving to a new city and not knowing anyone". Bereavement is the most emotionally loaded trigger in the sample. P4 traces her recurring loneliness directly to her father's death: "when loneliness hits, I start thinking about my father's death, how much I miss him, how lonely I feel since he passed". P20 experienced her grandmother's death as the loss of her primary witness: "when my grandmother died. She loved me unconditionally, and after her passing I felt nobody understood me the way she had, even though I was surrounded by caring family and friends.". P42 observes it in a neighbor: "Loneliness often follows grief or distance".

Structural and societal factors include over-protective parenting, economic hardship, aging-related isolation, gender norms, and the structural thinning of Morocco's traditional communal life. P12 names over-protective parenting as a developmental precursor: "when parents forbid children to explore the world, the child grows up unable to manage life independently and ends up isolated". P11 offers a family-system version: "My late grandmother was over-protective. None of her four sons married while she was alive; symbolically they were married to her. After she died, they felt profoundly lonely". P41 represents the loneliness of old age – joint pain limiting movement, friends and community members dying, children living abroad – as a structural condition rather than a personal failure. P42 names the male vulnerability specifically: "in Moroccan culture, needing emotional closeness can feel like weakness, especially for men". P38 describes the slow erosion of communal warmth: "in Morocco, we still have some warmth left... but we're slowly losing that. We're becoming colder, more individualistic. So yes, loneliness exists here, but it's less visible because we're better at hiding it behind *bsslama* (politeness) and *dahk* (laughter)". P41 mourns the same shift: "In Morocco, connection used to be our lifeblood. Doors were left open, neighbours dropped by with bread or soup without needing an invitation. But even that is changing."

Definition of loneliness – how does the target population define and explain loneliness?

Moroccan participants' definitions of loneliness are predominantly inward-facing: what loneliness does to the self rather than what the social world has withheld. Four main definitional threads run through the sample, with a fifth minority framing that redefines loneliness as a productive or informative state.

The most dominant definitional cluster: being present but unseen, unheard, and unknown. The most universal element of Moroccan definitions is the experience of invisibility — being physically among others yet emotionally unreachable or unregistered. This goes beyond simple aloneness into a felt erasure of one's inner world. P48 articulates it most directly: "It's the feeling that your presence doesn't matter. That you could disappear and nothing would shift. It's not just about being alone, it's about being unseen, unheard". P35 says nearly the same: "It's the sense that you don't matter to anyone in that moment. Like you could disappear and no one would notice. It's not just about being alone, it's about feeling unnecessary". P30 offers a crowd-and-sign metaphor: "It's wanting to be seen or heard by someone specific and realizing they're not there, or they can't see you the way you need. It's like standing in a crowd with a sign no one reads". P28 reduces it to its essence: "It's the ache of not being understood".

The second cluster: loneliness as belonging's absence. Many participants define loneliness through the lens of belonging specifically on its disappearance or inaccessibility. P2 gives the most expansive version: "Loneliness is feeling a sense of disconnection from everyone and everything around you. It's when you feel like you don't belong anywhere, you don't have anywhere to go, even with yourself". P40 adds the self-doubt layer: "It's the unshakable feeling that you don't belong anywhere,



that nobody really sees you, not for who you are. It's not just being alone; it's the belief that if you did reach out, you'd only burden someone." P21 defines it with a belonging-specific twist: "lately, I had a feeling that I belong nowhere — not at home, not at uni, not even with myself".

Metaphoric codes are among the most vivid and distinctive features of the Moroccan definitions — more varied and poetically developed than in many other samples. P1 uses the underwater register: voiceless, underwater, unable to speak, hear, or see — "the most lonely and loneliness is when you detach from yourself. When you can't connect with yourself". P41's "room where your name never gets spoken" and P30's "crowd with a sign no one reads" are both distinctive contributions to the sample's metaphoric register.

Minority framings. A small group of participants define loneliness in explicitly positive or instructive terms. P15 frames it as a teacher: "loneliness is like an infrequent friend who visits, teaches me a lesson about myself, and then leaves". P10 defines it through unmet expectation and treats it as informative: "Loneliness is wanting the company of a particular person, or a particular kind of person, and knowing you can't have it at that moment — it's like fasting: when you intend to go without food you don't feel deprived, but if you expect to eat and can't, hunger hits hard". P11 offers the most unusual definition in the sample — a sociological one: "I believe a lonely person is necessarily narcissistic — they rely on others to find themselves"

