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Social Media Humor and Loneliness during COVID-19 Quarantine: Experiences of Asian Students in Japan

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic radically disrupted social life, intensifying experiences of loneliness for many university students. This qualitative study examines how Asian students studying at Japanese universities experienced loneliness during the pandemic, and how humorous content on social media supported their emotional coping. Drawing on a narrative approach and semi-structured interviews, this study included in-depth interviews with five students from Japan, India, the Philippines, Turkey, and Kazakhstan who were enrolled in Japanese universities between March and December 2020. Timelines of “a typical day in quarantine” and narrative sketches were developed for each participant, focusing on their everyday rhythms, social ties, and media practices. The findings show that loneliness emerged not only from physical isolation and closed borders, but also from disrupted routines, cancelled rituals, and uncertainty about the future. Participants turned to familiar humorous series, memes, and short videos as a way to “escape,” feel “lighter,” and maintain mediated togetherness with distant friends and family. Humor on social media did not remove loneliness, but helped participants reframe it, soften emotional overload, and sustain a sense of shared experience across distance. The article argues that social media humor can act as a form of affective companionship and low-threshold emotional support for international and domestic students in times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, loneliness, social media, humor, Asian students, Japan

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted social and academic life across the world. In Japan, as in many other countries, universities closed campuses, shifted to online teaching, and introduced restrictions on mobility and social gatherings. For both domestic and international students, these measures limited face-to-face interactions, interrupted everyday routines, and created conditions in which loneliness became a central emotional experience.

This article investigates how Asian students in Japan experienced loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they used humorous content on social media as a coping resource. While existing scholarship has highlighted rising anxiety, depression, and stress during the pandemic (Czeisler et al., 2020; Olah & Ford, 2021; Starcevic et al., 2020), less attention has been paid to the lived narratives of loneliness among international and local students in Japan, and to the role of humor in mediating that loneliness.

Building on research that links humor to emotion regulation and coping (Abel, 2002; Strick, 2021), this study focuses specifically on mediated humor such as sitcoms, memes, short videos, and humorous posts shared via platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Messenger, WhatsApp, and LINE. Rather than treating humor only as a way to reduce anxiety, this article examines how

humorous media functioned as a form of companionship, continuity, and “emotional background noise” that helped students live with and reinterpret loneliness.

The study addresses two main research questions:

1. How did COVID-19 quarantine measures shape experiences of loneliness among Asian university students in Japan?
2. How did humorous media content on social media help these students cope with loneliness and social isolation during the pandemic?

Methodologically, the article is based on a narrative approach and semi-structured interviews with five Asian students who were studying in Japan between March and December 2020. The author collected qualitative data through online and offline interviews, constructed timelines of a “typical day in quarantine,” and developed narrative sketches for each interviewee.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature review discusses global mental health during COVID-19 with an emphasis on loneliness, and then examines humor as a coping mechanism in crisis. The methodology section describes the narrative design, data collection, and analysis procedures. The findings present four thematic clusters related to loneliness and humorous media. The discussion situates these findings within existing scholarship and reflects on their implications for support structures for international and domestic students. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments and points to future research directions.

Literature Review

Global Mental Health and Loneliness During COVID-19

The declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 triggered rapid and far-reaching changes in everyday life (Olah & Ford, 2021). Travel was restricted, universities moved online, public gatherings were cancelled, and people were urged to stay at home and avoid close contact with others. While these measures were necessary from a public health perspective, they had serious consequences for mental well-being. Studies have reported increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Czeisler et al., 2020). In this context in particular, loneliness, understood as the subjective experience of insufficient or unsatisfying social relationship, became a key concern. Both objective and subjective aspects of mental well-being were affected (Brooks et al., 2010; Quervain et al., 2020). Although some individuals reported improved mental states due to a slower pace of life and time for reflection, many others experienced heightened feelings of isolation, abandonment, and disconnection from their usual communities (Quervain et al., 2020). For international students, closed borders and travel bans meant that physical separation from family could not be easily remedied by temporary visits home, which intensified worries about the health and safety of relatives.

