Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences
Department of Education and Lifelong Learning

Yin Ting Lee

Understanding adolescents' perspectives on loneliness in urban Malaysia: The role of culture and social media

Master's thesis in Childhood Studies
Supervisor: Linn Cathrin Lorgen
May 2024

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Yin Ting Lee

Understanding adolescents' perspectives on loneliness in urban Malaysia: The role of culture and social media

Master's thesis in Childhood Studies
Supervisor: Linn Cathrin Lorgen
May 2024

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences
Department of Education and Lifelong Learning

Abstract

Loneliness is experienced across cultures and matters at all ages. Although the phenomenon of loneliness may be universal, it is conceptualized differently, shaped by the socio-cultural context. While significant research exists on older people's experiences of loneliness, relatively little attention has been given to studying children and young people. Therefore, having identified a gap in research, this thesis explores adolescents' sensemaking of loneliness within the Malaysian context. Moving beyond child-centeredness, this research focuses on the role of culture, language, and social media in shaping adolescents' knowledge production process. Within this aim, this research is guided by social constructionist and relational approaches that both highlight the situatedness and context-dependence of adolescents' perspectives of loneliness. To gain an in-depth understanding of this topic, a qualitative research methodology was employed and a total of nine participants aged between 13 – 17 were recruited. As a study positioned within the field of Childhood Studies that perceives adolescents as meaning-makers and social actors, drawing and sentence completion activities were used in addition to semi-structured interviews to facilitate participation and the inclusion of adolescents' voices.

The analysis underscores the significant role of cultural values, i.e., emphasis on collectivism, in shaping the participants' understanding of loneliness through informing their expectations for social connectedness. The term loneliness is also found to convey different meanings in different languages, resulting in nuanced views of the phenomenon. As such, loneliness requires relational analysis of the socio-cultural context that co-constructs these perspectives. Furthermore, loneliness is found to be associated with certain themes that are culturally meaningful and need to be interpreted within context. Other than the dualistic of good and evil, the findings also highlight other possibilities of social media's role in influencing one's perspective of loneliness. It echoes the relational perspective that recognizes individuals' role in influencing and transforming media interactions in an ongoing process of meaning-making. These insights on loneliness have implications for expanding the possibilities of identification, interpretation, and intervention of loneliness, which is beyond the individual and encompasses relations not just between humans but also between humans and technology.

Acknowledgements

A year ago, I could never have anticipated reaching this point—the completion of my thesis. If I were to describe this journey of pursuing my master's degree and writing this thesis, I envision myself as an explorer embarking on a voyage of exploration. Along the way, I have received invaluable support from countless people who in one way or another provided their valuable assistance.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my nine fellow sailors who generously shared their time and perspectives with me. Thank you for coming onboard and setting sail with me on this journey of "producing treasures". This thesis would not be what it is without each of your contributions.

I am beyond grateful for my supervisor, Linn Cathrin Lorgen, who has been my lighthouse throughout this process. Thank you for guiding my way while letting me forge my own path. Thank you for being the light that shows me a way out when I felt lost in the fog of uncertainty.

To my dear parents, to whom I owe everything, you are my safe haven. Thank you for the unwavering support you always have given me and will continue to give me. Thank you for the unconditional love that has enabled me to come this far.

To Daniel, my anchor, who has more confidence in me than I have in myself. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I doubted myself. Thank you for giving me the reassurance I needed to hear and the courage to pursue my dreams.

Finally, to the Lord who establish the work of my hands, to You be the glory!

I believe, this is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a whole new one. Linn's advice to "be curious" has been my guiding compass, especially when I felt nervous to navigate in the field, not knowing what to expect. Now, it will continue to steer me toward exciting horizons in my future endeavours.

Table of Contents

List of Figures ... xi
List of Tables ... xi
1 Introduction ... 1
1.1 Context of the topic ... 1
1.2 Significance of the study ... 3
1.3 Personal motivation ... 4
1.4 Research aims and questions ... 5
1.5 Theoretical perspectives and research design ... 5
1.6 Outline of thesis ... 6
2 Background ... 7
2.1 The roots of loneliness ... 7
2.1.1 Theoretical review of loneliness ... 8
2.1.2 Empirical review of loneliness ... 9
2.2 Loneliness and adolescents ... 10
2.3 Loneliness and social media ... 12
2.4 The research site - Malaysia ... 13
2.5 Loneliness in Malaysia ... 15
2.6 Chapter summary ... 16
3 Theoretical Framework ... 17
3.1 Introduction to childhood studies ... 17
3.1.1 Childhood as "being" and "becoming" ... 17
3.2 Childhood and the notion of loneliness as socially constructed ... 19
3.3 Relationality in childhood studies ... 22
3.4 The relational aspects of affordances ... 23
3.5 Chapter summary ... 24
4 Methodology ... 25
4.1 Methodological approach ... 25
4.2 Sampling strategy ... 27
4.3 Accessing the field and its challenges ... 28
4.4 Recruiting participants ... 29
4.5 Participatory methods ... 30
4.5.1 Drawing ... 31
4.5.2 Sentence completion exercise ... 32
4.5.3 Semi-structured interview ... 33
4.6 Ethical considerations ... 36

4.6.1 Reflexivity 37
4.7 Analysis 39
4.8 Chapter summary 39
5 Making Sense of Loneliness 40
5.1 Exploring Loneliness: Perspectives and narratives 40
5.1.1 The language of loneliness 41
5.1.2 Loneliness across languages 43
5.2 Loneliness as a state of being 44
5.3 Loneliness as a state of mind 49
5.4 Loneliness as transient and situational 53
5.5 The paradox of loneliness 55
5.6 The complexity of loneliness 58
5.7 Chapter summary 62
6 Loneliness, its associations, and social media 63
6.1 Loneliness and its associations 63
6.1.1 Loneliness and boredom 63
6.1.2 Loneliness and introversion 66
6.1.3 Loneliness across lifespan 68
6.2 Loneliness and social media 71
6.2.1 An overall view of social media's role 71
6.2.2 Diverse attitudes towarsd the role of social media in loneliness 74
6.2.3 Social media – two sides to the story 77
6.2.4 The role of social media in shaping perspectives of loneliness 78
6.3 Chapter summary 81
7 Conclusion 82
7.1 Key points summary 82
7.2 Strengths and limitations 84
7.3 Further recommendations 85
References 86
Appendices 100

List of Figures

Figure 5.1: Anna's drawing of 'A world of loneliness' 44
Figure 5.2: Ethan's drawing of 'A world of loneliness' 52
Figure 5.3: Lena's drawing of 'A world of loneliness' 57
Figure 5.4: Vivian's drawing of 'A world of loneliness' 60
Figure 6.1: An example of the content described by Vivian 74

List of Tables

Table 5.1: Information of participants 40

1 Introduction

Children are meaning-makers who construct their own version of reality within childhood. One key feature suggested by Prout and James (2015) was childhood is understood as a social construction. Social constructionism denies that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality (Burr, 2015). The rejection of a tendency to naturalize and essentialize children or childhood thus allows multiple models of childhood to exist. In the same line of thinking, this research focusses on understanding adolescents' sensemaking of loneliness, which the phenomenon has become a major issue of concern in societies. As adolescence, like childhood, can be culturally constructed, so the meaning of loneliness can be understood differently, depending on context. That is, knowledge and meanings are contextual as our beliefs and understandings of the world are shaped by the society we are positioned in. From this perspective, it is plausible that the conceptualization of loneliness varies from person to person. Yet, the overarching adult-child dichotomy makes it harder to take children seriously, let alone pay attention to understand how they give meaning to their experiences and to their relations with the world around them. This may explain the relatively scarce research focused on children and young people's experiences of loneliness (The Children's Society, 2019). As promoted by the principles of Childhood Studies, this research acknowledges adolescents' active roles in determining their own lives and influencing those around them, without losing sight of the social constructionist's perspective that encourages viewing adolescence in context. Therefore, the research's interest is in adolescents' contextual knowledge on a phenomenon often described as universal - loneliness (Bekhet et al., 2008). In this chapter, the background and significance of this study will be presented in the following sections along with the research aim and questions. An outline of the thesis will be provided as well.

1.1 Context of the topic

Loneliness as a phenomenon is both prevalent and common throughout the life course. Despite the apparent universality of loneliness, scant research on adolescents' individual perspectives on loneliness has been undertaken due to the misconception of them as not susceptible to feelings of loneliness (Hemberg et al., 2022). To be precise, the term adolescents, as defined by The World Health Organization (WHO), refers to individuals in the 10-19 years age group. This definition is also accepted by the Malaysian society (Anderson & Barrett, 2020). Childhood and adolescence are often perceived as periods in which individuals are constantly surrounded by peers and friends, filled with fun and laughter. The absence of loneliness in children and adolescents is a commonly held view, thus delaying the discovery and investigation on childhood loneliness (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). As a result, the concerted effort of work to understand loneliness in childhood and adolescence has been fairly late in coming to the field as compared to the investigation of loneliness in adulthood (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). Loneliness, however, has been described as an inherent part of the human condition, which derives from the universal need for belongingness–the need to establish stable social bonds with others who care (Baumeister & Leary, 1995 as cited in Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). Recognizing that children can and do experience loneliness, the phenomenon was later examined from various perspectives, including positive and negative experiences of loneliness

(Larson et al., 2014), involuntary and voluntary loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007), types of loneliness, i.e., social and emotional basis (Hemberg et al., 2022), risk factors (Verity et al., 2021), and preventive measures (Sháked & Rokach, 2015).

However, the majority of existing studies on loneliness are still heavily positioned within the context of adulthood and the elderly. For example, loneliness among older people is often studied in relation to social isolation, depression, and physical health, whilst research on loneliness in adults has been carried out within the area of caring and nursing by including various contexts of illness. Specific to this research context, studies on loneliness in Malaysia have been conducted in relation to variables such as stress, self-esteem, depression (Yaacob et al., 2009; Uba et al., 2020), and there is research with a range of contexts, for instance focusing on the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown on loneliness (Hussin et al., 2021). Much of the research is analyzed through quantitative and statistical approaches (Aung et al., 2017; Nasir et al., 2016). Given the lack of qualitative findings in the field, there is a gap to bridge in terms of an in-depth understanding of how individuals within this particular context make sense of loneliness. After a comprehensive review of the research context, there are indeed a broad range of publications on loneliness, with a great deal related to other existential aspects and feelings, as well as major attention upon the negative aspects of loneliness. If the positive aspects of loneliness are focused upon at all, part of the results are characterized by the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007). Sadly, most research stop with this dualistic understanding, that loneliness is either positive or negative, and the essential structure that connects these aspects of loneliness are not illuminated (Dahlberg, 2007). Therefore, this research attempts to understand adolescents' sensemaking of loneliness within their context through a relational lens.

Furthermore, the links between social media use and loneliness have also been explored with mixed results (e.g. Guo et al., 2014; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014; Twenge et al., 2019). In efforts to understand the association of loneliness and social Internet usage, past researchers found two dominating yet contrasting perspectives based on prior studies. On one hand, the *displacement hypothesis* advances the idea that people often displace offline relationships with online relationships. On the other hand, the *stimulation hypothesis* focuses on the potential of social technologies to reduce loneliness by enhancing existing relationships or forging new ones (Nowland et al., 2017). Similarly, Fox (2019) has pointed out that the literature to date only gives the picture of a general interest in either the positive or the negative effects of social media use. A deterministic thinking as such can be problematic as it leads to the risk of overlooking the complexities of our relationship with social media, that is beyond the simple categorization of "either-or".

Finally, a major difficulty encountered by researchers in this field is the conceptualization of loneliness in childhood and adolescence. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that whatever theoretical framework researchers adopt, loneliness is regarded as a multidimensional and complex construct that is subjective, and thus can only be judged from the individual's own perspective (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). Looking from a macro level, the differences between societies and cultures may further imply different meanings of loneliness due to the discrepancy in expectations of how individuals should be embedded in social relationships. As loneliness can be experienced by anyone, regardless of age (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), across varied cultures and diverse relational contexts people inhabit, it points to the need for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of loneliness to confront imperialism on knowledge production in

this field. That is, how loneliness is conceptualized in a culture or society should not (and cannot) be naturalized and disseminated as normative conceptions across nations and cultures. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that there are cultural differences in regard to the meaning of loneliness. As a point of departure, this research seeks to problematize the universalistic concept of loneliness that is projected to the world by mainstream cultures and open our eyes to other potential and diverse constructions of loneliness in other contexts.

1.2 Significance of the study

As a phenomenon belonging to our everyday existence, much has been said and written about it. Yet the fact that loneliness is recognized and experienced by almost everyone at some point in life does not make it any easier to capture the phenomenon and its meaning (Dahlberg, 2007). Loneliness can be perceived differently, even by one person, at different times and in different situations (Dahlberg, 2007). Past researchers have noticed that although there were a number of similarities, there are also some important differences between the ways that children conceptualize loneliness and the ways that adult researchers in the field conceptualize loneliness in children (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). With that said, loneliness is likely to be conceptualized dissimilarly according to the stage of life at which it is experienced due to the distinct social contexts of adolescence and adulthood, such as the function of social relationships, the role of friendships, and attachments to caregivers (Dahlberg, 2007). Moving forward, the uniqueness of this research lies in the fact that instead of merely taking an interest in university students, adults, and elderly people like previous studies in Malaysia (Aung et al., 2017; Tahir et al., 2017; Hussin et al., 2021), it focuses on adolescents, which are reported to be significantly lonelier than any other age group (Franssen et al., 2020 as cited in Hemberg et al., 2022). This is also the case in Malaysia where almost 10 percent of Malaysian secondary school students were found to feel lonely "most of the time or always" (NHMS, 2017). Because loneliness is prevalent in young people, and the contexts of youth differ to those of older adulthood, it is important to establish whether such conceptualizations of loneliness make sense to young people.

By contributing to understanding loneliness among adolescents, the quality of current measurements for loneliness and interventional strategies for overcoming loneliness can be made beneficial and enhanced (Heu, 2021). This is significant because many widely used measures of loneliness for adolescents today have been developed based on research focusing on the experiences and conceptualizations of loneliness in adulthood (Cole et al., 2021). In other words, the development of those measures neglects the voices of adolescents thus are incongruent and inappropriate for use within the contexts of adolescence (Maes et al., 2017). Consequently, exploring perspectives of loneliness among adolescents can inform further research in the development of loneliness measures and utilizable intervention materials that are tailored towards young people's experiences of loneliness, which contradicts with current practice, where ideas developed from older adults are applied to young people (Verity et al., 2021). As mentioned earlier, the findings of quantitative research have shed light on the factors associated with loneliness in adolescence, but there is no doubt a deficit in knowledge of young people's views on loneliness. This research aims to focus on the fundamental level, that is understanding the perspectives of adolescents themselves, by using qualitative methods to explore the in-depth meanings that adolescents assign to loneliness. Building upon this, this research moves beyond child-centeredness by taking account of the context and culture that shape adolescents' knowledge production process. With such an

approach to loneliness, the idea is to illuminate the intertwined personal and contextual meanings of the phenomenon, and by that offer new understandings of what loneliness is and can be within a specific context. Furthermore, given today's networked society, additional attention has been given to the links between social media use and loneliness. This research attempts to open up possible discussions of the role social media plays within this context, instead of centering on the idea of technological determinism. Rather than focusing on either the good and bad impact social media has on loneliness, this study considers the wider structures and contexts that shape adolescents' lives and how adolescents make sense of the use of social media in their daily lives (Burkitt, 2016).

1.3 Personal motivation

As someone who came from a psychology background, the universal principles of human thoughts and action had always been my center of focus until I was introduced to a different lens of seeing things through the Childhood Studies program. While I do believe that everyone is unique, categorizing people seemed to be an extremely productive pursuit and an easy way out in a chaotic world that we are living in now. When I was fully immersed in that field and surrounded by beliefs of "one size fits all", it was hard to see that my attempt to describe only the average actually runs the risk of describing nobody in particular (Molden & Dweck, 2006). This is not to dismiss the importance of universal principles, but rather an acknowledgement that relying solely on psychological ways of thinking and theorizing might obscure our understanding of how real people actually function, especially when we start generalizing and fitting others into boxes we made for ourselves out of our own experiences.

In my first semester of the Childhood studies program, I came across a research paper that challenged my view on the concept of "universal understanding", leaving a profound impact on how I see things that I have once taken for granted. That is, what I thought was universal and common might not be applicable for others from a different culture and/or society. Just because I agree with the "universal" standard does not make it a fact or reality to others. In brief, that paper introduced a different perspective on how people from different parts of the world, with different languages and practices, define orphanhood (Meintjes & Giese, 2006). With the term being widely used and expanded broadly over time, the textbook definition of an orphan has now more than one implication depending on the societal and cultural context (Abebe, 2009). Unlike the commonly agreed definition of orphans as those who have lost one or both biological parents, children in some contexts (especially in the collectivistic communities) are identified as orphans only if they have no parent and no other "substitute" guardian or caregiver in terms of the social aspects to care for them. In other words, orphans means those who have been left in a state of isolation and destitution in that particular context, rather than the "standard" definition some societies agree with (Meintjes & Giese, 2006). While reflecting on the root words of orphans in my mother tongue, I noticed that orphan in Mandarin, which is "孤儿" (gū'ér), is formed by two Chinese characters that are equivalent to the term lonely, lone or alone; and child, respectively. Following that train of thought, I started to ponder the question of whether loneliness also carries different contextual meanings that I never bothered to find out. It came to my awareness that not being able to acknowledge the diverse meanings of a term can led to misconceptions and mislabeling of others.

More often than not, Eurocentric values are so deeply ingrained in the world's mainstream cultures that we tend to take them for granted and stop seeking for other

possibilities thus unconsciously imposing “Western” assumptions of childhood across contexts (Liebel & Budde, 2017). This is when I realized I cannot and should not assume something to be true and generalizable without considering the local meanings and sentiments associated with the concept. Most importantly, I started considering this question - what is the point of doing all this if my knowledge is still based on assumptions? Being inspired by that, I knew I had to start somewhere. While being introduced to relational approaches through the curriculum, I realized that Childhood Studies itself is relational. The interdisciplinarity of the field allows me to work on my interest in the phenomenon of loneliness, while upholding the importance of children’s active roles and agency. Rather than condemning universality, this research begins by questioning taken-for-granted knowledge with a careful consideration of personal meaning people assign to their experiences and interactions with the world. In so doing, one is able to unfold and reconstruct one’s knowledge on the “truth”.

1.4 Research aims and questions

The overarching aim of this research is to explore the contextual meanings of loneliness through the perspectives of Malaysian adolescents. I chose to explore this topic conceptually as opposed to directly probing participants about their personal experiences with loneliness. My concern was that delving into personal accounts might inadvertently cause harm as disclosing such experiences can trigger sensitive emotions and unpleasant memories, rendering participants vulnerable. Consequently, I developed research questions that prioritize the participants’ well-being, adhering to ethical principles and avoiding undue intrusiveness. While addressing the complexity of this phenomenon, this thesis seeks to develop a more nuanced portrayal of loneliness by understanding the perspectives of Malaysian adolescents themselves. Additionally, the influence of cultural factors, language, and social media within this context will be considered. Initially, the research questions were formulated in a way that equal attention should be shared between the aspects of adolescents’ description of loneliness and the role of social media in this phenomenon. However, after listening to the participants’ perspective during fieldwork, their way of making sense loneliness contextually took up a large part of our conversations. As it turned out, the participants have provided rich data on the subject of loneliness itself that requires more in-depth attention and space for discussion. Hence, the aspect of social media has been toned down and reformulated as a sub-question to better elucidate the participants’ perspectives on this topic. As such one main research question, along with two sub questions, will be explored to approach the research aim:

1. How do Malaysian adolescents make sense of the phenomenon of loneliness?
    - 1.1 How can Malaysian adolescents’ descriptions of loneliness be understood in light of culture and language?
    - 1.2 How do Malaysian adolescents describe the role of social media in terms of loneliness?

1.5 Theoretical perspectives and research design

This study refers to social constructionism and relational approaches to frame the analysis of the data collected. Social constructionism provides a framework to understand how adolescents make sense of loneliness within their socio-cultural context, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual and structural aspects. The role of language is also emphasized through discourse analysis within this framework. By using relational approaches, both the phenomenon of loneliness and adolescence can be understood from

the wider cultural structure and societal contexts that encompass relations between humans, as well as between humans and technology. To highlight the interdisciplinarity of Childhood Studies, insights and perspectives from other fields will be integrated into the analysis process as well. For example, the concept of affordances borrowed from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) plays an important part in understanding the role social media plays in shaping adolescents' perspectives on loneliness. To achieve the research aims and address the research questions, active participation and engagement of adolescents in expressing their views and opinions are essential. The fieldwork site is located in an urban area in Malaysia, and the study sample consists of Malaysian individuals aged 10 to 19, in accordance with both local definitions and the United Nations' definition of adolescents. For this qualitative research, drawing and sentence completion activities, in addition to semi-structured interviews were methods employed. The use of these approaches enabled a thorough exploration of the intricate concept of loneliness, contextualized through the perspectives of the participants. In the forthcoming chapters, I will delve into a detailed discussion of both the theoretical framework and the research design.

1.6 Outline of thesis

This thesis comprises a total of seven chapters. **Chapter 2** provides a comprehensive review of the literature on loneliness, focusing on its various dimensions. Loneliness will be discussed in relation to adolescents and social media to understand how they have been interpreted and presented in past studies. Next to that, a brief description of how this research is situated within these debates will be shared. I will then provide a detailed introduction to the research site, explaining its complexity and diversity. A literature review on loneliness within the Malaysian context will also be highlighted. **Chapter 3** delves into the theoretical orientation underpinning this study as well as guiding the analysis process. Relevant theories and concepts in Childhood Studies such as social constructionism and relationality will be critically explored in regard to how they are relevant to this research. Theoretical perspectives on social media research will also be introduced. **Chapter 4** is dedicated to the methodology and methods employed in this research. In this chapter I will present the methodological approach of this study, sampling strategy, and my process of entering the field. Furthermore, a detailed description of the participatory methods that were incorporated in this study will be provided alongside a discussion of ethical considerations and analytical approach. **Chapter 5** is the first of two analysis chapters for this thesis, which begins with an overview of the participants who took part in this research, followed by a thorough analysis of the participants' descriptions of loneliness and the role of language. This chapter is structured in accordance with the participants' diverse perspectives on loneliness which includes loneliness as a state of being and mind, as well as loneliness as a transient and situational phenomenon. The paradox and complexity of loneliness are also included to address its multifaceted nature. **Chapter 6** is the second part of the analysis, in which the associations of loneliness with other aspects are discussed through a cultural lens. The participants' perspectives of social media's role in loneliness are highlighted by analyzing their diverse attitudes and how they navigate through the virtual realm. **Chapter 7**, as a concluding chapter, offers discussions of key findings along with critical reflections on the strength and limitations of this research. Finally, recommendations for future research are presented.

2 Background

The phenomenon of loneliness may be universal, but the way of perceiving it is a product of discourse and an effect of social construction. To provide a backdrop for understanding the ways the phenomenon is shaped and understood today, I will review previous literature on the history, definition, components, impact, and stigma of loneliness across time and space. A comprehensive review of past research findings on loneliness will be presented to see how the two important aspects of the current research, social media and adolescents, are generally discussed in relation to loneliness. Finally, a description of the context in which this research takes place will be included. Aside from individual experience, considering the multicultural and multilingual characteristics of the Malaysian context may shed light on the construction of adolescents' perspective of loneliness as socio-cultural context also plays a significant role in the process of meaning-making.

2.1 The roots of loneliness

Exploring the origins of the word "loneliness" and tracing how its meaning has evolved over time can provide valuable insights into contemporary notions of loneliness and being alone, and the ways in which we might address it (Worsley, 2018). The term seems to have originated in early modern Britain during the late sixteenth century, when it signaled the danger created by being too far from other people. In those days, straying far from society meant relinquishing the protections it offered. Therefore, loneliness was defined as "far from neighbors" with no one else around to provide assistance (Hood, 2018). Interestingly, before the nineteenth century, loneliness was not considered as an emotional or psychological experience, but a physical state with both negative and positive connotations. Simply being alone was not inherently negative or a reflection of an individual's social failures, as is often portrayed in modern concepts of loneliness (Burnett, 2023). However, loneliness also has social and political dimensions, causing its meaning to shift according to people's views about the self and the outer world.

As Western societies underwent radical lifestyle transformations due to industrialization and mass migration in the early nineteenth century, a new conception of loneliness emerged. Early modern Britain used to associate loneliness with the spaces outside the city however, loneliness has since moved inward. Here, loneliness means a distinct experience arising in response to the emerging competitive individualism of modern life (Fernandez & Matt, 2020). The concept of "individualism" introduced and praised in the West has changed humans' understandings of themselves and others, constrained individual self-expression, and consequently created the sense of isolation necessary for the emergence of loneliness throughout the nineteenth century. This emphasis on individualism, particularly in the setting of growing capitalism, led to increased personal accountability for failures. As a result of these individualistic ideologies, many felt lonely with a desire for meaningful relationships with others, hoping to feel a sense of belonging. Loneliness can no longer be explained by environmental factors alone as people would not have experienced loneliness when urban environments push people closer to one another if that was the case (Burnett, 2023). Consequently, it gave birth to new understandings of loneliness that is not necessarily caused by a lack of social interactions, but rather a lack of meaningful relationships. It is an emotional state of feeling apart from others – without necessarily being so. Evidently, the rise of

individualism corroded social and communal ties, leading to a language of loneliness that did not exist prior to around 1800. Aside from that, the advancement of psychology in the twentieth century came up with series of specialisms around emotional and psychological wellbeing that attempted to define the healthy and unhealthy emotions an individual should experience (Burnett, 2023). As a result, it brought forth psychological concepts like introversion and extroversion, that had significant cultural and social implications, particularly in the American society where ideas of individualism and self-improvement is highly valued. Introversion became associated with loneliness, while extroversion reflected more desirable traits like sociability and self-reliance. This perspective often blamed lonely individuals for their own suffering and reinforced the concept that loneliness was linked to personal shortcomings. These concepts not only shaped the way people perceived themselves but also shaped societal views of certain personality traits, thus stigmatizing loneliness (Alberti, 2018). By the 1970s, loneliness was widely regarded as a socially negative condition resulting from an individual's failure to conform to a socially acceptable, extroverted lifestyle (Burnett, 2023).

The contemporary notion of loneliness has evolved through cultural, economic, and scientific transformations in the modern West. These influences continue to shape Western political, economic, and intellectual discussions, resulting in a dominant perspective on loneliness. Eurocentrism plays a role here—Europe takes up the center stage, and other parts of the world are often interpreted through Western values (Frank, 2010). However, this exported idea of loneliness does not always align with diverse global contexts. While some regions emphasize "the individual", others maintain traditional and collectivistic visions of a society where everyone has a place. It is likely that, given their distinct historical context, individualistic countries characterized by individualism may experience loneliness differently from collectivist societies. In light of this, a nuanced understanding of loneliness—one that considers cultural variations—is necessary to avoid generalizing and oversimplifying the meaning of loneliness for others.

2.1.1 Theoretical review of loneliness

Despite the early appearance of loneliness in human history, social scientists have largely disregarded the utility of loneliness as an important concept (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006). It was not until the mid-twentieth century when an ever-increasing flow of work since the 1970s brought the need to understand loneliness to scholars' attention. Over the years, psychologists and sociologists have offered theoretical remarks on loneliness. The oldest loneliness-related publication is dated back to 1785, which is Zimmermann's work on *Uber die Eínsamkeí*. The publication of "Loneliness" by Fromm Reichman (1959 as cited in de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006) in the 1950s marked the beginning of more recent attempts to conceptualize this phenomenon. Later on, Perlman and Peplau (1982, p. 31) defined loneliness as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively". The underlying idea of this definition is that loneliness is a subjective and negative experience that results from a cognitive evaluation of how well the quantity and quality of one's existing relationships measure up with its standard for relationships (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006). Perlman and Peplau (1982) further classified the theoretical approaches of loneliness into eight different categories, which are psychodynamic, phenomenological, existential-humanistic, sociological, interactionist, cognitive, privacy, and system theory. The majority of the theoretical speculation on loneliness has been tied to clinical work or stemmed from existing theory. According to Perlman and Peplau (1982), while most commentators see loneliness as an aversive, unpleasant experience,

a minority of observers discuss loneliness as a pathological response. For most, it is a phenomenon experienced by a broad cross-section of the population. Diving deeper into this topic, several types and components of loneliness are further distinguished. Some of the widely discussed theories are the positive and negative type of loneliness, proposed by Zimmermann (1785-1786 as cited in de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006); emotional and social loneliness, differentiated by Weiss (1973); and voluntary and involuntary loneliness, developed by Dahlberg (2007). Given the field's youthful stage of development, most of the discussions on loneliness still remained on a philosophical or theoretical level. Yet, these models for understanding loneliness have helped to illuminate the phenomenon and laid significant foundation of empirical research into loneliness.

2.1.2 Empirical review of loneliness

According to Karnick (2005, p.11), the lived experience of loneliness is "not adequately addressed" in the existing literature in healthcare disciplines and not seen as a phenomenon belonging to our everyday existence by most fields. Thus, scholars have suggested that bringing together individual and structural aspects, such as sociocultural factors of one's environment, will provide us greater insight into loneliness (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006). This is because macro-level factors related to historical time and geographic space might influence loneliness through their effects on individuals (Luhmann et al., 2023). This echoes with Gidden's Structuration theory (1984), in which both the individual and society are mutually constitutive. Inspired by this theoretical gaze, this research aims to draw a holistic picture of what loneliness means to adolescents on a personal and cultural level (as both have influence on each other) while considering the role of social media that is now deeply ingrained in our daily lives.

Generally, most studies consider loneliness as a common feeling that every person, most likely, experiences at some point during the course of their lives (Tan et al., 2013, p. 606). Yet, the way people around the world describe loneliness can be very different due to the varied experiences in different times and different circumstances in one's life. After all, loneliness is seen as a subjective and personal feeling (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006). But one common acknowledgement is that the worldwide prevalence of loneliness is a serious matter in today's networked society as it is often associated with various health problems. Studies have found that chronic loneliness can pose a serious threat to one's mental and physical health (BBC News, 2018), such as depression, suicidal thoughts, aggression, anxiety, cognitive decline, dementia, obesity, and heart disease (effects). As a result, it marks increased risk for morbidity and mortality (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). The health-related consequences of loneliness are detrimental for individual general well-being and come with substantial economic costs for society (Kung et al., 2021; Mihalopoulos et al., 2020). Loneliness has therefore been recognized as a public health issue that needs to be addressed by public policy (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Holt-Lunstad, 2017).

Having been called a modern epidemic, a condition akin to leprosy, and a silent plague of civilization (Alberti, 2018), loneliness is getting more and more media coverage and attention from policy makers. In 2018, the UK government went as far as to establish a new Minster for Loneliness that works across departments to address the issue (Yeginsu, 2018). That has made the UK the first country in the world to recognize the social significance of the state of being, followed by the Japanese government, that appointed its first-ever Minister for Loneliness, a countermeasures office in the cabinet, in 2021

(Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2021). The minister, Mr. Sakamoto, is instructed to examine the issue and put forward a comprehensive strategy that counter the alarming surge in suicides amid the COVID-19 pandemic, prevent social loneliness and isolation, and to protect ties between people. Loneliness is not only a Western-countries'-problem. It is apparent that the experience of loneliness transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, affecting people around the world. However, our understanding of loneliness has predominantly been shaped by Western perspectives, theories, and research, reflecting cultural and societal norms prevalent in Western societies. It is crucial to acknowledge that loneliness is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can manifest differently across contexts. For instance, loneliness appears distinct in collectivist versus individualistic cultures (Barretto et al., 2020). By considering a range of cultural viewpoints, we can grasp universal aspects of loneliness while respecting its nuanced variations across societies. Only then can we approach it in an efficient manner that is both inclusive and culturally sensitive.

2.2 Loneliness and adolescents

Despite the fact that loneliness can be experienced by anyone, regardless of age, (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), a common assumption that loneliness usually strikes elderly or isolated people (and of course it can and does) still exists (BBC News, 2018). The issue of such stereotype is that it often ignores young adults who also struggle to live with loneliness. Ironically, researchers have found that loneliness most frequently occurs during the life period known as adolescence (Hawthorne, 2008; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Many studies have even found higher levels of loneliness among younger people as compared to other age groups, and this pattern was the same in most countries involved in the studies (BBC News, 2018). According to Pinquart and Sorensen (2010), loneliness is more common and intense among young adults than any other age group. Victor and Yang (2012) also argue that the prevalence of loneliness follows a U-shaped pattern when graphed against age, suggesting that both younger and older individuals face a higher risk of social isolation. Qualter and colleagues (2015), too, found a peak in adolescence in her review of loneliness across the life course. Even so, to date, not much is known about loneliness in young adults and studies that focus on this age group tend to primarily involve undergraduate students (e.g., Matsuba, 2006; Ong et al., 2011; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Skues et al., 2012; Sheldon, 2012; Lou et al., 2012; Lemieux et al., 2013; Kross et al., 2013; Tan et al. 2013; Guo et al., 2014; Ozsaker et al., 2015 as cited in Fox, 2019), excluding other young adults' groups that are not in Higher Education. For example, Ryan and Xenos (2011) recruited participants who are at least 18 years old to complete an online questionnaire, aiming to investigate to relationship between the Big Five, shyness, narcissism, loneliness, and Facebook usage; Tan and colleagues (2013), in their research analyzed the relationship between loneliness and mobile phone, with a total participation of 527 university students and the average age was 20.8 years old; Ozsaker and colleagues (2015) also carried out a study on the effects of loneliness, depression and perceived social support on problematic Internet use among 3460 university students and the mean age was 20.92. Most of these studies on loneliness were quantitative and explored together with other aspects, such as the Big Five, mobile phone usage, and problematic Internet use.

Although it can be tempting to assume that something about modern life makes young people more likely to experience loneliness, elder respondents in a survey conducted by BBC also reported that the loneliest times in their lives was when they were younger (BBC News, 2018). There could be a few reasons leading to the peaking of loneliness at

that stage of life. Emerging evidence in the field of psychology indicates that adolescents are especially prone to experiencing loneliness (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016). This susceptibility arises as they navigate the transition toward greater independence from their families, forging strong connections with friends (Balážová et al., 2017; Brown & Klute, 2003), and are in the process of developing their social and emotional skills (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Brown and Klute (2003) highlight that North American youths often encounter the challenge of negotiating a much more complex and elaborate system of peer relationships as they transition into adolescence. Unlike the dyadic peer relationships of childhood, new forms of interactions—particularly romantic and sexual relationships—emerge during adolescence, thus expanding their social network. In the North American context, adolescence is often viewed as a time to shift focus from family to peers, with young people expected to build their social lives around peer relationships. The inability to do so may breed the sense of isolation and aloneness, which are necessary for loneliness to occur. These observations aligns with Lykes and Kemmelmeier's (2014) findings that a lack of social interactions with friends is a stronger predictor of loneliness in individualistic countries. While all stages of life experience certain life changes that may lead to increased levels of loneliness, there are specific risk factors that are more prevalent in one stage than another. For adolescents and young adults, friendships serve as primary social connections, making the number of friends more strongly correlated with loneliness (Green et al., 2001; Qualter et al., 2015). However, studies often adopt an age-normative perspective that informs researchers about factors that are likely to influence loneliness at each age. It is possible that age-related differences in loneliness are explained by different predictors in different countries (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016), or may not correlate directly with chronological age at all. Therefore, it would be more helpful to explore sociocultural norms that define the desired and expected level of social engagement and relationships.

In one qualitative study of how young people conceptualize loneliness, researchers found that loneliness among young people comes from within and appears to be linked to difficulties with peer relationships, negative self-beliefs, and issues of trust, which is different from loneliness experienced at an older age (Verity et al., 2021). It was discovered that loneliness is a negative and transient experience, mostly happening in school settings that caused the participants to feel excluded. Due to a sense of disconnection from others or the perceptions that a "wanted aspect" is missing from their social relationships, these young people engage in negative thinking patterns that led to the conceptualization of loneliness as a negative emotion. Other researchers also proposed that young people's loneliness feelings may arise from situational changes and only momentary (Hemberg et al., 2022). Howbeit, adolescents themselves may hold different views on the prevalence of loneliness across lifespan (as the participants in this research have demonstrated in the upcoming chapters). As the context of each life stage varies, it is necessary to understand the form and sources of loneliness across lifespan instead of applying concepts and theories derived from certain contexts to the experiences of loneliness in young people. As Hemberg and colleagues (2022) suggested, there still exists a knowledge gap of loneliness in adolescents as little qualitative research on their perspectives of loneliness has been undertaken. While this research centers on adolescents' perspectives on loneliness, it does not negate the significance of loneliness across all age groups. Quite the opposite—it underscores the critical need to amplify the voices that remain absent from the discourse. Overall, there is much we have yet to uncover about loneliness. Recognizing the complexity and ambiguity of loneliness, social

constructionism offers an ideal point of departure to understand this phenomenon, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

2.3 Loneliness and social media

Social media refers to computer-based technologies that facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and personal content within virtual communities (Smith et al., 2021). As an umbrella term that also includes social networking sites, a focus will be sustained on the most widely used social networking websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Smith et al., 2021; Fox, 2019). The rapid emergence of social media has revolutionized the way people interact with each other. As social media have become an integral part of our lives, it has been found to have repercussions on human general well-being, connectivity, and sociability (Fox, 2019). In today's digital society where most of our social relationships are being "increasingly developed and maintained in a digital domain" (Nowland et al., 2017, p. 70), it is hard to overlook the role of social media in most existing social problems, i.e., loneliness. Some people say that the success of social media was a product of an epidemic of loneliness; some people say it was a contributor to it; some people say it is the perfect remedy for it (Blachnio et al., 2016).

The more popular opinion is that social media use is correlated with higher levels of loneliness among adolescents (Hunt et al., 2018; Primack et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2008), which may be related to a decline in face-to-face interaction (Nie et al., 2002; Twenge et al., 2019). Through self-reported surveys that involves 234 participants, Hu (2009) found that young people express a statistically significantly greater degree of loneliness after "conversations" on the Internet, compared with the degree of loneliness they express after face-to-face communication. Likewise, Dror and Gershon (2012) found a direct association between loneliness and a large number of social networks "conversations" with virtual friends through the form of survey. They noted that virtual friendships may be less gratifying than face-to-face friendships. Some studies suggest that online communication, by its very nature, is devoid of the richness and complexity of face-to-face social interactions, thereby resulting in less fulfilling social encounters and, ultimately, heightened risks for loneliness (Putnam, 2000; Spears et al., 2002). On the other hand, some have conversely seen that the use of social media might increase positive feelings and a sense of community/belonging by using these platforms to compensate for a lack of real-life (online) relationships (Liu et al., 2018; Skues et al., 2012). A growing body of research suggests that social media technology enables the formation of interactions with individuals and groups well outside the bounds of face-to-face encounters; that is, social connections expand. Furthermore, there are opportunities for online users to deepen connections and foster an enduring sense of identity and purpose via social media platforms (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Verduyn et al., 2017; Vincent, 2016 as cited in Smith et al., 2021). Another reason social media can help with alleviating loneliness is because users find it easier to be themselves online where the need to disclose identity for dialogue is not necessary (Fox, 2019).

