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**Loneliness from the Adolescent Perspective: A Qualitative
Analysis of Conversations about Loneliness between
Adolescents and Childline Counsellors**

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Loneliness from the Adolescent Perspective: A Qualitative Analysis of Conversations about Loneliness between Adolescents and Childline Counsellors

Abstract

There is limited qualitative research on the experience of loneliness in adolescence, meaning key facets of the loneliness experience that are important in adolescence may have been overlooked. The current study addresses that gap in the literature and explores how loneliness is experienced in the context of adolescence from the perspective of adolescents. Sixty-seven online counselling conversations between Childline counsellors and adolescents (ages 12-18 years; 70% females) who had contacted Childline to talk about loneliness were analyzed using Thematic Framework Analysis to establish commonalities and salient issues involved in adolescent experiences of loneliness. Young people considered loneliness to be an intense experience that negatively impacted their daily lives. Experiences of loneliness revolved around difficulties with peer relationships, but turmoil at home worsened those experiences. Young people often employed short-term coping strategies that distracted them from loneliness. Issues with trusting others and self-worth acted as barriers to seeking long-term help. Recommendations include (1) the training of teachers and parents to recognize and support young people experiencing loneliness, and (2) further research to establish the coping strategies that are used by adolescents who successfully overcome loneliness.

Loneliness from the Adolescent Perspective: A Qualitative Analysis of Conversations about Loneliness between Adolescents and Childline Counsellors

The currently accepted definition of loneliness is that it occurs when an individual perceives a discrepancy between their actual social relationships and those they would like (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). That discrepancy could be in terms of the quantity and/or quality of their relationships (Qualter et al., 2015). Loneliness is a normative experience and for most people, it will be transient and adaptive in that it promotes social reconnection. For other people, loneliness can become chronic and maladaptive (Cacioppo, Cacioppo & Boomsma, 2013). Cacioppo & Hawkley's (2010) model of loneliness posits that loneliness is experienced as social pain, alerting an individual to an issue within their social environment. The individual may become hypervigilant to social threat, paying attention to potential negative social feedback as a way to avoid future social pain. It can also result in social withdrawal, where the individual observes others from a distance to make decisions about how to engage with others in a way that will avoid further social pain, i.e., further withdrawal or social reconnection. When an individual enacts an avoidant approach to socializing, it can evoke negative responses from others, thus justifying further withdrawal from social interactions and establishing a loop of loneliness. Neglecting to break that loop means that loneliness becomes chronic (Qualter et al., 2015).

Research with adults suggests that loneliness is associated with certain emotions including anger, emptiness, awkwardness, restlessness, unhappiness, and anxiety (Perlman, Gerson, & Spinner, 1978; Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978). Recent work suggests that adolescents report emotional correlates of loneliness similar to those of adults, including being unhappy, restless, feeling unloved, and generally despondent (Yang, Petersen, & Qualter, 2020). But, there is a dearth of qualitative research examining the unique and diverse perspectives and experiences of adolescents who are lonely.

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Loneliness in Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental period that involves changes in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. For example, the role of friendship transitions from being based on companionship in childhood towards emotional support in adolescence; meanwhile, adolescents seek autonomy from parents who originally provided that emotional support (Laursen & Hartl, 2013; Berndt & Perry, 1986). Adolescents, therefore, require a greater level of intimacy from their friendships than in childhood, and navigate those requirements while grappling with explorations of their own identity (Crocetti, 2017; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). That means, adolescents have to balance their needs for emotional support with changes to their values and beliefs, which may contrast with their childhood friends. In line with that, early adolescence is characterized by a high level of friendship instability (Chan & Poulin, 2007). Those social and emotional challenges help to explain why adolescence is the developmental period when loneliness is most prevalent despite the fact that social networks are widening (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

Cacioppo's evolutionary model explains loneliness in adolescence as a result of increased social sensitivity in response to the social challenges of adolescence, paired with adolescents' focus on the self which inhibits their ability to socially reconnect (Goossens, 2018). Whilst loneliness in adolescence can be adaptive, motivating youth to find their place in their social environment, the benefits diminish when it becomes more prolonged (Qualter et al., 2015). Loneliness leads to hypervigilant and avoidant approaches to social interaction in order to protect one's self from social pain (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2010). In paradox, those approaches negatively impact social relationships (Vanhalst et al., 2018). Chronic high and moderately high loneliness throughout adolescence are identified to relate to later depressive symptomology at age 18 years (Ladd & Ettekal, 2013).

Measurements of Adolescent Loneliness

Loneliness in adolescence has typically been investigated through quantitative research. A meta-analysis of predictors of adolescent loneliness identified depression, shyness, low self-esteem, and social anxiety as the most powerful predictors (Mahon et al., 2006). However, the most frequently used measure of loneliness amongst the studies in the meta-analysis was the UCLA loneliness scale (Russell, 1996), which has been criticized for its overreliance on personality factors to measure loneliness (Jenkins, Sanchez & Lidia Olivias-Hernandez, 2019).

While quantitative research is undoubtedly valuable, commonly used measurements of loneliness employed in quantitative research have been developed from existing understanding and conceptualizations of loneliness in older adulthood. Therefore, the measurements most commonly used to assess loneliness in adolescence may not tap into the way adolescents experience loneliness (Maes et al., 2017). Indeed, a recent systematic review identified that none of the questionnaires used in quantitative research to measure loneliness among youth included interviews with children or adolescents as part of their measurement development. It was concluded that whilst the UCLA is the most popular measure for adolescent loneliness, it does not have robust psychometric properties in relation to adolescents (Cole, Bond, Qualter, & Maes, 2021). Gaining an understanding of how youth experience loneliness will help to provide a basis for investigating concurrent validity of measures for adolescent loneliness (Cole et al., 2021).

Interventions for Youth Loneliness

Interventions developed for loneliness have been designed based upon quantitative research. A recent meta-analysis of interventions for alleviating youth loneliness showed that they were diverse, involving social and emotional training, social skills training, psychological intervention, enhancement of social support, and learning new skills (Eccles & Qualter, 2021). Overall, intervention type was not significant (Eccles & Qualter, 2021) but the authors noted

that interventions were targeted, most often, at those considered to be at risk of loneliness, such as those with social skills deficits, as opposed to those identified as experiencing loneliness. Such foci highlight a misunderstanding about what adolescent loneliness is (Eccles & Qualter., 2021). That points to the need for qualitative investigations that provide much clearer understandings of the causes and contexts in which adolescent loneliness arises, i.e., what leads to an adolescent perceiving themselves to be disconnected from others, and what help is needed to ameliorate loneliness. In the current study, we fill that gap in knowledge about the causes and contexts of youth loneliness according to adolescents with lived experience of loneliness.

