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Associations between crowded loneliness, difficulties in emotion regulation, and individual–social responsibility

Saffet Karayaman[a] and Ahmet Deniz[b]

[a]Arhavi Vocational School, Artvin Çoruh University, Artvin, Turkey; [b]Department of Applied Sciences, İstanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi, Istanbul, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how crowded loneliness influences difficulties in emotion regulation and individual–social responsibility among employees working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Istanbul. Crowded loneliness, which gained national attention after being selected as Türkiye's Word of the Year in 2024, reflects the growing impact of digital environments that foster superficial connections and deepen emotional isolation. Using a relational survey model, data were collected from 385 NGO employees in 2025. Findings indicate that crowded loneliness is positively associated with both difficulties in emotion regulation and individual–social responsibility, although the relationships are weak in magnitude. Younger participants reported higher levels of crowded loneliness and greater difficulties in emotion regulation. In addition, male participants reported higher levels of difficulties in emotion regulation. Overall, the study shows that crowded loneliness contributes to meaningful yet limited variations in key psychosocial characteristics among NGO employees.

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Introduction

In modern societies, it is common for individuals to feel psychologically lonely despite being physically present in crowded social environments. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as 'crowded loneliness' or 'loneliness in the crowd' (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Crowded loneliness arises when superficial or unfulfilling social relationships fail to meet an individual's need for social belonging. This situation leads individuals to become detached from their social bonds, negatively affecting both their social participation and emotional satisfaction. While loneliness has long been conceptualized through classic typologies such as emotional and social loneliness (Weiss, 1973), crowded loneliness represents a distinct form of alienation specific to the digital and urban age. It captures the paradoxical experience of being surrounded by people; both physically and virtually, yet feeling disconnected from authentic emotional bonds. Unlike traditional loneliness, which arises from physical or social isolation, crowded loneliness emerges from relational overload combined with emotional emptiness, a condition intensified by constant digital exposure and the superficiality of mediated interactions (Karayaman et al., 2025a). Although the concept of crowded loneliness is frequently discussed in relation to digital communication environments, the present study does not directly measure participants' digital media use. Therefore, digitalization is treated in this study primarily as a theoretical and contextual background rather than as an empirically tested variable within the statistical model.

The phenomenon of crowded loneliness brought about by the modern age also requires individuals to possess effective emotion regulation capacities. Individuals who experience difficulties in regulating their emotions may have difficulty establishing deep relationships in social settings and the feeling of loneliness may become chronic (Gross, 1998). Emotion regulation is defined as the capacity to initiate, guide and modify emotional responses in order to maintain normal behavior.

CONTACT Saffet Karayaman saffetkarayaman@gmail.com Arhavi Vocational School, Artvin Çoruh Üniversitesi, Artvin, Turkey
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In recent years, many studies have reported strong associations between emotion regulation and variables such as loneliness, addiction, psychological well-being, anxiety, depression and academic burnout (Saruhan & Yüksel, 2021). In this context, emotion regulation capacities have increasingly been addressed in psychoeducation, therapy and school-based intervention programs.

An individual's sense of responsibility toward society and their environment plays an important role in reducing the feeling of loneliness, both on a personal and social level. Responsibility involves the individual being accountable for their own actions (personal responsibility) as well as being sensitive and contributive to others (social responsibility) (Filiz & Demirhan, 2015; Li et al., 2008).

The concept of individual-social responsibility is based on the idea that individuals carry responsibility not only for their own interests but also for the general good of society. In this framework, individuals aim to contribute to society as active members of social life. This concept is considered a balancing element, especially against the increasing individualism and alienation problems in contemporary societies (Graham et al., 2012). The model based on Hellison's (2011) Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility approach focuses on developing individuals' levels of responsibility through behavioral dimensions such as making an effort, self-direction, respect, helpfulness and transferring values into daily life (Filiz & Demirhan, 2015).

Individuals with a high level of personal-social responsibility have been shown to be more sensitive to social problems, participate more in public decision-making processes, and play a more effective role in building a dignified social structure (Berman et al., 2002; Hackman & Johnson, 2013). It is understood that individuals with a strong sense of responsibility maintain higher-quality social interactions and experience less loneliness. Anderson and colleagues (Anderson, 2014) found that individuals who participate in social responsibility activities such as volunteering develop stronger social bonds and feel less lonely. Similarly, Fancourt and Steptoe (2019) noted that regular participation in cultural and social activities reduces feelings of depression and loneliness. Christakis and Fowler (2009) emphasized that the level of loneliness individuals feel is linked to the quality of their social connections. Therefore, developing responsible behaviors is important for individuals to build and maintain meaningful social ties.

