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Fit to belong: loneliness from the perspectives of adolescents from five European countries

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Previous qualitative research has explored how adolescents conceptualise loneliness, but, there is currently no examination of whether loneliness is understood differently by adolescents in different countries. To address that gap, the current study used semi-structured interviews to explore what loneliness is, and how to cope with it, from the perspectives of 29 adolescents (15 male, 14 female), aged 14–16 years from Lithuania ($n=6$), Poland ($n=5$), Portugal ($n=6$), Serbia ($n=6$), and Turkey ($n=6$). Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants via project partners. Participants were included if they were aged 14–16 years, attended a school, youth centre, or foster home included in the Fit to Belong Erasmus+ Project, and did not have any disabilities or impairments that would impact their participation or understanding of the research activities. Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA) was used to analyse interviews with the adolescents and develop themes that reflected adolescents' nuanced accounts of loneliness. Themes and subthemes described loneliness as a negative emotional experience involving a lack of belonging to one's social environment and difficulty opening up to others. Themes recommended coping strategies for loneliness. Adolescents in the different countries described loneliness similarly: they understand it to involve negative emotions, and a lack of belongingness to one's social environment, often due to social exclusion. Future research should explore the appropriateness of current measures and interventions that are used to address loneliness in youth and how those can be enhanced by including youth perspectives in the development process.

KEYWORDS

loneliness, adolescence, cross-cultural, qualitative, interviews

1. Introduction

Research shows that adults from diverse cultures think of loneliness in similar ways, but research is yet to establish whether or not adolescents across cultures do the same thing (Heu et al., 2021). Understanding adolescents' perspectives is important because it cannot be taken for granted that their experiences are unanimous with adults'. The social world of adolescents looks different to that of adults (Laursen and Hartl, 2013), which means conceptualisations based on the perspectives of adults are likely to overlook important facets of the adolescent loneliness experience. The current study examined adolescents' conceptualisations of loneliness across five European countries: Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, and Turkey. These countries vary in cultural dimensions such as individualism–collectivism, masculinity, power distance,

uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence, (Hofstede, 2011), which are likely to influence relationship dynamics and attitudes towards aloneness.

Theoretical definitions of loneliness regard it as perceived social isolation that occurs when an individual experiences a discrepancy between the relationships they desire, and those that they have (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). Loneliness is not the same as being alone: individuals may be alone, but not feel lonely (Laursen and Hartl, 2013). In fact, being alone is often viewed as positively, providing an opportunity for rest and recuperation (Long and Averill, 2003). Loneliness is a subjective experience; whilst environmental factors may give rise to loneliness, whether or not someone feels lonely in a situation is dependent upon their perceptions, wants, and needs (Galanaki, 2004). For example, some people are satisfied with intermittent contact with friends, while others desire daily conversations.

These theoretical notions of loneliness tend to generally chime with how adults speak about the loneliness they experience. For example, Heu et al. (2021) showed that participants from five different countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Israel, Egypt, and India) similarly described loneliness as an experience that involved impairments in an individual's relationship with the self or others, it was viewed as different to being alone, as negative but potentially beneficial, and was described as being similar to depression. Work with adolescents has shown that they experience loneliness as a negative emotional experience that involves feeling disconnected from those around you; it centres primarily on deficits in friendships and involves a negative attitude towards aloneness (Korkiamäki, 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Rönkä et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2019; Hemberg et al., 2021; Verity et al., 2021). However, it is, as yet, unknown whether or not, or in what ways, adolescents' conceptualizations of loneliness vary between countries.

In adolescents, youth face new developmental tasks including identity formation; they may find themselves developing beliefs and values that are different to those of their childhood friends, causing disruptions to their longstanding friendships. Such social and individual changes occur at the same time that peers are becoming more important to youth than their parents (Laursen and Hartl, 2013). Those challenges explain why loneliness has been found to peak in adolescence (Qualter et al., 2015) across countries (Barreto et al., 2021).

Recent research indicates a stable prevalence rate of loneliness among school-aged adolescents (11, 13, and 15 years) in England, with 8.2% reporting that they felt lonely "always" or "very often" between 2006 and 2014 (Qualter et al., 2021a). However, the percentage of 15-year-olds who report feeling lonely at school in 2018 varied considerably across countries, with extremes from 7.5% in the Netherlands to 28.2% in the Dominican Republic (Jefferson et al., 2022). Although it seems loneliness is a normative experience for adolescents, evidence shows significant differences in prevalence rates across countries, and it remains unclear whether this difference is to do with the way loneliness is conceptualised by youth in separate countries. Any variation in conceptualisations across countries could mean that we lack a clear picture of loneliness amongst youth, with current measures of adolescent loneliness not accounting for cultural variations in what loneliness is and is not.

Researchers have identified relationships between concepts that are involved in adolescents' loneliness experiences and demonstrated differences between cultures (Rokach and Neto, 2000; Le Roux, 2009;

Maes et al., 2016a; van Zyl et al., 2018). Yet, an examination of cross-cultural differences between adolescents' own conceptualisations of loneliness is missing. It is important to centre the voices of adolescents when exploring their own experiences (Woodgate et al., 2020), and qualitative research enables this exploration. In addition, a qualitative approach can help to identify nuances in young people's understandings of their experiences, which can help to explain relationships identified by quantitative research.