The role of social media in loneliness is not always a clear-cut of positive or negative influence. Instead, studies on associations between loneliness and social media use have shown conflicting results (Kraut et al., 1998; Odaci & Kalkan, 2010; Spraggins, 2011; Guo et al., 2014; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014; Twenge et al., 2019 as cited in Fox, 2019). Predictors of using social networking sites include sense of belonging, fear of being judged by "offline" friends, and the need for a platform for dialogue. Despite this upsurge of research on the consequences of social media use on people's lives, none of the

existing studies present consistent findings nor do they show sufficient empirical evidence to support any of the proposed hypotheses (ibid). There are also researchers who found no association between loneliness and the use of social media (Facebook; Yavich et al., 2019), whilst another group of researchers discerned that the use of social media could both cause and alleviate adolescents' loneliness (Hemberg et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2020; Vaarala et al., 2013). To be specific, social media might heighten feelings of loneliness by displacing offline interactions and leading to more cyberbullying, at the same it can also potentially reduce loneliness by increasing the frequency of social contact and decreasing people's sense of social isolation. In sum, the connection between social media and loneliness remains unclear and indirect (Smith et al., 2021).

The problem lies in researchers' tendency to narrowly frame questions around one-sided technological causality that oversimplifies complex social processes within particular dimensions of people's lives. Being shaped by technological determinist thinking, which is the belief that technology drives societal transformation, the wider structures and contexts that shape one's everyday lives are neglected. Levy (1998, as cited in Hauer, 2017) contends that relationships are far more intricate than mere determinism suggests. He posits that the social and cultural context constitutes an infinitely complex and partially indeterminate interplay of processes that operate automatically or are intentionally suppressed. Therefore, he proposes the concept of conditionality as opposed to deterministic thinking. That is, technological developments have influence on society; nevertheless, people's misuse of technology, not the nature of technology itself, is what causes its negative effects. Castells (1996) has taken a similar stand on this issue, highlighting the two-way process of both technology and social aspects shaping one another, also known as social embeddedness. Fox (2019) also suggests that more factors, such as user characteristics, need to be included. For example, researchers have identified a distinction between active and passive use of social networking sites, indicating that active users tend to feel less lonely, while passive users may experience greater loneliness as they merely observe others' lives and view photos without posting (Burke et al., 2010, as cited in Fox, 2019). The link between social media and loneliness is often primarily mediated by users' personality traits and dispositions. This may be a reason why existing literature has been struggling to certify either the benefits or the negative effects of social media use. To move beyond one-dimensional thinking that overlooks the complexities of our relationship with social media and leave behind moral panics built around its use (Hauer, 2017), this research aims to explore the meanings and practices adolescents associate with social media without presuming its effect as either beneficial or detrimental, and how loneliness is understood within this interaction.

2.4 The research site - Malaysia

As the research site of this project is in Malaysia, I will provide an overview of its context to ease the process of understanding and relating to the participants' perspectives that are shaped within the wider sociocultural context. Malaysia is a progressing country located in Southeast Asia, that comprises two separate regions – West Malaysia also known as Peninsular that forms part of the mainland of Asia, and East Malaysia, which is part of the island of Borneo. It is a democratic sovereign nation with constitutional monarchy and consists of a total of 13 states. Among them, the prevalence of loneliness was highest in Kuala Lumpur (the capital) as well as other urban areas according to the National Health & Morbidity Survey (2017). Given that a majority (72 percent in 2010) of Malaysian adolescents reside in urban settings, our research site is specifically located in an urban area. Among all urban regions, Klang Valley has been chosen as the ideal

location for participant recruitment due to its status as a densely populated agglomeration within Peninsular (West) Malaysia. This strategic choice has allowed me to explore loneliness dynamics in a context that reflects the perspectives of urban adolescents.

Malaysia consists of a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual population of 33.4 million, composed of three major ethnic groups: the Malays (70.1%), the Chinese (22.6%), and the Indians (6.6%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). The population of Malaysia is richly diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, culture and religion. Growing up in Malaysia exposes individuals to various cultural heritage, values, and ways of life that allows them to see the world from various angles. As a nation with such diversity, Malaysia thrives on vibrant cultural celebrations and festivities, such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, celebrated by Muslims; Chinese New Year, celebrated by the Chinese community; Deepavali and Thaipusam, observed by Hindus and the Tamil community, according to their religious beliefs. Importantly, these festivities transcend individual groups and are celebrated across Malaysia's ethnic and religious communities. On most of these celebrations, it is customary to host an "open house", where guests are treated to Malaysian delicacies and hospitality (Malaysia, n.d.). By doing so, it fosters appreciation for each other's cultural heritage, promoting unity and inclusivity among Malaysians. Being aware of and acknowledging others' cultural norms and beliefs may significantly impact adolescents' perspectives on loneliness, as it closely relates to the way adolescents in this context perceive social relationships. It is worth highlighting that collectivism is a significant value practiced by Malaysians (Sumari et al., 2020). As is generally known in Asian culture, collectivism is valued over individualism, therefore people within the collectivist society perceive the self, others, and their interdependence differently. These distinct conceptions of individuality result in emphasis on attending to others, fitting in, and maintaining harmonious interdependence. Insisting on the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other, values such as cooperation, helpfulness, and obedience are encouraged and promoted, particularly during childhood (Kling, 1995). Given societal and cultural influences, it is possible that Malaysian adolescents have distinct expectations and assumptions about their relationships compared to individuals from more individualistic countries.

Malaysia, as a multilingual country, has an extremely complex language situation. Bahasa Malaysia, a symbol of national identity and unity, is established as the national official language used for communication among various social groups in Malaysia. At the same time, English is also implemented in the school curriculums having recognized its importance as the global language. As a result, a child who uses their mother tongue at home (e.g., Chinese, Tamil) and speaks the local national language at school is also required to learn English as a second language, which is systematically taught in schools from an early age. Hence, most Malaysians speak at least two to three languages or dialects. Consequently, this substantially changes the patterns of communication and language use among the people and they tend to incorporate words and phrases from other languages to express themselves. This form of language is known as Bahasa Rojak (literally translated as mixed language) as "Rojak" is a Malay term that typically refers to a mixed or eclectic combination of ingredients or elements. It reflects the multicultural nature of Malaysian society and serves as a means of communication among individuals who may be proficient in different languages. The impact of multilingualism and multiculturalism is noteworthy as each language serves as a unique lens for perceiving, categorizing, and constructing meaning in the world. The rich linguistic and cultural diversity contribute to the complexity of loneliness.

According to a quantitative study that explored the language differentially associated with loneliness and depression on social media (Liu et al., 2022), researchers found that loneliness is associated with the language that reflects a stronger cognitive focus, an over-attention to the environment, and cognitive activities like reading and writing (in the "head"). Depression, on the other hand, focuses on negative emotions, pain perception, and emotionally-focused rumination (from the "heart"). Therefore, lonely individuals are more likely to view the social world as threatening and pay more attention to and generate interpretations of the social environment. The researchers also observed that loneliness is negatively correlated with language about close relationships (i.e., romantic relationships and friends and family members) and positive social interactions related to these relationships (e.g., hugging), indicating that loneliness might be particularly driven by the lack of personal and family experiences. The findings are based on analysis of psychological assessments of adult individuals across the United States, hence it cannot easily be extended to adolescents and those from different contexts. However, the study has provided valuable insights into the interplay between language and conception of loneliness. According to Alldred (1998, as cited in Alldred & Burman, 2005), children's "voices" cannot be heard outside of, or free from, cultural understandings of childhood and the cultural meanings assigned to their communication (Alldred, 1998). Language is an important piece of the puzzle when exploring the meaning of loneliness among adolescents in Malaysia. Considering the role language plays in shaping adolescents' knowledge production and reality construction may help us understand their views better.

2.5 Loneliness in Malaysia

Human emotions are inseparable from their social, economic, and ideological contexts. Distinct cultures encompass varying social norms and social relationships, which have implications for loneliness. Researchers indicates that differences in loneliness across nations are linked to variations in cultural values, such as individualism, as well as differences in the sociodemographic makeup of the population. According to Perlman and Peplau (1982), individualism is rooted in the belief of the self as independent, whilst collectivism values interdependency, connection to others and fitting in. Despite significant research on loneliness in Western contexts, which are often characterized as individualistic, these findings may not fully apply to collectivistic societies. The differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures suggest that loneliness may carry different meanings due the discrepancy in expectations of how individuals should be embedded in social relationships. There is a common assumption that members of individualistic cultures are more likely to experience loneliness than those from collectivistic culture (Hemberg et al., 2022). Contrary to popular beliefs, this is not always the case. Subsequent research has revealed that the implications of the individualism-collectivism theory for loneliness are insufficient and not readily apparent as the patterns of independence and interdependence vary widely across cultures and within cultures (Mossakowski, 2003; Visser & El Fakiri, 2016; Alegria et al., 2015, as cited in Hemberg et al., 2022). However, considering how loneliness has been interpreted in diverse ways throughout Western history that brings forth individualism (see section 2.1), it is still plausible that collectivist countries experience loneliness differently from individualistic countries. Loneliness, therefore, varies across both place and time. This points to the need for further research on loneliness to study diverse contexts that can provide nuanced understandings on loneliness to help expand knowledge and challenge existing assumptions in this field.

Loneliness in the Malaysian context is often studied correlatedly, if not as mediator, with other variables such as stress (Yaacob et al., 2009), self-esteem (Lim et al., 2023; Yaacob et al., 2009), depression (Uba et al., 2020; Yaacob et al., 2009), anxiety (Syed Elias et al., 2019), psychological well-being (Nordin & Talib, 2009), health outcomes (Hussein et al., 2021; Nor & Ghazali, 2016) and life satisfaction (Gan et al., 2020). The relationship between loneliness and the Covid-19 pandemic has gained increasing interest in recent years (Tan, 2022; Hussin et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2020) due to its close link with social isolation that comes after lockdown measures. To date, not much can be found on Malaysian's conceptualisations of loneliness as most existing research have been focusing more on the associations of loneliness and its coping mechanisms (Amzat & Jayawardena, 2016; Hussin et al., 2021). In terms of the methodological tendency of studies on loneliness, the majority of these studies were analysed through quantitative and statistical approaches (Aung et al., 2017; Nasir et al., 2016). Moreover, little research has focused on adolescents, who are reported to be significantly lonelier than any other age group as discussed earlier (Franssen et al., 2020 as cited in Hemberg et al., 2022). According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS, 2017), almost 10 percent of Malaysian secondary school students felt lonely "most of the time or always". Yet, many previous studies were merely interested in undergraduate students (Lim et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2021; Hashim & Khodarahimi, 2012), adults (Gan et al., 2020; Tahir et al., 2017; Yamin & Kadir, 2016), and elderly people (Hussein et al., 2021; Mamat & SZ, 2020; Aung et al., 2017). Given the lack of qualitative research, lack of focus on adolescents, lack of attention to understanding adolescents' conceptualisation of loneliness in this context, I attempt to explore the phenomenon of loneliness from the perspective of adolescents in Malaysia to bridge the gap.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of conversations in the field regarding loneliness and positioned this research within those debates. The discrepancy of the meaning of loneliness among individuals, in a way, opens up space for describing "reality", rather than fitting people into a one-size-fits-all explanation. As supported by Tangen (2008, p. 159), "listening to children's voices is contextual and interactional". Understanding adolescents' perspectives on loneliness is important for developing sustainable coping strategies that are applicable and useful for adolescents. Without this understanding, interventional strategies that are beneficial for adults may be incongruent within the contexts of adolescence. Additionally, current measures or interventions that are designed based on findings in Western contexts may not be relevant and effective when applied elsewhere. Given the absence of adolescents' voices in current conceptualization of loneliness in Malaysia, the need to explore how children and adolescents view loneliness becomes increasingly important. In the upcoming chapter, I will present the theoretical perspective used in this researcher to interpret adolescents' view on loneliness.

3 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical orientation of the study to inform how this research is situated within the field. Like a foundation and blueprint for a house, the theoretical framework provides the essential support for the study as well as clarifies its context (Crawford, 2020). Theories and concepts presented in the following sections are critical tools that have prompted me to rethink my knowledge practices and influence the way I interpret and analyze the collected data. The theoretical framework can also be understood as a foundational review of existing theories that serves as a roadmap for this research. This chapter will begin with an overview of relevant theoretical perspectives that stemmed from the field of childhood studies. I will critically explore how the notions of children as "beings" and "becoming", social constructionism, and relationality apply to understanding adolescents' perspectives of loneliness in this research. Towards the end, I will introduce the concept of affordances, that is developed within the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). This concept will serve as the theoretical lens through which I analyze the participants' perspectives on social media's role in the phenomenon of loneliness.

3.1 Introduction to childhood studies

Social studies of childhood emerged in the 1980s partly as a reaction to what was seen as children's invisible and voiceless position in the social sciences (Hardman, 1973; Qvortrup et al., 2009). As explained by James and Prout (1990, p. 7), the history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked by children's silence rather than an absence of interest in them. By regarding "children as people to be studied in their own right", as Hardman (1973, p. 87) proposed, the emergent paradigm aims to give children a voice and acknowledge them as independent and autonomous individuals. It also seeks to establish the idea of children as actors in their own right and as legitimate right-holders and claim-makers in the here and now. One of the key features of the new paradigm of childhood sociology, as reiterated by Prout and James, is that childhood is understood as a social construction. Unlike biological immaturity, childhood and its components are a particular structural and cultural aspect of many societies rather than an inherent or universal characteristic of human populations. It is through this gradual growth in awareness that the meanings attached to the category "child" and "childhood" might differ across time or in space which began to destabilize traditional models of child development and socialization. As Danziger (1970, as cited in James & Prout, 1990) notes, the traditional model of socialization developed in the west contained an implicit cultural bias, making it of little use for comparative purposes. The emergent paradigm, in contrast, begins with the assumption that a child is socialized by belonging to a "particular culture at a certain stage in its history" (Danziger, 1970, p.18).

3.1.1 Childhood as "being" and "becoming"

The emergence of childhood studies can be understood as a challenge to orthodoxy. Being seen "as some kind of universal" the category of "children" was within traditional explanations tied to what Hastrup has called "the semantics of biology" (1978, p. 49, as cited in James & Prout, 1990). That is to say, the social facts of childhood were constantly explained as the biological facts of life, birth, and infancy, with little account

taken of any cultural component. Being convinced that children are incompetent, vulnerable, and irrational by the dominant developmental paradigm, the worlds of children and adults have become more and more separated from each other (Jenks, 1996). Children were being treated as objects, subjects, and adults' possessions that are passive and dependent in traditional theories, such as Parson's socialization theory and Piaget's child development theory, instead of active beings, contributors, and participants of their own lives (Qvortrup, 1994).

The notions of children and childhood as "becomings" rather than "beings" played a part in ensuing exclusion of children too (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1994). In brief, the "being" child is seen as a social actor in his or her own right, who is actively constructing his or her own "childhood", whereas the "becoming" child is seen as an "adult in the making", who is lacking universal skills and features of the "adult" that they will become (Brannen & O'Brien, 1995; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1982, 1996; Qvortrup, 1991, 1994, as cited in Uprichard, 2008). The construction of the "becoming" child discourse emphasizes what the child will be rather than what the child is (Uprichard, 2008). It is the forward-looking and futuristic perspectives of seeing children as "future adults" that lead to the difficulty of locating children as active participants, thus neglecting the present everyday realities of being a child. Consequently, children are deprived of their subjectivity, and further silenced by society. On the other hand, the construction of the "being" child has its problem as well. That is, the *future* experiences of becoming an adult is dismissed in the process of focusing on the "being" child (*ibid*). "Looking forward" to what a child "becomes" is arguably an important part of "being" a child (Qvorturp, 2004). By ignoring the future, Uprichard (2008) is concerned that we may be prevented from exploring the ways in which this may itself shape experiences of being children. Clearly, perceiving the child as either a human "being" or human "becoming" tends to involve conflicting approaches to what it means to be a child.

The pressing question lies at the heart of this discussion: Why do we have to choose between children's current well-being and future positive outcomes? At the end of the day, is it in the best interests of the child to disregard their present for purposes that are alien to them and pushed ahead into their futurity? Here, I agree with Uprichard's (2008) argument that we should not treat these two constructs of the child as dualistic but use them together in complementary ways as neither approach is in itself satisfactory. Similarly, Lee (2001) has suggested that all of us, regardless children or adults, are interdependent beings who are always in the process of "being" and "becoming" with one another, who are more or less competent at doing certain things throughout our lives. Instead of considering participants as distinct due to their adolescent identities, I attempt to attribute their differences to their unique individualities, which should be reflected based on their unique experiences. Moving beyond the being/becoming distinction, this research is situated to take on the "being and becoming" approach to adolescents and adolescence. That is, to appreciate adolescence in the present moment, focusing on adolescents' current life experiences without losing sight of the long-term perspective. Through understanding adolescents' sensemaking of loneliness, their well-being, feelings, thoughts, and opinions in this present moment come into focus. These insights can inform effective coping mechanisms and interventions to prevent loneliness in the future. Moreover, this research encounter has the potential to transform participants' understanding of their societal roles, leaving a lasting impact on how they view themselves, others, and the world.

Recognizing that adolescents, like adults, are social actors means that they should have a say in matters that concern them. This holds particular significance in the Malaysian context where adolescents are often seen as vulnerable assets that need protection but their right to meaningful participation is not consistently upheld (Andersonn & Barrett, 2020). As reported by researchers, limited information exists to assess how inclusive and impactful adolescent participation is in Malaysia. From a political standpoint, rights such as freedom of expression and association have been curtailed by a number of laws, hindering young people's ability to express their views politically, even though these rights are constitutionally guaranteed (Andersonn & Barrett, 2020). The 2018 Status Report on Child Rights in Malaysia highlights that the Child Act does not specifically address a child's right to freedom of expression. While some efforts have been made to incorporate the voice of the child into policymaking, general attitudes towards children remain paternalistic in Malaysia. Based on the latest available progress report, there is currently no comprehensive framework or guidelines which encourage child participation in decisions that affect them. Marginalised children in Malaysia face systemic barrier in expressing themselves, accessing information, and seeking redress, especially in the face of stigma and discrimination (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2018). Given the current right status of Malaysian children and adolescents, it is essential to recognize adolescents as social actors and holders of rights as I embark on this research journey.

3.2 Childhood and the notion of loneliness as socially constructed

Understanding childhood (and by association, I refer to adolescence as well) as socially constructed provides an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life. Several studies have proven that childhood appears to be socially and culturally different at given points in history or geography, suggesting that childhood is socially constructed rather than a natural process. It refers to the understanding that childhood (as well as adolescence) cannot be seen in isolation, but deeply intertwined with other factors in society (Jenks, 2004). Therefore, scholars have advocated the need to take into account the intersectional character of childhood and the need to study children's social worlds and cultures from children's own perspectives by highlighting their voices in research and by recognizing their active, agentive role in social life (James & Prout, 1990). The idea of understanding childhood contextually is where social constructionism comes forth. By emphasizing the role of culture and context in constructing meaning and understanding (Burr, 2015), social constructionism rejects the notion of a universal childhood and embraces the variability of childhood, in which it is possible for multiple realities of childhood to exist. Children are seen as capable agents who interpret, act and participate in the shaping of childhood, their own everyday lives, and society, rather than merely passive receptors of socialization. Social constructionism has allowed for the possibility of questioning the conventional and grand concepts, such as development and socialization, which previously had been seen as unproblematic (Burr, 2015). By situating the child in social contexts, social constructionism helped unravel the strands of so-called "truths" and "universality" of childhood. As such, there can be no such object as the "real child" or any variant on this theme such as "the authentic experience of childhood". Because each and all different childhoods produced by different discursive practices are "real" within their own regime of truth. Moreover, social constructionism also rejects reductionism which is "the attempt to explain complex events in terms of simpler, lower level ones" (Burr, 2015, p. 224). These levels of explanation span from biological factors to psychological aspects and extend to social and societal influence (Burr, 2015). In light of social constructionist thinking, this research recognizes that loneliness is a

multifaceted, changeable social phenomenon subject to local interpretation, hence cannot be easily explained or reduced in simple or straightforward terms.

Furthermore, the cultural turn in theory involved recognizing ethnocentrism within the field. Scholars realized that the theoretical center of the field was often the Global North "child" subject (Pérez et al., 2017). The cultural turn emphasizes that all phenomena and all contexts could and should be studied on the basis of the cultural rationale of the people. Therefore, what is believed or practiced as true, or right, or wrong for any culture should not be imposed on others (Gairdner, 2008). Cultural relativism recognizes that values and beliefs can vary across societies thus stands against ethnocentrism, which involves looking at another culture from the perspective of one's own culture. Applying to this research, loneliness as a social phenomenon and a culturally shaped experience needs to be understood relative to its own cultural context. However, although extensive research has been conducted on the topic of loneliness, most are only relevant in the western context due to a misalignment of cultural values and pattern that indicate different social relationship expectations. This calls for the need to understand loneliness from the perspective of the culture itself instead of disseminating dominant theories that do not fit to other societies. This is supported by Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons (2020) who have argued that loneliness is inherently social, thus it is not experienced in the same way everywhere. They also highlight the need to avoid dualistic notions of individuals as separate from society as our subjectivity is shaped by the context we are positioned within, reflecting the notion of social constructionism. In short, individuals have to be understood through the collectives they are embedded in and are part of.

By keeping in mind the cultural relativism perspective, I acknowledge that knowledge is contextually situated and inherently embedded in a specific historical period and cultural setting (Burr, 2015). Having this at the back of my mind while conducting fieldwork and analysis can illuminate how cultural factors shape experiences and expectations related to loneliness. As the interpretation that an individual assigns to their own reality differs, the concept of loneliness is subjective too. Likewise, it would be challenging to grasp the contextual, cultural, and social meaning of the term without considering the actors who assign meaning to words. Social actors here refer to adolescents who are recognized as capable and competent people to form their own views. They not only live in structured adolescence but also are themselves structuring their adolescences. This may result in the construction of more "messy texts" which allow for multiple voices, contradiction, and ambiguity (Komulainen, 2007). This perspective offers significant potential for enhancing children's social inclusion and providing valuable insights. However, it also presents challenges in terms of generalizing knowledge, necessitating critical and reflective representation of children's voices. However, the participants' perspectives are still worth being represented not as a depiction of all adolescents' perspectives of loneliness but as a portrayal of their unique individualities and how cultural context constitute their perspectives, which other adolescents from the same background may identify with.

Recognising that individuals are part of a world of social relations, language, norms and customs, our thoughts, beliefs, sense of self arise out of interaction with others. Discourse analytical approach is thus introduced to highlight the socio-cultural sourcing of individuals' accounts (Potter & Wetherell, 1987 as cited in Alldred & Burman, 2005). Here, I will focus on discussing language and its relevance to culture, given its role as a fundamental element in social interaction. According to Alldred and Burman (2005), "discourses are frameworks of meaning produced in language" (p. 5). As highlighted in discourse analytical perspectives, language is not only used to describe the world, but

also the precondition of thought and the formation of our understanding of the world (*ibid*). In other words, language is structured so as to produce and constrain meanings. As language shaped the way how we construct things, there is a need for researchers to attend at an epistemological level to what language means in the process of knowledge production to represent participants' voices. Bakhtin (1981, p. 272) argued that languages (and voice by extension) are social and ideological and therefore represent the interests, assumptions, and values of particular groups. Consistent with Bakhtin, Alldred and Burman (2005) highlighted that language is an essential way to access and interpret the social world. Thus, when children speak, they do so by drawing from the repertoire of their inherited social languages and speech genres which constrain to some extent what they can and/or will say (Spyrou, 2011). In the context of this study, participants may draw on their social norms and cultural values when making sense of loneliness, resulting in diverse understandings and use of language in expressing the concept of loneliness. Therefore discourse analysis is employed not only to interpret what the participants say, but also where their voices are coming from. In so doing, adolescents' perspectives of loneliness are located at a cultural, rather than individual level, pointing to the importance of context that is in consistent with social constructionism (Alldred & Bruman, 2005).

Though social constructionism has, in many ways, become the field's mantra, this theory has limitations of its own. The field's fixation on the socially constructed child may have been fruitful in helping establish children's agency, participation, and voices but its limits are indeed becoming apparent as scholars seek to develop more nuanced approached to understanding social life. Social constructionist' emphasis on the social context is found to recapitulate the fundamental individual-society dualism which was criticised by past researchers. Furthermore, by giving an increased weight to the culture at the expense of downplaying the nature has led to a culture-nature dualism which is rejected by scholars who argued that nature and culture are entangled (Ferrando, 2013). Social constructionism has been rejected for unduly focusing on human action and meaning. Instead, society can be seen as "produced in and through patterned networks of heterogenous materials; it is made up through a wide variety of shifting associations (and disassociations) between human and non-human entities" (Prout, 2005, p. 109). Relationships, then, might be considered equally between children and young people and physical materials, spaces and entities in hybrids that do not sharply distinguish between the social construct and nature. The critique of modernist notions within social constructionism, and the unhelpful distinction between human beings and human becomings (Lee 2001, Prout 2005), offer revised possibilities in relationships between not only people, but spaces and materials.

To summarize, social constructionism, though not without its critics, has contributed greatly to our understanding of the cultural relativity of social phenomena (James & Prout, 2015). In application, this approach has allowed me to adapt the structure of my analysis chapter from presenting the participants' personal and cultural definitions of loneliness in a separate manner to discussing them relationally as both are so tightly woven, mutually constitutive. Furthermore, the social constructionist perspective serves as the backbone for this study as developmental psychology is still a dominant approach to adolescence and adolescents in the Malaysian context. This has been indicated in the Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia, in which adolescence is repeatedly described as "a unique developmental stage and a critical period for physical, psychological and emotional growth" throughout the report (Andersonn & Barrett, 2020). As such, it has inspired me to rethink adolescence and adolescents, and their position in

the society. Early on in the field's development, James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) pointed out "the need for a constant vigilance over the kinds of attention we pay to our growing body of knowledge", which is still an important note for us today as it was back then. As pointed out by scholars, there is a need to consider adolescents in a broader context, acknowledging relationships not only among humans but also between humans and non-humans entities.

3.3 Relationality in childhood studies

Without downplaying the contribution of the emergent paradigm, scholars found a need to offer a reflective attempt at reimagining childhood studies by turning back to the discussion of ontology. Ontology is what brings us back to the heart of the field, the theory of reality or being that we so often take for granted without careful consideration. Which child, children and childhood are we creating and who do we exclude through our research? A so called "ontological turn" to relationality in childhood studies has provided and continues to provide useful theoretical insights not only in relation to overcome its child-centeredness but also to rethink knowledge production. Although a focus on relations or relationality has existed in the field prior to this, it was a renewed interest in ontological issues, concerned primarily with the relationality and materiality of social life, that brought it back to the center again. As Spyrou (2018) suggests, a turn to relational ontologies in childhood studies may prove quite productive for a field whose potential has been greatly curtailed by its inability to move decidedly beyond its foundational analytical frameworks. To think relationally in childhood studies is a move to decenter the subject and destabilize the field's object of inquiry—the child—and to move beyond claims to truth and authenticity often represented through the notions of "children's voices" and "children's perspectives".

Other than that, by paying attention to the relationality and materiality of social life, the networks of relations and associations that link adolescents with other humans and non-humans across multiple spatial and temporal scales can be expanded (Sparrman & Sandin, 2012; Samuelsson et al., 2015, as cited in Spyrou, 2018). The ontological turn is not concerned with essences (as in most traditional discussions of ontology in philosophy) but with what things are and what they could become as a result of their relational encounters with the world: entities do not pre-exist their relations. It is clear that relational thinking takes as their starting point the assumption that the world is constituted through social and material. Thus, thinking children's lives relationally simply means to acknowledge that everything matters and everything is relational when we rethink about ontological questions like "what is a child" and "how is the child possible". By challenging essentialist understandings of childhood ontology and decentering the child, this emerging line of work seeks to reimagine the field beyond the dualisms of modernist sociology (Prout, 2005). In that sense, an opportunity opens up for the field to rethink the ethics and politics of its own knowledge practices through its choices to disclose or bring into light certain childhoods rather than others (Spyrou, 2018).

More specifically, the call of the "ontological turn" has offered critical insights to embrace a more expansive terrain where human, non-human and technological forces are seen as entangled in the constitution of the social world and generating knowledge about its character (Spyrou et al., 2018). The ontological turn offers a theoretical framework that allows us to acknowledge the materiality of life. Simultaneously, it emphasizes that discourse is intricately connected with, generated by, and productive of this material reality. In other words, by repositioning relationality as the core focus, we can navigate

into realms where children and childhood are fruitfully located through linkages with other human and non-human aspects of the world. This approach invites a relational posture not only toward bodies and persons but also toward objects, technologies, systems, epistemes, and historical eras (Spyrou et al., 2018). Placing childhood and children within this larger relational field of human, non-human, and technological forces leads us to explore their becomings as necessarily and inevitably interdependent "on other bodies and matter" (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 525, 531), but without resorting to romantic claims about authenticity (Rautio, 2014). All in all, adopting a relational perspective when researching the contextual and cultural meanings of loneliness represents a shift in perspective from the individual or the essences to the individual-in-society, that is adolescents' relational encounters with the greater context.

Drawing from the perspectives in childhood studies, this research regards adolescents as individuals worth studying in their own right. The social constructionist perspective has encouraged a reflexive mode of viewing participants as existing within society, instead of isolated individuals. Considering the interdependent aspects of their social lives helps illustrate the way culture and context shape expectations of social connectedness that has implications for adolescents' concept of loneliness. In addition, taking on a relational lens is productive in understanding how adolescents relate to the role of social media, particularly on what social media does in the phenomenon of loneliness and how its use affects or is affected by loneliness as understood by the participants. This ontological turn and its commitment to the materiality of children's lives inspired me to move beyond a mere account of human interactions and enter a new world of research inquiry which considers, in addition to the human, the multitude of non-human forces (Spyrou, 2019). By positioning the participants in interdependent, relational encounters with "other bodies and matter" (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 525, 531), it opens our eyes to the emergence of adolescents' subjectivities through this intra-activity with other human and non-human entities each time anew without the need to claim essence and authenticity (Rautio, 2014, p. 471-472).

3.4 The relational aspects of affordances

While the field of Childhood Studies has been developing and deconstructing concepts that contributes to the furtherance of our theoretical understanding of childhood, other fields of studies have been undergoing similar processes as well. To explore the role of social media in relation to loneliness, I will draw on the theoretical perspective of affordances from another field for my analysis work on participants' perspectives of social media's role in loneliness. The affordance concept was first introduced by Gibson in 1977 within the field of ecology, and later Norman applied it to product design in 1988. It was only in 2001 that Hutchby proposed affordances as a framework for studying technologies and social life within the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). The concept serves to bridge the dichotomy of constructionism and realism within the field. Similar to Childhood Studies, the sociology of technology, which has gained a resurgence of interest as an object of sociological investigation, is primarily dominated by the long-standing debate between realism and constructionism. Realism, by definition, is the view that worldly objects have inherent properties that act as constraints on observational accounts, whereas, constructionism, as discussed earlier, is the view that the very "reality" of objects is itself an outcome of discursive practices in relation to the object. The emphasis of realism on the objective reality that exists independently of human perception or interpretation has contributed to centralizing the view that forms of technology actively impact and cause social and cultural changes, which is also known as

technological determinism (Hutchby, 2001). However, social constructionists in the field have problematized and challenged this mode of thinking as they argued that social processes and the characteristics of technologies are interrelated and intertwined. This is also agreed by Hutchby (*ibid*), stating that "the social constructivist consensus has usefully brought to the forefront the recognition that social processes are involved in all aspects of technology, and not simply in its effects upon society" (p. 13). Hutchby did, however, address the risk that we may become too fixated on the social shaping of technology at the expense of an equally pressing, though differently framed, issue with the technological shaping of social action. Therefore, Hutchby suggests seeing technologies neither in terms of their "interpretive textual" properties nor of their "essential technical" properties, but in terms of their affordances (Gibson, 1979). Affordances is defined as "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). The use of this concept helps us to avoid the single-minded view of both constructionist and technological determinist approaches. Rather, there is more than one way of responding to the range of affordances for action and interaction that technology, i.e., social media, presents. In short, technology both enables and constraints specific humans actions without directly "causing" the actions (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). This new empirical perspective frames the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object through its functional and relational aspects, in which the latter fits well into the overall framework. More precisely, the relational aspect directs our focus towards how the affordances of social media can vary between different users, highlighting both the significant role of the properties of actors and their context. By considering the contextual and individual aspects of technology usage, affordances recognizes and emphasizes the role and agency of individuals in the use of technology (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). In sum, affordances offer a "'third way' between the emphasis on the shaping power of human agency (grounded in social constructionism) and the emphasis on the constraining power of technical capacities (ground in technological determinism)" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 441). The affordances perspective, which is relational and contextual, will be employed when analyzing participants' narratives on social media's role in loneliness.

3.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of childhood studies' turn from research *on* children to research *with* and *by* children. This turn has provided a fundamental acknowledgement of the value of children's situated knowledges and their role in creating alternative understandings of their worlds which are more collaborative and less patronizing (Spyrou, 2018). Key theoretical concepts have been explored, highlighting the shifts towards viewing childhood as socially constructed and emphasizing the diverse experiences of children across various socio-cultural contexts. The discussion also touches upon the ontological turn towards relationality, which considers the interconnectedness of children's lives with other non-human entities, and how these concepts are tied to my research. Additionally, the relational property of affordances underlines the importance of human, technology, and context in understanding human-technology relationship. Overall, the process of formulating a theoretical framework has given me the opportunity to think deeply and carefully, taking into consideration various perspectives. Instead of reducing one's understanding to essentialist assertions, reimagination of the adolescent is made possible through a fresh look at matters of ontology which highlight the complexities and nuances of the individual.

4 Methodology

This chapter outlines the epistemological orientation that underpins the choice of methodology and methods in this research. While methodology encompasses the principles and theoretical perspectives shaping research design, methods refers to the techniques used to engage directly with children and to collect data (Beazley et al., 2009; Beazley et al., 2016). As Punch (2002) has pointed out, the way we perceive children affects how we listen to them. In addition to semi-structured interview, a qualitive research method, this research integrated drawing and completion activities to gain deeper insights into participants' perspectives. An overview of the data collection process starting from sampling strategy, accessing the field, recruiting participants, and challenges encountered will be provided. Description of each participatory method, including its purpose, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges are included, followed by the ethical concerns that were permeated throughout the process. Finally, the analytical approach of this research will be explained.

4.1 Methodological approach

The emergence of the new paradigm for childhood studies has opened up a theoretical and conceptual space in which children, as agentic social actors, can speak as meaning-producing individuals about their experiences of the world (James, 2007; Prout & James, 2015). As Hardman suggested, it is an attempt to regard "children as people to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching" (1973, p. 87). Consequently, the powerful and pervasive mantra of listening to the voices of children has significantly influenced activists, policy makers, politicians, as well as practitioners across the globe. This new discourse of "the child" – as a rights-bearing citizen is expressed most powerfully through the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by the United Nations (UN) in 1989 (Lansdown, 2001). The UNCRC, being the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, is committed to promoting rights and freedom for all children, without exception (UNICEF, n.d.). To put it simply, children are human beings thus should be entitled to human rights like the rest. However, given their vulnerability and dependence, the UN saw a need to single out a convention for children (under age 18) that operates on four guiding principles: non-discrimination (article 2), best interests of the child as a primary consideration (article 3:1), the right to survival and development (article 6), and the right to freely express views in all matters concerning the child (article 12) (UNICEF, n.d.).

As a new impetus for child research, the UNCRC contributed to the development of rights-based research with children by acknowledging their agency and recognizing they are subjects of rights. The rights-based approach refers to the idea that children have the right to be properly researched. According to Beazley and colleagues (2009), this right is derived from interpreting a combination of provisions from four articles in the convention: the right to express opinions (article 12), the right to freedom of expression using a medium of children's own choice (article 13); the right to protection from forms of exploitation not addressed in other articles (article 36); and the right to the highest possible standards being used in work with children (article 3.3). In relevance to rights-based research, these articles were concluded as "children being participants in research;

using methods that make it easy for them to express their opinions, views and experiences; being protected from harm that might result from taking part in research conducted by researchers who use quality, scientific methods and analysis" (Beazley et al., 2009, p. 370; Ennew & Plateau, 2004, p.29). To realize children's rights to expression and participation, a small but growing number of researchers have been putting in effort in developing research methodologies and methods to engage children meaningfully and ethically in research. For instance, Boyden and Ennew (1997) set out the principles that should underpin participatory research with children, including issues of informed consent and the use of appropriate methods tailored to the needs of children. The rethinking of children's position within society as social actors not only encouraged the inclusion of children's voices in research but also resulted in explicit consideration of how to engage children's participation without losing sight of their interests and human's rights. In short, both the right to participate and the right to be properly researched should go hand in hand.

To adhere to these rights-based standards means moving away from traditional forms of research with children that treats them as "objects of concern" and disconnects us from their lives (Bessell et al., 2017). Taking into consideration the culture and context, this research employed a participatory approach, in the sense of participatory techniques, to ensure that the methods are culturally sensitive and designed to facilitate participants' expression of their views while respecting their rights and dignity in the process. To be precise, the notion of participatory here do not imply that the participants are involved in all aspects or phases of the research as it is sometimes defined by scholars. Rather, I refer to Hart's (1992) ladder of participation that describes different degrees of participation, in which this research is situated on the *assigned but informed* rung within the degree of participation continuum. Participation that constitutes *assigned and informed* occurs when the participants understand the research purpose, the reason for the involvement and their role as meaningful, thus voluntarily take part in the research after being fully aware of what their participation entails. It should not be assumed that children's active involvement in making key decisions throughout the research process is what makes research good or considered as fulfilling children rights because this degree of emphasis on individual agency may not be appropriate to many cultures. As Hart (2008) highlighted, the concept of participation may take on distinct meanings for children growing up in a collectivistic society. Unlike the internationally sown Western model of the child that stresses agency and autonomy of individuals, children in a more collectivist culture are raised from an early age to see themselves deeply as members of a community with a responsibility to contribute to the larger network. Specific to this research context, the authoritarian parenting style is still widely practiced among the Malaysian collectivist society, encouraging adolescents to follow rules and conform to the norms (Masiran, 2022), thus being involved in the research decision-making process (as what some scholars would define as participatory) may put the participants in the position of challenging authority in a manner that is inappropriate and does not align with their cultural upbringing and values. The *assigned but informed* degree of participation may be more comfortable and meaningful for the participants as they remain part of the community while offering insights that could help us better understand matters concerning them. Without putting them under the spotlight that is insensitive to their culture, this form of participation can be valuable as it is concerned with both the achievement of human rights and with maintaining the integrity of cultures.

