



The Weight of the World Without Wonder



Student Anxiety and Solitude in Contemporary Mexico

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A Generation Under Strain

53–76%

of Mexican university students show anxiety symptoms
(multiple post-pandemic studies, 2023–2025)

>90%

of UNAM external applicants are rejected annually
(UNAM DGAE, 2024–2025)

+198%

increase in youth suicide in Mexico from 1990 to 2020
(Ortiz-Pérez et al., Salud Mental 2023)

Loneliness is the strongest single predictor of psychological distress among Latin American university students — above economics, above specific stressors.

Something more than circumstance is at work.

Economy, Competition, and the Digital Paradox

MATERIAL PRESSURES

34.5% of youth 18–29 in multidimensional poverty (CONEVAL, 2022)

Graduate real wages fell **roughly 19%** from 2005–2022, including STEM graduates (Santillán Hernández et al., 2024)

63.8% of urban Mexicans feel unsafe; violence costs 14.6% of GDP (INEGI ENSU, 2025)

9 in 10 young people surveyed report anxiety or depression alongside deep political distrust (El País, Dec 2025)

DIGITAL PARADOX

50% of Mexican teenagers say they “feel addicted” to their phones — highest rate among 4 countries surveyed (USC Annenberg / Common Sense, 2019)

Both passive and active social media use increase loneliness over time — a bidirectional cycle (Roberts et al., PSPB 2024, n=6,965)

Attention on screens: **2.5 min (2004) → 47 sec (2023)**

University students struggle to focus beyond 10–15 minutes (Mark 2023; Tec de Monterrey Observatorio, 2025)

When Life Becomes a Performance

“[T]he chief idea of my life... is the idea of taking things with gratitude, and not taking things for granted.”

G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography (1936)

Time as resource.

Student time is structured entirely by deadlines, credit hours, and productivity metrics. There is no legitimate category for time spent without output — for wonder, for stillness, for presence.

Self as project.

The student self is not experienced as given but as constructed — a personal brand to optimize, a GPA to maintain, a CV to build. Burnout is the cost of treating a person as a product.

Others as rivals.

In a world of 1.5% acceptance rates and shrinking graduate salaries, structural conditions enforce a view of peers as competitors. Social trust erodes; genuine solidarity becomes scarce.

On the Loss of Wonder

“How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it?”

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chapter I

Diagnosis, not doctrine.

Chesterton is not a preacher here. He is diagnosing a cultural condition: the modern world has become efficient without becoming joyful; connected without becoming present; rational without remaining alive to the strangeness of existence.

Disenchantment.

Max Weber called this *Entzauberung* — the stripping of symbolic richness from modern life through rationalization. Hurley (*Literature and Theology*, 2023) shows Chesterton makes precisely this diagnosis over a decade before Weber was widely translated.

The deeper cause.

“When everything about a people is for the time growing weak and ineffective, it begins to talk about efficiency.” (*Heretics*, Ch. 1). A civilization that asks only how, and never why, has already lost its purpose.

Beauty Is Not Decoration

“The only words that ever satisfied me as describing Nature are the terms used in the fairy books, ‘charm,’ ‘spell,’ ‘enchantment.’ They express the arbitrariness of the fact and its mystery. A tree grows fruit because it is a magic tree. Water runs downhill because it is bewitched.”

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908)

Ch. IV — “The Ethics of Elfland”

NOT FANTASY: *a philosophical claim about contingency: things exist and might not have. Wonder is the appropriate response.*

What this means in student life

— The university courtyard at noon — taken for granted or genuinely seen?

— A conversation that exceeds its purpose and becomes something more.

— A shared meal, eaten slowly, as an end in itself.

— A text that opens a world — not because it appears on any exam.

— Laughter after a difficult test: brief, unnecessary, and essential.

These are not luxuries, but rituals through which communities form and persons recognize themselves as more than functions.

The Cost of Impoverishment

“The world will never starve for want of wonders, but only for want of wonder.”

G. K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles (1909)

Loss of communal ritual → Loneliness

Smartphone use disrupts the co-present interaction rituals through which communities generate solidarity and belonging. Digital contact is real but structurally thin (Husband, 2022).

Instrumentalized time → Inability to rest

When every hour is either productive or wasted, rest becomes guilt and play becomes frivolous. The student who cannot be idle without anxiety has internalized a logic that makes ordinary life uninhabitable.

Comparison culture → Chronic inadequacy

Social media enforces permanent comparison of curated selves. The self always falls short — not because students lack worth, but because the metric of worth has been made infinite and external (Roberts et al., 2024).

Atrophy of gratitude → World as burden

“The test of all happiness is gratitude” (Orthodoxy, Ch. IV). A culture trained to demand rather than receive experiences existence as an obligation — something to endure, not to inhabit.

Recovering Attention, Gratitude, and Ritual

Not a prescription — a reorientation of what education is for.

1 Attention

Recovering the capacity to dwell — on a text, a conversation, a place — without immediately asking what it produces. This is not inefficiency. It is the precondition for serious thought, genuine friendship, and any intellectual life worth having.

Screen attention: 2.5 min (2004) → 47 sec (2023)
Mark (2023); Tec de Monterrey Obs. (2025)

2 Gratitude

“The test of all happiness is gratitude.” — Not a therapeutic technique, but a philosophical posture: the world received as gift rather than given. Gratitude is, in Chesterton’s phrase, “happiness doubled by wonder” (A Short History of England, 1917).

Chesterton, Orthodoxy Ch. IV (1908)

3 Shared Ritual

Small, recurring acts of communal life — shared meals, celebrations, slow conversations — that do not justify themselves through productivity. Taylor (A Secular Age, 2007) calls their erosion “excarnation”: the disembodiment of the social bond. Recovery requires re-embodiment.

Taylor (2007); Husband (2022)

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