Different cultural experiences of loneliness are represented in qualitative research, but not directly compared. For example, Jenkins et al. (2019) identified socio-cultural adversities that impact Mexican adolescents' ability to build social connections, such as high rates of violence and criminal activity in their neighbourhoods. Adolescents in that study often spent significant periods of time alone due to parents' long working hours, which often involved them taking on household responsibilities such as looking after younger siblings. Those who experienced loneliness conceptualised it as an absence of emotional connections with family and friends (Jenkins et al., 2019). In interviews with Finnish adolescents, Korkiamäki (2014) identified four categories of "being an outsider": (1) feeling slightly rejected, (2) getting victimised, (3) being ignored, and (4) being an outsider by choice. Although the experiences of those categorised as outsiders might be considered loneliness by an observer, those who self-identified as an outsider were happy with their social position (Korkiamäki, 2014). Amongst those Finnish adolescents, experiences of discrimination/social exclusion that result in emotional distress were more likely to result in loneliness than simply not belonging to a group, suggesting, in line with other recent work with adults (Qualter et al., 2021b) that shows discrimination is pivotal to the loneliness experience.

Interviews with Australian adolescents similarly identified loneliness as a multifactorial experience that involved attitudes towards aloneness and the availability of friends (Martin et al., 2014). Having a negative perception of aloneness meant that youth were less likely to view loneliness as a mechanism for positive change (Martin et al., 2014). Additionally, being alone was often experienced more negatively when meaningful friendships were lacking; having meaningful friendships enables more positive attitudes towards aloneness (Martin et al., 2014). Other work also shows that feelings of disconnection, and not solely physical social isolation, determine adolescents' experiences of loneliness (Hemberg et al., 2021). Causes of that disconnection, however, vary depending on culture (Korkiamäki, 2014).

Changes within interpersonal relationships are likely for all adolescents, but the way that those changes are experienced is probably different depending on cultural influences (Rokach et al., 2003). One dimension across which cultures have been compared to understand differences in loneliness is individualism vs. collectivism (Hofstede, 2011). In individualistic cultures, the belief that individuals should be self-reliant is dominant, with chosen connections with friends prevailing over those with the extended family; in collectivist cultures there is a greater emphasis on interconnection, which prioritises family members (Hofstede, 2011). Such cultural differences affect the extent to which people feel lonely (Heu et al., 2020; Barreto et al., 2021), but they can also affect the circumstances that drive the loneliness experience. For example, those in individualistic cultures might feel most lonely when they differ from the cultural expectation for self-reliance, such as when they require support from others (Lykes and Kimmelmeier, 2014), or when they are excluded by peers

(Cicognani et al., 2014). Work with adolescents has also suggested that inter-individual competition amongst peers might be an important driver amongst adolescents living in individualistic environments (Medora et al., 1987). By contrast, those in collectivist cultures might feel most lonely when they do not feel supported by others (Lykes and Kimmelmeier, 2014), or when they feel isolated from their family (Cicognani et al., 2014).

The current study included participants from Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, and Turkey. Of those countries, Serbia, Portugal and Turkey are low on individualism as scored according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions; Lithuania and Poland are high on individualism (see Appendix B). Those countries were included in the study because they were partnering institutions on the Erasmus funded 'Fit to Belong' project. Because the aim of 'Fit to Belong' was to develop materials to help tackle loneliness, it was important that loneliness was understood with considerations made to cultural differences; to establish that materials could be utilised by youth in different cultures, similarities and differences in the conceptualization of loneliness between cultures needed examination. Previous research comparing loneliness in bereaved individuals from collectivist and individualist cultures which included participants from Turkey and Lithuania found higher levels of loneliness in Turkish, compared to Lithuanian, participants; that difference was attributed to more emphasis placed on personal relationships as part of an individual's identity in collectivist cultures, meaning that the loss of a personal relationship had greater impact (Kostikidou, 2020). In a comparison of Hofstede cultural dimensions, Serbia were reported to value long-term commitment to the family, and extended relationships, with loyalty to others, overriding the majority of other societal rules (Milosevic, 2019). Portugal was included as a collectivist culture in a study exploring the relationship between collectivism–individualism, and loneliness (Heu et al., 2019), with findings showing higher collectivism to be related to lower levels of loneliness; those in collectivist cultures had higher implied ideals in relation to social embeddedness, which may present a potential risk if ideals are not met (Heu et al., 2019).

The current study explored data from interviews with adolescents from five different European countries to identify how they defined loneliness, who they considered was likely to feel lonely, and what strategies could help those experiencing loneliness to cope. Using Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA), we aimed to inductively identify salient themes that reflect how loneliness is conceptualised by youth aged between 14 and 16 years in five European countries: Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, and Turkey. Following that, a deductive content analysis was conducted to identify quantitative differences in loneliness conceptualisations according to country; those analyses would establish whether or not youth in certain countries were more likely to give particular answers than others. Cultural signifiers – individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence were considered in analyses (see Appendix B).

2. Method

2.1. Research design

The study aimed to explore 1. the extent to which there are qualitative differences in how youth defined loneliness according to

culture, 2. whether there are strategies that youth across the five European countries consider useful for coping with loneliness, and if those strategies are similar or different across countries. The study utilised an inductive qualitative approach to explore youth conceptualizations of loneliness across five European countries. That enabled in-depth explorations of the salient features of youths' understanding of loneliness. It ensured that the perspectives of youth were centred, as opposed to quantitatively exploring loneliness through the use of measures that have neglected to include youth perspectives in their development.