How loneliness definitions differ from disconnection definitions. Across the sample, loneliness is consistently defined as more sustained, more identity-implicating, and more internally generated than disconnection. Disconnection is defined as a state — being present but absent in a given moment — that is situational, often external in origin, and resolvable without requiring change in one's fundamental sense of self. Loneliness, by contrast, is defined as a condition: the persistent felt absence of being known, a belief that one cannot be understood or does not matter, sometimes a conviction

that reaching out would only confirm one's unlovability. P3 captures the difference most clearly: "loneliness is when you have people around, friends, family, yet you still feel no connection or belonging. Being alone is physical; loneliness is emotional". P29 offers the most clinically precise formulation: ***"loneliness is more of a psychological condition than a social one. You can have a full calendar and still feel isolated. It's not about how many people you know — it's about how known you feel"***.

Loneliness vs. solitude — how does the target population distinguish between them?

Across the Moroccan sample, the distinction between loneliness and solitude is one of the most clearly and consistently articulated. The most dominant codes are Choice (agency vs. unchosen isolation), Positive affect/peace (solitude as restorative), Emptiness (loneliness as void), and Mis/non-understanding (loneliness as the failure of being known).

Choice as the master variable. The most universally invoked code in this comparison is choice — whether one is alone by decision or by default. P45 articulates it most crisply: "peaceful solitude is when I choose the silence. Loneliness is when it chooses me. One feels like rest. The other feels like exile". P5 mirrors this: "being alone is a choice. Loneliness is when everyone seems to have left and you didn't choose it". P19 adds the unwantedness dimension: "being alone isn't always loneliness, but loneliness is always the feeling of being unwanted". P39 grounds it in affect: "loneliness is emotional; being alone is sometimes necessary. The key difference is whether you feel at peace or unwanted". P33 situates choice within a relational frame: "solitude is something I value — it's a conscious choice to be with myself, to reflect or relax. Disconnection, on the other hand, feels like being cut off without

wanting to be".

Solitude as positive affect, restoration, and peace. A second dominant cluster in the sample frames solitude not merely as the absence of loneliness but as a genuinely nourishing state. P2 reports "most of the time I enjoy being alone. I'm just that kind of person... I find peace in being alone in the quiet. I also like the '*raha*' of doing whatever I want...when you're alone, you can just do whatever you want whenever you want. I find that very, very comforting". P42 describes his Sunday ritual as the paradigm case of nourishing solitude: "every Sunday morning. I wake up, brew strong coffee, open the window, and read the paper. No noise, no pressure. I'm alone, but I feel full, not empty". P30 calls it recharging: "most evenings, actually. I enjoy silence. Watching a movie alone or sketching something at night, those moments recharge me. I feel full, not empty". P43 gives it a spiritual quality: "early in the morning, sitting by the window with my tea, just as the sun begins to rise. The street is still asleep, birds are starting to stir, and there's this soft hush over everything. I'm entirely alone, but I feel completely at peace. It's a kind of solitude that feels sacred, like I'm part of something bigger, even if no one else is in the room".

Mis/non-understanding as the structural boundary. For many participants, the real distinction is not physical aloneness versus company but the presence or absence of being truly known. P7 grounds the distinction in accessibility: "loneliness isn't just about being alone. It's when you need someone — not just physically, but emotionally — and they're not there... That feeling, that your inner world isn't accessible to anyone, that's loneliness". P43 describes grief-induced loneliness as "even surrounded by well-meaning people, when I felt like I was speaking from a different place, and they couldn't quite hear me. They wanted to comfort me, but grief has its own language".

How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?

Across the Moroccan sample, perceptions of lonely individuals are shaped by three overlapping dynamics: a dominant cultural frame that treats loneliness as evidence of social or personal failure; a perceptual challenge rooted in loneliness's invisibility; and a small but notable minority view that treats loneliness as evidence of depth or courage. These dynamics produce a social environment in which lonely people are simultaneously hard to identify, reluctant to self-disclose, and at risk of blame or pity when they do.

Loneliness as failure and social stigma. The most pervasive perception of lonely individuals in this sample — reported by participants who have experienced it themselves and by those observing it in others — is that loneliness signals some form of personal deficiency. P7 names the stigma directly: "People associate loneliness with failure. Like, if you admit you're lonely, it sounds like you're saying nobody wants you. That's a hard thing to



say out loud. There's this pressure to seem okay all the time, especially for men". P27 gives it a vernacular form: "here we link loneliness with failure. If you admit you're lonely, you fear people will say, 'Ma 'and-kch sahab?' — 'You got no friends?' — and judge you as a loser". P48 captures the shame mechanism from inside: "saying you're lonely is like confessing you did something wrong. So we keep it quiet". P34 frames it as a competence failure: "In our culture, you're expected to be strong, social, surrounded. Admitting loneliness feels like admitting you've failed at something everyone else seems to manage". P42 observes that this shame extends to men specifically: "loneliness still carries shame. People think it makes them look needy or unwanted. There's also pride — we don't want to admit we're missing something. And in Moroccan culture, needing emotional closeness can feel like weakness, especially for men". P44 describes the cultural image problem: "admitting to loneliness feels like standing outside a party with your face against the glass".

