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Loneliness as experienced by adolescents and young adults: an explorative qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Mental health problems among adolescents and young adults are increasing worldwide together with loneliness, which is considered a global public health problem. The aim of this study was to explore loneliness through adolescents' and young adults' own descriptions and experiences. The research questions were: (1) How do adolescents and young adults describe and experience loneliness?, (2) What types of loneliness do adolescents and young adults describe? Data were collected through interviews with fifteen Swedish-speaking Finns aged 17–30. Content analysis was used for data analysis. Loneliness was linked to earlier negative experiences, mental illness or physical disorders, self-centred society, social norms and social media. Three different types of loneliness were identified: social loneliness, emotional loneliness and existential loneliness. It is important that adults and professionals are able to identify, interpret and understand signs that adolescents and young adults are experiencing negative feelings, which may indicate underlying loneliness.

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Adolescents and young adults; content analysis; interview; lived experiences; loneliness

Introduction

Considered a public health problem in most Western countries (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), loneliness can be described as a distressing feeling. Some define loneliness as a painful feeling of sadness and emptiness that arises when one becomes cognitively aware of an inconsistency between one's actual social connections and the number of social connections one desires (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Weeks & Asher, 2012). Others define loneliness as an unpleasant experience arising from the perception that one's network of social relations is lacking significantly in either number or quality (Perlman & Peplau, 1998). Emotional loneliness can arise if one does not have a close intimate bond with another or from the sense that one lacks a social network where one is accepted and fits in (Weiss, 1973). Loneliness can be considered to be self-selected, intrapersonal or existential (Strang, 2014). From a temporal perspective, loneliness can also be seen as situational (arising from unexpected negative events), chronic (arising from a lack of satisfactory social relationships over time; cf. Shaked & Rokach, 2015) or transient (occasional, momentary feelings of loneliness; Beck & Young, 1978; cf. Shaked & Rokach, 2015). In qualitative research, a differentiation is made between voluntary and involuntary loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007). Voluntary loneliness is considered to be a self-chosen act; one wishes to be alone for the purpose of seeking renewed strength and the resulting solitude is experienced as

being positive (Hemberg et al., 2021). Conversely, involuntary loneliness is considered to be a non-self-chosen act; one does not wish to be alone and the resulting loneliness is experienced as being negative, stressful or paralysing.

Adolescents seem to experience loneliness more often than other age groups (Franssen et al., 2020; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Qualter et al., 2013). Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of loneliness (Balážová et al., 2017) because they are in a state of development where they gradually become more independent from their family, seek to establish strong relationships with their peers (Balážová et al., 2017; Brown & Klute, 2006) and are in the process of developing their social and emotional skills (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Consequently, some may be especially vulnerable to experiencing loneliness, e.g. during early adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Loneliness during adolescence increases the risk for a number of health, behavioural and academic problems (Goosby et al., 2013; Van Dulmen & Goossens, 2013). Associated with diverse negative outcomes and risk for emotional pain (Madsen et al., 2016), loneliness can constitute a risk factor for adolescents' and young adults' health and well-being (Lyyra et al., 2018). It is therefore important that comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon be sought so that loneliness may be managed.

A complex phenomenon, there appears to be no single factor or reason underlying loneliness (Verity et al., 2021a). Scant research on adolescents' and young adults' individual perspectives on loneliness has been undertaken (cf., Verity et al., 2021a). Understanding how loneliness is experienced can lead to improved interventions and strengthen the validity of measurements of loneliness (Heu et al., 2021). Therefore, adolescents' and young adults' daily experiences of loneliness, including own descriptions and experiences, particularly regarding the types of loneliness adolescents and young adults experience today, should be investigated.

Research on adolescents' and young adults' loneliness

A sense of loneliness is not necessarily linked to being alone; one can spend a long time alone without experiencing a sense of loneliness or be surrounded by others yet still experience a sense of loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2002). Loneliness and social isolation are not the same phenomena; loneliness is a subjective, unpleasant feeling that can arise, e.g. from one's perceived lack of closeness to others, while social isolation is related to one's lack of physical interactions or objective lack of connections through which to interact with others (Child & Lawton, 2017).

Among adolescents and young adults, genetic factors (Abdellaoui et al., 2019; Goossens, 2012) and/or other environmental factors may be linked to the development of loneliness, e.g. a *lack of social competence* (Mahon et al., 2006; Vanhalst et al., 2014), a *lack of social support* (Tan et al., 2016), *parents' separation* (Kingery et al., 2011), *social withdrawal* (Boivin et al., 1995), *school transfer* (Lasgaard et al., 2015), *low social status* (Margalit, 2010), a *lack of peer acceptance* or *exposure to bullying* (Sakız et al., 2021; Vanhalst et al., 2014; Weeks & Asher, 2012). Loneliness during adolescence or young adulthood may impact personality (Mund et al., 2019), with especially neuroticism (Buecker et al., 2020; Mund & Neyer, 2018) found to be the strongest correlate of loneliness (Matthews et al., 2022). Other personality traits linked to loneliness include, e.g. a sense of *low self-worth*, *emotional instability* (Qualter et al., 2013; Vanhalst et al., 2013), *introversion* (Qualter et al., 2013), *shyness* (Woodhouse et al., 2012) or *poor emotional functioning* (Wols et al., 2015).

Self-esteem has also been linked to loneliness among adolescents and young adults (Olmstead et al., 1991; Yilmaz et al., 2013). In comparison to adulthood, more intense positive and negative experiences are had during early adolescence (Larson et al., 2014) and a short-lived decline in self-esteem may occur during early adolescence (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Self-esteem can be defined as a positive psychological state that encompasses self-confidence (without considering oneself to be inferior or superior to others) and a sense of feeling worthy, i.e. satisfaction with the self (Yörükoğlu, 1998). As seen among young adults, those with high self-esteem may experience less

loneliness because they are confident in their social relationships, can communicate more efficiently and are more competent in solving interpersonal difficulties and evaluating others in a positive, cognitive way (Yilmaz et al., 2013).