Examining Loneliness Using a Qualitative Approach

Previous qualitative work has focused on adolescents' conceptualizations of loneliness, aloneness, and the social environments of adolescents experiencing loneliness. Extant qualitative work exploring the nature of adolescent loneliness, aloneness, and friendship concluded that loneliness is centered around two main concepts: (1) connectedness with friends, and (2) perceptions of aloneness (Martin et al., 2014). That work highlights the importance of young people's peer relationships in understanding their loneliness experiences. Other qualitative research showed two sides to youths' loneliness experiences: loneliness as an involuntary negative experience, but self-chosen solitude as a means to manage loneliness could provide calmness and an opportunity to recharge (Hemberg et al., 2021). Further work has emphasized the importance of understanding the social contexts that loneliness during adolescence occurs within, such as their school and home environments (Jenkins et al., 2019); that work also acknowledged loneliness as an emotional experience (Jenkins et al., 2019). Understanding the social contexts of loneliness matters because the emotional experience of loneliness does not happen spontaneously. Social environments such as where an individual feels they do not fit, can promote hypervigilance to social threats and reinforce the loneliness loop (Qualter at al., 2015; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2010). Further exploration of the lived

experiences of adolescents who are navigating loneliness is needed to establish appropriate interventions. The current study builds upon previous qualitative research by developing themes that reflect the salient issues discussed by adolescents seeking support for experiences of loneliness from Childline's online counselling service. The study is advantaged by utilizing naturally occurring data in which adolescents chose to talk about loneliness on their own terms and focused on issues they considered to be most important. Using Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA), the study developed themes that reflect the diversity in those unique experiences, identifying a range of perspectives about the circumstances in which loneliness occurs, what loneliness feels like, and how it is coped with.

The Current Study

The aim of the current qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of how adolescents perceive, experience, and cope with loneliness in their daily lives. The study acknowledged that individuals are the most representative sources for explaining their experiences and emotional state, and recognized the importance of prioritizing the voices of young people experiencing loneliness in order to understand the phenomena (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Adolescents in the current study had contacted an online counselling service to gain support in navigating their current state of loneliness and related issues. The conversations between the adolescents and the online counsellors were analyzed using Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA) to identify the salient issues between youths' individual experiences of loneliness, and the aspects of young people's lives that contributed to feelings of loneliness. By examining the firsthand reports of young people's lived experiences, the study was able to highlight the nuances in adolescent experiences of loneliness that cannot be identified through quantitative research (Jenkins et al., 2019). Utilizing qualitative methods meant that the study was not limited to exploring predetermined factors and their associations with loneliness, but could instead develop novel findings through inductive interpretation of in-depth data.

Participants

One hundred transcripts of Childline online counselling sessions were randomly selected from those coded by Childline counsellors as relating to "loneliness", "isolation", or "aloneness". The 100 transcripts were chosen from the 5100 possible transcripts through the use of a random number generator; 100 transcripts were a manageable number that enabled a range of opinions and different representations to be considered (Gaskell, 2000). During the familiarization stage of analysis, data saturation was considered to have been achieved, so no additional transcripts were requested (Bowen, 2008). The conversations took place between April and May 2018, mostly in the evening, with a duration of between 3 to 109 minutes, with a mean average of 50 minutes. The conversations generally contained over 20 text bubble exchanges. All transcripts were anonymized by Childline prior to being received by the research team. The 100 transcripts were examined by two independent raters from the research team (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and classified as "loneliness" or "not loneliness". At this point agreement between the raters was 96%; those that were not agreed upon were discussed further with other team members. Thirty-three transcripts were considered to not be about loneliness, or did not include enough information for analysis; 67 were included in our data analysis. The transcripts were also coded for gender: female (n=44), male (n=7) and unknown (n=16). The higher percentage of female participants is indicative of the demographics of Childline contactees, for whom 65% are female, 16% are male, 1% are transgender and 18% gender are unknown (NSPCC, 2018/19). The age of participants ranged from 12-18 years; the majority of the sample were 14-17 years old (ages of 14 participants were unknown). Characteristics of the young people whose transcripts we included in data analysis are included in Supplementary Information: Appendix A; characteristics were only disclosed if the young person chose to and so additional demographic information such as ethnicity and location are unavailable.

Data collection

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is a charitable organization in the UK that supports the wellbeing of young people who are facing adversity. Childline is a service provided by the NSPCC that offers counselling services for young people up to the age of 19 years via phone, online chat, and email. The data consisted of transcripts of online counselling sessions held by NSPCC's Childline and retrieved from their archives. Prior to retrieval of the data, ethical approval was obtained from the NSPCC Research Committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the institution the lead author belongs to.

The online counselling service enables young people to contact a Childline counsellor confidentially via a web-based instant messenger and talk about the issues they are facing. Childline counsellors code the interaction they have with each young person according to the main issue discussed during the interaction. The range of topics Childline counsellors code are extensive and 'loneliness' is included in the list. Childline's annual review 2018/2019 reported over 5100 counselling sessions (both over the phone and online) about loneliness, a 12% increase on the previous year. Those counselling sessions primarily took place online (82% online live chats or secure email; 12% over the phone in 2018/19) (NSPCC, 2018/2019). Loneliness data from the counselling sessions from 2018/2019 were those data that we explored in the current study.

For every counselling session, an advice record was created to log the main concerns discussed by the young person, and sub-concerns that provided further insight into the topics discussed; the counsellor selected the most appropriate code category according to the young person's presentation. Concerns additional to loneliness included family relationships, school/college/education problems, friendship issues, self-harm, suicidal, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, eating disorders, bullying, parent/adult health/behaviors, runaway/missing, sexual and gender identity, and sex, relationships, and puberty.

The adolescents in the current study were considered to be at high risk by counsellors during the assessment process that was based on the young person's presentation. 'High risk' refers to a young person who is very distressed, shows no coping abilities, has no support, or alternatively is not distressed but is discussing an issue that puts them at high risk of harm, (e.g., ongoing abuse, high level of neglect or bullying, severe depression, mental health problems, frequent self-harm, suicidal feelings, homelessness or running away from home). The inclusion of those considered high risk means that experiences of loneliness may be more intense or differ from those of individuals considered to be at low risk, particularly because of their reports of other mental health issues that they were dealing with alongside loneliness.