2.2. Participants

The research was part of a wider Erasmus+ project entitled "Fit2belong" that involved collaboration between researchers, adolescents, teachers, and youth workers, working with young people across Europe to understand their perspectives on adolescent loneliness.¹ Project partner working in each school, youth centre, or foster home randomly selected youth from the school, youth centre or foster home population to take part in the current study. Twenty-nine participants aged 14–16 years old were recruited in Lithuania (6), Poland (5), Portugal (6), Serbia (6), and Turkey (6). Participants were split evenly by gender for each country, except for Poland (3 male; 2 female), and all participants belonged to the ethnic majority for their country. Sample sizes were determined by availability of participants and ensured that the volume of data was manageable for conducting an in-depth analysis that would provide rich and meaningful conceptualisations. Participants were included if they were aged between 14–16 years old and attended one of the partnering schools, youth centres or foster homes. Participants included were individuals who did not have any disabilities or impairments that would impact their participation or understanding of the interviews. Written consent was obtained from participants, and their parents. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manchester.

2.3. Partnering organisations

Schools were situated in Poland, Serbia, and Turkey. The youth organisations were situated in Lithuania and Portugal. The youth organisation in Portugal worked solely with youth who lived in residential care. The countries included in the current study varied in terms of individualism–collectivism. Three countries were low on individualism (Serbia, Portugal and Turkey; Hofstede, 2011) whilst two were high on individualism (Lithuania and Poland; Hofstede, 2011).

2.4. Data collection

Interviews were conducted during June 2020. A psychologist or counsellor from the schools or youth organisations involved in the

¹ <https://fit2belong.eu/>

project conducted the interviews via Zoom using an interview protocol developed by XXBLINDEDFORPEERREVIEWXXX (see [Appendix C](#)). The use of mental health professionals as interviewers ensured that the appropriate referral mechanisms were in place for conducting the interviews virtually in case of distress or risk disclosures. Instructional training documents accompanied the interview protocol given to all interviewers. Zoom training and guidance on how to proceed with the interviews was provided by the research team for the interviewers. Interviews took place as part of participants' virtual school day; participants were in a quiet room in their own homes, and interviewers were in a quiet room in their workplace or home. Interviews for the Portuguese participants took place face to face within the foster home following regional COVID-19 protocols. Interviews lasted approximately 1 h on average.

Interviews were conducted in the primary language spoken in each country, transcribed, and subsequently translated into English using DeepL or Google Translate. Those translations were then checked and edited for accuracy by project partners who were speakers of both the primary language and English.

To avoid distress, participants were asked about loneliness from a third person perspective. That meant the majority of participants spoke about loneliness from the perspective of an hypothetical peer who may be experiencing loneliness. However, some participants referred to their own experiences or the experiences of someone close to them. Further details about the interview protocol can be found in the supplementary materials.

2.5. Data analysis

A variation of Thematic Analysis: Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA; [Ritchie and Spencer, 1994](#)) was used to analyse the transcripts. For further details of the process of analysis see [Appendix A](#).

3. Results

3.1. Themes

Seven themes with 14 subthemes were identified during TFA. They reflect participants' accounts about what loneliness is, how someone experiencing loneliness might think and behave, and how it could be alleviated. Some quotes have been shortened for conciseness. Different participants are represented by their transcript number (i.e., t1) to illustrate the breadth of quotes from across the dataset.

3.1.1. Theme 1: describing how loneliness might feel

3.1.1.1. Loneliness as a negative, emotional experience

Participants across all countries included descriptors such as 'sad', 'depressed', 'disappointed', 'empty', 'uncomfortable', 'alienated', and 'rejected' to describe how someone experiencing loneliness might feel.

"Alone, sad, misunderstood, not listened to the fullest, as if they have no support from another person, as if something is missing." (Lithuania, female, t5)

Some participants from Portugal, and one from Lithuania mentioned that anger or frustration might be involved in experiences of loneliness.

"This person has no friends, so they feel frustrated and sad and may start to be afraid because they think that no one likes them, and [that they have] no one to talk to or to do day to day things with." (Portuguese, female, t4)

In some cases, they thought someone experiencing loneliness might also experience depression and suicidal thoughts.

"Some [of those who experience loneliness] even think about dying and sometimes even ask themselves why they came to the world. They want to disappear from this life. They feel angry at the world. They even cut themselves, to release their pain." (Portuguese, female, t3)

3.1.1.2. Aloneness as a choice, loneliness as involuntary

The majority of participants recognised loneliness as distinct to being alone. They explained that loneliness was likely to involve being alone, but that being alone was more of a negative experience; being alone when not lonely could be positive.

"I was on a trip for a few days and now I want to rest for a while. It's actually good to be alone every once in a while." (Polish, male, t5)

Being alone was seen as more of a personal choice, that could be restorative; loneliness was seen as involuntary isolation from those around you.

"Being alone can be a preference. A person may want to be alone when they feel too distressed or stuck. Loneliness may not be chosen by people. They can involuntarily isolate themselves, which may upset them. Being alone is a person's own choice, so there is a difference." (Turkish, female, t1)

Participants acknowledged that those who may be alone, but not lonely were in a different situation to those who were lonely because they were still emotionally connected to others despite being physically alone. Having a negative attitude towards spending time alone was seen to be involved in experiencing loneliness.