Social dismissal. Several participants describe how lonely individuals are perceived as partly responsible for their own isolation — either for not socializing hard enough or for being too sensitive to handle normal social friction. P35 reports the direct accusation: people will "hit you with 'you're just not trying hard enough to socialize'", reframing what is a genuine emotional state as a motivational shortfall. P23 describes the perception in her social environment: when loneliness becomes visible, a person is "sometimes perceived as overly sensitive or an attention-seeker". P11 offers the most reductive take: "I strongly think that if you're not busy, it's because you don't want to be" — framing loneliness as an outcome of insufficient social will. P21 captures how the cultural assumption of communal support compounds the dismissal: "in Morocco **admitting loneliness can sound ungrateful — 'You have family, food, a roof. What else do you want?'** That reaction makes people lock up after the first attempt". P43 describes the paradox: "because it feels like an admission of failure... people respond with confusion or even shame — 'But you're not alone!' they'll say, as if that solves it. So you end up

hiding it".

Loneliness as largely invisible and masked. A consistent theme is that loneliness is very difficult to perceive from the outside — often actively concealed — and that attempts to identify it by behavioral cues alone are unreliable. P20 states it flatly: "unless you know someone well, loneliness is invisible. A distant, mysterious person might be fine, or deeply lonely" . P40 describes the performance of non-loneliness: "some of the loneliest people are great performers. They laugh, socialize, seem energetic... but when you're close enough, you notice the little things: how fast they change the topic when things get real, how they over-explain joy like they're trying to convince themselves". P2 echoes this: "some of the most cheerful, social people — the ones who appear to be living it up — are actually truly, truly lonely and have a lot of baggage" .

Behavioral markers used to identify lonely individuals. Despite this masking, participants describe a set of behavioral cues they use to recognize loneliness in others P3 offers a dual pattern: "a lonely person either withdraws or does the opposite, talks nonstop to keep the conversation going. You can sometimes see it in their eyes — something's off even if it isn't necessarily loneliness". P27 uses voice: "you can hear the echo in his voice notes — lots of '*makayn bass*' ('all good') but you feel the gap". P28 reads eye contact and timing: "someone who avoids eye contact, who laughs a little too quickly, like they're trying to mask something". P42 identifies doorway lingering as a telltale: "they hesitate before speaking, like they're unsure they're welcome. They apologise too much for calling or stopping by. And there's this habit of lingering at the door after a visit, as if they don't want to go back to quiet". P4 describes a response to genuine listening as a recognition cue: "they're shocked when you truly listen; they apologize for talking; they're amazed when you validate their feelings". P44 adds the apologetic preface pattern: "they apologize before they even start speaking — 'Sorry for texting so late,' 'Hope I'm not bothering you.' It's like they're

constantly shrinking themselves. And once you ask how they are, the stories flood out, like they've been sitting on words for days". P7 cites clinical-adjacent signs: "things like insomnia, low energy, not eating properly. Sometimes they'll break down crying randomly or seem emotionally distant for no clear reason. It can look a lot like depression".

A generational shift in perception. Two participants explicitly note that perceptions of loneliness are changing across generations in Morocco. P40 observes: "older generations saw loneliness as weakness, or worse, something supernatural, like being *mashūr* (cursed). That mindset is shifting. Our generation talks more openly about depression, burnout, isolation. We're still learning, but at least we're acknowledging that mental health is real". P20 makes a similar observation: "older attitudes linked loneliness to superstition; now we're slowly recognising its dangers, from depression to suicidal thoughts, so the conversation is beginning to change".

A smaller number of participants describe a contrasting perception in which admitting loneliness is seen as evidence of introspective depth or social courage. P8 articulates this most directly: "I admire when someone admits they feel lonely; it takes courage. Unfortunately, people are afraid their problems will be used against them. In my circle, admitting loneliness can signal you're introspective, but most peers will think you're too sensitive to handle life". P22 describes a similar pocket of acceptance: "people in my circle see it as natural rather than a defect". This perception is geographically and socially specific — it appears among more educated, urban, or reflective participants who have been exposed to mental health discourse — and is clearly minority rather than dominant.