Participatory approaches aim to give children greater control over their involvement in research through a shift in power dynamics between the researcher and participant (van

Blerk et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been shown that children tend to express their insights into their own lives more easily when they are supported by self-directed methods (Young & Barrett, 2001). In a way, the interests of participants during the process may enhance the richness of the information contributed by them. Combining the themes of adolescents as social actors and the appropriateness of methodology addressed earlier, a qualitative approach together with task-based activities have been employed in this research. Qualitative methods were chosen to approach the research questions due to its possibility of obtaining in-depth knowledge and rich data from individual adolescents' perspectives. By emphasizing active engagement, a qualitative approach offers the possibility to obtain valuable insights on adolescents' perspectives on loneliness. In the next section, I will describe how participants in this research were identified and recruited.

4.2 Sampling strategy

Sampling strategy here refers to the plan used to recruit participants for the study. Two strategies were used after careful consideration: purposive sampling, a widely used non-probability technique in qualitative research; and snowball sampling, also known as "referral chains". Purposive sampling is a method that identifies and selects a sample based on the judgement of the researcher (Campbell et al., 2020). In this research, adolescents between 10 – 19 years old living in the urban are chosen in accordance with the research objectives and needs. The age range is in accordance with the definition adopted by World Health Organization (WHO), followed by UNICEF, and subsequently the Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia (SitAn) (Anderson & Barrett, 2020). Therefore, I refer to adolescents and adolescence according to the age bandings and definitions used by the society that my research will be conducted within rather than adhering to the age-related developmental frame of thinking. Snowball sampling was used later on by asking participants and potential participants for recommendation of acquaintances who fulfil the criteria and might be interested to participate. This was especially helpful in this case when the target population is unlikely to respond to the research invitation because of the stigmatizing nature of this research topic, which was further confirmed by a few participants during the interviews.

There are many debates when it comes to deciding on the sample size of a qualitative study, each with their own reasoning behind it. However, as stated by Morse (1991, 2015) and Patton (2015), the most important aspect of a qualitative study is empirical data that contains extensive and diverse accounts of new discoveries of the phenomenon the study intends to explore. While appraising the outcome of analysis, researchers also highlighted that the sample size should neither be too small nor too large (Kvale, 1996; Sandelowski, 1995). Considering the social constructionist discourse I referred to in this research, whereby knowledge is regarded as partial, depending on the situated view of the research, an idea that qualitative studies ideally comprise a "total" amount of facts is not relevant (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Haraway, 1991). In other words, the number of participants does not guarantee the richness and depth of analysis. Therefore, an initial approximation of sample size, which is 10 participants, was proposed for planning, but the adequacy of the final sample size was still evaluated continuously during the fieldwork process. The sufficiency of material is context dependent. In this research, informed judgments are made based on the depth and richness of data provided by the participants. This includes nuanced insights, thick descriptions, and detailed narratives, which allows for analysis to address the research questions.

4.3 Accessing the field and its challenges

Entering the field involves navigating practical and ethical considerations, yet it remains an exciting experience. After receiving approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) (see appendix 1), I reached out to a local church in my neighborhood, which is also where I had the opportunity to volunteer in their children's ministry before pursuing my master's degree. Their children ministry focuses on organizing weekend character-building programs open to all the kids in the community. In addition, they also carry out sports and games activities which engage youth in the community, encouraging them to develop relationships with others and socialize as a group. The main reason why I chose this institution for my fieldwork is due to the pressing concern of "gaining access". As Burgess (2002, p. 36) notes, "access is a prerequisite; a precondition for the research to be conducted". Given that children and adolescents are generally considered vulnerable, building trust with gatekeepers and obtaining parental consent are essential for involving them in research. Gatekeepers—such as parents, guardians, and those in charge of the institution—are those with "the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research" (Burgess, 2002, p. 48). Similarly, other researchers have described the process of negotiating access as ill-defined, unpredictable, and challenging, mainly based on building positive relationships with gatekeepers (Burgess, 1991; Maruyama & Deno, 1992; Feldman et al., 2004).

After weighing my options, I realized that obtaining approval from urban schools would be a lengthy and complex procedure, having to go through multiple levels of gatekeepers within the hierarchy of a formal organizational structure. Additionally, I was informed that most schools were either preparing students for exams or in the midst of exam season during that time. Given the strong emphasis on academic performance in the Malaysian context, granting access would mean adding an additional strain on teachers and students, which is why access would most likely be refused. Hence, despite the potential benefits of gaining exposure and securing participants through school access, I explored alternative approaches. On a side note, it is important to acknowledge that gaining access from gatekeepers does not guarantee full cooperation or consent from participants (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1990). Conversely, my positive past relationship with the church organization undoubtedly smoothed the path for gaining access. The persons-in-charge were familiar with me and my character due to previous connections. It is also a more straightforward process to gain official approval and support. As a result, the existence of prior links with the institution played a pivotal role in gaining access to the research site. Another reason that led to my decision to choose this institution was its informal and casual setting as a research site as compared to schools. Growing up in the Malaysian context, I observed that most students perceive schools as authorities with strict rules and regulations that expect their complete obedience without questions or negotiations. This conditioning may lead them to respond to those perceived as "above" them submissively. According to Alias and colleagues (2023), children and young people in the Malaysian school environment often feel afraid to express their opinions, lack of confidence, and exhibit shyness due to the power imbalance between teachers and students. These dynamics may impact adolescents' participation as they associate such ideas with this research, potentially limiting their willingness to voice their views. In a similar vein, researchers have underlined the importance of creating an inclusive environment where participants feel safe expressing themselves (Blanchet-Cohen & Di Mambro, 2014). Other researchers have noted that conducting research in specific environments, such as schools, may not be ideal as children might perceive research as

similar to schoolwork, raising issues related to power dynamics (Bergström et al., 2010; Lundy et al., 2011).

While power imbalances do exist in informal and casual settings, comparing the atmosphere of schools with the church programs reveals a difference. In the church context, where children and adolescents can relax, have fun, and spend leisure time together, they may feel less compelled or obligated to agree with whatever the "superiors" say. The reduced power imbalance in this research site seemed optimal for participants to express their views in a less rigid manner and allow rapport to be built in a limited amount of time. I also presented myself as an "older sister" instead of a teacher-related role that often depicts "the authority" that they need to obey. This is in line with Christensen's (2004) approach that suggests adults conducting research with children should present and perform themselves as adults who are genuinely interested in understanding children's perspectives of the social world, rather than attempting to mimic being a child. It is believed that through this, the participants would likely perceive me primarily as a social person, and secondarily as a professional with a distinctive purpose. A potential challenge of using the church as a research site and for recruitment is that the guiding norms of what is appropriate for them to say within this context may shape adolescents' voices in a way that they might (or might not) produce certain voices if they were within other setting. For example, upon the sentence stem of "If I am lonely…", one participant responded with a spiritual perspective: "I would find a time to be quiet and rest in God's presence to know that I am never alone". The church context may be constitutive of the process which produces the participant's voice as the participant may find it fitting to say that in this research setting but not another. In other words, particular contexts produce certain voices rather than others (Spyrou, 2011), pointing to the significance of understanding the situated and variable character of the participants' voices. In essence, being realistic with the constraint of time and resources, as well as the significant power issues in schools as compared to this site, the church institution appeared to be an ideal entry point to the field.

4.4 Recruiting participants

After securing access, the next step was recruiting participants. I arranged to visit the church on a weekend to interact directly with potential participants. Information sheets were handed out before I started presenting essential information such as purpose of the research, expectations of involvement, type of activities, plan for the use of data and the results. I took extra time to explain their rights to participation, anonymity, and confidentiality to ensure that they have a clear understanding about the full meaning of concepts such as consent, right to withdraw, and voluntary. This is because almost all adolescents I spoke with had never been involved in research, let alone interviewed about their thoughts and opinions. Hence, the concept of informed consent seemed strange and unfamiliar to them. However, having the opportunity to give consent carries meaning beyond fulfilling ethical responsibility; it also contributes to their well-being by demonstrating respect for their sense of control (Hill, 2005, p. 68). It is hard not to notice the excitement that lit up their faces when messages like "You have the right to be heard" and "You should have a say in matters concerning you" were explicitly conveyed. I hope this experience was as meaningful and unique to them as it was for me. After the interview, one of the participants, Ethan, told me that he was feeling unsure and reserved of expressing his thoughts and opinions until he was told that "you are the expert" at the start of our conversation. That is when he felt his views would be taken seriously and decided to share more. It dawned on me that as researchers, we frequently

repeat certain mantras within our field to the extent that I've grown accustomed to hearing them, but I hadn't considered that adolescents or children might not be familiar with these phrases themselves. It reminds me that, as a researcher, my encounters with the participants (including the way I treat them and the things I have said to them) may leave a lasting impact on how they perceive themselves and the world around them.

An opt-in approach to research was enforced, which means the participants were the ones who initiated contact to take part. As Murray (2005) suggested, an opt-in approach inevitably reduces the likelihood of respondents agreeing to participate as it excludes those who choose not to take the initiative to make contact for reason like lethargy. Nonetheless, this is preferred over an opt-out approach due to ethical concerns that an opt-out policy will lead to the inclusion of reluctant participants (Murray, 2005), which is very likely to happen in the Malaysian context where children or adolescents are generally not used to the option of saying "no" but feel "ordered to cooperate". I wanted to make sure what I did was extend an invitation so that they did not feel pressured. Those who had decided on their participation, after being thoroughly informed of the nature of the study and given the opportunity to clarify their doubts, contacted me and provided written consent to participate, along with their parents' consent (for those who are below 16 years of age). I did not have much opportunity to talk to the parents as most of them usually come and go in a rush to pick-up and drop-off their children without even entering the compound. Yet, it was still surprising how most parents respect their children's decisions and understand the value of research given the fact that research that requires children's involvement is not extensive in Malaysia (Alias et al., 2023). One of the parents was very enthusiastic about her child's decision to participate when I approached her after her child consented to join. The parent told me that she recognizes adolescents' tendency to withhold certain things from their parents while openly sharing others, thus she sees this an outlet for her child to express her thoughts and feelings. Regardless, she did express concern about the sensitivity of the subject, and I was glad to have the chance to reassure her and clarify that the study focuses on the conceptual understanding of loneliness, rather than targeting personal experiences of loneliness, hence intrusive questions will be avoided.

Initially, eight adolescents responded positively and provided consents from both their parents and themselves. However, during the interview arrangement process, one participant decided that she would not be able to make it due to her hectic schedule during the exam period and holiday season. Meanwhile, two more adolescents responded through snowball sampling. They expressed interest in participating but faced transportation issues and location challenges. As I found it inappropriate to turn them down because of inaccessibility, an alternative to conduct the interviews and activities online was proposed to and approved by SIKT to ensure fair inclusion (see appendix 1). Afterwards, all nine participants were contacted directly to arrange the interview timing and location based on their convenience.

4.5 Participatory methods

Given the plethora of methods and techniques available, the dilemma lies in choosing between these. Flick (2009) has pointed out the need to prioritize aspects such as the purpose of the research and the appropriateness of the methods for the participants. Based on the methodological approach of this research that acknowledge children as meaning-making individuals whose voices should be listened to and respected (James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1982), a few participatory methods were incorporated to help

participants articulate their opinions and perspectives (Beazley et al. 2009; Young & Barrett, 2001). The purpose of using these participatory methods is not to patronize adolescents as some researchers have addressed the risk of children being patronized by using only special "child-friendly" or childish techniques (Punch, 2002; O'Brien & Moules, 2007). Rather, it reflects my understanding that they have different needs and competencies that need to be respected, thus requires diverse ways and channels to communicate. It is my responsibility, as the researcher, to strive to facilitate communication in ways that the participants are comfortable with and confident in. Therefore, it is important that the participants determine these innovative techniques, tailored to their skills and capabilities, as being appropriate and adequate means of self-expression for themselves (Grant, 2017). Moreover, recognizing that adolescents are potentially more vulnerable to unequal power relationships between adult researcher and adolescent participants, the use of these methods also attempts to address the power imbalance between both parties.

As an attempt to unfold as well as embrace the complexity of loneliness constructed in a specific social setting, semi-structured interviews and task-based activities including drawing and sentence completion exercises are incorporated in this research. This is supported by Punch (2002) who found it useful to introduce some task-based activities in addition to individual interviews to facilitate the expression of ideas. The proposed order of the methods was drawing, sentence completion exercise, followed by an interview. But after meeting with my first participant, I thought it would be better to let them decide the sequence of the activities as some participants might not feel comfortable starting off with task they are not confident in or familiar with. Minor improvisation as such creates space for participants to exercise their rights, gain a sense of control, and make decisions depending on their own preference. Although, in hindsight, I believe more could have been done such as giving them the option of not doing a method if they did not like it or choose to express themselves in other ways besides those suggested in the research. Most importantly, the entire research design and practice should draw on the underpinning principle that children and adolescents are competent and capable people, entitled to rights (Alderson, 1995; Hill, 1997; Morrow, 1999; Christensen & James, 2000). Hence, their voices should be understood and taken seriously.

4.5.1 Drawing

As a complement to interviews that stresses verbal competency, non-linguistic methods allow us to access and represent thoughts and feelings which are not easily communicated otherwise. It offers an alternative to "writing" or "telling" their views. The use of drawing, a visual method, allows participants to focus on the activity rather than the presence of the researcher, providing them time to think, reflect, and settle into the interview in an open-ended way (Kesby, 2000 as cited in Grant, 2017). It seeks to limit adults' interventions in the production of knowledge about young people's perspectives of their lives and the world (Blazek, 2017), thus potentially minimizing the significant power imbalances in individual interviews. Drawing on my experience in the field, this activity helped foster trust and build rapport between me and my participants without putting them under pressure to respond immediately to a specific question. Particular to this context, adolescents may find one-on-one interviews intimidating, but engaging them in a task they are familiar with in their social and cultural contexts may provide them with a higher degree of control of their own expressions and subsequently be more effective in bringing out the complexities of their views (Smørholm & Simonsen, 2017). Johnson and colleagues (2017) found that using drawings to support the discussions helped the

participants to remain involved in the process as interviews with teenagers can be particularly challenging in terms of their lack of engagement in the process (Punch & Graham, 2017). Drawing was introduced in this research, particularly by asking the participants to illustrate "A world of loneliness" on a drawing paper, provided with art supplies. I found the method helpful and effective as many aspects were covered even before going into the interview, allowing us to go more in-depth within a short period of time. Moreover, being able to visualize loneliness seemed to help them in narrating their thoughts and making abstract concepts more accessible. For example, when I noticed that most drawings were without colors and was curious about the choice, a participant told me:

> You know usually, colors usually carry the feeling of joy, you know. You use it to spread emotions and stuff. I feel like in a lonely world is, there's just no colors. There's just no life. There's just no happiness. (Ethan, age 17)

Indeed, the use of drawing in this research has presented the opportunity to access insights and bring forth meanings that might not be accessible and formulated in other methods. However, the drawing method is not free from ethical and methodological challenges. Keeping in mind that there may be some participants who feel unconfident and uncomfortable to draw, participants were informed that they have the right to opt-out or proceed without having to draw. Other alternatives such as completing the drawing beforehand or referring to online pictures were provided as well. As a result, there were participants who preferred and took these options. Another methodological challenge is that the request for them to draw may concern aspects that they are restrained culturally and normatively to talk about, especially when we are relying on their own interpretation of the drawings through conversations. Smørholm and Simonsen (2017) highlighted that verbalization may also be impossible as the drawings represent ideas and notions taken for granted, naturalized, or implicit. That is, knowledge is tacit and emotions may be difficult to articulate in words, thereby creating language barriers and asymmetric power relations between the researcher and participants. Therefore, the aim of this task was not for me to analyze their drawings and look at them as true descriptions of daily life but rather to encourage and inform conversation between me and my participants. Nevertheless, instead of imposing my own interpretations, participants' drawings should still be evaluated and analyzed in their own terms since it is a meaning-making activity (Costall, 1995, p. 24). To gain further insight into the meaning behind participants' drawings, follow-up questions were posed once they had completed their drawing and were prepared to engage in discussions. This approach allowed for deeper exploration and clarification of their creative expressions.

4.5.2 Sentence completion exercise

Given the potential challenges associated with discussing the topic of loneliness, sentence completion was chosen as an enabling method to generate richer datasets compared to relying solely on individual conversations. Sentence completion is a semi-structured projective technique, whereby participants are provided with open-ended sentence stems that they then complete in ways that are meaningful to them (Solely & Smith, 2008). This method has been found to be beneficial in assessing a variety of constructs, including individuals' attitudes and formation of thoughts. Sentence completion does not give ready answer categories that could reveal the researcher's point of view about the topic, but participants are invited to interpret the sentence stimulus from their own perspective (Solely & Smith, 2008). It served as a warm-up activity in this study that may direct the subsequent discussion as well as a means for providing useful data itself.

By providing only the beginnings of sentences, the participants were encouraged to freely respond to a total of six prompts as they wish (see appendix 8). In their own words, participants described their initial reactions to, and associations with, the given topic, such as "Loneliness is…", "I think being lonely is…" or "You know someone is lonely when…". The process of following children's interests may diminish the control of researchers, which is one of the intentions of employing this method. It could also lead to unexpected directions, especially as the presence of the researcher becomes less noticeable over time (Collier, 2019). With task-based methods like this, the interaction is between the adolescents and the paper, which allows for familiarity with the researcher to be build up over time (Punch, 2002).

This activity was proposed with the advantage of obtaining responses whilst encouraging participants to put things into perspective and think about loneliness in general (Lichtenstein et al., 2003). However, as writing skills are closely associated with academic competency in Malaysia, participants could be consciously or subconsciously worried about being judged because of spelling or grammar. Therefore, participants were reassured that expressing their feelings is what matters the most here as there are no definite answers to the sentence stems. They were also reminded not to worry about the length of the sentence as well as being right or wrong but approach it in ways that they find suitable to express their thoughts using their own words. Afterwards, participants were engaged in conversations about their answers to the prompts in order to make explicit and further elaborate their point of view. Interestingly, after gathering participants' opinions on all the methods used, I learned that what initially appeared as a limitation could actually be an advantage. As mentioned earlier, it was a concern that participants might be fixated on their writing competencies thus potentially hindering their self-expression. However, it turns out that this method is preferred and effective for those participants who feel more confident conveying their feelings through the form of writing rather than speaking. One of them, Lena (age 17), shared that this exercise provides time for reflection and allows space for second thoughts, unlike speaking, which can lead to stumbling and concerns about fluency. Another participant, Ethan (age 17), who claims to be more logical and enjoys reading and writing, mentioned that "sentence completion just helps it flow easier". As preferences and competencies vary from adolescent to adolescent, it may not be possible to find the most ideal method for research with them, but it points to the significance of using a range of methods, both traditional and innovative (Punch, 2002).

4.5.3 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interview is particularly common in qualitative research as it makes in-depth exploration of personal perspectives possible (Bryman, 2004). Interviews also allow spaces for new ideas to be brought forth as a result of the interaction between the researcher and participants during the knowledge-production process. Like a traveler with a map, although a basic framework of themes to be explored is needed, the traveler is flexible and open to new directions when unexpected and interesting topics emerge along the way (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This method is chosen to approach the research questions due to its strength for the collection of rich data on the topic in private and confidential settings. Interviews were conducted after both drawing and sentence completion exercise were completed, which created opportunities for the participants to further elaborate on their point of view from different dimensions by using the drawing and sentences as prompts in interviews. As adolescents may have complex and nuanced perspectives of loneliness that cannot be adequately captured through non-

verbal methods alone, interviews allowed me to ask and follow up with open-ended questions that can probe for deeper understanding and meaning beneath their words (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). As Faux and colleagues (1988) pointed out, semi-structured interviews are known to facilitate young people in enunciating their point of view. Although an interview guide that consists of a list of questions was determined beforehand, it was formulated in a loose and flexible way, only to direct the interview toward the central topic and ensure the researcher remain structured during the interview. In the interview guide, main themes such as personal and cultural definition of loneliness, and the role of social media were identified alongside several detailed questions that could help navigate the interview process (see appendix 7). However, the flow of the interview still varies in order and in content depending on the participants' responses. Instead of sticking precisely to a set of fixed questions, the flexible structure of the interview enabled me to probe and follow different directions as information emerges. Moreover, it provides participants with a certain degree of freedom to steer the conversation in ways as they see fit. At times when I sensed that we were veering off-topic, I would consult the interview guide to realign our discussion.

However, a limitation of using interviews with anyone, not just adolescents, is that there is a reliance on people's views as told in the interview situation (Punch & Graham, 2017), especially in a collective society of the Malaysian context. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that adolescents' perspectives are also the product of certain discourses from the context that they are positioned within (Alldred & Burman, 2005) while listening to their voices. This is recognized and expressed by the participants themselves too. For example, participants have shared how norms and values instilled by their parents and society can affect their own understanding of loneliness, shaping them to think in a similar way as others. One participant described this process as being "taught". In this sense, the voices of the adolescents cannot be separated from the dominant discourse in the society. This is not to downplay their voices by claiming that they are not authentic, but to acknowledge that what I present is "a truth" of a specific context instead of the truth. Moreover, this may in turn provide me with insights into the interdependent social dynamic of the culture as will be seen in both Chapter 5 and 6 of analysis. Reflecting on my approach, I acknowledge the concern about posing leading questions, whether consciously or not, that might guide the participants towards a desired answer. Despite my awareness of personal biases, complete neutrality remains elusive. In hindsight, I recognize that certain questions could have been formulated better and clearer to avoid imposing my own views. I felt embarrassed but was reminded by the principle of transparency in reflexive practice, in which I need to be transparent about the research experience. Reflecting on my role as a researcher, I inevitably played a part in co-constructing the research encounters with the participants, as well as producing knowledge through our interactions, which is a unique process between me and my participants that cannot be replicated. This reflects the social constructionism perspective that suggests knowledge arises out of human relationships. In keeping with this, the interview is exploratory, discovery-oriented rather than confirmatory (Elliott et al., 1999). That is, the interview data is not to confirm my assumptions and beliefs of what is true, rather it is to shed light on adolescents' perspectives of the world.

The interview setting is another important aspect of the discussion as it might affect what participants would choose to share. Recognizing that many spaces in society are dominated by adults, where children have minimal control (Punch, 2002), it was difficult to decide on a suitable setting to conduct research with my participants. After much consideration, I decided to discuss with each participant to come up with a location that

seemed appropriate for them. As recommended by Clark (2010), the interviews took place in environments that the participants are familiar with, i.e., an office in the church compound as offered by them and the participants' respective homes. The decision-making process was done with particular care, awareness, and sensitivity as I am aware that a participant's voice is dependent on the circumstances in which the conversations are being held (Spyrou, 2011). Selecting a more relaxed environment where the participants are able to express themselves openly without feeling restrained could minimize any discomfort among them in sharing their point of view. A total of five participants chose to do their interview in the church setting. As mentioned, conducting the interviews within the church has the possibility for minimizing adult authority in my research encounters with the participants as the place is a less adult-controlled social setting that represents fun and play with their peers. However, it also entails other unforeseen challenges. For example, when I was conducting the interview with a participant, May (age 13), in the room provided by the church, we were interrupted by the volunteers as they needed May's participation in their program that was also ongoing during that time. Out of respect for the church and May's preference to join the program, we decided to put our interview on hold and resume later when she returned from the activity. However, the flow was disrupted, and it took us some time to get back into the things that were covered earlier. It was not an ideal situation, but it shows how doing research with adolescents in "an inevitably messy real world" can be full of surprises (Robson et al., 2009).

The other four participants chose to have the interview at their respective homes, either through in-person or virtual form via Zoom. Conducting the interview in the participants' homes presents opportunities and challenges for gathering information. While the participant may feel more comfortable and convenient to share their views in their own personal space (Downey et al., 2007), my interview experience with a participant, Anna (age 14), has led to a reflection on what defines a "personal space". Before the commencement of the interview, I visited Anna's home and inquired about her preferred location in the house for the interview and activities. She directed me to the dining area, which is an open space connecting the living room and kitchen. I confirmed with her that conducting the interview there was comfortable for her, and she assured me it was. No other family members were present as they were upstairs. We settled down at the dining area and the interview began. Soon after, Anna's father came down and we greeted each other (he was aware and informed about the research before my arrival). We had a quick conversation before I returned to the interview with Anna. Later, Anna's grandfather joined us at the dining table and Anna's father came to assist him with eating. When I noticed that our conversation was no longer private nor confidential, I asked Anna how she was feeling and whether she wanted to relocate somewhere else. To my surprise, Anna was not bothered by the interruptions or her family members' presence around us. Instead, she turned the question back around on me to make sure that I felt alright too. Being culturally sensitive to the context, I decided it would be impolite to leave the dining area, especially since Anna seemed comfortable with the situation. We then proceeded with the interview, with us on one side of the table while Anna's father and grandfather engaged in their own conversations on the other side. I observed Anna's verbal and non-verbal expressions closely throughout the time and the way she presented herself was the same as before. It seemed she was used to sharing spaces with her family members, extending her concept of "personal space" to include loved or close ones. Remarkably, she did not mind their presence even when discussing sensitive topics like loneliness. Reflecting on this experience, I recognized that it not only facilitated disclosure from the

participant, but also given me the opportunity to build a richer picture of her reality by observing the social relations and dynamics within her context (Elwood & Martin, 2000). However, in hindsight, I realized that I could have been more ethically and culturally sensitive by informing the other family members that the interview was being audio recorded, as their voices might have also been captured as well.

An attempt to diminish the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the child has been central to discussion of children's participation in research. This is the same for research with adolescents. This is because an unequal power balance can result in discomfort for the participant and inhibit expression (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). However, as Christensen (2004) highlights, power-imbalance is inherent to research with children. Although, the power-imbalance between the researcher and the participants will never disappear, it can be lessened through different ways such as paying more attention to the location of the research (Spyrou, 2011) and using a combination of visual and written methods (Punch, 2002).

4.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations should be considered in every aspect of the research, from the beginning to the end, and even after it (James, 2007). While much ethical reflections have been woven into the fabric of this chapter, I will now specifically address key ethical aspects, including informed consent, participant well-being and autonomy, confidentiality, potential risks and benefits, socio-cultural and methodological considerations. Keeping the adolescents' best interests in mind, participants' well-being was prioritised to ensure that they were respected and protected from potential risks and harm. Therefore, participants were informed of the research topic, purpose, processes, methods, what the data will be used for, and the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any time without any consequences. I also adhered to established guidelines and principles for data storage, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality through careful handling of data storage and transcription (NESH, 2022). In a cultural context where socio-cultural norms prioritize complete obedience of children to adults (UNICEF, 2020), care was taken to ensure adolescents' confidentiality (Valentine, 1999 as cited in Punch & Graham, 2017). Considering that we all take on different discourses to make sense of the world, I am attentive to the voices of participants and acknowledge their diverse perspectives and values that do not always resonate with me. Although it may be impossible to be free from my own biases and expectations, being aware of them and recognizing how my presence influenced the research process allows me to value participants' knowledge equally, instead of assuming my knowledge as superior to them.

The potential risk or harm of participating in this research lies in the psychological or emotional discomfort associated with discussing a sensitive topic like loneliness. Although the research purpose is framed around the cultural and contextual understanding and conceptualisation of loneliness (see Chapter 1), it is difficult to detach oneself from the recollections of individual experiences when sharing perspectives. This is informed by the social constructionist approach which posits that our knowledge of the world is constructed by our past engagement and experiences. Consequently, sharing perspectives on loneliness may potentially impact one's mental well-being. Recognizing this, I submitted an evaluation request to determine whether the project required approval from The Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK). In response, REK confirmed that the project does not fall under health research and thus does not require ethical clearance from REK before commencement (see appendix 2).

Ethically it is the researcher's responsibility not to make any participants feel worse after the research (Punch & Graham, 2017). Research is an intervention and should therefore be beneficial (Collier, 2019). It has been argued that not only should participants suffer no harm, but they are also expected to be left in a better situation. How the benefit is understood might be different in the eyes of different players in the process. But the benefits can be as subtle as increased self-awareness, a small celebration of interesting insight, the recognition that they are of interest, and worth the time and attention to be heard and taken seriously (Collier, 2019). Most participants expressed that they have gained insights from this research. For instance, Anna's (age 14) realization was that what might appear unimportant to her could hold significant meaning for others, especially when discussing factors that contribute to feelings of loneliness. Her newfound awareness encourages empathy and a broader perspective, reminding her to consider the feelings and experiences of others. Lena (age 17), on the other hand, gained a sense of meaning in her participation as she perceived it as a contribution to a worthy cause. Furthermore, being able to express oneself freely on a topic that is not usually openly discussed, while having the right to remain anonymous, can be beneficial and even provide relief for certain participants. As described by one participant, Alysia (age 16), after the interview, she found the interview therapeutic.

When engaging with young people in research, it is crucial that the methods respect the time commitment of young people and their ability to participate (Lloyd-Evans, 2017). For example, some participants might be at ease and confident with straightforward talking whereas others prefer visual task-based activities (Punch & Graham, 2017). To avoid making incorrect possibly "adultist" assumptions, a range of methods were employed to listen to their voices. Where possible, tools where used in a flexible manner to cater to participants' varied preferences and skills, enabling them to feel more comfortable with an unfamiliar adult researcher and express themselves better (Punch, 2002). For example, participants were given the option to present online image if they do not feel comfortable with drawing. Participants were also reminded that they have the right to stop or withdraw from the research at any time, without any consequences. This is important so that the participants do not feel forced or put in a difficult position to proceed even after giving consent to participate. However, it is acknowledged that participatory methods do not necessarily transcend asymmetric power relations, class, and cultural differences between the adult researcher and participants. Many of the participants may not be used to being treated as equals but assume the researcher to hold a position of power (Punch, 2002; Robson & Fumoto, 2009). This challenge may be even greater in collectivistic society like Malaysia, which emphasises on hierarchy in which obeying orders of seniority is an important cultural value. Therefore, it is possible that declining my request to draw turned out to be difficult for the participants. Although unexpected circumstances may arise that require immediate decision-making, regardless of how well-prepared I am, the key is not to devise a perfect and "bulletproof" plan. Instead, I acknowledge that unforeseen situations will occur and commit to giving my best effort to ensure project quality while prioritizing the participants' best interests

4.6.1 Reflexivity

In the social sciences, there is no single, widely-acknowledged understanding of what being reflexive means, although the ongoing debates since the "reflexive turn" have provided many insights. Here, I refer to the definition of reflexivity as an ongoing internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation by the researcher regarding their positionality (Mitchell et al., 2018). Additionally, it involves acknowledging and explicitly recognizing

that this position can influence the research process and outcomes (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). It means directing the researcher's focus inward, acknowledging and taking responsibility for their own position within the research. This awareness extends to understanding its impact on the research context, participants, inquiry, data collection, and subsequent interpretation (Berger, 2015). As such, the practice of reflexivity challenges the notion of knowledge as purely objective, instead highlighting that knowledge production involves active interpretation and co-creation between the researcher and participants (Berger, 2015). Reflecting on my own positionality in shaping the knowledge produced in this research, my familiarity with the cultural norms and insider knowledge of the national context has significantly influenced the way I make sense of and interpret the data.

As a Malaysian myself, having shared the cultural values and beliefs with my participants positioned me in the role of an "insider". That is, my own experiences and language sensitivity within the research context have given me a "head start" in understanding how to address the topic of loneliness in a culturally appropriate (and relevant) manner and grasp nuanced perspective of participants in context. As a result, my "cultural intuition" and insight have enabled me to identify disguised and subtle expressions of themes within participants' narratives. These narratives were then analyzed in the frame of collectivistic values, affecting the process and result of data analysis. However, I was also reminded to be conscious of the assumptions and biases that underlie the way I make sense of my fieldwork and participants. It occurred to me that my familiarity with the context might carry the risks of taking similarities for granted and being blind to certain aspects of participants' viewpoint that could be meaningful to them (Daly, 1992). To minimize the impact of my ignorance, I humbly embraced the standpoint of the uninformed and actively sought feedback from the participants before ending the interview to tell me what I may have missed. Without being reflexive, I might unintentionally dismiss voices that do not align with mine and project my own view when interpreting their perspectives. It is without doubt that the research direction and knowledge produced would be completely different if the researcher were another person.

Because "no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved" (Sword, 1999: 277), exercising reflexivity reminds me that my participation in the research process is open to scrutiny, as processes of constructing knowledge, in relations of power. Given that knowledge is socially constructed and relational, reflexivity invites us to question our claims to knowledge and the process of knowledge production (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000), thus resisting the temptation to claim authenticity. Rather than attempting to achieve objectivity, both relational and social constructionist approaches to knowledge generation, as outlined earlier, encouraged me to identify my personal narratives as this contributes to my understanding of how meaning is created (or constructed) in interactions with my participants. It refers to a stance of being able to locate myself in the picture, to acknowledge and appreciate how my own self is part of the process of knowledge creation, influencing the research act (Berger, 2015). In a way, reflexivity's value, as often argued, rests on its potential for making the very process by which we produce knowledge more transparent. In its critical form then, reflexivity is no longer about finding truth through proper method but rather a means of constructing knowledge that is local, situated, and contingent. Likewise, Connolly (2008) recognizes that to be critically reflexive is to overcome the need to identify the "true" and

"authentic" voices of children and to recognize, instead, the need to take into account the very contexts in which their voices are produced, and that includes my position.

4.7 Analysis

Thematic analysis is a generic method to the analysis of qualitative data that involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Through thematic analysis, patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices can be identified (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In particular, thematic analysis in childhood studies allows researchers to "discover themes and concepts embedded throughout" the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 226, as cited in Fox, 2019). The identified themes in the collected data are patterns that capture meaningful or interesting information about the research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, as cited in Fox, 2019). Clarke and Braun (2013) proposed a six-phase data analysis process for thematic analysis to identify the themes and patterns in the data, which are: familiarization of data, generation of codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing themes, determine significance of themes, and reporting of findings. Specific to this research, I drew inspiration from this approach when making sense of my own empirical data. That means I adapted this approach in my study with a degree of flexibility to jump back and forth the phases, instead of adhering to them precisely. As Hignett and McDermott (2013) pointed out, these steps are intertwined and cyclical instead of linear as the qualitative process is iterative. As a way of being thorough in the process, I spent a lot of time at the familiarization stage after transcribing all the audio-recorded interview data to make sure that I have a full grasp of my materials. Transcribing is the process of converting spoken data into written data (Hignett & McDermott, 2013). Although it can be time-consuming, it does allow familiarization with the raw data at an early state through reading and re-reading data (Grey, 2009). During this process of being fully immersed with the data, I wrote comments in the transcriptions whenever I came across relevant insights. Subsequently, I started to notice a recurring pattern and that led me to grouping sections of the data together, thus developing themes. This process is similar to Clarke and Braun's *generation of codes* and *combining codes into themes phase*, though these phases were conducted simultaneously in this study. Both themes and codes were review and revised from time to time as more in-depth and detailed analyses took place. The writing process began after having a clearer overview and outline of the analysis, with continuous interpretation of the data throughout the process. Guided by the research questions, some themes were omitted during the finalization stage. In summary, the analysis process adopted the same logic and systematic approach of thematic analysis with more interpretive work that requires thorough consideration along the way.

4.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology of this project, rooted in a participatory and rights-based approach within childhood studies. The sampling strategy combines both purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. In addition, access to and challenges in the field were described to gain a better understanding of the research context. This was followed by an overview of the opportunities and risks of the methods employed in this research, which are sentence completion exercise, drawing, and semi-structured interview. Finally, ethical considerations and the process of analysis were presented to demonstrate transparency in research practices.

5 Making Sense of Loneliness

This chapter is dedicated to answer the main and sub research questions: *How do Malaysian adolescents make sense of the phenomenon of loneliness?* and *How can Malaysian adolescents' descriptions of loneliness be understood in light of culture and language?* As a participant precisely expressed "I think it definitely affects me because when people around you think a certain way, you start to think that way as well, whether you are conscious of it or you're unconscious of it'' (Lena, age 17). People shape context, and the same context also shapes people's thought and behavior (Burr, 2015). Therefore, it is important to recognize that whatever the participants share also gives us a glimpse into the greater context in which they are situated. Hence, these aspects should not and cannot be interpreted separately. Grasping the many nuances of the meaning of loneliness and how adolescents make sense of it requires us to embrace the complexity and messiness of their sensemaking along the way. First, I will present the background information of the research participants to give a firm grasp of who the participants are and their narratives. Then, discussions on the role of language, which is significant to the study context, will be introduced to gain a clearer idea of what kind of context the participants are situated in and speaking from. This can help us relate to their perspectives better. The general themes, which are loneliness as a state of being, loneliness as a state of mind, and loneliness as transient and situational, will be explored throughout this analysis chapter. Some of the themes may come close to the findings of previous research, some may provide new insights, but they are all deeply meaningful and contribute to the continuous unlearning and learning process of taken-for-granted concepts in a constantly shifting world. After that, I will focus on the paradox and complexity of loneliness as described by the participants.

5.1 Exploring Loneliness: Perspectives and Narratives

Conceptualizing loneliness is not a straightforward or direct task as its definition can vary from person to person, even for those from the same cultural background, due to individual differences and diverse life experience. To provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the fieldwork's context and to gain a firm grasp of who the participants are, I will briefly introduce all nine participants in the form of a table presentation.

Pseudonyms	Sex	Age	Choice of Language	Location of interview
May	Female	13	Mandarin	Church
Anna	Female	14	Mandarin	Home (In-person)
Shaun	Male	14	Mandarin	Church
Shirley	Female	16	Mandarin	Church
Vivian	Female	16	Mandarin	Church
Alysia	Female	16	English	Home (Online via ZOOM)
Lena	Female	17	English	Home (Online via ZOOM)
Michael	Male	17	Bahasa Rojak	Home (In-person)
Ethan	Male	17	English	Church

Table 5.1: Information of participants

Despite the prevalence of loneliness across the world, most participants mentioned that they had never thought about loneliness in depth before the interview. Some participants described the interview questions as helpful:

> I just think that they're good questions that actually prompt you to think about loneliness as a whole. (Ethan, age 17)
>
> Uhm, I just really, I feel like it really opened my mind more, to on like what loneliness really is, and like it really made my mind think. (Alysia, age 16)

As expressed by Ethan and Alysia, this research encounter can also invite new insights and reflections among the participants, thus leaving traces in their lives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This resonates with the discussion on ethical considerations in Chapter 4, in which participating in research should be beneficial. The benefits could be as subtle as an increased self-awareness or a small celebration of interesting insight. While only a few participants spoke from their own lived experience, most of them described the process as thinking from the perspective of a lonely person or putting themselves in others' shoes:

> Maybe I was thinking, I would imagine a person if he/she is really lonely, if I were to be that person, what would he/she do if he/she was really lonely? (Anna, age 14)
>
> Uhm, maybe I've thought of like how other people feel when they are lonely. And like, and I think maybe… Yeah, maybe I will always think of other people and maybe sometimes how I feel too. But it's mostly on other people. Yeah (Alysia, age 16)

Evidently, these participants chose to take on a third-person narrative, which is an attempt of seeing a situation from a point-of-view outside of their own, when talking about loneliness. This may indicate a tendency to distancing oneself from a sensitive topic as such that is commonly associated with negative attitudes. As highlighted in the earlier chapters, this is a deliberate part of the research design and questions to be ethical sensitive, which does not demand participants to share their personal experiences of loneliness, enabling them greater control over how much they choose to disclose about their personal lives and feelings. Taking on a third-person perspective allow participants to share their thoughts about loneliness without having to share personal experiences which overcome potential distress and reluctance to talk that can occur when asked to talk about experiences of loneliness. At the same time, this perspective is also important for understanding the width of the experiences of loneliness, i.e. they describe how loneliness can be perceived by some people, and in that way, they belong to the structure of loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007). As Merleau-Ponty (1995/1945, as cited in Dahlberg, 2007) and Heidegger (1998/1927, as cited in Dahlberg, 2007) suggested, loneliness can only be understood in light of our existence with others. This is aligned with the relational perspective applied in this research project, that helps us understand loneliness as a relational phenomenon.