Data Analysis

A sample of transcripts on loneliness from 2018/2019 were analyzed using Thematic Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) to establish themes that reflected the salient issues in young people's experiences of loneliness. To summarize, first, notes were made on the issues discussed in each transcript by two members of the team (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX); the other team members also read a random selection of 30 different transcripts to gain familiarity with them. Initial codes and categories were developed by XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX, and refined into an analytical framework with input from the whole team. The framework was trialled and re-trialled by XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX until the codes reflected the meaning of the data they were intended to capture. The whole dataset was then coded and charted into the framework matrix by the same two authors. Emerging themes were developed from the charted data through discussions between XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX, before being refined into final themes in discussions with the whole team. Quotes from the transcripts were identified to support final themes, grammatical errors in these were corrected. TFA helped to develop a cohesive set of themes

that reflected the variation in young people's experiences because it involved arranging all coded data within a framework matrix, which assured that all transcripts were considered equally, as opposed to overreliance on those with the most detail or those that confirm pre-existing biases. It also assured that data that contradicted the dominant narratives were taken into consideration resulting in a nuanced analysis of the data (Gale et al., 2013). Please refer to Supplementary Information: Appendix B to find more information on Thematic Framework Analysis, and how it was used in the current study.

Themes

Five main themes and twelve subthemes that reflect commonalities in youths' experiences of loneliness were identified using thematic framework analysis.

Theme 1: Loneliness as an Extreme, Dark Experience

Loneliness and dark, disturbing thoughts. When describing loneliness, young people primarily mentioned emotions such as sadness, emptiness, stress, frustration, anger, anxiety, and boredom. Some young people described loneliness as a dark experience; others reported dark thoughts alongside their experiences of loneliness, but they did not always link them directly.

> I just don't do anything, I lose contact with people, I just kind of sit and
> think about my loneliness, it's dark. (female, 17 years old)

> Every time I look in the mirror, I look deep into my eyes and I see nothing,
> darkness. (female, 16 years old)

Loneliness was viewed to be a consistent presence that "haunted" youth; they did not talk about loneliness as intermittent, but something they carried with them. Experiencing

loneliness took young people to a "lonely place", implying that loneliness was a distinct and debilitating emotional experience:

Everything is getting on top of me and I feel like I've hit rock bottom.

(unknown gender, 17 years old)

That idea that loneliness took young people to a different place was amplified by comparisons with their seemingly happy peers, which were taken as evidence that the feelings they experienced were atypical for their age.

Loneliness to me just means sad and confused and makes me feel like the

only one that's feeling like this. It's really dark. (female, 15 years old)

Experiencing suicidal thoughts and self-harm behavior in conjunction with loneliness. Expressing that they experienced suicidal thoughts alongside feelings of loneliness was common, although those thoughts were not always specified to be a direct result of their loneliness.

I get suicidal thoughts… it's scary. I don't know why but I feel so horrible

and awful. I just want to do something bad to myself, but I try not to.

(female, 12 years old)

Lonely young people commonly reported an urge to self-harm, or said they had carried out self-harming behavior. Cutting was the most prominently reported form of self-harming behavior. Young people cut themselves in an attempt to alleviate the agony from negative thoughts and emotions. In some cases, young people reported to have previously attempted suicide.

Tonight, I had to speak to someone as I was plucking up the courage to cut

and overdose. Thankfully, you came and are speaking to me. I need to vent

because at the moment I'm crumbling. (female, 18 years old)

Existential thoughts and loneliness. Some young people experienced existential concerns alongside loneliness. Some young people held the belief that they failed to positively contribute to, or impact, society; in turn, those thoughts made life seem pointless to them.

I don't make any contributions to the world. I don't matter. (unknown

gender, unknown age)

Theme 2: Exhausted by Loneliness, but Unable to Sleep Restfully

This theme describes how the experience of loneliness was exhausting for young people. They described an inability to effectively alleviate their feelings of loneliness, which disrupted their everyday life and left them with a lack of energy.

I'm so exhausted and sick of letting this rule my life. (female, 17 years old)

Making things worse, some young people reported that loneliness disrupted their sleep, causing problems getting to sleep and remaining asleep, resulting in little or too much sleep that was not restful. Their disrupted sleep was also characterized by vivid dreams and sleep paralysis which are likely to further contribute to negative affect due to their disturbing nature.

I haven't slept in 3 days. I went to sleep for an hour last night and had sleep

paralysis and woke up again, I feel so alone. (female, 15 years old)

Theme 3: Loneliness Centered Around Difficulties with Peer Relationships, which was Made Worse by Conflict at Home

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Finding socializing difficult. Some young people said they had trouble when trying to socialize with their peers; they perceived themselves to be intrinsically different to others. Some young people were able to articulate reasons for feeling different, reporting that the sense of loneliness or disconnection showed them that they were not "normal", or were lacking in something inherent to others which enabled others to have the friendships they wanted.

> I feel abnormal because I see everyone being close with their friends and
>
> I'm like an outsider. (female, 16 years old)

Other young people saw themselves as "abnormal" but could not pinpoint exactly why that was.

> I just feel like I don't belong in society and I don't know why. (female, 14
>
> years old)

For some young people, their disconnection from others was attributed to belonging to a stigmatized group.

> "I have a group of friends, I came out to them as a lesbian about a year ago but ever
>
> since then, everything's changed if I'm being honest, but they were kind of a new
>
> group of friends" (14years, female)

Some young people mentioned a difference in how much they felt like they belonged in their social environment after a life change, such as moving school.

> "I went to college and they [school friends] don't go to the same one as me"
>
> (17years, female).

Socializing was often a source of anxiety because lonely young people believed that they stood out for being unable to maintain conversations and seeming awkward.

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Everyone around me seems to be happy, meeting new people, and I fade

away. (unknown gender, unknown age)

Lonely young people often expressed extreme distress in cases where they believed

they had fewer friends than their peers or were not successful in social situations.

Sometimes I have thoughts that even people I've never met before like

celebrities, etc, would hate me, that's how bad it is. (female, 18 years old)

They often said they were not liked by their peers, but they did not report many

instances of bullying or teasing. The following quote is from a young person who believes

themselves to be unpopular with their peers and thinks that their peers consider them to be

blunt:

Nobody has ever said anything like that to me [i.e. they are blunt] however

I can just tell. (unknown gender, unknown age)

Having trouble dealing with peer relationships. For young people who reported having

friends, navigating those friendships was seen to be challenging. A disconnect between young

people experiencing loneliness and their friends was clear, as some young people who reported

being part of a friendship group held the belief that they did not fit well into that group, or that

their friendships were of poor quality.