Loneliness during the pandemic was not only a result of physical distancing. It also derived from disrupted rituals and milestones, such as cancelled graduations, club activities, or celebrations that normally affirm belonging and mark life transitions. In the narratives of students, loneliness often appeared mixed with boredom, fear, and uncertainty rather than as a single isolated feeling.

Humor, Social Media, and Coping with Loneliness

Humor has long been discussed as a psychological resource that helps individuals cope with stress, reframe negative events, and maintain emotional balance (Abel, 2002; Nezelek & Derks, 2001). Sigmund Freud considered humor a powerful defense mechanism, and later research has linked humor

to reduced anxiety and improved mood in experimental and clinical settings (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020; Robinson et al., 1990). Experimental studies show that humorous stimuli can buffer the emotional impact of distressing images, tasks, or anticipated threats, often increasing positive emotions such as interest and hope (Strick, 2021). Humor can function through several mechanisms: distraction from negative thoughts, cognitive reframing of stressful situations, and social bonding through shared laughter. However, not all types of humor are equally beneficial. Positive, self-enhancing humor tends to support well-being, whereas cynical or hostile humor may reinforce negativity (Strick, 2021).

During COVID-19, people across the world produced and circulated memes, jokes, and satirical content about the pandemic as a way to manage fear and uncertainty (Amici, 2020; Hussein & Aljamili, 2020). Strick (2021) found that humorous and emotionally moving media messages helped respondents down-regulate negative emotions and up-regulate positive ones during the pandemic. Abel (2002) showed that individuals with a stronger sense of humor used more positive reappraisal and problem-solving strategies and reported lower levels of stress. Social media platforms intensified and accelerated these dynamics. For many, they became one of the main arenas where both information and affect circulated. Humorous content on social media did not only provide distraction, it also signaled that others were going through similar experiences, thereby reducing the sense of being alone with one's fears or frustrations.

While there is growing work on humor and coping during COVID-19, most studies remain quantitative and focus on anxiety, perceived stress, or resilience (e.g., Olah & Ford, 2021; Strick, 2021). Qualitative research that traces how individuals narrate their loneliness and how humorous media becomes woven into their everyday attempts to live with that loneliness remains limited, particularly in the context of Asian students studying in Japan. Moreover, many studies treat humor primarily as a tool to reduce anxiety, rather than as a way to sustain a sense of connection and shared experience in situations of physical and emotional isolation. This article addresses these gaps by offering a narrative analysis of five Asian students' experiences of loneliness and their use of humorous social media content during the pandemic.

Methodology

Due to the lack of qualitative studies that describe in detail how individuals feel during a crisis and how they cope with those feelings, this paper adopted a narrative approach (Riessman, 1993). The aim was not to measure loneliness quantitatively, but to understand how students made sense of their experiences through stories, and how humor entered those stories as a coping resource. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen because they allow participants to move into narrative mode and elaborate on their own terms (McCance et al., 2001). Rather than relying on checklists or multiple-choice questionnaires, the author wanted to hear how students themselves described their days, their emotional states, and their media practices.

Five participants were selected using purposive sampling. The main criterion was that they were undergraduate or graduate students at Japanese universities during the first year of the pandemic (March–December 2020). They came from different parts of Asia (Japan, India, the Philippines, Turkey, and Kazakhstan) so that diverse cultural backgrounds could be included. All five had experienced some form of social disruption due to COVID-19: cancelled club activities, closed dorm common rooms, travel restrictions, or inability to visit family. However, they differed in personality (introverted/extroverted), living arrangements (alone, with roommates, with parents), and levels of

self-reported loneliness. This diversity allowed a nuanced exploration of how loneliness is shaped by context rather than being a uniform feeling. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They agreed that anonymized transcripts and quotes could be used for research purposes.

Data were collected through a combination of online and offline interviews, depending on location and restrictions at the time. Zoom was used for online sessions; face-to-face meetings were held where possible while following health guidelines. Each participant took part in at least one extended interview of about 60 minutes, in some cases, follow-up sessions were conducted.