"I have been lonely and alone. Alone I didn't want to be around anyone, just because at that moment I didn't want to be around anyone. But I knew that people were there to be with me. While lonely I had no one to be with, but also didn't want to be with anyone." (Portuguese, male, t5)

Participants described having friends, so being physically around others, but not feeling supported by them as a reason for loneliness.

"It happened to me in middle school. I know from myself. That year I lost my aunt from my father's side... you can't find someone to share your sorrow. You feel sorry, but you swallow it. There is no one to share things with. You have no close friends. Then I had very lonely times." (Turkish, male, t2)

3.1.2. Theme 2. factors affecting loneliness conceptualisations

3.1.2.1. Personal experience affects how one understands loneliness

Some participants reported that loneliness was a new idea to them; they had not previously thought about in detail; others reported that their knowledge of loneliness came from their own personal experiences of loneliness, or the experiences of someone close to them.

“For example, I was once feeling lonely and I couldn’t breathe back then. It was hard for me. In such a state, you don’t feel like doing anything. Even if you have someone to talk to, someone from your family, you just want to do nothing. You just feel strange, you don’t want to eat, you can’t even breathe normally.” (Polish, female, t4)

3.1.2.2. Differences in perceptions about what constitutes loneliness

Participants considered certain reasons for feeling lonely as less legitimate than others; they were more understanding of having no one to talk to as a reason for loneliness, but more likely to talk negatively about someone feeling lonely because they had friends but wanted more.

“It’s kind of like... not selfish, but somehow... I think it’s enough to have two good friends, who will always be there for you. You don’t have to have many friends [...] I don’t know anyone [experiencing this type of loneliness]. I don’t really hang out with those people.” (Serbia, female, t2)

3.1.2.3. The media’s influence on conceptualisations of loneliness

Some participants reported that their understanding of loneliness had come from their exposure to portrayals of loneliness in television, films, magazines, books, etc. That exposure influenced their descriptions of someone experiencing loneliness.

“Personally, I don’t know this feeling, but as far as the books I’ve read, the many movies I’ve seen and the many magazine articles there are the events that lead to those suicides are basically because of loneliness.” (Lithuanian, female, t5)

3.1.2.4. Variation between people

Some participants suggested that the impact of loneliness could vary depending on individual and situational factors, and intensity of loneliness. Some referred to this as the ‘dose’ of loneliness, with small doses of loneliness not being detrimental. One participant reported that when in a new environment loneliness might gradually get stronger until you make real friends.

“I think it gets a little stronger if you are in a new environment. In the beginning most people would talk to you, but after a while you would choose who you want to talk more with and it would feel like you are gradually separating from loneliness” (Lithuanian, male, t4)

One Turkish participant reported that loneliness may be considered detrimental if it involves an individual opting to spend time alone, but potentially missing out on positive social interactions.

“For shy people loneliness isn’t considered too bad, but these people can lose a lot. They are deprived of the events around them.” (Turkish, female, t3)

Participants also discussed how loneliness experiences might differ according to gender. Some thought that loneliness might be experienced more often, or felt more intensely for girls than boys. They thought that young people might also react to loneliness differently depending on their gender. They thought boys would be less likely to admit to loneliness than girls, and that they would be more likely to cope in maladaptive ways.

“Girls are more likely to be lonely. I can’t explain it, but girls are more lonely than boys... because boys are stronger. They hide more and girls do not hide.” (Portuguese, female, t2)

“Maybe, for example, if a boy wanted to seek that support from not very good friends, he would start smoking, drinking to get interested in it, but not all girls would do that.” (Lithuanian, male, t1)

Some participants, particularly those from Lithuania and Poland, did not think there would be any differences between genders, and that it would vary between individuals regardless of gender.

“I think it’s different and different not just between boys and girls, but between every person. Everyone understands it [loneliness] differently.” (Lithuanian, female, t3)

3.1.3. Theme 3. fitting in with their social environment

3.1.3.1. A lack of belongingness to one’s social environment

Participants relayed what it meant to feel like a part of their society, e.g., having real friends, like-minded friends, close relationships, support available, and people they could trust; they imagined that difficulties developing high quality relationships with those around them, or being in an unsupportive “harsh” social environment, might contribute to feelings of loneliness. Participants thought a lack of belongingness might occur when someone is new to an environment.

“For example, it happened to me, when I entered the foster home, I was amongst many young people, but felt alone because I didn’t know anyone.” (Portuguese, male, t1)

Participants reported that someone might feel lonely when they are not accepted in a social environment that they want to be part of.

“When they want to join a society or a group, I don’t know, they can be judged by their appearance, financial situation, how they

behave, their grades, whether they are smart or stupid.” (Serbia, female, t1)

In some cases, those trying to fit in may experience rejection that directly contributes to feelings of loneliness.

“For example, you are at school, there is always a group and a person is pushed out of the group. They are pushed out because they does not have the same feelings and thoughts [as the group], and thus loneliness occurs.” (Turkish, female, t1)

3.1.3.2. Difficulties opening up to others

Participants reported that qualities such as difficulty socialising, shyness, introversion might be received negatively by peers, and those who have such qualities may struggle to fit in, and experience loneliness as a result. Participants suggested someone experiencing loneliness might withdraw to avoid negative experiences when attempting to connect with others. In the following quotes “they” refers to a person experiencing loneliness.