Previous empirical studies conducted with organizational and voluntary sector participants indicate that workplace social environments and perceived social support significantly influence emotional well-being and responsibility-related behaviors. For instance, Anderson (2014) found that individuals involved in voluntary activities develop stronger social bonds and greater emotional resilience, while Fancourt and Steptoe (2019) reported that regular participation in social and cultural activities is associated with reduced loneliness and improved psychological well-being. These findings provide empirical support for examining crowded loneliness among NGO employees.

In the literature, strong relationships have been found between social responsibility and psychological well-being, levels of empathy, sense of belonging, and volunteerism (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Karakayalı & Yüce, 2019). Individuals with a strong sense of responsibility have been found to be more resilient against feelings of loneliness, alienation and meaninglessness.

All these findings suggest that crowded loneliness may influence individuals' difficulties in emotion regulation and their sense of social responsibility. Given its relevance to digital socialization patterns, it is essential to empirically examine how crowded loneliness interacts with these psychosocial variables in contemporary societies. Employees working in non-governmental organizations operate in socially intensive environments characterized by continuous interpersonal interaction, emotional labor, and voluntary commitment. These conditions make NGO employees particularly vulnerable to experiences of crowded loneliness, while simultaneously requiring effective emotion regulation and strong social responsibility skills. Therefore, focusing on this group provides an appropriate context for examining the psychosocial consequences of crowded loneliness. Accordingly, the present study investigates whether crowded loneliness is associated with differences in difficulties in emotion regulation and individual–social responsibility among NGO employees.

From a theoretical perspective, crowded loneliness may influence psychosocial functioning through two complementary mechanisms. First, consistent with risk-based models, persistent emotional isolation may increase difficulties in emotion regulation. Second, based on compensatory belonging theory, individuals experiencing social disconnection may engage in prosocial and responsible behaviors as a means of restoring meaning and social value. Accordingly, the present study adopts both risk and compensatory

frameworks to examine the effects of crowded loneliness among NGO employees. In this context, difficulties in emotion regulation are conceptualized as a key risk factor, whereas social responsibility is interpreted as a potential adaptive response.

Crowded loneliness

Crowded loneliness denotes a paradoxical experience in which individuals, despite being socially or digitally surrounded by others, fail to establish emotionally fulfilling bonds. This concept has become a significant issue in contemporary societies, especially with the rise of urbanization, digitalization and superficial social relationships (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). The fact that the Turkish Language Association selected this expression as the 'word of the year' in 2024 indicates that public awareness of the concept has increased (Türk Dil Kurumu (TDK), 2024). Conceptually, crowded loneliness extends the traditional understanding of loneliness by emphasizing the discrepancy between perceived social connectedness and emotional fulfillment. Unlike general loneliness, which typically reflects the absence of relationships, crowded loneliness represents a paradoxical presence; feeling isolated despite social or digital engagement. This distinction aligns with the notion of qualitative disconnection and justifies its incremental theoretical value beyond conventional loneliness measures such as the UCLA and De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scales.

Theoretically, crowded loneliness is related to, but distinct from, emotional loneliness in Weiss's typology (Weiss, 1973). Emotional loneliness arises from the absence of intimate attachment figures, whereas crowded loneliness occurs despite the physical or virtual presence of others. It reflects a qualitative deficiency rather than a quantitative absence of relationships. This distinction allows crowded loneliness to be positioned as a modern subtype of relational disconnection that intersects with the conditions of digital and urban life. This framework aligns with Baumeister and Leary's 'need to belong' theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which suggests that individuals have an instinctive need to form meaningful, lasting and reciprocal social relationships. When this need is unmet, loneliness occurs.

Additionally, Turkle argues that in the digital age, individuals are increasingly 'alone together,' emphasizing that social media offers superficial connections and hinders true social fulfillment (Turkle, 2011). This highlights crowded loneliness as a contemporary problem. Perlman and Peplau (1981) define loneliness as the gap between the relationships a person has and the relationships they desire, which helps explain how individuals can feel lonely even in crowded settings.

In this sense, crowded loneliness does not merely coexist with digital communication. Digital networks simulate social proximity while eroding emotional depth, creating an illusion of connectedness without genuine interpersonal reciprocity. This digital amplification framework positions crowded loneliness as a socio-technological phenomenon rooted in network saturation, reduced empathy and emotional desensitization (Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Wolfson, 2024). Community psychology findings indicate that social density alone does not ensure genuine connectedness. Andoh-Arthur (2019) notes that belonging depends on the quality of ties, while Hossain (2021) shows that exclusion can persist even in crowded settings. Sustainable social cohesion is understood to depend on meaningful participation rather than mere social density (Rambaree, 2022).

With the high number of followers and interaction levels on social media platforms, individuals are moving away from empathetic and face-to-face relationships, which leads to a sense of 'pseudo-intimacy' and deepens feelings of loneliness (Wolfson, 2024). Similarly, Hammoud et al. (2021) evaluated individuals' momentary levels of loneliness in crowded environments and revealed that physical crowding does not necessarily correspond to social satisfaction.