The first interview followed a semi-structured guide of 20 open-ended questions covering demographic information (age, gender, nationality, study program, living arrangements), experience of COVID-19 (infection status, family members' health, travel restrictions), emotional responses during quarantine (fear, uncertainty, loneliness, boredom, stress), coping strategies, including media use and humorous content, the platforms used (e.g., YouTube, Netflix, Instagram, Messenger, WhatsApp, LINE), and concrete descriptions of "one day in quarantine." Questions were flexible and could be rephrased or skipped, depending on the participant's comfort and narrative flow. In later sessions, the author invited participants to recount specific episodes that they remembered clearly, such as a "bad day" when loneliness felt strong or a "typical evening" watching humorous content with friends online.

All interviews were audio-recorded with permission. Recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription function and then manually checked and corrected. Each transcript resulted in a document of approximately 22,000–24,000 words before condensation.

Data analysis proceeded in several steps:

1. Familiarization and initial coding. The author read each transcript multiple times, marking passages related to loneliness, isolation, social relationships, humor, media use, and emotional coping.
2. Timelines. Based on participants' descriptions, a timeline of a "typical day in quarantine" for each interviewee was constructed, indicating when and how they used devices and social media. Time spent with humorous or light content was highlighted, which made visible how humor was integrated into daily routines.
3. Narrative sketches. Following Riessman (1993) and McCance et al. (2001), the author wrote a narrative sketch for each participant that reformulated their story while preserving their voice, context, and key events. These sketches helped to see the trajectory of loneliness over time and how humor entered at different stages.
4. Thematic synthesis. Finally, sketches and timelines across cases were compared and recurrent themes related to loneliness and humorous media were identified. Four broader thematic clusters were developed and refined: (1) disrupted routines and the emergence of loneliness; (2) mediated togetherness through humorous content; (3) comfort and "escape" via familiar series; and (4) resisting loneliness through activity, self-development, and family support.

Ethically, the author paid attention to the emotional weight of certain stories, especially when participants spoke about panic attacks, physical pain, or fear of losing family members. Pseudonyms and generalized descriptions of locations and institutions were used to protect confidentiality.

Results

Disrupted Routines and Emerging Loneliness

For several participants, loneliness emerged gradually as their usual routines and social spaces disappeared. For instance, Participant 1, a Filipina graduate student at a research institute, lived on

campus in a dormitory only a few minutes from her lab. When strict rules were introduced, such as no group meetings in one room, closure of student lounges, cancellation of parties, her everyday life narrowed to a short corridor between her lab and her small room. At the same time, she developed severe back pain due to long hours of sitting at the computer, which made it difficult to work, walk, or even go grocery shopping. Over time, she described herself as “just laying down, scrolling social media and watching series.” The combination of physical immobility, closed borders, and inability to visit her family produced a deep sense of being “stuck” and alone.

She recalled taking an online personality test before and after the pandemic and noticing that she had shifted from “extrovert” to “introvert.” While she still enjoyed people, she no longer had energy for parties and began to stay at home, partly because of pain and partly because of fear. When she spoke about this change during the interview, she often looked away and laughed nervously, a reaction that suggested unresolved sadness.

Participant 2, a Kazakh undergraduate student in Tokyo, initially did not feel lonely. She lived in a dormitory with other international students, shared a kitchen and common space, and continued to work as an English tutor. She described the early months of COVID-19 almost as an opportunity to focus on her studies and self-development. However, when her dorm contract ended and she moved into a small apartment alone, the emotional climate changed. The turning point for her was New Year’s Eve 2020. New Year in Astana is a central family ritual for her, and for the first time in her life she had to celebrate alone in Japan. Because her friends were very strict about not meeting in person, she spent that night in her apartment, knowing that her family was far away. She said that this was when she felt “real sadness” and recognized that she was, in fact, lonely.

Participant 3, a Turkish student, insisted that he did not feel lonely in a classical sense, because he was constantly busy; first as a hotel receptionist, then as an Uber Eats delivery rider, and later as a student and startup co-founder. Yet his narrative was filled with moments where the absence of social life weighed on him: seeing Osaka’s normally crowded Shinsaibashi area become “a ghost city,” losing his hotel job and the daily contact with tourists, and restricting meetings with friends because they lived with elderly family members. He missed karaoke, casual dinners, and spontaneous encounters, and repeatedly described the situation as “weird” and “frustrating.” Loneliness here appeared as a quiet background – not explicit, but present as a sense of missing something essential.