“They can be noticeable but as an object of fun, everyone would disrespect those people because they are silent. And maybe for the very same reason, they think they will be insulted and not fit in, so they stay aside.” (Serbian, female, t1)

3.1.4. Theme 4: negative cognitions associated with loneliness experiences

3.1.4.1. Negative thoughts about oneself

Participants reported that someone experiencing loneliness might think negatively about themselves; they might blame themselves for their experience of loneliness. Participants reported that negative thoughts might be about how the individual acts or looks.

“[They think] that they are a bad person, ugly, that they don’t help anyone, that they can’t be happy with themselves...” (Portuguese, female, t2)

Participants thought those negative thoughts might extend to making comparisons between themselves and their peers.

“[They might wonder] why everyone else has friends to go somewhere with, talk to, whilst they sit alone and everyone has such a good life, they maybe think something is wrong and start hating themselves.” (Lithuanian, female, t6)

Participants reported that negative thinking might involve an individual experiencing loneliness to re-evaluate the way they act and consider what they might be doing wrong.

“I think they might be thinking something is wrong with them, why they are lonely, why they have no like-minded people.” (Lithuanian, female, t6)

3.1.4.2. Thinking negatively about others

Some participants thought that negative thoughts experienced when lonely might also relate to others. Someone experiencing loneliness might blame their peers for their feelings of loneliness, and get angry at them as a result of that.

“[They wonder] Why don’t they want to accept me? I think they see others as selfish.” (Turkish, male, t2)

3.1.5. Theme 5: recommendations for coping with loneliness

3.1.5.1. Finding enjoyment

Participants suggested that those experiencing loneliness may benefit from finding new ways to enjoy themselves; this could be alone, or through joining new social groups and activities.

“They can go ride a bike, shoot a basket [play basketball], play in a room, read, do something for school or anything that is fun for them.” (Serbian, male, t4)

Some suggested that finding new friends did not necessarily need to be in person, they could use the internet to connect with people who had similar interests.

“You find a lot of people in the world who are similar to you and they can share their experiences with you and help you with that [online friendships].” (Serbian, male, t6)

3.1.5.2. Evaluating existing friendships

Some participants suggested the need for someone experiencing loneliness to re-examine their existing friendships to see if they were fulfilling; they particularly wanted to encourage more positive thinking about those already in their life, if they thought the person was lonely due to wanting more friends.

“Try to have fun with people who they used to think it is not possible to have fun with and understand that it is actually possible to have fun with them and to spend time together. Or I think they might try to spend time with new people who are compatible with them.” (Turkish, female, t1)

3.1.5.3. Changing their attitude and mindset

Participants thought it might help those experiencing loneliness to connect if they changed their mindset to think more positively, and be more open to engaging with their peers.

“Try to change the whole picture in your mind of the world as everything is, and maybe try to understand that you are not as lonely as you imagine.” (Lithuanian, female, t3)

“They might try not to be so detached, try to communicate with others, not be so far away from them.” (Lithuanian, male, t2)

They could practise socialising with someone they trust so they could build up confidence:

“I would also advise him to be more open, to try with anyone, with his brother, or with a toy, to see how he would approach a person and what he would actually say to that person.” (Serbian, female, t1)

3.1.6. Theme 6: supporting someone who is experiencing loneliness

3.1.6.1. Peers can create a better environment

Participants suggested ways that peers could support someone who was experiencing loneliness. They could help by offering their support, and friendship, and by appearing approachable so that someone experiencing loneliness could feel at ease around them.

“I might not like that person but if they seem to be friendly, I would suggest to my acquaintances and friends to meet with them. Other people could do the same, I would think.” (Lithuanian, female, t5)

Peers could make an effort to include them in social events, and asking them to join in with a joint task or activity.

“For example, I invited them to be with my friends, and me, to ‘fit in’, to help them not to be alone. And we helped them with homework.” (Serbian, female, t2)

Some participants mentioned the importance of setting aside any prejudices in order to welcome people into their social circles.

“First of all, prejudices should definitely be removed. I mean these people come to the world with features they can’t choose. Someone can be overweight, and someone may be weak. Such biases need to be removed. Then they can be invited to events. They will probably not accept it [the invite] to start with, it might be necessary be a bit forceful. They will socialise with some encouragement.” (Turkish, male, t2)

3.1.6.2. Adults can create a better environment

Participants suggested ways adults could support young people to find their way out of loneliness. For example, teachers could encourage an inclusive class environment, and provide opportunities for friendships to be built.

“Get them working on a project to see if they have common interests.” (Polish, male, t5)

Adults could also act as a source of comfort for those experiencing loneliness.

“They may try to make them feel cared for. Parents can approach them about this subject [loneliness] without reservation. [...]. Similarly, teachers can make them aware of this issue [loneliness]. I think teachers can talk to them and make them feel good.” (Turkish, female, t1)

Some participants mentioned the importance of empathy, suggesting that adults should be careful not to dismiss the problems young people report.

“They [adults] should not disregard them [a young person experiencing loneliness] by thinking they are just an adolescent. They should try to understand them, not judge. They should not consider them silly and childish.” (Turkish, female, t6)

They should also find social opportunities for someone experiencing loneliness and encourage them to participate in these.