Depressive symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; McHugh Power et al., 2020; Spithoven et al., 2017) have even been linked to loneliness among adolescents and young adults. Depression during adolescence has been found to be interrelated with loneliness: loneliness can lead to depressive symptoms and depressive symptoms can lead to loneliness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While those of all age groups feel a need 'to belong' (cf., Rokach, 2019), negative friendship experiences during adolescence may possibly result in feelings of loneliness and thereby depressive symptoms (Gere & MacDonald, 2010). Although distinct phenomena, loneliness and depressive symptoms have been found to be somewhat overlapping constructs during adolescence, i.e. they may occur either simultaneously or independently (Spithoven et al., 2013). Among adolescents, loneliness has even been linked to both friendship quantity and quality (Nangle et al., 2003). Self-reported loneliness can moreover be used to predict whether early adolescents experience a lack of peer acceptance or poor-quality friendships (Kingery & Erdley, 2007; Parker & Asher, 1993). Low levels of parental support or elevated family conflict can heighten the depressive aspects of loneliness that are associated with social isolation during adolescence (DeLay et al., 2013). Long-lasting feelings of loneliness in early life stage (childhood or adolescence) may not only increase the risk for depressive symptoms (Ladd & Ettekal, 2013; Qualter et al., 2013) but even increase the risk for eating disorders (Levine, 2012), academic problems (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011), self-harm (Jones et al., 2011), suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide (Jones et al., 2011; Schinka et al., 2012). Among older adolescents, a positive relationship between loneliness, depression, self-esteem and Internet addiction has been discerned; given that humans are social beings, those who are shy or find it difficult to communicate may seek to convey feelings or thoughts to others without face-to-face interaction, e.g. online (Ayas & Horzum, 2013).

To our knowledge, little qualitative research on adolescents' and young adults' perceptions of loneliness has been undertaken. For example, in one study of how young people conceptualize loneliness, loneliness was found to be a negative, transient experience that primarily occurs in school settings, due to one feeling excluded (Verity et al., 2021a). In that study, loneliness was conceptualized as a negative emotional state where young people engage in negative thinking patterns because of a sense of disconnection from others or the perception that a 'wanted aspect' is missing from their social relationships. The researchers in that study concluded that, unlike loneliness experienced at an older age, loneliness among young people comes from within and appears to be linked to difficulties with peer relationships, negative self-beliefs and issues of trust. Young people's experiences of loneliness could be transient and arise from situational changes, i.e. moving to a new place. Interventions through which young people's negative thought patterns could be transformed and the promotion of inclusive school environments were recommended.

In another qualitative study, a comparison of selected conceptualizations of loneliness to experiences of loneliness from various settings/countries (including levels of social embeddedness, ages 24–45), loneliness was seen as the experience of some impairment of the relationship between an individual and the outside world (Heu et al., 2021). In that study, loneliness was linked to feelings of being closed off from others (not being understood), being trapped inside oneself or being rejected as well as relationship shortcomings, e.g. lacking support or love, isolation, or not being able to count on or share one's thoughts with others. The aspects of loneliness identified included that loneliness can frequently occur despite fulfilling social relationships and that social withdrawal and/or greater independence (i.e. being alone viewed positively) could constitute important solutions and/or help prevent loneliness.

Due to its complexity as a concept, loneliness cannot solely be defined in terms of living far away from and/or seldom interacting with others. Instead, one can be surrounded by others, have online/digital networks or engage in social activities yet still experience a lack of a closer social connection whereby one's loneliness can be alleviated (cf., Junttila, 2018). Understanding how loneliness is experienced can lead to improved interventions and strengthen the validity of measurements of

loneliness (Heu et al., 2021). Having identified a gap in the research, we sought to explore adolescents' and young adults' own experiences of loneliness, including the different types of loneliness that they experience in today's world.

Current study

The aim was to explore loneliness through adolescents' and young adults' own descriptions and experiences. Two key objectives steered our work, expressed here in the form of research questions:

- (1) How do adolescents and young adults describe and experience loneliness?
- (2) What types of loneliness do adolescents and young adults describe?

Method

Sampling and recruitment

In Finland, both the Finnish and Swedish languages are classified as national languages (Arzoz, 2007). Considered an ethnic minority (Statistics Finland, 2018), at about 300,000 people the Swedish-speaking population comprises a significant part of the Finnish population and forms the largest minority group in the Nordic countries (Kulla et al., 2006). As noted in the study information letter, Swedish-speaking adolescents and young adults from Finland were sought for inclusion. We conducted interviews with 15 Swedish-speaking Finns aged 17–30 (eleven females and four males living on the southern and western coasts of Finland). The mean age of the participants was 23 years; all participants were enrolled in high school or university settings. During one interview, a participant revealed that he/she was bilingual and did not self-identify as a Swedish-speaking Finn (Finnish was his/her 'stronger' language). This participant was nevertheless included because he/she spoke Swedish fluently on an everyday basis and lived and studied in a Swedish-language setting. Another participant who was slightly older than the intended age group (30 years) was included because we perceived that that participant provided an important perspective when describing own experiences from adolescence. Most of the included participants lived on their own or in shared accommodation with peers. Two participants lived at home with their parents, two with a partner and one with a partner and small children. All participants were seen to come from a middle-class socioeconomic background.

Participant recruitment occurred in collaboration with a high school and a university in Finland. Self-selection and snowball sampling were used. An information letter in the form of a flyer was sent to all students enrolled in the included settings by email, and the information letter was also posted on the included settings' student union electronic bulletin boards and social media webpages. Included in the flyer was information about the study, participant inclusion criteria (e.g. Swedish-speaking Finn, those with experience of loneliness), that participation would be confidential, and that participants would contribute to valuable research. The researchers' contact information was also included in the flyer, and those who wished to participate were asked to contact the researchers by telephone or email. Those included in the study were encouraged to speak to friends, acquaintances, et cetera about participating in the study. During the interviews, many participants mentioned different types of problems or traumas they had experienced during early childhood that they believed were linked to their present loneliness. These included, e.g. mental problems, anxiety, depression, panic disorder, obsessions, exhaustion, eating disorders, self-harming behaviours and/or childhood trauma.