'Cause I realized just the other day, my friends aren't really my friends.

(unknown gender, 17 years old)

That meant friendships were often unfulfilling and rarely described as "close". Even where friends expressed that they cared about them, young people experiencing loneliness were reluctant to believe that support was genuine. It seemed to be the case that friendships did little to ameliorate feelings of loneliness.

[Friend] told me that I'm very loved but somehow I still feel this way

[lonely/unloved] although people tell me that a lot. (female, 12 years old)

Some young people also encountered turmoil in their romantic relationships. Romantic relationships were primarily talked about in terms of breaking up rather than as being sources of support, indicating that loneliness may be associated with the termination of a romantic relationship. Not having a romantic partner meant that young people felt that they were missing out on an experience that others had, and one that could give them an avenue to be included in a friendship group.

I often feel like no one is ever going to love me and it scares me that I'll

be alone forever, unlike all of my friends. (female, 17 years old)

Difficulties at home emphasized feelings of loneliness. Although loneliness for young people was centered around their peer relationships, young people's home lives also contributed to their feelings of loneliness. Where there were conflicts or difficulties at home, with their siblings, parents, or caregivers, this heightened the young person's feelings of loneliness and lack of connection. For example, tumultuous relationships with parental figures left lonely young people lacking emotional support at home, increasing their general feelings of aloneness, and provided validation for them that the loneliness experience was about something being "wrong" with them.

I'm struggling at the moment…my family is constantly arguing, and I feel

so alone. (unknown gender, 17 years old)

These conflicts at home often occurred as a direct result of young people seeking

support for their feelings of loneliness or for a mental health issue, which increased their

awareness that they lacked support, cementing their experience of loneliness.

Even when I was in hospital a few weeks ago due to self-harm, they

[parents] were just screaming at me. (unknown gender, unknown age)

In cases where conflicts at home were prevalent, young people sought sanctuary

outside of their home by running away or walking around their neighborhood.

I struggle to cope when I'm at home as I feel like I can't go to my family

[…] don't see any other option than running away for a while. (female, 16

years old)

Young people also considered the conflict within their home to be a barrier to

connecting with their peers. They thought their friends would not understand them because

they had not experienced the same issues at home. Young people's beliefs about those

differences in home life in comparison to their peers served as a further barrier in their ability

to connect with their peers.

The other two [friends] have the perfect family lives, so it's hard for them

to understand. (female, 17 years old)

Theme 4: School as a difficult place to be whilst experiencing loneliness

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Academic struggles. Lonely young people struggled to balance their academic life with their wellbeing. The stress associated with having to revise and perform well in their exams depleted their capacity to deal with their experiences of loneliness, and vice versa. It created a cycle whereby their loneliness caused them to struggle academically, which in turn produced further loneliness. Young people's academic stress was also compounded by their perceived lack of support from their schoolteachers and school support staff who dismissed their loneliness experiences.

They [school staff] only care about homework and coursework, not me.

(female, 17 years old)

The school holidays did not seem to produce relief from feeling overwhelmed; instead, they triggered loneliness for some youth. In addition, during the school holidays, there often seemed to be too much time for contemplation, leaving some lonely youth to focus on their disconnection from others.

I get these [lonely] feelings at the beginning of summer breaks, which has

started last week. (unknown gender, unknown age)

I wish I was in college; I only have one week to go but it's my distraction.

(female, 18 years old)

Struggles with socializing at school. In addition to the academic aspects of school, young people had to navigate the social environment which was challenging for some who struggled with the large number of peers in that context.

> I will try to avoid it as much as I can, my attendance is currently very low,
>
> and I always feel extremely anxious in the large groups of people. (female,
>
> 14 years old)

Some lonely youth also felt pressured to appear positive in their interactions with peers when they were actually quite unhappy. They believed their negative emotional state would not be understood by their peers at school, and, thus, did not believe their friends knew the "real" them.

> I just don't ever show my true emotions. In school I smile away, and I
>
> seem happy and outgoing but the person I pretend to be is so much
>
> different than I actually am. (female, 15 years old)

For some young people, concealment led to school absence and truancy.

> Unfortunately, I'm off for this whole week because I just feel so lonely
>
> and depressed and can't bear to go in… (female, 16 years old)

However, for others being at school was preferable to being alone at home.

> It's just really overwhelming and not a place I'd like to be though it's better
>
> than being alone. (unknown gender, unknown age)

Theme 5. Belief that Coping Strategies Fail to Alleviate Loneliness

Preference for short-term coping strategies providing only a temporary distraction from loneliness. Young people reported employing coping strategies that acted

to distract them from feelings of loneliness, including watching videos, playing video games, and listening to music. Those coping strategies often did not work to improve mood.

> All I'm trying to do at the moment is distract myself by watching mindless
>
> YouTube videos, but I just feel numb, and I'm not focused on it. (female,
>
> 17 years old)

More worryingly, some young people talked about distracting themselves through alcohol or drug abuse, porn, or risky sexual behaviors, which incurred further detrimental impacts to their self-worth.

> I don't really deal with emotional trauma well. I normally get absolutely
>
> wasted to forget. (female, 17 years old)

Unease around opening up about loneliness acts as a barrier to seeking help. Young people felt a dilemma when they thought about telling others about their loneliness. They often felt that opening up involved the risk of being faced with negative reactions that could further exacerbate feelings of loneliness, preferring to hold back until they felt ready to take such a risk. There were also concerns about what being lonely signaled to others.

> ...And I'm scared to reach out because I'm scared of my parents' reaction.
>
> (unknown gender, unknown age)

Despite this reluctance to tell others about their feelings of loneliness, young people demonstrated a need for others to validate their feelings.

> Everyone says its normal for teenagers to feel like this, but it's not.
>
> (female, 15 years old)

Some young people, in fact, had previous negative experiences of opening up to others,

which led to fears about opening up again.

I find that talking to everyone I thought I could trust just makes it worse

for me. (female, 14 years old)

Young people were also careful to consider the possibility that by opening up, they

could negatively impact the wellbeing of their confidants. Fear of being a burden was

emphasized if their confidant was facing their own difficulties.

No, it's really difficult because then I feel guilty and like I'm being a stupid

burden to them, (unknown gender, unknown age)

The fear of being a burden was indicative of a wider tendency for lonely young people

to view themselves as less important than other people. They valued the feelings of their

confidants over their need to seek help for their problems, despite those problems being

debilitating. This meant that even in cases where they expected positive responses to opening

up, they still neglected to do so.