“Actually I think there should be a little bit of a push. Because a lonely person will say that they don’t want to participate. Parents on the other hand, should insist, I think parents should challenge you to go and socialise.” (Turkish, male, t2)

3.1.7. Theme 7: barriers to gaining help for loneliness

3.1.7.1. Finding the right person

Participants discussed the difficulties people might face when trying to gain help for loneliness. Some participants reported that peers might not be willing to help and would not care about making things better for those experiencing loneliness.

“Of course, when it comes to peers, this is very difficult, these days especially, because, for example, teenagers are very cruel, and I would say selfish. Clearly not all, but some. Helping other these days is a challenge because I think everyone just thinks about themselves.” (Lithuanian, female, t3)

Participants also thought it might be important to think about the appropriateness of the type of person offering help. They thought in some cases young people might not feel comfortable talking to adults; it might be more beneficial for help to be offered by a same age peer who is familiar to them.

“Adults are different and not all adults understand problems of young people.” (Polish, female, t2)

3.1.7.2. Fear of vulnerability

Participants recognised that someone experiencing loneliness might find it difficult to open up to others, for example, due to the fear that others share their disclosures with others in the peer group.

“Sometimes they can have friends to tell things to, but sometimes it doesn’t count because when they do their friends tell others so sometimes they keep it to themselves.” (Portuguese, female, t3)

If someone did not want help, some participants reported that it might be seen as detrimental to give it to them.

“It’s rude to help someone who doesn’t want help.” (Turkish, female, t3)

3.2. Further analysis of the data to explore cultural differences

A deductive content analysis was conducted to examine differences in loneliness conceptualisations, causes, and coping strategies across countries. See Appendix D for more details of analytic method.

3.2.1. Emotions associated with loneliness according to country

Emotive experiences of loneliness were similar across countries. Sadness (including sad, unhappy, depressed, disappointed and bad) was commonly described in relation to loneliness by participants across all countries. Discomfort with the self was reported by participants in all countries, but most commonly by those in Lithuania, Portugal, and Serbia. Feeling excluded (excluded, rejected, missing something, alone) was reported by participants from all countries, but more commonly by those from Lithuania and Portugal.

3.2.2. Causes and triggers of loneliness according to country

Experiencing exclusion/rejection/prejudice was a commonly reported cause of loneliness across all countries, with all countries except Poland having more than half of participants reporting exclusion, rejection, or prejudice as a cause of loneliness. Participants in Lithuania and Turkey were more likely to report 'not feeling like you belong' as a driver of loneliness. Participants from Poland and Turkey were more likely to report 'feeling unsupported' as a driver of loneliness. These findings reflect those reported in theme 3 in which youth experiencing loneliness are considered to have trouble fitting in with their social environments.

3.2.3. Coping strategies according to country

Participants from the different countries suggested similar coping strategies. For example, more than half of the participants (>3) from each country suggested finding new friends as a personal coping strategy. That suggests young people consider making new friends, rather than trying to work on existing friendships, to be more effective for managing or alleviating loneliness reflecting that loneliness triggers a reconsideration of one's social ties.

Participants commonly suggested that peers should make an effort to include someone who is feeling lonely, and that adults should talk to, provide advice, or comfort young people who report loneliness. All participants from Portugal recommended that youth experiencing loneliness should talk to peers, who should provide advice or comfort. Given that participants in Portugal are in foster care, those findings might reflect the fact that peers in foster care might need to take on a stronger emotionally supportive role than in other settings.

3.3. Discussion

To explore differences and similarities in young people's conceptualisations of loneliness, we used Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA) to explore interview data from youth from several countries in Europe. Although previous qualitative research on young people's conceptualisations includes accounts of young people from different countries, there is currently no cross-cultural qualitative

research that includes youth from different countries in the same study, and explores directly the similarities and differences in their descriptions. The current study fills that gap by taking into account the conceptualisations, described in interviews, by adolescents from five European countries: Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, and Turkey. Those countries vary in a range of ways, including cultural markers, i.e., individualism–collectivism. Overall, there were no fundamental qualitative differences in how loneliness was conceptualised by adolescents according to country of residence. Instead, loneliness was conceptualised similarly by youth in different countries across Europe. Salient themes were developed to reflect participants' thoughts about loneliness and how they might cope with it, and highlighted that young people considered loneliness to involve feeling disconnected from one's social environment; it may vary in intensity depending on individual attitudes towards aloneness. Their proposed coping strategies focused on promoting reconnection within one's social environment, and included peers ensuring that they overcame prejudices to include all peers in the school social environment. Findings showed loneliness to be considered similarly across countries, suggesting loneliness is a universally understood concept for adolescents across Europe.

3.3.1. Social environments

Participants focused on how loneliness can be attributed to feeling like you do not belong in a social group or environment. The idea was consistent across countries, irrespective of whether they were culturally collectivist or individualist indicating that although both cultural characteristics involve opposing approaches to socialisation, neither provides the antidote for loneliness as both have the potential to lead to an individual feeling excluded, different from others, and emotionally disconnected. Participants acknowledged that loneliness is not the same as social isolation. Feeling negatively about one's social situation determined loneliness; someone might voluntarily opt to be alone, but would not opt to be lonely. Such statements reflect the findings of previous qualitative research in which participants who considered themselves to be "outsiders" could be content with that status, despite potentially being misidentified as lonely by an observer (Korkiamäki, 2014). Previous research found that the emotional facets of loneliness increase during adolescence (Von Soest et al., 2020). Combined, previous findings and those from the current study, reflect the emotional challenges that adolescents face despite widening social networks; relative to other age groups, adolescents may have more social connections available to them, but finding their place in that social world can be an emotionally isolating experience.

Previous research has focused on hypervigilance as a mechanism that contributes to those feelings of disconnection; it emphasised that those who feel lonely are likely to interpret social interactions more negatively than those who do not feel lonely (Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2009). Whilst that may be true (Doyle and Molix, 2014; Sutin et al., 2015; Priest et al., 2017; Doyle and Barreto, 2021; Qi et al., 2021), young people in the current study acknowledged that experiencing stigma and discriminatory behaviour can act as a catalyst for that hypervigilance. It may be that peers react negatively towards introverted behaviour and physical characteristics that are considered unattractive. Those negative reactions may be what causes individuals to feel misunderstood and disconnected in their social worlds, resulting in loneliness. Supporting our findings from our interviews are the findings from The BBC Loneliness Experiment where people

who felt discriminated against were more likely to experience loneliness (Qualter et al., 2021b), and analyses of PISA data that showed teacher support, teacher interest, peer competition and cooperation, and discrimination were important in understanding student loneliness (Jefferson et al., 2022).

Recent quantitative research also contributes to that argument; it identified the relationship between loneliness and negative attributional bias to be concurrent rather than causal (Lau et al., 2021). Therefore, whilst cognitive behavioural therapy that alleviates hypervigilance may be beneficial to alleviate loneliness, it may be favourable to also focus on universal interventions that can improve social conditions for all. Social skills interventions are commonly suggested to help those experiencing loneliness to overcome it by facing social difficulties with peers. However, social skills interventions often take a misguided approach that focuses on teaching individuals outside the dominant group how to “fit in” with the dominant group. Instead, social skills interventions should consider which, and who’s skills need to be improved in order to build a more inclusive peer environment (McDaid et al., 2022).

Participants were more likely to respond disparagingly to a scenario in which an individual experienced loneliness due to a desire for more friends than to an individual who felt lonely because they desired someone to talk to. This is likely to reflect participants’ understandings that loneliness is more about having good relationships than about having many relationships. Being lonely despite the presence of friends might also suggest that there is something ‘wrong’ with the person feeling lonely, who is then blamed for the loneliness they experience. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that participants’ advice for those who felt lonely despite having friends was to engage in cognitive strategies, like reappraising their existing friends, rather than make changes to their social environment. Those suggestions may have been motivated by participants’ negative attitudes towards the concept of seeking popularity (Cillessen and Mayeux, 2004). This finding has implications for our understanding of how peers may interact with those experiencing loneliness: it is likely that they are less sympathetic to a peer experiencing loneliness if they perceive that peer to have friends to call upon. To counteract this, it is important that interventions for loneliness promote awareness of the different situations in which someone may feel lonely in order to reiterate their validity.

3.3.2. Variation in loneliness experiences according to individual characteristics

Similar to previous qualitative research, young people regarded attitudes towards being alone as an important factor in determining whether or not someone feels lonely: Those who had a more positive attitude towards aloneness were seen as less likely to experience loneliness intensely (Martin et al., 2014; Hemberg et al., 2021). However, one participant remarked that loneliness was unlikely to dissipate unless “true friends” were found. Whilst a positive attitude towards aloneness may help someone feel loneliness less intensely, it could also prevent them from seeking out friendships that enable them to mitigate the negative emotions that accompany loneliness. Positive attitudes towards aloneness have been found to occur alongside peer loneliness in some adolescents (Maes et al., 2016b), suggesting that preferring to be alone may represent a tendency for

social withdrawal to avoid negative experiences when with their peers. Coping strategies, such as withdrawal, that focus on alleviating emotional responses to stress, are associated with higher levels of loneliness: social withdrawal has been identified as a significant predictor of later loneliness (London et al., 2007; Deckx et al., 2018). Thus, it is important that adolescents who are often seen enjoying alone time are not assumed to be better equipped to cope with loneliness.

Variations according to gender were reported. Whilst participants said that loneliness would be conceptualised the same irrespective of gender, participants believed girls would be more likely to show and admit to loneliness, and boys more likely to hide their feelings. This reflects the existence of a stigma associated with loneliness that particularly targets young men (Barreto et al., 2022) and which explains why indirect measures for loneliness find no gender differences in loneliness rates, whilst direct measures find higher loneliness in females which is attributed to diversity of items included in widely used loneliness measures (Weeks and Asher, 2012). In a recent meta-analysis, Maes et al. (2019) also find a “close to zero” overall effect size for gender differences in loneliness across the lifespan. In congruence, despite differing gender expectations across countries, young people reported similar opinions on how loneliness is experienced according to gender. These findings are corroborated in qualitative research with young people in Belgium and Italy (Verity et al., 2021), and, together, suggest that interventions for loneliness should ensure that strategies involved can be utilised irrespective of gender. For example, for boys, activities that encourage the sharing of emotions may not be received positively; interventions focused on group activities that are centred around a given activity may be more welcomed.