Participant 4, a Japanese student living with her parents, experienced a milder form of loneliness. When club activities and her graduation ceremony were cancelled, she felt sad and disappointed. Friends moved away to other cities after graduation, and welcome events for new master’s students were also cancelled. She described herself as “used to being alone,” yet acknowledged moments when she felt the absence of peers and wished for new friendships.

Participant 5, an Indian PhD student, described perhaps the most intense mix of anxiety and loneliness. Japan’s borders were closed, her family in India contracted COVID-19, and she heard stories about international students who lost parents but could not return for funerals. While her laboratory remained open and work gave structure to her days, she felt emotionally disconnected from the outside world and afraid of losing her loved ones without being able to say goodbye. Living alone in a dorm room for the first six months amplified the feeling of being “stuck in the middle of the PhD and in the middle of a pandemic.”

Across these narratives, loneliness did not appear simply as “being alone,” but as being physically and emotionally separated from sources of comfort – family, friends, rituals, everyday spaces – and not knowing when or how this separation would end.

Mediated Togetherness Through Humorous Content

Humorous media on social platforms became one of the main ways to maintain a feeling of connection despite physical distance. For example, Participant 1, who mostly used Facebook and Messenger, did not post much herself, but regularly shared memes, screenshots from sitcoms, and short videos with her boyfriend, cousins, and close friends. She explained that when she sent a meme from *How I Met Your Mother* or *Modern Family*, she knew the other person had seen the series and could “relate to the situation and the character.” This shared reference became a small bridge: a way to say “this is how I feel” without having to explain everything in serious words. Exchanging memes often turned into longer conversations that went beyond the content itself and touched on their real worries.

Similarly, Participant 5 used Instagram and WhatsApp to keep in touch. She did not increase her overall screen time during COVID-19 because, as she joked, it was already high. However, she described memes as an “easy way” to show care and remain emotionally present in her friends’ lives without having to engage in energy-consuming phone calls. She forwarded “stupid memes” that made her and others laugh “like crazy people” for a moment. For her, this lightness was crucial in periods when anxiety was otherwise heavy.

In contrast, Participant 3 emphasized the importance of group chats and video calls via WhatsApp, LINE, Discord, and Zoom. While he did not rely on specific comedy shows as much as some others, he frequently shared YouTube shorts, including COVID-19 and mask-related jokes. Seeing that others around the world were also frustrated with masks, restrictions, and confusing official advice made him feel “not alone with this feeling.”

In all cases, humorous media acted as a low-threshold form of mediated togetherness. It allowed participants to check in on each other, express affection, and experience simultaneous laughter, even when time zones and obligations made long conversations difficult.

Comfort, Familiarity, and “Escape” Through Sitcoms

Another pattern in the data was the turn towards familiar humorous series as “comfort shows.” Rather than exploring new genres, participants often rewatched comedies they already knew by heart. In particular, Participant 1 started watching *Friends* and *Modern Family* during the pandemic and later rewatched episodes whenever she felt down. She stressed that, before COVID-19, she almost never rewatched films or series. During the pandemic, however, she intentionally chose something whose jokes she could anticipate: “You expect to laugh at this episode.” For her, this predictability was soothing. She described the experience as “more like an escape,” allowing her to forget her pain and obligations for a while and then “reset” to continue working.

Participant 2 rewatched the Russian sketch show *Once Upon a Time in Russia*, which she had first watched as a teenager on TV in Kazakhstan. She could spend several hours lying in bed, watching episode after episode on YouTube. She emphasized that she understood Russian and Kazakh humor much better than American or other foreign humor, and that the exaggerated situations in the show were funny precisely because they resonated with her cultural background. Watching this program gave her a sense of being “back home” mentally, even when borders remained closed.

Participant 5, who loved binge-watching new series before COVID-19, found herself unable to handle any serious or dramatic content during periods of high anxiety. For four to five months she watched nothing new and instead returned to *Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and similar sitcoms. These shows required little cognitive effort, did not add more heaviness, and created a reliable emotional atmosphere in which she could relax after long days at the lab.