5.1.1 The language of loneliness

Before delving into the analysis of participants' descriptions of loneliness, I find it necessary to give a full picture of what other cultural factors are involved in this research context that might play a role in shaping adolescents' perspective of loneliness. First and foremost, it is important to consider the role of language. One of the ways to better understand a context is through language as language is what gives meaning to words that we use to describe loneliness. Besides, language is not only about words but also a mode of looking at the world. Therefore, how words like loneliness came into use and how their meanings morphed into what they mean today tell us much about its culture and context. In short, words tell stories. Consider how the meaning of loneliness shifted

throughout history as an example. In the 1580s, loneliness meant "condition of being solitary", a physical experience. Such definition is tied to the structure of society at that time, where living alone was an indication of lesser chance of survival for human beings before modern times. Loneliness thereby could be expressive of the individual's relationship to the community (Rokach et al., 2001). Gradually, what was regarded as loneliness then is no longer perceived the same way today due to various historical and intellectual developments. These developments changed humanity's relationship with itself and the world. New understandings of loneliness as a psychological or emotional experience emerged in Western thought alongside new ways of living and became dominant. Summarizing dictionary meanings of the term loneliness, D'Aboy (1973) concluded that although loneliness is a familiar experience for most people, it has no consistent definition. The researcher suggested that loneliness is best understood as existing on a continuum ranging from states or conditions that are wholly negative to ones that are ambiguous to those associated with positive effects. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the contemporary notion of loneliness is primarily altered by individualistic ideologies that may not be relevant in the collectivistic society. As language affects how we perceive things, we cannot move past this discussion without acknowledging the role of language in shaping our understanding of loneliness as well as the context that shapes the meaning of the words through language.

People often use terms like loneliness, aloneness, and solitude to describe solitary experiences. Although scholars have assigned a conceptual definition for each of these terms to differentiate them, these concepts have become ubiquitous as they are getting more and more attention over time, making it easy to blur them together and gloss over their meanings. Solitude, for instance, is commonly differentiated from loneliness today, yet the word actually comes from the Latin word *solitudinem*, which means loneliness. Prior to the nineteenth century, the terms "loneliness" and "lonely" were frequently used interchangeably with "solitude". They conveyed the idea of being physically alone or intentionally distancing oneself from society (Burnett, 2023). Likewise, dictionary synonyms used to define loneliness include alienation, mental alienation, alone, estrangement, isolation, separation, and solitude and reflected both negative and positive connotations as well as voluntary and involuntary conditions. Once upon a time, solitude and loneliness actually carried the same meaning. As time passes, solitude, like any other word, is then assigned a slightly different meaning that can be shared and understood by a group of people who find it useful in describing a particular situation. However, everyday language is rife with ambiguity. When it comes to our everyday usage, each of us have our own understanding of different phenomena, which affects the way we describe them and the words we choose to use to capture these divergent experiences of time alone. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that the meaning of words depends greatly on the context in which they are used. In this chapter, we will take a look at how loneliness is understood to denote different phenomena in participants' everyday language and how the same term can be perceived differently by individuals, even for those from the same "category". Specific to this context, multiple terms were used by participants when it comes to describing and defining loneliness, showing the width, depth, and the many faces of loneliness. Therefore, interpreting the concept of loneliness with a discourse analytical approach may help us to traverse such a complex and ambiguous phenomenon (see chapter 3).

5.1.2 Loneliness across languages

Understanding loneliness is all the more challenging when it comes to more than one language. As a multilingual society, Malaysians are constantly exposed to multiple languages and using them in daily interactions. Participants were given the option to converse in the language that they feel most comfortable with, thus the interviews were conducted in not only English, but also Mandarin. Interestingly, some of the interviews even involved a mix of both languages – "Bahasa Rojak". "Bahasa Rojak" is one of the code-mixing examples that combines Malay and English into a certain level of language structure (Bukhari et al., 2015). It is also often mixed with Chinese due to the large Chinese population in Malaysia (Vollmann & Soon, 2019). As a result, three out of nine participants preferred English and the rest preferred to speak in Mandarin or a mix of both languages. Although each language is unique on its own, it also comes with limitations. That is, certain words cannot be directly translated into another language without losing the essence of the word during translation. As a consequence, concepts originating in one language may undergo distortion and assume a different form—one that holds greater cultural significance—when expressed in another language.

Taking "loneliness" as an example, there are a few common Mandarin terms used to describe this phenomenon, such as "孤单" (gū dān), "孤独" (gū dú), and "寂寞" (jì mò). Among those participants who spoke Mandarin throughout the interview, two of them preferred to use "孤独" (gū dú), one preferred "孤单" (gū dān), one did not have a preference and thought either was fine. Additionally, one participant used both "孤单" (gū dān) and "孤独" (gū dú) interchangeably, believing that both words represent the same concept, another participant simply used the term "loneliness" as the interview was conducted in "Bahasa Rojak". Both "孤单" (gū dān) and "孤独" (gū dú) consist of the Chinese character "孤" (gū) that means alone, isolated, solitary, and orphan. I do not intend to discuss the definition of each Mandarin term in depth as the participants' diverse preference for the terms to describe loneliness reflects how people differ widely in their understanding and usage of words. Despite how dictionary or scholars define them, definitions are not what people have in mind when they actually use words. Languages have to be lived to be understood. Most importantly, it became apparent that the concept of loneliness varies as it travels across languages and this difference in interpretation affects our use of words to describe it.

Travelling between languages can be messy but it also offers a certain extent of flexibility. Most of the participants are used to switching and mixing at least two languages when they speak and that equips them with the ability to think and communicate in a more flexible and versatile way. The pool of words in those languages they have access to come in handy when they find themselves being limited by the extent of their vocabulary they acquire in a single language. They can then switch to another language and retrieve the words that allow them to express themselves in a more accurate manner. For instance, one of the participants, May (age 13), could not think of a Mandarin word that best conveys the equivalent sentiment of being left out in English even though she spoke mostly Mandarin throughout the interview. After a moment of struggle to search for the right word, she simply switched to English and used the words "left out" to express herself. People find their own ways to navigate through life. Juggling two languages in one mind may be taxing and confusing, but participants eventually learn to work their way through and maximize the potential use of languages in their everyday lives. In retrospect, involving more than one language in this research did complicate the situation but in a way makes our communication effective, enabling

me to connect and relate with the participants on a deeper level that opened my eyes to the influence of language on our way of thinking and seeing the world. In the next section, I will present the general themes identified during the analysis.

5.2 Loneliness as a state of being

Loneliness takes on many forms. For some participants, when they were first asked what loneliness means to them, it means being alone, being separated from people, without others around them (In Mandarin Chinese: 一个人在那边 yī gè rén zài nà biān). This expression of a state where you are, physically, all by yourself is a strong "common theme", recurring in almost all interviews I had with the participants:

> You know someone is lonely when they're rarely hanging out with others. It's always them, by themselves […] When a person is physically by themselves or in a way in their own world, or in their own personal space, a lot. (Alysia, age 16)

> … it's like there's a group of people and you're not with them, there's a sense of alienation. (Anna, age 14)

> I think loneliness means being alone. […] I know I'm lonely when I see friends being together, but I'm not among them. […] It's just like maybe they are all together, then I'm over here. […] Physically not there. (Shirley, age 16)

> That person is alone every time. Everywhere he goes, he's alone, no one is being with him. (Shaun, age 13)

> [Loneliness] means being on your own, and then not having, not having anyone with you. […] That person just keeps sitting alone. Even during recess time, he'll probably not be with a big group, just by himself. (Vivian, age 16)

As we see, these quotes point towards a coherent expression of loneliness as a state of one being physically isolated juxtaposed with an image of a crowd of people. Anna also presented a similar perspective in her drawing (see Figure 5.1). She expressed that the first thing that came to her mind when she heard the title of "a world of loneliness" was "someone swinging alone". Based on her explanation, the sign "For 1 only" highlighted that the person is physically distant from other people, doing things alone in their own comfort space, including special occasions like celebrating their birthday (the cultural meaning associated with birthday celebrations will be explored in section 5.4):

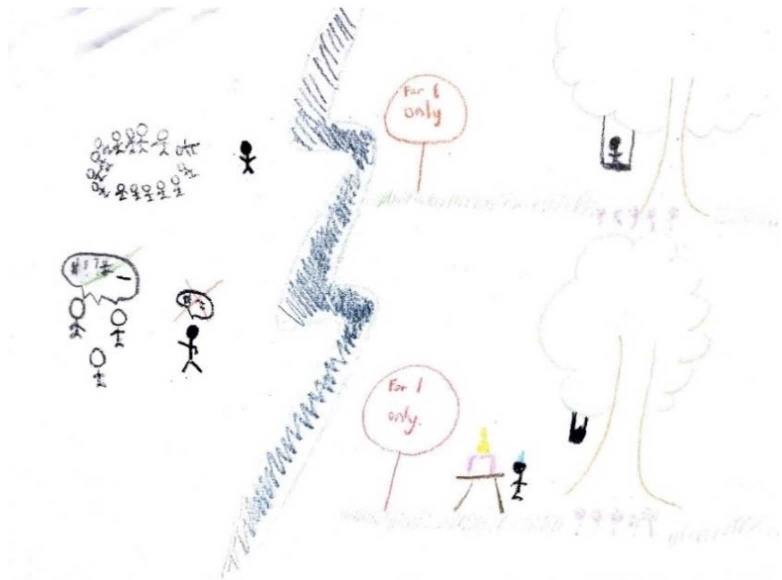


Figure 5.1: Anna's drawing of 'A world of loneliness'

Anna further explained that lonely people would retreat to somewhere comfortable and it came to her mind that being in nature would be enjoyable for them because it is quiet and serene. Although past research has differentiated being alone or social isolation from loneliness, stating that these two are not the same thing, the everyday understanding of adolescents in this research says otherwise. That is, loneliness is often conflated with social isolation. Many participants perceive loneliness as one's lack of physical interactions or objective lack of connection through which to interact with others, that is in line with how Child and Lawton (2017) have defined social isolation. In fact, these two phenomena do have something in common. According to Dahlberg (2007), being alone and loneliness are both seen as the opposite of being together with someone else. In the case where being alone is the other side of being with, loneliness can and does mean being alone for some people in a specific context that values togetherness. In addition, the role of language and cultural context may also contribute to shaping the meaning of loneliness. For example, a participant explicitly pointed out how the concept of loneliness is understood differently in English and Mandarin language due to cultural differences:

> Lena: I think like uhm… In English, right, being, loneliness is like actually like, being like a person alone.
> Yin Ting: Yeah.
> Lena: But like in Chinese, like, it's when you're, like, secluded, right? And then I think for… Uhh I think for like the Western cultures, they, they tend to think of loneliness as like a big feeling like, like a problem. Yeah. But to us, it's more just like a feeling.

Not only do certain words not have an exact equivalent in another language, but there is also a chance that the sentiment value of the words may be lost or warped in translation. This is because a culture's language is deeply tied to the mental capacities and characteristics of those who speak it that cannot be replicated in another language. Following this train of thought, it could explain why most participants associate the state of being alone with loneliness, instead of solitude. Unlike how most scholars differentiated these two concepts, participants easily refer to loneliness when describing both negative and positive solitary experiences. When reflecting on possible reasons for this, I became aware that although the translation of solitude in Mandarin, which is "独处" (dú chǔ), is also defined as a state in which a person is alone and separated from others, the sentiment or connotation is not equivalent. In contrast to the positivity and meaningfulness that usually come with "solitude" in English, "独处" (dú chǔ) is more often associated with a sense of unhappiness and negativity when being mentioned (Chen & Zhou, 2012). There's no such word as "solitude" in Mandarin that is precisely equivalent or truly encapsulate the meaning of the word as in English. As such, the concept of solitude in Mandarin match up with loneliness, having lost the full subtlety of the meaning of solitude in English in the gap which are created by cultural differences in lived experience. In another words, the concept of solitude in English, that is being alone is a pleasant experience, is foreign to some participants even though the translated word for it exists; it simply has a different connotation now. It then seems to make sense that participants would describe "loneliness" as a state of being alone because it does fall under the idea of loneliness from their point of view. In this case, our comprehension of a concept or idea influences the words we use, reflecting the social constructionist thinking.

Now, let us take a closer look at the values of the Malaysian context in regards of loneliness. Most research has focused on cultural values, particularly individualism/collectivism, as a macro-level factor that might account for cross-national differences in loneliness. Individualistic cultures value autonomy and self-reliance, whereas collectivistic cultures value being part of and contributing to the ingroup. Hence,

individualism/collectivism reflects the value of social relationships and might therefore be particularly relevant for loneliness, but in complex ways (Luhmann et al., 2023). Considering the collectivistic nature of Malaysian society that values belonging to groups (Saat, 2009), it fosters the social expectation of not only to be a part of a group but also to be seen together with someone else. It also indicates that social ties are more important and social relationships might be more likely to be perceived as insufficient within society. This shared social expectation guides people's behavior and influences their belief. During the sentence completion exercise, one participant responded to the sentence stem of "You know someone is lonely when…" by ending it with "that person sits alone in a place with no one else around them" (Shirley, age 16). Similarly, most participants described a scenario of being on one's own, away from the crowd when being asked "how do you know when someone is lonely?". Keeping in mind that we inevitably speak from our own lived experience even if we are talking about our view of others, it is also possible that participants would assume others to perceive them the way they perceive others. Furthermore, another participant associated loneliness with "individual", "by oneself", "independent", and "independent individual" (Michael, age 17). These terms may indirectly convey his understanding that people are expected to rely on one another. This is in line with the collectivist culture that values collaboration and constructive interdependence. Thus, being conditioned by cultural expectations that deem being in groups or with someone as normal, it can possibly explain why participants hold negative attitude towards the state of being alone and interpreted it as loneliness. These expectations also lead to negative assumptions of people who are "by themselves", forming stigmas around loneliness. For instance, participants suggest that being alone is peculiar and would attract attention, especially in contrast to the idea of their peers socializing in groups in the background:

> They would like try to cover they are not lonely. […] Because they don't want to make themselves look 'special', like unusual or odd. […] They try not to be the focus of the crowd, the spotlight. (Anna, age 14)

> Vivian: It could be like that classmate, like he doesn't want to join the group, so it's like, 'Eh, why does he like being alone like that', so it probably seems weird.
> Yin Ting: So it's easy to attract attention whenever someone is alone?
> Vivian: Yes, especially at our age, it is even more obvious when the rest are in big groups of people. And then if you're playing sports on your own and you're not playing together [or], you're sitting elsewhere reading a book, then I'll be like, 'Huh? Why wouldn't you join in? You're not that kind who socialize with people'.
> Yin Ting: So it's easier to attract attention if you're alone instead
> Vivian: Yes, if you're at this age. Because most of the activities are group activities
> Yin Ting: So it's kind of normal to be in a group, it's kind of normal to be seen by others...
> Vivian: Yeah, normal. But actually two people being together is also normal. It's just that being on your own is more noticeable.

Not only do Anna and Vivian talk about how being alone would stand out from the crowd, but Vivian also raises the relevance of age in this matter. She points out that they, as adolescents, are in a phase of life where one is expected to be constantly organized in groups. It is interesting to hear from adolescents themselves about their own understanding of how they are supposed to behave and what is expected of them at this stage of life. However, the stigma surrounding loneliness can be harmful in a way that prevents many people from admitting how they feel to themselves, let alone others. Indeed, almost all participants said that they have never engaged in conversation about loneliness because "we want to present the best form of ourselves to others and hide the not-so-good side of us" (May, age 13). Loneliness apparently is a side they do not wish to be seen by others. They were also afraid that "the negativity of loneliness will ruin the happy and positive atmosphere" if they were to talk about this subject. Moreover, the

social stigma of loneliness is characterized by the belief that disclosure of being lonely will engender negative responses from others:

> I feel like it's such a… there's just like a stigma around loneliness, where if you tell someone you're lonely, maybe they'll see you as 'Ey, you're not good enough, that's why people don't want…' something like that maybe. So it feels there's a lot of negative stigma around being lonely, that's why people tend to just keep it in. (Ethan, age 17)

> Most of the time it's not that they choose to be lonely. It's just that they want to tell someone but they're scared on what other people might think, or they're scared on what other people might say to others. […] They're really, they're really scared of being judged by other people, and so in a way, they just keep those emotions to themselves and yeah. (Alysia, age 16)

> It's like maybe, like my friends, they will think that those who are lonely maybe have unlikeable characters. Maybe it's because of that that's why nobody wants to be near around them. So one of the reasons why it attracts people's attention is because that person is not easy to get along with. (Vivian, age 16)

As Ethan described, the stigmatization of loneliness can create a vicious cycle as revealing loneliness is more likely to deepen the problem. By placing the burden and blame of loneliness on those who are already affected by it, people suffering from loneliness are less likely to act to address loneliness but keep it to themselves. After the interview, Vivian told me that what she found most interesting throughout our conversation is the realization that the first thought that usually comes to her and her friends' mind when they see someone lonely or being alone is that he/she must be an outcast. Without giving it further thought, they would assume there is something wrong with that person leading to them being excluded. As the participants described, we tend to blame the lonely for their loneliness, attributing it to some sort of personal failing. We assume the person isn't trying hard enough or has unlikable qualities. Loneliness seemed to be interpreted as a personality deficit or bad attitude, and as a personal responsibility (Hauge, 2010). As Alysia notes, this interpretation might lead to a fear of being judged by others and worries about what other people might think of them, thus choosing to bottle up their feelings instead of openly discussing a struggle that is, in reality, quite common. On a side note, people in collectivistic cultures are found to be more likely to perceive the social stigma of loneliness than people in individualistic countries (Luhmann et al., 2023). Researchers have proposed that this is because the stigma surrounding loneliness is more apparent in cultures that prioritize relationship (i.e., collectivistic cultures) than in those that prize independence (i.e., individualistic cultures) (Kerr & Stanley, 2021). This observation is picked up by one of the participants:

> Uhm, but I'd say a lot of my friends they define loneliness as, 'Ohh, that girl, that girl has like a lot of problems, no wonder she's like lonely, you know. Maybe people don't want to talk to her because of that', you know. But I feel like other cultures are sorta like, they kinda know in a sense that, 'Ohh, maybe they are going through something and it's not necessarily based on that person'. I feel like maybe it's sorta like that. I feel like… yeah. (Alysia, age 16)

Here, Alysia demonstrated awareness of how people around her attribute loneliness to negative reasons and made a comparison with her impression of how other cultures are more compassionate and less judgmental to those who are experiencing loneliness. According to Rokach and Broch (1997), distinct views on the cause of loneliness may stem from cultural differences. In their study, South Asians ascribed loneliness to feelings of inferiority and personal inadequacy, while North Americans were of the opinion that loneliness is due to unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships and an absence of social support. Clearly, some contexts have placed more emphasis on the individual in terms of the cause of loneliness as compared to other contexts, and this has implications for self-

disclosure. All in all, it reflects the impact of Malaysian norms on one's perspective of the world and others, informing people the behaviors that are generally believed as appropriate and inappropriate. Therefore, when loneliness is intertwined with togetherness and one fails to meet that expectation of being together with others, being alone and loneliness could carry the same meaning.

Taking the cultural route to understanding loneliness resonates with the concept of relationality whereby what matters is how children affect and are affected in the networks and relations they find themselves in (Fox & Alldred, 2017 as cited in Spyrou et al., 2018). What can be problematic here is the way we, researchers, react when a different voice that does not align with and challenges our version of "truth" arises. It is, therefore, important to be constantly reminded of the research's theoretical orientation, that is I, as a researcher, am not taking the role of an expert who presents how loneliness should be defined or what is right and wrong about conceptualizing loneliness but how adolescents make sense of it contextually. Drawing upon Spyrou (2018), my approach to knowledge production involves the practice of analyzing "the interactional contexts in which children's voices emerge, the institutional contexts in which they are embedded, and the discursive contexts which inform them" (p, 86). Meaning is relational, and everyday relational practices, rather than standard definition, shape loneliness (Ozawa-de Silva & Parsons, 2020). Here, I present how social expectations and social pressures play crucial roles in one's understanding of loneliness.

While it is possible that one can feel lonely without the presence of "others in general", the feeling of loneliness could also arise when those people deemed "important" are absent in one's life. Some participants identified loneliness as being without companions, which means having no friends, or loved ones that could accompany you. There are other similar descriptions, such as "no one you could share your ups and downs with", "no one you could confide in", "no one you could confidently say cares for you and enjoys being around you", "no one you could reach out to", and "no one who cares about you". In a way, loneliness is not simply the absence of companionship, but also a lack of someone to talk to or to do something with. This meaning is especially apparent in the interviews with the participants.

> I feel like friends really play like a huge impact on loneliness. I would say that, yeah. Because most of the times you're lonely because you don't have anyone to talk to, about like your feelings and all. (Alysia, age 16)

> … Or maybe it's when you suddenly realise that it seems like you don't have anyone to share what's on your mind with, that's when you know you're lonely. (Michael, age 17)

> … when someone's feeling lonely, it feels like they're, they're just going through life themselves. Like everything they do, it's by themselves. So it's basically a big burden on them. It's like carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. […] because for me, friendship and having people around you is very important. Like it's very important to be able to hang out and just… doesn't have to, even have to be serious talks like just casual conversations. I feel like those are super important to me. (Ethan, age 17)

As the participants describe, to be lonely when one desires companionship may result in feelings of being left out, ignored, unwanted, excluded, marginalized, or alienated from social situations, society, and the world. One then feels like "an outcast" who "does not belong" and "cannot fit in". Some participants further expressed that what is worse than feeling "not being needed" by others and having no one when you need them is when "others come looking for me only if they need something from me or need me for something" (May, age 13). In one sense, it refers to a lack of an authentic relationship as described by Ethan (age 17):

> Ethan: Definition of loneliness [whispering] …… Having no… real, having no real authentic relationship with the people around you.
> Yin Ting: Okay… I heard something interesting. Authentic relationship. How do you define an authentic relationship?
> Ethan: Ok, for, for me I think… Obviously all, all relationships, not just romantic, even like friendships and stuff, it's all a two-way street. You, you put in effort, someone… and the other party also puts in the effort. So I think an authentic relationship is where you're both willing to put in the effort to care for one another. Instead of just like, I'm gonna, I'm gonna kind of be friends with you because of what you can give me. But I'm going to keep a distance so it doesn't feel like I'm pouring in too much to get what you can give me.

As Ethan notes, authentic relationship is important as the absence of it would lead to loneliness. His understanding of an inauthentic relationship can also be viewed together with May's description of how feeling or being used by others could lead to loneliness. They both expressed the significance of both parties' willingness to contribute to the relationship instead of a one-sided effort relationship. To this point, more and more layers have been added to the meaning of loneliness. It now indicates a desire for meaningful relationships with others. Because without that, one can still experience a sense of loneliness even when having people around.

5.3 Loneliness as a state of mind

As discussed in the previous section, it is recognized that loneliness can occur alongside being alone after taking into consideration the context. At the same time, participants also described loneliness in regard to internal thoughts and feelings, as opposed to being determined by physical isolation. That meant, participants identified that a sense of loneliness could arise even when one is surrounded by people:

> Maybe you're, you know you're lonely when you're like by yourself. And uhm maybe sometimes it's in the state of the mind as well. [….] And so you might be surrounded by people, but in, in that moment, you feel lonely. (Alysia, age 16)

> Uhm so like you feel, because most of the times when you're alone, you're not like completely alone, like secluded in a corner, but you're still in the middle, like with people and you're at the center so **at the same time you're with them, but you're not there**, so yeah. (Lena, age 17)

> Uh, actually I think loneliness is probably felt mostly when there are more people around actually. You don't feel as lonely when you're alone. It's like, loneliness is like having a lot of people around you, but you still feel like you're all by yourself, there's still a feeling that you're on your own. (May, age 13)

> It's like when you're left out, in like a friend group or something. It's like when you're having a party with someone but you're the only one that, you don't have someone to talk to. I think that's loneliness, for me. (Michael, age 17)

Alysia notes both possibilities of loneliness as a state of being as well as a state of mind. Lena recognized that loneliness could occur when is among or even being at the center of people. Michael expressed that without the presence of a real friend or someone to talk to when being with a crowd can create a sense of loneliness. As May described, people may feel most lonely when they are in the presence of others, where one could compare their own feelings of isolation to those socializing around them. Previous research has suggested that this notion of loneliness sometimes occurs when there are many people around, e.g. at big parties, yet there is no one with which to relate in a truer sense (Dahlberg, 2007), which is precisely what Michael and Shirley have described. However, feelings are subjective, including the feeling of loneliness:

> Loneliness is something very subjective. […] It's like, loneliness can only be defined by ourselves, depending on how you see it for yourself. So this is very personal. (Michael, age 17)

The subjectivity of feeling is not a foreign concept to the participants. Similarly, another participant recognized that most of the time we do not consider how others feel about the things we do to them, i.e., not acknowledging how others think or feel in a social situation:

> It's like if you exclude someone else, you won't feel anything, but that person will just like think a lot. (May, age 13)

This could be due to a lack of empathy, but it could also be because we are unable to see the world through others' eyes. Thus, the way we interpret a situation may be different from how others perceive and interpret it. From one's point of view, they may not be actively or purposely shunning the other person, but the other person may feel negatively about the situation due to different expectations, leading to the feeling of loneliness. A similar response has been found in past research in which "the participants perceived that loneliness can be based on one's own imagined perception of being excluded from a group, even if they are not actually being excluded" (Hemberg et al., 2022). Feeling excluded by others, whether it is inflicted intentionally or not, is one thing. Another aspect of loneliness that can appear, even with the presence of others, is when one is "unable to truly connect to others". Dahlberg (2007) described this phenomenon as "there are others nearby not offering genuine companionship but something superficial". Participants expressed the importance of having a "true connection" or, as pointed out by one of the participants in the previous section, an "authentic relationship" with others:

> I think that goes back to when you're like, when you have a lot of people around and like you still can't make that connection and like, ohh then you'll just have to like, have like make small talk and like uhm, talk about things that don't really matter and like you feel like the conversation is going nowhere and there's not much relationship. Uhm I think that's when you feel that it is a bit lonely to talk to someone. So even if we have a lot of people around you, but if everyone is like that, this relationship is about the same. Then you won't feel like very rejuvenated from, like the friendship, probably just like still lonely. Yeah. (Lena, age 17)

Being-together or being surrounded by people does not necessarily depict a life free from loneliness. It also seems to be the case that loneliness can be more prevalent for some participants in public or social situations where there are many people around. According to Dahlberg (2007), this is likely to happen when the presence of others that could mean an experience of being-together, but that denies another person this opportunity. In other words, the contrast of being around people but not having the desired relationship or interaction is what gives rise to the feeling of loneliness. Heidegger (1998/1927), among others, reveals how we do not always live a true existence together, but live side-by-side without interest in or care for each other. However, it should be noted that these views are not referred to as "the truth" about loneliness here. Rather the point is to show how the participants' thinking resonates with a specific form of philosophical thinking on the subject. What the participants in this research described is in accordance with Heidegger, that a person can experience loneliness even in the midst of a group of people. It is clear that the presence of people, even having them close by, does not guarantee a relief from loneliness. Instead, this meaning of loneliness is related to a sense that "no one understands me", especially after several failed attempts of developing desired connections with others:

> I think a lot of that still goes like to understanding. So when like, when two people understand each other, there's like a connection, there's like a spark. And that's why, you know, they're good along. But when, when over time when a person is unable to find connection between so many other people and they just repeat, I think that's when they start to like uhm, feel alone and just singular in whatever they do. Yeah. (Lena, age 17)

Lena emphasized that mutual understanding connects people, and the absence of someone who truly understands can hinder our ability to connect with others, ultimately resulting in feelings of loneliness. Research also suggests that lonely people frequently experience a sense of being misunderstood and perceive their relationships as lacking meaning. (Lim et al., 2016). When a connection is missing, one feels left out instead of belonging, which creates loneliness. Participants further elaborate that this feeling of loneliness is even stronger when people around them do not know and care about their thoughts and feelings. For instance, Anna (age 14) described that a feeling of discomfort would arise when socializing with those whom you are unable to connect with. Other participants perceived that this difficulty in connecting could most likely be attributed to two main reasons. One of them is not having people who share the same interests as you:

> Anna: One possibility is that it might be the easiest and most intuitive and most visible, there are no friends. But, uh, the other one might be like, the group you're participating in is not your favorite. It's like you feel… you don't feel comfortable. It's like you feel, you know, you're not comfortable, you're not comfortable in that place, and you feel lonely. I think there's two kinds. One is you don't have it, it's just very intuitive. One is that even if you have but you just don't feel comfortable.
> Yin Ting: And what is the reason for feeling uncomfortable?
> Anna: It's that maybe you feel like, it’s like you're not the same kind of people as them. But they are also not excluding you, it's just that you automatically, you don't want to be around them.
> Yin Ting: Not the same kind of people in terms of?
> Anna: Uhm... For example, the way we think and the stuff that we like to do. Maybe they are a group of friends that will hangout, like 'hey, we're going to a ball game when and when’, but you don't want to go to a ball game, but you're still going to do things that you don't like in order to cater to them.
> Yin Ting: Different interests
> Anna: In terms of interests. Yeah, so maybe during the game you feel lonely. It's like “why is there no one who can accompany me to do what I want to do”.

Anna described two forms of loneliness, which is similar to the themes of the analysis on loneliness. That is, one could feel lonely without having physical companions and with companions but there is a sense of discomfort being around them. She attributed this sense of discomfort to “not being the same kind of people as them”, and this is further explained in terms of having different interests. Lena also a shared similar viewpoint:

> I think when you don't have like a certain community around you to connect, then you won't like feel fit in. Because like people often have like different characteristics that share like different like interests and stuff. And when a lot of people don't share those interests, they can't really get along. So when you don't get along and there's like already of like, like a society built there uhm and you can't like enter in, I think that's when you don't feel it, don't fit in and you don't feel accepted by these people. (Lena, age 17)

As Lena notes, sharing similar interests is vital to connecting with people and fitting in, thus being accepted by people. Scholars have differentiated between dimensions of loneliness and developed several models to define each of them. What the participants described above appears to be in line with Weiss’ (1987) *social loneliness,* that is defined as not being capable of becoming affiliated with a group with whom one shares common interests and activities. Expanding upon this model, Hawkley and colleagues (2005) conceptualized one’s lack of sense of inclusion in a network of others with common interests or values as *collective loneliness*. Participants further identified the other possible reason for difficulty in connecting with others as not having people who share the same values as you:

> Lena: I think it's like when you, when you don't really like, belong. Like uhm when everyone else is talking and like you just can't fit in and you're like kind of left out, yeah.

Yin Ting: So what do you think makes people feel like they don't belong or they don't fit in?
Lena: Maybe that, uhm… Maybe that they aren't like uhm… trending enough, or like they don't get along as well, or they're not as likable. Maybe they don't have like a certain characteristic that others look for.

So it feels like sometimes, for other people, this is not myself, for other people, when maybe they don't, they feel the need to constantly keep up with the latest things, the latest trends in order to fit in, but sometimes the latest things, the latest trends, the latest norms may not be the same values that they carry. So the loneliness comes when they feel like they can't be themselves or no one else will accept them. […] And at that point you're kind of just detaching your own morals and values from what you're doing. So it feels like, you know, 'I have to keep, keep my own values and my own morals hidden to myself, and then I have to put up this front to everybody else to so called fit in'. (Ethan, age 17)

Based on Lena and Ethan's description, one does not feel belonging and acceptance from others when one is different from them. This feeling of being different is described as stemming from holding different values. As we can see, being trending or keeping up with the latest trends has almost become a requirement, something that others "look for", among adolescents in order to fit in and get along with their peers. In a sense, following the same norms, values, and keeping up with "trends" is highlighted as crucial for feeling connection and being accepted. However, when these trends are not aligned with their personal values, it leads to a sense of loneliness because "there's no one to be completely transparent with", which can be an indicator of loneliness:

[…] I could be surrounded by a lot of people, but if their values and morals don't match my own, and I'm putting up a front, I could be surrounded by all of these people, but I'll still feel lonely because no one, because I'm not being transparent with anyone, so I'm still keeping everything to myself. (Ethan, age 17)

It is the inability to be transparent to oneself as well as to others that creates a barrier between them and the rest. This barrier could also give rise to a feeling of helplessness as if one is "taking on the burden of everything they are facing by themselves and overburden themselves" (Ethan, age 17) because there's no one else to reach out to, as illustrated by Ethan in his drawing (see Figure 5.2):

Figure 5.2: Ethan's drawing of 'A world of loneliness'

I think it's very simple, I kinda just condensed it down. It's… I drew someone carrying how to say it's kind of like an earth and added like chains and boulders on the sides. So this is to kind of just uhm represent how when, what I said just now when someone's feeling lonely, it feels like they're, they're just going through life themselves. Like everything they

> do, it's by themselves. So it's basically a big burden on them. It's like carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. (Ethan, age 17)

Ethan's expression of "a world of loneliness" is in relation to not having someone to rely on as he believes that loneliness feels like doing everything and going through life on their own. He added that what comes out of loneliness is the feeling of carrying the burden of the world by oneself, making one unable to enjoy life. Ethan's perspectives can also be connected to the values of a collectivist society, in which interdependence underscores the importance of community and mutual support over individual autonomy. Therefore, not having someone to depend on can result in loneliness due to unsatisfactory social relationships.

> I think lonely people will feel helpless. Because, maybe when they have a bad day and they want to vent, but they don't have someone to vent to, so I think they will feel helpless. (Michael, age 17)

> […] Facing things alone makes one feel lonely, because there's no one to connect to. (Vivian, age 16)

The idea of facing things alone and helplessness as described by Michael and Vivian is consistent with Ethan's view, in which the absence of someone to connect with fosters negative feelings that subsequently lead to loneliness. Additionally, the term "emptiness" was brought up by some participants when talking about loneliness. One participant perceived the feeling of emptiness as "a hole in my heart" (Lena, age 17). When being asked how they would define loneliness in a dictionary, Anna defined it as "when there's an emptiness in your heart" (Anna, age 14). In her own words, emptiness means "there's a lot of things that no longer appeal to you anymore" and "you lost interest in many things". Looking at past studies, loneliness is often related to the feeling of emptiness. According to Kirova (2004), the emotional state of children's loneliness can be described as inner emptiness or a feeling akin to coldness. This sense of loneliness can be felt when one is not seen, not heard, when no one cares to acknowledge your existence, and you do not fit in. It makes one feel abandoned and involves having lost something (Dahlberg, 2007), but at the same time, this emptiness in humans helps us understand why people long for the presence of important other fellow beings to not feel lonely.

5.4 Loneliness as transient and situational

In this research, loneliness, as described by the participants, is primarily considered as a temporary state that could change according to the situation a person is in. In other words, loneliness can be a feeling that comes and goes:

> Hmm… it should be momentary. It's like after you're lonely, you might forget about it after a while […] It's like when I feel lonely, and then they [my friends] come back to me and then I don't feel lonely anymore. […] It's like at first I'm quiet, and when I'm not lonely anymore then I start talking again and become very noisy. (May, age 13)

May described loneliness as a fleeting feeling that can be forgotten or even dissipate once the cause of loneliness, which is absence of friends, is solved.

> Michael: Hmm… Loneliness, maybe it's, maybe just temporary only, not necessarily permanent loneliness. Maybe like, as I mentioned earlier like you're with a group of friends, maybe you're hanging out with some of them, then it's like they just keep walking ahead, and suddenly you need to tie your shoelace, so you squatted down and tied it, but they didn't wait for you, yeah. They just keep walking. But you actually have friends, but then at that moment it's like you feel like you're the one being left out.
> Yin Ting: Oh, but that feeling vanishes quickly?
> Michael: Yes, it's a flash. When you rejoin them and you guys started talking again, then it's gone.

Michael acknowledged the possibility of both permanent and temporary loneliness. Similarly, he also illustrated a scenario of transient loneliness when one is with friends, suggesting that loneliness can disappear as quickly as it happens. Participants have provided different examples of life events or scenarios that may make one feel lonely. These experiences are brief and context-specific, occurring only at particular times or in certain situations:

> Maybe on special occasions, like birthdays. […] Especially when there's going to be a celebration, and maybe it's your celebration but then nobody remembers about it. (Anna, age 14)
>
> It's very lonely to spend your birthday alone. Blowing the candles alone seems… it still feels sad. You won't feel like 'Eh, this is quite happy, celebrating alone is so happy', no. It feels like that person doesn't… he needs some people to celebrate with him. […] Or maybe like you're walking together with your friends, then it seems like the two of them are having a good time talking and then I'm all by myself. That also feels lonely. […] Just for that moment, you feel lonely, after that it's nothing. (Vivan, age 16)

Interestingly, both Anna and Vivian noted the significance of birthdays and celebrations as a potential site and occasion for loneliness. Anna explained that birthdays or celebrations are considered as moments to be shared with others, hence not having someone to celebrate things with you means not being remembered and cared for:

> Anna: I think sometimes celebration also stands for, like people maybe if they really care for you they'd be like, 'eh, it's so-and-so's birthday'.
> Yin Ting: Remember
> Anna: Remember, will remember, or think of you. But if you're lonely, no one usually remembers you.