3.3.3. Support for overcoming loneliness

Participants suggested that individuals can overcome loneliness by increasing their opportunities to make social connections with peers. Peers can help by making the effort to ensure no one is excluded. Focusing on tasks that can be done collaboratively and do not involve a competitive element by which those who are less able are singled out or picked on, e.g., a class project, homework clubs. Those can give peers a common goal to work towards whilst reducing the pressure to find common interests. Teachers can facilitate socialisation by providing more opportunities to make new connections in class; it was often suggested that someone feeling lonely should attempt to find new friends, rather than rekindle struggling existing friendships, given that loneliness might be signalling that old relationships are not working for the lonely individual. Providing opportunities for peers to strengthen connections with less familiar peers may help those experiencing loneliness to overcome negative feelings associated with feeling disconnected from their existing friends. Accordingly, previous suggestions for tackling loneliness include enhancing school climate through cooperative group work in classes and play interventions (Qualter, 2003). Universal whole-school interventions that promote social and emotional skills could also help to alleviate loneliness by building adolescents’ self-awareness, conflict resolution strategies, and emotion management, and creating more supportive school environments (Hennessey et al., 2021).

Adults, in particular parents and teachers, were considered to act as confidants and provide comfort for adolescents. The issues faced

by adolescents are often not taken seriously enough by adults (Townsend, 2019). Previous qualitative research (Verity et al., 2022) found that young people experienced negative reactions such as anger when opening up to adults about their loneliness; fear of negative reactions from adults was also identified as a barrier that prevented young people from seeking help. In the current study, some participants specified that adults should be careful not to dismiss a young person when they are opening up about loneliness. Thus, support offered to those seeking help for loneliness should be careful considered: who might youth choose to confide in, and who is likely to respond in a way that meets their needs. Previous research suggests young people are more likely to feel safe to open up when teachers talk openly about mental health, and that guidance for young people on how to decide who to open up to may be beneficial (Buchholz et al., 2015).

3.3.4. Strengths and limitations

The current study recruited adolescents who were likely to have heterogeneity in life experience due to differences in country of origin, gender, age, and being in the care system or not. Heterogeneity is advantageous as it ensures diverse perspectives that can reveal nuances and complexities that may not be evident in more homogenous samples. However, a potential limitation is the inclusion of only participants within the foster care system in Portugal who may have unique experiences of disruptions to their social relationships that other Portuguese young people have not encountered. Through the use of Thematic Framework Analysis (TFA) we identified similarities and differences in conceptualisations of loneliness by accounting for cases that do not fit the overall narrative. That means the conclusions reached are made with consideration of each individual account, as opposed to only those that support the research teams' pre-existing beliefs about adolescent loneliness. That is reflected, for example, in "Theme 1. Describing how loneliness might feel," where many participants considered loneliness to include sadness, but where some reported anger and frustration. Acknowledging those nuances means that interventions can be developed to address the different ways loneliness might look depending on individual differences. Whilst differences identified may be a result of individual differences such as culture, interviews were conducted by different school counsellors or psychologists at partnering educational institutions. Although the professionals involved had experience of conducting interviews, a potential limitation was the variability in interviewing techniques for a research capacity. To mitigate that, interviewees were provided training and guidance on best practise. Where leading questions did occur, we made a decision about whether or not to code the response based on whether or not the interviewee had repeated the sentiments of the interviewer. Additionally, we have been careful here to include both researcher interpretations and participants' words in order to provide evidence for the conclusions we made (Yeh and Inman, 2007).

The study is potentially limited by not including a measure of current, or previous loneliness. It is possible that opinions about loneliness differ depending on whether an individual has experienced it, but the findings of the current study are in line with previous qualitative research with adolescents experiencing loneliness (Korkiamäki, 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Rönkä et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2019; Hemberg et al., 2021; Verity et al., 2021, 2022). Further, the study may be limited by the fact that youth were asked to talk

about loneliness from a third person perspective. While that enabled youth to share their thoughts and feelings without having to talk about personal experiences, reducing any stigma and, thus, reluctance to talk about loneliness (Barreto et al., 2021; Kerr and Stanley, 2021), it may raise other issues, such as limiting our understanding of what motivates those experiencing loneliness to act in certain ways, i.e., why they might socially withdraw.

3.3.5. Conclusion

We asked adolescents across Europe to describe loneliness, and the strategies they thought would be useful to help someone overcome it. Participants commonly described feeling or being excluded by others as a characteristic of loneliness. Not feeling connected to one's social environment was often considered to be a result of experiencing hostility (victimisation and discrimination) from those in that environment, primarily peers. Ways to support someone reporting lonely focused on how to reduce those experiences of hostility, perhaps by ensuring peers let go of prejudices, and teachers provided opportunities for collaborative learning that could enhance peer connectedness. Secondary content analyses examined differences in interview content between countries. We found loneliness was conceptualised similarly for adolescents in the different countries, with types of coping strategies suggested at similar rates across countries. The findings indicate that loneliness has a shared meaning for adolescents across Europe. Considering those findings, interventions for loneliness should aim to overcome prejudice and discrimination and create an inclusive school environment by addressing both cognitive and environmental factors that contribute to loneliness; a universal social and emotional school based programme can ensure that all pupils receive the same provision, reducing negative thinking patterns and increasing empathy and consideration for peers.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Manchester. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

LV, PQ, MB, and FtB conceived of the study, participated in its design and coordination. RJ and LV performed the statistical analysis, and interpretation of the data. PQ and MB participated in the interpretation of data. LV drafted the paper and managed the curation of data. PQ, MB, RJ, and FtB commented on versions of the full manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1220279/full#supplementary-material>

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