Table 1. Example of the data analysis process.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Subtheme	Main theme
<i>... I think that a lot of my loneliness comes from that I during my childhood did not experience that I was accepted. I was hurt from being with other people. So ... it led I suppose to that I was drawn to a loneliness ... there was a lot of bullying but I was not like frozen out but I was forced to seriously adapt to be part of a group.</i>	Being hurt and bullied by people while growing up Exclusion and loneliness from previously being excluded and consequently hurt	Bullying Feelings of alienation and exclusion	Bullying or exclusion	Earlier negative experiences
<i>And I have also previously been the one who has been a little outside in [my] class ... I came as a new [student] in the seventh grade and then I tried to be friends with them, but they froze me out. So then I also thought the first year whether it was therefore I had such difficulty in being part of the other classmates in the group [at the university].</i>	Experiencing exclusion while at school Previously experiencing bullying or exclusion results in a fear of connecting with new groups	Feelings of alienation and exclusion Bullying or exclusion	Bullying or exclusion	Earlier negative experiences

Data collection

The data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted by the first researcher. The questions asked included a focus on, e.g. the participants' experiences and feelings of loneliness, and the reason(s) underlying their experiences of loneliness. For example, during interviews prompts or questions were used, e.g. Describe what loneliness means to you, Recount your own experiences of loneliness, What main feelings arise when you experience loneliness?, Have you experienced situations during or from which disturbing/challenging feelings have arisen because of loneliness?, If so, during/from which situations?, How do you usually cope with/manage your loneliness? The participants were also asked to describe in detail a specific situation when they had experienced involuntary loneliness, alongside their actions after and thoughts about the experience. The interviews lasted for 60–90 minutes and were performed digitally by computer (live software program) or by telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The data analysis was inspired by content analysis as defined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The data were read several times and analysed by the first researcher in order to uncover textual meaning, expressed in the form of meaning units. These meaning units were condensed, coded and sorted into subthemes and themes with the purpose of revealing themes that expressed the meaning of the data. To prevent researcher preunderstanding from steering the interpretation, the preunderstanding was acknowledged and thereby mastered. The data were even approached with considerate vigilance. Close reading was used to uncover the substance in the data. During interpretation, subjectivity in relation to objectivity was maintained through a constant balancing act, in order to enable understanding of the substance. A first draft of the main themes and subthemes were created, followed by joint discussion with all of the researchers participating in an iterative process, i.e. back-and-forth movement, until consensus was reached. For an example of the data analysis process, see, Table 1.

Ethical considerations

Prior to the start of the study, a relevant ethical committee granted ethical approval for the study and determined that so long as children under the age of 15 were not included (separate) parental and/or guardian permission for participation in the study was not needed (Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics TENK, 2019; Pekkarinen, 2018). The participants provided their written

Table 2. Study findings related to research question 1.

Main theme	Subtheme
Earlier negative experiences	Lack of attachment to parents or other trauma Low self-esteem Bullying or exclusion
Mental illness or physical disorders	
Self-Centred society, Social norms and social media	

Table 3. Study findings related to research question 2.

Main theme	Subtheme
Different types of loneliness	Social loneliness Emotional loneliness Existential loneliness

informed consent. Ethical guidelines outlined by the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics TENK (2019, 2012) and the WMA Declaration of Helsinki – Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (2018) were followed throughout the duration of the study. The interviewer had a background as a public health nurse with many years of experience from the public health care context. To manage participant distress both during and after the interviews, the interviewer slowed the pace of the interviews and sought to thoroughly discuss any feelings of uneasiness that were seen to arise and/or that the participants either noted and/or displayed during the interviews. The participants were also informed that they could contact the interviewer if they needed help coping with any eventual distress even after the interview.

Findings

Four main themes and six subthemes were generated. From the results, we discerned that adolescents' and young adults' loneliness is not a freestanding phenomenon but instead a complex, subjective experience often interconnected with other experiences or phenomena. We also saw that there are often one or more reasons underlying loneliness. The participants noted that the concepts of being alone and experiencing loneliness were not the same. While they stated that they generally did not perceive being alone to be difficult, they revealed that involuntary loneliness and difficult/burdensome loneliness could be more difficult to manage. They also experienced that loneliness could vary in terms of duration and depth; some reported that they could feel lonelier on certain days while others expressed a more chronic-like or 'life-long' sense of loneliness.

The main themes and subthemes are presented below (see, Tables 2 and 3). In Table 2, the study findings related to research question 1 are presented; in Table 3, the study findings related to research question 2 are presented.

Earlier negative experiences

Earlier negative experiences emerged as a main theme, with the participants describing a variety of different experiences. The subthemes included in this main theme were: Lack of attachment to parents or other trauma, Low self-esteem, and Bullying or exclusion.

Lack of attachment to parents or other trauma

The participants revealed that the absence of or an unsatisfactory attachment with one's parents could negatively influence and/or even increase one's sense of loneliness as an adolescent. They furthermore noted that such a lack of attachment could in turn negatively impact one's future

relationships. ... *I think that [my] mother was depressed when I was little ... And that is perhaps the biggest difference between me and my siblings ... that they have not been in [an] incubator and they have not either the same type of existential loneliness as me. I think a lot is based on [my mother's lack of attachment]* (P1). Another participant described the sense of sorrow she felt following her mother's suicide. The participant perceived that her experience was more intense than that of her siblings because she had been 'mother's favourite'. This participant perceived that she had been left with an existential emptiness; she lacked a mother figure to use as a role model when she later became a parent. A different participant stated that his loneliness arose from the premature death of his mother:

... I ended up taking care of my father, because he did not really have the chance to take care of me ... when he had a very hard time himself. And that's where this loneliness came from that I ended up ... to alone deal with certain feelings ... I ended up dealing with adulthood ... that I didn't really yet have the tools for at that age. (P15)

The same participant described how loneliness manifested itself as silence during his teenage years following his mother's traumatic death. This participant also described his ambivalent relationship to loneliness as a growing need to be alone combined with a desire to be able to manage the anxiety within.