As much as I want to tell her everything, to cry in her arms, I can't, it

wouldn't be fair. (female, 16 years old)

Lonely youth discussed how their low self-worth acted as a barrier to utilizing the

support available to them, reflected by their implied guilt at occupying Childline's resources.

Some young people found their conversations with Childline to be beneficial, but they were

reluctant to take up any additional support suggested or offered.

I'm sorry I feel like such a burden. I have so much to talk about (…)

because you have so many people on this line and you're wasting your

time talking to someone as useless as me. (female, 16 years old)

Long-term coping strategies were perceived to have made things worse. Lonely

young people struggled to envision how they could cope with loneliness in the long-term. They

reported that counselling and support services, to help them learn suitable coping, were

available for them, but they rarely used them. Those who did engage with face-to-face

counselling reported finding it difficult to know how to engage with their counsellors, and that

in some cases the sessions made them feel worse, rather than alleviate their loneliness.

They [counselling service] just made me feel like... if I wanted to feel

better, all I needed to do was start thinking positively instead of

negatively… and I was just like, oh thanks, never thought of that before…

(unknown gender, 17 years old)

The belief that finding a strategy that would help was unlikely. Lonely young

people discussed a sense of hopelessness about their ability to "get better", seeing coping

strategies as futile. There was often a belief that they had exhausted all their available options

for coping, with none of them working to reduce their feelings of loneliness.

I'm not better. I never will be. I keep telling myself that it's going to get

better, but it never does. (female, 15 years old)

Some young people were resigned to the idea that their negative emotional state was

characteristic of who they were as a person, and therefore unchangeable.

My parents tell me to change but how can I change the person that I am?

I'm not sure I can change myself idk [I don't know] I'll ever be able to."

(female, 16 years old)

Despite that, some young people felt an urgent need for things to get better but did not know what would work to ameliorate their experiences of loneliness and the associated negative affect.

I want to be happy for the people who care. I just need to learn how.

(unknown gender, unknown age)

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning and experience of loneliness from the perspectives of adolescents who were experiencing loneliness and had sourced support from online Childline counsellors. Previous qualitative research sought adolescents' perspectives on loneliness through interviews, and often participants were included who were not experiencing loneliness (Hemberg et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2019; Korkaimaki et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014) Access to the current data provided a novel opportunity to understand loneliness from the perspectives of those currently experiencing it, in a non-research setting, where they had chosen to open up about their experiences by seeking help through Childline. Thematic analysis of the online transcripts between adolescents and counsellors revealed that loneliness was experienced as a negative set of emotions. Salient themes that emerged in the experience of loneliness included difficulties related to managing peer relationships and having a sense that desired close social connections with peers were lacking. Turmoil within family relationships contributed to the sense of young people's feelings of disconnection from others; they recognized how that turmoil may not be

understood by peers. Strained social connections with those around them, paired with feelings of low self-worth and low trust created barriers to young people opening up about their loneliness. Young people experiencing loneliness used short-term coping strategies that served to distract from, rather than alleviate, loneliness.

Distinct Emotions Linked to Loneliness

Young people described a discrete set of emotions that characterized loneliness. Sadness, anger, emptiness, frustration, apathy, feeling unloved, and hopeless were described. Those emotional descriptions provided by lonely youth are comparable to those provided by adults, (Heu et al., 2020; Perlman, Gerson & Spinner, 1978; Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978; Sermat, 1980), and youth in previous qualitative research (Hemberg et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2019; Korkaimaki et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014). It is possible that the emotions expressed when experiencing loneliness differ depending on situational factors involved in those experiences, such as whether or not the individual has been rejected. Feelings of anger and frustration are often associated with experiences of rejection (Korkaimaki et al., 2014; Leary, Twenge & Quinlivan, 2006). In the current study, experiences of rejection or perceived rejection were common, so it is possible that anger arises when loneliness involves such experiences. Perceived social support has been identified as a protective factor for anxiety; in the current study, adolescents considered there to be deficits in the support available to them that could explain their mentions of anxiety (Roohafza et al., 2014). Previous research has highlighted a bidirectional relationship between adolescent loneliness and social anxiety, and suggested similar internalizing symptoms such as self-blame, which are evident in the current study (Danneel et al., 2019). The link between loneliness and depression has been vastly covered in research and it is likely that those in the current sample are experiencing chronic loneliness that would give rise to feelings of depression (Vanhalst et al., 2012). Those chronic experiences, and a loss of what to do about them, could also be expressed as emptiness, apathy,

and hopelessness as previous research highlights avoidant coping to positively relate to hopelessness (O'Connor & O'Connor, 2003). The findings indicate that experiences or perceptions of rejection and a lack of social support alongside negative cognitions about themselves underpin chronic loneliness. Those experiences may evoke feelings of anxiety, depression, and/or anger. Interventions for adolescent loneliness should consider not only the emotional responses, but the individuals' maladaptive thought patterns; that is in line with previous research that identifies psychological interventions as the most successful type for alleviating loneliness for those that report high levels of loneliness (Eccles & Qualter, 2020). Given that experiences or perceptions of rejection and lack of social support are involved, interventions would benefit from taking the social environments of adolescents into account. Interventions could include a focus on school ethos to reiterate the importance of an inclusive social environment within schools.

Youth also described loneliness as a dark experience or a dark place, suggesting they felt consumed by negative emotions when lonely. Those descriptions of darkness have not been identified by previous qualitative research on loneliness in youth (Korkaimaki et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2019). But, references to darkness have been made by participants in previous qualitative research with adults, and with university students (18 – 30 years) who discussed loneliness alongside depression (Hauge & Kirkevold, 2010; Hemberg et al., 2021; Heu et al., 2020). Depression and suicide ideation are often discussed alongside descriptions of darkness (Kearns et al., 2017; Medlock, 2015; Silverman, 2018). That was true also for our sample. It may be that the current sample who contacted Childline for support experienced loneliness alongside mental health issues, and more intensely than adolescents who did not have mental health issues. The intense negative emotions that characterized loneliness felt overwhelming and their presence was emotionally difficult.