Across participants, humorous series functioned as emotional safe spaces. They offered

familiar characters, recurring jokes, and light narratives that contrasted sharply with the uncertainty and fear of the outside world. This did not erase loneliness, but it made it more bearable.

Resisting Loneliness: Activity, Self-Development, and Family Support

Loneliness was mitigated not only by humorous media, but also by active efforts to structure time and maintain meaningful activities. Participant 2 responded to the pandemic by disciplining her days: she created personal projects, studied Japanese, read books, and ran in the park every evening. She deliberately stopped reading constant COVID-19 news, arguing that it only added negativity without increasing her ability to act. Instead, she tried to see the pandemic as a time to focus on herself. Humorous content became her main way to relax and “turn off seriousness” for a few hours.

Participant 4 combined media consumption with creative hobbies. She watched Korean and Chinese dramas with her mother almost every evening, invited a friend to play the piano at her house, and started working with clay. She also followed online live concerts by her favorite Japanese artist, whose messages and songs encouraged her not to give up. Her parents’ presence and support clearly played a protective role, cushioning loneliness.

Participant 3 used work itself – both physical jobs and later entrepreneurial projects – as a way to resist feeling lonely. Delivering food around Osaka or traveling for startup business trips kept him in motion and gave him a sense of purpose. Humor in his case was more embedded in quick online content and group chats rather than long series, but it still helped him see that others were going through similar frustrations.

Participant 1 and 5, who experienced more severe emotional distress, both emphasized the importance of family contact via calls and video chats. For participant 1, the decision to return home to the Philippines for several months was crucial in restoring both physical and emotional health. After rehabilitation and time with her family, she felt more able to care for herself and more aware of her limits.

These strategies show that humorous media was one coping layer among others. It worked in combination with structured routines, physical activity, creative practices, and supportive relationships.

Discussion

This study has examined how five Asian students in Japan narrated their experiences of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how humorous social media content supported their coping. The findings support and extend previous research on humor and mental health in several ways.

First, the narratives confirm Strick’s (2021) argument that humorous media can help down-regulate negative emotions and up-regulate positive ones in times of crisis. Participants consistently described humorous content as something that made them feel “lighter,” “better than before watching,” or able to “escape” from heavy thoughts for a while. They did not claim that humor solved their problems, but they recognized its emotional utility.

Second, the study resonates with Abel’s (2002) emphasis on positive reappraisal. Humor allowed participants to see certain aspects of the pandemic – from mask rules to awkward online teaching – as absurd or ironic rather than purely threatening. This cognitive shift did not remove loneliness, but made it easier to live with and talk about.

Third, the findings contribute to research on mediated sociality by showing how memes and sitcoms functioned as tools for maintaining connection across distance. Humor here was not only intra-

psychic (inside the individual) but also relational. Sharing a meme signaled attention and care; watching the same series and referencing its scenes created a common affective language between friends and partners.

Fourth, the narratives underline the heterogeneity of loneliness. Some participants, like 1 and 5, experienced intense loneliness intertwined with anxiety, physical pain, and fear of losing family members. Others, like 2 and 4, reported episodic sadness or boredom rather than chronic loneliness, shaped by their personality and living situation. This variation suggests that support measures for students during crises should not assume a single pattern of emotional response.

Finally, the study highlights the specific vulnerability of international students. Closed borders, travel bans, and different national responses to the pandemic created a situation in which students physically situated in Japan but emotionally attached to families abroad felt caught in between. Humorous media, especially in their native languages, helped them maintain a sense of belonging to their home cultures while navigating life in Japan.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that universities and student support services could recognize and even strategically use positive humor in online communication, peer mentoring, and mental health promotion. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between inclusive, self-enhancing humor and forms of humor that may marginalize or trivialize students' suffering.

Conclusion

This article has explored how Asian students in Japan experienced loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they used humorous media on social networks to cope. Based on narrative interviews with five students from different Asian countries, the study shows that loneliness was shaped by cancelled rituals, restricted mobility, physical health problems, and closed borders, not only by formal lockdown rules. It highlights that humorous media, especially familiar sitcoms and memes, offered moments of emotional relief, a sense of continuity, and mediated togetherness with distant others. This research demonstrated that humor did not eliminate loneliness but contributed to making it more bearable and shareable. Moreover, it was revealed that coping with loneliness depended on a combination of factors, such as personal disposition, living arrangements, family support, self-chosen routines, and access to meaningful activities.