Low self-esteem

The participants perceived that good self-esteem could form a sort of 'protection' against others who purposefully or unpurposefully attempted to belittle one's person. They noted that life was more difficult if one had poor self-esteem from a young age; for those with low self-esteem, negative comments from others could more easily 'hit the mark', leaving the adolescent receiving the comments at risk for loneliness. One participant stated that it was one's 'strength of self' that influenced whether one chooses to 'lose oneself' in a group where one is not accepted or chooses to be alone. This participant also noted that increased personal maturity had given him the courage to be true to himself and that he had realized that, seen from a long-term perspective, he experienced anxiety in groups if he could not be true to himself. This participant stated that he would rather be alone because he felt better that way. Another participant revealed that: ... *I would say that [my] sense of loneliness was often connected to precisely a very weak self-esteem and poor self-confidence* (P6).

Yet another participant related that she is outgoing and easily makes new friends, but that there was a problem retaining those friends. She believed that her loneliness stemmed from the conditional love she experienced in childhood; she only received love and/or confirmation if she had done something well e.g. at school.

... it was, like, kind of my way then maybe ... to seek attention ... because then [when I was diagnosed with Anorexia] ... then [my parents] have started to speak to me in an empathetic and friendly manner. Like when I received a very big prize ... was like the first time [my] mother said that she loved me. So it feels ... that you must ... perform to like ... be good and recognized. (P10)

The same participant also described that even today she lives with deep 'scars' and feels shame, a sense of loneliness and insufficiency, as well as questioning herself. ... *perhaps more shame for who I am, like. As a person ... I have always doubted, that 'I am even a person' ...* (P10).

Bullying or exclusion

The participants mentioned several reasons for their loneliness, including that bullying and/or exclusion at a young age could damage one's trust in others, which we interpreted as underlying their feelings of loneliness.

... I think that a lot of my loneliness comes from that I during my childhood did not experience that I was accepted. I was hurt from being with other people. So ... it led I suppose to that I was drawn to a loneliness ... there was a lot of bullying but I was not like frozen out but I was forced to seriously adapt to be a part of a group. (P12)

One participant stated that he was uncertain whether he had any friends at all: *I don't really know, because of the bullying it became difficult for me to trust people* (P1). Another described how previous experience of exclusion at school had probably impacted her future ability to make connections with classmates while at university.

And I have also previously been the one who has been a little outside in [my] class ... I came as a new [student] in the seventh grade and then I tried to be friends with them, but they froze me out. So then I also thought the first year whether it was therefore I had such difficulty in being a part of the other classmates in the group [at the university]. (P3)

Another participant revealed that, because of bullying, she was left with a feeling that she did not belong, which resulted in a constant fear of being alone and excluded. The participant stated that she would rather leave a group prematurely, before someone could exclude her. This resulted in a vicious spiral of loneliness, isolation and irritation.

... in the small group where I now participate no one has ... bullied me, but I still like feel in a group that I am always excluded. And then like it is easy ... that I withdraw before I feel ... rather than that I all the time get such strong, horrible feelings 'they don't like me, and I am not allowed to be here'. (P10)

In a similar vein, a different participant explained how bullying had caused him to be drawn to loneliness as a way to protect himself against harm.

I would love to share with other people but ... I have become scared of sharing ... [withdrawing] has become a defense mechanism ... and a lot of my time alone I struggle with dark thoughts about myself ... push myself down ... and demand that I should be better ... I have internalized the [bullies'] voices in myself. (P12)

Still another participant described how friends had excluded her from social gatherings while at university, because she had a child and the other friends did not. The participant said that this made her feel very lonely, and she expressed irritation over being excluded.

Mental illness or physical disorders

Mental illness or physical disorders were also seen as a main theme. The participants perceived that involuntary loneliness could be linked to various mental illnesses or physical disorders, especially when experienced at a young age. The participants revealed that their mental state could influence their loneliness, even at various stages of their schooling. One participant stated that her social anxiety while at university prevented her from attending different student happenings arranged for her peers, which hindered her from making friends. Another participant revealed that she had experienced both self-destructive thoughts and engaged in self-destructive behaviour while in high school, which she attributed to a sense of loneliness and a skewed self-image. Yet another noted that her mental state had impacted her school experience, stating that, ... *I had of course a lot of feelings of loneliness when I was in middle school ... I was also completely alone with all the black that was inside [of me]* (P2). As a further participant stated:

It has been a bit like, back and forth depending on ... my own mental state, if I have had a worse period when I have been ... depressed so I have probably had [it] more difficult ... to make contact [with new friends] and have therefore experienced loneliness. (P6)

Another participant mentioned that social anxiety had led to his preference for solitude. This participant perceived that he could not speak to anyone, because he had not been taught that one could reveal one's weak sides:

I had a lot of social anxiety. So I tried in some way also with drugs [to] manage it or something and ... and yes, so I started to just feel worse ... and ... to, like, I wasn't able to get in touch and speak with someone ... I hadn't understood that I also got to have ... that my feelings are entirely valid, and I am allowed to express them. So always when I have felt unwell so I have withdrawn into solitude. (P12)

For another participant, panic disorder had resulted in feelings of loneliness. *Well, if I have been to some larger event and there experienced very big feelings of panic and had to rush out from there ... so you feel really small on this earth and ... and so alone that no one understands* (P7). A different participant described that he is very badly affected by loneliness and that his loneliness increases and his mental health decreases the more time he spends alone. *... it has probably led to quite a few identity crises ... depression, anxiety, panic attacks ... high impulsivity and I easily become like ... like this ... hopeless ... worthless, would only deserve to die ... in the end I become annoyed ... and filled with ... anger* (P9).

One participant noted that her chronic physical disorder impacted her experience of loneliness. *... I have an autoimmune disease ... so ... like ... I have felt alone [with] the disease* (P6). Another participant stated that one of the reasons he had experienced exclusion and loneliness was linked to his illness: *... I have had such a little ... mixture of liking loneliness and ending up a bit excluded and being alone, of different situations and just primarily this then with the thought that this ... since I ... am a diabetic so I have been very taken care of during my upbringing by my parents* (P15).

Self-centred society, social norms and social media

Self-Centred society, social norms and social media emerged as another main theme. One participant stated that people in society today are very self-centred and that such individualism has increased many adolescents' feelings of involuntary loneliness, with adolescents feeling that they perhaps do not 'fit the mold' and cannot live up to the normative standards being set.

I don't think you can blame one [thing], but that it is probably like a little everyone, society in general ... maybe just that, that it has become like extremely self-centered, so if you are a little like that ... odd compared with others ... like that in general then it becomes really easy that you become excluded then. (P11)

Another participant perceived that feelings of loneliness could arise from the combination of not meeting normative standards oneself while also seeing how others, in real life and on social media, socialize and 'fit in'. *Perhaps it is simply that you see that other people ... it can make you feel in some way that you don't fit in, because there is something like this 'pressure' to fit in, and I think that it can also cause you to feel alone* (P4). This participant also emphasized that today's high standards and demands could make one feel 'odd' and therefore unsuccessful and unhappy; one would perhaps never live up to the perfection being portrayed as normative, which in turn could lead to feelings of loneliness.

The participants described social media as both contributing to and alleviating feelings of loneliness and perceived that social media was therefore both negative and positive. *... more feelings of loneliness arise from social media ... there I see of course that other people are social and [can] manage those social situations so then if I myself feel alone, then it feels of course more alone then* (P12). A different participant maintained that social media only shows a 'polished surface' and perceived that such strong contrast to one's own life could result in adolescents feeling lonely. *... so clear that adolescents feel extra alone when they see the nice façade that is shown on social media, because they think that everyone else has it much better* (P2). Another participant noted that the Internet and its offerings combined with the sense that one should take advantage of everything being offered online, e.g. following various platforms, could result in a lack of social interaction, which could lead to a sense of loneliness.

I think that a big reason can be that this with modern technology and Internet ... there is so much to do ... and the [Internet] is so big ... there is so much you can do there ... and I think you can become addicted to it ... and then feel that you perhaps then don't have so much of a need to be out so much or do so much else ... and in that way then I think that you can begin to feel a sort of loneliness where you don't see others face-to-face. And then it can feel difficult to go out and try to hang out with someone ... and you perhaps don't even have someone to hang out with since a while back. (P4)

Conversely, one participant stated that social media could be a positive influence, in the sense that it allows one to temporarily focus on something other than one's own loneliness. This participant maintained that seeing others' activities could act as a form of temporary escapism that also includes the opportunity to contact someone (through social media).

... if I ever feel lonely then it is of course a way to escape ... the grim reality and disappear into another world ... and probably of course I know of course that if you feel alone then ... and later perhaps you yourself take hold of it or someone sends [something] to you so ... it is clear that you feel less alone then. (P6)

The participants also described how the opportunity to speak over the Internet using a live digital video format (picture and sound) could decrease loneliness. However, the participants also emphasized the risk of spending many hours in a row on social media, noting that it could become a burden in everyday life that takes more energy than it gives. One participant perceived that a sense of frustration could easily arise if one sought contact with others via social media but was not able to establish any contact. Another participant stated that it could be negative for adolescents to see videos or pictures from social events that they had not been invited to, because such could increase adolescents' sense of loneliness.

Snapchat map [a location-sharing feature] is the worst they have ever invented like ... so you see then that 'yeah, now that person is with that person' ... and so you only see there how those figures clump together ... and they haven't invited me ... I think it probably ... [increases the feeling of loneliness]. (P8)

One participant observed that if one was already very alone and unwell that social media could make one feel even more unwell. Another participant revealed that:

... on Facebook I nearly only get worse because there you see everyone 'oh, how happy they are', there I also see pictures from the group I am a part of and then it nearly becomes worse, because I know there is one from the group that always wants to socialize with another ... and they are by themselves ... (P10)

Different types of loneliness

Different types of loneliness also emerged as a main theme. Some participants perceived that loneliness could be either more short-term or long-term depending on who else was surrounding them at the time. Some described loneliness as a feeling that could come and go, while others perceived that it was a constant, lurking in the background of their lives. The subthemes included in this main theme are: Social loneliness, Emotional loneliness, and Existential loneliness.

Social loneliness

One participant revealed that if she did not receive the social interaction that she needed during the day, she would seek interaction during the evening/night instead. *Loneliness becomes pretty tough ... if you are alone 24 hours a day* (P14). Another participant described how she experienced social loneliness during her first year at university, when everything was new. *That involuntary loneliness came probably when I started [my] first year of university. Because I came to a new city, a new school and it was the first time I had lived alone in my entire life. I was 19 years old ...* (P2).

A feeling of loneliness arose from her spending too much time alone during her free time:

I can't think of any special situation during [my] first year of studies where I felt especially alone, instead it was something that you felt all the time. And I think it was because we didn't have so many courses, there was a lot of free time, and I was not used to having free time and then ... what do you do with your free time if you don't have any friends ... and what do you do with your free time when you don't have your hobbies that you previously have had. (P2)

Yet another participant stated that while she had previously enjoyed being alone, during her first year of university she did not have so many people to socialize with and it became more difficult to be alone. . . . *I saw of course my classmates adapt more quickly to this new student life. It was easier for them to make new friends and go to events and stuff. . . . I could feel sad and so . . . I don't think I have felt like a part of . . . this group that I study with. Not yet either . . .* (P3). A different participant also described how she had difficulty making contact with peers when starting a new school during high school. . . . *I have of course maybe just thought that 'why, why am I so cowardly and don't take a step to really get to know them'. That I like withdraw so much, that why don't I just go and sit there then in the lunchroom* (P14). One participant explained that she did not have friends among her peer group; instead her friends were between one to two decades older. . . . *I would love to have friends, a group my age that I could socialize with* (P10). Another participant perceived that feelings of sadness, depression and a longing for friends could arise when one was completely without social contacts and/or did not have close friends to contact.

I wouldn't say that I have anyone. Well, I have never had it because if I should feel really alone someday then I don't have a person who I can call and say 'Hi, I feel really alone . . . can we meet?' . . . because based on previous experiences it doesn't work . . . I have noticed . . . when I have tried . . . (P1)

One participant explained that it feels frustrating when one is not included in a social context. *Yes, it becomes like . . . more a frustration over being like not chosen and forgotten in some way . . . to not be enough . . . that why am I not enough, that why, like, does no one look this way. That it becomes like . . . I become more like . . . certainly I become sad . . .* (P14).