Difficulties in Social Relationships

Up until now we have not understood whether young people consider their loneliness to be centered around peer relationships, family relationships, or both. The findings in the current study suggest that youth loneliness is focused upon problems with peer relationships, but that conflict at home can reinforce those feelings of disconnection. Previous research has identified links between loneliness and peer relationships, with positive peer relationships associated with lower levels of loneliness (Lodder, Scholte, Goossens & Verhagen, 2017; Putarek & Kerestes, 2016; Woodhouse, Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Previous research has highlighted that support from friends buffers the relationship between stress and loneliness (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). When stress was unchanged, support from friends and romantic partners, but not from family, was negatively related to loneliness which indicates that for young people, friends play a more pivotal role in supporting emotions than family (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). The difficulties young people who experience loneliness face in establishing positive peer relationships have commonly been attributed to deficits in social skills (Qualter & Munn, 2002). However, in the current study young people reported difficulties in navigating friendships even when they were reassured by peers that they were well-liked and supported. Youth noted that it was their own negative self-perceptions and distrust of others that contributed to their loneliness. That finding suggests perceived difficulties in maintaining friendships were not due to those who experienced loneliness being disliked by classmates, supporting previous research that showed the friends of lonely young people reported good friendship quality (Lodder et al., 2017).

Young people in the current study reported conflict with their family, in particular, their parents. A lack of familial support and secure home environment compounded young people's negative feelings towards themselves; young people saw lack of parental support as evidence that their negative self-judgments were justified. Turmoil at home was also considered to impact relationships with peers. Some young people thought that their difficulties at home

made them different to their peers, who they considered would not be able to relate to those family difficulties. Previous research has identified peer attachment to strongly mediate parental attachment and emotional loneliness (Bogaerts, Vanheule & Desmet, 2006), indicating that it is beneficial to consider how to promote positive relationships with both peers and parents for those experiencing loneliness.

Young people experiencing loneliness perceived the way they felt to be abnormal, which caused them to feel pressure to appear positive in front of their peers. This is congruent with previous research, where concealment of loneliness is common because there is stigma surrounding it (Qualter et al., 2015). Hiding their feelings from peers meant that young people experiencing loneliness felt unable to consider their friendships as meaningful because they believed that their friends did not truly know them, and if they did, they would react negatively. Feeling different to peers also pertains to the developmental task of identity formation that young people are undergoing. Identity exploration involves forming their own values and beliefs that may lead to restructuring their social worlds (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999). It could also contribute to understanding youths' experiences of existential loneliness, as they begin to question their place in the world, and in the current study, become frustrated at the seeming lack of meaning to life. Previous research indicates that individuals belonging to stigmatized groups are more likely to experience existential isolation, a concept distinct from, but related to loneliness (Helm et al., 2020). That is congruent with current findings that showed some participants faced difficulties coming to terms with their gender identity or sexuality, and perceiving or experiencing prejudice from those around them. Future research should investigate how cognitive behavioral interventions could benefit young people who experience loneliness by reframing negative thinking patterns and enhancing self-worth. The idea of addressing the negative thinking associated with loneliness is not new (Qualter et al., 2015), but this has not been fully implemented into loneliness interventions for youth (Eccles &

Qualter, 2020). In addition, school-based interventions that acknowledge the importance of understanding individual differences, and promote acceptance of marginalized groups, could help to alleviate loneliness by promoting more inclusive school environments.

Our data suggest terminations of romantic relationships are important sources of loneliness in adolescence as there was often a loss of peer friendship groups that occurred as a consequence of the break-up. Future research should (1) consider how the emergence of romantic relationships in adolescence influence the way other social relationships are experienced, and (2) explore the implications that may have for devising interventions to alleviate loneliness in young people.

Facing difficulties with peer relationships meant that young people experiencing loneliness regarded school as an overwhelming place to be. The pressure to perform well academically created undue stress for young people who were also trying to regulate the negative affect associated with loneliness. That finding supports previous research that has shown lonely young people experience difficulties in academic progression and exam success (Benner, 2011). Notably, time away from school did not ameliorate feelings of loneliness, with young people reporting that the school holidays triggered loneliness. That could be because exam pressure and the need to revise still remain during the holidays, yet peer and teacher support is not as available. Despite the anxiety associated with being at school, some young people with loneliness reported being at school to be preferential to being at home because school provided opportunities to be distracted from loneliness. A school environment that is attentive to student wellbeing could help to mitigate the detrimental impacts of loneliness.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Young people mentioned using passive coping strategies, such as watching television and listening to music, which distracted them from their experience of loneliness and the associated negative affect. They also reported consuming alcohol, self-harming, and indulging

in risky sexual behavior to distract them from their loneliness experience. This is similar to previous research that found passive coping strategies for loneliness to be associated with increased risky behavior in adolescence (Gentina, Shrum & Lowrey, 2018), particularly self-harm (Yang, Peterson & Qualter, 2020), and findings from a recent meta-analysis showing self-harm to be prevalent among older adults who report loneliness (Troya et al., 2019). These findings provide further evidence that access to positive coping strategies should be a priority for lonely youth (Drake, Sladek & Doane, 2016). Being able to manage the loneliness experience, reconnecting with others, and managing social distress should be the focus of future intervention work on mitigating the negative effects of loneliness among adolescents.

In the current study, young people expressed apathy towards the long-term coping strategies that were available to them, believing that they had exhausted all options available and nothing would work. Despite that, adolescents recognized they did not have the tools to cope by themselves and reported an urgency to figure out successful ways to cope with their loneliness. Qualitative research with university students experiencing loneliness identified that they coped primarily through five families of coping strategies: accommodation, support seeking, social isolation, self-reliance, and problem-solving (Vasileiou et al., 2019). Vasileiou et al. (2019) found that participants valued support from those close to them, whom they considered to be trusted, understanding, and receptive to their problems. In congruence, when youth in the current study believed they were upsetting their confidant(s) they would, instead, cope through social isolation. Distraction and self-reliance coping strategies were utilized when other social resources were unavailable (Vasileou et al., 2019). Although that study identified strategies considered valuable for coping with loneliness, it was unable to measure the extent to which the strategies were psychologically beneficial, and involved university students who were at a different phase of adolescence to those in the current study. Because youth in the current study were struggling with how to positively cope with loneliness,

potential positive coping strategies were unable to be identified. Future research should explore, explicitly, the types of coping strategies used by young people to successfully overcome loneliness. Development of interventions for young people that use co-production methodology, where interventions are developed in collaboration with young people, will be particularly important to ensure that interventions are relevant and accessible for young people.

Young people faced barriers in seeking help from others including fear of negative reactions and of burdening others. They also reported difficulties with trusting others and fears of their trust being broken. In some cases that fear originated from previous experiences. Young people experiencing loneliness were often wary of other people's motivations, finding it difficult to believe that they genuinely wanted to help. Those beliefs reflect previous findings that people who are lonely are more likely to evaluate their own, and other people's behaviors more negatively than people who are not lonely (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Rotenberg et al., 2010). Such concerns were also applied to their experiences with support services, which meant they reluctantly engaged with counsellors when counselling was offered to them. These findings could provide context to previous findings that identify low trust as an important predictor for persistent loneliness (Qualter et al., 2013), and a significant barrier to overcoming loneliness (Qualter et al., 2015). Combined, such findings highlight the need for support services to be aware of how a lack of trust may be a barrier for engagement with young people experiencing loneliness.

Young people in the current study often reported apprehension about the way people may react if they were to open up about their loneliness. Conflicts within the home were detrimental to adolescents' wellbeing and exacerbated their feelings of peer-related loneliness. Parents would often respond to young people's disclosures, or help seeking, with frustration and anger. The lack of parental support could be attributed to parent's personal barriers in

gaining support for their family, but the current findings suggest that some loneliness awareness raising, and training are needed for parents.

Previous research has highlighted personal stressors, such as family conflict and parent's own psychopathology, as barriers to engaging with mental health support (McKay et al., 1996; Nock & Ferriter, 2005). In the current study, young people were often aware of the stressors faced by their parents, but had no one else to turn to for help. Young people experiencing loneliness were attuned to the difficulties other people faced, and feared that, by opening up, they would be burdening them with problems that they perceived to be of less importance. As a result, they kept the full extent of their issues to themselves even if the potential confidant had expressed a willingness to help. Those findings suggest that training adults in recognizing the signs of loneliness in young people and supporting them with tools to help young people who are experiencing loneliness would be beneficial. Such training should be made available for any adult that comes into contact with adolescents.

Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study

Research has previously highlighted the benefit of engaging children and adolescents in dialogue to access their lived experiences (Kirova, 2003). Online counselling provides a feeling of privacy and safety for young people that is conducive to a more open and forthcoming conversation about their issues than that of face to face or telephone counselling (King et al., 2006). The anonymity and ease of access of online counselling is likely to appeal to individuals who would be reluctant to engage with traditional counselling services. That is particularly true for young people experiencing loneliness who have indicated the preference for online communication over offline (Bonetti, Campbell & Gilmore., 2010; Hunt, 2002) . However, individuals who contact Childline are likely to be at the more extreme end of experiences, and that should be acknowledged when making inferences from the current study.

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The young people in the current study often reported experiencing other mental health issues such as depression, and their preference for passive coping may be related to those experiences rather than to their experiences of loneliness. Indeed, Vanhalst, Luyckx and Goossens (2009) highlighted that in emerging adulthood, loneliness is predicted by depression; that relationship is mediated by maladaptive emotion regulation, meaning that maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., self-blame for feelings of loneliness) increase vulnerability to depression. But, it is also important to note that an examination of loneliness in this cohort is advantageous because it gives us an insight into how to help those who are most likely to be at risk and does so on their own terms, because they voluntarily contacted Childline, as opposed to a researcher contacting youth in an academic study (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). The use of this sample is not to establish findings that are representative of young people, or young people who contact Childline; rather, we wish to generate understanding about the way loneliness is experienced by young people.

The current study finds further nuances to the issue of peer relationships that has been highlighted by previous qualitative research as an important facet of loneliness experiences (Hunt, 2002; Korkaimaki et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2014). Issues with peer relationships for young people in the current study went beyond a concern of having no friends to include difficulties in navigating currently held friendships. For example, young people felt that they had to hide their negative emotional state from their friends and also faced difficulties trusting that their friends had good intentions. Whilst previous studies focus on what loneliness means to youth, the current study also explored the ways youth attempt to overcome loneliness; the current study identified how young people face barriers to opening up about loneliness and are at a loss to establish coping strategies that are effective in alleviating loneliness.

The primary aim of the conversations between young people and the Childline counsellors was not to focus on their experience of loneliness. Instead, counsellors tended to

focus on the issue that appeared to be most concerning to the counsellor (e.g., suicidal thoughts and behavior). Therefore, opportunities to steer the conversation towards a focus on loneliness were missed. Future research would benefit from utilizing traditional qualitative approaches, such as one to one interviewing, that allow for opportunities to make loneliness the focal issue of the conversations. However, an advantage of the current approach is that the adolescents had contacted Childline with the specific aim of discussing the issues they were facing. As a consequence, the use of online conversations gave visibility to issues that would be more challenging to access through traditional qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups (Misoch, 2015).

Conclusions

The current study utilized qualitative methods and data to expand previous knowledge about the contextual differences of how loneliness is experienced by youth. It identifies that, unlike loneliness in older adulthood, youth loneliness was centered around difficulties in navigating relationships with peers, and influenced by tumultuous relationships with family. However, the issues faced in navigating such relationships are not due to deficits in social skills, but rather, negative self-beliefs and trust issues that make it difficult for young people experiencing loneliness to create and maintain quality connections with peers. Disconnection with peers was sometimes attributed to feeling different and/or being different (i.e., belonging to a stigmatized group). Interventions should focus on methods, such as cognitive behavioral practices, that aim to reframe negative thought patterns with particular focus on self-worth, but also consider how to promote inclusive school environments that can alleviate feelings of disconnection with peers. The current study also highlighted young people's reluctance to seek help due to believing that the adults in their lives would not react in a way that validated their feelings and concerns or to prevent burdening adults with their problems. Those barriers meant that young people preferred to adopt short-term coping strategies to distract themselves from

feeling of loneliness. Strategies developed to alleviate loneliness in youth should address this by ensuring adults are knowledgeable about what loneliness is, and how they can respond to young people experiencing loneliness in a way that will be supportive of their needs and encourage them to open up.

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Loneliness from the Adolescent Perspective: A Qualitative Analysis of Conversations about Loneliness between Adolescents and Childline Counsellors

Supplementary Information

APPENDIX A: Table 1. Demographics of the Sample

Table 1

Demographic information about youth whose transcripts were included in analysis

Age	Gender			Total
	Female	Male	Unknown	
11	2	0	3	5
12	2	1	0	3
13	2	2	2	6
14	7	1	0	8
15	5	1	0	6
16	11	0	0	11
17	7	1	2	10
18	3	1	0	4
Unknown	5	0	9	14
Total	44	7	16	67

Note. The 100 transcripts were examined by the research team to establish that they had correctly been categorized as regarding loneliness, that excluded 33 transcripts that were considered not to be about loneliness, or did not include enough information for analysis, leaving 67 for inclusion in data analysis.

APPENDIX B: Additional methodological information

Data

The data were dyadic online conversations between Childline counsellors and young people who had contacted Childline about experiences that involved loneliness. The counsellors all received training on how to conduct the online sessions and therefore responded in similar ways. The conversations were not intended as data for research.