As Anna stated, having people to celebrate your birthday with you usually means there are people who care for you and remember you, thus loneliness can arise when one is being forgotten by others, especially on the day when one expects to be remembered. This may be a shared expectation within the culture. Furthermore, May and other participants illustrated situations of loneliness that occur among friends:

> It feels like a lot of people are like... like every time I see it, it's like... maybe there is a group of three friends, and at first the two of them are talking, and then they don't care about the other one, […], and then you feel like it's lonely. That's what I see most of the time. (May, age 13)
>
> It's when you see your friends, but they don't come and find you. (Shirley, age 16)

May's description of feeling left out and ignored by peers is consistent with Shirley's expression that loneliness means not being acknowledged by her friends. Similar feelings and experiences from family contexts are also highlighted by participants:

> Hmm… […] So like for example if you're, if you're like, if you had like a lot of siblings and then like, your mom was like giving all your siblings like, like a gift, because like, she just went out for a bit and then she like saw things that made her think of them, and everybody got something except for you. And then you feel like very lonely. Yeah. (Lena, age 17)

Here, Lena provided an example of how one can feel lonely when being with family, particularly by not being remembered, favored, and treated equally by people who are significant to them. Michael provided another scenario that suggests both the situational and transient aspects of loneliness:

> At night, I think […] or maybe like you're taking a nap and then you woke up, and then it's like, all of a sudden you feel kinda lonely out of nowhere. Then you turn on your phone and there's no message, no notification, and then it's already at night when you woke up alone. This is for people who are alone. When you take a nap by yourself and wake up and look at your phone, there's nothing on it, so you feel like, tsk, a little lonely. […] But then suddenly you hear your mom calling you, 'hey, it's time for dinner', and you go downstairs, then it's

> gone. Maybe it's like, some loneliness is just temporary, you feel kinda lonely at that particular moment, but then after that, there's no more. (Michael, age 17)

Michael, in his opinion, attributed the transient feeling of loneliness to not receiving messages or notifications after a long nap because it indicates not being cared for throughout the time one was napping, highlighting the role of materiality in the relational phenomena of loneliness. This feeling of emptiness may also signify an expectation to be constantly connected or in touch with the world. Therefore, it is only until one hears the sound of their mom calling for them that this need is met and loneliness dissipates. These descriptions presented by the participants may look different at first glance. But after putting the puzzle together, they all have the same underlying theme. Not only did all participants use relational examples to describe loneliness, but the idea that loneliness means not being remembered and acknowledged by others is also recurring. The situations in which loneliness was considered to happen reflect times in which participants felt forgotten or unnoticed by people in their lives. As Dahlberg (2007) pointed out, loneliness is a phenomenon that is intimately tied to the whole of existence and existence with others, which also explains why relational examples are used when describing scenarios of loneliness. Although they mentioned that sense of loneliness would dissipate once their need for others' attention is fulfilled, they still feel like "something is missing" when they are aware that nobody remembers them at that present moment. Michael (age 17) even cited a famous quote from Michael Scott, a fictional character in the sitcom "The Office": "It is only when no one remembers that you are truly lost. That is the true death", stating that it also applies to loneliness.

However, I grappled with two conflicting ideas for a while. On one hand, based on what participants described earlier, lonely individuals often pretend to be fine to avoid drawing attention and go unnoticed by their peers. Yet, I have also encountered a different impression: loneliness can lead to a craving for attention and social validation from others. There appears to be a fine line between "I don't want to stand out" and "I want to be noticed". Could it be that lonely people desire recognition for valid reasons—someone genuinely caring for them—rather than merely standing out because they don't fit in? I have come to realize that feelings are not always neatly compartmentalized but messy and ambiguous; they don't have to be either/or but can be both/and (Alldred & Burman, 2005). The coexistence of contradictory feelings or thoughts doesn't render one false and the other more authentic. This nuanced understanding applies to approaching adolescents' perspectives in this research as well. It is possible that we simultaneously experience opposing feelings or thoughts, just as different views of loneliness can coexist. Finally, understanding how adolescents perceive loneliness may have implication on the measures that can be taken to alleviate loneliness. The above analysis also indicate that loneliness can potentially be reduced through more positive and genuine interaction with others. As suggested by another participant, "as long as someone is letting you know that they're there for you and that they care, then there shouldn't be a reason to feel lonely" (Ethan, age 17).

5.5 The paradox of loneliness

Most of the time, loneliness is portrayed as an undesirable state that one would avoid as much as possible by seeking the company of others. For instance, Vivian (age 16), responded to the sentence stem of "If I am lonely…" by ending it with "I will try to make myself less lonely, like meeting new people and new things, and spending more time with my family". Another participant, Michael (age 17), also mentioned that he would try to make new friends or join a new community or club, basically meeting new people,

supposing that he is lonely. However, there seems to be a slightly different reaction to loneliness throughout my conversation with some of the participants. Instead of reaching out to people to escape from loneliness, participants addressed the likelihood of a lonely person to remain in that state. It comes as no surprise as a recent meta-synthesis of experiences of loneliness among young people with depression highlighted a paradox of yearning to be with others, whilst wanting to withdraw and be alone (Achterbergh et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Coplan and colleagues (2018) found that being alone is depicted as undesirable and isolating, but at times therapeutic and revitalizing. Moreover, research indicates that many lonely individuals actively seek social withdrawal rather than passively suffering from it (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999). That is, unlike how people often perceive social withdrawal as harmful, lonely people may not avoid social withdrawal since they may, paradoxically, benefit from it (Moustakas, 2016).

> Because like some people, even when they're lonely, they just want to be alone. Like maybe they just want to like, get to their feelings and all. (Alysia, age 16)

Alysia addressed the mixed feeling of wanting to be alone while feeling lonely, reflecting what was stated by the researchers above. As Alysia suggests, by doing this people can "get to their feelings", which may be beneficial for their well-being. Baloyannis (2015) believes that individuals may yearn for solitude during specific life stages and intentionally seek loneliness as a means for self-development, self-reflection, acquiring knowledge, and finding inner peace. Therefore, adolescents are more likely to isolate themselves in order to achieve spiritual elevation and regain emotional stability. Generally speaking, participants recognize that there is a mixture of feelings when it comes to dealing with loneliness. Lena expressed the struggle faced by lonely people where they are "stuck in their own barrier" and do not know how to get out even though they have the desire to socialize with people. Vivian added that people may choose to be lonely even though they do not want to be due to unsatisfactory experience of trying to blend in.

> One may still want to be a part of a group, but if you are unable to do something that you have always wanted to do, you may slowly have negative emotions, and then eventually, maybe letting go, yeah. […] Just stop trying and accept that you're a lonely person. (Anna, age 14)

Anna believes that there would be a point where lonely people feel comfortable to be alone. When negative emotions dissipate, even though they are still in the state of loneliness, "I think it is a relief", she described. According to Nyström (2014), loneliness can be the real lifeform for adolescents, preparing them to face the world. In order to connect with the outside world, adolescents must first examine their inner world. Thus, loneliness is the inner source for them to achieve this since it allows them to explore their complex inner world and possibly discover their life's purpose and meaning (Nyström, 2014). The participants in this research have their own interpretation of this paradox, believing that this desire to remain alone rather than reach out can be attributed to one's negative experiences from the past:

> Ethan: […] Because you know when you, when you feel lonely, obviously you're gonna build again the mindset that I'm doing this by myself, there's no need for me to go and find someone else because I'm, I'm carrying the mindset that they're not going to care for me, and rather than putting in the effort to someone that may not care for me, I can take all of that time and I work and put it into doing this whole thing myself.
> Yin Ting: Before having that mindset, is it because… What is the reason for having that mindset?
> Ethan: There could be a lot of different things. You know the world, the world is a messed up place. So I feel like… for example, one reason could be bullying within school you know, like when you're, when you're bullied as a child, uh obviously you feel outcast because

> they're making fun of you, they're leaving you out and they're coming just to hurt you. So at that point, maybe you develop a habit of not trusting anyone, not opening up, and that's where the loneliness starts to settle in and the mindset starts to build. Or another example could be, you know, maybe you didn't have a good relationship with your parents and your siblings, so it feels like even though you're at home, you're in a family, but there's no one really you can talk to. So that you feel like the people around me who are closest to me and are so-called supposed to love me, if they don't even care about me, how can I expect other people to care about myself.

Ethan (age 17) pointed out how negative experiences from the past can shape one's mindset over time, resulting in trust issues with others and loneliness. What was described by Ethan could be supported by Anna's description of "lonely people are usually more independent because they trust themselves more than they trust others". Putting their voices together, it is when one is disappointed by people around oneself that one begins to build the mindset that they can only rely on themselves, instead of putting their expectations on people who have let them down. Being positioned in a collectivistic culture that emphasizes trust and interdependence between people, not having a reliable support system can induce a deep sense of loneliness in that person.

Moving on, Lena (age 17), analyzed the loneliness situation as a result of fear of rejection through her drawing that represents "a world of loneliness" (see Figure 5.3):

Figure 5.3: Lena's drawing of 'A world of loneliness'

> Lena: [...] Basically like uhm, like the pink and the orange is like everyone else, uhm like, you know. And then the black is like a barrier between you and them. Because when you feel lonely it kind of separates you from other people and then you just feel so alone and like uhm, that you're completely separated and you don't know how to get there. Yeah.
> Yin Ting: And you have like, have a choice of you know purple, blue and different colors. Is that...
> Lena: Yeah, I think that's like uh, to represent like mixed emotions about how you'd like to reach out. But at the same time, you're so stuck there that you don't want to and you're too afraid to.
> Yin Ting: Okay. So when you say like you don't want to, is it like, you're… Like what does it mean that they don't want to?
> Lena: I think like, uhm… There's a lot of fear of, like rejection because like when you try to reach out to people and then they'll like, reject you for who you are. So it gets harder to speak to them and like even come in contact and socialize.

Lena's interpretation of her own drawing highlighted the possibility that the fear of being rejected can make it even harder for people who already feel isolated to improve their situation, leaving them stuck in a situation that can result in loneliness. According to the participants, both negative experiences from the past and fear of rejection form a barrier

that limits one from "getting to the other side". In a way, it works as a defense mechanism that protects one from getting hurt again after being traumatized by past events. As told by Anna (age 14), she believes that a lonely person will most likely avoid or even leave a social situation to stay away from the crowds. She explained the reason for them to "remain as they are" is because "they've probably already experienced that sense of alienation and marginalization before, and maybe don't want to experience it again". As portrayed by the participants, this feeling of being stuck would more often than not develop into a fixed mindset, creating "a loop of hypervigilance to social threat, maladaptive thinking, and strained connections with others" (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). In a similar vein, researchers have observed that people who experience loneliness are in a state of mind that prevents them from connecting with others, even though they often wish for human contact and relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). As Lena (age 17) said, "what comes as first their feelings makes it into reality". That is, our reality is often shaped by our perspective, including the way we feel and think. As we are all situated within a context, our perspective is affected by the norms and social interactions, thereby informing different versions of reality. What was described by the participants so far demonstrated how individuals are intertwined with the context, thus our knowledge on loneliness is socially constructed. That being said, loneliness described here is not a presentation of truth or objective reality but the participants' portrayal of loneliness, in which this knowledge is created through interpretation of experiences that is located in a specific social and cultural context (see Chapter 3.2).

5.6 The complexity of loneliness

Despite some participants perceiving loneliness as the state of being alone or all by oneself as discussed in the earlier section, there are other participants who see loneliness and being alone as completely different from one another thus should not be conflated in discussion. In fact, this is the first thing that Ethan (age 17) brought up in the beginning of our interview:

> Ethan: Er… I think it's, that's like a… to me there's like a common misconception between loneliness and solitude…
> Yin Ting: Ahh, okay.
> Ethan: …where there's a difference being… there's a difference between being by yourself at times err, just by yourself, and having no choice but to be by yourself.
> Yin Ting: Okay, so the latter refers to loneliness?
> Ethan: So solitude is something that, you know, I can enjoy. Sometimes I have quiet time on my own
> Yin Ting: And does that mean that you're like voluntarily being alone
> Ethan: Yeah. Yes, but I also know that anytime I want, I could reach out to a friend, I could call a friend. I could, you know, text them. But I think loneliness is when you want to call someone but there's no one to call, there's no one you know will pick up at me.
> Yin Ting: Okay, alright. Wow… wow. So is that like a common, you know, misconception?
> Ethan: I think it is. From what I've seen, within… within the friends I have.

> But sometimes being by yourself is not called loneliness, that's just having me-time. Yeah. That's not called loneliness. Loneliness is when you really feel that you know you have no one to do a lot of things with, that's called loneliness. (Michael, age 17)

> I feel like voluntary loneliness doesn't count as loneliness. Because they prefer to be alone, and they are comfortable that way. It's not considered as loneliness. Loneliness is passive, relatively. […] Self-chosen ones are not loneliness, I think. (Shirley, age 16)

Participants identify that the distinction between loneliness and aloneness or solitude lies in having the assurance that one has someone who is available to reach out to whenever they desire companionship. Loneliness, unlike solitude, is neither pleasant nor enjoyable because one usually does not have a choice but to be "on their own". It is externally

imposed and undesirable (Galanaki, 2004). Solitude, on the contrary, is a blissful state, whereby a person desires alone time (Hipson et al., 2021). This is consistent with findings of mainstream studies on loneliness that ascribe to lonely and loneliness a negative feeling arising from a perceived lack of affiliation and closeness (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Other participants also share similar view on the differences between these concepts, that is loneliness entails a feeling of sadness:

> Being alone and being lonely are so different. It's like sometimes when I'm alone, I can be quite happy. But lonely is like a feeling that makes us feel sadder. […] Alone is maybe like you do things alone, like shopping, you can also feel happy. It's okay to do things alone. But lonely is very much like you're not necessarily alone, but you will feel kinda sad. (May, age 13)

> Being alone doesn't sound as sad as being lonely. (Vivian, age 16)

People spend time alone for many different reasons, with some experiences of being alone more conducive and others less conducive to positive emotions. One of the participants explained that being alone does not mean lonely, but what differs is one's mood:

> Shaun: Some people like to be alone.
> Yin Ting: In that case, is that person considered as lonely?
> Shaun: It depends on his mood.
> Yin Ting: What moods count as lonely and what moods don't? Is there a difference in moods?
> Shaun: The good ones aren't [loneliness].

As Shaun (age 14) explained, if one is in a good mood when being alone, then one is not lonely. Summarizing the above, loneliness is understood as uncomfortable and involuntary, hence self-chosen act should be considered otherwise. Taken altogether, the participants' perspectives shed some light on how the word "loneliness" is more commonly preferred in negative contexts than "alone" or "solitude". This reflects findings of past studies on conceptualization of loneliness, in which loneliness denotes a more unpleasant, stressful, and externally imposed experience of being alone (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Qualter et al., 2015). Researchers also found additional support for these associations among discrete emotion labels, such as anger, fear, and sadness (Hipson et al., 2021). By now, there is a clearer understanding of the emotional context loneliness and solitude each denote. However, I have also talked to participants who told me contradictory ideas regarding their understanding of loneliness, in which they proposed a different approach to loneliness:

> I think being lonely is sad, but also in a way fun […] You can be lonely voluntarily if you chose to. (Alysia, age 16)

> Maybe don't see it [loneliness] as so negative. It's possible that some lonely people can be happy. It can also be a very happy thing. (Vivian, age 16)

Proposing a different approach to loneliness, both Alysia and Vivian suggest that loneliness can be voluntary, fun or happy for some people. During the drawing exercise, Vivian (age 16) presented a picture she prepared beforehand and shared her thoughts with me (see Figure 5.4). She questioned the way loneliness is depicted in most pictures she came across during her search on the Internet, and chose a different style of picture, one that is less intense and more peaceful, that best expressed her understanding of "a world of loneliness":

Figure 5.4: Vivian's drawing of 'A world of loneliness'

> Vivian: Because most of the pictures [online] are kind of black and dark, and someone falling off the cliff kind of thing. But I don't think loneliness is necessarily sad. It can also be someone watching a movie by themself.
> Yin Ting: Wow, that's a new perspective. So all those pictures you've seen, like what you just said about falling off a cliff, none of that seems relevant to you?
> Vivian: It's not exactly that sad. Loneliness does not necessarily have to be sad.
> Yin Ting: It can also be happy?
> Vivian: Just enjoying the time being alone

Vivian further elaborated that most pictures she saw were filled with black or blue color, instead of pink, and contain the image of someone crying in the corner. Not only does this give off the impression that loneliness is "more on the sad side", but it is also when she realized that is how loneliness is generally portrayed by "the people outside". She then suggested that loneliness can be enjoyable, especially for those who find social interactions exhausting or draining due to the superficiality of relationships. Therefore, there should be another perspective, a more positive one, when looking at it (see section 5.5 on the paradox of loneliness). Alysia, who holds the same view as Vivian, told me that "you can be lonely voluntarily if you choose to" and what makes it fun or positive is that "you can do whatever you want" and people can "just be with themselves":

> So I think, I based this off on myself. So like, I think being lonely, sometimes, I mean, yeah, it is sad, especially when you can't control it, right? When like, other people don't want to talk to you and like, you are forced to be alone by yourself. And maybe you just kinda just want that one person to talk to, but you don't have a person to talk to. So in that way it's kinda sad and like uhm yeah, but you can't control it, right? But then I feel like some people, they chose to be alone because they just want to be like, they just want like some me-time or they just want to like, maybe, they just want to like, be with, with themselves. Maybe they are… Sometimes, some people they always say this and I really agree, it's like their social battery has like run out, so they can't really talk like the whole day. I feel like I've been, I've had that before, but I've seen it from other people as well. So like being lonely during that time, I feel like it's the best thing and it's actually quite fun because you can do whatever you want, but you, in a way you can just do it by yourself, you know. Yeah. (Alysia, age 16)

What was expressed here reflects findings of past research that found adolescents in loneliness can experience a sense of freedom, control, and recovery, which all offer positive experiences (Hemberg et al., 2021). It is worth noting that participants who proposed a more positive way of looking at loneliness are also the ones who perceive

loneliness as the state of being alone. At least that is the first thought that came to their mind when being asked "what is loneliness?" Instead of dismissing their opinion as unreliable, I believe there is more value to it than it seems on the surface level. That is, if the word "loneliness" means being alone (or aloneness) to them, it seems reasonable that they would consider what others define as solitude to be loneliness as well. Evidently, the way we understand a word differs from others and it affects how we use the word in everyday language. Previous research has found that the kind of words that people use is heavily influenced by social context (Uziel, 2021). Just because their understanding is different than others does not make them wrong, rather it gives us a glimpse into the participants' socio-cultural context. Malaysia is a collectivist society as aforementioned, in which the idea of one being alone, whether it is a self-chosen act or not, is not well-received. Within a society that emphasizes sociability and the appearance of friendliness, people are seen as well-adjusted only if they are sociable and seek out friends, whilst loners, for whatever reason, are abnormal. Hence, participants would easily associate the idea of being alone as loneliness because of its negative connotation, which then further strengthen the societal expectations. Loneliness here works as an "umbrella concept" that stretches and captures a range of different experiences (Mijuskovic, 2015). Additionally, there is evidence that different people may associate slightly different meanings with words, suggesting that word meanings are not fixed, even in the same language community. That is, one word can morph into multiple meanings, therefore the context and clarity are important in understanding loneliness (Makin, 2023). However, as the conversation with Alysia (age 16) went on, uncertainty seems to arise:

> Yin Ting: That makes me wonder, does like… Being like uhm, lonely, but actually, it's actually fun to, to some people. Is it like still considered as lonely? I'm not sure. What do you think?
> Alysia: Yeah, uhm… I kind, I'm kinda not sure too. But I feel like to me, loneliness is like something that, is something that you kinda do, tend to do when you're by yourself, right? Not do by yourself like it's a state where you are all by yourself and so I feel like loneliness can be seen in a few ways, not just like a really depressing way. I feel like sometimes it can be more, in like a positive way as well. Yeah.

Alysia expresses doubts regarding whether the notion that loneliness can be enjoyable can truly be classified as loneliness. Similar thing happened with Vivian too:

> It's that they think being alone can be very free. They'll go on adventures by themselves and that kind of... actually this kind of stuff isn't really lonely, I think... come to think of it, actually loneliness... maybe this kind of enjoying the moment, enjoying this kind of stuff, they won't perceive it as loneliness. They'd probably think that being alone can live a good life as well. (Vivian, age 16)

There seems to be a profound awareness that those who enjoy being and doing things alone probably do not fall under the category of loneliness or there should just be another way of seeing loneliness. This profound awareness can also be seen as knowledge co-produced in the research process, in which knowledge is built through collaboration and interaction between both the participant and the researcher (Cook, 2009). Based on my analysis and interpretation of their views, I realized that there may be two different perspectives of understanding loneliness involved in the picture. One, the "outsider" view, whereby the participant considers someone as lonely because they are in an objective state of being alone, which is also known as "aloneness". Their judgement is merely based on what can be easily observed, such as the visible cues and behaviors of other people, that one is "labelled" as lonely in the eyes of others. Whereas the other one, the "insider" view, is when the participant takes a step further by putting themselves in other people's (those who enjoy doing things alone) shoes and try to

understand from their point of view. After taking into consideration the fact that these people actually enjoy the state of being alone, participants decide that it should be up to one's own judgement of whether they are in a state of loneliness or not.

> Loneliness is just… You can't say, 'Hey, why is this person so lonely?' Well, it's just like, loneliness is something that only you can define yourself as lonely. As I said earlier, if you yourself don't think you're lonely, then it's not loneliness. (Michael, age 17)

Although loneliness is subjective and self-defined, it is important to not lose sight of the relational aspect of people's lives. That is, our subjectivity, the way we consider ourselves, is in relations to our social contexts (Archer, 2013). As we are part of webs of connectedness, our concept of self, others, and the world is interrelated. For instance, how people perceive us can affect how we are seen and treated, which in some cases may result in more isolation and rejection from others. Therefore, the important aspects addressed earlier, such as the emphasis on being together and norms within collectivistic cultures, could be tied to the process of self-defining too.

5.7 Chapter summary

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. Despite being surrounded by others, having online or digital networks, or participating in social activities, one can still experience a lack of genuine social connection, which may contribute to feelings of loneliness (Junttila, 2018). People can be lonely but not alone and alone but not lonely; they can also be alone and lonely and not alone and not lonely. As presented in this chapter, loneliness can be both state of being and state of mind, depending on how adolescents' make sense of their world and the context they are positioned within. In a sense, a lack of clarity when talking about loneliness may risk overshadowing one's experience. Hence, the definition of loneliness should not be narrowed down to either/or as that would advertently exclude people who are experiencing loneliness but do not conform to the standard definition as well as including those who seem to be lonely but actually feel otherwise. Loneliness is experienced differently as it is configured by cultural expectations of social connection. This can be seen through the way collectivistic norms affect the participants understanding and expression of loneliness. Therefore, it is necessary to be sufficiently sensitive to local ways of understanding the world while interpreting adolescents' perspectives of loneliness. The next chapter will explore what adolescents associate loneliness with within their culture and how they relate social media to loneliness.

6 Loneliness, its associations, and social media

The previous chapter focused on adolescents' sensemaking of loneliness and the meanings they assigned to this phenomenon. Adolescents described their perspective in relation to the role of culture and language of the context they are positioned within. In this chapter, I will continue to explore the subject of loneliness based on adolescents' voices, specifically on the phenomena that the participants associated loneliness with. These associations will be discussed to understand their contextual relevance. The rest of the chapter will answer the remaining research question: *How do Malaysian adolescents describe the role of social media in terms of loneliness?* By exploring participants' view on social media in relation to loneliness, the influence of social media is understood through the analysis of relational connections between users and technology, where they mutually constitute each other. As such, adolescents' perspectives of loneliness is produced through social relations and their interaction with technology.

6.1 Loneliness and its associations

As shown in Chapter 5, understandings of loneliness are embedded in local cultural contexts, which means that people from different times and places may associate loneliness in diverse ways. These associations, rather than directly defining loneliness, refer to topics that are closely related or relevant to loneliness. They are often discussed alongside loneliness yet are not equivalent to loneliness. The reason for a separate section to discuss associations is because through my conversations with the participants I learned that loneliness is a big word in their world. It is a "big thing" that carries too much weight, that people seldom want to touch on in order to avoid its heaviness and complexity. Therefore, it seems to be more common to disguise it in lighter versions, which is by associating it with something else to make is easier to talk about. As such, several associations were identified and presented below. Most importantly, being aware of these associations could be an approach to comprehending adolescents' perspectives of loneliness and may help us get on the "same page" when it matters.

6.1.1 Loneliness and boredom

> If you are lonely, you are bored. (Michael, age 17)

I have had some interesting conversations revolving around *boredom* with some of the participants. It turns out that the connection between loneliness and boredom is, in so many ways, closer than I anticipated. As shown by Li and colleagues (2021), boredom and loneliness are significantly and positively associated with each other. Moreover, boredom, as with loneliness, has been found to be characterized by an increasing trend in the last decade (2008–2017), particularly among adolescents (Weybright et al., 2020). A recent study that examined how the terms *lonely, alone,* and *solitude* are used in online language also discovered that the word *bored* co-occurred with *lonely* (Hipson et al., 2021). Even research dating back several decades has shown similar results as today, that is adolescents most often attribute loneliness to boredom (Moore & Schultz Jr, 1983). Michael expressed that loneliness stems from being bored, thus he would come up with something to divert his attention, such as playing video games, although he described this as only a temporary solution. As he puts it, one has to "be with friends

or something” to “get rid of loneliness permanently”. Another participant described a similar viewpoint:

> I notice that in my pattern is that if I, if I don't do anything, I'll start to feel like this emptiness start to creep in. And then, like, I feel like lonely and like, and I'll start overthinking about things and like, “Oh no, what if I did this? What if I did that? Like why I can’t do this”. And I'm like “Oh, I’ll freak out” and like, get really nauseous. But like, if you're so busy that you can't even have like, time to think about yourself and your life. You're technically like working towards something and like, if you keep that up like you have no time to think about all the depressing thoughts, so you won't ever feel that you're lonely since you're ever, like so busy. (Lena, age 17)

Based on her own observations, she notices that feelings of loneliness tend to arise when she is not occupied, leading to overthinking and anxiety. Hence, staying busy can divert her attention from negative thoughts and loneliness. She then reached the conclusion that “if you just really occupy your time with lesser thoughts and more jobs to do, you’d probably be less probable to thinking you're lonely”. Taken together, the participants suggest that having nothing to do to occupy one’s mind is what gives rise to a feeling of boredom, and inevitably, loneliness. Similar to previous findings of German and Latkin (2012), the participants stated that boredom proneness can generate negative emotions, which may induce loneliness. In addition, a study found that the increase in boredom may be part of broader historical changes in behavior such as digital and social media use and time spent alone, both of which are associated with boredom (Martz et al., 2018). Combining their findings and the participants’ descriptions, time spent alone is likely to result in a high prevalence of boredom, and boredom can lead to feelings of loneliness. This chain reaction may offer another explanation of why participants, as described in the previous chapter, would relate loneliness to one’s state of being alone. In hindsight, it became clear to me that Lena’s viewpoint actually reflects the values of her own upbringing context:

> Uhm… I think maybe it's because like I'm from, like quite a Chinese family. So maybe when someone thinks they are like, when someone says they're lonely, I think everyone will be like 'Haih, this one 太闲了，没东西做' [too bored, nothing else to do in Mandarin]. I don't even know what that means, but it basically, it means that, like uhm, this person has like nothing on their hands to do, they are way too, like uhm free, that's why they're lonely. (Lena, age 17)

Lena showed awareness of how her background shapes what she attributes loneliness to, and this has also in a way affected how she would think of loneliness, which is associating loneliness with boredom. Furthermore, not only do loneliness and boredom appear to be associated, but they can, in some situations, be used interchangeably.

> Because personally, from the environment I'm around in, when you are lonely, it gives off the impression that you're like depressed and stuff. And in the, the people I'm around, they don't really like talk about their like, feelings or like if they have any problems at home. So if, uhm if they are lonely, they’ll try to say like, “I'm bored”, actually. So like a lot of them try to say they're bored instead. […] Because uhm, I feel that in my background like lonely is a big word, right? So I think it's easier and it’s like a lighter word to use ‘bored’. And like I see a lot from like kids to like teenagers to even adults, actually, they're like, “Ugh, quite boring, you know?” Yeah. Like, like I think it’s an Asian thing? (Lena, age 17)

Here, Lena offered another perspective of understanding loneliness, in which loneliness may appear in the form of boredom due to different cultural values and expectations. This is consistent with previous study that found adolescents tend to translate their experiences of loneliness into boredom (Spaeth et al., 2015). When asked what she meant by “Asian thing”, Lena further elaborated that “Asians like, they more prioritize their goals, their task over feelings. I think it’s like a… It’s our culture to not really talk about our feelings, how we're feeling, what's going on in our family, the background”. As

explained in a study by Mojaverian and Kim (2013), the phenomenon of the lack of self-expression is particularly prevalent in Asian cultures as disclosing problems or seeking help is deemed as "losing face", disrupting group harmony, and receiving criticism from others. This may have implications for the prevalence of loneliness in these cultures. Another study has identified that individuals in more collectivistic cultures may, in general, feel even lonelier because of the stricter and more demanding social norms that are likely to limit opportunities for people to relate to others in personally fulfilling ways and increase the likelihood of individuals not meeting cultural expectations in their relationships (Heu, 2021). This is relevant to Lena's description too as most Asian cultures are predominantly collectivistic in nature. Lena's view of such cultural values was coherent with other participants:

> I think people don't really talk about it. Because they are more likely to talk about something that happened around them, things like that, uh, just about other stuff, not like feelings, they rarely [talk about it] (May, age 13)

> Cause like you don't care about it. No offense but just like… maybe they don't care? It's not like a priority so like maybe they are more interested in other stuff, but not this, yeah. Maybe they also never thought of it (Anna, age 14)

As May and Anna observed, people within their context usually have little to no interest in talking about their feelings, not to mention loneliness. Not only is this apparent in their surroundings, one participant expressed that this is the same in her own situation too. Shirley shared that she would be more likely to hide her feelings instead of confiding in others because she is afraid of bothering other people. To make it worse, saying "I'm lonely" does not guarantee genuine concern but gives off the impression that one is trying to seek attention:

> I think uhm currently like in school or with my friends like because uhm… Because like the whole depression thing used to be like a trend, like people would think of it as trend, right? Because like everyone was saying that they were. And then like, once you said like you're lonely out loud, I think like, a lot of people will be like, "oh, this guy, attention seeker". Yeah, a bit. […] Yeah, so I think that's why people prefer to say that they're bored because lonely makes you look like you're seeking for attention. (Lena, age 17)

All the above, once again, points to the significance of understanding loneliness in context. Culture profoundly influences people's expectations, experiences, and expressions of loneliness. Our subjectivity is in constant dialogue with our environment and the subjectivity of others (Ozawa-de Silva & Parsons, 2020). In this case, the participants' cultural environment informs their behavior and self-expression in a way that society deems acceptable and appropriate, that does not alarm others or make others uncomfortable. In other words, an unspoken agreement seems to exist, which is even if suffering from negative emotions, lonely individuals should keep a low profile. As a result, they either claim boredom to avoid the uneasiness of discussing their feelings openly or simply suppress those emotions altogether. Hence, this silence surrounding feelings shapes how loneliness manifests within this context. Interestingly, the association between loneliness and boredom not only implies that boredom can trigger loneliness but also suggests that discussing loneliness itself is perceived as boring:

> Yin Ting: What do you think would happen to a lonely person?
> Shaun: [Long pauses] It's boring
> Yin Ting: It's boring. Is there anything else?
> Shaun: [Pauses] Maybe he wouldn't want to go to school. Because there was no one to talk to and time seems slow.
> […]
> Yin Ting: So, what do you think it feels like if were to talk to people about loneliness? How would the atmosphere be like?
> Shaun: [Long pauses] It's boring

Shaun (age 14) perceived that a lonely person would experience a slow passing of time. This subjective impression of time as moving slowly, which is commonly referred to as time awareness has been shown to be strongly associated with emotions and feelings of isolation. According to Cravo and colleagues (2022), loneliness was one of the main predictors for the sensation of time slowing down. In summary, this section has explored how boredom often precedes loneliness, perhaps particularly in collectivist cultures, where openly discussing loneliness is not well-received yet. Instead, people may use "boredom" as a more socially acceptable term. This reluctance to address loneliness openly stems from cultural norms and a fear of being seen as attention-seeking or burdening others. Additionally, subjective experiences of time, such as feeling time move slowly, are linked to loneliness. Overall, this highlights the complex interplay between boredom, loneliness, and cultural norms in shaping adolescents' perspectives of loneliness.

6.1.2 Loneliness and Introversion

Introversion is, to my surprise, a recurring theme that emerged in most of the interviews with my participants. Although the concept was not introduced in the sentence stems nor interview guide, participants were still able to steer our conversation towards that path. When being asked "what do you think makes people lonely?", Michael (age 17) came up with a few explanations, with one suggesting that it is because "some people are very introverted, they don't make new friends or are very quiet". According to him, loneliness is attributed to introversion. However, he also clarified that not all introverts are lonely and not all lonely people are introverts because there are many predictors for loneliness, and introversion is just one of them. In other words, loneliness and introversion are associated due to the overlapping traits they both share, which will be discussed below. Looking from another dimension, some participants perceive introverts as lonely, if not more prone to loneliness.

> Cause like, I, I, I'm tend to be more extroverted, so I like to pick up more introverted friends. And then along the way, when like we, and when I'm like talking to others and they're like at the side, then they're like quiet and I'm like, oh no, they're not joining the conversation. And I'm like uhm perhaps it's because like, they can't like, talk to anyone and they can't really connect. So that's when you know they're lonely or, you know, then when their eyes are like drifting off and distanced and they're thinking about something and they're like, they kind of look like they're depressed. I'm like, oh, you know, that's when they're lonely. (Lena, age 17)

> Maybe you're, you know you're lonely when you're like by yourself. And uhm maybe sometimes it's in the state of the mind as well. So like, maybe you really don't want to talk to others. You're, you're kind of like, for that particular time, you feel really introverted. So yeah. In, in that, in that aspect, I would say that you know you are lonely when like… yeah. (Alysia, age 16)

> Introverted people are more likely to feel lonely. Because they don't take initiative. Like maybe for extroverts, if they are lonely, they'd maybe take the initiative to… like for me, I'd not let myself feel lonely. But introverts are passive by nature, so maybe it'd be difficult for them to take the initiative when they need to, which would then make them lonely. (Vivian, age 16)

As Lena says, what makes her think that her introverted friends are lonely is when they are quiet and withdrawn in social situations because that is when connection cannot be established. Alysia also referred to "feeling introverted" when describing the state of loneliness. For Vivian, it is the passive characteristic associated with introverts that makes her think that introverts would not take the initiative to "get out of loneliness", causing them more likely to feel lonely. In keeping with previous works that shows introversion demonstrates strong positive associations with loneliness (Buecker et al.,

2020; Matthews et al., 2022; Mund & Neyer, 2019; Schermer & Martin, 2019; Wieczorek et al., 2021), participants also pointed out that it is actually the traits of typical introverts that give rise to loneliness:

> I think introverts by themselves, their nature is to be more quiet and like uhm, a bit more colder because they don't communicate as much. (Lena, age 17).

> Maybe like some people, they don't choose to be lonely. But maybe like, it's because like maybe they are too quiet, or they're too shy to talk to others. (Alysia, age 16)

The voices here are coherent. All the participants above note that traits like being quiet, shy, and withdrawn, which may entail less social interactions, could be the contributing factors of loneliness. In a more specific sense, quietness or silence, among others, has been mentioned repetitively by the participants, especially when they are speaking from their experience or observation of those who are lonely:

> You know someone is lonely because [they would] suddenly become very quiet and just don't want to talk. Sometimes maybe, uh, they will feel sad, and then being there alone, without the intention to socialize or don't even feel like talking […] Like for my friend, he/she would become very quiet when he/she feels lonely. (May, age 13)

> You know someone is lonely when they are quiet. (Anna, age 14)

> People who are lonely are often quieter. (Lena, age 17)

According to May, Anna, and Lena, one way to tell if someone is lonely is when they are quiet. In other words, a quiet person gives off an impression of loneliness. Surprisingly, it also works the other way round. When being asked "How could you tell if someone is lonely or not, Shaun (age 14) said he would think one is probably not lonely when that person is happily talking to his or her friends. Now, how does this make sense on a cultural level? In collectivistic cultures, group harmony is considered crucial to be maintained, thus, characteristics like being sociable, friendly, talkative are favorable in social interactions (Schreier et al., 2010). Besides, scholars also suggest that silence occurring in social interactions would be more of a problem in a collectivistically oriented culture than in individualist cultures. This is because individualist cultures "emphasis independence from one's social groups" and that it is natural for members of such cultures to "become resistant to others" (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995, p. 636). In a way, this suggests that people from an individualist society may not react to silence the same way as how the participants in this research would, due to different attitudes and interpretation towards silent and talking behavior. Being silent in a collectivistic context, on the other hand, may be interpreted as unwillingness-to-communicate, a reluctance to self-disclosure that disrupts group harmony. Self-disclosure involves the verbal communication of both superficial and more intimate information (Crowley, 2019), and has been found to correlate negatively with loneliness, which means individuals with high self-disclosure would have less sense of loneliness (Pingxian et al., 2008). In May's (age 13) opinion, loneliness is more likely to happen within a larger group of friends because "it's hard to let everyone speak one by one". Here, the importance of allowing everyone to have a chance to speak is highlighted and associated with loneliness because it represents an act of self-disclosure, where you tell others something about yourself:

> But I think there is a connection to loneliness because the less you talk to people, maybe like the more, uhm, the more you feel alone because, like the less you get to share about things with others. (Lena, age 17)

Lena, who holds a similar view, explains that a lack of self-disclosure ("sharing about things with others"), which is mostly done through talking, would cause one to feel lonely. Similar results were presented by Sheldon (2013) in which lonely people were found to self-disclose much less than people who are not lonely. Later, Lena pointed out

the significant role of talking in relation to loneliness as "loneliness still has like a lot of things to do with like speech. So when you're lonely, you tend to have not as eloquent speech". This is to suggest that loneliness would affect communication skills, which includes speech and language skills. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to her to perceive quiet people as lonely. In addition, loneliness was associated with a reluctance to take social risks. These characteristics serve to put the lonely adolescent in a vulnerable social position. As Peplau and Perlman (1982) point out, the likelihood of loneliness is increased by personal characteristics that undermine either the initiation or maintenance of relationships (e.g., shyness and low levels of self-disclosure). In light of the context, it is plausible that participants would connect silence and talking behavior with loneliness. The following section will explore adolescents' perspectives of loneliness in relation to age.