Another participant perceived that long-term isolation could lead to a sense of loneliness. . . . *how should I say . . . well, this rat race, this isolation, I have like also physical pains from this mental isolation . . . I can have pain in [my] leg, or in [my] stomach or in different places* (P10). Another participant spoke of how isolation and spending a long time alone can give rise to a sense of fear. . . . *if I have been alone a while, and then I go out because I don't want to be alone in my apartment by myself any more . . . I go out then I become afraid of people . . . that someone would come and speak to me and see how weak and alone I feel . . .* (P12).

Emotional loneliness

The participants perceived that experiencing loneliness in a group or when together with a partner led to a more or less lasting feeling of loneliness because one was constantly reminded of being lonely. One participant initially stated that, because she was constantly surrounded by different people in various contexts, she did not think that she would experience loneliness. However, upon reflection, the participant revealed that: . . . *I have been like that 'I who am surrounded by so many people all the time of course can't be lonely' . . . but later when I thought more about it then . . . probably I can of course feel alone even though I have a lot of people around me* (P7).

The participants perceived that loneliness can even be based on one's own imagined perception of being excluded from a group, even if they are not actually being excluded.

. . . when you feel alone in a group, oh . . . that is the worst there is. When you like . . . if there has been a party or something, and then you come to school. And then you were not there, and it is the only thing people are talking about, and then so they have a lot of those inside 'so you remember that, it was so fun . . . ' and you just sit there and just ugh . . . I don't of course think it's fun that they talk about it. (P8)

Another participant perceived that feelings of loneliness could arise if the context one belongs to is wrong. This participant described a situation where one could try to be social and make friends but may not succeed if the context is incorrect, e.g. the others in the context are very different. The participant continued and stated that when such occurs it is important to seek a new context and a new group with interests similar to one's own. A different participant expressed a similar thought, noting that she believes that it is a very common phenomenon for adolescents

to feel 'left out' in a group of friends. This participant perceived that her own group of friends was dysfunctional and described how all the time someone in the group could feel a little excluded.

The participants revealed that a feeling of emotional loneliness could arise if one did not have someone who 'understood' them, regardless of whether one was part of larger or smaller group; even two people who attempt to relieve their loneliness by socializing with each other can still feel loneliness. One participant perceived that this could most likely be attributed to the different types of loneliness people experience and that a sort of emotional loneliness can arise when a connection is missing. *... we can chat about loneliness, and I know that even if I meet another person, who feels lonely, then we can even feel lonely in the moment ... even though we physically meet up* (P1). A different participant described how lonely she felt during her teens while living at home with her parents because she did not have an emotional connection with them. Another participant spoke about how a feeling of loneliness arose when the emotional connection and exchange he had desired with two friends did not materialize.

And I was of course together with ... the nicest girls ... but yet I still felt alone. Because there were ... things that weren't good ... became completely ... filled inside ... I gave a lot and didn't really get back everything I hoped for ... it just became like ... a feeling of loneliness. (P9)

The participants perceived that emotional loneliness could also be related to a sense that 'no one understands me'.

If you don't feel understood in some way ... It is of course in a way a great loneliness. Yes, that you feel different and then like ... it certainly feels very alone. ... I at least wish that I didn't need to feel ashamed of my loneliness, or ... at least not with friends ... the main thing is that you should be allowed to like be yourself in all your ... faults and whatnot, like. (P12)

Existential loneliness

Several of the participants mentioned that they had often experienced a feeling of being 'lost in life', which can be interpreted as existential loneliness. *Yes such I have experienced a lot ...* (P12). The participants also revealed that they were worried about the future and that they compare themselves to their peers.

... you always become of course like so hard on yourself ... you of course compare yourself, and it develops from that you think that others have had children and such ... it becomes a little like a vicious circle ... but it is obvious that you start to think that 'well when will I find that person' ... and such. (P7)

One participant described that she often experienced existential loneliness at night because it was the only time of the day that she was alone. Being alone caused her to 'brood over' things and thereby lose a lot of sleep. *... for many years I have experienced ... that time when I am home alone, [it] is often night-time. ... that I have felt alone and been left brooding and such ...* (P7). Another participant revealed a loneliness that was linked to a lack of self-confidence and poor self-esteem, which can be interpreted as an existential loneliness. *... the times I have felt that ... my self-confidence and self-image and everything is like on the bottom, so I have felt alone in that ... I am the only one in the world who feels like this and why do I feel like this and ... it becomes of course like a vicious circle from this* (P6). A different participant revealed that she experienced deep sadness, which we interpreted as an existential loneliness, because she perceived that her mother did not understand her as a person and did not confirm her in her identity.

I would say that sometimes ... it has happened so many times that I have felt ... like that I am not understood [by my mother] ... and then I think also that I have felt alone ... it has felt like that she doesn't understand me as a person ... that she has assumed things about me that perhaps have not been true ... and despite that we like have lived a long time together in the same house she still doesn't understand me ... or ... so she doesn't see who I am. (P4)

This same participant described that her mother changed after being confronted and treated her with indifference, noting that this made her feel unloved and extremely alone.

You get no attention or confirmation at all. ... when I was in elementary school then I used to become pretty scared when [my mother] became angry ... but later when I started puberty so I started to be a little more like angry and I remember the first time that I ever yelled back at her ... after that she completely changed in a way ... that she no longer ... she stopped becoming mad ... [and instead become indifferent] ... I have thought a lot about her and think that she wasn't well herself. (P4)

A different participant perceived that she neither belonged nor fit in with other people.

... that in some way no matter where I am so I am like the whole time like this that ... that there is something missing in me, that there is like an emptiness all the time even though I like would be among people so it still happens with them then that I feel [like an outsider] in the group, that it feels like that, that no matter how you are you still have perhaps an anxiety about life, like ... I have always felt myself [to be] so odd ... And that is like horrible, it is like a ripping feeling in you that, because it feels like wherever you go you belong nowhere. (P10)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore loneliness through adolescents' and young adults' own descriptions and experiences. The research questions were: (1) How do adolescents and young adults experience and describe their experiences of loneliness?, (2) What types of loneliness do adolescents and young adults describe?

We found that many reasons underlie and contribute to adolescents' and young adults' loneliness and that it is difficult to define the impact of one particular or individual factor. For example, we saw from the findings that loneliness was associated with low self-esteem and poor self-confidence. This is in line with earlier research, in which internal instability or a difficult relationship with oneself (e.g. poor self-love, poor self-acceptance) has been found to possibly cause loneliness (Heu et al., 2021) and even self-blame has been even linked with loneliness (Verity et al., 2021a). The complexity of the phenomenon that we discerned in the findings is also reflected in earlier research. Other researchers have previously identified an association between loneliness and genes (Van Roekel et al., 2011), family environment (Uruk et al., 1982), low self-efficacy (Tu & Zhang, 2015), self-related doubts, personal factors, other external factors (Vaarala et al., 2013) or personality traits (Vanhalst et al., 2012) such as, e.g. introversion (Vaarala et al., 2013) or shyness (Bowker et al., 2019; Perlman & Peplau, 1998; Shell & Absher, 2019; Stickley et al., 2016; Vaarala et al., 2013). Some have seen an association between loneliness and gender (Avery, 1982) while others have found no such link to gender (Achterbergh et al., 2020) and/or that young people, regardless of gender, feel equally negative emotions (Verity et al., 2021a).

We even found that *earlier negative experiences*, including a *lack of attachment to parents or other trauma*, *low self-esteem* and *bullying or exclusion*, were linked to adolescents' and young adults' loneliness. Other researchers have found a link between loneliness and inconsistent parenting (Stickley et al., 2016); between parental attachment (or lack thereof) and whether one develops loneliness (Wiseman et al., 2006); that those with negative and insecure attachment styles more often experience loneliness (Akbağ & Erden Imamoğlu, 2010; Carr et al., 2013); between adolescents' loneliness and problems in family relationships, e.g. violence (Mereish & Poteat, 2015); and between having experienced an unsafe childhood and the intensity and quantity of loneliness (Tornstam et al., 2010). Loneliness lasting from childhood through adolescence has even been linked to children's and adolescents' low trust in others (cf., Heu et al., 2021; Qualter et al., 2013). More intense feelings of loneliness in adulthood have been linked to an insecure childhood and difficulties making friends during adolescence (Esenay, 2002).

From the findings, we saw that a lack of attachment to parents, including a lack of parental confirmation during childhood, could result in adolescents and young adults beginning to doubt their self-worth, which in turn could result in long-term and unbearable loneliness. Other researchers

investigating adolescents' suffering have determined that the 'cruellest loneliness' that adolescents experience is the feeling that one is excluded from life and not loved (cf., Heu et al., 2021; Lindholm, 1998, 2000). Conversely, less loneliness has been associated with, among others, perceiving one's parents as caring (Von Soest et al., 2020). We even saw from the findings that low self-esteem as an earlier negative experience was a predictor for loneliness, in line with earlier research (Esenay, 2002; Neto, 2002; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Qualter et al., 2013; Rokach, 1989; Vanhalst et al., 2013; Yilmaz et al., 2013). Others have found that low self-esteem and loneliness are associated (Sakiz et al., 2021) and that adolescents with low self-esteem may also lack self-confidence and the social skills needed for developing new relationships, while those with high self-esteem are securely attached (Dhal et al., 2007). Furthermore, as seen from the findings, bullying or exclusion was also linked to adolescents' and young adults' loneliness (cf., Rönkä et al., 2014; Stickley et al., 2016; Vaarala et al., 2013; Vanhalst et al., 2013; Weeks & Asher, 2012). Other researchers have seen that adolescents and young adults who have experienced traumatic environments or childhood bullying have an increased risk for anxiety and severe depressive disorders and often suffer from loneliness (Chen & Qin, 2020; Matthews et al., 2019).

We moreover found that mental illness or physical disorders were linked to adolescents' and young adults' loneliness. Other researchers have found a connection between loneliness and mental illness (Goodwin et al., 2001; Marcus et al., 2012; Mellor et al., 2008; Myllyniemi, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2014); loneliness, anxiety and depression (Qualter et al., 2010, 2013; Schinka et al., 2012, 2013; Vanhalst et al., 2015); loneliness and physical disorders in adolescents (Riggenbach et al., 2019); and social isolation and adolescents with chronic physical disease (Cheung & Zebrack, 2017).

Even self-centred society, social norms and social media were associated with adolescents' and young adults' loneliness in the findings. Still, the link between social media and loneliness is not necessarily straightforward (cf., Smith et al., 2021). Other researchers have seen that social media can increase adolescents' loneliness (Arampatzi et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2018; Jin, 2013; Krause-Parello, 2008; Lemieux et al., 2013; Primack et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2008; Twenge et al., 2019; Vaarala et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2018), possibly linked to a decrease in in-person interaction (Nie et al., 2002; Twenge et al., 2019). We discerned that the use of social media could both cause and alleviate adolescents' and young adults' loneliness, which is in line with earlier research (cf., Thomas et al., 2020; Vaarala et al., 2013). For example, other researchers have found no association between loneliness and the use of social media (Facebook; Yavich et al., 2019) while others have conversely seen that the use of social media might increase positive feelings and a sense of community/belonging (Liu et al., 2018). Some have seen that the use of social media might for those students deemed high in openness (as a 'Big Five' personality trait) constitute a resource to connect with others while those high in loneliness use social media to compensate a lack of real-life (offline) relationships (Skues et al., 2012).

Also different types of loneliness, including *social loneliness*, *emotional loneliness* and *existential loneliness*, emerged from the findings as being linked to adolescents' and young adults' loneliness. Other researchers have previously found that loneliness is a multidimensional concept (Von Soest et al., 2020). For example, among university students some researchers have found a connection between social loneliness, emotional loneliness and feelings of depression and anxiety (Diehl et al., 2018). Others have found that loneliness and depressive symptoms may overlap, noting that such should be jointly assessed (cf., Heu et al., 2021; Spithoven et al., 2017). Many of the participants in this study experienced chronic or even lifelong loneliness, which is in line with earlier research (Heu et al., 2021). While other researchers have discerned the existence of social, emotional and existential loneliness (Heu et al., 2021) they have even found that emotional and existential loneliness, quite common among our participants, is much less frequent and mostly situational (bound to a specific event or a shorter timeline; Heu et al., 2021).

As seen from the findings, adolescents' and young adults' social and emotional loneliness appear to be linked to structural shortcomings in one's relational network (cf. Weiss, 1973) or a lack of meaningful social relationships. One participant in this study revealed that her loneliness was due to a *social loneliness* that began the first year of university when she moved to a new city and school and lived alone for the first time in an unfamiliar environment. Other researchers have seen that young people want to have fun with others and can even long for someone to share their secrets with (Verity et al., 2021b). Even other participants in this study noted that they perceived their move to a new setting to be a source of involuntary loneliness. Other researchers have found that moving to new places can be stressful and cause loneliness (Carr et al., 2013; Serrano-Sánchez et al., 2021; Blinded for peer review; Vaarala et al., 2013) and that studying at university is a life-stage during which loneliness can become a part of life (Vaarala et al., 2013). Another participant stated that he lacked and had never had a close friend. While some researchers have also seen that shortcomings in social relationships can cause loneliness (Hawkey et al., 2008), others have found the opposite (cf., Heu et al., 2021).

We even discerned *emotional loneliness* among the participants in this study, a sense of being alone even though one is surrounded by others. Loneliness can still be experienced despite one having fulfilling social relationships (cf., Moustakas, 1972), and researchers have identified a type of loneliness connected to being in the middle of a group of people yet still feeling lonely (Cacioppo et al., 2002). As seen in this study, emotional loneliness can be considered a lack in one's social network (a sense one is neither accepted nor fits in) or the lack of a close intimate connection with another person (Weiss, 1973). Researchers have previously seen that having at least one close friend is important because this reduces the likelihood of suffering from loneliness (Stickley et al., 2016). However, we note that the forms that loneliness takes has changed over the past few years (Junttila, 2018); in today's world loneliness is not necessarily related to the quantity or availability of ones' social interactions but instead the possible 'mismatch' between one's desired social interactions and the subjective perceptions of them (Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014).

All except one of the participants in this study are Swedish-speaking Finns and consequently belong to a minority group. Being part of an ethnic minority can be a resource for an individual because it can give a sense of belonging to a community and pride in a shared collective identity (Mossakowski, 2003). However, members of ethnic minority populations have been found to experience higher degrees of loneliness (Visser & El Fakiri, 2016) and experience discrimination and abuse, while adolescents from ethnic minorities often suffer from higher levels of mental illness (Alegria et al., 2015). The link between loneliness and adolescents' and young adults' ethnic identity should be explored in future research, to see whether ethnic identity (i.e. majority versus minority population) impacts adolescents' and young adults' experiences.

We wish to emphasize the importance of adults and professionals being able to discern and interpret possible signs of loneliness among adolescents and young adults. Researchers have previously demonstrated that being excluded from a community and thereby experiencing, e.g. isolation or social loneliness, can be truly harmful (Junttila, 2018). Being rejected by others can be compared to bullying and abuse because these all cause 'social pain', seen as impulses in the brain that occur in the exact same area as physical pain. While it is possible to alleviate physical pain, social pain is more difficult to manage (Junttila, 2018).

As noted above, we found that adolescents' and young adults' use of social media could both contribute to and alleviate loneliness and that the participants in this study especially experienced emotional and existential loneliness. We therefore question whether, in today's

digitalized society, modern technology is at the root of such loneliness. Has spending more time virtually socializing through social media led to a decrease in real-life social interactions and relational encounters among adolescents and young adults? Has adolescents' and young adults' ability to naturally connect on an emotional level decreased because their interaction with others most frequently occurs online and not in real life? Has adolescents' and young adults' growing emotional loneliness led in turn to an increase in existential loneliness, where adolescents and young adults eventually feel that they do not belong anywhere? Lastly, does a sense of emotional loneliness more easily 'trigger' adolescents' and young adults' feelings of existential loneliness because of the developmental life stage that they are in?

Those experiencing loneliness can even experience negative feelings (Verity et al., 2021a), e.g. sadness, pessimism, hostility or irritability. If one cannot address the origin of such negative feelings, one cannot understand how to reduce one's loneliness over time and reconnect with others (Wols et al., 2015). Consequently, not only is it important that adults and professionals are able to discern and interpret possible signs of loneliness in adolescents and young adults, it is also important that adults and professionals are able to identify, interpret and understand signs that adolescents and young adults are experiencing negative feelings, which may indicate underlying loneliness. Furthermore, we stress that *time* must be allocated to pursuing the goal of alleviating and reducing adolescents' and young adults' loneliness.

One limitation of this study is that many of the participants had various mental problems or traumatic backgrounds, which could constitute a source for bias. Another limitation is that it is possible that various physical signs and/or other potentially valuable forms of physical expression were missed because the interviews were conducted by computer (live software program) or telephone. However, a strength is that the data were seen to be very rich. Another strength is that the first researcher was experienced in qualitative studies and personally transcribed the interviews to facilitate thorough familiarization with the data prior to initial analysis. Moreover, all of the researchers participated in a discussion of the main themes and subthemes to achieve consensus. We therefore maintain that a trustworthy, nuanced depiction of adolescents' and young adults' lived experiences of loneliness in Finland was yielded from the study findings.

Conclusion

A nuanced understanding of adolescents' and young adults' lived experiences of loneliness in the year 2020 was revealed, which can contribute to new understanding of the reasons underlying adolescents' and young adults' loneliness. We saw that earlier negative experiences, mental illness or physical disorders, self-centred society, social norms and social media were all linked to adolescents' and young adults' loneliness in the setting investigated. In future studies, a focus should be placed on exploring the different types of loneliness adolescents and young adults experience as well as professionals' perspectives on adolescents' and young adults' loneliness.

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Author contributions

Jessica Hemberg contributed to study conception, data collection, design, data analysis, discussion and drafted the manuscript. Lillemor Östman, Yulia Korzhina, Henrik Groundstroem, Lisbet Nyström and Pia Nyman-Kurkiala contributed to the data analysis, discussion and provided critical reflections.

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Ethical approval

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