The sessions were not prearranged; the young persons were not known to the Childline counsellors and the young persons were not required to give any personal details unless they wished to, although many did in order to help the counsellor better understand their experiences. The conversations were guided by the young people who were able to talk about whatever issue was troubling them; counsellors responded by asking further questions about those issues. The counsellors all received training on how to conduct the online sessions and therefore responded in similar ways. If counsellors identified an ongoing potential risk, for example if the young person mentioned self-harm, they would ask questions specifically about that issue until they were assured there was no ongoing risk, or they were able to refer the young person to the appropriate authority. Although young people reported experiences of mental ill health, it is unknown if those issues were officially diagnosed and thus the current study cannot report on the extent of comorbidities.

Methodology

The transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA), a qualitative method used to establish themes that reflected the commonalities in young people's

experiences of loneliness. TFA was developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994), based upon widely used approach to qualitative analyses, Thematic Analysis (TA). It is used to compare and contrast complex textual data to identify and summarize the salient matters reported within the texts (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). It seeks to interpret, rather than describe the patterns across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TFA consists of 7 stages: transcription, familiarisation, coding, developing an analytic framework, applying the analytic framework, charting the data into a framework matrix, and interpreting the data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). It is more systematic than traditional TA in that it ensures a clear audit trail for the development of themes and follows an agreed procedure, enhancing transparency of the analyses undertaken (Smith & Firth, 2011; Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000). TFA is beneficial for research teams, particularly for those less familiar with qualitative analyses, because it provides a clear definition for each stage of the process, providing structure and reliability during the analytic process and in turn, enhancing the credibility of findings (Gale et al, 2013; Smith & Firth, 2011). Each stage of TFA ensures focus is given to the dataset, preserving the voices of the young people including in the final interpretation stage for which direct quotes and descriptions from the original data set are used to support interpretations made (Alhojailan, 2012).

Transcription was not a necessary step for the current analyses because the nature of the data meant the online conversations were already transcribed. Consistency in transcription style was achieved by the similarity in conversational styles adhered to by Childline counsellors as a result of their training (Williams, 2019). During the **familiarisation** stage, the transcripts were read, and decisions were made by two of the authors (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) about whether or not the transcripts had been correctly categorized as loneliness, or that loneliness was the main focus of the conversation. Loneliness for the purpose of the current study was defined as an uncomfortable feeling that arises when there is a discrepancy

between a person's actual relationships, and their desired relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Each transcript was coded by the two authors (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) as loneliness or not loneliness; percentage of agreement was 96%. Disagreements were resolved through discussions. Transcripts coded as "not loneliness" were not included in the analysis. This resulted in the removal of 33 transcripts. The remaining 67 transcripts were then re-read and brief notes on the salient issues covered were made for each transcript and notes on the similarities and differences were made for the data set as a whole. An initial chart of the summaries made for each transcript was created using Microsoft excel, this helped to portray the date in an accessible way to the wider team, organize initial thoughts and increase transparency of the familiarisation stage for the benefit of the subsequent analytic stages. Other team members read the initial chart and a selection of 30 transcripts each to become familiar with the data, and a discussion between the whole team was had about the salient issues that could constitute codes.

Initial codes were developed through a process of (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and (XXXdeletedfor BLIND ReviewXXX) independently carrying out open coding of a sample of 10 transcripts, and coming back together to compare the codes that they had each identified. This led to the **development of an analytic framework** by which a list of codes were developed inductively from the open coding process, to apply to the whole dataset (Bryman & Burgess, 2002). An inductive approach to coding was taken to allow for the experiences of young people to be at the forefront of the research, as opposed to applying existing ideas about loneliness formed through quantitative research to the analysis. Unlike TA, codes are not produced as a list but rather are organized into "categories" with clear definitions, helping to develop a narrative about the data that can be followed through interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The preliminary framework was discussed with the full team and revised accordingly.

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Application of the analytic framework could then begin. Devising the analytical framework is not a linear process and required continual refinement until it was considered representative of the data set as a whole; the framework was trialled on 10 transcripts to assess how adequately the codes represented the data, the transcripts were coded independently by (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and then compared to ensure that coding was consistent, and robust. The framework was edited accordingly and re-trialled until coding was consistent; at that point the framework could be applied to the whole dataset, and was done so by (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX).

Once all transcripts had been coded, **Charting** of the coded data were undertaken. A framework matrix was created using Microsoft excel; the framework consisted of tabs to represent the categories by which the codes were organized. **Charting** arranges data to be visually accessible, aiding with later stages of analyses by ensuring comparisons between cases can be made with ease (Gale et al., 2013). Coded data were abstracted as quotes, or summarised into the charts for each case, and code within each category; data were summarised or directly quoted depending upon the method that was thought to most accurately reflect the original meaning of the text. A trial of charting was conducted by (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and checked for consistency and accuracy by (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX). Following that, charting was completed solely by (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) which ensured consistency.

All coded data were inputted into the charts, **Interpreting the data** involved generating salient themes using the framework matrix for thematic analysis; thematic analysis involved identifying patterns, commonalities and contradictions across the data set (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Using TFA enabled deviant cases, that contrasted to the expected or dominant patterns within the data set to be considered which is important for illustrating the nuances of young people's loneliness experiences (Cote & Turgeon, 2005). The framework matrix was studied

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separately by (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and (XXXdeleted for BLIND ReviewXXX) and then ideas about initial themes were discussed. Robust themes are essential for creating a coherent interpretation of the data, as opposed to merely describing the data (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Illustrative quotes are used to justify the inclusion of each theme which avoided pre-existing knowledge or biases about loneliness in young people leading the analyses. Themes were developed, including illustrative quotes, and refined according to feedback from the whole team to produce a final list of themes that were ordered in a logical manner, portraying a cohesive narrative about the data set.

The intention of the analysis was to identify issues that were considered to be salient. Decisions about saliency were made through the research teams interpretation of the conversations; factors that informed those interpretations included the extent to which an issue appeared to be linked with a young person's account of their loneliness, the intensity with which a young person described an issue, and the extent to which young people's accounts included overlapping of such issues, but not solely the frequency that those issues were mentioned. That was important because experiences that are uncommon can still be meaningful.

It is recommended that TFA interpretations avoid quantification because qualitative research is designed to capture diversity around a phenomenon, not be representative of a wider population (Gale et al., 2013; Polit & Beck, 2010). However, percentages for descriptive codes to illustrate data that were commonly reported, but could not be interpreted thematically (e.g., the prevelance of certain descriptive phrases such as "sad") are available at request from the authors.

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