6.1.3 Loneliness across lifespan

Loneliness has existed across time and space, affecting people of all ages, backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances. As Dr. Murthy, a surgeon general and an author of a book on loneliness from the United States said, "we all feel lonely at times just like we all feel hunger or thirst" (Caron, 2023). The universality of loneliness is addressed by the participants, as shown in the following statement by Alysia (age 16): "In a way, I feel like you are always going to experience loneliness, no matter like how, whatever age you are, even if you're like young or like an adult. I think one way or another you will definitely feel loneliness". Here Alysia acknowledges that all of us are capable of feeling lonely and that loneliness is something that everyone goes through. Although it is a common phenomenon, loneliness research has focused on certain groups – mainstream or older populations (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). That leaves many gaps to be bridged as loneliness is a deeply subjective experience despite its universality. According to several participants, there is a difference as to how people in different stages of life experience loneliness, mainly comparing between adolescence and adulthood:

> Uhm… I think definitely, yeah. Because adults go through a life that is much different than uhm adolescents' life. So like for adolescents [it's] like school and then like extracurricular activities. But for adults, it's more like work, uhh family, pressure, society… uhm a lot of comparison to others and yeah. A lot to do with family. (Lena, age 17)

> I think, adult's loneliness tends to be more complicated, like it's going to be a little bit harder to talk about it […] Because like you have more to worry about. Maybe if you have kids and you have parents, like you have two things to worry about. And then you also have a career and all those stuff to manage. Even if you're lonely, you probably don't have time to talk about it. […] And maybe even something [making them] lonely that I can't think of. (Anna, age 14)

> Uh, I think it would be [different]. Because probably we're more all about school now, probably besides studying, your life is mostly about friends, mostly. And then, probably adults have more things, like job, and more. So maybe, uh… I think for us now, it's like we're mostly lonely because of friends only. As for adults, I don't know. For adults, I don't know. (May, age 13)

According to Lena and Anna, they perceive that there are more elements in adulthood as compared to adolescence, entailing new roles and greater responsibilities. They suggest that these markers of adulthood, such as career, having children, family life, societal expectations and so on, may raise the likelihood of experiencing loneliness. That reflects Qualter and colleagues' (2015) findings that sources of loneliness differ across the lifespan in line with changes in social priorities and influences. With the impression of "there are more things to worry about as an adult", Anna described adults' loneliness as more complicated and difficult to express. This is consistent with Ethan's viewpoint, that offers a more detailed explanation:

> Ethan: I feel adults will feel loneliness a lot more than adolescents
> Yin Ting: Really? Why is that?
> Ethan: Because if you're lonely as an adult, I'm going to assume that, again, you maybe been lonely throughout your entire life. So there's been so much more time for you to build up all of these walls. And again, the adult life is so much more stressful than the teenagers. So it's basically, it's more burden, it's more pressure, it's more stress. It's gonna cause the person to put up more and more and more walls around them. So maybe an adult will feel loneliness more than an adolescent.
> Yin Ting: So it's like they have longer span?
> Ethan: Yeah. And again, I feel like the negative stigma around loneliness is also much more apparent in adults than in like teenagers and stuff. Because, again, teenagers uhh the, at, at the end of the day, there's still people out there who just want to make friends, who just want to socialize. If they chance upon the lonely person, good for them. But in an adult world where it's a lot more just about the world, about finances, about your responsibilities, there's not really anyone that's gonna reach out to you unless you're, like, a successful person that can give, like, connections if you are useful. There's no one that's, very rare… Ok, it's not that there's no one. It's very rare that you will find someone who's gonna genuinely care about you as well.

Ethan (age 17), consistent with previous participants, observed adult life as more stressful and overwhelming. Notably, he suggested that loneliness is more prevalent in adulthood, which contrasts with studies indicating that loneliness occurs most frequently during adolescence (Hawthorne, 2008; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), but he also thought that the longer time span of an adult's life and the much more apparent negative stigma around loneliness among adults could exacerbate feelings of loneliness for adults. This is based on his impression that there are fewer opportunities to develop new genuine relationships in adulthood as compared to adolescence as much more attention is put into managing other aspects of life rather than making new friends. In general, people often think that friendships in adolescence, the period in life characterized by sociability and energy, are easily made, whereas making friends as an adult is harder and time-consuming, thus increasing the likelihood of feeling lonely (Sedghi, 2018). On the other hand, Vivian holds a slightly different point of view:

> Most people [at my age] don't [experience loneliness]. I mean, there are people who will face it, at my age, but as compared to those who started working, I think it is more likely to have more of this problem after you started working. (Vivian, age 16)

She agrees that most people at her age are less likely to experience loneliness but instead of comparing it with adulthood like the others did, the comparison was made with the category of "those who started working". Slightly contrary to previous work that suggests loneliness as most commonly present in younger and older adulthood (Victor & Yang, 2012), Vivian thought that "the more you live, the lonelier you get". Yet, she believes that the intensity of loneliness decreases with age and maturity. In her words, "maybe for people who are more matured, maybe they're more likely to treat it [loneliness] lightly because they may have experienced loneliness so much that they can take it lightly" (Vivian, age 16). This, too, is in contrast with Pinquart and Sorensen (2003) who argued that the prevalence and intensity of loneliness are greater in young adults than in any other age group. Take note that Vivian is not comparing the intensity between people but one's experience of loneliness across lifetime. Building on the theory that "the more you experience loneliness, the easier it is for you to take it lightly", she suggests that adolescence is the stage in life where loneliness is less prevalent but harder to bear when it happens because adolescents are "not used to it yet". It is interesting to see how people from different groups make inferences of one another based on their understanding of the world and how often we take assumptions for granted without realizing.

After a thorough analysis, I gained the impression that the participants were toning down their experience of loneliness. I thus wondered if the power dynamics within the parent-child relationship play a role in shaping their perspective. In traditional Asian culture, power is often distributed according to gender, age, and generation (Meredith et al., 1994). Under this influence, the power structure in Malaysian families indicates that the younger ones should give priority and demonstrate respect to those who are older than them (Sumari et al., 2020). In practice, children within this context are expected to prioritize the feelings and needs of others, especially those who are placed "above" them, to maintain harmonious relationships. Defining themselves as aspects of groups, adolescents in collectivist cultures may also relate to in-group members by putting the needs of others above their own. This point of view could offer an explanation of why the participants were placing more emphasis on the adults' experience of loneliness and downplaying their own. Besides, roles and rules are commonly determined by parents and grandparents in a collectivist society. This is aligned with Ethan's (age 17) acknowledgement that "a lot of what we know was obviously taught to us by the people before us". Thus we should be mindful that the participants are not only speaking as "individuals, with their unique and different experiences", but also as "the collective inhabitants of that social, cultural, economic and political space" (James, 2007). In a way that neither exoticizes nor disregards children's viewpoints, we can overcome the overly romantic idea that children's voices are unique, by placing their voices in the discursive fields of power that generate them (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p.181, 192).

Interestingly, both Anna (age 14) and May (age 13) expressed an uncertainty of how loneliness actually is like for adults when being asked what the difference between loneliness in adolescence and adulthood is. Shaun (age 14) also stated that there is a difference as to how adolescents and adults experience loneliness but he "can't tell what's different". They cannot say for sure what loneliness means for other people as they have never lived the life of an adult or any other person. Likewise, adults often assume they know and understand adolescents because they were adolescents themselves and they have frequent encounters with them. However, the presumptions about adolescents that adults think are valid may not be what the adolescents are experiencing here and now (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988 as cited in Spyrou, 2011). Rather, these "truths" are always products of human meaning making. As Lena (age 17) puts it, "what you have around you really defines it [loneliness]", we clearly do not share the same life experience as them even though we have been through their age. Ethan (age 17) also expressed a similar opinion that "the circumstance around their life affects how loneliness feels to them and how adverse of an effect loneliness has on them". These different life experiences and circumstances then call for a need to listen to their voices and not gloss over the diversity of their own lives and experiences. Before moving on to the next section, one of the participants left us an important reminder:

> I, like I would say that everyone has felt loneliness. Maybe some people think that it's worse for them, but in a way you can't really say like, 'oh, I've got it worse than you' or anything. (Alysia, age 16)

As Alysia notes, loneliness cannot be compared since it is subjectively experienced. We cannot put a standard to it and neglect the loneliness experience of one group saying the other deserves more of our attention. Agreeing with Luhmann and Hawkley (2016) who argued that age is not a risk factor for loneliness itself, as loneliness can be experienced by people of any age, and some risk factors are specific to certain age groups, it is important to acknowledge that loneliness experienced at all phases of life has equal significance and we should not use "it is just a phase" as an excuse to brush off or

diminish one's feelings. Finally, the participants believe that "there can be a lot more communication" (Ethan, age 17) as they perceive a general lack of understanding of how adolescents today feel about loneliness by adults:

> So it feels like there's a generation gap basically, between what they, they lived with and what we lived with. So it may be hard, a bit hard to understand. Because their time, maybe the older adults, they didn't have social media, so they don't understand this whole thing about having to keep up with trends and stuff. You know their life was, their definition of fun and friend was simple. You just go out, you play ball together, you eat together, you talk together. That's simple. But now, with the emergence of social media, it feels like there's a lot of things that young people may feel like they need to do in order to stay connected. (Ethan, age 17)

As Ethan said, things are not the same as how the adults experienced during their adolescence. Time has changed, meanings have shifted, and new technologies have been introduced that revolutionized the world. Hence, there is a constant need to "refresh" what we think we know about adolescents' and gain a better understanding of adolescence. The next section will focus on adolescents' perspectives of the role of social media in relation to loneliness.

6.2 Loneliness and social media

Remaining in line with relational thinking, adolescence and adolescents are placed within networks of relations that link the participants with other human as well as non-human aspects of the world, such as technologies. As Spyrou (2018) suggests, by paying attention to the material aspects of children's lives, as advocated by ontologically informed approaches, it broadens our research scope. Applying this thinking here, not only is loneliness significantly influenced by cultural, spatial, and temporal contexts, but it is also influenced by more-than human factors, i.e., technology. Following the rise of social media usage among younger generations that has made it an integral part of their daily lives and experiences, the effect of social media has concerned the general public, resulting in increasing discussions and studies on social media's impact on the younger generation's well-being. Amidst the confusion and controversy surrounding this topic, listening to the voices of participants may offer valuable insights on how adolescents themselves make sense of the relationship between loneliness and social media from lived experience. Adopting a relational posture can help us to analyze the social relations and the mode of life humans produce through technology, i.e., social media, instead of returning to technological determinism that view humans as passive users who are being imposed by technology (see Chapter 3.3). The role of social media in participants' lives will first be explored, followed by their observation of the way loneliness is portrayed on social media, and finally the participants' view of social media's role in loneliness.

6.2.1 An overall view of social media's role

With advances in technology, social media unleashes potential that not only change the way people communicate with others around them, but also affect other aspects of our lives. Due to various use motives, it is important to understand how the participants in this research use social media in their everyday lives and what role it plays in participants' relationships with others. In general, most of the participants are users of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and RED. After analyzing participants' descriptions of how they make use of social media and what they think of social media as a whole, it is apparent that most participants find social media useful as it provides greater convenience and connectivity.

> It's just a way for us to talk like we would in real life but over the phone. Without having to be physically there. […] But it also makes it a lot easier to grow closer because it kind, you know it kind of breaks the limit of… how much time you can spend with someone. For example, if I, let's say a church friend, right? I'll, I'll only see them once a week when I go on Sunday. But with social media, I can talk to them every other day, if I wanted to. So it becomes much easy to build a, to build on the relationship because you're not constrained by time or place. (Ethan, age 17)

As Ethan said, by overcoming the barriers created by distance and time, social media have allowed us to communicate and maintain social connections with others easier, and thereby strengthen relationships. This is emphasized by Baym (2010) who has taken a broad approach to understanding personal connection through digital media. One of the key concepts highlighted by Baym was "reach and mobility", which was identified by Ethan, that has significance for the creation and maintenance of relationships. A few participants, Michael, May, and Vivian expressed similar thoughts that viewing stories on Instagram informs them of what their friends are doing and where they are at, and they believe it improves their relationships with their friends as they come to know them better. With the physical barriers removed, social media could even help them to expand networks by meeting new people and making new friends just with the click of a button, which would not be possible in the days before social media. Social media use has been linked to positive outcomes such as connection with others as shown by studies. Seo and colleagues' (2016) study on the relationship between social interactions on Facebook and well-being found that increased interactions with Facebook friends were associated with greater perceptions of social support, subsequently reducing feelings of loneliness. Additionally, Davis (2012) suggests that social media not only enables young people to expand their friendship circles but also facilitates a sense of belonging by allowing them to connect with peers, regardless of temporal or spatial constraints.

In addition, some of the participants added that social media offers access to various information instantly and effortlessly. On the one hand, it can increase their knowledge and help them with their studies. For instance, Vivian (age 16) told me that students would share effective exam tips via social media and she had personally benefited from it too. But on the other hand, Anna (age 14) notes that the easy access to information also means that incorrect or false information can propagate faster and wider on social media. As we can see, there were different motives among participants, influencing their use of social media. Researchers have introduced the concept of uses and gratification to explain these interpersonal needs and motives that led to the active usage of media by considering various social and psychological antecedents (Katz et al., 1974). The main needs and gratifications include diversion, personal relationship (social utility of information in conversation), personal identity, and surveillance (McQuail et al., 1972). More uses and gratifications of social media were identified recently, such as virtual exploration (Mull & Lee, 2014), that is related to McQuail et al.'s (1972) motivation of information. This is particularly relevant to what Vivian and Anna shared, in which people use social media to explore and look for new things, with the possibility of obtaining knowledge in passing. Menon (2022) has also found that entertainment was one of the gratifications sought by people from contents on social media. However, it is worth noting that this framework can be limiting as it cannot encompass all human motivations due to the complex and diverse characteristics of human motives (Shao, 2009), thus requiring a more relational way of thinking, i.e., affordances as used in this study. Anna continues to address that social media is a source of entertainment that creates opportunities for small talk with her friends and to build relationships over interesting stuff that she came across on social media. In the same way, Lena (age 17) said that

“[social media] creates a lot of interest for me and other people to talk about” because one could send interesting and funny reels to others when people ran out of thing to say or when the relationship becomes boring. In a way, it serves as starting points to conversations that “could keep the relationship going” (Lena, age 17). Katz and Crocker (2015) noted that the exchange of videos on social media facilitates authentic yet playful interactions, contributing to the establishment of social capital. However, both May and Vivian raised concerns about the infinite scroll feature, which provides users with an endless stream of content. Excessive usage of this feature may predict loneliness, a topic I will delve into further in the following section.

Although the participants generally agree that social media has its advantages, they also suggest that the disadvantages cannot be overlooked. Here, participants are in line with a lot of media researchers that have problematized a tendency of technological determinism and negative depictions, but also overly optimistic portrayals (see Chapter 3). This points to the need for a more balanced and nuanced approach in understanding social media’s role in context. Despite acknowledging that social media is beneficial in maintaining relationships, the participants emphasized that social media cannot replace physical interactions, such as seeing someone physically and having the actual presence of people around them, and that “humans still tend to long after this kind of thing” (Lena, age 17). Michael (age 17) expressed that as compared to connecting in a virtual world, he thinks it is “best to be physical”, in the sense of being in the physical presence of others. Similarly, Shaun (age 14) differs friends on social media from the real world by saying “you can talk more with friends that you can see and won’t talk as much when you can’t see them”. Therefore, people will want more “real friends”, referring to friends in real life. This is also the same for Anna (age 14) who believes “real relationship is established through physical (real world) not social media”. She described physical gatherings as more important because that is when you can actually see each other, and only then “there is a feeling of bonding”. Interpreting what was said, it is apparent that physical presence is a core value in their relationships with others and it continues to resonate with the participants’ argument in the earlier chapter that loneliness, in their context, is not only a state of mind, but it can also be a state of being, without the presence of others.

However, it is worth nothing that there seems to be a co-existence of two contradicting voices in the ways the participants talk about social media. On one hand, the participants showed a tendency of viewing online and offline as separate spheres, where the physical sphere is seen as a field of more authentic or “real” connection. At the same time, earlier, they described media as a means of overcoming physical barrier and time, enabling being together with the same friends they already have in the “real world”. As such, social media is both depicted as an arena less valuable and “real”, that could even be a threat to human connection, as well as having the potential to enable valuable ways of being together and overcoming loneliness. One way to make sense of both perspectives is to “consider media as an integrated environment of affordances and propensities” (Madianou & Miller, 2013, para. 41) but also acknowledging that these affordances, in turn, corresponds to aspects of social relationships (Hutchby, 2001). Therefore, each affordance can be seen as a quality likely to be exploited within an emergent social relationship rather than merely an abstract attribute of media. In this sense, the ways adolescents manage their social relationships can lead to different interpretations of social media’s affordances. This understanding of this mutual shaping of social processes and the media may shed light on how adolescents’ perspectives are produced.

6.2.2 Diverse attitudes towarsd the role of social media in loneliness

When asked whether they have encountered loneliness-related content on social media, a few participants responded that they rarely or never come across such things, mainly because they are not interested. As they have never engaged with such content, the algorithm would not prioritize posts that are related to it, as Shaun (age 14) puts it, "I don't see things like that, because I won't look up this kind of thing". Nonetheless, Anna (age 14), who also never saw loneliness-related content on social media, expressed an interest in receiving more information about how lonely people feel so that she could know more about what her friends are thinking, thus support them.

Other participants revealed that they have, at some point, come across content relevant to loneliness. According to Vivian (age 16), she has seen positive contents about people sharing how much they enjoy doing things alone as well as depressing ones that introduce the concept of "levels of loneliness". The former one was also noticed by May (age 13), in which she adds that normalizing doing things alone or promoting the fun side of it could make people feel better and less lonely when they are doing things on their own. The latter one is basically a list, translated as "International Loneliness Scale" (国际孤独等级表) that went viral, circulating not only on the Internet but also reported by a few Chinese news websites. It consists of several activities that the society and culture deem should be done with others instead of alone ranked from Level 1 to 10. Hence, the idea is that, based on the levels, the higher you go, the lonelier you are.

Figure 6.1: An example of the content described by Vivian (Anonymous, 2019)

When I was searching for this chart online, I noticed that it is mostly available in Mandarin and the figure above is the only copy that I could get that is in English. It is hard to overlook the effects of culture on the meaning of loneliness here when even the mainstream media is playing a part in suggesting the idea of doing certain things alone as a state of loneliness. The China Central Television (CCTV), a national television broadcaster of China, attributed this profound understanding of loneliness as a state of being to the experience of complete isolation during the COVID pandemic. People realized that being totally cut off from others as a result of total lockdown has changed their understanding of what loneliness actually means for them. As reported by CCTV (2020), it was found that "young Chinese people, who once were fine even if they were alone on the operating table, seem to be rethinking their lives after experiencing the

loneliness during the strict epidemic control". Our perspective is fluid and it is shaped and reshaped by the context we are situated within. In this case, when people experience a change in life, it is likely that their values will be altered accordingly, affecting the way they conceptualize things. Hence, drawing on the social constructionist perspective that highlights knowledge as socially constructed, loneliness can be seen as a fluid concept that takes on different forms subjective to contexts.

After analyzing the participants descriptions, I found different viewpoints in their perspectives of the relationship between social media and loneliness. In general, some participants see a correlation (direct and indirect) between social media and loneliness, but not causation, which means social media does not cause loneliness, whilst a few others believe social media can cause and/or alleviate loneliness. On the other hand, some participants acknowledged that social media can, to some degree, alleviate loneliness. For example, Ethan (age 17) and Alysia (age 16) have noticed a surge of influencers and mental health related accounts on Instagram that are dedicated to raising awareness by posting positive contents like "just know that someone cares for you". Ethan believes that this "could maybe help with loneliness":

> I feel like it will maybe help lessen how lonely they feel, but it's not gonna solve the issue and it's root. So the person's not gonna stop feeling lonely. Maybe they just feel A BIT better while being lonely. (Ethan, age 17)

As Ethan notes, this may not be the most ideal solution to loneliness but at least it offers a brief relief. Other participants also agree that social media can in different ways lessen or even prevent loneliness. Shirley (age 16) thinks that "social media allows you to spend more time chatting with your friends, so you won't be lonely". Given its expanding social network, Michael (age 17) and Anna (age 14) view using social media as an opportunity to develop new friendships, or even romantic relationships, that help reduce loneliness when "virtual friends eventually become physical friends". As pointed out by them, the spheres of online and offline can in many ways overlap with each other, making it almost impossible to draw the line between online and offline. Given the interconnectedness of online and offline experiences, distinctions between these two may not be helpful or valid (Stoilova et al., 2016).

For Vivian (age 16), social media presents a different form of interaction that draws those who are shy to socialize in real life and prefer communicating through texting to seek social fulfilment online. It allows them to socialize in a way that is more comfortable and satisfying for them, and can compensate for social deficits in their off-line lives, which otherwise might lead to loneliness. This is consistent with scholars that suggest students who experience loneliness in the offline world are more likely to expand their social networks through online social media (Pi & Li, 2023). Likewise, Shaun (age 14) suggests that social media makes people feel less lonely by offering an alternative for people to socialize outside the real world. As he puts it, "at least there's some online friends" when real-world socializing is limited or not available for some people. However, Ethan pointed out that it might not work the way we expected as lonely people would not make the first move to reach out even if they have social media. Drawing on the concept of affordances, what the participants have described shows that social media has some qualities that may, both shape and be shaped by humans' ideals and cultural practice, invite certain behaviors and practice, without determining what happens. In other words, these affordances set limits on what it is possible to do with, around, or via social media, which may result in not one but a variety of ways of interpretation and usage of social media (Hutchby, 2001), and thereby also the consequences of media use. Further, Shaun (age 14) also addressed another potential issue for those who rely on online

relationships, which is “you will feel lonely when your phone runs out of battery”. This may sound like a simple logical way of thinking but the meaning and possibility behind this message is worth pondering over. Considering how the meaning of loneliness has shifted from being “far from the neighborhood” to today’s commonly adopted definition of “a lack of desired or meaningful relationships” in the Western context (as outlined in Chapter 2), could loneliness in the future means “a low phone battery”? Here, the relationship between social media and loneliness moves beyond what can be summarized with simple direct associations. There is an extension to this discussion where we need to understand how these two factors interact as they evolve.

Social media may be a potential remedy, but it is a complicating factor at the same time. This can be observed in most participants’ descriptions where they tend to fill in the potential drawbacks and consequences after providing the positive impacts social media could have on alleviating loneliness. Vivan, Lena and Anna, who all saw a significant relationship between social media and loneliness, expressed that social media is indeed a source of entertainment that could keep lonely people occupied. That is, people who are lonely could seek solace in social media and use it as a way to distract themselves from unpleasant feelings. With the unlimited content on social media, one can scroll endlessly without realizing how much time they have spent on it. According to them, several things could happen as a result of such behavior. One, “you feel less lonely, or even maybe happier after watching those funny videos” (Anna, age 14). Second, “you come to enjoy being alone and prefer staying at home instead of going out because you’re so addicted to social media” (Vivian, age 16). As Vivian notes, people will rather spend time on social media because of the interesting contents and become less interested with the outside world. In her words, “a lot of people don’t have much contact with the outside world because of social media”. Similarly, Anna said that there is a chance that people would not want to participate in social situations anymore.

> Because when you have something that can solve your so-called loneliness, and then when a physical person comes to you, you seem to be a little bit shielded. Because you already have a choice to be with your phone, so you do not want to have contact with the outside world. This should be considered a side effect. So it's harder to bring them out of the side of loneliness. (Anna, age 14)

What was described by Vivian and Anna suggests that individuals feeling lonely are more inclined to use social media as a means of escaping in-person interactions. Similarly, research carried out by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) has shown that those who are less satisfied with their life used the internet as a functional alternative for interpersonal interaction. Vivan described that being addicted to social media has made it so that people become less aware of their feelings thus lose grasp of the feeling of loneliness. In her words, “maybe that person is too addicted to the social media app, it’s like when he’s on social media, and he doesn’t feel unhappy or anything, so he’s already so into it. He doesn’t know what loneliness is” (Vivian, age 16). Yet, she also clarified that maybe it really is not loneliness for that person since loneliness is self-defined. However, as someone observing from the outside, she thinks “they should probably come out and socialize a little more”. More importantly, she was trying to point out the risk that people would become numb to their own feelings and stop thinking about it. Her view is similar to some researchers who argued that the excessive use of Internet-based technologies may serve as a coping strategy to alleviate negative moods or divert attention away from real-life issues (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). However, it is worth noting how Vivian’s statement here used and engaged with familiar discourses and general views about media use that is widely circulated in the society. The discourse and

ideas about media risks, that present media as a threat to authentic relations and connections, should also be considered as one of the entities within adolescents relational network shaping their sensemaking of social media and guiding their interpretation of loneliness. As we will see, Lena also expressed a similar viewpoint:

> If you're too hung on social media and like you're always like scrolling through TikTok or through reels, you probably tend to like forget to go out, like have your own hobbies and like talk to your family and stuff. And like when you put down the phone or you put down your laptop, then you think like "oh, I have no life outside this" then you feel lonely as well. (Lena, age 17)

As described by Lena, she is concerned that spending too much time on social media might weaken one's connection to the real world, thus diminishing one's sense of belonging in real-life interpersonal relationships and leading to a deeper sense of loneliness. Lena's way of making sense of loneliness has been observed in a study that found prolonged problematic use of social media can result in the loss of real-life social skills and social networks, in turn increasing feelings of loneliness (Pi & Li, 2023). Additionally, Anna (age 14) pointed out that spending too much time on social media could worsen feelings of loneliness when "you realize you have no one to do those interesting stuff you saw on social media with". Therefore, Anna described social media as serving as a last resort that "at least gives you some entertainment" when "there's nothing in the physical world that could keep you entertained". Overall, there seems to be a shared consensus among the participants that while social media may provide temporary solace as an escape from reality in the short term, in the long run, it can further disconnect people from real-world interpersonal relationships, consequently intensifying feelings of loneliness.

6.2.3 Social media – two sides to the story

The understanding of social media as a double-edged sword permeates the conversations I had with my participants. On one hand, the participants acknowledged that social media brings people closer together through sharing and seeing temporary life updates of each other. Lena shared that it is possible to receive positive affirmation through interactive functions such as commenting on others' posts. Alysia (age 16), who came across videos of people talking about how being and feeling lonely is on TikTok, described that many people recognized this as a cry for help and left encouraging words in the comment section. She believes that this positive interaction can alleviate loneliness. On the other hand, participants addressed that this behavior can also pull people apart and exacerbate loneliness. For example, Michael (age 17) suggests that when people decide to disclose their feelings and state their opinions online, they are putting themselves out there. It exposes them to a chance of receiving positive affirmation but also the risk of receiving negative comments and being cyberbullied. This can lead to a form of loneliness explored in the previous chapter, in which one feels lonely because of not being accepted and understood by others. Earlier on, participants expressed how functions like Instagram stories that gives users access to their friends' latest life updates benefits them and their relationship with others. However, it also comes with problems.

> I think like, the more you see other people, because people tend to post like only good things and like fun stuff on social media, you tend to look at that and then you compare it unconsciously, you compare it to your own life and then you start to feel lonely because you don't have that kind of thing that you see and that you envy. (Lena, age 17)

Lena suggests that people tend to present the positive aspects of their lives on social media and that leads to comparisons between one another. Social comparison is particularly important in the social media context as these platforms are rife with

opportunities for comparison, which often leads to envy (Yang, 2016). Past studies have shown that individuals tend to perceive people they encounter on social media platforms as more successful and happier than themselves (Jordan et al., 2011). This view of others can lead to feelings of inadequacy or self-comparison (Steers et al., 2014). Interpreting Lena's description, not being able to achieve what others did may also result in a feeling of not fitting in, and consequently, loneliness. Furthermore, there is also the fear that one is "left out":

> Like maybe seeing someone else hanging out with friends, and then I'm just home alone, it's… a bit lonely. (Shirley, age 16)

> Cause you look at other people's like stories, right? Like in an Instagram way. Uhm, you look at other people's stories and then you say like, 'oh, wow, they're hanging out so much', and maybe you think that 'oh, why didn't they call me or anything', so it just calls you to like distance yourself more from them. It's like, like, 'Ohh, maybe they don't want to hang out with me, so I'll just distance myself'. And I feel like that kinda has the impression on 'I'm surrounded by people but I'm still lonely' sorta thing, […] Even though it's not targeted to them, but they still feel like, 'oh these people, they're hanging out without me because I'm the problem' or like, uh yeah. (Alysia, age 16)

As Shirley and Alysia described, when one realizes that they are not part of a social activity, it leads to overthinking and loneliness. Driven by the need for inclusion, one may come up with every possible reason or assumption to explain their situation, often negative ones, ultimately distancing themselves from others. To make it worse, Alysia addressed the possibility that one could deliberately set out to hurt others by taking advantage of this fear. For instance, a group might post stories of their fun outings to make specific individuals feel excluded. This feeling of being left out, which contribute to the experience of loneliness, aligns with earlier discussions. Nonetheless, Michael (age 17) emphasized that as technology improves, associated risks may increase too. He believes that the outcomes of social media use depend on how people interact with these platforms. This perspective is in line with the concept of affordances that places emphasis on the relationship between the properties of social media and the capabilities of users. Affordances are relational as the action possibilities rely on individual agency and cultural forces (Steinert & Dennis, 2022). In this sense, social media do not have impact in the same way, everywhere, and all the time.

6.2.4 The role of social media in shaping perspectives of loneliness

What stood out from the participants' descriptions during the interview was a shared consensus that social media makes people aware of their loneliness. Interestingly, aside from the usual discussion of whether social media increases or decreases loneliness, the participants recognized other role social media plays in the loneliness phenomenon within their context. Specifically, individuals who had not previously recognized their loneliness began reconsidering it because of social media. Lena (age 17) shared her experience of how loneliness-related contents she encountered on social media affected her understanding of loneliness:

> Lena: Uhm… I think for one… I think I just remembered this reel that I just scrolled across, I thought it was really disturbing. Like, like some girl sharing about like uhm how she felt like… It was like a really short sentence, probably like half a sentence long. And then she was sharing like uhm… 'Oh when…' What did she say… Er… Uhm… 'When, when, when your parents don't think, when your parents don't remember this, or like don't even remember like your favorite food or something' and then like, and then like you see like all your friends like liking it and then like you see more of it and like, "Oh my, why?" Yeah.
> Yin Ting: Uh-hmm. What is the feeling…
> Lena: Like the moment you try to, uhhh, relate to it, then you're like, feel quite lonely as well, yeah.

> Yin Ting: Ohh ok, so it kind of like makes you aware… Even when you don't think that it's a big thing that people don't remember?
> Lena: Yeap
> Yin Ting: Ok, so that's kind of like disturbing to you?
> Lena: Yeah. I think like if you didn't tell me that, I'd be ok.

As Lena described, it did not occur to her that parents forgetting something about her would make her feel lonely until she was introduced to this perspective of interpreting it and this seems to be supported by her peers as well (i.e., by seeing them liking the reels). For Lena, this experience is disturbing and something she would have preferred not to come across. Evidently, social media exposes its users to all kinds of information. These platforms convert into a public space, promoting existing values and instilling new values. Ethan also perceived the same thing:

> I think [social media] it's a good thing… that has been used for the wrong reasons. You know, okay, the base of social media is, is great. You know. It's a way for you to stay connected with your friends when you're not physically with each other, with the texting, with the posting to keep everyone updated about your life. But with how far it's gotten, it's become a place where people push their own ideologies and agendas and their own morals and beliefs onto other people. (Ethan, age 17)

As Ethan said, social media is a global platform place where everyone can share, and anyone around the world can see. Consequently, "social media may be the thing dictating what people need to do in order to fit in to feel less lonely". As new norms and trends emerge on social media, adolescents may feel compelled to constantly keep up with the latest things to fit in. Yet, these trends may not align with their personal values or how they truly live. What happens next is that a sense of loneliness may arise because "they feel like they can't be themselves or no one else will accept them". This is in line with a form of loneliness mentioned in the previous chapter—one where individuals feel lonely because they can't be transparent with themselves and others. Additionally, Ethan raised the issue of influencers on social media, an inseparable aspect of the platform:

> Yeah, I think one, obviously, influencers are the ones that are pushing their own agendas. And that's, that's the, that's one part. Uh… I think this may not be as apparent of a problem, but when you're an influencer, you obviously have a lot of followers. You have a lot of fans, so when you scroll through the comments of influencers, you'll find a lot of like supportive messages and stuff. I feel like lonely people may see that and then think 'one person is not enough', that I need a lot of people, I need everyone to be caring about me, so it kind of distorts what a lonely person would see as a normal… Because what influencers have, what influencers have is not normal. You don't, you shouldn't have millions and millions of people uhh that so-called care about you in a parasocial relationship. So it can't, it may distort what people… what lonely people may see as a normal healthy relationship and social life. (Ethan, age 17)

Ethan believes that social media influencers may create and instill unrealistic expectations among users, particularly social expectations that diverge from local everyday realities. Media globalization has allowed information to flow, (re)constructing and negotiating norms and ideas that may enforce, disrupt, or come into tension with the local contexts (Thussu, 2006). This is because knowledge is socially constructed and when exported across contexts via social media, what is relevant in one setting may not apply elsewhere. Hence, Ethan suggests that people may experience loneliness when there is a misalignment between their interpretation and sensemaking of social relationships based on social media and their local everyday realities. Other participants also agree that seeing content on social media that does not reflect their personal values can be thought-provoking and may lead people to doubt themselves:

> I think like social media will make you skeptical, it will make you more skeptical, you'll feel like, you'll doubt yourself like, 'Am I really lonely?', yeah. […] Like you don't even, actually

> like you don't even have that problem, and you have never thought about it, then suddenly this 'symptoms of loneliness' video starts listing a whole bunch of things out to you, and you're like, 'Hey, I have this, I have that. Am I lonely?'. Yeah. (Michael, age 17)

Michael adds that while loneliness is self-defined, social media content plays a part in influencing our understanding of what constitutes loneliness. This aligns with Lena's (age 17) observation: "I think you tend to pick off things that you see online". Michael views these contents as being produced by people, whom he assumed, are professionals in their field, leading him to trust their statements by default. The underlying idea is that perceiving others as authoritative can lead to self-doubt, assuming they know more and are therefore right. Following up on that, May shared similar sentiments:

> Like maybe you won't feel much about it before coming across things like that, but after seeing it, you would think, 'oh, that's actually kinda lonely', so when something like that happens to you later, you will also have that feeling. (May, age 14)

May suggests that contents on social media introduce and shape people's perspectives of loneliness. As individuals encounter similar experiences, their perspective becomes reinforced. Gradually, what initially seemed unfamiliar becomes their "truth" as they relate to it. This highlights loneliness as a relational phenomenon, emphasizing not only the importance of people, cultural ideals and practices, but also the entanglement of technology or non-human actors in influencing participants' ways of making sense and navigating ideas of loneliness. From a theoretical standpoint, media act as significant cultural agents with both amplifying and restraining effects on active individuals who engage with media within their socio-cultural context. This echoes with the relational perspective that recognize individuals' role in shaping and transforming media encounters in a continuous cycle of meaning making (Steele & Brown, 1995). Correspondingly, Lena further elaborated on how the contents that we encounter on social media affect our thoughts and feelings:

> I think like uhm… Sometimes when you scroll through like videos of like, people like expressing their feelings, expressing their loneliness or like things that they've been through and that uhm, they're like really pressured or like a lot of negative emotions about. And like you see that and like a lot of these reels are accompanied with music of the same feelings. I think that worsens the mood and then like it darkens your own mood without like you even knowing. So after a while of scrolling this, and the algorithm doesn't help because the more you interact with these videos the more they show you, so when it, when it comes to a point where it's all like that in your full mood, every single day will be like that, and soon enough like you'll just feel this on your own, yeah. (Lena, age 17)

According to Lena, emotions can really be contagious, especially when it is amplified with music. As stated by Parkinson (2020), research indicates that emotions can quickly propagate within online communities. When others share similar feelings, these emotions are accepted and perceived, leading to the formation of large emotional communities in a short time. Yet, based on Lena's descriptions, its influence can go beyond "those with the same feelings" and might affect others who are exposed to these contents as well. As a result of continuous exposure to such contents, participants suggest that one may internalize these feelings or ideas as one's own. According to Steinert and Dennie (2022), while it is common knowledge that social media technologies have an impact on users' emotions, it is unclear exactly how that happens. Keeping in mind the affordances theory, technologies can, and often do, put users on particular paths that, once again, do not have the same impact for others or even for the same individual at different times (Hopkins, 2020). As seen above, May (age 13) suggests that childhoods with social media are more likely to be lonely as compared to those times without access to phone. In her opinion, one would start overthinking after seeing "those videos" (i.e., loneliness related) and being misled by others' perspectives online. As she said, "because when

you're scrolling through you see some negative reels and that negativity caught on to you". Therefore, with the effect of social media, she believes there is a greater likelihood that childhood today is more prone to loneliness. Regardless, participants remained positive that social media may be a key to destigmatizing loneliness. Lena, who came to notice the difference between Western and Asian's understandings of loneliness, expressed her thought:

> It's still a bit of a taboo topic, but as social media progresses and then like more of the current generations are like open to like the West like all the white people right, and like now everyone's talking about their feelings online. I think like after years they'll like tend to open up and they will talk about their feelings more in like public and with their own friends. (Lena, age 17)

Based on her observation, she portrayed Western people on social media as taking loneliness more seriously than people in her context. She suggests that online platforms provide the opportunity to observe how other people deal with loneliness, which might in turn affect one's view on this subject, thereby lifting the taboo and destigmatizing loneliness. Reflecting the social constructionist theoretical framework (Burr, 2015), we develop knowledge of the world within a social context (here I refer to media as a context for social interaction), and this understanding of a concept, i.e., loneliness, can be unlearned and relearned through one's interactions with other people online. In a sense, social media facilitates social construction of adolescents' knowledge or perspective on loneliness. In fact, as Michael (age 17) said, "social media is just a tool" that is relative to individual needs and capabilities. This resonates with the concept of affordances, which posits that media possesses some dispositions, inviting certain responses, without directly determining them.

6.3 Chapter summary

This first part of this chapter mainly focused on how adolescents associate loneliness with other phenomena such as introversion. According to the participants, it seems that loneliness is often disguised or downplayed through associations with boredom. This expression of loneliness was explored through a cultural lens to gain a better understanding of how adolescents' perspective is shaped within context. Furthermore, the differences in experiencing loneliness across different stages of life, contrasting adolescence and adulthood, was discussed. In the second part, more emphasis has been placed on understanding adolescents' sensemaking of the role social media plays in the phenomenon of loneliness. Other than exploring how social media alleviates and exacerbates loneliness, with some finding temporary relief through online interactions while others become more isolated from real-world relationships, participants also addressed other possibility of social media's role, such as making people aware that they are lonely according to "social media's definition". The differing perspectives and opinions of social media's role in loneliness did not come as a surprise. As highlighted by Ethan (age 17): "I don't think there's like a general perception of it from social media on its own. I think it's too diverse. There's too many people on social media to come up with a, like a general perception of it". If it is not possible to come up with a general understanding of loneliness on social media because of the diversity, does it not apply to the real world too? Rather than fixating on the truth of loneliness, I argue that loneliness and adolescence, as a diverse and relational phenomenon, are constantly unfolding, shaped, and reshaped through sensemaking and relations between humans, as well as, between humans and technology. Therefore, it should be understood from the wider cultural structure and societal contexts that shape adolescents' everyday lives.