Karayaman et al. (2025a) developed the Crowded Loneliness Scale, making the concept psychometrically measurable. The scale includes subdimensions such as 'sense of belonging,' 'feeling excluded in a crowd' and 'quality of relationships.' This phenomenon has also attracted media attention. Forbes Türkiye (2024) and Independent Türkçe (2024) emphasized that despite increased visibility in the digital age, individuals are drifting away from deep social bonds, and this manifests as a form of loneliness.

In conclusion, crowded loneliness should be addressed not only as an individual issue but also as a phenomenon that threatens social cohesion. Further research focusing on difficulties in emotion regulation and the role of digitalization in relation to this concept may contribute to strengthening public mental health.

Difficulties in emotion regulation

Emotion regulation refers to the process by which individuals manage and modify their emotional experiences and expressions (Gross, 1998; Gross & Ross, 2007). Difficulties in emotion regulation involve problems in recognizing, accepting, and effectively regulating emotional responses. It is a multidimensional psychological process that encompasses recognizing, guiding, maintaining, suppressing, or re-evaluating emotional experiences. This process includes the management of both positive and negative emotions and is closely related to individuals' social relationships, academic success, and psychological resilience (Gross & Ross, 2007). Within this framework, crowded loneliness can be understood as both a trigger and a consequence of emotional dysregulation. When individuals experience dissonance between social connectedness and emotional satisfaction, they may engage in maladaptive regulatory strategies such as suppression or avoidance (Gross, 2002; John & Gross, 2004).

In line with this reasoning, research in community psychology highlights that individuals working in socially demanding environments often experience a tension between emotional engagement and emotional exhaustion. High-density social interaction settings create emotional strain that requires effective regulatory capacities, reinforcing the relevance of emotion regulation in contexts where crowded loneliness is prevalent (Andoh-Arthur, 2019).

Gross (2002), through the Process Model, conceptualizes emotion regulation in five stages: situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression. This model suggests that functional strategies such as cognitive restructuring enhance psychological well-being, whereas suppression-based strategies may lead to negative outcomes. Thompson defines emotion regulation as the capacity to initiate, guide and modify emotional responses to support goal-directed behavior (Thompson, 1994). Difficulties in emotion regulation emerge when individuals are unable to effectively apply these regulatory processes.

Rugancı and Tülin (2010) adapted the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), originally developed by Gross (2002), into Turkish. Similarly, Onat and Otrar introduced the Turkish version of the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), which examines the cognitive strategies individuals use when faced with negative life events (Onat & Otrar, 2009).

Emotion regulation scale adaptations have also been conducted for children and adolescents (Çetin & Kaya, 2021), and academic research on the concept has expanded in recent years (Keskiner et al., 2024; Saruhan & Yüksel, 2021; Tatlı-Harmancı & Güngör-Aytar, 2021). Feelings of loneliness tend to increase especially among individuals who experience difficulties in emotion regulation (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Akçıl et al. (2024) proposed a mediating model involving intolerance of uncertainty, difficulties in emotion regulation, and mental well-being.

In conclusion, difficulties in emotion regulation play a critical role in both individual well-being and social relationships. Existing research supports the psychometric validity of this concept and highlights its connection to contemporary issues such as loneliness and addiction. Difficulties in emotion regulation, particularly in relation to internet addiction, loneliness, and mental well-being, are frequently addressed in both cultural and clinical research contexts.

Individual and social responsibility

Individual and social responsibility refers to the set of ethical obligations that a person feels toward both their own life and the society around them. Individual responsibility involves accepting the consequences of one's actions, maintaining a strong sense of internal control and making ethical decisions. Social responsibility, on the other hand, refers to an individual's desire to contribute actively to society, the environment, and other people through increased sensitivity and awareness (Schlenker et al., 1994). Together, these two concepts emphasize not only personal success but also social harmony.

Individual and social responsibility are closely related to social cognitive theory; self-regulation and moral behavior in individuals through internal motivation and social learning processes. In modern contexts, these responsibilities manifest through voluntary participation, social solidarity, environmental awareness, and ethical conduct (Schwartz, 2010). Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals' identification with social groups strengthens their sense of social belonging and increases their collective

sense of responsibility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This makes individual-social responsibility not only an individual-centered but also a group-centered phenomenon.

From a psychosocial perspective, crowded loneliness may paradoxically heighten individuals' sensitivity to social responsibility as a compensatory response to their perceived lack of belonging. When people experience emotional isolation amid social abundance, they may attempt to restore social meaning through altruistic or prosocial behaviors. This mechanism aligns with the 'compensatory belonging' model, which posits that loneliness can motivate individuals to seek reconnection by engaging in socially constructive actions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Therefore, the positive relationship between crowded loneliness and social responsibility may reflect an adaptive effort to re-establish a sense of purpose and moral coherence in one's social environment.

Individuals with high levels of individual and social responsibility tend to be more responsive to social issues, participate more actively in public decision-making and play a more effective role in building an ideal social structure (Berman et al., 2002; Hackman & Johnson, 2013). These individuals are also reported to engage in higher-quality social interactions and experience less loneliness (Anderson, 2014). Similarly, Fancourt and Steptoe (2019) noted that regular participation in cultural and social activities reduces symptoms of depression and feelings of loneliness.

Studies conducted in Turkey indicate that this concept is frequently examined in the context of education, health, and youth work. For example, Filiz and Demirhan (2015) adapted the Individual and Social Responsibility Scale (ISRS) into Turkish and analyzed the responsibility levels of high school students based on their participation in sports. The scale was found to be psychometrically strong and a positive relationship was observed between individual responsibility and voluntary social participation.

Similarly, Eraslan developed a scale to measure individual and social responsibility and used it to examine the social responsibility profiles of healthcare professionals (Eraslan, 2011). The subdimensions of volunteering, social sensitivity, and environmental awareness were found to be significantly associated with life satisfaction.

In conclusion, individual and social responsibility reflects not only a concern for the self but also a desire to transform society. In summary, this study contributes to the existing literature by introducing crowded loneliness as a distinct form of loneliness situated within the context of digital socialization. Unlike traditional loneliness, which arises from the absence of relationships, crowded loneliness emphasizes the psychological disconnect that persists despite abundant social exposure, particularly within online and urban settings. By examining its predictive relationship with difficulties in emotion regulation and social responsibility, this research not only highlights the paradoxical outcomes of digital social connectedness but also provides a theoretical basis for understanding how modern social environments shape emotional and moral functioning. These findings further support the view that social responsibility may function as an adaptive coping strategy in socially demanding environments.

Method

Research design

This study was conducted to investigate the association between participants' perceptions of crowded loneliness and their difficulties in emotion regulation and perceptions of individual and social responsibility in an increasingly digitalized world. The study employed the Crowded Loneliness Scale (Karayaman et al., 2025b), a newly validated and psychometrically reliable measure conceptualizing loneliness as a distinct phenomenon experienced in socially dense environments. A relational survey model, one of the quantitative research methods, was employed.

The research was carried out with individuals working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Istanbul with no political affiliations. Participants represented diverse roles within their respective NGOs, including administrative staff, field workers, project coordinators, and managerial personnel. In addition, some participants were young volunteers, interns, or entry-level employees actively involved in NGO projects and organizational activities. This structure is common in many NGOs, where early-career individuals and volunteers constitute an important part of the workforce.

This diversity allowed the study to reflect a broad range of professional experiences. NGOs function within a fast-paced, proactive environment that requires continuous communication with others, while being based on voluntarism and focused on social responsibility (Anheier, 2014; Salamon, 2010). Therefore, NGO employees were considered an appropriate sample group for this study. Data were collected in May and June 2025 through a questionnaire administered with voluntary participation and convenience sampling.

Ethical considerations and sampling

In line with the methodological rigor established in the research design, all ethical procedures required for social science research were followed. This research was approved by the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Artvin Çoruh University (Date: 16.05.2025; Decision No: 178645). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and the data were used solely for academic purposes.

According to Uzgören (2012) for a population of 100,000, a minimum sample size of 384 participants is required to achieve a 5% margin of error. In this context, the final sample of 385 voluntarily participating individuals was considered sufficient and representative of the population. In addition, this sample size (N = 385) was statistically adequate to detect small effect sizes (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.05$) at 0.80 power with $\alpha = 0.05$ (Cohen, 1988).

Measurement tools and validation

The study employed three validated scales and a demographic questionnaire. The Crowded Loneliness Scale (Karayaman et al., 2025b) was developed and validated through confirmatory factor analysis, demonstrating strong construct validity, reliability, and theoretical distinction from general loneliness measures. The scale consists of 22 items across three dimensions—*sense of belonging*, *feeling excluded in a crowd* and *quality of relationships*. The confirmatory factor analysis of the original validation study showed an excellent model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.006) and high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.938$), confirming the distinctiveness of the crowded loneliness construct.

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale, originally developed by Penner et al. (2023) and adapted into Turkish by Ekşi and Erik (2023), contains 8 items and has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in prior studies. The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-8) assesses individuals' difficulties in understanding, accepting, and managing emotional responses. Higher scores indicate greater difficulties in emotion regulation and lower levels of effective regulatory capacity. Therefore, higher scores in the present study reflect increased difficulties in emotion regulation rather than stronger regulatory abilities. The Individual and Social Responsibility Scale, developed by Li et al. (2008) and adapted into Turkish by Filiz and Demirhan (2015), includes 13 items and assesses both personal and collective responsibility dimensions.

In total, the study utilized 43 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). In addition to these scales, demographic variables such as gender, marital status and education level were collected.

Although the study conceptually associates crowded loneliness with digital social contexts, no direct behavioral data on participants' digital media use were collected. Therefore, the 'digital dimension' of crowded loneliness was examined conceptually rather than empirically, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

Data analysis

Prior to statistical analysis, all variables were checked for normality, reliability and internal consistency. The results indicated that the data met the assumptions for parametric tests. Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$, and results meeting the $p < 0.01$ criterion were considered highly significant. Data were further screened for normality, linearity,

homoscedasticity and multicollinearity. No serious deviations were detected; tolerance and VIF values were within acceptable limits (Hair et al., 2019). Outliers were examined through standardized residuals and Mahalanobis distances to ensure data integrity. The conceptual model of the study is presented in Figure 1.

Although hierarchical regression with demographic controls was considered, simple linear regression was employed in the present study to examine the direct associations between crowded loneliness and the outcome variables. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the primary focus on bivariate predictive relationships, this approach was deemed appropriate. The results are therefore interpreted cautiously, with attention to the modest explained variance.

Research hypotheses

The primary objectives of this study are to examine the associations between crowded loneliness, difficulties in emotion regulation, and individual and social responsibility, and to explore potential demographic differences in these variables.

H1: Crowded loneliness is positively associated with difficulties in emotion regulation.
H2: Crowded loneliness is positively associated with individual and social responsibility.
H3: Participants' perception of crowded loneliness differs significantly across demographic variables.
H4: Participants' difficulties in emotion regulation differ significantly across demographic variables.
H5: Participants' individual and social responsibility differs significantly across demographic variables.

Research findings

Results

Descriptive statistics and demographics

Of the 385 participants, 62.1% were female and 37.9% were male; 10.4% were married and 89.6% were single. Regarding education level, 9.1% held an associate degree, 68.8% a bachelor's degree and 22.1% a graduate degree. In terms of age, 64.4% were between 18–25 years, 26.5% between 26–45 years and 9.1% between 46–60 years.

Assumption testing and reliability

Normality. The normality values for all three scales are presented in Table 1, indicating that the distributions fall within acceptable skewness–kurtosis ranges. The skewness and kurtosis coefficients of all variables were within the acceptable range of −3 to +3 and indicated approximately normal distributions, supporting the assumption of normality (Kalaycı, 2010).

Reliability. All scales demonstrated high internal consistency (Büyüköztürk, 2007). Cronbach's alpha values were 0.903 for the Crowded Loneliness Scale, 0.917 for the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale, and 0.839 for the Individual and Social Responsibility Scale.

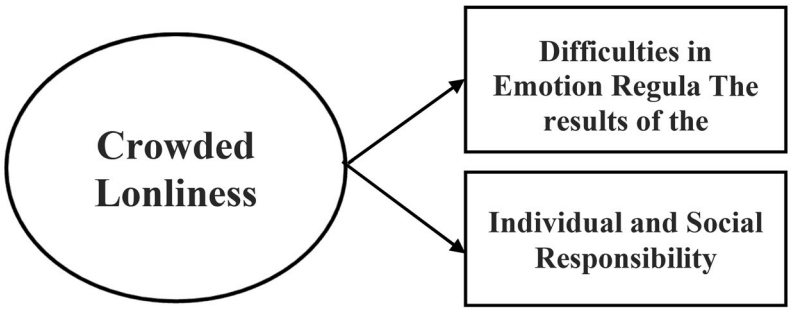


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study.

Group differences

As shown in Table 2, a statistically significant gender difference was found in difficulties in emotion regulation scores. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences by gender and marital status. Difficulties in emotion regulation scores significantly differed between male and female participants ($p = 0.015$), with males reporting slightly higher difficulties in emotion regulation. However, no significant gender-based differences were observed for crowded loneliness ($p = 0.797$) or individual and social responsibility ($p = 0.072$). Similarly, no statistically significant differences were found across marital status for any of the three variables.

ANOVA results

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether there were significant differences in the variables by education and age groups, as shown in Table 3. ANOVA is used to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between the means of more than two groups (Kalaycı, 2010).

Correlation analysis

Table 4 presents Pearson correlation coefficients computed to examine the relationships among Crowded Loneliness, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation, and Individual and Social Responsibility (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2014).

The analysis revealed weak but positive correlations between Crowded Loneliness and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation (r = 0.294) and between Crowded Loneliness and Individual and Social Responsibility (r = 0.252), both significant at $p < 0.01$.

Regression analysis

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effects of Crowded Loneliness on Difficulties in Emotion Regulation and Individual and Social Responsibility in Table 5 (Güriş & Çağlayan, 2005). R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variable, while F tests model significance (Kalaycı, 2010). Two simple linear regression models were tested, with crowded loneliness as the predictor variable. Both regression models were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Crowded Loneliness explained 8.6% of the variance in Difficulties in Emotion Regulation and 6.4% in Individual and Social Responsibility. According to Cohen's (1988) criteria for effect size interpretation, these values correspond to small effect sizes. Therefore, although the regression models were statistically significant, the magnitude of the predictive associations should be interpreted as modest.

Table 1. Normality of scale scores.

Scale	Skewness	Kurtosis
Crowded loneliness	0.096	0.141
Difficulties in emotion regulation	0.282	1.002
Individual and social responsibility	0.932	1.141

Table 2. Group differences by gender and marital status.

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	p
Crowded loneliness	Women	239	2.67	0.56	0.797
	Men	146	2.65	0.69	
Difficulties in emotion regulation	Women	239	2.01	0.70	0.015
	Men	146	2.19	0.71	
Individual & social responsibility	Women	239	4.23	0.36	0.072
	Men	146	4.30	0.40	

Note. No significant differences were found for marital status across any of the variables ($p > 0.05$).

Table 3. ANOVA results by education and age.

Variable	Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	Group difference
Crowded loneliness (education)	Between groups	0.995	2	0.498	1.351	0.260	–
	Within groups	140.728	382	0.368			
Difficulties in emotion regulation (education)	Between groups	0.625	2	0.313	0.621	0.538	–
	Within groups	192.250	382	0.503			
Individual & social responsibility (education)	Between groups	0.775	2	0.387	2.747	0.065	–
	Within groups	53.855	382	0.141			
Crowded loneliness (age)	Between groups	16.703	2	8.351	25.517	<0.001	18–25 > 26–45, 46–60
Difficulties in emotion regulation (age)	Between groups	3.520	2	1.760	3.551	0.030	18–25 > 26–45, 46–60
Individual & social responsibility (age)	Between groups	0.551	2	0.276	1.947	0.144	–

Note. Significant age differences were found for Crowded Loneliness ($p < 0.001$) and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation ($p = 0.030$). Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests indicated that participants aged 18–25 scored significantly higher than those aged 26–45 and 46–60 years. No significant effects of education were observed for any variable.

Table 4. Correlations among study variables.

Variable	1	2	3
1. Crowded loneliness	–	0.294**	0.252**
2. Difficulties in emotion regulation		–	0.140**
3. Individual & social responsibility			–

Note. **$p < .01$. Correlation coefficients (r) range between −1 and +1; positive values indicate a direct relationship. According to Cohen's (1988) criteria, the observed correlations indicate small to moderate effect sizes.

Table 5. Regression results.

Model	R	R^2	p	t	F	B
Crowded loneliness → Difficulties in emotion regulation	0.294	0.086	<0.001	7.488	36.207	0.343
Crowded loneliness → Individual & social responsibility	0.252	0.064	<0.001	6.768	26.044	0.157

These findings indicate that crowded loneliness is associated with difficulties in emotion regulation at a small but statistically meaningful level. Similarly, crowded loneliness is weakly but significantly associated with individual and social responsibility. In line with these results, H1 and H2 were supported.

Although the present findings demonstrate statistically significant relationships, the use of simple regression models limits causal and predictive interpretations. Considering the role of demographic factors, future research would benefit from hierarchical regression analyses including age and gender as control variables to enhance model robustness.

Research objectives

The present study aims to address the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between crowded loneliness and difficulties in emotion regulation;
2. To investigate the association between crowded loneliness and individual and social responsibility;
3. To explore demographic differences in these variables.

Hypotheses results and discussion

The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 6. H1 and H2 were accepted, indicating that Crowded Loneliness was positively associated with both Difficulties in Emotion Regulation and Individual/Social Responsibility. H3 and H4 were partially supported due to significant demographic effects (age and gender), whereas H5 was rejected as no demographic differences were found.

Discussion of the results

This study, conducted with 385 participants, examined the associations between Crowded Loneliness and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation and Individual and Social Responsibility within the context of an increasingly digitalized social life. Regression analyses revealed positive associations between Crowded Loneliness and both outcome variables. The acceptance of H1 and H2 further supports the dual theoretical framework of the study, indicating that crowded loneliness is associated with increased emotional regulation difficulties while simultaneously relating to greater social responsibility through compensatory meaning-seeking processes. Although the concept of Crowded Loneliness is relatively new, the findings align partially with existing theories that link emotional functioning, social belonging and responsibility.

Recent community-based studies have underlined the social ecology of loneliness, highlighting how belongingness and communal engagement predict emotional well-being (Baerg-MacDonald, 2025; Cunningham et al., 2025; Meehan et al., 2025). In addition to national studies, the present research is grounded in a broad international literature, including theoretical and empirical contributions by scholars such as Baumeister and Leary, Gross, Turkle, Fancourt and Steptoe, and Kashdan and Steger, which situate crowded loneliness within a global psychosocial framework. These findings align with the theoretical foundations of the current study, which conceptualizes crowded loneliness as a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by collective belongingness and interpersonal connection within dense social contexts. From a compensatory belonging perspective, individuals who experience loneliness in crowded settings may engage in behaviors that reaffirm their moral identity and social worth.

Several mechanisms may account for the positive association between crowded loneliness and individual/social responsibility observed in this study. First, consistent with compensatory belonging perspectives, individuals experiencing emotional disconnection in socially dense environments may engage in prosocial and responsible behaviors as a strategy to restore meaning, social value, and self-worth. Second, the normative prosocial climate characteristic of non-governmental organizations may reinforce responsibility-oriented behaviors even under conditions of perceived loneliness. In such contexts, organizational norms emphasizing altruism and social contribution may buffer the negative emotional consequences of social disconnection.

Alternatively, methodological factors such as common-method variance associated with self-report measures may have contributed to the observed associations. Therefore, future studies employing multi-method designs and objective behavioral indicators are needed to disentangle substantive psychosocial mechanisms from potential measurement artifacts.

Taken together, these compensatory and risk-based mechanisms may explain the weak yet positive relationship observed between Crowded Loneliness and Social Responsibility. These findings support a risk-based interpretation, suggesting that crowded loneliness may intensify emotional dysregulation by weakening individuals' capacity to manage negative emotional experiences. At the same time, the positive association with social responsibility may reflect a compensatory mechanism through which individuals seek to restore social meaning. In other words, those who feel isolated amid social abundance may seek to restore a sense of meaning by behaving more responsibly toward others and society. In addition, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures may have contributed to common-method variance, which could partially inflate the observed associations between crowded loneliness and social responsibility.

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis results.

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Crowded loneliness is positively associated with difficulties in emotion regulation.	Accepted ($p < 0.001$)
H2	Crowded loneliness is positively associated with individual and social responsibility.	Accepted ($p < 0.001$)
H3	Participants' perception of crowded loneliness significantly differs by demographic variables.	Partially Accepted (Age: $p < 0.001$)
H4	Participants' difficulties in emotion regulation significantly differ by demographic variables.	Partially Accepted (Gender: p = 0.015; Age: p = 0.030)
H5	Participants' individual and social responsibility significantly differs by demographic variables.	Rejected

Prior research supports the theoretical direction of these results. Kashdan and Steger (2006) noted that emotional self-expression is tied to social interaction and intimacy, while Gross emphasized that effective emotion regulation enhances quality of life through improved social functioning (Gross, 2015). Erdoğan & Erdem (2017) found a positive link between social responsibility and life satisfaction, while Amendola et al. (2019) highlighted that difficulties in emotion regulation may lead to problematic technology use among youth. Similarly, Ateş and Sağar (2021) reported that difficulties in emotion regulation predict internet addiction and Küçükibiş et al. (2022) demonstrated that social support predicts higher responsibility levels. Akgül and Dinç (2023) and Malli et al. (2025) also found that sports participation enhances responsibility and life satisfaction.

However, some findings in the literature contrast with the present results. For instance, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) and Karakayalı and Yüce (2019) associated social responsibility with empathy, belonging, and psychological well-being, suggesting that loneliness might weaken, not strengthen, social responsibility. These differences likely stem from the conceptual distinction between loneliness and crowded loneliness, two related but theoretically distinct constructs.

Although the relationships identified in this study were statistically significant, the effect sizes were small, indicating that unmeasured factors (e.g. personality traits, social desirability, digital engagement) may also influence the results. Future studies should include measures of online interaction frequency and compare results with established scales such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale to demonstrate the incremental validity of the Crowded Loneliness construct. Although the regression models were statistically significant, the modest levels of explained variance indicate that crowded loneliness represents only one of multiple factors influencing difficulties in emotion regulation and individual and social responsibility. Given the modest explained variance, the predictive effects should be interpreted cautiously. Future studies employing multivariate and hierarchical regression models are needed to clarify the independent contribution of crowded loneliness beyond demographic factors.

In modern societies, the seeming abundance of social connections often intensifies loneliness due to the superficial and temporary nature of these interactions. This growing sense of isolation has important individual and societal consequences, particularly in relation to difficulties in emotion regulation and social responsibility. Difficulties in emotion regulation play a central role in managing mood and shaping social interactions, while social responsibility reflects values such as accountability, reliability and altruism. Within this framework, the present study examined how perceptions of crowded loneliness influence difficulties in emotion regulation and individual/social responsibility, using data collected from 385 voluntary participants through a relational survey model. The study contributes to the literature by empirically extending the concept of crowded loneliness as a distinct psychosocial construct that interacts with emotional and moral functioning in contemporary social contexts.