Considering the above findings, future research could further explore differences between international and domestic students, gendered experiences of loneliness and humor, and the long-term effects of pandemic-related media habits on well-being. Comparative studies across countries and educational systems would also help clarify how institutional responses either mitigate or intensify student loneliness. Ultimately, the narratives presented here remind us that humor, even in the form of a short meme or an over-watched sitcom, can act as a quiet but important ally in times when physical closeness is limited and the future feels uncertain.

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Аңдатпа

COVID-19 пандемиясы университет студенттерінің күнделікті өмірін түбегейлі өзгертті және көпшілігі үшін жалғыздық сезімін күшейтті. Бұл сапалық зерттеу Жапония университеттерінде оқитын азиялық студенттердің пандемия кезіндегі жалғыздық тәжірибесін және әлеуметтік желідегі күлкілі контенттің эмоционалды күйді реттеудегі рөлін қарастырады. Зерттеуде баяндау (narrative) тәсілі қолданылып, жартылай құрылымдалған тереңдетілген сұхбаттар жүргізілді. Сұхбат үшін 2020 жылдың наурыз-желтоқсан айлары аралығында Жапонияда бакалавриат немесе магистратура/докторантура бағдарламаларында оқыған Жапония, Үндістан, Филиппин, Түркия және Қазақстаннан барған бес студент таңдалды. Әр қатысушы үшін карантин кезіндегі «бір типтік күннің» хронологиясы мен жеке баяндау эскиздері жасалды. Зерттеу нәтижелері жалғыздықтың тек физикалық оқшауланудан немесе шекаралардың жабылуынан ғана емес, сонымен қатар күн тәртібінің бұзылуы, маңызды рәсімдердің болмауы және болашаққа деген белгісіздікпен байланысты екенін көрсетті. Қатысушылар өздеріне таныс комедия сериалдарын, мемдер мен қысқа видеоларды қарап, оларды достары мен отбасы мүшелеріне жіберу арқылы «қашып шығу», жеңілдеу және қашықтықтағы адамдармен байланысын сезіну мүмкіндігін тапты. Әлеуметтік желідегі әзіл-оспақ жалғыздықты жоймағанымен, оны қайта қарауға, эмоциялық ауыртпалықты жұмсартуға және ортақ тәжірибе сезімін сақтауға көмектесті.

Кілт сөздер: COVID-19, жалғыздық, әлеуметтік желілер, әзіл-оспақ, азиялық студенттер, Жапония

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Юмор в социальных сетях и одиночество во время карантина COVID-19: опыт азиатских студентов в Японии

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Аннотация

Пандемия COVID-19 радикально изменила повседневную жизнь университетских студентов и усилила переживание одиночества. В данном качественном исследовании рассматривается, как азиатские студенты, обучающиеся в японских университетах, испытывали одиночество в период пандемии и каким образом юмористический контент в социальных сетях помогал им справляться с эмоциональными трудностями. Используя нарративный подход и полуструктурированные интервью, автор провела углублённые беседы с пятью студентами из Японии, Индии, Филиппин, Турции и Казахстана, обучавшимися в японских университетах в период с марта по декабрь 2020 года. Для каждого участника были составлены временные линии «типичного дня на карантине» и нарративные эскизы, отражающие ежедневный ритм, социальные связи и медиапрактики. Результаты показывают, что одиночество усиливалось не только из-за физической изоляции и закрытых границ, но и из-за нарушенных привычных рутин, отменённых ритуалов и неопределённости будущего. Участники обращались к знакомым комедийным сериалам, мемам и коротким видео как к способу «сбежать» от тяжёлых мыслей, почувствовать лёгкость и поддерживать медиированную близость с друзьями и семьёй на расстоянии. Юмор в социальных сетях не устранял одиночество полностью, но помогал переосмыслить его, смягчить эмоциональную перегрузку и сохранить ощущение разделённого опыта.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, одиночество, социальные сети, юмор, азиатские студенты, Япония

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