7 Conclusion

Given the heterogeneity of contexts in which loneliness can occur, notions of loneliness are manifold and diverse. It is not a single concept but requires contextual understanding to effectively address this issue within society. However, societal views that downgrade and downplay the role of adolescents has led to the tendency to overlook or undervalue their voices, even in matters like loneliness that also concerns them. Therefore, not only do adolescents' voices need to be heard, but it is also important that we listen to them without individualizing and divorcing the production of their voices from its interactional context (Komulainen, 2007, p. 25). The groundwork of this research, thus, rests in the new paradigm of childhood studies which considers adolescents' voices as social and co-constructed by networks of human, material actors, and forces. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of my analysis along with the strengths and limitations of this research. Finally, recommendations for future research will be presented.

7.1 Key points summary

With the aim to explore Malaysian adolescents' perspectives on loneliness, this theoretical framework of this research is informed by social constructionist and relational approaches, which both stress the situatedness and context-dependence of loneliness. Drawing, sentence completion exercise, and semi-structured interviews were the methods employed in this qualitative study to facilitate participants' diverse preference and competency in expression of ideas as well as to minimize the power imbalances between the researcher and the participants. After gaining access to adolescents in a local church, a total of nine participants aged between 13 – 17 were recruited by using purposive and snowball sampling strategy. The participants' perspectives were then analyzed to answer the research questions formulated for this research.

Contrary to most contemporary Western studies that moved away from viewing loneliness as the state of being physically alone, participants in this research mostly conceptualize loneliness as a state of being, encompassing physical isolation and social disconnection. The participants' sensemaking of loneliness was analyzed by taking into account the cultural norms and social expectations of the context. In collectivistic societies like Malaysia, the emphasis on social relationships and group cohesion informs people the inappropriateness of being alone, thus aloneness is often assigned as a meaning of loneliness. Nonetheless, participants also acknowledged other forms of loneliness, which are loneliness as a state of mind and loneliness as transient and situational. Recognizing that loneliness can occur even with the presence of others, the participants portrayed loneliness as the inability to make meaningful connections with others that is often attributed to a lack of shared interests and values. This also points to the influence of collectivistic culture which values group harmony and cohesiveness. That is, having shared interests and values allow people to fit together well and unite effectively, thus failure to do so indicate the absence of connection (even with company), resulting in loneliness. The understanding of loneliness as transient and situational by the participants suggests that positive and genuine interactions can help lessen loneliness as it gives rise to the feeling of being remembered and cared for, in which the lack of these is what often contribute to loneliness according to the social norms around relationships.

The paradox and complexity of loneliness were also addressed in this chapter, highlighting the ambiguity and messiness of the participants' narratives and lived experience. To unpack the multifaceted concept of loneliness, the role of language is considered. As our relationships with the world are mutually constitutive, language can influence our thinking, just as our thoughts and culture shape how language develops. Moreover, this interplay could lead to new understandings of loneliness in the future. Just as how the meaning of loneliness has changed throughout time and space due to cultural and societal shifts, it may continue to be altered to reflect the needs and experiences of future users of language. Therefore, the concept of loneliness, being affected by language, is fluid and ever changing, and should not be taken for granted. Overall, this chapter highlighted how cultural contexts (including language) configure the participants' understanding of loneliness through shaping their expectations of social connectedness. In this instance, loneliness requires relational analysis of the socio-cultural context that produces these perspectives.

Furthermore, adolescents' perspectives on loneliness were analyzed through its associations that are also intertwined with and influenced by the context. Not only can boredom cause loneliness, but it has also become an expression of loneliness according to the participants. Being influenced by the Asian cultural beliefs that deem disclosing problems or seeking help as "losing face", participants perceive that lonely people are more likely to say they are bored instead, to avoid receiving negative responses from others. Introversion is also a highly recurring theme associated with loneliness due to the perception that quiet people are reluctant to self-disclosure and that this lack of self-disclosure may be interpreted as loneliness. When it comes to the participants' perspective of loneliness across lifespan, they generally view loneliness in adolescence as less prevalent and less complicated than in adulthood. These narratives offered a glimpse into adolescents' expectations of adolescence as a phase constantly organized in groups and revolving around school and studies, making loneliness potentially being harder to bear in this period; whilst adulthood entails greater roles and responsibilities that are more stressful and overwhelming. In addition, participants' perspectives regarding the role of social media in the phenomenon of loneliness was explored. Participants generally acknowledged both the advantages and disadvantages of social media, suggesting that it offers greater convenience and connectivity in maintaining as well as creating relationships, but cannot replace face-to-face interaction and being in the physical presence of others. Although, the participants' views of social media and loneliness' relationship are diverse, there is some consensus among a few participants that social media may provide solace that can alleviate loneliness temporarily, but over time, it can further disconnect people from physical interpersonal relationships, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness. The participants also described social media as a double-edged sword in the phenomenon of loneliness, fostering both connection and isolation among adolescents. Through interactions on social media, it is possible that one may receive positive affirmation that leads to feeling accepted and understood, thus helping alleviate loneliness and/or resulting in social comparison that generates a feeling of not fitting in, thus giving rise to a sense of loneliness. Nonetheless, the participants' perspectives echo the concept of affordances where the influence of social media is viewed as relational. That is, social media offers the potential to be used in various ways, however individuals all use it in different ways. To avoid positioning technology as determinative of particular sociocultural outcomes or situating the use of technology as completely socially constructed, the concept of affordances acknowledges the limitations and directional pressures that technologies place upon the individual (Hopkins, 2020). Thus, participants

also recognized other possibilities of social media's role in shaping one's perception of loneliness which is beyond the dualistic of good and evil. That is, social media has the potential of making one become conscious that they are lonely. To be more specific, it is through the dissemination of beliefs and ideas via social media that people "learn" that they can be categorized as lonely even though they were not feeling or thinking about it. As such, their concept of loneliness is re-constructed and negotiated, making them feel lonely according to this newly introduced concept of loneliness. The rich contents on social media are subject to each person's own interpretation, and given our unique individualities, there is a variety of ways of responding to the range of affordances for action and interaction that social media presents. Therefore, it is crucial that we do not oversimplify the relationship between the individual, loneliness, and social media.

7.2 Strengths and limitations

Recognizing a lack of in-depth understanding on adolescents' contextual conceptualization of loneliness, the research was designed to approach adolescents as knowing subjects and foreground their voices. Through the active involvement and contributions of my participants, this study yielded rich and meaningful data that provided valuable insights into differentiated portrayals of loneliness that are culturally and contextually rooted. This led to overarching themes that relayed a nuanced narrative about adolescence loneliness, for example, some participants described loneliness as a state of being, whilst others described the experience as a state of mind. Being able to identify these nuances may contribute to the development of effective interventions that address the diverse experiences of loneliness. As Jenkins and colleagues (2020) has contended, current approaches to loneliness are overly reliant on psychological surveys and lack attention to social context. Hence, with a deep understanding of the cultural settings that frame loneliness based on the perspective of young people themselves, the range of possible support services and culture-specific intervention strategies beyond the individual and beyond the clinic may be expanded (Ozawa-de Silva & Parsons, 2020).

As there has been a lack of research in non-western contexts on loneliness (Ozawa-de Silva & Parsons, 2020), this research studied the conceptualizations of loneliness within a collectivist society and contributed to the understanding of how collectivistic norms affect ideals of social embeddedness. Furthermore, exploring cultural products such as language and norms about social relationships helps us understand how loneliness is perceived and expressed differently in the Malaysian context. Not only can this help us to better identify adolescents who are struggling with loneliness in this context, but also acknowledge that the notion of loneliness cannot be narrowed down or generalized. Moreover, the first interview that I conducted for this research was with Ethan and I felt very nervous and worried that things might go wrong. I decided to open up to him and frankly told him this was the first interview that I conducted. I considered the risk that he might think less of me or find me unprofessional but it was all in my head. To my surprise, this honest confession allowed us to build instant rapport as he could relate to me as a human being with vulnerabilities. He was actively engaged in the interview and provided interesting data because, according to him, he felt comfortable talking to me. In hindsight, I figured that being transparent to my participants had not only built trust between me and my participants but also destabilized the power differentials between us, creating a safe space for them to express themselves.

However, this study is not without limitations. It must be noted that researchers have been criticizing the individualism/collectivism distinction as being vaguely defined and

lacking explanatory power for many cross-cultural differences (Wong et al., 2018). Although Malaysians widely practice values of collectivism, the exposure to global media which introduces Western and individualist cultures may have also challenged and influenced these traditional values rapidly and intensively (Keshavarz & Baharudin, 2009), making the picture messier as people navigate multiple sets of cultural norms. Furthermore, Malaysia reflects a multi-racial and multi-religious country that each has their own norms and beliefs different from the others. Therefore, cultural differences in cultures may have different impacts on how individual adolescents in Malaysia conceptualize loneliness, which is not (and cannot) be adequately addressed in this research using the collectivistic frame. However, from another perspective, the global flows of communication and multiplicity of cultural values have given us all the more reason to use relational approaches that enable embracing this messiness.

Although the inclusion of multiple voices may be a strength of this research, it also accompanies some challenges. That is, it can be difficult to fully represent the diverse and messy voices that overlap with one another but at the same time carries significance on its own. Categorizing and finding patterns within the voices was a challenging process, as if jumping into a rabbit hole, and some voices might be overemphasized at the expense of suppressing others. For example, themes such as depression and overthinking were identified in the initial stage of analysis. However, they were given up after much contemplation to focus on analyzing participants' perspectives through a cultural lens. There is also a risk of misinterpreting what the participants' intend to convey as the interviews were conducted in multiple languages. Some meanings might be lost or warped in translation, leading to inaccuracy and lack of precision of what the participants meant. However, I acknowledge that authenticity cannot be guaranteed and we have to move beyond such claims as it is impossible to grasp voice and represent the essence of people's words (Spyrou, 2011). Moreover, my role as the researcher in interpreting the adolescents' perspectives has played a part in the construction of their voices, thereby co-producing knowledge (Komulainen, 2007).

7.3 Further recommendations

As a subject with great width and depth, there is more to unpack but at the same time there is a need to narrow it down to be more precise for further research. For instance, several participants have touched upon the aspect of family significance but it was not followed up further due to time constraint and the focus of the project. This could have potential for exploration as researchers have found that interaction with family is highly associated with loneliness among adolescents in collectivistic countries (Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014). Given that family relationships are commonly the main sources of relational provisions in collectivistic cultures, it may have implications for adolescents' perceived isolation and the resulting loneliness. Therefore, it would be beneficial to include other intersectional aspects of adolescents' lives while foregrounding adolescents' perspectives of loneliness within social structures. Furthermore, future research on cultural conceptions of loneliness should consider more precisely defined cultural values other than the individualism/collectivism dichotomy as it can obscure meaningful group differences by overlooking values that inherently serve both individual and collective interests (Schwartz, 1990). With more precisely defined cultural values, a more nuanced understanding of how loneliness is socially constructed can be gained. Finally, it would be effective that we truly commit to listen to adolescents before taking action to help so that we do not further marginalize them but come face to face with our presuppositions and expectations about what we think they can or should say and what counts as knowledge.

References

Abebe, T. (2009). Orphanhood, poverty and the care dilemma: Review of global policy trends. *Social Work & Society, 7*(1), 70-85.

Achterbergh, L., Pitman, A., Birken, M., Pearce, E., Sno, H., & Johnson, S. (2020). The experience of loneliness among young people with depression: A qualitative meta-synthesis of the literature. *BMC psychiatry*, *20*, 1-23.

Alberti, F. B. (2018, September 13). *Here's how industrialization and individualism led to a new language of loneliness*. AlterNet. https://www.alternet.org/author/fay-bound-alberti

Alderson, P. (1995). *Listening to children: Children, social research and ethics*. Barnardos.

Alias, A., Mohamad Nasri, N., & Awang, M. M. (2023). From active participant to active researcher: What do young people understand about research? *Children*, *10*(6), Article 6. https://doi.org/10.3390/children10061066

Alldred, P. & Burman, E. (2005). Analysing children's accounts using discourse analysis, In S. Greene and D. Hogan (eds) *Researching Children's Experience: Approaches and Methods*, pp. 175-198. Sage Publications.

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage

Amzat, I. H., & Jayawardena, P. (2016). Emotional loneliness and coping strategies: A reference to older Malaysians at nursing homes. *Journal of Population Ageing*, *9*, 227-247.

Anderson, K. & Barrett, J. (2020, September). *Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia.* UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/1521/file/Situation%20Analysis%20of%20Adolescents%20in%20Malaysia.pdf

Anonymous. (2019, May 30). *International Lonely Chart*. [An example of the content described by Vivian]. 9GAG. https://9gag.com/gag/aXY3YZ9

Archer, M. S. (2013). *Social morphogenesis* (Vol. 1). M. S. Archer (Ed.). Springer.

Aung, K., Nurumal, M. S., & Bukhari, W. N. S. W. (2017). Loneliness among elderly in nursing homes. *International Journal for Studies on Children, Women, Elderly And Disabled*, *2*, 72-8.

Balážová, M., Gallová, I., Praško, J., Šlepecký, M., & Kotianová, A. (2017). Family environment as predictor of adolescents' loneliness. *European Psychiatry*, *41*(1), 6–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurpsy.2017.01.259

Baloyannis, S. J. (2015). The philosophy of solitude. *Encephalos, 52*, 14–24.

Barreto, M., Victor, C., Hammond, C., Eccles, A., Richins, M. T., & Qualter, P. (2020). Loneliness around the world: Age, gender, and cultural differences in loneliness. *Personality and individual differences*, *169*(3), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110066

Baym, N. K. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. Polity.

BBC News. (2018, October 1). *'I'm surrounded by people - but I feel so lonely'*. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-45561334

Beazley, H., Bessell, S., Ennew, J., & Waterson, R. (2009). The right to be properly researched: Research with children in a messy, real world. *Children's Geographies*, *7*(4), 365–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280903234428

Beazley, H., Bessell, S., Ennew, J., & Waterson, R. (2016). How are the human rights of children related to research methodology? In *The Human Rights of Children* (pp. 159–178). Routledge.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Bergström K., Jonsson L., Shanahan H. (2010). Children as co-researchers voicing their preferences in foods and eating: Methodological reflections. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *34*(2), 183–189. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2009.00843.x

Bessell, S., Beazley, H., & Waterson, R. (2017). The methodology and ethics of rights-based research with children. In A. Invernizzi, M. Liebel, B. Milne, & R. Budde (Eds.), *'Children Out of Place' and Human Rights: In Memory of Judith Ennew* (pp. 211–231). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33251-2_13

Błachnio, A., Przepiorka, A., Boruch, W., & Bałakier, E. (2016). Self-presentation styles, privacy, and loneliness as predictors of Facebook use in young people. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *94*, 26-31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.12.051

Blanchet-Cohen N., Di Mambro G. (2014). Environmental education action research with immigrant children in schools: Space, audience and influence. *Action Research*, *13*(2), 123–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750314553679

Blazek, M. (2017). Participatory video with children and young people. *Methodological Approaches*, *2*, 243-260.

Bodén, L., & Joelsson, T. (2023). Advancing feminist relationality in childhood studies. *Childhood, 30*(4), 471-486. https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682231199363

Bound Alberti, F. (2018). This "modern epidemic": Loneliness as an emotion cluster and a neglected subject in the history of emotions. *Emotion Review*, *10*(3), 242–254. https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073918768876

Boyden, J. & Ennew, J. (1997). *Children in focus: A manual for participatory research with children*. Radda Barnen.

Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research*

Brown, B., & Klute, C. (2003). Friendships, cliques and crowds. In G. Adams & M. Berzonsky (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of adolescence* (pp. 330–348). Blackwell.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods*. (2nd Ed.). Oxford University Press.

Buecker, S., Maes, M., Denissen, J. J., & Luhmann, M. (2020). Loneliness and the Big Five personality traits: A meta–analysis. *European Journal of Personality*, *34*(1), 8-28.

Bukhari, N. I. B. A., Anuar, A. F., Khazin, K. M., & Abdul, T. M. F. B. T. (2015). English-Malay code-mixing innovation in Facebook among Malaysian University students. *Researchers World*, *6*(4), 1-10. http://dx.doi.org/10.18843/rwjasc/v6i4/01

Burgess, R. G. (1991). Sponsors, gatekeepers, members, and friends: Access in educational settings. *Experiencing Fieldwork: An inside View of Qualitative Research*, 43–52.

Burgess, R. G. (2002). *In the field: An introduction to field research* (Vol. 8). Routledge.

Burkitt, I. (2016). Relational agency: Relational sociology, agency and interaction. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *19*(3), 322–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431015591426

Burnett, C. (2023). The Historical Roots of Loneliness. *Vulcan Historical Review*, *27*(14). https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1135&context=vulcan

Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism.* Routledge.

Cacioppo, J. T., & Cacioppo, S. (2018). The growing problem of loneliness. *The Lancet*, *391*(10119), 426. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30142-9

Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., ... & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of research in Nursing*, *25*(8), 652-661.

Caron, C. (December 18, 2023). *There's No Shame in Feeling Lonely*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/18/well/mind/loneliness-connection.html

Castells, M. (1996). The rise of the network society. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol*. I. Blackwell, pp. 158-163.

Chen, X., & Zhou, H. (2012). “Loneliness” is the fate of all great souls? Solitude and relevant research. *Advances in Psychological Science*, *20*(11), 1850.
Child Rights Coalition Malaysia. (2018). Executive summary: Status report on child rights in Malaysia 2018. https://wao.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CRC-Report-Presentation.pdf
Child, S. T., & Lawton, L. (2017). Loneliness and social isolation among young and late middle-age adults: Associations with personal networks and social participation. *Ageing & Mental Health*, *23*(2), 196–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2017.1399345
Christensen, P. H. (2004). Children's participation in ethnographic research: Issues of power and representation. *Children & society*, *18*(2), 165-176.
Christensen, P., & James, A. (eds) (2000). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices*. Falmer Press.
Clark A. (2010). *Transforming children’s spaces*. Routledge.
Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2013) Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, *26*(2), 120-123
Cole, A., Bond, C., Qualter, P., & Maes, M. (2021). A systematic review of the development and psychometric properties of loneliness measures for children and adolescents. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(6), 3285. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18063285
Collier, D. R. (2019). Re-imagining research partnerships: Thinking through "co-research" and ethical practice with children and youth. *Studies in Social Justice*, *13*(1).
Connolly, P. (2008). Race, gender and critical reflexivity in research with young children. In *Research with children* (pp. 189-204). Routledge.
Coplan, R. J., Zelenski, J. M., & Bowker, J. C. (2018). Leave well enough alone? The costs and benefits of solitude. In *Subjective well-being and life satisfaction* (pp. 129-147). Routledge.
Costall, A. (1995) The myth of the sensory core: The traditional versus the ecological approach to children's drawings. In C. Lange-Kuttner & G. V. Thomas (Eds.), *Drawing and Looking: Theoretical Approaches to Pictorial Representation in children*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
Cravo, A. M., de Azevedo, G. B., Moraes Bilacchi Azarias, C., Barne, L. C., Bueno, F. D., de Camargo, R. Y., Morita, V. C., Sirius, E. V. P., Recio, R. S., Silvestrin, M., & de Azevedo Neto, R. M. (2022). Time experience during social distancing: A longitudinal study during the first months of COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. *Science Advances*, *8*(15), eabj7205. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abj7205
Crawford, L. M. (2020). *Conceptual and theoretical frameworks in research*. Foundations in Research Design, 35-48. Sage Publications.
Crowley, J. (2019). Self-disclosure. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.899
D’Aboy, J. E. (1973). Loneliness: An investigation of terminology. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 33*(7-B), 3281.
Dahlberg, K. (2007). The enigmatic phenomenon of loneliness. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, *2*(4), 195-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482620701626117
Daly, K. (1992). Parenthood as problematic: Insider interviews with couples seeking to adopt. *Qualitative methods in family research*, 103-125.
Davis, K. (2012). Friendship 2.0: Adolescents’ experiences of belonging and self-disclosure online. *Journal of adolescence*, *35*(6). 1527–1536. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.02.013
de Jong-Gierveld, J., van Tilburg, T. G., & Dykstra, P. A. (2006). Loneliness and social isolation. In D. Perlman, & A. Vangelisti (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 485-500). Cambridge University Press
Downey, H., Hamilton, K., & Catterall, M. (2007). Researching vulnerability: What about the researcher?. *European Journal of Marketing*, *41*(7/8), 734-739.

Dror, Y., & Gershon, S. (2012). Israelis in the digital age. *RishonLezion: The College of Management*. Retrieved from https://www.isoc.org.il/sts-data/10702
Elliott, R., Fischer, C. T., & Rennie, D. L. (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology, 38*, 215-229.
Elwood, S. A., & Martin, D. G. (2000). "Placing" interviews: location and scales of power in qualitative research. *The professional geographer*, *52*(4), 649-657.
Ennew, J., & Plateau, D. P. (2004). *How to research the physical and emotional punishment of children*. International Save the Children Alliance Southeast.
Ernst, J. M., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1999). Lonely hearts: Psychological perspectives on loneliness. *Applied and preventive psychology*, *8*(1), 1-22.
Faux, S. A., Walsh, M., & Deatrick, J. A. (1988). Intensive interviewing with children and adolescents. *Western journal of nursing research*, *10*(2), 180–194. https://doi.org/10.1177/019394598801000206
Feldman, M. S., Bell, J., & Berger, M. T. (2004). *Gaining access: A practical and theoretical guide for qualitative researchers*. Rowman Altamira.
Fernandes, B., Biswas, U. N., Mansukhani, R. T., Casarín, A. V., & Essau, C. A. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on internet use and escapism in adolescents. *Revista de psicología clínica con niños y adolescentes*, *7*(3), 59-65.
Fernandez, L., & Matt, S. J. (2020). *Bored, lonely, angry, stupid: Changing feelings about technology, from the telegraph to Twitter*. Harvard University Press.
Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research (4th ed.)*. Sage.
Fox, B. (2019). Loneliness and social media: A qualitative investigation of young people's motivations for use, and perceptions of social networking sites. In B. Fox (Ed.), *Emotions and loneliness in a networked society* (pp. 309-331). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24882-6_16
Frank, A. (2010). Eurocentrism. In Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History. *Berkshire Publishing Group*. Retrieved 22 Apr. 2024, from https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190622718.001.0001/acref-9780190622718-e-178.
Fuchs, S. (1992). Relativism and reflexivity in the sociology of scientific knowledge. *Metatheorizing,* 151-168, Sage.
Gairdner, W. D. (2008). *The book of absolutes: A critique of relativism and a defence of universals*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.
Galanaki, E. (2004). Are children able to distinguish among the concepts of aloneness, loneliness, and solitude? *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *28*(5), 435–443.
Gan, S. W., Ong, L. S., Lee, C. H., & Lin, Y. S. (2020). Perceived social support and life satisfaction of Malaysian Chinese young adults: The mediating effect of loneliness. *The Journal of genetic psychology*, *181*(6), 458-469.
German, D., & Latkin, C. A. (2012). Boredom, depressive symptoms, and HIV risk behaviors among urban injection drug users. *AIDS Behav. 16*, 2244–2250. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-012-0247-5
Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The ecological approach to perception*. Houghton Mifflin
Gill, R. (1995). 'Relativism, reflexivity and politics: Interrogating discourse analysis from a feminist perspective'. In Wilkinson, S. and Kitzinger, C. (eds), *Feminism and Dispartcourse: Psychological Perspectives*, Sage.
Grant T. (2017). Participatory research with children and young people: Using visual, creative, diagram, and written techniques. In SkeltonT. (Ed.), *Methodological Approaches* (Vol. 2, pp. 262–282). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-020-9_19
Green, L. R., Richardson, D. S., Lago, T., & Schatten-Jones, E. C. (2001). Network correlates of social and emotional loneliness in young and older adults. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*(3), 281-288. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167201273002
Grey D. (2009). *Doing research in the real world*. (2nd Ed.). Sage Publications Ltd.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *10*(2), 261-280.
Guo, Y., Li, Y., Ito, N. (2014). Exploring the predicted effect of social networking site use on perceived social capital and psychological well-being of Chinese international students in Japan. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, *17*(1), 52–58. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0537
Haraway D. (1991). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. In Haraway D. (Ed.), *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 183–201). Routledge.
Hardman, C. (1973). Can there be an anthropology of children? *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, *4*(1), 85–87.
Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. UNICEF Innocenti Essays, No. 4, International Child Development Centre of UNICEF.
Hart, R. A. (2008). Stepping back from 'The ladder': Reflections on a model of participatory work with children. In *Participation and learning: Perspectives on education and the environment, health and sustainability* (pp. 19-31). Springer Netherlands.
Hashim, I. H., & Khodarahimi, S. (2012). Loneliness and the development of social relationships in Malaysian university students. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, *40*(2), 227-238.
Hauer, T. (2017). Technological determinism and new media. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, *2*(2), 239174.
Hauge, S., & Kirkevold, M. (2010). Older Norwegians' understanding of loneliness. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, *5*(1), 4654. https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v5i1.4654
Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of behavioral medicine*, *40*(2), 218-227. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-010-9210-8
Hawkley, L. C., Browne, M. W., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2005). How can I connect with thee? Let me count the ways. *Psychological Science*, *16*(10), 798-804.
Hawthorne, G. (2008). Perceived social isolation in a community sample: Its prevalence and correlates with aspects of peoples' lives. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *43*(2), 140–150. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s00
Heidegger, M . (1998/1927). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Blackwells.
Heinrich, L. M., & Gullone, E. (2006). The clinical significance of loneliness: A literature review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26(6), 695–718. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2006.04.002.
Hemberg, J., Östman, L., Korzhina, Y., Groundstroem, H., Nyström, L., & Nyman-Kurkiala, P. (2022). Loneliness as experienced by adolescents and young adults: an explorative qualitative study*. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 27*(1), 362–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2022.2109422
Heu, L. (2021). *Solving the cultural paradox of loneliness*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen. https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.156121537
Hignett, S. & McDermott, H. (2013). Qualitative methodology for ergonomics. Chapter X. In Wilson, J.R., Sharples, S. (Eds.) *Evaluation of Human Work*. *A practical ergonomics methodology.* (4th Ed.) CRC Press.
Hill, M. (1997). Participatory research with children. *Child and Family Social Work, 2*(3), 171–183.
Hill, M. (2005). Ethical considerations in researching children's experiences. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experiences: Approaches and methods*. Sage
Hipson, W. E., Kiritchenko, S., Mohammad, S. M., & Coplan, R. J. (2021). Examining the language of solitude versus loneliness in tweets. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *38*(5), 1596-1610. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407521998460

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on psychological science*, *10*(2), 227-237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352
Hood, L. (March 19, 2018). *A history of loneliness*. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/a-history-of-loneliness-91542#:~:text=Although%20loneliness%20may%20seem%20like,surrender%20the%20protections%20it%20provided.
Hopkins, J. (2020). *The concept of affordances in digital media* (pp. 47–54). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-08357-1_67
Hu, M. (2009). Will online chat help alleviate mood loneliness? *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 12*(2), 219-223. https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2008.0134
Hultman, K., & Lenz Taguchi, H. (2010). Challenging anthropocentric analysis of visual data: A relational materialist methodological approach to educational research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 23*(5), 525–542.
Hunt, M. G., Marx, R., Lipson, C., & Young, J. (2018). No more FOMO: Limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression*. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 37*(10), 751-768. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751
Hussin, S. H., Daud, A. I. A., Taibi, M., & Hussin, S. R. (2021). Loneliness, coping strategies and perceived social support among students of public universities in Malaysia during the Covid-19 MCO. *International Journal of Business and Society*, *22*(3), 1402-1419.
Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, Texts and Affordances. *Sociology*, *35*(2), 441-456. https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038501000219
interviewing. (3rd ed.). Sage.
James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist*, *109*(2), 261–272. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4496640
James, A., & Prout, A. (1990). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood* (pp. 7–33). The Falmer Press
James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). Theorizing childhood. *New York*, 81–104.
Jenkins, J. H., Sanchez, G., & Lidia Olivas-Hernández, O. (2020). Loneliness, adolescence, and global mental health: Soledad and structural violence in Mexico. *Transcultural psychiatry*, *57*(5), 673-687. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519880126
Jenks, C. (1982). Introduction: Constituting the child. In C. Jenks (Ed.), *The sociology of childhood. Essential readings* (pp. 9–24). Batsford Academic.
Jenks, C. (1996). *Childhood*. Routledge.
Jenks, C. (2004). Constructing childhood sociologically. In M. J. Kehily (Ed.), *An introduction to childhood studies* (pp. 77-95). Open University Press.
Johnson, V., Hart, R., & Colwell, J. (2017). International Innovative Methods for Engaging Young Children in Research. In R. Evans, & L. Holt (Eds.), *Methodological Approaches: Geographies of Children and Young People* (Vol. 2, pp. 335-356). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-020-9_18
Jordan, A. H., Monin, B., Dweck, C. S., Lovett, B. J., John, O. P., & Gross, J. J. (2011). Misery has more company than people think: Underestimating the prevalence of others' negative emotions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *37*(1), 120-135.
Junttila, N. (2018). Alone in the midst of everything: The loneliness of adults. *Kustannusosakeyhtiö. Tammi*.
Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2014). A conceptual and methodological critique of internet addiction research: Towards a model of compensatory internet use. *Computers in human behavior*, *31*, 351-354. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.10.059
Karnick, P. M. (2005). Feeling lonely: Theoretical perspectives. *Nursing science quarterly*, *18*(1), 7-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894318404272483

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Uses and gratifications research. *The public opinion quarterly*, *37*(4), 509-523.
Katz, J., & Thomas Crocker, E. (2015). Selfies and photo messaging as visual conversation: Reports from the United States, United Kingdom and China. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*.
Kerr, N. A., & Stanley, T. B. (2021). Revisiting the social stigma of loneliness. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *171*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110482
Keshavarz, S., & Baharudin, R. (2009). Parenting style in a collectivist culture of Malaysia. *European Journal of Social Sciences,10*, 66–73
Kirova, A. (2004). Lonely or bored: Children's lived experiences reveal the difference. *Interchange*, *35*, 243-268.
Kling, Z. (1995). The Malay family: Beliefs and realities. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 26*, 43–67
Komulainen, S. (2007). The ambiguity of the child's 'voice' in social research. *Childhood*, *14*(1), 11-28. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568207068561
Kung, C. S., Kunz, J. S., & Shields, M. A. (2021). Economic aspects of loneliness in Australia. *Australian Economic Review*, *54*(1), 147-163. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8462.12414
Kuss, D. J., & Griffiths, M. D. (2012). Internet and gaming addiction: A systematic literature review of neuroimaging studies. *Brain sciences*, *2*(3), 347-374. https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci2030347
Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitive research interviewing*. Sage.
Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making*.
Larson, R., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Graef, R. (2014). Mood variability and the psycho-social adjustment of adolescents. In M. Csikszentmihalyi (Ed.), *Applications of flow in human development and education* (pp. 285–304). Springer.
Lee, N. (2001). *Childhood and society: Growing up in an age of uncertainty*. Open University Press.
Li X., Feng X., Xiao W., Zhou H. (2021). Loneliness and mobile phone addiction among Chinese college students: The mediating roles of boredom proneness and self-control. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, *14*, 687–694. https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S315879
Lichtenstein, M. J., Pruski, L. A., Marshall, C. E., Blalock, C. L., Lee, S., & Plaetke, R. (2003). Sentence completion to assess children's views about aging. *The Gerontologist*, *43*(6), 839-848.
Liebel, M., Budde, R. (2017). Other children, other youth: Against eurocentrism in childhood and youth research. In Invernizzi, A., Liebel, M., Milne, B., Budde, R. (eds) 'Children Out of Place' and Human Rights. *Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research, 15*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33251-2_8
Lim, M. H., Rodebaugh, T. L., Zyphur, M. J., & Gleeson, J. F. (2016). Loneliness over time: The crucial role of social anxiety. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *125*(5), 620–630. https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000162
Lim, W. F., Ng, C. Y., & Ong, T. W. (2023). *Relationship between loneliness, self-esteem, and binge eating among undergraduates in Malaysia* (Doctoral dissertation, UTAR).
Liu, Q., Shao, Z., & Fan, W. (2018). The impact of users' sense of belonging on social media habit formation: Empirical evidence from social networking and microblogging websites in China. *International Journal of Information Management*, *43*, 209–223. https://doi.org/10.16/j.ijinfomgt.2018.08.005
Liu, T., Ungar, L. H., Curtis, B., Sherman, G., Yadeta, K., Tay, L., ... & Guntuku, S. C. (2022). Head versus heart: Social media reveals differential language of loneliness from depression. *npj Mental Health Research*, *1*(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44184-022-00014-7
Lloyd-Evans, S. (2017). Focus groups, community engagement, and researching with young people. In Skelton, T., Evans, R. and Holt, L. (eds.) Methodological Approaches. *Geographies of Children and Young People, 2*. Springer.

Luhmann, M., & Hawkley, L. C. (2016). Age differences in loneliness from late adolescence to oldest old age. *Developmental Psychology*, 52(6), 943–959. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000117.

Luhmann, M., Buecker, S., & Rüsberg, M. (2023). Loneliness across time and space. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, *2*(1), 9-23. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00124-1

Lundy L., McEvoy L., Byrne B. (2011). Working with young children as co-researchers: An approach informed by the united nations convention on the rights of the child. *Early Education & Development*, *22*(5), 714–736. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463

Lykes, V. A., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2014). What predicts loneliness? Cultural difference between individualistic and collectivistic societies in Europe. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *45*(3), 468-490. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022113509881

Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 16*(2), 169-187. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486

Maes, M., Van den Noortgate, W., Vanhalst, J., Beyers, W., & Goossens, L. (2017). The children's loneliness scale: Factor structure and construct validity in Belgian children. *Assessment*, *24*(2), 244-251. https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191115605177

Makin, S. (2023, April 25). *People differ widely in their understanding of even a simple concept such as the word 'penguin'*. Scientific American. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-differ-widely-in-their-understanding-of-even-a-simple-concept-such-as-the-word-penguin1/

Malaysia. (n.d.). *Culture, cuisine, traditions*. Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/place/Malaysia/History

Martz, M. E., Schulenberg, J. E., Patrick, M. E., & Kloska, D. D. (2018). "I am so bored!": Prevalence rates and sociodemographic and contextual correlates of high boredom among American adolescents. *Youth & Society*, *50*(5), 688-710.

Maruyama, G., & Deno, S. L. (1992). *Research in educational settings* (Vol. 29). Sage.

Masiran, R. (2022). *A review of parenting in a multicultural country: The Malaysian experience*. IntechOpen. https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.101173

Matthews, T., Fisher, H. L., Bryan, B. T., Danese, A., Moffitt, T. E., Qualter, P., ... & Arseneault, L. (2022). This is what loneliness looks like: A mixed-methods study of loneliness in adolescence and young adulthood. *International journal of behavioral development*, *46*(1), 18-27.

McQuail, D., Blumler, J. G., & Brown, J. R. (1972). The television audience: A revised perspective. *Media studies: A reader*, *271*, 284.

Meintjes, H., & Giese, S. (2006). Spinning the epidemic: The making of mythologies of orphanhood in the context of AIDS. *Childhood*, *13*(3), 407-430.

Menon, D. (2022). Factors influencing Instagram Reels usage behaviours: An examination of motives, contextual age and narcissism. *Telematics and Informatics Reports*, *5*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teler.2022.100007

Meredith W. H., Abbott D. A., Tsai R., Fu Ming Z. (1994). Healthy family functioning in Chinese cultures: An exploratory study using the circumplex model. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family, 24*, 147–157.

Mijuskovic, B. L. (2015). *Feeling lonesome: The philosophy and psychology of loneliness*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Mitchell, J., Boettcher-Sheard, N., Duque, C., & Lashewicz, B. (2018). Who do we think we are? Disrupting notions of quality in qualitative research. *Qualitative health research, 28*(4), 673-680.

Mojaverian, T., & Kim, H. S. (2013). Interpreting a helping hand: Cultural variation in the effectiveness of solicited and unsolicited social support. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *39*(1), 88-99.