The study demonstrated that perceptions of crowded loneliness are positively but weakly associated with both difficulties in emotion regulation and individual/social responsibility. Regression analyses confirmed that crowded loneliness was significantly associated with both constructs. Gender differences emerged, with male participants reporting higher difficulties in emotion regulation, indicating greater challenges in emotional regulation processes compared to female participants. It should be noted that, because higher scores on the DERS-8 reflect greater difficulties in emotion regulation, this finding indicates increased regulatory challenges rather than superior emotional skills among male participants. The higher levels of difficulties in emotion regulation among male participants may be related to gender-based socialization processes that discourage emotional expression and promote emotional suppression. Cultural expectations emphasizing emotional restraint and self-control among men may limit the development of adaptive regulatory strategies, thereby increasing vulnerability to emotional dysregulation in stressful social contexts. Age-based differences were also significant: individuals aged 18–25 experienced higher levels of crowded loneliness and greater difficulties in emotion regulation compared to older groups. Overall, the findings highlight the paradoxical impact of contemporary social environments; while fostering perceived connectedness, they also contribute to heightened loneliness, which in turn influences emotional and social responsibility processes. The higher levels of difficulties in emotion regulation observed among younger participants may be understood within the framework of emerging adulthood. This developmental period is often characterized by identity exploration, unstable interpersonal relationships, increased social comparison, and a heightened need for belonging. These transitional

challenges may reduce emotional stability and increase vulnerability to emotional dysregulation, particularly in socially dense and digitally mediated environments.

Practical implications

Based on the findings of the study, several practical implications can be highlighted:

- Individuals should maintain a high level of conscious awareness when trying to control their behaviors during times of distress or emotional difficulty.
- During emotionally challenging periods, individuals should engage in hobbies or activities that help them feel better.
- While helping others, individuals should reflect on the meaning and purpose of life.
- People should internalize that by developing themselves, they can contribute to both personal and societal well-being.
- Even when in a crowd, individuals should seek meaning and purpose in their social interactions and personal lives.

Theoretical implications

The present study contributes to the literature by proposing a dual-mechanism framework for understanding the psychosocial implications of crowded loneliness. First, consistent with risk-based perspectives, crowded loneliness was found to be associated with increased difficulties in emotion regulation, suggesting that persistent feelings of emotional disconnection may undermine individuals' capacity to manage emotional experiences effectively. Second, the positive association between crowded loneliness and individual–social responsibility supports a compensatory interpretation. From this perspective, individuals experiencing loneliness in socially dense environments may engage in prosocial and responsible behaviors as a strategy to restore meaning, belonging, and social value.

By integrating risk-based and compensatory belonging frameworks, the study provides a more nuanced conceptual understanding of crowded loneliness. Rather than functioning solely as a negative psychosocial condition, crowded loneliness may simultaneously generate both vulnerability (through emotional dysregulation) and adaptive responses (through increased responsibility-oriented behaviors). This dual perspective contributes to the emerging literature on modern forms of loneliness in digitally mediated and socially dense environments.

Strengths of the study

Despite the limitations noted above, this study has several important strengths. First, it contributes to the emerging literature on crowded loneliness by empirically examining its associations with both emotional and social variables within a contemporary social context. Second, the study focuses on employees working in non-governmental organizations, a population characterized by high levels of social interaction and prosocial engagement, providing a meaningful context for examining the psychosocial implications of crowded loneliness. Third, the use of validated measurement instruments and a relatively large sample size ($N = 385$) enhances the reliability and robustness of the findings. Taken together, these strengths provide valuable empirical evidence regarding the role of crowded loneliness in shaping emotional regulation difficulties and responsibility-related behaviors in modern social environments.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures, which restricts causal inferences regarding the relationships among crowded loneliness, difficulties in emotion regulation, and individual/social responsibility. Longitudinal and experimental research

designs are therefore needed to clarify temporal and causal mechanisms underlying these associations. In addition, although significant age and gender differences were identified in some variables, the regression analyses were conducted using simple linear models without demographic control variables. Therefore, the observed associations should be interpreted with caution, as part of the relationships may be influenced by demographic factors. Future research employing hierarchical or multivariate regression models that include demographic controls would help clarify the independent contribution of crowded loneliness.

In addition, the sample consisted of employees working in non-governmental organizations, which represent a unique organizational context characterized by strong prosocial norms, emotional labor, and collective responsibility. This specific environment may have moderated the observed relationships and limits the generalizability of the findings to other occupational settings.

Future research should incorporate a broader range of psychosocial and contextual variables, including personality traits, perceived social support, relationship quality, organizational climate, and both online and offline social density. Moreover, behavioral indicators of social engagement and objective measures of digital interaction patterns may help reduce common-method bias associated with self-report data.

By integrating longitudinal, experimental, and multi-method approaches, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of crowded loneliness and its emotional and social consequences across diverse social and organizational contexts.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Saffet Karayaman**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Ahmet Deniz**: conceptualization of the study, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, software, supervision, validation, visualization, and writing – review and editing.

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ORCID

Saffet Karayaman http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5624-4678
Ahmet Deniz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-6331

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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