What are the culture-specific aspects of loneliness among the target population?

The Moroccan sample surfaces a set of loneliness-related dynamics that are deeply shaped by the country's social structure, religious fabric, and shifting cultural norms. These are not simply local variants of universal experiences — they constitute qualitatively different mechanisms through which loneliness is produced, concealed, amplified, and sometimes relieved. Culture-specific aspects emerge with consistent force across the 50 participants.

Sociality as moral obligation and measure of worth. The most distinctly Moroccan aspect of loneliness in this sample is not the feeling itself but the normative scaffolding surrounding it. Social connection in Morocco is not merely valued — it is moralized. P1 articulates this most comprehensively: "social connection is something very important to Moroccans, as I said, because sometimes you will find yourself forced to do it."

Moroccans don't know the notion of introverts... if you are someone who likes to spend time alone or want to be alone, you will be called autistic, or you have some kind of disease. The more you are socially connected, the more you are seen as a good person, the more you are seen as you have this component of Moroccan-ness. So it's like one of the main panels of Moroccan-ness is to be socially connected". P1 adds a further cultural expectation: "everyone should be involved in whatever you're doing... that comes like from neighbors, from like strangers in the streets. You feel like they, it's like a big family, which is not always a positive thing, but everyone should be involved". P41 encodes this in the language itself: "it's in our language — 'dima m'a l-jma'a' (always with the group) — but our actions sometimes drift toward isolation. And when someone chooses solitude, others think they're sad or sick. We struggle to respect those who walk alone". This moralization of sociality means that loneliness is not just a painful emotional state but a potential social verdict — proof of inadequate Moroccan-ness.

The paradox of compulsory presence and invisible loneliness. Because Moroccans are structurally immersed in family and community — never technically alone — loneliness becomes unusually hard to name, claim, or legitimize. P1 identifies this paradox: "the unique thing is that Morocco doesn't believe in loneliness. It's like something out of our jargon... they say, 'You have your health, you eat, you drink, you're good. You're not lonely you're good. It's like you're just victimizing yourself if you're saying that you're lonely'. P10 notes the cognitive consequence: "in a collective society people live with family, so they rarely sit alone long enough to name the feeling. They know something is missing — many frame it as wanting to marry — but they may lack the vocabulary to call it loneliness because, technically, they're never alone". P25 gives it its most compressed expression: "we live packed in big families, so admitting loneliness sounds crazy to others: 'How? House is full!' That makes you hide it more and turn only to God".

Ritual gatherings as amplifiers of loneliness. Morocco's dense calendar of communal rituals — Friday couscous, Ramadan, Eid, weddings, funerals, condolence visits — that are ostensibly designed to sustain connection can, for those who are already lonely, function as mirrors of exclusion. P45 describes the Friday experience: "that's when everyone is gathering for couscous or heading to the mosque. I sit alone, reheating leftovers. Also weddings — they amplify the loneliness. The joy in the air makes the silence in your phone feel louder". P1 connects this to the obligatory nature of such events: "we stick to those smallest cultural components, traditional components like how we still, on Friday, we still cook couscous, how we gather together for the smallest occasions. What is also unique is how sometimes even if you don't want to be socially connected to others, you will be forced to do it". P29 describes the emotional misalignment inside required presence: "not all contact is connection. Sometimes it's just noise. I've felt lonelier in group chats than in total silence". P50 identifies the obligatory gatherings as sites where loneliness sharpens: "weddings, engagement parties, or condolence visits...you attend mostly out of duty. You're expected to show up, greet people, maybe share a meal. But honestly, I don't always feel connected in those settings". This mechanism — where obligatory joyful or communal presence makes felt loneliness more acute by contrast — is distinctly Moroccan in its frequency and cultural weight.

The erosion of traditional community practices and increasing individualism. Several participants — particularly older ones — describe loneliness as historically new, produced by the breakdown of traditional communal life rather than an inherent feature of Moroccan society. P41 mourns a specific set of vanishing practices: "in Morocco, connection used to be our lifeblood. Doors were left open, neighbours dropped by with bread or soup without needing an invitation. But even that is changing. We're becoming a quieter people". P38 observes the same drift from a younger vantage point: "in Morocco, we still have some warmth left, at weddings, funerals, or even in a shared taxi. But we're slowly losing that.

We're becoming colder, more individualistic. So yes, loneliness exists here, but it's less visible because we're better at hiding it behind bsslama (politeness) and dahk (laughter)"



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