Molden, D. C., & Dweck, C. S. (2006). Finding "meaning" in psychology: A lay theories approach to self-regulation, social perception, and social development. *American Psychologist, 61*(3), 192–203. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.61.3.192

Moore, D., & Schultz, N. R., Jr (1983). Loneliness at adolescence: Correlates, attributions, and coping. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *12*(2), 95–100. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02088307
Morrow, V. (1999). Conceptualising social capital in relation to the well-being of children and young people: A critical review. *The Sociological Review, 47*(4), 744–765.
Morse, J. M. (1991). Strategies for sampling. In Morse J.M. (Ed.), *Qualitative nursing research—A contemporary dialogue* (pp. 127–145). Sage.
Morse, J. M. (2015). Data were saturated. *Qualitative Health Research*, *25*(5), 587–588.
Moustakas, C. E. (2016). *Loneliness*. Pickle Partners Publishing.
Mull, I. R., & Lee, S. E. (2014). "PIN" pointing the motivational dimensions behind Pinterest. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *33*, 192-200. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.011
Mund, M., & Neyer, F. J. (2019). Loneliness effects on personality. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *43*(2), 136-146.
Murphy, F. (2006). Loneliness: A challenge for nurses caring for older people. *Nursing older people*, *18*(5).
Murray, C. (2005). Children and young people's participation and non-participation in research. *Adoption & Fostering*, *29*(1), 57–66.
Nasir, R., Zamani, Z. A., Khairudin, R., Sulaiman, W. S. W., Sani, M. N. M., & Amin, A. S. (2016). Depression, loneliness and cognitive distortion among young unwed pregnant women in Malaysia: counseling implications. *Asian Social Science*, *12*(8), 104-109.
National Health and Morbidity Survey (2017). Institute for Public Health, Ministry of Health. *Adolescent Health Survey 2017*, Malaysia, pp. 103 and 106.
NESH (2022). *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities.* The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees. https://www.forskningsetikk.no/globalassets/dokumenter/4-publikasjoner-som-pdf/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-and-the-humanities.pdf
Nor, N. N. F. M., & Ghazali, S. (2016). Loneliness and its impacts to the health of elderly in rural Pahang. *International Journal of Environment, Society and Space*, *4*(1), 29-37.
Nordin, N. M., & Talib, M. A. (2009). Kesunyian dan kesejahteraan psikologi di kalangan pelajar universiti di Malaysia (Loneliness and psychological well-being among university students in Malaysia). *Jurnal Psikologi Malaysia*, *23*.
Nowland, R., Necka, E. A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2017). Loneliness and social Internet use: Pathways to reconnection in a digital world? *Perspectives on psychological science: A journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, *13*(1), 70–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617713052
Nyström, L. (2014). Health, suffering and life [In Swedish: Hälsa, lidande och liv]. In C. Wärnå-Furu (Ed.), *Hälsans praxis – I liv och arbete* (pp. 13–47). Liber AB.
O'Brien, N., & Moules, T. (2007). So round the spiral again: A reflective participatory research project with children and young people. *Educational Action Research*, *15*(3), 385–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790701514382
Ozawa-de Silva, C., & Parsons, M. (2020). Toward an anthropology of loneliness. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *57*(5), 613–622. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461520961627
Ozsaker, M., Muslu, G. K., Kahraman, A., Beytut, D., Yardimci, F., Basbakkal, Z. (2015). A study on the effects of loneliness, depression and perceived social support on problematic internet use among university students. *Anthropologist, 19*, 533-542. https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2015.11891688
Papacharissi, Z., & Rubin, A. M. (2000). Predictors of Internet use. *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media*, *44*(2), 175-196.
Parkinson, B. (2020). Intragroup emotion convergence: Beyond contagion and social appraisal. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *24*(2), 121-140. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868319882596
Parton, N. & O'Byrne, P. (2000). *Constructive social work: Towards a new practice*. Macmillan

Parton, N. (1998). Risk, advanced liberalism and child welfare: The need to rediscover uncertainty and ambiguity. *The British Journal of Social Work, 28*(1), 5–27.
Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage publications.
Pérez, M. S., Saavedra, C. M., & Habashi, J. (2017). Rethinking global north onto-epistemologies in childhood studies. *Global studies of childhood*, *7*(2), 79-83.
Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1982). Theoretical approaches to loneliness. In L. A. Peplau & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Loneliness* (pp. 123-134). Wiley.
Pi, L. Y. & Li, X. (2023). The relationship between loneliness and problematic mobile social media use among college students: A variable-centered and individual-centered analysis. *Chin J Health Psychology, 31*(6), 936–42.
Pingxian, Z., Zongkui, Z., Qingquan, P., Yuan, T., & Qian, D. (2008). The relationship between internet relationship addiction, self-disclosure and loneness among college students. A review of research on self-disclosure in foreign countries. *Adv Psychol Sci.*, *16*, 114–23.
Pinquart, M., & Sörensen, S. (2003). Risk factors for loneliness in adulthood and old age--a meta-analysis. *Advances in Psychology Research, 19*, 111-143.
Primack, B. A., Shensa, A., Sidani, J. E., Whaite, E. O., yi Lin, L., Rosen, D., Colditz, J. B., Radovic, A., & Miller, E. (2017). Social media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the US. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 53*(1), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010
Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. (2021, September 27). *Preparatory Meeting of the Collaborative Platform for Loneliness and Isolation Measures (Provisional Name).* The Prime Minister in Action. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/99_suga/actions/202109/_00033.html
Prout, A. (2005). *The future of childhood*. Routledge.
Prout, A., & James, A. (2015). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (3rd ed., pp. 6-28). Routledge.
Punch, S. (2002). Research with children: The same or different from research with adults? *Childhood*, *9*(3), 321–341.
Punch, S., & Graham, E. (2017). Interviewing children at home: Exploring the use of individual and focus group interviews. *Methodological approaches, 2*, 199.
Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster.
Qualter, P., Vanhalst, J., Harris, R., Van Roekel, E., Lodder, G., Bangee, M., ... & Verhagen, M. (2015). Loneliness across the life span. *Perspectives on psychological science*, *10*(2), 250-264.
Qvortrup, J. (1994). Childhood matters: An introduction. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta, H. Wintersberger (Eds), *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics* (pp. 1-24). Aldershot.
Qvortrup, J. (2004). The waiting child. *Childhood*, *11*(3), 267-273.
Qvortrup, J., Corsaro, W. A., & Honig, M. S. (2009). Why social studies of childhood? An introduction to the handbook. In *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies* (pp. 1-18). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
Rautio, P. (2014). Mingling and imitating in producing spaces for knowing and being: Insights from a Finnish study of child-matter intra-action. *Childhood, 21*(4), 461–474.
Robson, E., Porter, G., Hampshire, K., & Bourdillon, M. (2009). Doing it right?: Working with young researchers in Malawi to investigate children, transport and mobility. *Children's geographies*, *7*(4), 467-480.
Robson, S., & Fumoto, H. (2009). Practitioners' experiences of personal ownership and autonomy in their support for young children's thinking. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 10*(1), 43–54.
Rokach, A. & Brock, H. (1997). *Loneliness: A multidimensional experience*. Paper presented at the Ontario University, Canada

Rokach, A., Orzeck, T., Cripps, J., Lackovic-Grgin, K., & Penezic, Z. (2001). The effects of culture on the meaning of loneliness. *Social Indicators Research, 53*(1), 17–31. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007183101458

Ronzhyn, A., Cardenal, A. S., & Batlle Rubio, A. (2023). Defining affordances in social media research: A literature review. *New Media & Society, 25*(11), 3165-3188.

Rotenberg, K. J., & Hymel, S. (Eds.). (1999). *Loneliness in childhood and adolescence.* Cambridge University Press.

Ryan, T., & Xenos, S. (2011). Who uses Facebook? An investigation into the relationship between the Big Five, shyness, narcissism, loneliness, and Facebook usage. *Computers in Human Behavior, 27*(5), 1658–1664. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.02.004

Saat, I. (2009). *Malaysia 1945-2000.* Utusan Publicatons & Distributors

Sandelowski, M. (1995). Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health*, *18*(2), 179–183.

Schermer, J. A., & Martin, N. G. (2019). A behavior genetic analysis of personality and loneliness. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *78*, 133-137.

Schreier, S.-S., Heinrichs, N., Alden, L., Rapee, R. M., Hofmann, S. G., Chen, J., Oh, K. J., & Bögels, S. (2010). Social anxiety and social norms in individualistic and collectivistic countries. *Depression and Anxiety*, *27*(12), 1128–1134. https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20746

Schwartz, S. H. (1990). Individualism-collectivism: Critique and proposed refinements. *Journal of cross-cultural psychology*, *21*(2), 139-157.

Sedghi, A. (April 30, 2018). *Loneliness isn't inevitable – a guide to making new friends as an adult*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/apr/30/how-to-make-new-friends-adult-lonely-leap-of-faith

Seo, M., Kim, J., & Yang, H. (2016). Frequent interaction and fast feedback predict perceived social support: Using Crawled and self-reported data of Facebook users. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 21*(4), 282–297. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12160

Shaffir, W. & Stebbins, R. A. (1990). *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research*. Sage Publications.

Sháked, A. & Rokach, A. (2015). *Addressing loneliness: Coping, prevention and clinical interventions* (1st Ed.), Psychology Press

Shao, G. (2009). Understanding the appeal of user-generated media: A user and gratification perspective. *Internet research*, *19*(1), 7-25.

Sheldon, P. (2008). The relationship between unwillingness-to-communicate and students' Facebook use. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications, 20*(2), 67–75. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105.20.2.67

Sheldon, P. (2013). Voices that cannot be heard: Can shyness explain how we communicate on Facebook versus face-to-face?. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(4), 1402-1407. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.01.016

Singelis, T. M., & Sharkey, W. F. (1995). Culture, self-construal, and embarrassability. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 26*, 622-644

Skues, J. L., Williams, B., & Wise, L. (2012). The effects of personality traits, self-esteem, loneliness, and narcissism on Facebook use among university students. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, *28*(6), 2414–2419. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.012

Smith, D., Leonis, T., & Anandavalli, S. (2021). Belonging and loneliness in cyberspace: impacts of social media on adolescents’ well-being. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *73*(1), 12–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1898914

Smørholm, S., & Simonsen, J. K. (2017). Children’s drawings in ethnographic explorations: Analysis and interpretations. *In Methodological Approaches* (pp. 1-23). Springer.

Soley, L., & Smith, A. L. (2008). *Projective techniques for social science and business research*. Southshore Press.

Spaeth, M., Weichold, K., & Silbereisen, R. K. (2015). The development of leisure boredom in early adolescence: Predictors and longitudinal associations with delinquency and depression. *Developmental psychology*, *51*(10), 1380.
Spears, R., Postmes, T., Lea, M., & Wolbert, A. (2002). When are net effects gross products? The power of influence and the influence of power in computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Social Issues*, *58*(1), 91–107. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.002
Spyrou, S. (2011) The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood 18*(2), 151-165
Spyrou, S. (2018). *Disclosing childhoods: Research and knowledge production for a critical childhood studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Spyrou, S. (2019). An ontological turn for childhood studies?. *Children & society*, *33*(4), 316-323. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12292
Spyrou, S., Rosen, R., & Cook, D. T. (2018). Introduction: Reimagining childhood studies: connectivities… relationalities… linkages…. *Reimagining childhood studies*, 1-22.
Steele, J. R., & Brown, J. D. (1995). Adolescent room culture: Studying media in the context of everyday life. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *24*(5), 551–576. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01537056
Steers, M. L. N., Wickham, R. E., & Acitelli, L. K. (2014). Seeing everyone else's highlight reels: How Facebook usage is linked to depressive symptoms. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *33*(8), 701-731.
Steinberg, L., & Morris, A. S. (2001). Adolescent development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*(1), 83–110. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.83
Steinert, S., & Dennis, M. J. (2022). Emotions and Digital Well-Being: On Social Media's Emotional Affordances. *Philosophy & technology*, *35*(2), 36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00530-6
Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S., & Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2016). Global Kids Online: Researching children's rights globally in the digital age. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *6*(4), 455-466. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610616676035
Sumari, M., Baharudin, D. F., Khalid, N. M., Ibrahim, N. H., & Ahmed Tharbe, I. H. (2020). Family functioning in a collectivist culture of Malaysia: A qualitative study. *The Family Journal*, *28*(4), 396-402. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480719844334
Sword, W. (1999). Accounting for presence of self: Reflections on doing qualitative research. *Qualitative health research*, *9*(2), 270-278.
Syed Elias, S. M., Petriwskyj, A., Scott, T., & Neville, C. (2019). Spiritual reminiscence therapy for older people with loneliness, anxiety and depression living in a residential aged care facility, Malaysia: A qualitative approach. *Australasian journal on ageing*, *38*(1), E25-E30.
Tahir, L., Thakib, M. T. M., Hamzah, M. H., Said, M. N. H. M., & Musah, M. B. (2017). Novice head teachers' isolation and loneliness experiences: A mixed-methods study. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *45*(1), 164-189.
Tan, Ç., Pamuk, M., & Dönder, A. (2013). Loneliness and mobile phone. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *103*, 606-611. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.378
Tan, L. G. (2022). *Perceived social support, loneliness and anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate students during the covid-19* (Doctoral dissertation, UTAR).
Tangen, R. (2008). Listening to children's voices in educational research: Some theoretical and methodological problems. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *23*(2), 157-166. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250801945956.
The Children's Society. (2019, March). Loneliness in childhood: Exploring loneliness and well-being among 10-17 years olds. https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/loneliness_in_childhood.pdf
Thussu, D. K. (2006). *Media on the move: Global flow and contra-flow*. Routledge.

Twenge, J. M., Spitzberg, B. H., & Campbell, W. K. (2019). Less in-person social interaction with peers among US adolescents in the 21st century and links to loneliness. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *36*(6), 1892-1913. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0265407519836170

Uba, I., Yaacob, S. N., Juhari, R., & Talib, M. A. (2020). Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between loneliness and depression among Malaysian teenagers. *Editorial Board*, *20*(1), 179-188. UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific

UNICEF. (n.d.). *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Retrieved January 10, 2024, from https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention

Uprichard, E. (2008), Children as 'being and becomings': Children, childhood and temporality. *Children & Society, 22*(4), 303-313. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00110.x

Uziel L. (2021). The language of being alone and being with others. *Social Psychology*, *52*(1), 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000430

Van Blerk, L., Shand, W., & Shanahan, P. (2016). Street children as researchers: Critical reflections on a participatory methodological process in the "growing up on the streets" research project in Africa. In *Methodological approaches* (pp. 1–20). Springer.

Verity, L., Schellekens, T., Adam, T., Sillis, F., Majorano, M., Wigelsworth, M., and Qualter, P., Peters, B., Stajniak, S., Maes, M. (2021). Tell me about loneliness: Interviews with young people about what loneliness is and how to cope with it. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(22), https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182211904

Victor, C. R., & Yang, K. (2012). The prevalence of loneliness among adults: A case study of the United Kingdom. *The Journal of psychology*, *146*(1-2), 85-104.

Vollmann, R., & Soon, T. W. (2019). The sociolinguistic status of Malaysian English. *Grazer Linguistische Studien*, *91*, 133-150.

Weiss, R. S. (1973). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*. MIT Press.

Weybright, E. H., Schulenberg, J., & Caldwell, L. L. (2020). More bored today than yesterday? National trends in adolescent boredom from 2008 to 2017. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *66*(3), 360-365.

White, S. (2001). Auto-ethnography as reflexive enquiry: The research act as self-surveillance. In Shaw, I. and Gould, N. (eds), *Qualitative Research in Social Work,* Sage, pp. 100–115.

Wieczorek, L. L., Humberg, S., Gerstorf, D., & Wagner, J. (2021). Understanding loneliness in adolescence: a test of competing hypotheses on the interplay of extraversion and neuroticism. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(23), 12412.

Wong, Y. J., Wang, S.-Y., & Klann, E. M. (2018). The emperor with no clothes: A critique of collectivism and individualism. *Archives of Scientific Psychology, 6*(1), 251–260. https://doi.org/10.1037/arc0000059

Woodhead, M. & Faulkner, D. (2008). Subjects, objects or participants? Dilemmas of psychological research with children. In James A, Christensen P. (eds) *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*. 2nd ed. Falmer Press, pp. 9–35.

Xu, Y. Q. (September 7, 2020). rì méi : cóng "10 jí gū dú" kàn zhòng guó nián qīng rén [Japanese media: China's young people from "10 Levels of Lonelines"]. CCTV.com. https://news.cctv.com/2020/09/07/ARTIoZSEzusOPhLeml9YplRy200907.shtml

Yaacob, S. N., Juhari, R., Talib, M. A., & Uba, I. (2009). Loneliness, stress, self esteem and depression among Malaysian adolescents. *Jurnal Kemanusiaan*, *7*(2).

Yamin, S. N. R. M., & Kadir, N. B. A. (2016). Depression and its relationship to loneliness and life events among urban poor in the Federal Territory, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *Jurnal Psikologi Malaysia*, *30*(2).

Yang, C. C. (2016). Instagram use, loneliness, and social comparison orientation: Interact and browse on social media, but don't compare. *Cyberpsychology,*

Behavior, and Social Networking, *19*(12), 703-708. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0201
Yavich, R., Davidovitch, N., & Frenkel, Z. (2019). Social Media and loneliness--Forever connected?. *Higher Education Studies*, *9*(2), 10-21. https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v9n2p10
Yeginsu, C. (2018, January 17). *U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html
Young, L., & Barrett, H. (2001). Adapting visual methods: Action research with Kampala street children. *Area*, *33*(2), 141-152. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4762.00017

Appendices

Appendix 1: Approval from SIKT

Appendix 2: Notification from REK

Appendix 3: Information letter for adolescents (English)

Appendix 4: Information letter for adolescents (Chinese Mandarin)

Appendix 5: Information letter for parents/guardians (English)

Appendix 6: Information letter for parents/guardians (Chinese Mandarin)

Appendix 7: Interview guide

Appendix 8: Sentence completion exercise (English and Chinese Mandarin)

Appendix 1: Approval from SIKT

Assessment of processing of personal data

Reference number	Assessment type	Date
576535	Standard	14/12/2023

Title
Understanding adolescents' perceptions and the role of social media on loneliness in urban Malaysia

Institution responsible for the project
Norwegian University of Science and Technology / Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences (SU) / Department of Pedagogy and Lifelong Learning

Project leader
Linn C. Lorgen

Student
Yin Ting Lee

Project period
30/05/2023 - 30/06/2024

Categories of personal data
General
Special

Legal basis
Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 no. 1 a)
Explicit consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 9 no. 2 a)

The processing of personal data is lawful, as long as it is carried out as stated in the notification form. The legal basis is valid until 30.06.2024.

Notification Form

Comment
Data Protection Services has assessed the change registered in the Notification Form.

We find that the processing of personal data in this project is lawful and complies with data protection legislation, as long as it is carried out as described in the Notification Form with dialogue and attachments.

CHANGE
Zoom is going to be used for the interviews. Hence, Zoom is a data processor for the project. The online interview will be audio recorded by using an external recorder. We assume that the processing meets the requirements of data processors under the General Data Protection Regulation, cf. Species. 28 and Art. 29.

FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT
We will follow up the progress of the project during (every other year) and at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded/is being carried out in accordance with what is documented.

Good luck with the project!

Appendix 2: Notification from REK

Region:	Saksbehandler:	E-post:	Telefon:	Vår dato:	Vår referanse:
REK midt	Hilde Eikemo	rek-midt@mh.ntnu.no	73597508	20.09.2023	663376

Linn Cathrin Lorgen

Fremleggingsvurdering: Ungdommers perspektiv på ensomhet og sosiale medier i Malaysia
Søknadsnummer: 663376
Forskningsansvarlig institusjon: Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet

Prosjektet vurderes som ikke fremleggingspliktig

Søkers beskrivelse

Prosjektet er et mastergradsprosjekt ved Childhood Studies (IPL/NTNU). Prosjektet vil utforske ungdommers perspektiver på ensomhet gjennom en intervjustudie og vil fokusere på kulturelle og konseptuelle forståelser av ensomhet. Etter vår vurdering vil prosjektet ikke føre til ny kunnskap om helse og sykdom.

Studentens beskrivelse: The purpose of this research is to explore how adolescents view loneliness and the role social media plays within the Malaysian context. The inclusion of the aspect of social media in this research may shed light on our understanding of adolescents' behaviors on social networking sites that are associated with the feeling of loneliness. Therefore, the aim of the research is to explore the contextual and cultural meanings of loneliness and the role of social media in this phenomenon, through Malaysian adolescents' own descriptions.

Innledning
Vi viser til innsendt fremleggingsvurderingsskjema datert 01.09.2023. Henvendelsen er vurdert av sekretariatet for Regional komité for medisinsk og helsefaglig forskningsetikk Midt-Norge (REK midt) på fullmakt.

REKs vurdering
Det er formålet med et prosjekt som er avgjørende for hvorvidt man trenger etisk godkjenning fra REK før oppstart. Komiteen mener at prosjektet har karakter av å være annen type forskning enn medisinsk og helsefaglig forskning. Formålet med prosjektet er ikke primært å skaffe til veie ny kunnskap om helse og sykdom, men heller undersøke ungdommers perspektiver på ensomhet.

At det kan fremkomme helseopplysninger om den enkelte, er ikke alene nok til at prosjektet blir søknadspliktig.

Prosjektet er følgelig ikke omfattet av helseforskningslovens saklige virkeområde, jf. helseforskningslovens §§ 2 og 4. Du kan gjennomføre og publisere prosjektet uten godkjenning fra REK. Vi minner imidlertid om at dersom du skal registrere

personopplysninger må prosjektet ha et selvstendig behandlingsgrunnlag, jf. personopplysningsloven. Behandlingsgrunnlaget må avklares med egen institusjon.

Vurderingen er gjort på grunnlag av de innsendte dokumenter. Dersom du gjør endringer i prosjektet, kan dette ha betydning for REKs vurdering. Du bør da sende inn ny søknad /fremleggingsvurdering.

Konklusjon
Ikke søknadspliktig til REK.

Med vennlig hilsen

Hilde Eikemo
Sekretariatsleder, ph.d.
REK midt

Kopi til:
Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet

Appendix 3: Information letter for adolescents (English)

Are you interested in taking part in the research project?

"Understanding adolescents' perceptions and the role of social media on loneliness in urban Malaysia"

Hi! My name is Yin Ting, a master's student in Childhood Studies. This is an invitation to participate in a research project where the main purpose is to explore the contextual and cultural meanings of loneliness and the role of social media in this phenomenon through Malaysian adolescents' perspectives. In this letter we will explain what the project is about and what we will do if you decide to participate.

Purpose of the project
Past research has concluded that loneliness is a complex phenomenon, considered a public health concern and even a worldwide epidemic. Loneliness in adolescents is found to be significantly related to common mental health issues. To understand this issue of global concern, it is very important that we listen to and understand your perspectives. In addition, the use of social media has become a very important part of many people's lives including the young people. It would thus be helpful to explore what role you think social media plays when it comes to loneliness. Through your participation and voice, we hope to know more about the meaning of loneliness and the role social media plays within this context.
The main research questions for this project are "how do adolescents make sense of the phenomenon of loneliness?" and "how do adolescents describe the role of social media in terms of loneliness?" The end result of this project is a master's thesis.

Which institution is responsible for the research project?
The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

Why are you being asked to participate?
Adolescents who are between the age of 10 and 19, living in Malaysia are invited to participate. This project is looking for around 10 participants.

What does participation involve for you?
If you choose to partake in the project, this will involve an interview and two task-based activities that are part of the interview.

- *Sentence completion exercise*: As a warm-up activity, this should take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Participants will be provided with the beginning of a sentence that you then complete in ways that are meaningful to you based on your initial reaction to, and association with, the given topic. Your answers will be recorded electronically.
- *Drawing*: This activity should take approximately 20 minutes. You will be asked to illustrate "A world of loneliness" on a drawing paper based on your perception or observation. In situations where you feel uncomfortable drawing, you can also choose to do this in other modes of expression such as using photos or pictures. This activity can be done as an assignment beforehand or during the interview and the drawing method is open to your preference.
- *Interview*: The interview will be one-on-one. Physical interviews are preferred over online interviews. It will take approximately 45 minute in addition to the sentence completion and drawing exercise. The interview includes questions about your thoughts on loneliness as well as your impression of social media's role in this phenomenon. With your permission, I will record the interview (either physical or online) using an audio recorder. The recordings are to help me remember everything you said, and only I will listen to them.

Participation is voluntary
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data
We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).
Only the student researcher and supervisor will have access to the personal data. Your name and contact details will be replaced with a pseudonym. The list of names, contact details and respective pseudonyms will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data. The data will be stored on a research server, encrypted, and locked away. In the final thesis paper, information about participants will be anonymised.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?
The project is scheduled to end in June 2024. Audio recordings and other personal data will be deleted and all data will be anonymised after the end of the research project.

Your rights
So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:
- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?
We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with NTNU, The Data Protection Services of Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project meets requirements in data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:
- NTNU via Linn C. Lorgen
- Our Data Protection Officer Thomas Helgesen

If you have questions about how data protection has been assessed in this project by Sikt, contact:
- email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by telephone: +47 73 98 40 40.

Yours sincerely,

Yin Ting Lee	**Linn C. Lorgen**
Student	Project Leader (Supervisor)

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project *"Understanding adolescents' perceptions and the role of social media on loneliness in urban Malaysia"* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- ☐ to participate in an interview
- ☐ to participate in a task-based activity – sentence completion exercise
- ☐ to participate in a task-based activity – drawing

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end of the project, approx. June 2024.

(Name and signature of participant, date)

Appendix 4: Information letter for adolescents (Chinese Mandarin)

研究知情同意书

亲爱的参与者:

你好!

我叫盈庭，是一名来自挪威科技大学（Norwegian University of Science and Technology）的儿童童年研究（Master of Philosophy in Childhood Studies）硕士生。

我想邀请你参与我的一个研究，主题是《了解和探讨大马都市青少年对孤独以及社交媒体在此现象中扮演的角色的看法》。这个研究想弄清楚一些问题：对于你来说，孤独是什么意思？对于你所在的环境和文化中，孤独又意味着什么？当社交媒体已经成为我们生活中重要的一部分，提到孤独，青少年如何看待社交媒体所起到的作用？我认为要更深入回答这些问题，聆听你的想法非常重要。

如果你愿意加入这个研究，那么你要做的就是在我有疑问的时候，帮助我理解你对一些事情的观念和看法。比如说，我会很好奇当你听到孤独这个字的时候你会怎么形容它、你认为人一般在什么情况下会感受到孤独等等。我们也会进行一些有趣的活动，例如绘画或照片分享、完成短句等，这些活动可以帮助我更好的认识你和了解你的想法。在研究后期，我会与你进行一些非正式的访谈或对话。除了记录下我看到的东西和想法，我会在访谈时使用录音机。我会将所有文字和语音资料保密，不用担心你告诉我的内容会被除我以外的任何一个人知道，其中包括你的家长和老师。

虽然你的父母已经同意让你参与这个研究，但是如果你不愿意参与，那么你可以选择拒绝。另外，如果你在同意参与研究后，又改变了主意，你也可以随时退出。如果你对于这个研究有任何问题，欢迎随时向我提问。

如果你愿意并且同意参与研究，请在下面写下你的名字。

同意书

我收到并了解了关于《了解和探讨大马都市青少年对孤独以及社交媒体在此现象中扮演的角色的看法》项目的信息，并有机会提出问题。我同意参加上述活动——绘画或照片分享、完成短句，以及研究访谈。我同意在研究结束日期 [06.2024] 前分析处理有关我的数据。

孩子姓名:

孩子签名/监护人签名:

Appendix 5: Information letter for parents/guardians (English)

Is your child interested in taking part in the research project?

"Understanding adolescents' perceptions and the role of social media on loneliness in urban Malaysia"

Hi! My name is Yin Ting, a master's student in Childhood Studies. This is an invitation for your child to participate in a research project where the main purpose is to explore the contextual and cultural meanings of loneliness and the role of social media in this phenomenon through Malaysian adolescents' perspectives. In this letter we will give you information about the project and what your child's participation will involve.

Purpose of the project
Past research has concluded that loneliness is a complex phenomenon, considered a public health concern and even a worldwide epidemic. Scholars also found loneliness in adolescents to be significantly related to common mental health issues. As a major global concern, the need to investigate loneliness among adolescents by listening to them is both important and urgent. In addition, the rise of social media usage among younger generations has made it an integral part of their daily lives and experiences. Therefore, this research seeks to develop a more differentiated portrayal of loneliness by understanding what adolescents themselves have to say about loneliness and the role social media plays within this context.
The main research questions for this project are "how do adolescents make sense of the phenomenon of loneliness?" and "how do adolescents describe the role of social media in terms of loneliness?" The end result of this project is a master's thesis.

Which institution is responsible for the research project?
The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) is the institution responsible for the project.

Why is your child being asked to participate?
The adolescence population, which means those who are between the age of 10 and 19, living in Malaysia are invited to participate. This project is looking for approximately 10 participants.

What does participation involve for you child?
If your child chooses to partake in the project, this will involve an interview and two task-based activities that are part of the interview.

- *Sentence completion exercise*: As a warm-up activity, this should take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Participants will be provided with the beginning of a sentence that they then complete in ways that are meaningful to them based on their initial reaction to, and association with, the given topic. Your child's answers will be recorded electronically.
- *Drawing*: This activity should take approximately 20 minutes. Your child will be asked to illustrate "A world of loneliness" on a drawing paper based on their perception or observation. In situations where your child feel uncomfortable drawing, your child can also opt to do this in other modes of expression such as using photos or pictures. This activity can be done as an assignment beforehand or during the interview and the drawing method is open to your child's preference.
- *Interview*: The interview shall be one-on-one. Physical interviews are preferred over online interviews. It will take approximately 45 minutes in addition to the sentence completion and drawing exercise. The interview includes questions about your child's thoughts on loneliness as well as your child's impression of social media's role in this phenomenon. The interview

(either physical or online) will be recorded with a specific audio recorder for transcription after the interview.

Participation is voluntary
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you gave consent for your child to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about your child will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for your child if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your child's personal privacy – how we will store and use your child's personal data
We will only use your child's personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your child's personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).
Only the student researcher will have access to the personal data. Your child's name and contact details will be replaced with a pseudonym. The list of names, contact details and respective pseudonyms will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data. The data will be stored on a research server, encrypted, and locked away. In the final thesis paper, information about your child will be anonymised.

What will happen to your child's personal data at the end of the research project?
The project is scheduled to end in June 2024. Audio recordings and other personal data will be deleted and all data will be anonymised after the end of the research project.

Your child's rights
So long as your child can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:
- access the personal data that is being processed about your child
- request that your child's personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about your child is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your child's personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your child's personal data

What gives us the right to process your child's personal data?
We will process your child's personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with NTNU, The Data Protection Services of Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project meets requirements in data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:
- NTNU via Linn C. Lorgen
- Our Data Protection Officer Thomas Helgesen

If you have questions about how data protection has been assessed in this project by Sikt, contact:
- email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by telephone: +47 73 98 40 40.

Yours sincerely,

Yin Ting Lee	**Linn C. Lorgen**
Student	Project Leader (Supervisor)

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project *"Understanding adolescents' perceptions and the role of social media on loneliness in urban Malaysia"* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent for my child:

- ☐ to participate in an interview
- ☐ to participate in a task-based activity – sentence completion exercise
- ☐ to participate in a task-based activity – drawing

I give consent for my child's personal data to be processed until the end of the project, approx. June 2024.

(Signed by participant's guardian, date)

Appendix 6: Information letter for parents/guardians (Chinese Mandarin)

研究知情同意书

亲爱的家长或监护人：

您好！

我叫盈庭，是一名来自挪威科技大学（Norwegian University of Science and Technology）童年哲学研究（Master of Philosophy in Childhood Studies）的在读硕士生。在此希望您同意您的孩子参与我的一个研究，研究结果将作为我的硕士论文发表。研究主题是《了解和探讨大马都市青少年对孤独以及社交媒体在此现象中扮演的角色的看法》。从 2023 年 6 月至 2024 年 6 月，我会在我的导师 Linn C. Lorgen 的督导下完成我的研究生项目。在此期间，我会在马来西亚与至少十位青少年个别进行田野研究（fieldwork）。

基于童年研究的方法，我的研究强调从儿童或青少年的视角出发，进行小样本且深入的研究。其中主要的研究方式是访谈和任务型活动。本研究旨在了解青少年对孤独的看法、了解不同社会背景和文化对孤独的定义、以及在社交媒体不可或缺的时代，青少年如何看待社交媒体在孤独这个现象中起到的作用。在马来西亚以孤独为单独研究课题的项目目前较少，以青少年为中心的相关研究更是寥寥无几。我深信要更了解青少年的想法，就一定要尝试聆听他们的声音。我的研究将尽力填补这一块的空白，我也将致力于为马来西亚青少年对此议题的看法发声。

在本研究中，您的孩子将为主要参与者，16 岁以下的青少年需在自己及其家长都同意的前提下方可参与本研究。我将和您的孩子进行一系列活动，包括绘画、完成短句以及访谈，以便更加深入的了解它们。为了协助我后续的报告写作，我会在活动过程中时使用录音软件。所有文字和语音资料将予以保密，在研究报告以及任何文字或口头陈述中，参与者的名字会用化名表示，以确保孩子的信息不外传。我将恪守科研伦理原则，并对孩子的信息保护予以特别关注。这个研究已向挪威社会科学资料服务中心申报并获批准，该中心致力于规范研究伦理和隐私保护。

一旦您的孩子参与研究，所有信息将以化名方式保存。研究报告将以英文专题论文的形式呈现，对研究报告感兴趣的家长我可以在大约一年后（论文完成时）为您提供一份摘要，请需要的家长在此同意书结尾处提供电邮地址。为使研究顺利进行，我向各位家长提供这份知情同意书，并希望家长能签署同意。但是，在是否让孩子参加研究这一点上，家长是完全自愿的，并且家长有权在任何时候让孩子退出研究。同时，我会向孩子解释这一研究， 在孩子也愿意的情况下才让其参与研究。

最后，非常感谢您耐心地读完这一封信，同时也非常感谢您对我的项目的兴趣。如果有任何我没有解释清楚的地方，或您有其他的问题，您可以通过我的邮箱 yintl@stud.ntnu.no 或号码 018-9052265 联系我。我非常乐意为您解答任何疑问。

您诚挚的，

李盈庭。

同意书

我收到并了解了关于《了解和探讨大马都市青少年对孤独以及社交媒体在此现象中扮演的角色的看法》项目的信息，并有机会提出问题。我同意让我的孩子参加上述活动——绘画或照片分享、完成短句，以及研究访谈。我同意在研究结束日期 [06.2024] 前分析处理有关我孩子的数据。

监护人姓名：

监护人签名：

Appendix 7: Interview guide

Interview guide

1. **Building rapport – ensuring that the participant feels at ease.**
- How is your day? How are you feeling now?
- Do you mind sharing a little about yourself? (Your hobbies, favourite show…)
- Do you know why I'm here?
- Is there anything that I can do to help you feel more comfortable?
- Thank you for participating in this project
- Your participation is greatly appreciated and important as I am interested to know your perception about loneliness and the role social media plays within this context.
- I believe you are the expert and you should have a say in this matter
- Before we move on to the interview, it's important to know that I'm interested in whatever you have to say about this topic, so I hope you don't mind when I ask a lot of questions, even when you have already given me an answer. This is not because I didn't like your previous answer, but because I really need to dig deep into what you think and feel at the moment about the questions I asked. All answers will be good answer!
- Your answers will not be shared with anyone, including your parents or family, unless we think you might be in danger.
- About consent - While you have already signed the consent form to participate in this project, I just want to let you know that if you wish to stop or withdraw from the interview at any time during the interview, even now, you have the right to do so.
- About confidentiality - This interview will be audio-recorded as it helps me to really listen to you and what you are saying, especially when this interview is over. It will also help me to hear what I say and do, and how I can do better. Only I have the access to the recording and I will erase them after the project ends.
- Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

2. **Sentence completion exercise (10-15 minutes)**
- Objective: A warm-up activity aiming to direct the subsequent discussion as well as a means for providing meaningful data itself. It encourages participants to think about loneliness in general. The process of following participants' interest may help to dimmish the control of researchers too.
- Explaining the method to the participant:
    - Here I have a few sentences. But only the beginning is there, can you help me to finish the sentences? There is no right or wrong answer, only your answer matters and that's what I am most interested in. So feel free to respond to it as you wish without worrying if you're doing it right or wrong. As mentioned in the information letter, what you wrote will be recorded electronically. Do you have any questions for me?
- 6 sentence stems/prompts:
    1. "Loneliness is…"
    2. "You know you are lonely when…"
    3. "You know someone is lonely when…"
    4. "I think being lonely is…"
    5. "People who are lonely…"

6. “If I am lonely…”

- Invite participants to interpret the sentence stimulus from their own perspective:
    - o Would you like to share with me your thoughts on this sentence?
    - o What is your reaction to this sentence?

3. Drawing – illustrate ‘A world of loneliness’ (20 minutes)

- Aim: A visual method that allows participants to focus on the activity rather than the presence of the researcher and provide them time to think, reflect, and settle into the interview in an open-ended way.
- Explaining the method to the participant:
    - o Explain that the participant will make a drawing that shows how a world of loneliness looks like.
    - o In this world, draw what you think loneliness looks like or feels like. It could also be what the world may look like for people who are lonely. If you do not wish to draw, you can also find some 2-3 pictures from the internet that you think illustrate what loneliness it.
- If participant did this as an assignment (will be discussed during recruitment):
    - o Wow… this is interesting! Would you mind telling me about your idea behind this drawing?
    - o How did this picture come to your mind?
- If participant chose to do this before the interview:
    - o What comes to your mind when you heard this title - ‘A world of loneliness’? Could you draw it down on the paper?
    - o It is up to you on how you want to draw it. It can be anything that you think it is.
    - o The participants will proceed to draw whilst I will ask questions about their drawing. They may elaborate on their drawing individually or else may be encouraged by additional questions from me.

4. Definition of loneliness I *(Personal definition and association)*

- Scenario: Imagine someone asks you to write a dictionary. How would you describe loneliness? What words would you use to describe?
- Someone who is lonely, how do you think he or she feels?
- Someone who is lonely, how do you think he or she thinks?
- Someone who is lonely, how do you think he or she acts?
- When might someone feel lonely?
- What kind of things make someone feel lonely?
- What do you think might happen to people who feel lonely?
- When someone you know feels lonely, what advice would you give them?
- When someone you know feels lonely, how could you help them? (What would you do)

5.* Definition of loneliness II *(Cultural and social definition)

- Have you heard people around you talk about loneliness before?
- If yes, how do they talk about loneliness?

- Are there different ways of being or feeling lonely? (If necessary: I have heard a few example of people feeling lonely in different situations, like a university student might feel lonely despite being surrounded by roommates and other peers)
- How do people generally feel when they talk about loneliness?
- Is there any difference between how people talk about loneliness and how you feel about it?
- Do you wish that something was different in how people perceive loneliness?

6. The role of social media

- **Relationship and usage of social media, positive/negative side**
- I heard some people think that social media makes people less lonely and some think it makes people lonelier. Some say both and some say neither. Have you heard of anyone talk about social media and if it plays a role in loneliness? (Examples?)
- Does social media have anything to do with loneliness?
- What do you think about the role social media plays when it comes to loneliness? (Why?)
- How do people on social media talk about loneliness?

7. Finishing the interview:

- That was interesting and useful. Is there anything else that I should know?
- Did you learn or discover anything new here today? (What did you find interesting?) If yes, what is it?
- What do you think is important for adults to know about adolescents' thoughts and feelings on loneliness and the role social media plays?
- How do you think people who are lonely can be helped or supported?
- Do you have some tips for me to talk to the other participants?
- Thank you for helping by doing this interview! I truly appreciate your time and contribution to this project. Your sharing has shed valuable insights on this topic.
- That is all for the interview. I will end the audio recording here.
- If participant shared drawings/photos:
  - Can I take a photo of what you have shown me?
  - Again, only I will have access to this and it will be erased immediately after the project ends.
  - Would it be okay if I describe this drawing/photo in the thesis?
  - Do I have your permission to include this drawing/photo in the thesis if necessary?
- If you would like to receive a copy of the thesis, please let me know.
- If you have any further thoughts, please feel free to contact me.
- What else are you going to do for the rest of the day?
- I hope you have a great day!

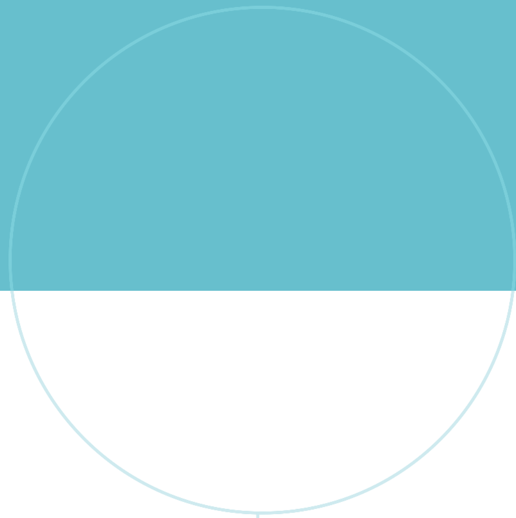
Appendix 8: Sentence completion exercise (English and Chinese Mandarin)

Sentence Completion Exercise

1. Loneliness is____
2. You know you are lonely when_________________________________
3. You know someone is lonely when______________________________
4. I think being lonely is_______________________________________
5. People who are lonely____
6. If I am lonely____

完成短句

1. 孤独/孤单是____
2. 我知道我孤独/孤单，因为____________________________________
3. 我知道别人孤独/孤单，因为__________________________________
4. 我认为孤独/孤单是____
5. 孤独/孤单的人____
6. 如果我孤独/孤单____



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology