



‘Let’s be Lonely Together’: Co-Constructing Narratives of Loneliness with University Students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

During the past fifty years, loneliness has been dominantly conceptualised through psychodisciplines, and an in-depth qualitative understanding of loneliness remains needed, especially among young people.

This research explores students' experience of loneliness in UK universities. It examines the social and cultural context where relationships between students are constructed. It aims at understanding loneliness experiences in depth. It examines how the intersectionality of gender, race, class, nationality, and culture translates into different experiences of loneliness, which universities might not fully understand yet.

The study followed a narrative inquiry approach, where ten students of multi-ethnic backgrounds from different universities in England shared their stories of loneliness. They shared their stories in various forms and ways e.g., oral storytelling through narrative interviews in person/online, written storytelling via Google document in the form of diary entries, and collection of photos capturing moments of loneliness. These stories were then analysed through two layers of narrative thematic analysis.

The research findings show that loneliness is constructed as a burden that students do not want to share with others. Students feel pressured to perform belonging even when they feel lonely, and they live with a stigma that arises from erroneous dominant neoliberal discourses framing success as independence and self-reliance. The importance of groupings is another significant finding; groups are built on hetero/white normative standards of 'student experience', which is mainly exclusionary to many students. Finally, universities can foster a specific type of loneliness, 'ethical loneliness' (Stauffer, 2015), in which students feel neglected by systems that cannot keep up with their student's mental well-being. Relationships with tutors are crucial in this context as they determine if the student feels seen or ignored. The study argues that a slow, relational understanding of loneliness is needed.

The findings provide a foundation for developing improvements in professional practice in universities. In particular, this study will help UK universities to understand better the particularities of students' loneliness and their social and academic experiences and how best to design appropriate support.

Dedication

I dedicate the work to my mother, Amel and my father, Ali Kamel Lemmouchi, and my husband, Basher.

I dedicate it to my parents, who dedicated all their lives, career and every single Dinar they gained to my and my siblings' education, food, and clothing.

To my parents, who put themselves last by putting us first. To my parents, who shielded me from loneliness, coldness, and emptiness. To my parents, who taught me to care and love endlessly and not expect returns. To my parents, who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

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Preface: A Study of Loneliness

Lonely Story

I begin this chapter and my thesis with a story of how I came into loneliness or (if I am being honest) how loneliness came to me.

I travelled to the UK for the first time in November 2017. After obtaining a fully paid scholarship, I felt I was above the skies, and I was, given that it was my first time on an airplane too. I came to this country thinking of nothing, basically, but I was happy, and when I am happy I do not think. I started thinking, however, once I started feeling out of place. When I share this with my community, they call it “Ghorba”, the Algerian term for being abroad, which means foreignness and estrangement. It usually applies to any Algerian living abroad away from home. It is not new that migration is associated with foreignness and feeling out of place, as migration is a construction of strangeness (Diken,1998).

The strange thing was I never felt that way (Ghorba) because I could cope easily, I had the language, and I had the understanding that I was away and never thought of it as difficult. After all, I was still surrounded by humans on the same planet. Yet, I felt something I did not have a name for in my mother tongue, but it was still something. I would go to the university library, my PhD pre-sessional classes with other Algerian students, and restaurants on my own, and all I remember is dimmed lights and darkness. Every place was quiet, people would avoid eye contact in order not to exchange smiles, and nobody seemed interested in anybody. On the other side of these feelings, I had to find a research idea and, ideally, a supervisor. At the time, I was caught by suicide in a news article from a local newspaper. It was a student who went to the same university, who committed suicide in their accommodation, but all that was written were two lines and a half, no more. No names, no photos, no story. I wanted to speak to someone in the library and ask them what was happening there, but again, eye contact was avoided, and random smiles were considered creepy. I went back to my screen and tried to make a proposal out of suicide, but it was overwhelmingly difficult since I could not speak to and for those who passed away.

I went down to mental health ‘problems’, and again I found that the topic was overtaken by psychiatry, medicine and pharmaceutical research, which did not make sense to me or give me the understanding I sought. Fortunately, there was a point in common between all of this

secretive news reporting and hushed conversations on mental ill-health: loneliness. The student who committed suicide must have felt very lonely at specific points that they thought their life wasn't worth it. The students increasingly getting mental health diagnoses must also feel very lonely when the only answers they get are in continuous prescriptions. The point in common was the feeling I felt and couldn't find a name for earlier. I am the most talkative person in my family, and still, my vocal strings were dry for most of the day because I did not speak to anybody. When I talked, it was always my voice alone echoing in the room, which was different and hard to recognise at first.

I took up loneliness as a research topic and was determined to explore it with a qualitative approach. I wanted answers, and I needed to talk to others. Loneliness became the conversation starter, and it was also my way of making others feel they were heard, and their feelings were validated.

I see loneliness and life as a collection of stories we are told and tell others. There is nothing static about it, and the moment you think you figured it all out, you start again. As we live in interwoven stories, which our bodies carry as we breathe (Clandinin,2013), we are shaped by these stories, and they shape us. This follows a narrative way of thinking (Bruner,1990) in which the narrative impulse is universal and "Life ... is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as "a narrative" is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same kind of ratiocination through which we construct narratives. (Bruner,2004; P.692). Loneliness has not stopped when I became friends with it; that is when I started researching it. It has been hunting me and showing up at different stages of my life during the past 5 years in different stories. It wasn't only my research topic but also the ground on which I made important life decisions. Loneliness was something to escape indeed, but it always found a way back. It came back with a full vengeance with the covid-19 outbreak as its consequences were a prime example of how life sometimes imitates art —Oscar Wilde. Loneliness became central in my daily routines; I either felt it, or I was busy avoiding it, but it was always there.

I had managed to make very few friends and some acquaintances, but my place was always empty. I turned the lights off before I left, and when I returned to my studio, they were still off. The place was made for me and functioned for me, but it did not communicate with me. It did not greet me when I left or welcomed me when I was back. Loneliness was a feeling of void I couldn't converse with, an abyss, and I tried not to stare at it for long. Loneliness was a

lack of touch, and it wasn't any touch. I remember going on a dog walk at my favourite volunteering place in Sheffield. I was petting the dog and neared her head for a hug, only to feel the warmth I missed. It was then that I realised that all of my beings were in lack of touch, both in the literal and figurative sense. My being was striving for touch and not finding it anywhere close, not in space, not in time.

I am sharing my story to show the reader a part of who I am, my approach to research and overall, my approach to knowledge production. My story-sharing adheres to Indigenous ways of knowing, specifically African worldviews rooted in storytelling. African art of oral storytelling is a good example which shows that stories are not only used in understanding the world; they also serve as an important means of teaching 'good' socialising lessons and refining the creativity and intellect of a person (Chinyowa, 2001; Fiorio, 2006; Hart, 2010). When I did not have anyone to tell my stories to, and nobody shared their stories with me, I could not socialise, and loneliness dominated the narrative of my life during those times.

The African storytelling tradition is shaped around others, and it focuses on how one mind thinks in many stories. In the African tradition, storytelling is about the potential of one story to teach many minds how to co-exist respectfully (Oamen, 2015). Stories also teach morals and values which directly feed into the greater development and civilisation of a society (Datta, 2018; Kovach, 2009). It is only through others an individual can realise their place and obligation towards society (Chinyowa, 2000). In African society, a person is obligated toward their family, neighbours and friends; the sense of obligation is not a burden but an opportunity to show and act their best selves (Chinyowa, 2000). In a sense, others are enabling and not burdening. Storytelling draws these layers together and attracts the audience to each other; the focus on one oneself extends to a focus on all of us. Therefore, the story does not belong to the person telling it but to the community; so, at the end of each storytelling gathering, the storyteller indicates the end of the story with a closing statement in which they declare their death (Chinyowa, 2011). The ownership of the story may be communal, but the individual can tell it in their ways, and people from the audience can jump in at the end of the story to explain some parts or add a follow-up. Thus, while stories in Africa reproduce values of respect for the traditions of previous generations, the story is still a creative body which carries imprints of particulars of the people involved in the telling. There are many

intersections between loneliness, storytelling and indigenous understanding of society, an individual and the world. As a North African, I live for and crave stories, I grew up listening to my grandmother's stories and always had mind space for others in my head. It was never lonely in my head. Moreover, as the culture focuses on communities rather than individuals, being part of something was always the unquestioned right of individuals. Therefore, loneliness could be understood as stories unheard, stories untaught, and stories not allowed to be shared. It is a lack of interest in others and knowledge that is produced but only kept for oneself. To me, loneliness is a lack of story exchange and an invitation to stay out rather than come in.

This thesis focuses on stories of loneliness that university students in the UK might keep for themselves. It utilises a qualitative methodological approach: specifically, a narrative inquiry where relationships are respected and accounted for (Louis, 2007). The study involved ten young people (between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five) sharing their stories of loneliness and reflecting on their university experiences. In most stories, loneliness wasn't clearly defined, so our conversations were an attempt to track down and understand the feeling. Their stories acted as counter-narratives to dominant psychological studies, which captured, measured and tested mental well-being and transformed it into a motionless, lifeless object.

This thesis focuses on the social embodied world of students where they are physically together with others but still felt disconnected. Although I acknowledge that young people today are considered the most connected online (Batsleer, & Duggan, 2021), and there is another world of connections provided by social media in which loneliness is not necessarily apparent, I find investigating the physical world of connections more meaningful and conducive to this specific study. It offers an understanding of loneliness away from devices and looks at potential for connections away from apps designed to facilitate that. By not prioritising social media, I could study how young people navigate their social world in university full of different people from different backgrounds without the help of apps. Thus, by taking a step back from social media, I also take a step back from the debate whether social media makes people lonelier or more connected. I instead focus on understanding why

loneliness is still an issue despite the abundance of digital apps designed for connections, and the alternative type of sociality online.

A justification of the above research choices takes place in the next section, where I look into research done on young people and loneliness and identify potential gaps. Then I outline the research's aims and objectives and share the questions which started and guided my research. Finally, I provide the structure of the thesis and present a brief summary of each chapter. I also show how the chapters link together to tell a story and walk the reader through the circular map of loneliness.

Why 'story' loneliness together with young people in university?

When I had my research proposal ready and sought a PhD offer, loneliness was still exclusively an elderly issue. This is not strange as back in November 2018; the UK had its first in the country and Europe minister of loneliness after a report was released in 2017 indicating that 9 million Britons were feeling lonely, the numbers were particularly higher among the elderly and disabled people (Mead, 2018). Loneliness was framed as a serious public health concern among the elderly, increasing cognitive decline and use of healthcare resources (Gerst-Emerson, & Jayawardhana, 2015). There was (still is) heavy media coverage of the 'epidemic' of loneliness. However, the elderly weren't the only people suffering isolation, especially after austerity cuts and a number of tax bills penalising any and all citizens in need of support; many people felt the disconnection and unworthiness (Barnes et al., 2016; Stewart, 2019). Media further exacerbated the isolation by demonising the vulnerability of the human condition under the criteria of neoliberal values of productivity and worthiness (Briant, Watson, & Philo, 2013; McEnhill, Byrne, 2014; Goethal et al., 2022).

Young people started getting particular attention after BBC Radio 4 launched the BBC Loneliness experiment in 2018. The nationwide survey revealed that loneliness is the most widespread among the 16-24 age group (BBC Loneliness Experiment, 2018). This finding was consistent with the released numbers pre-pandemic in the Community Life Survey in which

the younger population communicated more loneliness than the elderly (Office for National Statistics, 2018). The numbers continued to rise during the pandemic, with two-thirds of students reporting a decline in their well-being, and more than a quarter reported feeling lonely often or always (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Although the response rate in these surveys is remarkable (for example, the BBC loneliness experiment had 55000 respondents), whether those participants felt heard is questionable. Quantitative studies make it easy to get insights from many people, but their impersonal nature makes it challenging to connect with participants and to connect dots. However, In a co-produced study with university students, they formed groups to share their loneliness and received informal care since they felt seen and heard (Cooper & Jones, 2022). Due to the limited in-depth qualitative research examining the loneliness experiences of young people in university, this research intends to explore the insights of young university students by getting them to become the storytellers of their own experiences.

The reason for choosing this level of education - higher education- had to do with the fact that universities in the UK are highly international, with one-third of UK university students being international students (Bennell, 2020). This means that understanding why students from different backgrounds and even countries experience loneliness might partly explain what is lonely about the UK in general and the university in specific. In line with this, Lupton (1998) observes, “ A bodily feeling or sensation may be experienced as ‘internal’, but the way in which we interpret it as evidence of an ‘emotion’ is always already a product of acculturation into a particular society “ p.107, investigating loneliness in the particular setting of a British university is an opportunity to explore loneliness as a phenomenon and see how its ‘essential nature’ gets shaped, interpreted and translated in the social-cultural context that is unique to today’s time and space.

Moreover, findings of previous international studies (Bernardon et al., 2011; Hysing et al., 2020; Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015), which drew on quantitative loneliness studies, proposed that university students were under a lot of pressure to find their social circles. They also suggest that it was during that time that students became more conscious of their social lives and their social identity. Students became more concerned about finding and establishing

friendships to last the entire university course. This is strongly encouraged by the narrative of the great student experience fuelled by the dominant drinking discourse in the global north (Goddard & Cook, 2022; Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013). This research investigates whether young university students in the UK also find their university experiences lonely and, if so, what the social roots of such negative experiences are. Reading the literature around loneliness and identifying the gaps in knowledge as well as looking at findings of previous studies, is worth examining in further depth, e.g. why students continued to feel lonely if many other students were also feeling the same. How is it that the shared loneliness did not lead to establishing relationships? Thus, the following research questions were formulated to try and understand what was missing:

- **What are the students' experiences of loneliness in university?**

This is the main overarching research question of my thesis; it looks at the overall experience of loneliness but at the same time acknowledges that there are details and components to this experience. The answer to this question lies in the answer to the three following questions together. I also answer this question in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

1- How is loneliness co-constructed in university?

In this question, I examine the co-construction of loneliness as a relational experience. I specifically look into how individual students construct and contribute to the overall experience of students' loneliness. I do not see loneliness as a private experience happening to individual students separately but rather a fault in relationships that allow loneliness to show and thrive. Thus, I look into the relationships students have with their friends and their classmates to see how loneliness finds its place, even amongst close friends. I look into the narratives students draw from and the performances they engage in when they keep their loneliness to themselves. I also look at what makes them hesitant to share their experiences with others.

2- How are connections made/unmade on campus?

In this question, I look at the broader circle that students are part of. I focus on the student union as a space for new interactions and continuing relationships. I explore how students' groups are formed and unformed. I look specifically at what students do to create connections and their difficulties in being part of a group. I chose connections as an entry point to this question, believing that relationships are key in fending off loneliness. I also focus on relationships that did not get a chance to bloom, did not work and reasons why I question relationships are easier for some students and not others.

3- How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness?

This question tries to expand the argument that loneliness is not only relational and is more likely to happen to some students than others. It is also part of a production of systems and structures that are hostile to students, although they have the potential to be the opposite. In this question, I look into the interactions between students and university spaces. Although I do not engage with the geography of loneliness per se, I investigate how spaces become hostile to some students following interactions. I also use the concept of belonging as an entry point to see whether students get to belong automatically to their institutions once they get a place.

Research Aims and Objectives

Besides the research questions this thesis investigates, it also has certain aims, which I divide into three types: knowledge production aims, methodological aims and impact aims. Knowledge production aims to refer to the gaps in knowledge this thesis intends to fill. These aims are:

- To understand the nuances of students' loneliness as described by them and consider what we can learn from them regarding mental well-being in university.

- To explore the narratives young students draw on to make sense of their experiences and whether these are in agreement or opposition with the dominant psychological explanation of loneliness as an individual dissatisfaction with their relationships. (e.g. do their stories position loneliness in their brains only or at the structures?)

Methodological aims have to do with the contributions this thesis makes in relation to methodologies of 'sensitive topics'. Such aims include:

- Engaging with a methodology which ensures meaningful, genuine and respectful conversations are held.
- Proposing a way to decolonise research around mental well-being, which results in research that has an immediate positive impact on the spot rather than delayed long-term hard-to-guarantee benefits.

Impact aims consider the effects I plan and aspire to this research to have. These aims are:

- To disseminate the research findings to larger audiences of students and young people mental health charities.
- Share findings and advice in higher education conferences where people with first-hand contact with students can learn and think about best practices together.
- Ensure the stories shared in this research are heard in secondary schools for prospective university students, especially those from minority ethnic backgrounds and first-generation, to balance their expectations.

- The longer-term aim is to carefully implement the findings in Algerian universities to prevent young people from framing their feelings and experiences through Western lenses. Instead, these findings will be used as ways to think about alternatives that are more suitable to the Algerian context and productive to a student's mental well-being and sense of direction in life.

Research Significance

The tools used to fulfil impact aims are targeted talks in community centres and schools and conferences in Algerian universities. Social media, such as the loneliness group where I first recruited half of my participants, will be part of the dissemination process. The aim is to write a short story in a post where the voices of my participants are used to tell the wider audience that things will be okay eventually and that loneliness is not their fault, especially after they try and fail. It will also encourage them to think of alternative ways of being content and happy. The short story will also encourage students to challenge the mainstream discourse of success and belonging. This will be an ongoing task, which will largely depend on access, but I will try different outlets.

It is also through these stories that young university students can resist and challenge the discourses that circulate about them. Instead of finding loneliness, they could find belonging in non-belonging. An examination of in-depth narratives of loneliness can show that it is not the students smiling and laughing with each other on the university's main webpage that count; it is also those without connections, those who do not make it to the cover photos. They matter because their stories have the potential to disrupt what we already know about loneliness, to challenge systems that produce loneliness and also to hold ourselves accountable for buying into cultures that sell us happiness, but the product is broken.

Thesis Overview and Chapters' Summaries

Preface

This chapter sets the scene for my research. I introduce who I am and my story about loneliness to introduce the reader to my research journey. I share my research questions, the rationale behind the research and the overall aims and objectives of the project.

Chapter 1 - Loneliness: Theoretical Perspectives and previous research

The literature review chapter examines the already existing literature on loneliness from different fields: philosophy, social psychology (the interactionist view), cognitivism, evolutionary psychology and social neuroscience. These schools of thought were placed first according to their dominance in loneliness studies. Afterwards, I introduce and provide a review of theories and concepts I have employed in interpreting the stories from my participants. I begin with Affect theory and the works of Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Gregory J. Seigworth, Melissa Gregg and Brian Massumi. Affect theory offered me a different reading of loneliness as an affective circular process rather than an individual cognitive experience of dissatisfaction. Affect also took me out of the - is loneliness an emotion/feeling debate - and redirected my attention towards what emotions and feelings can do, where they stem from and how they translate differently in different bodies. I then move to Goffman's self-presentation theory in everyday social interactions (1956) and stigma (1963). I review his concepts on performances in everyday life, facework and the importance of maintaining a certain persona while also exploring what happens when individuals are othered and alienated from interactions because of their stigmatising identity. Last but not least, I review studies around university students' loneliness, concepts of belonging and mattering and look into how students interact with the system and how systems could prevent or contribute to loneliness.

Chapter 2 - Methodology and Method

In this chapter, I introduce my methodology, my world assumptions (ontology and epistemology) and my positionality. I share with readers how I hold different epistemologies at once, but as a researcher, I am a moderate social constructionist in thoughts and indigenous in practice and beliefs. I also share my research values under the title of Axiology.

I introduce my research methodology: narrative inquiry and, specifically, my research methods: narrative interviewing and photos. I also walk the reader through the process of participants' recruitment and share channels that did work and those which did not. I then reflect on the ethics process and practical issues that occurred during the Covid-19 lockdown. Later I will write about my analytical approach: narrative constructionist approach and analytical method: a narrative, thematic analysis. I share how I did my analysis through two layers; in the first stage, I analysed narratives separately and looked for patterns in each to maintain the particularities of each conversation. I developed different codebooks for each narrative to maintain the particularities of each conversation. I used the different codebooks in the second stage of the analysis, where I looked for themes which brought the narratives together. I did both layers of the analysing while considering the differences between students' narratives. Then I briefly share the theories and concepts which informed my analysis. I close the chapter with a note on my analytical writing and explain how allowing data to shape the analysis afforded a different style of analysis.

My two layers analysis allowed me to understand each story separately, to be able to find commonalities and differences with other participants' stories. I reckoned a two layers process was necessary because although loneliness was a common burden, connections and university (the three discussion themes) were commonalities, how students arrived at each one differed. To illustrate, while feeling loneliness was an inconvenience, it differed between students. Those who were well connected felt they were a burden and couldn't share it, whereas those without social ties had nobody to be a burden on. Thus, I let loneliness be the narrative thread walking the reader through each theme while highlighting the different experiences when necessary. In the following chapters, I present the different paths of loneliness in students' lives as my discussion themes.

Chapter 3: Analysis 1: Personal Burden: How Loneliness is Co-constructed by Students in the University

This is the first chapter where I begin to answer my research questions. Burden attempts to answer the first research question: How is loneliness co-constructed in university? Burden as a term opens ways to understand how loneliness still reigns powerfully even amongst close friends and inside cosy social circles. Students perceive themselves as burdensome and associate their loneliness with personal weakness and personal failures. They wouldn't share

their feelings with their close friends because they are afraid that their desire for connection would be seen as a desire for attention which may then make them easily disposable in the eyes of others. The stigma surrounding loneliness is reproduced by students thinking it is not normal to feel lonely despite being young and having friends in university. Therefore, students engage in performances of belonging that are not true to their feelings. Their loneliness is kept backstage of their social interactions and becomes the burden they carry alone.

Chapter 4: Analysis 2: Dealing with Burden: How students connect to Deal with Loneliness

In this chapter, I aim to answer the second research question: How are connections made/unmade on campus? I explore how students navigate and negotiate social spaces in their universities. The student union was the setting I examined with participants to see how groups are formed, why they are formed and why they are important in the student's life. I engage with Affect theory to show how affect, such as happiness, attracts some students toward each other while it alienates others. I look into how the narrative around student experience shapes students' acts of socialisation. In other words, I see how it is interpreted by students in their acts of grouping. I use loneliness as the counter-narrative which disrupts the promise of happiness in university.

Chapter 5: Analysis 3: Institutional Burden: How Loneliness is Constructed by Universities

In this chapter, I aim to answer the third research question: How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness? I present loneliness as an institutional story in which the interactions between students, staff and the university as a system open room for loneliness. I also look into positive social interactions, which were key in students' feeling that they belong. I use concepts that challenge the traditional understanding of belonging as a static state while also thinking about those who want to belong but cannot due to structural issues. I later move to concepts of ethical loneliness and slow violence to illustrate how small acts of negligence by the university build up the students' distress and wear them out to the extent they do not wish to ask for help.

Chapter 6 - Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, I summarise the research findings by revisiting each research question. I then move to the contributions of the thesis and divide them into three subheadings: theoretical consideration, methodological contributions, and application to professional practice. I

conclude the chapter by thinking about ideas for future research, and a final conclusion where I add the photos my participants shared with me to allow the reader to think and tell their own stories of loneliness.

Conclusion

This chapter served several purposes, which I summarise here. Firstly, it begins with a personal story on how loneliness and I met and how this meeting resulted in research on loneliness. Then it introduced the topic of research of this thesis: university students' experiences of loneliness, and the methodological approach this thesis takes, a narrative inquiry and, specifically, narrative interviewing. Secondly, it gives a short background for this research, meaning that it refers briefly to the context where loneliness in young people became a popular issue and the type of research that has already been carried out in relation to this topic broadly speaking - predominantly psychological- and identified both a research gap and the need and value in engaging with university students' accounts of their loneliness. Thirdly, it introduced the research questions this thesis intends to answer and its aims, which were divided into knowledge, methodological and impact ones. Finally, it provided a clear picture of the structure of this thesis, with a brief summary of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Loneliness: Theoretical Perspectives and Previous Research

Introduction

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part entitled: Mainstream theoretical perspectives on Loneliness: Scoping some dominant approaches to the Study of Loneliness perspectives, introduces the theoretical frameworks that have dominated loneliness research, specifically in past fifty years. It covers the philosophical understanding of loneliness, and the empirical quantitative studies which established loneliness as a 'scientific' object of inquiry.

It also covers the qualitative studies done on loneliness and draws attention to the implication of the dominant psychological understanding of loneliness. I discuss critiques of the dominantly psychological studies at a methodological level e.g., the use of scales to measure a complex experience, and their problematic implications, such as the individualisation and monopolization of loneliness as a Eurocentric experience. Then I outline the rationale for studying loneliness qualitatively and highlight the value of this approach. Still, it is important to be aware of the different mainstream perspectives around loneliness since it shapes how loneliness is understood today, and more importantly helps understands how the research participants frame their experiences within the various theories.

The next section of the literature review introduces the alternatives which I have drawn from in resisting the mainstream psychology and exploring different understandings of loneliness. I begin with part two which presents the first theoretical framework which I drew from in interpreting my data; namely, Affect studies (Ahmed, 2004; 2010; 2012 Berlant, 2011) in my second analytical chapter. Part three entitled "Understanding the Relationalities of Loneliness: Goffman and The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (Goffman, 1956; 1963) covers the second theoretical lens I draw from in discussing my findings in my first analytical chapter. The fourth part entitled "Loneliness, students and Higher Education: Mattering in University" engages with empirical studies done on students' loneliness, and engages with concepts such as transition, belonging, racism, intersectionality, recognition and mattering which were all relevant in interpreting and discussing data in my third analysis chapter.

Finally, I outline the rationale(s) for choosing the different theoretical lenses and explain how this PhD builds on the literature reviewed. I also discuss my use of the 'plunder as a method' (Hughes et al. 2012, p.315), meaning how my eclectic theoretical approach is applied to the analyses chapters.

Part 1: Mainstream theoretical perspectives on Loneliness: Scoping some dominant approaches to the Study of Loneliness

1. Loneliness as an object of philosophical discussion

When I first came to consider what loneliness 'is' I began with my own experiences. For me loneliness seemed to be an experience of feeling cold and empty. Although all buildings I walked into were well-heated, there was something missing. Relationships were missing and I was an isolated organism. Being Muslim, I still believed wholeheartedly that one is never alone, but I missed the call for prayer that reminded me of being part of something bigger than myself. Part of my reflections and experiences are reflected in some of the writings of theologians, and those of indigenous psychology.

Indigenous psychologists note that unrooting oneself from their environment induces feelings of disorientation, similar to loneliness. It is not simply being away from one's roots that induces loneliness, it is also the pressure of acculturation and challenges that create more harm. To illustrate, indigenous children who were forced to join residential schools in Canada faced all sorts of violence under the cover of acculturation (Barnes & Josefowitz, 2019). It was the case that indigenous children's identity and ways of existing in a community were not enough to fit Eurocentric ideals of being (Woolford & Gacek, 2016). In a highly individualistic society, it was no longer possible for me to start a conversation with a stranger or to say one word extra in formal transactions in administrations, shops, or anywhere.

In the literature loneliness was exclusively in terms of relationships, the focus is often on connections made between humans while there is an “exclusion of the Divine” (Gotesky,1965; p.223). Religion is brought up in studying institutional engagements for the elderly population illustrating the benefits of being involved in religious activities (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017; Krause, 2016). It is clear that one’s religiosity offers a lifelong involvement with a system of belief and others of similar views; what is not apparent, however, is how religiosity plays out in the absence of others. Do people still seek companionship? One study suggests that just believing in divinity is not enough to counter loneliness; it is how a person pictures this deity; if God is viewed as merciful and kind, the person would be less lonely (Schwab & Petersen, 1990). Moreover, in a study of Romanian migrants in France, some participants deliberately ignored the support and presence of their friends to turn to God for guidance and help (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017). Although these studies ring true to me, as a Muslim they were not identical to my faith. Religiosity indeed challenges the view that humans are existentially alone and provides opportunities for social support, but it does not negate natural reactions to calamities and hardship as stated in Quran, “and man was created weak” [an-Nisa’ 4:28]. Feeling lonely was something I considered a hardship, so instead of questioning whether I had the right to feel or not feel lonely, I continued looking into what triggered this weakness. I found philosophical explanations of loneliness helpful as they explored how loneliness is provoked once human weaknesses are awakened.

The concept of loneliness has been theorised in many fields, from philosophy where loneliness was viewed positively such as in German literature until 1945 (See review by de Jong Gierveld, 1998), to children's literature such as *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2001), and *Oliver* by Birgitta Sif (2012). It is an experience many find captivating, whether as a purely negative one which all humans are born with (Fromm,1941), and able to feel at any time of their lives (Sha'ked, & Rokach, 2015), or an opportunity to resort to nature (Korpela et al,2001), and a chance to rejuvenate energy (Lay et al.,2019).

Although loneliness is popular in scholarly works today, there was seemingly no mention of the term in English texts until the end of the 18th century. Before this, ‘oneliness’ was used to mean being on one’s own, equivalent to ‘solitude’ today (Alberti,2019). Solitude usually carries a positive connotation (Manusov,2020), especially when used in the context of religious worship (Durà-Vilà, & Leavey, 2017). However, loneliness today has a negative

connotation being framed as a serious mental and physical health concern (Qualter, et al.,2015) Further. Loneliness could be divided into ‘metaphysical’ loneliness and ‘epistemic’ loneliness (Svendsen,2017). Metaphysical loneliness is the belief that one is destined to be forever alone because of the way the world is structured; whereas epistemic loneliness is the feeling that one cannot understand or be understood by others.

Moreover, loneliness has a physical dimension to it, and the question of whether or not being alone equals loneliness received considerable attention in loneliness research (Van Baarsen-Heppener, et al, 2001; Perissinotto, & Covinsky, 2014; Carollo, et al., 20210). However, there is a growing consensus that loneliness rises with social isolation (Heu et al.,2019; Utz et al., 2014) while living alone does not always equal loneliness (Klinenberg, 2013). Whether or not loneliness links to physical isolation, Russel (1967) observes that there might a feeling of companionship in realizing that everyone else is lonely, he writes:

Everyone who realizes at all what human life is must feel at some time the strange loneliness of every separate soul; and then in the discovery in others of the same loneliness make a strange tie and growth, and a growth of pity so warm as to be almost a compensation for what is lost (p.160).

Although loneliness is a lonely feeling, it cannot be separated from connections. Loneliness in the literary and philosophical mode of thinking is conceptualized as an experience of a whole. The body and spirit were not separate, which is similar to my personal experience of loneliness as a feeling without a shape that moves constantly in and between bodies; it explains why I might have found Sheffield a lonely place. Nevertheless, with the rise of scientific medicine in the 19th century, the spirit and soul were removed from the study of humans; the psyche was disposed of in the mind, and the mind became the main material object of study (Alberti, 2016). The compartmentalization of body parts and examining them in the distinct field of medicine deepened the hollowness of emotions (Alberti,2010). In other words, when loneliness became a matter of cognition only, the body lost touch with itself.

2. Interactionist views on Loneliness

The philosophical view of loneliness as inescapable at worst and profitable at best did not suffice scholars anymore. For example, Fromm (1959) was unhappy with the lack of a scientific definition of loneliness which was evident in the lack of empirical works on loneliness in the first half of the 20th century. She called for a psychiatric discussion of “real loneliness” (Fromm,1959,p.2), and social psychology and neuroscience responded with abundant research.

One of the early respondents was the American sociologist Robert Stuart Weiss. Weiss (1973) published his influential work entitled *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*. He formulated an interactionist theory of loneliness, with the term interactionist meaning the combination of personal vulnerabilities and external pressure on relationships (Peplau and Perlman,1982). Weiss (1973) observed: “Loneliness appears always to be a response to the absence of some particular type of relationship or, more accurately, a response to the absence of some particular relational provision. “P.17 Similarly. De Jong-gierveld and Kamphuis (1985) perceive that “the essence of loneliness” (p.290) depends on the importance and impact of the absent relationship.

Weiss's (1973) greatest contribution was his dichotomy of loneliness into emotional and social loneliness, therefore, acknowledging the multidimensionality of the experience. Emotional isolation is the absence of an attachment figure in adults; whereas social isolation follows a deficit in social relationships and social integration; both types have a set of ‘symptoms’ such as anxiety and hypervigilance (Weiss,1973). The discourse of symptoms encouraged others influenced by his work to classify loneliness as a ‘syndrome’ (example of DiTommaso & Spinner, 1996).

It is important to note that Weiss's distinction was greatly influenced by the conceptual framework of Bowlby (1969) and Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory (1979). The link Weiss made between loneliness and attachment inspired the making of scales that focused on loneliness related to family, romantic and social domains; it also imposed an understanding of loneliness that is purely based on attachments (see, e.g. Bemardon et al., 2011; DiTommaso et al., 2003; Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006).

To Weiss (1973), loneliness can only be healed when a person has a sufficient supply of the right relationships. Meaning that loneliness needs to be understood within the frames of multiple relationships which provide different needs. Thus, if a global assessment shows that certain needs are unmet, it results in different types of loneliness.

3. Cognitivist View of Loneliness

Social psychologists have quickly joined the mission of defining loneliness. Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau, two American scholars who are credited for the widely used definition of loneliness today, developed the cognitive discrepancy model. Perlman and Peplau (1981) define 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.” P.31. They critique Weiss’s view as being inadequate and they argue that loneliness is not just an absence of certain relationships. They propose that loneliness emerges in the gap between the reality of a person’s social circle and their yearning for something different (Peplau and Perlman, 1981). What follows this definition of loneliness as a cognitive experience is a positivist approach to investigation in which loneliness is quantified and assessed (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980).

In emphasising the underlying cognitive processes, Peplau and Perlman (1981) clarify that being alone does not mean being lonely; therefore, loneliness is a subjective experience of isolation rather than an objective one. Individuals can be amongst groups and still feel lonely which depicts the complexity of the experience (Yanguas, Pinazo-Henandis, & Tarazona-Santabalbina, 2018). Since most definitions of loneliness emphasise the subjectivity of the experience (Rokach, 2021) an attributional approach dominated. This approach draws from personality psychology, mainly the Big-Five dimension of personality, to account for the differences in an individual's perception of the discrepancy (see examples Buecker et al, 2020; Dalton, & Cassidy, 2021; Mund, & Neyer, 2016). Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is widely used with different age groups to address ‘maladaptive social cognition’ (Masi, et al, 2011). CBT showed the most positive results and can even be administered online (Jarvis, Padmanabhanunni, & Chipps, 2019; Käll et al., 2020). The cognitivist approach to loneliness narrows my starting definition and makes the experience of loneliness, even lonelier. It

encourages the individual to find the fault and the solution within themselves, and to me, that is an unproductive way of thinking about loneliness that was dominantly present in my participants' accounts.

4. Evolutionary and Neuroscience Perspectives on loneliness

J.T. Cacioppo and Bernston (2002), the founding fathers of social neuroscience, believe that humans are social animals and that social processes must be studied biologically; they state: "The human brain and biology have evolved within a fiercely social world; individuals who live in isolation are unlikely to survive and less like yet to reproduce." p.4. The social neuroscientists' work on loneliness was shaped by the aforementioned concepts of Weiss's (1973) relational deficits with the hypervigilance remark; and Perlman and Peplau's (1981) cognitivist theory of mismatch between actual and ideal relationships. The individual's brain is thought of as the centre of social processes, in which the same relationship can be viewed as safe and loving or as threatening and shallow (S. Cacioppo, Capitanio, & J. Cacioppo, 2014). Loneliness is familiarly defined as "the discrepancy between the presence of a preferred and an actual conspecific" (S.Cacioppo and J. Cacioppo, 2015, p.948). It is important to note that social neuroscientists consider loneliness a similar experience in both humans and animals. That is why they tend to use perceived social isolation instead of the term loneliness (Hawkey et al.,2003; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983).

The evolutionary perspective of loneliness stands on the idea that those who fail to form groups create their own coping mechanisms with danger. When a person is feeling lonely, they become more sensitive to the world around them (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005). This sensitivity can be viewed from two different angles. One has a positive end which is restoring social bonds (Inagaki et al., 2016; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), and the other, is hyperalertness, which leads to a negative result despite the good intentions (Weiss,1973).

In this discipline, loneliness is also defined as impaired social cognition. A lonely person is perceived to have poor self-regulation, thus harmonious co-regulation with others fails (J. T.

Cacioppo and Patrick, 2009). Moreover, loneliness has been described as a “common emotional distress syndrome with a high-risk factor for early mortality and a wide variety of physiological; health, and psychiatric issues”(S. Cacioppo et al., 2015, p.245). The link between loneliness and a plethora of poor health outcomes such as worse cardiovascular disease and serious mental health problems is now well established (Leigh-Hunt,2017; Fortuna,2021, Lederman,2021). Loneliness became highly visible after the World Health Organization declared it a public health issue that warrants the attention of everyone (Courtet, et al.2020). Linking loneliness to the risk of dying is dominant in the media coverage of loneliness and causes moral panic (Alberti,2019). Loneliness as an epidemic (Holt-lunstad,2017) is still the main narrative used around loneliness in research, media, and policy discourse. Although it is important to be aware of loneliness, sensational irrational media coverage can amplify the struggle and result in an increased risk of suicide (Sisask & Värnik,2012).

Hawkey and Cacioppo (2010) constructed the Loneliness Model, which tested the hypervigilance characteristic empirically. They demonstrated that hyperaltness can be seriously destructive to one’s health. Sleep disruption is one of them (Cho et al., & Irwin, 2015; Kurina et al., 2011; Zilioli et al., 2017). However, in one study of adolescents twins (Matthews et al., 2017), poor sleep quality was not due to loneliness and sleeping sharing the same genetic/ environmental source. Exposure to violence during childhood and adolescence intensified hypervigilance in teenagers.

Genetically, it is suggested that loneliness has a component that is both stable and heritable and that lonely individuals tend to start a family with another lonely individual (Distel et al., 2010). Loneliness was also demonstrated to share the same gene as depression (Matthews et al., 2016). Thus, social neuroscientists are actively working toward a tangible remedy. They Proposed formulas including Oxytocin, fluoxetine Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) that are mainly prescribed to treat depression and severe PMS (S. Cacioppo et al., 2015; Van Roekel et al., 2013). Studies are in progress trying to explore a short-term pharmacological treatment for loneliness (Cacioppo et al.,2015; Matrisciano & Pinna,2021). As the future of a loneliness pill is approaching, I recall Klinenberg (2002) once cautioned: “Medical science can tell us little about social conditions that affect the course of our lives and the context of our deaths. Excessive use of the medical microscope obscures or makes invisible the social pathologies that generate illness and diseases. “ p.234.

Following the reviewed conceptualization above, it is made clear that loneliness is not about lacking social skills, for example. J.T. Cacioppo et al. (2000) portray lonely individuals as only different in terms of how they evaluate social interactions. Contradictorily, Christensen and Kashy (1998) established that lonely people were more active and willing to use the research setting to engage with others. They were also perceived as friendlier by their non-lonely counterparts. In another study, individuals who scored lonely tend to gaze more at the face of others in conversations, which could indicate a strong desire to connect (Lodder et al., 2016). It is important to mention that this is not a popular opinion in the literature. Even with optimistic results, interpretations tend to be very cautious because, somehow, positivity is atypical in a lonely person's profile.

In my study, it is important to be aware of all of these different conceptions of loneliness because the psychological framing of loneliness seeps into how my participants understood themselves, other students and their entire university experience.

The research participants constructed themselves and their loneliness as deficient and incompetent while drawing from discourses indicating failure. The dominant understanding of loneliness was heard in their assumptions on which loneliness is legitimate and understandable and which one is not. As the philosophical framings described the visceral sensation of loneliness, its pain and dullness; the interactionist view was apparent in how students assumed that more relationships would mean less loneliness. The cognitivist view translated into students counting their friendships and measuring them against a certain ideal. The evolutionist perspectives with its gene and social brain studies indicate how individuals could come to understand their loneliness as stemming from something internally wrong with them. Even with all this knowledge, the research participants still had gaps in their understanding of why they felt the way they felt.

5. Qualitative Studies on Loneliness

In the last three to four years, scholars from other paradigms wrote on loneliness. Here, I will briefly review works from feminism and anthropology. Eleanor Wilkinson (2022) persuasively

argues that in the midst of the moral panic around loneliness today in the media and in government discourses, loneliness is a feminist issue, it is not just personal but also political. Wilkinson (2022) analyses how loneliness is held hostage in personal life by families and communities so the government is not held accountable for its isolating destructive mechanisms. Wilkinson (2022) challenges the dominant discourse around loneliness as a personal problem and failure, they encourage everyone to imagine a life lived otherwise. From a feminist perspective, scholars look at wider world politics through lenses of colonialism, racism, ableism anti-queer and other structural inequalities to examine the complexity of loneliness (Magnet, & Orr 2022). To illustrate, loneliness is also used as an entryway to argue against white privilege that is able to separate thinking from feeling and encourages distancing oneself from their pain and that of others (Magnet and Dunnington,2022). Loneliness then becomes the affective state of today's living conditions, resulting from long-lasting violence that is too complex to be pinned down to abstract variables in a vacuum (Cvetkovich,2022).

From an anthropological point of view, loneliness is cultural and cultural expectations give it shape and prominence (Ozawa-de Silva, Parsons; 2020). Loneliness as a term does not mean the same thing everywhere, in Northern Niger and Mali loneliness is directly linked to the harm done to the environment and how that violence pushes people to look for their existence again and cope with the changes (Rasmussen,2020). In Post-Soviet Russia, loneliness is about being unwanted society after fighting a war, it is the absence of recognition that makes people feel worthy of living (Parson,2020). Thus, research around loneliness must be contextualized, as Jenkins et al,(2020) argue: "Loneliness, as a vital, intricate, and intimate emotional realm requires breadth and depth of understanding" p.682. So rather than relying only on the psychological conceptualization of loneliness which explore loneliness from within, cultural and sociological understandings of loneliness today need to begin with the outside-in perspective.

Implications of the dominant loneliness studies

It is clear from the literature reviewed above that loneliness studies are dominated by the cognitivist individual-based models. Adopting a single definition as a standard explanation of loneliness overlooks loneliness' wider more complex causes. I am somehow cautioning against the danger of having dominant cognitivist definitions that aim to be applicable to everyone, of being told what your loneliness is and having other experiences negated and silenced. Moreover, cognitivist approaches imply a fault-finding approach that positions loneliness as called upon oneself.

Further, loneliness is understood from the global north but still expands its finding to include every human since it is claimed to be cognitive and ingrained in our evolution. The UCLA scale has been translated into many languages including Arabic (AlNajjar & Dodeen,2017) Urdu (Anjum,& Batool,2016), Turkish (Yıldız, & Duy,2014) and Korean (Kim,1997) to further impose a single simplistic understanding of a complex feeling. A monopolization of loneliness takes away the experience and the contribution of others who do not see the world from a Eurocentric epistemology. Moreover, studying a private matter such as loneliness in a population of hundreds does not recognise that loneliness may be understood and experienced differently by each participant. Arguably, exploring loneliness requires more than a simple analysis of one's social circle, especially when social circles themselves are not equally accessible to everyone.

Therefore, the simple question scholars started with what is loneliness remains unanswered and it requires a different mode of investigation to expand our understanding of loneliness, and potentially use the depth of loneliness as an opportunity for changing what leads us there in the first place (Magnet & Dunnington, 2022).

In my view, loneliness is in relationships, it is not the simple case of being with or without the right relationship. Loss of certain relationships could be a trigger, but it is not the only one. If one pictures humans as islands, loneliness is the water surrounding, bringing together or separating those islands. Relationships are the objects forming on those islands. Herz and Lalander (2017) worded it nicely in writing: "Loneliness is more like an emotion in motion than

something permanent or fixed. Loneliness needs to be approached through relationships between individuals, as it is constantly given shape in the complexity of their everyday lives.” p.1065. That is to say, loneliness does not just exist as a reality that is unchangeable, but it can overwhelm human lives as 71 per cent earth’s water-covered surface. It can also be used as an opportunity to connect with each other while overlooking differences that are socially constructed rather than innate. A model I found particularly useful is the experiential model of loneliness (Stein and Tuval-Mashiach,2015).

This experiential model follows an interpretative social constructionist approach which highlights the complexity of loneliness. It views loneliness in its wholeness without focusing on the division in its conceptualization (loneliness as cognitive, affective, existential). It also highlights that each explanation of loneliness represents an experience (denoting experiential) which is not necessarily felt as prescribed. For example, someone who perceives a lack of quality in their relationship does not necessarily have to feel lonely. Someone else who feels lonely, irrelevant of their solid relationships is also still a valid experience of loneliness. According to this model, pain is the indicator of loneliness, it does not require articulation but requires to be felt (Stein and Tuval-Mashiach,2015). A cognitivist understanding of loneliness is expanded and challenged when we view it in different cultural contexts. As a young person would feel lonely in a British university for not having many friends, another person of similar age would feel lonely and removed from society when losing their herd of animals and with it their livelihood; the latter is an example from Turkana migrants in Kenya (Pike & Crocker,2020). Other conditions that shift loneliness away from an individual’s cognitive evaluation include dire social circumstances. A collaboration between researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University and youth co-researchers at 42nd Street Charity has produced a report in which the lived loneliness is different from the theoretical. The findings of this report, Loneliness Connect Us (2018) presented a socially embedded loneliness. Social conditions encompassing daily adversities such as poverty that is both personal and communal, drug use/abuse, being ‘different’ in conservative communities, and perhaps most relatable to my study is the present pressures in education to become something (Batsleer, Duggan, Mcnicol, Spray, & Angel, 2018). In another analysis of feeling removed, Herz and Lalander (2017) study the account of ‘unaccompanied minor’ refugee in Sweden; they observe: “ Loneliness is not something essential he carries within him, rather something created in the marginal social situation he experiences and lives in”

p.1067. Therefore, before examining an experience that people had in common across time and space, it is important to recognise that loneliness does not exist in a vacuum.

Part 2: Alternative Theoretical Perspectives; Affect studies and Loneliness.

The Alternatives

In this section, I shift away from the more mainstream, more recognisable assumptions of loneliness to those which enable possibilities. I move from pathological certainties to conceptions of loneliness that enable empowerment and freedom from the vicious cycle of self-blame. I look into understanding loneliness from outside the individual, I explore loneliness as an affect, an experience that moves us closer or away from each other; presentation of self from a dramaturgical perspective which links to how loneliness is performed, and finally structures that host loneliness and give it space to thrive.

Affect

Is loneliness an emotion? A feeling? or an Affect?

In this section, I offer Affect theory as one alternative for the understanding of loneliness.

Affect Theory is a discipline that rose to popularity in the middle of the 1990s thanks to the work of philosophers like Spinoza, Deleuze, Eve Sedgwick, and Brian Massumi. It came to be known under what was termed the “Affective Turn”, where many disciplines started thinking about emotions and their political and social functions and what they serve rather than seeing emotions as transcultural unaffected by outside circumstances, or what was understood as the “biomediated body” (Clough,2008; p.2). Massumi (2002) succinctly describes affect in writing: “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving.” p.1 Thus, it becomes difficult to separate affect from cognition and body when affect happens to the body and triggers thought and thoughts frames affect. Affect then becomes two things: a capacity to be constantly moving others and the feeling of being moved by them (Massumi,2015).

How can Affect offer a different perspective on loneliness?

Affect is difficult to engage with because it is not one theory that stands for a single worldview (Massumi, 2015). While Affect refuses to be defined, thinking of movement is helpful in beginning to imagine affect. Affect is the ability to affect and be affected. it is the initial “*force or forces of encounter*” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; p.2). These forces of the encounter only happen in the proximity between bodies human or non-human; thus, Affect is relational. Affect also brings disruption to a situation and it increases or decreases a body’s ability to act; it also forces bodies to realign with the new irruptions and capacity to change power relations (Massumi, 2015). Affect is not an emotion, but it is not separate from it either, emotions are the expression of affect (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). Affect is pre-conscious, prelinguistic pre-emotion and it can “drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p.1). Affect invites exploration, movement, and fluidity into theory; therefore, it refuses to be defined as it is always in the process of becoming.

On the other hand, Ahmed (2004) disagrees with Affect works which view emotion as dormant, and she does not view affect as autonomous and separate from emotions. Ahmed (2004) insists that we see emotions in terms of what they do instead of what they are. Ahmed (2004) argues “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.” p.119. Thus, she is interested in the “binding” characteristics of emotions, which means the way some emotions pull people together at the expense of dispersing others. Ahmed (2015) adopts a Marxist logic of capital where she explains that “affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation” p.45. Thus, just as the value of commodity increases in its movement (Marx, 1976, as cited in Ahmed, 2015), the movement of signs increases their affective value. Ahmed (2004) makes use of another important concept, Marx’s ‘commodity fetishism’ p.120 in describing how the movement of feelings between signs, objectifies the feeling. The feeling becomes an object, and it becomes known as the “containing” affect. Affect becomes inherent to the object by masking the social and historical background of its production and accumulation. It is through the accumulation and circulation of affect that some emotions gain prominence, they stick to bodies and objects and define

how are they to be known (Ahmed,2004). Affect then maintains associations between ideas, values and objects.

Whereas affect is an unrecognized intensity that is beyond cognition, emotions, on the other hand, they are “forms of intensity, bodily orientation, and direction that are not simply about “subjective content” or qualification of intensity” (Ahmed,2010; p.230). Meaning that instead of adopting an ‘inside-out model of emotions’, it is worth recognizing emotions as something that does not reside in specific bodies only, but as something that is always in the form of becoming when moving through different bodies and surfaces (Ahmed, 2015; p.9). Affect is something that ‘sticks’ and shapes the way something or someone is known. The circulation of cultural narratives usually charges affects, and affect can be actualized and intensified through different rhetoric (Wetherell,2012). Indeed, this explains why Ahmed uses affect and emotion interchangeably. To her affect and emotions “slide into each other; they stick, and cohere”. P.230. Berlant (2011) offers strong examples of Ahmed’s argument under a concept she termed “cruel optimism”, she writes:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. p.1

Although Berlant argues that not all orientations to happiness necessarily result in happiness, her concept still shows that affect and emotions are orientations that people internalise from the environment. The intensities that others such as Massumi describe as affect are “directed” as well as “qualified” or even “congealed”: this directedness is not simply about subjects and interior feeling states but about how things cohere in a certain way.” (Ahmed,2010; p.230-231). This is where the contribution of value/power-laden contexts shapes certain affect more than others. This also means that before we affect or get affected in Massumi understanding, we are already set to be affected in certain ways, which is especially the case when some objects, places and groups of people are assigned certain affective values (Ahmed,2010). Therefore, to Ahmed Affect is not purely presubjective and

autonomous. If we are to think of loneliness in these terms, we arrive at the idea that loneliness is set to affect some more than others, with some bodies being more repellent or attractive than others. What determines the agreeability of a body is the power dynamics and different values in different contexts.

Therefore, instead of seeing emotions and loneliness as contagious (Tomkins,1995) which move swiftly from one body to another while remaining the same; Affect is sticky. Indeed, we are not all affected by the contagion in the same way because the time and the state of the body arriving at a certain affective atmosphere determines how it is affected (Ahmed,2010).

Further, Ahmed (2010) explains that affect involves the evaluation of objects in the near sphere of our bodies. This means that different affects shape the near sphere around people, with it attracting certain objects and turning away from others “ things we do not wish to have, touch, taste, hear, feel, see, those things we do not want to keep within reach ” (Ahmed,2010; p.24). Affect also doubles; to clarify, an orientation to an object such as tasty food and proximity to it registers an emotion as love, the experience of love involves a loving orientation towards this food, and the experience of love marks down objects as tasty. The nuance Ahmed offers in her view on Affect allows me to approach loneliness as an experience that is co-constructed between students. Loneliness is not inherent in certain bodies or spaces; it is the result of proximities to certain objects and orientations away from other objects. Loneliness is the promise of belonging which doesn't return happiness. This discussion matters for my analysis and understanding participants because I am able to look beyond the individual, outside of loneliness as a lonely experience, and I am also able to look into different orientations that could avoid loneliness.

Furthermore, since Affect can be expected without having a direct experience with the object, an object accumulates the value of proximity from its environment. This could explain why certain places such as the student union and pubs are assigned happiness whereas others are assigned loneliness (bedrooms, lecture theatres). It also clarifies my own theoretical position as it frees me from seeing loneliness as the natural state of feeling alone, to question how affective structures divide students even more into groups which allow for more loneliness to

seep through. Thus, Affect is relational because affective atmospheres are shared and the attachments people make and desire to keep in their environments vary (Berlant, 2011).

Both Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011) see an agency in humans reacting to the incoherences of the world. With agency, affect becomes political (Stewart, 2007). Whetherell (2012) also contextualises affect and acknowledges its multiple social and historical readings. When emotions are theorized and politicised as part of power-laden, gendered, raced, and classed relations, we can see how affect sticks to certain bodies and sticks them bodies together while alienating others (Ahmed, 2004). This work is important in understanding the relationship between affect and race; affect then “invites us to recognize that the spatial geopolitical, and historical parameters *that produce otherness also simultaneously secure certain affective planes of belonging and nonbelonging* through such production” (Shome, 2010; p.164). The idea of otherness is important in my work because it directly links to why students of colour and international students in my study feel alienated in a majority White university. Otherness then is not about being different, but about being constructed as alien in spaces that are reserved for certain bodies while excluding other bodies. Ahmed (2010) observes: “Ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy ‘in the right way’” p.13. In other words, happiness perpetuates inequalities, and the person exposing inequality while not fitting in the archetype of happiness becomes a “Feminist Killjoy” (Ahmed, 2017), the person that brings tension to other bodies, bodies that disrupt “organic enjoyment”; killjoy resists the “promise of happiness” because “inequality is preserved through the appeal of happiness, the appeal to happiness. It is as if the response to power and violence is or should be to simply adjust or modify how we feel” (p. 60)

Lonely individuals can be seen as killjoys to university systems, mental health support who might not know how to support them, and overall, loneliness disrupts the promise of the glamorous ‘student experience’ university uses in its advertisement.

Alienation

Ahmed's (2014) discussion of the affective structure of racism and her analysis of fear and hate-producing objects sticky with anger, echoes Fanon's idea of the black person's alienation as an object of hate in the white subject world.

I was introduced to the concept of alienation when reading *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1961). Then in reading another of his books, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). Alienation is depicted in different parts of the book: the black child, black Martinique in France, the Arab and Fanon's own experiences of encountering racism. He (1952) portrayed alienation in a raw visceral manner: "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?" p.92 Fanon (1952) exemplifies alienation in the black child growing up to "become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world" (p.121), in referring to the colonial society; whereas a white child grows up to be normal. Fanon's ethno-psychiatric (McCulloch, 1983; p.13) writing on colonial racism shows how colonialism shapes people's view of themselves from the early years of development; it creates a psychic structure of perceiving oneself as a subhuman (Fanon, 1952). Fanon (1961) examines the wider context behind the division by critiquing Western humanism which is built on white values and used as a universal code. The white values become the norm and the ideal against which the black image is constructed.

"The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly" (Fanon, 1952; p. 112). In believing that the black person is what the white person isn't, and in pinning all negative characteristics on the black person, black inferiority confirms white superiority.

The Black man becomes this repulsive body, the object of disgust sticking to it. It creates the affect of fear in other bodies as violence becomes inherent to the body. The black body becomes the canvas on which all violence is projected (Fanon, 1952). I find the work of Fanon (1965, 1968) useful in interpreting the alienation of students who do not identify as White British; the alienation of living in a post-colonial world where structures of white supremacy and racism still prevail constructing certain bodies as 'friend-able' while others as empty vessels walking around which do not qualify to attract interest, or in worse scenarios bodies which are full with affective values of hate, fear and extremism. Emotions indeed "both

generate their objects and repeat past associations” (Ahmed 2014, p.194). They form the relations we have today and assign different affective loads to them.

The relevance of affect studies to this PhD: Why Affect and Loneliness?

In using Affect, loneliness can be seen as a process, a movement. It moves between bodies; loneliness affects a body and the bodies affect each other. Loneliness is necessarily affective: it has the potential to affect and be affected. I see loneliness as an affect that circulates within bodies, it is accumulative, ever-changing without edges, and thus hard to explain in terms of cause and effect (Wetherell,2012). I argue that loneliness is an experience everybody participates in and because of its relational nature, the loneliness some feel is deeply interconnected with the non-loneliness of others. Instead of thinking of loneliness as a private psychological matter, either a feeling or an emotion, I find Ahmed’s (2004) model of affective economies more productive. In using Affect we are encouraged to examine loneliness as a movement in which everyone shares responsibility. We are also encouraged to view loneliness as movement gone off. Affect encourages a careful examination of the culture which mediates the way we affect and get affected. Affect also looks at language as a tool that does not only describe the world but also creates it. If we begin the affect of loneliness from language, it can be seen how the utterances we repeat from the culture surrounding us construct the experience of loneliness, what should be counted as loneliness and what should not. Narratives could determine the paths of belonging and the paths to loneliness. Therefore, Affect not only offers a different conceptualization of loneliness, but it also sets it free from definitions and expectations that bound an individual in a vicious circle of isolation. Affect also encourages the multiplicity of potentials (Seigworth,2005), which offers new ways of viewing students’ experiences and could release many people from dominant narratives around their mental well-being.

Finally, Affect leads me to question who has the right to be happy and the disadvantage of feeling lonely. As a theory, it helps me make sense of one of my research questions: How are connections made/unmade on campus?

Part 3: Understanding the Relationalities of Loneliness: Goffman and The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

Goffman and the Self

Goffman is known by many as “the ethnographer of the self” (Freidson, 2019), he is the “supreme analyst of face-to-face social interaction” (Pinch, 2010, p.410) whose primary objective was “unravelling the procedures employed by people in their face to face dealings with each other” (Drew and Wootton, 1988, p.4). Goffman’s ideas are thriving today in the context of social media. His concepts, such as ‘face work’, ‘front’, and ‘stages’ along with the ‘presentation of self’ which focus on the self-image of participants and how they negotiate and maintain them on social media are used profusely in online social interactions (see Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Lillqvist and Louhjala, 2014; West and Trester, 2012; Davies 2012).

Goffman (1983) pushed for ‘interaction order’ or face-to-face interactions to become a valid analytical tool of daily life. He sees the self as the product of various means whose task is to maintain harmonious relationships with others.

Perceiving daily life as a theatre and thinking of people as characters and performers in interactions attracted disdain from Goffman’s peers who thought he was portraying a dark version of reality where everybody is a manipulator (Williams, 1986). Performance might also suggest that people lack agency, always being part of an act; nevertheless, according to Sirinivasan (1990) Goffman “does not treat the individual subject as a programmed puppet” p.144. Goffman sees agency enacting when individuals engage in controlling their performances and in managing others’ impressions of them (Srinivasan,1990). Although Goffman positions himself as an uncertain positivist (Verhoeven,199) I use his concepts to reach one understanding of loneliness out of many. When it comes to agency, I see that performance even if indirectly enforced by social encounters still remains a choice. Whether or not it is the only choice students have, it still portrays students’ agency in manoeuvring their daily university life. The concepts I choose from Goffman’s dramaturgical approach are the following: face work, regions (back and front), impression management, performance,

and stigma to argue that in a highly competitive environment such as the university, performativity might be inescapable.

Goffmanian Concepts

Before I delve into definitions of the concepts I used, it is important to note that social interactions do not necessarily mean people talking to each other. According to Jenkins (2010) the mere presence of others in our daily lives is enough to call it a social interaction. So as time and space become less relevant in the game of impression management, so is the portrayal of loneliness as an affect that moves between present and absent bodies through objects. In my analysis of *Burden in Burden* Chapter, I point out that students are interacting with other students even when they are not acknowledging each other. It is in those silent social interactions where loneliness finds its way. I draw from Goffman's concepts of impression management, facework, regions, and stigma to argue that an investment made in managing impressions attracts loneliness.

Performance

In *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (1956) Goffman pictures the self as an actor actively involved in both performing, watching and responding to performances. He differentiates between impressions we "*give*" and impressions we "*give off*" (Goffman, 1956, p.14). The first refers to verbal or its substitutes communication where meaning is conveyed by the exact chosen words. The second refers to the symbols and actions that are performed to convey another meaning that both the actor and audience recognize (Goffman, 1956 p.14). Goffman (1956) relies heavily on cognitive control as the core of the interaction structure. He also views performances from the point of view of groups. He proposes that performers constitute a team who cooperates to maintain a certain image, part of their cooperation requires that they conceal the secret of their harmony and it also involves them adhering to "a particular definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1956, p.108). Goffman (1956) continues to explain that performers are not a team by default if they are part of a wider group, they are only a team when they have one image to maintain.

Impression Management

In order to keep an image, teams engage in what Goffman (1956) termed Impression management. It refers to people or individuals in performance working on shaping what others think of them. They choose the impression that they want to be seen and hide every fact that could discredit their performance (Goffman,1956). Since performance is a combination of rules both performers and audience follow, they can easily go wrong. Goffman outlines three rules on how performances 'succeed', all of which entail responsibility and accountability to others. The three forms are: 'dramaturgical loyalty', 'dramaturgical discipline' and 'dramaturgical circumspection (Goffman,1956, p.207-210-.212.) In the first one entails complete allegiance to the secrets of a team and not disclosing any account even when the individual does not agree with them. The second 'discipline', entails dedicated involvement in the role being performed but not allowing oneself to get "carried away by his own show"(Goffman,1956, p.210). The last one 'is circumspection' where performers pre-plan their shows and only engage with audiences that are less threatening to their performances. All of the three forms make up strategies in impression management where teams and individuals are careful about how they are perceived.

Additionally, Goffman (1956) positions performances as prone to failure. performances: disruptions and scenes. Disruptions refer to the points which break a performance, deviate it from its purpose, and cause confusion and embarrassment.

Facework

Face is a concept coined by Goffman (1967) which may be "defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967, p.5). Brown and Levinson (1987) in their work "Politeness Theory" add the concept of "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" p.61. For them, the face is something "that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" p.61. Brown and Levinson (1987) make a distinction in Goffman's face concepts by categorising faces into negative and positive, both of which are related. Here, the negative face is understood as an individual's concern to protect their autonomy and personal space whilst the positive face is related to an individual's concern for their self-image to be liked and

approved of. Thus, interaction becomes “a constant balancing act between protecting our own face and the face of others” (Benwell & Stokoe 2006, p.274)

My analysis will explore how positive face is attended to by linking the concept of face, and face work, to students not wanting to share their loneliness. They avoid putting pressure and awkwardness on the other person who wouldn't know how to respond in such conversations while simultaneously preserving their positive face. Specifically, when loneliness questions the very relationship, the speaker has with the listener; meaning both participants' faces are threatened.

This concept of 'face' is a relevant one to draw upon when interested in the process of self-presentation, impression management, and even stigma later on.

Regions

Goffman(1956) uses theatre illustration to portray how people are in a constant movement between what he termed front and back regions. It is understood by Goffman (1956) that when in social interactions, individuals perform to communicate a desirable picture of themselves. During interactions, the performance happens on the front stage where the actor is aware of the presence of an audience watching; thus they follow the rules of the frame in order to maintain their face. Thus, Goffman argues that facework is specifically more active on the front stage rather than backstage, where individuals are more likely to relax in the absence of performances. Backstage, individuals are also more likely to work on their presentations, and their performances, as Goffman (1956) portrays backstage as a safe space as long as the audience does not have access to it. Performances also occur when there is no direct engagement from the audience which Goffman (1956) called 'decorum' p.110. Goffman (1956) divides rules of decorum into two types: moral and instrumental with moral referring to showing respect and instrumental meaning the duties and tasks assigned in different situations.

It can be deduced from the above that individuals are skilled in performance and know exactly when to switch off. Although I do not take Goffman's ideas as the only rules of interaction, I find them useful in analysing the barriers to sharing and in the construction of burden as a

feeling student sense when they feel lonely. In Goffmanian ideas, feeling lonely could be seen as something that requires more facework: meaning when someone feels lonely, they are aware that they are not in their best self-image, their face is threatened by the fragility of their feelings inside, so there is more effort spent in maintaining the face from the embarrassment and shame that admitting one's loneliness can trigger. Thus, the frontstage performance of non-loneliness is ongoing; however, the tricky aspect is, the performance needs the audience, it needs the other and in the case of feeling isolated, sometimes the other is completely absent which further complicates loneliness: is it an issue to share with others or something to keep oneself in the backstage?

Stigma

I am extending this current field of literature by focusing more so on the organisation of the interaction among students and the environment around them than on the individuals themselves. Goffman (1982) saw a value in observing "behavioral settings" p.4 because it shows the rules and the norms of the social interactions and the environment surrounding it. He was intrigued by the question of how people learn the norms and conventions of interactions and how they (un) follow them. With loneliness, students feeling lonely follow the norms and do not follow them at the same time: they follow them by performing or acting non-loneliness. They do not follow them by feeling lonely in what is set as a highly socialised time and space. I find the concept of Stigma also developed by Goffman (1963) very relevant in explaining the second, meaning how certain experiences became an undesirable part of performances. Goffman (1963) argues that stigma happens when an individual is "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one...sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming" p.9-10. Goffman (1963) notes that an understanding of stigma should not be limited to stigma as a discrediting characteristic but rather " a language of relationships"p.10. Although Goffman describes well what stigma is, he neglects the structural conditions including power in the production of stigma. This is especially strange given that the time when he wrote his book on Stigma coincided with the 1960 US civil rights and black power movements, which shows that Goffman focused on the micro level of stigma while isolating his work from the macro structures imposing it (Tyler,2018). Tyler (2020) writes: "Stigma is purposefully crafted as a strategy of government, in ways that often

deliberately seek to foment and accentuate inequalities and injustices.” p.18. Another accompanying emotion is guilt although guilt allows for forgiveness whereas shame stands for a constant irreversible feeling of worthlessness (Buchbinder,& Eisikovits,2003).

The stigma of loneliness might not be as politically charged as the one caused by austerity; however, it still stems from neoliberal logic which advocates self-efficiency and self-reliance. Neoliberalism logic is understood here as the material practices and discursive constructions that view humans from a market perspective. It shows that an effective government emphasises the idea of the self-regulating free market, which prioritises competition and self-interest to achieve success (Steger & Roy 2010, p. 12). I use the term to refer to the values associated with neoliberalism while acknowledging that it is a highly contested concept (Castree, 2006; Clarke, 2008; Mudge,2008)

Critique of Goffman's work

One of the earliest critiques of Goffman is from Gouldner (1970) who viewed Goffman as working within the sphere of Western middle-class mentality. Moreover, Schegloff (1988), a previous student of Goffman and of his harshest critics, laid out two main limitations with Goffman's work. The first one is that Goffman's work focused a lot on the topics of ritual and 'face' but little on the systematic research aspect. Secondly, Schegloff (1988) noted that many of Goffman's data were "invented data" which renders them "empirically not accurate" p.106. This means, that his study of social interaction in some cases was only social in Goffman's mind and detached from the real world. Not only researchers cannot replicate and test the study somewhere else, but the examples Goffman used might also be an exaggeration or an understatement of daily interactions. Goffman did use fictional sources such as novels as illustrations in a way that caused genuine confusion amongst scholars; he was aware of these critiques and relied less on literature from the mid-70s onward (Smith,2022).

Goffman and his notion of performance partly inform the theoretical framework of this thesis: a framework that understands loneliness is exacerbated by daily performances of independence, self-reliance, and strength. I argue that performances amplify loneliness,

invalidate its importance, and increase its intensity. My discussion of burden is also informed by Goffman's Stigma and the concept of face and impression management. I will argue that loneliness is constructed as a burden because students feel that it stigmatises their identity as young carefree happy social students having the best student experience. Students might have to conform to certain performances dictated by the expectations of the frame and are only allowed to feel lonely in backstage of their performances.

The relevance of Goffman to this PhD

Using Goffman's theory on the presentation of self (1956) and stigma as spoiled identity (1963), I can explore how loneliness is navigated in close relationships. I can also understand why students find it difficult to share their feelings with close friends and what kind of performances they are engaged in in order not to spoil their identities. Thus, Goffman's concepts help me answer my first research question: **how is loneliness co-constructed in university?** Using the concepts of Goffman, I can see how loneliness is co-constructed between students and their close friends as a relational feeling rather than an individual one. It also answers specifically why students feel lonely despite having a good network of friends and acquaintances, and what kind of identity markers they try to avoid in their performances of belonging. Further engaging with Goffman's concepts allows me to explore the expectations students have of themselves and others and examine where and how those expectations are constructed.

Part 4: Loneliness, students and Higher Education: Matter in University

Loneliness in Higher Education

Students go to university with all sorts of luggage, physical and emotional. During the transition period from adolescence to adulthood as in the case of young students starting university immediately after school, this transition can be distressful (Fiori & Consedine, 2013; Vasileiou et al., 2019; Jaud et al., 2023). The distress translates in alarming numbers, to say the least; for example, in 2016-2017, 95 students ended their own lives in England and Wales (Universities UK, 2018). This is not strange as loneliness is associated with self-harm and suicide, especially among men living alone (Shaw. et al, 2021). Loneliness is more prevalent among young people than the elderly despite the younger population having larger social networks (Child and Lawton, 2019). It is even more problematically higher in young adults than in adolescents (Lim, et.al, 2019).

In order to understand what was specific about university students' loneliness, many studies were based on examining transition-related variables as a key determinant of loneliness. The variables ranged from attachment styles to coping mechanisms and coping efficacy as well as self-efficacy (Diehl, Jansen, Ishchanova, & Hilger-Kolb, 2018; Tsai, Wang, & Wei, 2017; Drake, Sladek, & Doane, 2016; Quan, Zhen, Yao, & Zhou, 2014; Carr, Colthurst, Coyle, & Elliott, 2013; Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006; Wiseman, 1997). Shyness was also frequently linked to loneliness; shy students were shown to have low self-esteem, which prevents them from engaging in social interactions and even being physically active (Ma, Liang, Zeng, Jiang, & Liu, 2014; Page & Hammermeister, 1995; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012).

First-year students are specifically targeted to study the effect of the transition (Drake, Sladek, & Doane, 2016). A number of studies across the years have persistently framed young students as vulnerable and the first year of university as a high-risk time of life (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014; Shaver, Furman, & Burhmester, 1985; Mattanah et al., 2010). The trigger to loneliness is considered to be students leaving their existing relationships and are under pressure to form new ones in the university, which is often challenging and stressful (Arnett, 2015; Perera, & DiGiacomo, 2015; Qualter, 2015). Paul and Brie (2001) used the term

‘friendsickness’ to describe students yearning for their old relationships during their transition.

Social media and its relation to loneliness among students was also explored during the transition period. There are mixed findings, however, following the rich-get-richer model (Kraut et al., 2002), those who had higher social capital offline were also popular online; whereas those lacking relationships in real life did not have better chances on social platforms (Abbas & Mesch, 2018). Another model is the social compensation hypothesis suggested by McKenna and Bargh (1998) in which lonely students had many friends online. This was explained in terms of compensating for the relational deficiencies offline (Hood, Creed, & Mills, 2017; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012). Social media and loneliness is a continuous debate which is not of direct importance in my research since I am more interested in the construction of loneliness offline between students.

Questioning Transition

The concept of transition, as it was traditionally explored in relation to loneliness, hinders an understanding of in-betweenness and of the back-and-forward movement of students and their experiences. Transition as a concept has been used uncritically in the literature since it views the journey of students from point A to B, or a pathway with milestones (Furlong 2009; Pallas 2003). The common definition of transition is “a fixed turning point which takes place at a preordained time and in a certain place”(Quinn 2010, 122). It is also linked to time as “a process of change over time” (Colley, 2007; p. 428). The traditional understanding of transition sees time as linear and development and progression as the end goal. Transition is also seen from the lenses of development, in terms of stages where students leave one culture and enter another.; the metaphors used are “a series of stages, linear, *cumulative* and non-reversible” (Baron et al.1999; p. 484). Both conceptions construct a preferred ideal student experience which implies that students need to achieve to guarantee a “smooth transition” (Gill. et al, 2016; p.63). Moreover, transition viewed this way requires students to assimilate into a single university culture in order to succeed (Gale & Parker, 2014). This is problematic because it buries the diversity in students and attributes their ‘failure’ in transitioning to their different personal characteristics instead of working on accommodating

the differences (Gale & Parker, 2014). Failing at the normative experience of transition presents the student as 'deviant and 'deficient' (Colley 2007; p.430), Moreover, university students

do not view work and study in the linear sequential way implied by the conventional career paradigm (...) Images about 'pathways' and linear transitions from school via further study and then into the world of work and an independent adult way of life *do not reflect the actual experience*. (Cohen and Ainley, 2000; p.83-84)

Therefore, student transition should be seen as "an everyday event" (Quinn, 2010; p.124), something that cannot be captured in one moment; as Grosz (1993) argues: "it must be understood as a series of flows, energies, movements and capacities, a series of fragments or segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those that congeal it into an identity." p 197-198. Supporters of transition as a fluid movement think of it as a continuous process of meaning-making, negotiation, and belonging (Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen 2014). It can also be troublesome which is an understanding that contrasts the smooth transition; troublesome here has been used as an opportunity to learn, adjust and transform. Gourlay (2009, p.181) observes "confusion, indeterminacy and emotional destabilisation may be seen as "normal" features of the student transition" and that "troublesome points of struggle" could be a significant part of becoming a student. This does not mean that transition should be troublesome for all students, but that for some "risk, challenge and even difficulty might also be important factors in successful transitions for others" (Ecclestone, Biesta, and Hughes 2010, p.2)

Therefore, students are not fixed in identities in relation to major events (Gale and Parker, 2014). This means that students' socialization and loneliness should not be viewed in terms of specific social events that are not necessarily accessible to everyone (discussed in chapter: groupings). This also means that becoming a student is more than succeeding or failing in a transition. Loneliness should be thought of as a multilevel experience that goes beyond transition as the transition is not its only trigger.

Belonging and troubling belonging

When the notion of transition is questioned, the concept of belonging follows. Transition becomes problematic for students who do not fit the ideal vision for a university student experience, the “inadequate” and the “unruly” (Quinn, 2010; p.126).

One main component of the ideal vision is belonging. Belonging is often conceptualized as a fundamental need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), a basic human need essential for growth (Strayhorn 2012). It is the emotional attachment, the feeling at ‘home’, and the safety that accompanies it (Yuval-Davis 2006). It is the feeling of being valued and respected in social groups one chooses or wants to belong to (Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013). Student belonging is “a generalized sense of membership that stems from students’ perception of their involvement in a variety of settings and the support they experience from those around them” (Tinto 2012, p.66). Student belonging with its positive effects on academic achievement and successful university life is well documented (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Thomas, 2012); thus it is not surprising to see belonging in the heart of higher education discourse and policies. Student belonging is often not questioned and all students are expected to belong. Guyotte, Flint, & Latopolski (2019) trouble this taken-for-granted narrative by asking “What are we wanting students to belong to? Why? When might belonging be undesirable? And, ontological questions: What does belonging do to/with students? What does it make possible? How might it constrain?” p.556. They argue that belonging is not static rather: “belonging exists in simultaneity, through a co-presence with multiple bodies, ideologies, spaces, places, and times; drawn from situated and particular politics of location.” (Guyotte, Flint & Latopolski, 2019; p.556), meaning that belonging is not inherent to a place but is always in relation to others, time, and space. Moreover, the notion has been troubled by covid19 changing the experience of studying at university. Gravett and Ajjawi (2021) in rethinking belonging with online learning propose that an understanding of belonging cannot be divorced from the material world. This world highlights the disadvantages and difficulties in some students’ lives which hinder them from belonging (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021). Thus it is more fruitful to think of belonging as a ‘situated practice’ they argue: “Belonging should attend to difference through a recognition of belonging as ongoing, fluid, partial and processual, across spaces” p.7

Belonging is also troublesome for students who don’t mean the traditional student profile. Part-time undergraduate mature students or those who live at home find it difficult to form

social bonds through societies or residence halls (Thomas,2015). Similarly, working-class students worry about their finances and thus spend more time working outside the university (Rubin,& Wright, 2017). This means that belonging as it stands today in higher education discourses, is not an accessible experience to all students.

International Students: Racism Away from home

Another insight into students' loneliness comes from international students' experiences of isolation. They are more likely to report having no connections with UK domiciled students. Although the British classmates were reported to be friendly in class, they returned to their usual circles of British friends (Sovic, 2009). International students were also more likely to suffer discrimination (Brown, 2009; Brown & Jones, 2013; Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014) which worsened with the rise of covid19 against students from East Asia (Reny, & Barreto, 2022; Wang, et al, 2021; Wu, Qian, & Wilkes, 2021). Moreover, experiences of discrimination were most prevalent among international students of colour than among their White identifying European counterparts (Brown, & Jones, 2013; Mitchel. Et.al, 2017). Linguistic racism is another type of racism these students may experience; linguistic racism follows the idea of linguicism by Skutnabb-Kangas (2015) which is classified as another form of racism:

(a) which language(s) one uses; (b) how one uses them; and (c) which language(s) one does NOT use/know or one is not competent in, all according to the norms of those who (arrogate to themselves the power to) judge others by their languages. p.1

Studies show that many international students are afraid to talk despite their competence due to linguistic stereotyping which gradually damages their well-being and belonging (Dovchin, 2020; Dobinson, & Mercieca, 2020; Hajar, & Mhamed, 2021).

BME¹: racism at home

The issue of disconnection from university does not affect international students only; Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students also communicate their own kind of foreignness in their home universities. In the 2017 survey of The Student Academic Experience (Neves & Hillman, 2017), UK-domiciled students of non-white ethnicity reported a lack of connections with both staff and other students. The disconnection between students and the university is evidenced in the noticeable awarding gap between white students and BME. Black students for example are less likely to achieve a first or a distinction, which mounts up to a 23% awarding gap, and get paid significantly less (MacGregor-Smith, 2017; Mance, 2018; NUS & Universities UK, 2019). BME students also report racist incidents on campus and loneliness (Bernard et al. 2011; Equalities & Human Rights Commission, 2019; NUS & Universities UK, 2019; Stevenson . et al, 2019). Moreover, they felt inferior and isolated from their peers and lecturers not understanding their background and challenges; the materials taught and the overall attitudes made them feel irrelevant and this feeling was persistent (Bunce et al,2019; Bernard. Et al,2014). Although there have been efforts to reduce racial and ethnic inequalities in multicultural societies, the UK made slow yet insufficient progress in health, housing, and education(Byrne. Et al,2020). This links to the point Robbie Shilliam (2015) made on universities being open to diversity but remaining white at heart: “Universities remain overwhelmingly administratively, normatively, habitually and intellectually ‘White.’ Their doors have been opened, but the architecture remains the same” p.33. Whiteness here goes beyond ethnicity, Bilge (2014) separates whiteness from a skin tone and understands it as

a structurally advantaged position (race privilege); a (privileged) standpoint from which White people view themselves, others, and society; and a set of cultural practices that are considered ‘unmarked’ – yet unmarked only if viewed from the perspective of normative whiteness. (p.412–413)

Whiteness then becomes the position of privilege because it is exclusionary, it reproduces in racial habitus—a White habitus “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings and emotions and their views

¹ I use BME while acknowledging that the category is broad and there is an issue in its broadness. It ignores and misrecognises the different experiences of groups of people categorised within it (Young,1990).

on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006;p. 104). An understanding of this habitus is important in examining how loneliness is the by-product of the white understanding of belonging. The white habitus (Bonilla- Silva, 2006) generates “norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and even ways of thinking about the notion of culture itself” (Frankenberg, 1993; p. 231). Whiteness continues to be solidified through the othering of groups who are not white in the materiality of university spaces; It establishes a hierarchy where being white and British/English is the most important marker of belonging and privilege (Ahmet,2020).

Although UK universities are trying to engage with the problem of racial inequality, as evidenced by (the Race Equality Charter, an award for best effort in addressing racial inequalities) universities are “oblivious to the scale of racial abuse on campus” (EHRC,2019). Moreover, the credibility and authenticity of the entire initiative have been questioned (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018). Especially when two-thirds of racist incidents experienced by students are underreported EHRC, 2019).

Intersectionality

Similar to BME students’ experiences of disconnection, disabled students and LGBTQ students also felt the discomfort of being in spaces where white, able-bodied, heterosexual identities are given priority (Bernard. Et al, 2014; Jeyasingham,2012; Morgan, 2012). Thus, the experience of non-belonging is multiplied by the intersections of multiple identities. Intersectionality is “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado and Stefancic,2001; p.51). It was first used as a metaphor and developed by the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, one of the founders of Critical Race Theory in the U.S. It explains how racism is multiplied by intersecting categories of identity and that antidiscrimination movements addressing one aspect of the identity (such as gender) while leaving out another (race) only perpetuates more racism (Crenshaw,1989). Crenshaw (1991) offers three layers of intersectionality: structural intersectionality which leaves battered black women in shelters unable to start a new life or get support from family and friends who are altogether victims of structural racism, before being victims of abuse and rape (Crenshaw,1991; p.1245). Second, political intersectionality’ (Crenshaw,1991; p.1251) describes the two political movements

failing the women of colour's experiences and "constitutes a denial of a fundamental dimension of our subordination' (Crenshaw,1992;p.1252): feminism ignores the experiences of women of colour whereas antiracism ignores the patriarchy women of colour are subjected to. Thirdly, 'representational intersectionality' addresses the cultural imagery around women of colour created from sexist and racist narratives; it also addresses the outcomes of critiquing these representations that are objectification and further marginalization of women of colour (Crenshaw 1283).

Thus, Intersectionality was raised as a critique of the white self-solipsism in feminist studies at the time (Carastathis,2014) and intersectionality was considered " one of the greatest gifts of *black women's studies* to social theory as a whole" (Belkhir, 2009; p.303). It has also been utilized as a methodology in the feminist paradigm to address the three layers that Crenshaw referred to above. Drawing from the influential work of Collins (2000) on power, Dill & Zambrana (2009) point out that intersectional analysis reveals structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal dimensions of power (Collins, 2000;p.275 ac cited in Dill & Zambrana,2009;p.7), it also "reveal how oppression is constructed and maintained through multiple aspects of identity simultaneously" (Dill& Zambrana,2009; p.7). The use of intersectional analysis can show how loneliness and quality of life are worse in those from underprivileged backgrounds unable to join the digital world to find information during covid-19 (Liu,2021). Although loneliness levels are already studied in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic status; examining these categories together shows how privilege may protect against loneliness whereas oppression worsens it(Li, Spini,2022). To illustrate first generation migrants are more likely to experience loneliness than their 'native' counterparts in the Netherlands (Ten Kate, Bilecen, & Steverink, 2020). It is worth keeping in mind that the meaning of identity and what constitutes privilege and oppression is always socially constructed (Berger & Guidroz,2009).

It is important to think of intersectionality when thinking of loneliness. Intersectionality takes the attention away from the feeling as something 'naturally shared' by all humans to a closer inspection of who is more likely to feel lonely and what identities are on the receiving end of isolating cultures, attitudes, and power dynamics. Intersectionality offers multiple readings of the causes of loneliness. Intersectional invisibility is another important concept that shows the double harm done in being ignored for carrying multiple stigmatizing identities (Purdie-

Vaughns, Eibach, 2008). The notion of invisibility echoes the loneliness felt in being intentionally ignored and links to the notion of ethical loneliness (reviewed in the following section)

International and BME domicile students can experience multiple points of isolation with their intersecting identities, such as race/ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and age (Yao, Mwangi, & Malaney Brown, 2019). However, it is important to note that many international students can experience the privilege of good socioeconomic status as well as oppression on the basis of other aspects of their identities.

From a more holistic outlook, a rising number of home students regardless of ethnicity, are also lacking the necessary informal support from their peers. This latter is evidenced by the rise in initiatives encouraging students to support each other in light of the university mental health crisis (Guliver, Byrom, 2014). Peer relationships proved useful in adjusting to university and in establishing stronger attachments to university (Maunder, 2018) Still, it is important to remain sensitive to the heterologous body of students when thinking of any initiative, as the term student carries multiple identities and meanings.

Recognition, ethical loneliness, and slow violence

For a title that carries many concepts, I will review the literature around what I view as powerfully interlinked concepts. I will argue that if we are to think of loneliness, it is important to prioritize the importance of 'recognition'.

The theory of recognition originates in the theory of politics with its two main advocates Honneth and Taylor drawing from Hegel's relational philosophy and ideas on ethical life and political right. Hegel does not believe in the existence of a self-conscious isolated individual, but he favours identity and self-consciousness being identified and assigned meaning in interactions (see Douzinas, 2002; Honneth, & Farrell, 1997). Thus, Recognition is about a person being seen, appreciated, and approved by others. It communicates care and mutual respect. Recognition must flow both ways symmetrically as a subject cannot achieve full recognition if they misrecognize others because a distorted view of another means an inability to see oneself in others (Hegel, 1977)

Honneth (1996) argues that in the age of conflict and social divisions, there is a need to rebuild a social model on shared values, one of which is recognition. The principles of social justice Honneth (1996) calls for “principles of love, of equal treatment in law and of social esteem” p.385 which must be accompanied by individuals' rights “to be recognized in their needs, in their legal equality, or finally in their contribution to society” p.385. Love comes from the small significant circles, respect comes from fellow citizens who view the person as worthy of equal rights and esteem is the recognition of efforts invested in bettering society (Martineau, Meer, & Thompson, 2012) This dictates that the absence of these rights, is misrecognition, a form of violence and injustice. Taylor (1994) observes:

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. P.25

Misrecognition can induce harm, it reduces the person to a ‘nobody’ unworthy of consideration. Misrecognition can convey that the person does not belong (Honneth, 1996), even when they have the legal right to belong to a nation as in citizenship unlike other groups of citizens (Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2013; McNamara & Reicher, 2019) Similarly when others do not see us or refuse to see us, an acute sense of loneliness follows (Knowles, & Dean, 2018). Those who are not acknowledged or “looked at as through air” feel a sense of invisibility and disconnection although they are in the same physical space as others (Wesselmann et al., 2012, p. 166). Further, being denied eye contact induces exclusion and lower self-esteem (Wirth. et al, 2010). Invisibility and loneliness have been mutually explored in popular media, e.g. Invisible Man by Ellison, 1952/1995 where a young black guy struggles in a society where others refuse to see him as a human being. The Invisible Man by Welles, 1897/1988) although science fiction, also shows how a scientist is driven to madness and terrorism once he turns himself invisible and he couldn’t handle the isolation. Unlike fiction, invisibility is not a quality inherent to a person, but the result of perception or lack of it by others (Knowles & Dean, 2018). I am not interested in the invisibility of the body being out of sight, but in the invisibility of the self when the body is seen.

Similarly, Jill Stauffer (2015) explores the experience of not being heard and not receiving the justice one deserves. She termed the concept 'ethical loneliness' and defines it as: "the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard" (Stauffer 2015, p.1). Stauffer (2015) writes for the victims of violence who have had to go through double the injury, the first being the abuse and the second being moral injury exacerbated by the "failure of just-minded people to hear well." This concept was explored further in studying victims of war crimes, rape, and abuse (Swemmer, 2019; Schulz, 2018) Stauffer (2015) draws her work from Levinas's insights on ethics and responsibility. Levinas sees that the core of responsibility is the ethical obligations people have for each other: *being-for-itself* is conditional to the unconditioned responsibility of *being-for-the-other* (Levinas, 1981). Thus Stauffer (2015) writes on the responsibility of attending to others' trouble, not ignoring them, and not forcing our own readings of their stories

Communication (like fatigue, weariness, and indolence in Chapter 1) may, if we take note of how it works, interrupt our sense of the certainty of meanings and remind us that we are responsive creatures trying to build and share worlds. It does this (if we stop to notice) by drawing our attention to what we did not get to choose and to the risks none of us can escape—of misunderstanding, abandonment and refusal of response. (p. 92–93)

Stauffer (2015) pushes for a reading and a hearing that recognizes other troubles and sees our own proximity to the same troubles. Thus again as Hegel would argue, in recognizing others fully, we recognize our immunity to hardship, we recognize ourselves in others and we offer them the care that we would expect of them because the world we live in survives on ethical responsible accountable relationships. Similarly, an indigenous paradigm of knowledge prioritises relationships, commitments, and accountability because life is understood as reciprocal (Kovach, 2005; Wilson, 2001)

Another concept that shows how violence committed to others sticks in our relationships is 'Slow violence' by Rob Nixon (2011). It takes us to the environment, and the acts of abuse committed against it which result in long-lasting wounds. Nixon (2011) defines it as "a violence occur[ing] gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction ... dispersed

across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”
p.2

Nixon (2011) uses the concept to critique the neoliberal systems still practising a colonial environmental invasion which falls disproportionately on the poor in the global south. Others also argue that violence moves across spaces and neoliberalism as discursive and material practices gradually consume entire nations' health (Springer 2015; Tyner 2016).

Berlant (2007) joins the conversation with her concept of “slow death”. Like slow violence, her concept of “slow death” is not about specific in-time acts of destruction but instead, she looks at the hidden long-standing forms of violence “whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself” (Berlant 2007, p. 759). Berlant (2007) also notes that the violence stemming from neoliberalism becomes “simultaneously an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable” (754). In terms of my research, loneliness becomes almost the norm for students who do not abide by the ideal student narrative. Students who are exposed to the slow violence of misrecognition eventually leave higher education or cease to live all together, cultures of misrecognition and its resulting loneliness does the function of “wearing out” (Berlant,2007; p.754) of students, even when it is done unintentionally.

Therefore, I use the concepts above (mis*recognition, ethical loneliness, slow violence, and slow death) to dissect how small acts of misrecognition in the structure of university courses, the atmosphere of the ideal student experience and in interactions between humans functioning within the university sphere, all induce and foster loneliness. The same loneliness accumulates in everyday life to the point where it becomes violence committed against oneself and others. The slow violence in loneliness comes from a culture of performing strength and independence which takes away the foundation of a community, stigmatizes help-seeking, and deprioritizes help-giving. The slow violence of loneliness might show immediately in the cases of suicide, or leaving the university as a place that is not for everyone, or in the long run when loneliness is intensified and the person is so far off (post-university) that they do not see another way of existing, except loneliness. I argue that in misrecognizing others, in not hearing them not only the others hurt but we hurt ourselves

too, thus loneliness in university is relational and intersubjective. It does not reflect the student feeling lonely only, but the whole student body that is lonely in lonely universities.

Relational Pedagogy, pedagogy of mattering

An outside-in insight into loneliness in university suggests that students' maladjustment is partly attributed to the lack of both formal and informal relationships with the faculty. The lack of social support from classmates was another factor (Newsome & Paul, 2016; Yu & Moskal, 2014). This latter affected the sense of belonging students felt (Sevinç & Gizir, 2014). The nature of the course also plays a role in students' sense of belonging, specifically, students from social sciences reported more loneliness than students from other disciplines; due to self-directed learning (Diehl et al., 2018). Nonetheless, even studying among larger groups as in lecture theatres does not guarantee higher social connectedness (Slaten et al., 2016).

Therefore, it is important to examine the relationship between students, lecturers, and the university system to see what fosters loneliness. Lynch (2006) argues the morals and values of trust which the university is supposed to promote are not prioritized but replaced with market values of competition and control. These values are driven by neoliberalism, which can be defined as a "peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms" (Brown, 2015; p. 17). The marketisation of universities alters students' expectations and experiences, as Harkavy (2005) notes: "When Universities openly and increasingly pursue commercialisation, it powerfully legitimises and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest by students and contributes to the widespread sense among them that they are in college solely to gain career skills and credentials" p.15. Students are conceptualized as customers (Baker, Hunter, and Thomas 2016) which might change their goals from getting an education to buying a degree. Students are more likely to think of the economic worthiness of their degree if they are unhappy with their relationship with their tutor (Yale, 2017). The market culture undoubtedly affects relationships between staff and students, and it downplays the importance of care in education (Cree, Christie, & Tett, 2016), especially when caring in neoliberal logic is counterproductive.

The concept of care is used as a tool these days to resist the uncaring neoliberal, individualistic and competitive higher education system (Bovill 2020; Felten and Lambert 2020). The concept of care is not free of issues of power and tension. Care can be comprised of the power academics have in marking students' work; for example, when assessment results do not satisfy the student, this will likely lead to a rupture in relationships, and the students feel uncared for (O'Brien, 2010). Moreover, lecturers are worried about providing excessive support, which might alter the relationship to a therapeutic one (Ecclestone, 2012).

Overall, it is important to look at the affective dimension of learning in university. Hockings et al. (2010) call for relational pedagogies that forefront the students' experiences so that students feel safe enough to share their knowledge and beliefs in inclusive space. They also call for learning materials that are relevant to the student's experiences so the lecturers can connect with the students through things that matter (Hockings et al, 2019). Ideas of relational pedagogy gave rise to the concept of the student as a partner in learning and teaching (Bovill, 2016; Mathews et al, 2019). This new form of co-producing knowledge and policies disrupts the neoliberal culture (Matthews, Cook-Sather, and Healey 2018), and provides an ideal atmosphere for meaningful learning (Jarvis, Dickerson, & Stockwell, 2013). Thus genuine connections between students and staff are important for students learning (Walker-Gleaves, 2019). These relationships are important because they communicate a sense of recognition and mattering (Riley, 2009).

How this PhD builds on this literature

In the midst of all the possible conceptualizations of loneliness, understanding the dominant discourses, and the alternatives are important for the research because it helps me see where the student is drawing their interpretation of their loneliness from. We need to sit within the shifting mess of different discourses and definitions, otherwise, we will not be able to attempt to understand what lonely students are experiencing. I argue that the complexity of loneliness cannot be accounted for in a single definition. I also argue that there is a danger in sticking to one definition as it silences any other alternatives to understanding feelings in relation to the world surrounding a person. It also obstructs other productive ways of thinking about well-being. If loneliness is defined as a subjective cognitive assessment of one's relationships, well-

being becomes entirely the responsibility of the individual alone. This conceals social and structural issues in a society in which the university is already part of. Therefore, I draw from Affect theory, the dramaturgical approach to social interactions and finally concepts around mattering, belonging and ethical loneliness to inform my analysis and answer my research questions.

The discussion in my literature review, especially Chapter 1, which shows the narrow conceptions of loneliness, helps me justify why a study like mine is so important or valuable. The theories and concepts I draw from in my thesis are supposed to rethink the dominant psychological explanation of feelings and answer the overlapping question which is: What are the students' experiences of loneliness in university? And the three questions I am asking are:

- 1- How is loneliness co-constructed in university?
- 2- How are connections made/unmade on campus?
- 3- How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness?

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed a range of theoretical approaches for the study of loneliness as well as reviewing the available research on university students' loneliness considering their implications. My intention was to demonstrate, on the one hand, the dominant narrow conceptualization of loneliness and on the other hand, the alternative views that could be adopted to better understand loneliness in young people.

Therefore, one of the aims of this thesis was to take advantage of this pluralism and apply it in the case of students struggling with loneliness to understand their multifaceted experience. This took place through the use of 'plunder as a method' (Hughes et al 2012; p. 315), which enabled me to draw on various theoretical frameworks to make sense and interpret the stories, including the affect theory, the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1956-1963) as well as concepts and arguments from othering, belonging, mattering.

For instance, Chapter 3 brings together arguments from disability studies, neoliberalism and Goffman's approach to understanding social interactions to consider the perception of loneliness amongst students, and how they navigate it in their personal spaces with their friends. This takes place through an exploration of performance in social interactions and stigma studies. Arguments from disability studies and neoliberalism allowed me to understand what students meant by the term burden, and how they conceptualised their loneliness and loneliness in general. It also provided a background to the following subtheme on performances, and why/how students perform belonging. Stigma studies enabled me to explore what was shameful about loneliness without falling back into the trap of essentialism as well as different components of the stigma that shaped the participants' experiences of loneliness.

In Chapter 4, Affect theory is adopted to consider how loneliness moves students toward and away from each other. In the next part of the chapter, I engage with two concepts from postcolonialism studies, in particular, Alienation and Othering to examine how the participants of international backgrounds found themselves more prone to loneliness because of the unequal power dynamics in students' socialisation journey. Moreover, participants' experiences of discrimination are discussed.

In Chapter 5, I bring together studies on space, belonging, and mattering in higher education to consider the different ways the university system can include or further isolate students. A discussion of the relationship between students and staff also takes place to acknowledge the important role of relational pedagogy in making students feel included or excluded. I also bring together the two concepts of ethical loneliness and slow violence to consider how systems construct and enforce a specific kind of loneliness: ethical loneliness which later accumulates harm that is small yet significant in the long run.

These theories and concepts I have chosen shift the discussion away from attributing loneliness to the personal attributes of individuals to the social and structural roots of loneliness. Across all chapters, alternative understandings of loneliness play a crucial role in resisting the dominant narrative of loneliness constructed by psy-disciplines such as cognitive psychology, social psychology, neuropsychology, and evolutionary psychology.

Chapter 2 - Methodology and Method

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the literature related to loneliness and the range of theories and concepts which could be used as different ways of understanding loneliness. It highlighted the importance of listening to individuals' stories of loneliness to develop our understanding of loneliness' complexities. This chapter will introduce the methodology adopted for this research. It is divided into four sections and provides details on how the study was conducted. The first section begins with an outline of my philosophical assumptions and the influence these have had on my methodological selections. The second section describes the choice of methodology, namely narrative inquiry and explains reasons why it is the most appropriate approach to my study. The third section outlines the procedure of the study, including recruitment process and data collection methods. It also includes personal reflexivity on how this study was affected by Covid-19 lockdown, and an account on ethics of studying loneliness before and during isolating times. The fourth and last section provides a detailed description of the analysis process, illustrated with examples, and explains briefly how the following analysis chapters were written differently by following a range of concepts and theoretical lenses in interpreting the data.

My Philosophical Assumptions

This research adheres to three different worldviews which correspond to three aspects of my identity: an African Muslim researcher in a mostly white European British institution. As a Muslim researcher, I am more inclined to view the world from a critical realist point of view. As an African researcher, I am at home with understanding the world from an indigenous paradigm. As a postgraduate researcher looking at loneliness in a university in the 'loneliness capital' of Europe: Britain (Orr, 2014), I have explored and found useful the relativist/interpretivist ontological lenses, specifically the epistemic understanding of psychological phenomena as a social construction that surpasses positivists and reductionist labels. This section will tell the story of how I found myself with sometimes conflicting, yet complementary philosophical assumptions. It

With the focus on who I am

I come from a Muslim background where there are clear guiding spiritual and religious practices that inform my ethics and morality. I cannot fully strip out that belief because it is ingrained in me, and it comforts me. This belief imposes some limits on my understanding of the world, but it does not restrain my thinking. Loneliness in this sense is not immoral or punishable, it is neither right nor wrong, but it exists in the making of Adam and Hawwa (Eve). A verse from Quran reads "It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her in love" (7:189), In my understanding, if Adam was never lonely, God wouldn't have created a companion. Thus, loneliness essentially exists in the absence of others, it is not a separate phenomenon but a relational one. In other words, loneliness is not a lack of relationships only, it is in itself a relationship that is defined by lacking. Ibn Khaldun, in his *Muqaddimah* (Introduction), also insisted on the social nature of human beings, in a translated version he writes: "Human beings have to dwell in common and settle together in cities and hamlets for the comforts of companionship and for the satisfaction of human needs" (Rosenthal,1958, p.6). Ibn Khaldun draws heavily from the Quran which explains the similarity between his statement and this Quranic verse: "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another" (49:13).

My religious understanding could suggest that loneliness is out there to be discovered, but since loneliness is not separate from relationships, it needs a context of social interactions to happen. Meaning loneliness is a relationship of lacking, but the what of lacking (the object of lacking) is defined by the cultural and social context of these relationships. Also, why an object is lacking is a question that is not related to human making but to the circumstances where they live.

Admittedly, at some point in this research, it was tempting as a researcher of faith to push my research under the critical realism umbrella; especially since critical realism constructs a ground for theology and science to co-exist respectfully (Shipway,2000). However, critical realism requires that I keep a distance from the research subjects and instead rely on the scholarly community to produce valid knowledge (Guba & Lincoln,2005). Keeping a distance contradicts my research aim of understanding loneliness in depth. Depth is generated by the

exact proximity between me and the participants. The blending of our voices and stories shaped how we made sense of loneliness in the research interactions. Thus, I have abandoned critical realism despite it corresponding to how I generally understand being. In my research, it is the that I am looking at and not the universal. It is not loneliness as an isolated phenomenon or object that I am interested in but its fluidity and its different constructions in the context of the university.

With the focus on loneliness

I view reality as a reflection of multiple ways of understanding; thus, there is not one single reality independent of our constructions, but many. Each reality is constructed by the relationships shared in its community; it is charged with values that are useful to that community (Gergen,2015). According to this perspective, any knowledge is culturally, economically, and historically situated; thus, access to it is time and space-bound (Burr,2003). In other words, there is not one knowledge which shapes the world, but many (Willig,2008). In multiple sets of knowledge, the idea of 'truth' is challenged. Since meanings are context-based and the nature of knowledge is relational, it follows that truth is relative (Taylor, 1978). McWilliams (2020) proposes "the reality in which we live owes more to the intersubjectivity of our social interactions, definitions, labels, and conventions than to an objective reality that exists independently of human construction and even personal, or individual, subjective experience" p.5. Therefore, the truths we assign to loneliness are context dependent, the meaning of the label itself depends on the narratives used in constructing it. I also adopt Dewey's (1916) view of experience that embraces continuity to account for the complexity of loneliness. I would classify my approach to loneliness under relativist ontology. Relativism is the belief that reality is embodied in the subjective experience of humans, it is their interaction and their understanding of their experiences that construct what exists (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, experiences are multiple so are their interpretations and so are the realities they construct (Levers, 2013). Unlike the realist paradigm, there is no objective single reality out there which can be accessed using rigorous scientific methods. In relativism, access to the varying context-based realities is not guaranteed through a certain group of methods only, but it is also displayed through a rigorous process of interpretation (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba,2018).

With the focus on Where I come from: As an African/Algerian researcher.

I do not view the world in mere Western categorization of the nature of being. I continued to feel uncomfortable with the two paradigms (critical realism and relativism). I found it too self-centred to claim that no reality exists beyond the human experience of it (strong relativism), and navel-gazing to explain reality according to what the human can or can't understand (critical realism). Kovach (2018) observes that Western theory is heavily based on classification, something indigenous groups continually oppose. Perhaps my discomfort stems from being brought up in an Amazigh² / Berber indigenous group in Algeria which keeps resisting forced identity labels (mainly Arab /Muslim) across different colonization's (Aïtel,2014)

Therefore, instead of shifting my ontology from one Western mode of thinking to another where both focus on human reasoning as the only reference for seeing the world, I found it comforting to engage with an indigenous paradigm where humans are not the most important actors in the chain of existence (Simpson,2000). Wilson (2001) explores the differences between Eurocentric and Indigenous paradigms and highlights that whereas dominant paradigms view knowledge as individual property, the indigenous paradigm thrives in relational knowledge. Ontologically speaking then relationships are reality (Wilson,2008). Furthermore, the physical and the spiritual meet in the indigenist view dictating an exchange of respect between the human and other forms of life (Hart, 2010). Thus, as the dominant Eurocentric perspective focuses on individualistic values, indigenous knowledge is grounded on accountability and responsibility (Henry & Pene, 2001), both of which signify a relational self. Another main difference between indigenous and Western theory is what sets the path to understanding. Western theory focuses on reason and the indigenous theory embraces intuition and senses (Cordero,1995). I have felt a lot in my research, many of the decisions I made in my methodology were out of feelings rather than pure 'reasoning'.

² One listed meaning of Amazigh is Free Man according to Leo Africanus an author from the 15th century. He is best known for his book *Descrittione dell'Africa* (*Description of Africa*)

The indigenous reality is often negated in Western research that silences indigenous ways of knowing and being; it denies them of their world as they had been often considered as inhuman (Braun, Browne, Ka'Opua, Kim,& Mokuau 2014; Wilson,2003). Moreover, the indigenous paradigm rejects colonisation for the havoc it caused on their lands (Smith,1999)

It is clear that the indigenous groups' lives were interrupted by Western imperialism. Smith (1999) continues to write that the practices of exclusion came under the justification of spreading human rights but, they stemmed from a supremacist belief of who is human and who is savage.

It is worth mentioning that a number of Western theories today have added their voice to indigenous research believing that knowledge about the human mind and psychology is colonised by one rigid concept of who counts as human. Examples include but are not limited to feminist studies (Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler) and critical disability studies (Dan Goodley, Katherine Runswick-Cole & Kirsty Liddiard). The term human is especially bothersome to Posthumanism advocates such as Rosi Braidotti (2020) who argues the term human is power-laden. She also argues that the term human is contentious because it does not apply to everyone who is not white, male, able-bodied and straight (Bardiotti,2013)

Axiology

A question might be raised of why I am engaged with indigenous philosophical assumptions if my research is not with indigenous communities and has no decolonial interest. What attracts me to this paradigm is the freedom it gives me as an African researcher who does not view the world an absolute Western lens. It also supports my choice of methodology for narratives and storytelling. Stories are an important source of knowledge and learning about the world and they highlight the relations between the storyteller, the listener, the world around them and their place in it (Iseke,2013 ; Archibald, 2008).I have implemented the indigenous choice of relational methodology and adopted a few key points from its axiology. Axiology stands for "how researchers act based on the research they produce " (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018, p.126); meaning the value system the researcher honours in carrying out their work. The values I picked from indigenous axiology are demonstrated in accountability and reciprocity.

I have found values of responsibility and accountability specifically useful in the unexpected ethical issues faced in my research. Kovach (2018) differentiates between the concrete aspect of the ethics process or what she calls protocols and the big “E” ethics of indigenous research. She writes : “ Big “E” ethics are about relationality and how we build trust and credibility with one another” p.225 In research around loneliness which got interrupted by forced isolation of Covid19, the big “E” were particularly important in ensuring my participants’ struggle was not exploited. I continued to feel accountable to my participants despite the university ethics not imposing it. I have enacted the reciprocity value in continuing to make myself available for my participants during difficult times. Reciprocity insists that you give back to those who gave you their stories (Rice,Oakes, Riewe, 2005). Put simply, since indigenous axiology is built on relationships, It encourages a relationship between the storyteller and the listener and the sharing of stories. The researcher is not being scared away by the possibility of temporary attachment, the opposite. Relationships in indigenous methodology are strongly encouraged because they are considered to generate meaningful research (Wilson,2000).

In summary, my philosophical assumptions are a mixture of my identity, my location, and my research interest. In a few words, I am a social constructionist in reading loneliness, a critical realist in my personal life, and an indigenous in how I live both my research and my life. I see myself as what Denzin and Lincoln (2008) termed as “Researcher-as-Bricoleur” p.5 ; more specifically their identification of an interpretative and a narrative bricoleur. My bricolage is interpretative in the sense that my interpretations are affected by my worldviews both spiritual and cultural, and by my social and ethnic background. The interactions I have had with my participants are also key in my different interpretations. As a narrative bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln,2018), I share the view that my paradigm is only one way of narrating loneliness.

Limits of a Social Constructionist Understanding of Loneliness

Social constructionism privileges language and ignores the material world. The focus on language reproduced in cultural settings, and the thoughts built from those societal reproductions is an important principle of social constructionism. It is thought that language

is not a reflection of reality or a route to the internal world, but it is the ground for concepts (Burr,2003). Looking through this language is looking at content, structure, performance and the cultural repertoire it is drawn from (Wells, 2011). My participants come from different backgrounds, and for some of them, English is a foreign language. This does not situate my participants as deficient storytellers. Nevertheless, to claim that I have heard all the loneliness my participants carried, solely based on the language exchanged between us is not right. This enforces a limited linguistic English construction of loneliness, while missing all the alternative expressions from other worlds. Indeed, some of my participants had the privilege of expressing themselves clearly, while others had felt more comfortable in alternative ways of sharing their loneliness (use of photos). This links to the other critique of social constructionism which states that it does not involve itself with the material world. New materialism addresses this limitation by challenging the reliance on meaning as the fabric of research while ignoring everything outside the words , including other animate beings (animals, plants) and inanimate objects. With the acknowledgement that other entities outside discourse also affect experiences , the boundaries between discourse and matter disappear (Deleuze in Feely,2020). In my research for example, in focusing on the wording of loneliness between students, I left minimum space for objects that were part of the loneliness experience. Some objects that had an active role in the student's loneliness were mobiles, Google Alexa, dish soap and carry-on bags. An interaction with the aforementioned objects is lost in a constructionist account which considers anything remotely related to concrete reality as "insidious foundationalism" (Coole & Frost,2010)

Approach to Research: Reason for Choosing Narrative Inquiry

Approaching narratives with a moderate social constructionist view indicates that this work is not a search for a single universal truth, it seeks to understand the different subjective truths people hold. Choosing narrative inquiry as a research methodology also means adopting its epistemic understanding of knowledge and human experience as a storied phenomenon. I similarly view reality as socially constructed through stories; the architecture of loneliness is part of that construction. In order to make sense of loneliness, we need to hear how others are trying to tell its stories, how they present them and explain them. We also need to be aware of what kind of stories are circulating in a specific place and time to understand when loneliness is inflamed or dimmed.

That is mainly why I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology. I have used narrative research because I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of a subjective experience that is loneliness. Squire, Andrews et al. (2014) argue “narrative accounts provide an especially rich insight into subjective truths, the frameworks of meaning by which individuals live their lives” p.11. This does not mean that narratives have the special power of uncovering the authenticity or truthfulness of one person which other methodology cannot do (Atkinson, 2010); it does not also imply that people have layers to be discovered only through stories. I opt for narrative inquiry because I am interested in what the stories have to say about the world we live in, and how they contribute to constructing ourselves and the world around us. One critique of narratives is presented by Ricoeur in Squire (2013) who points out that narratives offer truths of a tradition but can’t present grand truth which expands to the universal level. I find this critique irrelevant to my pursuit. I do not aim at finding the grand truth as I believe that the truth about loneliness is largely relevant to how it is interpreted and constructed in certain settings. Moreover, what happens when you are presented with multiple worldviews in stories? As Pier (2005) argues: “...narrative does not simply tell one story, but weaves a rich, ontologically multidimensional fabric of alternate possible worlds”

P.160; thus, it is difficult, if not unfeasible to find one grand truth that universalizes multiple worlds.

Narrative Inquiry as a Research Methodology

What is narrative Inquiry?

It is difficult to reduce the complexity of narrative research into one simple definition (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukhou,2013), but there is a general census that narrative inquiry was introduced as a new research methodology in education and social sciences in the early 1990s. Clandinin and Connelly, the two leading scholars of narrative inquiry observed that narratives were both a phenomenon and a methodology. The basis of narrative inquiry is that humans experience their being through the stories they live and tell (Clandinin and Connelly,2006). These storied lives can be accessed and studied through stories (Clandinin and Connelly,1990).

To clarify the terms they have used, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) draw a distinction between the two terms story and narrative, the former being the phenomenon under study, the latter being the actual methodology. Nonetheless, the word story has been in use since the 13th century, it originates from Anglo-Norman French and Latin meaning a factual account of true events which happened in history (Tobin & Snyman,2008). This definition stresses the past tense of an experience and trueness in the happenings. It has been modified to include present and future events, true or fictional, and real or imaginary characters. Stories are told with a purpose and are rarely factual because they reflect interpretations (Hansen & Kahnweiler,1993). The terms narrative and stories sometimes are considered equivalent when referring to plots and themes (Polkinghorne,1988,1991). They also intersect when narrative research is any work that makes use of narratives as a subject or object of the research (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashuah & Zilber,1998). However, narratives can adopt different meanings depending on the discipline. It can be the whole story of one's life from an anthropological point of view or specific smaller stories from a sociological lens (Riessman,2005).

As for this work, I follow Clandinin and Connely's (1990) conceptualization of narrative inquiry. Three key terms explain what narrative inquiry is about experience, story and phenomena. If you think about experience as a story that can be formally studied, you are doing a narrative inquiry. In my research context, I view the loneliness students feel as the sum of experiences: personal, societal, cultural and even political. The loneliness experience brings other experiences to life; in parallel with Dewey's principle of continuity. Therefore, I understand the experience of loneliness as a collection of stories students tell themselves and the stories they are told. In order to understand loneliness, I must understand its stories. Stories are, therefore, a means of understanding and communicating the meaning of individual experiences. The terms story and narrative in the frame of this research are used interchangeably; any story referring to loneliness directly or indirectly is considered a narrative material (Flick & Roulston, 2014).

Narrative Inquiry: Paradigm

Originally, narratives were established to counter the realist assumptions of positivist and post positivists research in the mid-1980s indicating the major turn (Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 2008). What is specific about the narrative turn in social sciences is a move from positivist paradigm, to a more interpretivist, relational view of the world. Reality from narrative lenses is subjective and relative thus multiple (Liblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1997). What is particular however about the rise of narratives is the status narrative inquiry gained in social sciences as a methodology in its own (Clandinin, 2006; McAlpine, 2016). That is why it is important to distinguish narrative inquiry from other narrative research and analysis. Clandinin (2013) insists that narratives are more than a representational form of data; the author identifies their understanding of narrative inquiry which stems from Dewey pragmatic ontology of experience (1938). More specifically, the two criteria of: interaction and continuity. These experiences are not limited to the person's perception, but are also the combination of the cultural, historical, and societal influences. Feelings also play an integral role in the nourishing and the formation of those experiences (Hohr, 2013). Therefore, narrative inquiry accepts that multiple ways of knowing the world are also valid.

Validity ³in narrative inquiry has different criteria. There are two approaches to proving validity of interpretation and analysis. The first one is criteriological approach and the second is the relative approach (Burke, 2016). The relativist approach is more suitable to narrative inquiry as a relational methodology. The relativist approach offers more flexibility in choosing which criteria suits the particular research being carried (Sparks & Smith, 2009). For my study, I select different criterion from different works to judge my work, both as a researcher and for the audience reading the final product.

I begin with substantive contribution: In this criteria Richardson (2000) asks questions such as : “ Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded social (if embedded) social scientific perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text? “ p.937. To Richardson, writing is not only the mean to present the findings of a research, writing in itself is an analytical method through which we learn as we write. Impact is another criterion, it is the effect the writing of the research leaves on the reader. It includes both emotional and intellectual effects. The impact does not stop at that level only but extends to action. If the reader is left with a drive to write themselves and are inspired to try new approaches to researcher, then the work has left its mark successful (Richardson 2000, p.937). Tracy (2010) uses the term resonance similarly to propose that qualitative research should result evocative piece of work, which wakes empathy in the readers.

Width (Liblich et al., 1998, Criteria for qualitative research, para. 5) is another dimension refers to the quality of the interview or the observations as well as to the proposed interpretation or analysis. Numerous quotations in reporting narrative studies, as well as suggestions of alternative explanations, should be provided for the reader's judgment of the evidence and its interpretation. Further, coherence (Liblich et al., 1998, Criteria for qualitative research, para. 5) can be evaluated both internally, in terms of how the parts fit together, and externally, namely, against existing theories and previous research. Validity can be also demonstrated through authenticity and sincerity (Lincoln & Guba, 2007; Tracy, 2010).

³ I use this term cautiously as I do not wish to impose positivist lenses on a qualitative work.

Choice Explained

In summary, I choose narrative inquiry because it offers a rich understanding of people's stories, it shows how people situate their experiences by drawing from stories in the repertoire of culture where they are located. It also offers the opportunity to dissect what a story can do when told a certain way, how it constitutes the person telling them and how it shapes their experience. Narrative inquiry helps me view and explain loneliness in terms of a social phenomenon told differently by different people. It does not situate loneliness as one person's distress only but shows relationships where this distress comes from and how it could be healed. I use narrative inquiry to answer the following questions:

Research Questions

- What are the students' experiences of loneliness in university?
- 1- How is loneliness co-constructed in university?
 - 2- How are connections made/unmade on campus?
 - 3- How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness?

Method, & Ethics

In this section, I write about the journey of data collection. I start by sharing the recruitment process, the different channels I used, and what worked and what did not. I add some reflections, which shaped my approach to recruitment. Then I explain my data collection methods: narrative interviewing in its two forms online/offline; and photo elicitation interviews. Later, I discuss ethics in terms of application and challenges faced. I end this section with personal reflections on the ethical process.

Recruitment

This section will discuss my recruitment criteria and the various channels I have used before and after getting my ethical approval. It is not only a discussion of what worked and what did not, it also entails a discussion of positionality and in it an exploration of relationships amongst students (myself and all the students, which I came across in recruitment).

Recruitment criteria

I was looking for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students who were feeling lonely at the time or had recent experiences of loneliness. I did not specify the age range or the course type, but the course level was determined. The level was important as I chose to exclude PhD students despite continuously reported loneliness in this population (Janta & Lugosi, 2018; Brown, 2013). I was only interested in the taught students' population who at the time had regular contact with others (tutors, peers, and professional staff) and who had found themselves in regular classes with smaller and larger number of students. Even though many students were going to meet my criteria, my approach to recruitment was more focused on getting a diverse sample. I have however, taken all the participants that enquired and did not drop out, and that is how I ended up with ten students, the sample could be larger (around twenty students), but these were the students who committed since the first call of participants and had at least one conversation with myself. The rest would express interest but not necessarily get back to me once they had to sign the consent form and read the information sheet.

My approach to recruitment is explained in more details under the channels I have used, what worked and what did not, in the following sections.

Channels that did not work /Reflections.

In seeking recruitment this worked this is who I approached and here is an example of a challenge to recruitment

As I was writing the ethics application, I contacted student communications team and the head of Advertising and Sponsorship which together, could act as an important channel of advertising my research. I was ambitious to have a big attractive poster in the student union, and in one of the digital screens in the library's entrance so that if any student wishes to participate, they would not be too embarrassed to come forward. However, this did not work as poster was too costly (£65 per week). I did not opt for student research communication emails either because it could result in a dominantly Sheffield students' group of participants while I wanted diversity. I also had the desire to have a first-hand involvement in the recruitment process. I wanted to meet people face to face, make new contacts and talk to others. Now looking back, I can see that my research was guided by my loneliness from the early stages of thinking of a research topic up until the stage of recruiting participants.

I looked into more channels such as Facebook to find societies, email societies to attend their events, hand leaflets in libraries, and advertise through lectures and seminars starting from the school of education.

The first society I started with was the well-being society. I have placed the most importance on this society because I assumed it would lead me to the "right" participants. I suspected loneliness was highly likely to be present in this setting. Thus, I joined one of their events to spread out the word about my research. Only three people were there, and knowing that mental health was important among students, I assumed the society was popular. One of the students wore a headscarf like me, but she was a British Muslim. After sharing my research interest with her, she spoke about the importance of raising awareness amongst the Islamic community regarding mental health problems. It did not resonate with me well since my understanding of mental health issues in my community (Algerian) is shaped by civil war, trauma and political corruptness (Ait Sidhoum, Arar, Bouatta, Khaled & Elmasri, 2002; Khaled, 2004). Even though we were all Muslim women sharing an outer identity in the form of a Hijab we did not "click" very well. Therefore, as a researcher who is a student at the same time, I could start to see glimpses of how loneliness can easily find its place among students.

I also approached the student welfare office at the university. However, like the mental well-being society, this step would have made my recruitment more targeted than necessary. Expecting participants from two places that focus exclusively on mental health made me think

of my sampling as guided by convenience rather than purposiveness with the latter being more compatible with the qualitative research aims (Padgett,2008).

Channels that worked

I have made those leaflets with a picture of a dog that looked sad, but it was just their droopy face. Dogs are one point that could situate me as insider in the British society, I love dogs so I felt it would be a common language between myself and many of my prospective participants. I printed 40 leaflets, but I did not have the courage to disseminate them the following day. I have always thought of myself as someone who has no problem approaching others; in England however, I do not recognise myself since I am not following “social norms” of the society. I also feel unable to use English with others who believe they will not understand because my accent sounds different. Before I open my mouth, my body and attire also speak for me (the Muslim foreigner). I restarted again from my comfort zone, my flat and my computer and left the leaflets for another time.

There are more than 360 students societies in Uni of Sheffield (The University of Sheffield, n.d.). I did not plan to contact every society. Since it was going to be time-consuming to contact each society on Facebook, or email, I decided for my approach to be more targeted. I aimed at specific societies to get a diverse group of students; some examples are BME groups, international students, different faiths societies, sports, Disabled & Dyslexic Students groups. Diversity is important in my research because my aim was to hear different stories. I sent messages to different student societies' pages on Facebook, and I have attended a number of events where I gave a bunch of leaflets for the society leader to give away. However, I always had in the back of my mind the idea that perhaps those who actively engage with societies might not be the “loneliest”. What about those who hardly leave their room? Where do I find them? When recruitment did not work through, I realised I had to recruit participants directly without having to go through gatekeepers. I had to go back to my leaflets.

I attempted to give the leaflets to students in the library, the moment I looked at anybody for longer than 3 seconds, they would notice, look at me then immediately look away. If I

approach them, they'd become alarmed. I eventually could not bring myself to do it. My loneliness was wearing me from head to toe, and I did not want others to see it.

When I did not have the confidence, I took a seat and posted a call for participants on a Facebook group under the theme of loneliness in a university in the UK. I have enclosed in my post how anxious I was feeling about getting participants face to face, students reached back, telling me that they understood the feeling. The responses were overwhelming, and it took me two days to sort the emails. Some students just wanted to talk about it but not necessarily take part in research, some were even attending university away from the UK. I wondered: were these two different realities?

I have had four participants through this group, I have met three of them face-to-face, and one wanted to keep contact online. I have posted in another Facebook group for students in Sheffield. The post I have written was casual and a little bit different from the other group. My call was not specifically for participants, but it suggested a meet-up to talk about loneliness. Two women contacted me: one was a PhD student, and the second was an MA student. I met with the MA student in the students' union for the first-time few days later. A few days later, I went to the library in the evening when I felt most comfortable because it was less busy, thus safer somehow. I shared earlier with a friend how I felt about distributing the leaflets, and despite her own anxieties; she offered to give me a helping hand. We had done a lot of warming up before we could approach students. I could finally hand a couple of students the leaflets, even those who sitting in groups. I had three participants from distributing the leaflets method.

The other channel that worked was speaking about my research in different lectures and seminar rooms. I had three participants from this place, which makes up a total of ten participants. I have travelled to see three of them, and we met in cafes that they liked or felt safe in I have met the rest in different university buildings. For the following up conversations, which I could arrange, we would meet and talk somewhere quiet on the university campus as well, then go for a walk. The narrative interviews would last between 40 minutes and an hour and half.

Demographics of participants

Five months (September 2019 to January 2020) were devoted to identifying, accessing and recruiting participants. The final sample ended up being a quite diverse one, including participants of both sexes, a range of ages and geographical locations, different year of study, different nationalities and different socioeconomic backgrounds. The following tables illustrate some demographic information about the participants without covering all the aspects such as the socio-economic background of the participants' families, year of study and name of university. It is important to note that I have not asked for such identifiable information because my aim was not to collect personal information. However, access to such information was implicitly or explicitly brought up sometimes during the interviews. This information is presented with utter carefulness to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Pseudonym	Rough Age	Gender (if known)	faith/relationship to faith (if known)	Number of times we have met	Type of Contact	Student Status	Rough geographical area in UK
Azure	19	Female	Ex-Muslim / current: unknown	2	Face to face	Home	Midlands
Orchid	21	Female	Unknown	3	Online (email contact) and face to face	Overseas	Scotland
Grey	18	Male	Muslim	2	Online (email contact) and face to face	Home	West Midlands
Red	25	Male	Unknown	1	Face to Face	Overseas	Midlands

Rose	23	Female	Unknown	2	Online (online interview) and face to face	Home	West Midlands
Violet	19	Female	Muslim	2	Online and face to face	Home	Southwest England
Blue	25	Female	Christian	2	Online and face to face	Home	Southeast England
Steel	23	Male	Unknown	2	Online (online interviews)	Overseas	South England
Yellow	21	Female	Unknown	2	Face to face	Overseas	Midlands
Silver	22	Male	Christian	2	Online (email contact) and face to face	Home	Midlands

Narrative Interviewing Method

1-Face-to-Face Interview

On my recruitment leaflet, I have invited students to have a conversation face to face where I pay for coffee/tea. In my research plan, I had a topic guide to ensure I covered all the questions I wanted to ask. At the same time, I wanted my participants to tell me their story of loneliness, the way they felt it and the way it was important and relevant to them, without a lot of interruption. Still, I needed a topic guide to ensure I covered the topics I wanted to learn more about. Narrative interviewing seemed like the right option because it lets the interviewee direct the interview while, at the same time, it allows the researcher to use their topic guide when appropriate (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016).

The interviewer must accept that the participant leads the conversation, and they have to listen attentively to construct what Riessman (2008) referred to as “dialogic relationships and greater communicative equality”. Acknowledging that narratives are co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee is inspired by Mishler’s idea of interviews as a discursive practice; Mishler (1992) believes that meanings are collaboratively constructed in the discourse between interviewer and interviewee. It only makes sense to use narrative interviewing to create a comfortable setting for stories to be told.

I followed this approach by starting with a general open question such as: Tell me what kind of loneliness story/stories have brought you here today? Or “What do you think of when you hear or see the word lonely?” In some instances, I share my own experiences as a response to reassure them indirectly that I am not judging them deep inside. One aspect of enacting a relational understanding of the world means exchanging stories with the person you are researching, It is only natural and intuitive in indigenous research (Wilson, 2001). You hear with all your senses and respect what’s being said while also monitoring yourself in relation to the person beside/opposite you (Atkinson, 2001, as cited in Wilson,2000; p.174) .

My questions were divided into three main areas: **1-** Relationship on Campus; **2-** Questions around University spaces and Loneliness; **3-** Managing Loneliness; **4-** questions related to past experiences.

The rationale behind looking at relationships is to study how students find connections at university. In asking about space, I wished to see how loneliness is (if) shaped in the different locations (accommodation, library, classrooms, student union, bars). In asking about dealing with loneliness, I wished to see how students perceive themselves and make sense of their feelings and whether they reach out to others. Lastly, in the part about the past, I aimed at tracing back loneliness in an educational setting, I wanted to see whether it was specific to the university.

My initial plan of collecting data was through multiple conversations with each participant. I framed it as a conversation which should take place whenever the participant felt like talking. The mode of the follow-up conversations was not decided, but I planned for the first conversations to be face-to-face when possible. The covid outbreak had its effects on data

collection. It was not clear whether I needed to pause in collecting data or just end the process entirely. The university context I was studying was lost in lockdown, and all my participants were removed from the spaces they once discussed (accommodation, classes, student union). I tried to maintain contact through email, where I asked participants to share their writings on Google documents. The form followed was letters exchanged between participants and myself who were willing to talk again. This method was successful with three participants. Two of them exchanged two one-page letters in April times which they have addressed me directly. Whereas the third participant continued sending me a few photos with long texts about her day and feelings.

2-Online Interviews

Having recruited four of my participants through Facebook, our initial conversations were by default online. With two of the participants, we only used the online platform to decide on the time and location of the meeting. With the other two, we had our first research conversation online and a follow-up. I have met three of them face to face, whereas only spoke online with the other participant.

I have used the same approach of narrative interviewing online, that is, starting with an open question, listening (in this case, reading) without interruption and encouraging the participant to share more details. However, it did not generate the same quantity of data as the face-to-face interviews did. I could not read the physical cues; thus, I did not know when I was asking too much. To ensure that I was not upsetting them, instead of following up with “how/why is that?” questions, I would copy-paste their sentences and ask them to explain more. Online narrative interviewing mixes the method with the personal in a way that the researcher is not prepared for. The participant knows they are being researched, but they do not necessarily perform the research participant/interviewee role. The absence of face could explain why the participant was not editing his feelings and answers (Lind et al.,2013) and would disclose more sensitive experiences in texting (Schober et al.,2015). Perhaps if we spoke face to face, the statement the participant wrote would be something he says in his mind but not in writing.

The silence was another sign I could not locate in the online texting interview. I did not know when the participant had finished answering or when they were thinking, or just distracted; the longer the silence was the more negative perceptions built up (Roberts & Francis, 2013).

Online interviewing methods come with challenges to the narrative research because the silence, which could encourage expansion in stories and reflection, becomes awkward (Hart, 2021). In some cases, respondents simply do not engage in narrative mode even when they are invited to do so; thus, the researcher finds themselves talking more to ensure a continuity in the conversation (Brannen, 2013).

Listening for emotions which are key to understanding the other person's story (McDuffie & Poelina, 2018) was another aspect I lost in an emotionally intense but mute conversation. I have tried to invite this participant to speak face to face, he initially accepted, then grew uncomfortable with the idea. Even though I felt like I lost confidence and control in the online conversation, it does not mean the method is useless. My participant must have felt relaxed and safer sharing from a distance which supports the proposition that chat interviewing creates the relaxing environment the participant to be comfortable (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). I only lacked control because all the control in the conversation was transferred to him. Lessening the disparity of power between the interview and interviewee is supposed to one of narrative methods' strengths (Riessman, 2008); funnily enough, it was an aspect which I struggled with online. The participant controlled what to say online, it was a power reconfiguration in which the participant chooses the affective atmosphere that is suitable to them (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017). This made the participant share more stigmatizing experiences. He spoke unhedged about stigmatizing issues such as drugs and excessive alcohol consumption. This is not unusual for research taking place in private and personal settings (Jenner & Myers, 2019).

3-Photos

The idea of adding visuals or other creative means to my research was present in my initial plan. It was not as essential as the conversations, but it would have added a visual understanding of loneliness.

I have asked my participants to take a photo of the moment when they felt lonely. I did not want to be specific about what photos I wanted, so I focused on the loneliness part and left the rest to them. The plan was to have a photo elicitation interview (Harper, 2002) whereby we speak about those images. I had four participants sharing photos with me, one preferred to attach a few sentences to the image, and another two participants spoke about the photos in a follow up conversation. I had to remind the rest of my participants to send me photos, but they always forgot as they were just busy with their students' lives. The idea perhaps did not make full sense to the participants because they do not see loneliness as an object to be captured in a photo. I have received a total of 16 photos between four participants. Majority were taken by mobile cameras and the rest were screenshots or an internet meme. Memes are what Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014) define as: "digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet" p.249. The participants sent me a funny meme which triggered one aspect of their loneliness or reminded them of what it feels like when they are lonely.

Summary of Methods

In this research, two data collection tools were used: narrative interviewing in two forms: face-to-face conversation and online (chat), plus photos. I refer to the narrative interview as a conversation because that is what it should be. Even though the methods are practically different and communicate different aspects of loneliness (performative, textual and visual), they adhere to the same concept of narrative thinking about loneliness. With most of my participants (9 out of 10), we met face to face and had a narrative conversation. With one participant, we spoke online. As for photos, four participants sent me pictures of what they perceived as loneliness, the photos were either taken by the person with their phone cameras or memes downloaded from social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook).

Ethics

This study has been shaped by its ethical boundaries from recruitment to data collection to analysis. I will discuss the main ethical decisions I had to make in terms of what potential

participants to target (*Caring for people I did not meet*) changing the data collection plan (*When is it too much?*), ending research ties (*Leaving the conversation*), and other practical details, which took place during the interviews.

Once I have received the ethical application approval, I have started collecting data adhering to the four principles of confidentiality, anonymity, the right to withdraw without explanation and reducing harm. One issue I encountered was linked to the consent forms and information sheet. I had one participant who was willing to start the interview immediately even without signing the form. I was obliged to delay the interview one hour so the participant can read the information sheet and sign the consent form. Some other participants had a lot of trust in me and only wished to sign the consent form, but given my duty as a researcher, I had to explain why it was important to read the information sheet.

I found three concepts useful in engaging with ethics in my research: narrative care/ethics (Baldwin, 2015) relational ethics (Clandinin, 2018) that is based on ethics of care (Noddings, 1984). Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology which highlights relationships with the past, present, future and between the researcher and participants (Clandinin, 2013; p.23). Thus, narrative ethics (Baldwin, 2005) follow as a process that is embedded in a web of relationships and stories. It is unique to the encounter where people shape the narratives of one another; that is to say, everyone involved is in the process of becoming. These relationships shape the inquiry so the researcher cannot remove themselves from the study, they are part of it. Each interaction in my research was different, so were the ethics. Clandinin (2013) stance on relational ethics suggests that ethical decisions are made according to the circumstances of the interaction. While principles of anonymity, information sheet and consent form apply in all interactions, the intricacies of individual research meetings determine how ethics are enacted.

In narrative inquiry there is a possibility of change in the inquirer's life and that of people around them. This prospect was very important to me. The first question I asked was do my participants know they were signing up for a potential change in their experience? In entering such sensitive zone, researchers are involved in a caring relationship with their participants by living ethics of care (Noddings, 1984). The relationship becomes "the carer" and the "cared for" that being the participant. Caring for the participant is attempting to see their reality and feel what they feel, it is a commitment made by the carer (Noddings, 2013; p.15). The

relational ethics of care is not one way, it flows between the researcher and the participants (Caine et al., 2020). There were instances where my participants cared for me, in checking up on them during the first lockdown (March, 2020), they made sure I was ok too and knew what to eat and drink to keep healthy.

Caring for people I did not meet

Mental health students' society was the first society I approached for recruitment; however, I was faced with the ethical issue of targeting people who are already suffering from different mental health (MH) issues in addition to loneliness. I felt like I was going to use them as an easy sample, so I was afraid that I would benefit from their participation more than they would benefit from participating. Thus, I excluded this society, but it does not mean I have rejected all participants who live with a MH diagnosis.

When is it too much?

I have limited the period of interaction between myself and the participants to 4 months on the advertisement leaflet. As the conversations started taking place, the entire period of data collection was extended to 6 months (November 2019 to April 2020). Looking back, I realise regardless of the outbreak that one conversation with a short follow-up was probably enough. Talking about any subject for an hour can be draining physically, talking about loneliness for an hour, even with cheerful pauses, is emotionally draining. I could find myself insisting on loneliness questions like: yeah, what about loneliness now? Did you feel lonely then? Especially when loneliness as a term was not explicitly used. Then I had to limit my questions, at least for one setting, hoping that we could talk again more about loneliness in our following conversation.

Looking back, I realise that students should not be expected to commit to a 4 months' timeframe research about loneliness. Also, they do not have to reach out to me particularly as a researcher to talk about their loneliness. They also know that I am not their friend and that we can't be friends so does that position me in the place of someone who really cares about them? I honestly thought of the follow up conversations were a way of assuring they were alright. Talking about an emotional experience multiple times could potentially help the

narrator cope with the negative emotions (Habermas,2019), so I wanted to ensure they had someone (me) to listen. It was my way of caring and doing research at the same time. I am happy however that each time I asked my participants how they felt following the interview, they all found the first talks to be cathartic and intriguing. Many shared that this was the first time they got to understand and reflect on their loneliness and their behaviours when they are lonely. Finding solace in narrating emotionally intense experiences is not new. Catharsis derived from Greek Katharsis literally translates to cleansing, in the process of catharsis, the subject's body and soul are purified from blemishes and sins (Aristotle,1961 as cited in Vives,2011, Meineck,2016). Participants felt relief when they understood that loneliness was difficult to grapple with when they felt it on their own.

Leaving the conversation

One month after the beginning of the pandemic, when many people realized, it was not going to end soon, I have regained some confidence to contact other participants. Many of them responded to my texts but not all of them wanted to carry on. Before starting the research, I have had prepared plans of slowly and softly leaving the research conversations once my data collection period finishes. However, it was understandably extended due to multiple reasons starting from Christmas period to assessments, then the pandemic. Leaving the conversations was not as I pictured it when I planned ethics. I imagined it would be difficult for both participants and I because we would have developed some familiarity and attachment to each other. However, with half of my participants leaving the conversation was not hard because they have left first. Only one participant expressed withdrawal, the rest (four participants) did not get back to me after one text, I took that as a sign of withdrawal too. I had to come to terms with the fact that not all people want to be reminded of loneliness in multiple conversations. Indeed, I have not inquired why they had left, they have the right to withdraw at any time, and I am always grateful for the time they gave me in the first conversations we had. With the other half of the participants, (five out of ten) they were happy to write to me again. Ending the conversation with them was not difficult as well because they were busy with the changes in their lives. The fortunate thing is the pandemic was an opportunity for them to distance themselves from university and work onto the old

and the new connections they made. Thus, I did not leave the conversation worried about them, I was happy when they shared, they were happy.

Procedural ethics

Although I have made sure that the conversations my participants and I had were happening within a safe space, where I avoid upsetting them, it does not mean that sensitive topics could be avoided entirely. Talking about loneliness and experiences of isolation could easily bring in other topics such as suicide in the students' close circle such as family and friends, or even suicidal thoughts that one participant had which were triggered even in a seminar session.

I had a procedure to follow at hand for when a participant shared information that I could not handle within my capacity as a researcher.

In order to protect the participant, I would do the following:

- I make sure they have knowledge of and access to the university mental health services and other alternative options such as mental health charities. In addition, I would look into crisis support services available around them. I would carry small research the moment I learned what university they are from; copy paste the information available on that university's websites on mental health support in a separate document, print it out, and bring it with me to our first conversation.
- Whenever the student gets slightly upset, I change topic and remain in the conversation until the student shows signs of feeling better, such as they can continue talking (not necessarily answering my interview questions) after they take the break they need. I also contact them a day after and see how they feel and do the same for the following week.

Beside keeping my participants safe, I had to protect myself from being overwhelmed by the content of our conversations; especially during Covid-19 lockdowns where I struggled with loneliness too. I would do the following:

- Make my supervisors aware if I am having any issues during data collection, I also update them on how I am feeling and handling the process from data collection to data analysis. They would always advise that I prioritise my mental well being and only continue once I feel better.
- I would take a break and stay away from my data recordings and transcripts and do different light tasks such as watching a favourite series, and then only work once I feel I am in a stronger state of mind.

Pen Portrait of My Participants

I choose to present my participants in the present tense as they have presented their stories to me. However, they are in different places in life now, so these stories do not determine them. All the key information such as the name of the university or degree is omitted or altered when necessary to protect participants' confidentiality. I assigned pseudonyms for all participants even though they did not mind for their first names being used. Still, in the consent form statements 4 and 7 reads that their names will not be shared with anybody outside the project. The pseudonyms I used were names of colours.

Azure

Azure is a final-year undergraduate female student from a pre-1992 University in the Midlands. She studies a subject that she finds interesting. She comes from an underprivileged background and she is the first generation to go to university. Azure came to university with a heavy load of stories of abuse from her childhood. Still, she is this intelligent dreamy young woman who reads her way through life. Loneliness added an extra load on her which she couldn't manage very well in the first year. Thus, she took an extended leave of absence (LoA) because of the accumulated issues. We met the year after her LoA, and she shared with me a retrospective and an ongoing account of her loneliness. Azure found herself with a different year group in which she struggled to make friends. People in her previous accommodation provided her with a sense of stability and belonging, but she had to change the place because her contract ended. Coming from a working-class family she couldn't pay for a full-year

contract, or have another source of money which can assure that her rent is paid despite delays in student loans. Azure has multiple sources of stress in her life, but she keeps her dreams sacred in the words she writes. as she is a very creative person. She continues looking for friends, even when she realises that it is costing her more than she is gaining.

Orchid

Orchid is an international student in her final undergraduate year. She is one of the very few international students in her course. Orchid believes that she has language issues which hinder others from understanding her. Having classmates and meeting new people who are not necessarily interested in hearing a fellow course mate speak a foreign language, Orchid shared that she has had no friends in the city during the three years she has been there. Orchid told me stories of loneliness that walk with her every day. She wrote about it and took photos which also speak loneliness to her. Orchid is the only participant who was committed to sending me snippets of her loneliness every couple of months without being reminded. Having a long ongoing relationship with loneliness, Orchid taught herself that loneliness has to have a positive effect. She would actively stop herself from reaching out to others to cut her need for them. When all that is left is her and her loneliness, a peace treaty is signed. Still, loneliness returns especially when Orchid is all alone; be it in a failed conversation with a new person, or watching people return to their homes from the kitchen window, or just being in a student union event where she can't feel any union. The good news is, for someone like Orchid, just having a good conversation with another person silences the loneliness; and if that is not available, then watching a soap opera with multiple families creates the feeling of being together with someone. Orchid has the perfect online support system, that is her cousin in another continent. Offline, however, it is only herself and others who think she is from a different planet.

Grey

Grey is a home student who does not know what a home is. Coming from another country as a child with parents who struggled to create a space for the family, Grey travelled a lot in the new country. It was not for leisure but for a necessity that he was too young to fully

understand. Being an only child, he shares that he has always felt lonely. Even when there was no need for the family to travel for work or for him to travel for school anymore, Grey's loneliness always travelled with him. He was in university as a first-year student who does not really know if university, or at least that exact course was for him. He loved the subject but could not make full sense of the university experience. Grey knew he desperately needed guidance but did not know where to find it, so that was a lonely conflict of thoughts. Grey joined my research because he wanted to help me understand loneliness. He said he suffered from it and all he wanted to do was help others so that they never feel the same pain. Grey may be more motivated to help others because the person who helped him see himself committed suicide following mental health struggles. Grey went beyond speaking about his university loneliness because it only made sense to explain to me how this feeling was not new. He has shared with me how he learned social skills from the television, which made him an awkward child; he shared how his favourite person inspired him to be himself despite her being quite young at the time she ended her life. He shared how travelling made it difficult to establish friendships, but the closest relationship he had was with the family's friends' children. Grey started to feel like he belongs more once he settled in a school for more than 3 years, the friends were too from similar backgrounds. In asking about loneliness, Grey took advantage of the international environment the university creates, and he befriended many international students. Grey is also the best friend of many people online; he is, in a way, their mentor. Being in different continents makes it safe for him and his friends to speak about loneliness without any shame. Grey feels protected from my loneliness questions by referring to his friends online, and the flourishing friendships offline. Once the Covid lockdown took place, Grey had sharper experiences of loneliness to share. Even though he was in his family's home at the time, he felt like he needed to talk to someone. He had to mess with his sleep routine to talk with his friends from a different time zone. He wanted to be back in university, making one friend after another, but the lockdown has robbed him of the face-to-face contact he craves.

Red

Red is an international student who chose to do his master's degree in the UK. He came prepared with a small robot to talk to in case there was nobody else to talk with in his mother

tongue. Red later realized he could speak his mother tongue with many fellow students; still, he made use of the robot when he felt lonely, and language was not the issue. Red was motivated to join the research as part of his “redemption journey”. Red felt too lonely and unmotivated to study during the break. Usually, the break is for home students to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s Eve, but for Red, it was a period in which he had to study for his assignments. Being spiritually away from this tradition, but physically present in a city that is deserted during these breaks, Red played videogames and watched movies. At the time we spoke, warnings about Covid-19 were widespread in East Asia, but not in the UK yet. Red followed the guidelines from his home. He did not trust either the NHS or the English Government which was taking too long to respond. This meant he had to isolate himself from the friends he made in university and miss tutorials. He felt too guilty about everything, so he showed up in for the research while putting covid-19 warnings outside of the space where we spoke. Red brought the physical aspect of loneliness to this research, for a man, I did not expect him to share other vulnerabilities than loneliness with me. Red opened up about love, jealousy, friends, social media, relationships, racism and feeling physically cold. Red also shared how listening to a specific album that tells a story makes him feel less lonely. Whether it was the comfort speaking a different language gives you, or him wanting to speak about loneliness with someone, Red was unapologetically lonely. He was very motivated to change his loneliness, or what he refers to many times, as laziness.

Rose

Rose is a home student who has tried different forms of friendships, still, she disclosed feeling lonely. Online, Rose was upfront about her loneliness, offline when we met face to face everything was cool, but we still had to speak about loneliness. On the surface, Rose is fine and whatever negative feelings she’s feeling are the sum of some bad, or unresolved situations. I ask about the loneliness she answers belonging. It was until she grew more comfortable that she started using the same words from the online chat. Rose studies in a big city, with countless of things to do and nobody to do those things with, she feels trapped. Neither the university, nor the flat is home to her, she finds shelter in the few people she likes, or her boyfriend on the weekend or friends from home when she is back home. However, in the now and here (back to the time we had the conversation), Rose had no solid

connection to make her feel at home. Rose is a postgraduate student so in our conversation we spoke about 4 years of university. In the four years, she had several attachments, some of which were “proper”, as she calls them, and others were intentionally temporary. To someone looking from the outside, Rose has checked most of the to-do list of being a university student. Student society worked for her, friends from the course worked, and their attachment to home was still present. Yet Rose felt lonely, there were cracks in her university experiences, and those were the same cracks loneliness crept through. To me, Rose’s story is the perfect example of the short, almost meaningless “Hi, how are you? I am alright, how are you?” talk. It is normal to say a quick hello, it is not socially normal to open about feelings during that short talk with friends; however, in Rose’s story, these are friendships that do not curb loneliness. Rose came to the research looking for a better understanding of her feeling, she knew something was off and was afraid loneliness was her entire fault.

Violet

Violet is another first generation to go to university, she is an undergraduate student for whom university wasn’t the expected path for her. She fought to be in university without any support from home, she was more prone to taking it all upon herself. University was not a safe option, neither financially, nor socially. That means Violet had a lot at stake, but still she fought to prove everyone wrong. Violet came to my research in an attempt to leave no space for loneliness. Lacking clear structure in university despite trying hard to get involved in any structure, Violet found herself creating a structure. Not ideal, but workable. The research conversation was part of her structure, she is meeting new people and keeping busy, even with a loneliness research. Violet is outspoken, intelligent and expresses herself with so much honesty. Violet shared how she was struggling to make something for herself, part of the struggle was studying with middle-class rich people and getting inspirational talks from middle-class rich people for whom money was never an issue. Violet goes to a prestigious university; she stands out for having different worries and constant worries about failing and facing people who believed university is a waste of time in the first place. Indeed, she cannot be the only one, but in her story, she was, and she was very lonely. Violet tried doing the university student social life the typical way. That is sticking to one group and doing everything together, or else you are left out. It did not work for her and only made her feel trapped and

lonely. Violet was lucky enough to find similarities between her previous city in the current city and went there to be in a community. Violet came to university hoping to find a family, that is a source of support. Violet was ashamed for needing others, so she finds herself justifying it. Violet knew that whatever difficulty she was going through, she did not have the luxury to go back and not hate herself for it. Thus, loneliness was a problem to solve with her CBT journaling, but not to be talked about with the therapist and certainly not in public.

Blue

Blue is a postgraduate home student at another prestigious university. Blue is this confident, well-spoken, elegant lady whom anybody would think she is too glowy for feeling any gloom. Blue came to my call for a small gathering to speak about loneliness (it was a recruitment option I tried). In a sense, what is more, confident than sharing how you feel with a stranger in the potential presence of others? Blue shared that she was feeling lonely, and she was trying to understand why she was feeling that way. Blue looks around she has a supportive family; she knows many people and she is not afraid of meeting new ones. She has a solid group of friends which she is in constant touch with online, but she was still feeling very lonely. Blue studies in a highly specialized course and she was one of two Black British in the lecture theatre. For a Black woman, Blue shares how she does not feel black enough and her colour imposes a profile on her which she must be careful about. Blue is a highly intuitive person who would sometimes go against her intuition to win a friend. Her choice of society is always affected by the activities the society offers; the idea of structured conversation doesn't appeal to her. Blue is careful about how she comes across, and she is careful about how others feel around her. She is caring and open to meeting people from different backgrounds, still when she needs to be with someone, everyone is busy. Thus, even with friends and acquaintances around, Blue presents the story of feeling lonely and not remembering why.

Steel

Steel is a final-year student from the south of Europe. Steel was the first person to reach out for a conversation about loneliness. He seemed too excited and very happy to talk. He wanted to start the conversation immediately without even signing the forms. After reading the

information sheet and sending me the signed consent form, we spoke online. It all happened in the same evening but talk happened the following day because I was not mentally prepared. There was no need for a schedule and a wait with Steel, he was very easy to reach, very quick to respond and very quick to get into how bad his loneliness was. Steel did not wish to meet face-to-face and was happily texting online. Steel is a sociable guy who jokes around and looks fun to be around, he exerts a youthful warmth which he believes it makes him easy to be friends with. Steel, however, was not happy to be around anybody because he is always reminded where he is from. Steel is good friends with people only under the influence (alcohol or drugs), once the influence wears off, Steel is unhappy with others around, he is lonely with them and without them. Talking online, Steel shared with me stories from his bedroom, the place where he chooses to be rather than lecture halls or around people who only talk to him when they need him. Steel's story of loneliness is savage in the sense that he did not think twice about sharing unkind views about himself. He was in pain and he thought he was not made to be happy or not lonely.

Yellow

Yellow is another student from the South of Europe who expressed her will to join the research online. She is an undergraduate student doing a course she loves but couldn't quite keep up with the pace of it. Yellow came to the UK to do a course that wasn't available in her country; having to pay for everything, Yellow was always unsure about whether it was worth it being in the UK. What made Yellow doubt her choice even more was the nature of everyone around her; the more she approached fellow students, the more they pull further away from her. Her accommodation was lonely, her grocery shopping was lonely and the social events she turned up to were lonely too. Only a few people show up, and none of them is interested in the idea of starting a friendship. Yellow is a quiet person who loves quietness, but only the quietness she chooses; being forced to not talk or meet anybody triggers loneliness for her. Moreover, for a quiet person who considers herself shy, Yellow was the first to start many conversations. She wasn't the person to end them. In Yellow's story, relationships are not even allowed to sprout; they are crashed into their soil. Yellow, like few other students, is lucky to have her support system from home, parents who think she is doing well, and a girlfriend who knows she is not doing well but believes Yellow is doing her best. Yellows

loneliness is fragile, yet strong in that it doesn't leave her; it resists her love for solitude and presents itself as a bothersome issue day in and day out.

Silver

Silver is a second-year home student who sees himself as the popular guy in certain settings but not others. Silver has kindly joined the research despite previously hating Muslims. To Silver, loneliness is more than university, his loneliness was marked by grief early on in his life, and a constant need for the person he lost. Coming to university, loneliness was shaped differently, it wasn't always about losing someone he cared for. His loneliness was more about being in a place where he feels he does not belong. Having many good friends around and living with them under the same roof, Silver can easily detect when he feels lonely. Despite being well-known by his group of friends and liked by many girls, Silver in other settings feels awkward, lonely and completely out of place. To Silver confidence is key in attracting and being attracted to others, but he gets his confidence from others so once the foundation of his relationship with others shakes, his world collapses and loneliness takes place. In Silver's story, loneliness finds its place in strong relationships, it stems from those very connections Silver made with others.

How does loneliness bring my participants together?

My participants are similar in the fact that loneliness does not define them. They were all young people who came to university with much energy, expectations and dreams. They were not defeated by their loneliness and kept trying to meet people similar to them. Loneliness did not drain them as much as their failed attempts did. They had a lot of courage, and they were not passive in their experiences. They are, however, different in the sense that they came from different walks of life. They did not have the same social support system from families and friends; not all came from 'happy' homes where their parents believed in them. They did not start the university journey equally, which created more trouble for some than others. Still, it was loneliness that brought them to me and brought me to them. It was the feeling of lacking and craving a connection that made their stories worth telling and worth listening to. Despite the complex lives they had; loneliness ironically brought everyone together.

Method of Analysis

Analytical Approach

A narrative constructionist approach (Smith & Monforte, 2020) was adopted for three reasons:

Firstly, since the stories analysed were not a reflection of one reality, I examined the interaction between the stories told and the context surrounding them, it was not only what was told only, but also how it was told. I drew from the narrative constructionism approach (Smith & Monforte, 2020) and for the sake of analysis, I had to make the distinction between the terms story and narrative. The narrative is the larger set of cultural and social stories, and the story is smaller tales that draw from the floating narratives in a particular context. Further, the stories told are not a direct reflection of the experience and they are not the route to one's mind; they are however one construction of many depending on the narratives present in that society. This means stories give us a look at the culture more than they do at the person telling them. Moreover, narratives don't just provide people with linguistic resources to construct their stories, they also play a role in how one thinks and feels in a particular situation. This does not mean that storytellers are passive actors who mimic what they hear, they can react and claim that stories do not shape them in "counter stories"; stories therefore do not determine the person and they are always changing. The body is also important in stories as it is sometimes the reference in how one experiences something, and in how one tells it.

Secondly, narrative constructionism (Smith & Monforte, 2020) allows me to answer my research questions because I specifically look at what narratives make students lonely and which ones protect them from feeling lonely. As a feeling claimed by an individual yet constructed between many, I look at what kind of stories are circulated between students, and which are categorised as success or failure. I also look at where these stories come from and how they function, what they do to these students and where they lead them.

I also look at how the university presents itself, the experience of its students and how those narratives force themselves on students and challenge their mental well-being. I look at who benefits from certain narratives and who finds themselves othered. Finally, in learning about all the different stories I hope to find a way into altering the shared narrative of loneliness in a way that empowers a person and not destroys them.

Analytical Method

All the narrative interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with affective expressions recorded (for example, nervous laughter, both laughing, a sigh of sadness, and groan). The online conversations, along with the email communications and the Google documents, were copy-pasted into a Word document. I then proceeded with a narrative, thematic analysis. The narrative analysis treats long excerpts of the story as the unit of analysis. It focuses on sequences and eventualities in stories (Riessman, 2008); thus, the stories related to loneliness are what I focus on. Although I use narratives and stories interchangeably in other sections, during the analysis, I settled on the understanding of narrative as the entire conversation, whereas stories were the excerpts referring to loneliness directly or indirectly. Focusing on stories helped me track paths of loneliness in each narrative. I have opted for narrative, thematic analysis in specific (Riessman, 2005; Braun, Clark & Wheate, 2016) to best depict common themes. This method allows me to focus initially on the particular and the context in each narrative and then on similarities in patterns across stories.

Narrative thematic analysis: Layer 1

To maintain the particularities of each story, it was helpful to analyse them separately. To protect the co-construction of each conversation and accentuate the differences in each individual story, I began with an individual analysis of each narrative. The tool used for this layer of analysis is inspired by one instruction in Riessman's (2008) narrative thematic analysis. Questions such as **“What is the common theme(s) or thread(s) in each story?”** and **“What occurs repeatedly within the whole story?”** (Smith, 2016.p264) shape the first layer of analysis.

The analysis included the following stages:

1. I started by listening to the audio of the conversation first to get a feel of the interview, I wanted to remember the tone of the conversation was it relaxed? Tense? Sad? Then I noted it down.
2. I read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. I draw thin lines with a pencil under words or sentences I find intriguing, acting on Creswell's (2007,p.153). "What strikes you? "guide to analysis.
3. I colour-code sentences and passages in the narrative. I develop a colour codebook as I go, and I keep it specific to each participant. The colour coding depends on the particular events in the narrative and also what is unique about it. For example, in one narrative, I would use green for triggers of loneliness with the story that comes with it and blue for feelings of strangeness. In another narrative, however, I would use green for making connections and blue for a difficult past. The reason why I do not have a unitary colour code guide is that in narrative, thematic analysis, the aim is to maintain the particularities of each story. In the margins, I jot down a sentence on the apparent meaning of data and what it could implicate.

0. This stage of analysis was largely inductive (See appendix 1).

I did not want to impose a certain codebook on all narratives because they are told in different sequences, and the events are given different importance. I attempted to keep the story "intact" (Riessman,2008) by going with different colours in the codebooks; except for participants' definition of loneliness which I always highlighted in bright yellow . Moreover, when practising narrative analysis, you are thinking in terms of patterns and stories rather than codes, there is a risk of ending up with many fragmented codes rather than stories (Smith & Monforte, 2020). It is also important to note that I have kept my reflective notes from each conversation and compared them with my interpretation of each conversation. In some cases, my interpretation remains unchanged, but in others, my notes from the day shape the analysis. For example, I would ask participants how they felt and their thoughts after I stopped the recording. It was an ethics-related step and an opportunity to learn about what was

important to them, irrelevant to the questions I asked. The reflections helped me prioritize what was important to them; for instance, one participant did not speak about stigma openly during the interview. However, once the record stopped, he shared how unmasculine talking about loneliness could be. This point brought my attention to the implicit ways he referred to stigma during the conversation. Stigma became a subtheme of Burden and was I compared to how others spoke of stigma.

- The colour-coding process was followed by identifying the patterns of each narrative. In this stage, I brought out the common threads/themes in one narrative. The codes from Step 3 were collated together to construct different threads. I would note the pattern of each story on a big white sheet (See appendices 3,4,5,6,7). The pattern is specific to the participant's narrative, so I write their pseudonym, a cartoonish sketch of them and write one striking line from their story. Then, I note down my interpretation of what is important and significant in their narrative of loneliness. This step was performed immediately after developing the colour codebook (See appendices 8 and 9) its resulting provisional themes so I would ensure remembering all-important details. It is worth noting that by pattern, I mean how each participant's narrative unravels; whereas themes signify the repeated codes put together or the threads linking the codes together.
- I have continued performing the same steps (1,2,3,4) on each participant's narrative. The result is different codebooks for each conversation and different patterns (See appendices 3,4,5,6,7).

Narrative Thematic Analysis: Layer 2

- Pattern spotting was followed by the identification of common themes (See appendices 10,11,12,13) and sub-themes common between all narratives. This step was made

relatively easier by locating pronounced similarities in the students' narratives through the colour codebook (See appendices 8 and 9) and the well-pronounced themes in each narrative. However, a challenge was faced at this point. Even though the themes were, to a degree, similar, they were not identical. To illustrate, the disappointment felt by students when entering university differed between students from low and high socio-economic backgrounds. Even though these two stories were used to construct the same sub-theme (deception which wasn't used later), they are very different.

This second layer of analyses was facilitated by Braun, Clarke & Weate's (2016) analysis questions:

- Why might the participants be making sense of things in this way (and not that way)?**
- How would I feel in this situation?**
- How could the participants' accounts be different?**
- What assumptions underpin the data?**
- What worldview does the account imply or rely on?**
- What implications might this account have?**

In this step, I used the similarities in patterns to guide me in constructing themes. For example, the term 'bother' echoed many times in almost all interviews. I have used it as a code and went through the participants' narratives, highlighting them. Then, I read the full extract and started thinking about how other participants have used it. For instance, bothering others was commonly constructed in the context of feeling like a burden. However, it is worth noting that not all participants had the same perception of burden. For example, one participant felt like a burden to friends who were doing well, while another felt like a burden to friends who were not doing well. Another had nobody to burden but still felt that loneliness was a burden to themselves. It is in these nuances that I attempt to show commonality while at the same time maintaining and manifesting the differences between students and their stories. Therefore, feeling like a burden was one of the themes with three subthemes: Burden, what is it? Performance and Stigma. This second stage was deductive (See appendix 2), as I was thinking more actively about theory and concepts at this stage.

It is important to note that my thematic map kept changing until it held the form it has today (See appendices 14, 15,16).

As for the theoretical frameworks that shaped my analysis and influenced my interpretations, these were determined by, firstly, my worldviews and personal background and my experience of loneliness. In addition to that, Goffman's representational self-theory and stigma (1956,1963), along with Affect theory (Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant). Further concepts on belonging, mattering in higher education, ethical loneliness (Stauffer,2015) together with slow violence (Nixon, 2011) shaped my analysis. When I work with participants' stories, I hold all of these ideas in mind, and they will help to inform my analysis. I invited emerging data to push me towards an eclectic and interdisciplinary mix of theoretical resources.

Writing Analysis

By following the loneliness track in the students' narratives, I have written the three analysis chapters differently. The way in which the data emerged in addressing the three different research questions afforded a different style of analysis and a different narrative thread per each analysis-discussion chapter. This approach is in line with a qualitative approach which demands imaginative ways of making sense of data. It is also in line with narrative analysis that allows space for re-imagining lives told through stories rather than representing them as factual accounts (Riessman,2005) . The narrative thread also allows me to track and construct the connections between the personal, the social and the structural in students' loneliness. Therefore, in creating new narrative threads out of my participant stories, I have come out with a writing style unique to this thesis. However, I still use the terms of themes and subthemes to honour the two layers of my analytical method: Narrative Thematic Analysis. Thus, I let the thread of loneliness and the emerging data shape my analysis in each chapter; to illustrate, in the chapter Burden as a personal story, I followed how loneliness took place in the personal sphere of participants. In Dealing with Burden, I analysed and discussed what students do to avoid loneliness, how they arrive at loneliness and how some of them succeed at escaping loneliness. In the last chapter, Loneliness as an Institutional Burden, I examined how loneliness is influenced, hosted and prevented in academic spaces. My intention is to walk the reader through the loneliness students feel by examining different stories and exploring the different settings when, how and why loneliness happened. This writing

analysis style was possible to implement by letting the emerging data take me to different theoretical lenses in order to make sense of and converse with participants stories.

Conclusion

The first aim of this chapter was to explain my methodological, epistemological and ontological stance in this research and the researcher's values which guided this project. I also explain the theoretical frameworks that shaped it. I first defined the key terms of my narrative inquiry approach: narrative inquiry, narratives, and stories, considering the epistemological and ontological background of narrative inquiry. I then elaborated on the framework that informed my narrative inquiry approach, indigenous research demonstrating its organic approach to storytelling. Here I am thinking beyond the use of research tools to obtain knowledge from participants, but also how to respect and honour the relationships between researcher and participants through the stories we share.

In the next part, I provide a picture of what the fieldwork looked like, that is, to make clear who was involved in this research (participants), why they were chosen (sampling), how they were approached (channels that did not and those that did not work) and what forms their involvement took (methods). I also referred to the analytical approach and method (Narrative thematic analysis done in two layers) that I used to interpret and organise the stories into themes. Moreover, I explained why my analytical writing style is different from the traditional style in each analytical chapter.

Another aim of this chapter was to show how loneliness shaped the choice of methods and the complexities that arose once Covid19 lockdowns took place. The difficulties ranged from maintaining contact with participants to how I could manage a loneliness research during lonely times without causing more harm (loneliness). The following three chapters are the analyses chapters, which discuss the findings from the participants' stories, and they are the outcome of the narrative thematic analysis of the storied data. The first analytical chapter, Chapter 3, focuses on the student's experiences of feeling loneliness, the burden they felt they were, and sharing or hiding this loneliness from their close mates. Chapter 4 turns the analytical gaze to the social spaces where students tried to manage the burden they felt,

escape loneliness and looked for new connections. Chapter 5, the final analysis chapter, explores loneliness as an institutional burden and looks at the ways it is constructed in/by university systems.

Chapter 3: Analysis 1: Personal Burden: How Loneliness is Co-constructed by Students in the University

Introduction

In this chapter, I walk you through what goes around in the mind of a student feeling lonely. I draw from Goffman's dramaturgical approach to the presentation of self (1956) in daily interactions to visualise burden as part of an act, a performance. Although I use Goffman's concepts, this theme has arrived at me as the word 'burden' repeated itself in all of my participants' stories. It caught my attention, especially when loneliness could need communication to fade away. In this theme, I answer the first research question: how is loneliness co-constructed in university? I use the term co-construct to indicate that I am thinking relationally and to argue that loneliness is not an individual feeling but a collective experience where the more loneliness is stigmatised, the more students are stuck feeling lonely alone.

Drawing from Goffman's theory of stigma (1963) and self-presentation concepts (1956), this chapter aims to unpack the idea of the burden from the different lenses of stigma: self, public and associative; together with the backstage, frontstage and framework concepts of performance. The chapter also aims to argue that the idea of a burden doesn't only hamper sharing; it also contributes to the thickening of one's experience of loneliness.

I will analyse and discuss the participants' extracts under three subthemes: Burden, Performance and Stigma. In the first subtheme, I link burden to the concept of busyness and

how that relates to being independent. I also look at burden from a disability perspective and a social healthcare framing where the term burden is mostly found in the literature, I argue that students perceive themselves as a burden because they adopt the neoliberal values of self-dependency and rational self-management. In the second subtheme, I look into performances of belonging that suffocate loneliness and do not leave room for vulnerability. In the last subtheme, *Stigma*, I link both burden and performance to spoiled identities and the idea of stigma by expanding on the work of Goffman and engaging with his critiques. The main argument of this chapter is that the burden is entwined with the idea of the neoliberal citizen, which demonises care and vulnerability in relationships. I also argue that the stigma of loneliness does not stem from an essential nature of the experience but rather the social construction of loneliness as a failure. I point out that stigma here causes what it stigmatises: more loneliness. Finally, I call for a cautious understanding of Stigma.

1. Burden

The term burden seemed to repeat itself within many students' accounts. Each student came with a different story leading to the uttering of the word burden, but all participants constructed a sense of burden in their stories. I asked Rose, in our very first conversation online, about the times she felt lonely and what happened. She answered :

Rose: Um well, I don't live with friends as we had housing issues, so I often feel lonely in my flat as I live with strangers. But because I have few friends in (the city where she studies), there's also nowhere I can go, so I feel trapped. And I could message my other friends online but I feel like a burden – I know they are busy too

Having friends and feeling like a burden did not sit right with me as I wondered how can a student be lonely despite having 'many' friends; this was especially the case when other participants shared how lonely they felt because every attempt to make friends failed. Not being happy with the friendship group resembles the widely used definition of loneliness by Peplau and Perlman (1982); that is the dissatisfaction with the quality of relationships regardless of the quantity. The quality of peer relationships is a decisive point in a successful

adjustment at a university where students feel like they belong (Maunder,2018; Meehan & Howells,2018). The quality, however, is often difficult to find when quantity is emphasised in the students' narratives of socially successful university life (discussed in Chapter 2). Quality is also difficult to obtain when students struggle to be open about their vulnerability.

Moreover, Rose felt particularly lonely in her flat because she did not live with her friends; she saw her flatmates as strangers. When tensions arise in students' residential, individuals tend to retrieve to their separate spaces, which makes meaningful connections impossible to establish (Holton,2016). Students struggle when they haven't established a good group of friends in their first year and move in together in the following years (Hubbard, 2009). The students, in this case, do not view making friends as a continuous process that can happen at any point in time and space but rather restrict themselves to a rigid way of befriending others that is usually the most popular in university (discussed in Chapter 2).

Further, Rose felt like she could not even talk to her friends online when she felt lonely. Interestingly, while online connections create "an illusion of companionship without friendship", these beliefs are counterproductive since they increase the sense of loneliness and disconnection (Turkle,2017; p. 1). Although social media is found most helpful when it is used to maintain existing relationships while creating new ones (Thomas et al.,2017), it comes with its challenges as these two types of relationships become blurred in the process. Rose was afraid that sharing her loneliness would disrupt her friends' daily life since they would have a job caring for her. Arguably her friends also become strangers to her loneliness, and their caring for her feels abnormal to her. Care is somehow demonised in contexts where it is linked to economic costs—feeling like a burden in the healthcare literature is usually linked to the financial cost of caring for others. The elderly and end-of-life patients who need care (Noyes et al,2005; Porensky et al.,2009; Iragorri et al.,2021), the overweight population (Yang & Hall, 2008; Withrow & Alter, 2011) and the alcohol addicts (Williams et al.,2018; Manthey et al.,2016) are all portrayed as draining the state's treasury. Loneliness also has its own share of economic costs which governments could consider a 'burden' too (Mihalopoulos et al., 2020). The burden of loneliness is constantly linked to the framing of loneliness as a risk factor similar to obesity, smoking and hypertension (Holt-Lunstad, & Smith, 2016), and during the pandemic Covid19, loneliness has been established as a critical public health issue (Killgore et

al.,2020). The burden can also be transferred to the individual where informal caregivers are relied on to reduce the economic cost by the state (Bastawrous,2013; Adelman et al., 2014). In the midst of these negative framings, where the term burden circulates between the elderly, loneliness and disease, Rose might have correlated her need to have a conversation as a need to be cared for. Care becomes a costly activity requiring that her friends 'give up' their time and well-being, and this position her as a burden. Rose's feelings match the neoliberal atmosphere today, which denies "social compassion and shared civic responsibility in favour of a social Darwinist politics of disposability" (Hamer, & Lang,2015 ; p.899).

In speaking of time, Rose had to tell herself that her friends must be busy, just like she gets busy at university. The idea of being busy shapes the life of many people today, it has become a ' mode of being ' (Martinsen as cited in Dreyer et al., 2018; p.33); and busyness becomes equal to productivity (Briody., et al.,2019). Busyness can even be a determinant of manhood among men who work and those who do not (Jeffrey,2010). Unemployment and not being busy become an identity marker for men as in the "permanent male adolescence" (Hansen 2018, p.105). Boredom could also be linked to not being busy, and could communicate a "feeling of not being involved in or engaged by events or activities" (Barbalet, 1999; p.634). Being lonely when she was supposed to be busy as other university students, Rose's un-busyness might signify a lack of social activities, lack of productivity and failure, which attracts guilt. This is especially the case when boredom is socially constructed as a negative attribute that needs to be hidden (Ohlmeier, Finkielstein, & Pfaff, 2020) and busyness as a positive attribute signifying a meaningful way of living especially with an abundance of time (Parker,2021). Rose might have thought that her loneliness and self-perceived failure will become a burden on her friends, as is the burden of being jobless or old and ill in society. Thus Rose perhaps felt that opening a conversation because she is lonely could waste her friends' time; reflecting feelings of unworthiness in relationships with strong interdependence (Rothers, & Cohr, 2022). Moreover, constant conversations with them would reinforce her image as 'not busy' indicating that she is unengaged in her university experience. Unproductivity also shows in Violet's description of loneliness :

Violet: *When I think of loneliness, I think of isolation and sadness and ... also it ties to things like unmotivation and unproductivity because I always felt like when I am in the best place when I have friends and I have support you are in the mindset of more optimistic about things (...)*

M: *what were you scared of exactly*

Violet: *I don't know because there are some people who work perfectly fine by themselves and I always wondered how they do that because I am not that person, I definitely need the company of other people I need people to talk to and that is what keeps me sane (laughs as if embarrassed)*

M: *I know that's normal*

Violet: *but I am not that person, so I think what I fear is I don't want to be in that position where there is no one and there is nothing I can do about that or then I think I started getting into the irrational phase of you know there is nothing wrong with others maybe it's just me there are loads of nice people maybe it's just me who can't make friends it's me that they don't like which isn't helpful*

M: *but do you sometimes think that's the way to be in university? Like you need to get used to it and be alone*

Violet: *I think you need to find a balance because if you go to an employer that just shows inability to work with other people and at some point in life you have to work with someone else, listen to someone else work for someone else so that's not an asset that's definitely a disadvantage*

Violet is highly aware that independence is not the ultimate way of being. Still, she was shaming her feelings of dependence, framing it as a weakness. Her internalised shame is not

strange, as dependence is commonly framed as a deplorable punishable state of being in political speeches (Garthwaite, 2011; Reeve, 2017). Violet later defends her need for others by labelling it as job market quality, that is, the ability to work with others. This implies that a need for others can only be disclosed safely and then utilised in a work environment. It also implies that unless this need is profitable, which is the excuse, individuals must manage on their own. This highlights the centrality of independence in students' life as "part of contemporary culture" (Malleon, 2018; p.164). Needing others becomes a quantifiable necessity and interest; rather than a human desire for connection. Not only Violet's need for others is stigmatised, but it is also turned into a perceived sense of 'failure' is, resulting in a cycle of self-blame and shame. Under neoliberal systems, which pervade everyday life, the self becomes quantified, and the person constantly feels shame about who they are (Hoggett, 2017). The shame is covered when individuals with stigmatised identities find themselves othering those, thus trapped in an insidious chain of stigma (Jun, 2022). This is something Violet unconsciously does in othering people who don't know how to function with others in a workspace.

Although interdependence could fend off loneliness and is exactly what some students desire, the burden Rose and Violet perceived themselves to be, feeds off the idea of dependence as a negative experience in a young person's life. Rose compares herself to her disabled friend, who also feels lonely but doesn't shy away from admitting it :

***M:** have you ever as a group spoken about loneliness at all? With anyone of them individually*

***Rose:** one I know we've talked about loneliness she has mobility problems so she is often physically trapped in the flat so I know she gets lonely and she has told me this, the others not so much like I know they have had a hard time sometimes but it's just like oh yeah it's been had a bad day but that as far as it goes (...)it doesn't go sort of deeper than that*

Rose confirmed that loneliness is taboo among friends, a topic which can't be discussed. The only exception was the friend with mobility issues, who was presented as having the right and the 'excuse' to feel lonely and to talk about it openly. The friend does not only feel trapped, but she is also physically trapped by her disability. When Rose draws the comparison between herself and her friend, she perhaps draws from narratives which portray disabled people as tragic figures going through tragic lives; or monsters going through monstrous lives (Goodley, Runswick-Cole, & Liddiard, 2016); thus feeling loneliness while disabled was normalised. It wasn't surprising for Rose to think of her friend as lonely because she doesn't meet the neoliberal citizen characteristics of independence, autonomy and strength (Liddiard et al., 2019) that presumably actualise a person's humanity. Thus, the friend's loneliness is somehow justifiable, less valuable and more understandable as opposed to Rose's, who is able-bodied but still trapped in her flat. However, while Rose keeps her loneliness protected, her friend benefits from sharing; therefore, it begs the question of who is really trapped here. The disabled friend or the participants, along with their non-disabled mates, are stuck in feeling like burdens.

It can be argued that dependence isn't and should not be viewed negatively, especially when it gets you through difficult times. Butler (2012) uses difficult times to explore the potential for connections that gets people through; they propose "*[p]recarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency*" (p.148). Whereas Rose's friend was not afraid to admit her needs for others, Rose kept it to herself along with her other friends. Arguably, the burden is relational, it can be used as an opportunity to connect with others thus, unburden (Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2018); or it can remain there weighing heavy if the relations do not allow its sharing. Even when the self-perceived sense of burden stems from a performance of autonomy and independence, it is still relational. Individualisation is still relational because individual autonomy is embedded in social connectedness with others (Mason, 2004).

Blue another participant was also afraid that her friends would get tired of her and perhaps leave as Rose feared. The care here is conceptualised not as a prerequisite of friendship, but as an offer which could be retracted at any time; this is similar to research done with disabled people in their intimate life where the disabled person would avoid conflict with their

partners in order to continue receiving care (Liddiard, 2014). Although my participants did not receive any material care from their friends, they did not want to risk losing being part of a friendship group. Blue was also nervous at the idea of coming across as weak when reaching out to her friends when she felt lonely:

***Blue:** I always found it easy to make friends, and it wasn't easy to make friends at that time my friends were busy, it was hard to keep contacting them over and over, I worried that they are getting tired of this(...) like it probably it's getting annoying, so I can't call them as much, so I tried to stop calling them as much which means I was just by myself a lot more, and then I was struggling with the work, I was stressed, so I guess it was a moment of weakness I suppose,*

Weakness and dependence counter the narrative of young and independent, it situates the student as frail, needy of support and unproductive. It can also bring to mind the images of the elderly who are incapable of self-reliance, children, the chronically ill and the severely disabled⁴ (Malleeson, 2018).

Therefore, burden can be seen from two different angles, perceiving oneself as a burden and being perceived as such indicate different mechanisms. Following the biological logic of evolution, Gruter and Masters (1986) view burden in terms of an individual hurdling the progress of a group. It is a practice common in primates, and humans do it under cultural and legal frameworks where an individual is ostracised for breaking the law or for just being different. Others analysed why groups socially reject one of its members and theorized that the burdensome member causes others psychological pain which threatens the well-being of a group; thus, necessitates immediate removal of the burden (Wirth, LeRoy and Bernstein, 2020). Ostracism in this case seems specific to groups which have a common goal; however, exclusion of others occurs on a daily basis, and its effects vary between being shunned by strangers or close people (Nezlek et al., 2012). Regardless of where it comes from, 3 minutes of being ostracised are enough to inflict social pain on the ostracised which is similar to

⁴ I recognise that the chronically ill and the severely disabled are ableist terms which I wouldn't use; however, they were used by the article's author. They could be changed with: people who have a long term condition, people with disability,

physical pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003). This pain in some cases leads the ostracised person to seek solitude (Ren et al., 2021), in order to avoid further rejections (Ren et al., 2016). Rose and Blue could have been scared to show their vulnerability because they were afraid of rejection. Blue saw loneliness as a 'weakness' so she was afraid that frequently chatting with her friends would expose her loneliness instead of alleviating it. Her friends might have been more accepting than she thinks. Findings from the BBC loneliness experiment (2018) show that the public is more accepting of lonely others while lonely individuals are not accepting of themselves. The lonely society report also showed that people are more embarrassed to admit feeling lonely; thus, seek help (Griffin, 2010) which makes admitting loneliness even harder. Instead of speaking about loneliness, Blue wished to counter her loneliness by meeting new people. So, when this did not work, she returns to her old friends but with limits on sharing. Arguably then, the burden is framed with reference to humanist capitalist values which equate being human with being productive, rational, independent and most interestingly able-bodied (Goodley, 2014). These values are usually exclusionary of others who do not meet them (Braidotti, 2013). Thus the term human becomes power laden as Braidotti (2020) who argues:

not all humans are equal and the human is not at all a neutral category. It is rather a normative category that indexes access to privileges and entitlements. Appeals to the "human" are always discriminatory: they create structural distinctions and inequalities among different categories of humans (...) This dominant idea is based on a simple assumption of superiority by a subject that is: masculine, white, Eurocentric, practicing compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanized, speaking a standard language. para.7

Therefore, the question of who is human is contentious and does not apply to everyone who is not white, male, able bodied and straight. In power structured relationships, those who do not meet this criteria are reduced to subhuman. In the case of students feeling burdensome, they equate their loneliness with inability, dependence and inferiority in comparison to the non-lonely students who are thriving.

The stories that have been discussed so far tackled burden as an extra layer of negative emotions on top of the loneliness students experience. They also portrayed where the conception of burden comes from, how it is socially constructed and how it creates a

discursive reality that affects students' ability to share their vulnerabilities. However, feeling burdensome doesn't stop when the student decides not to share, it also seeps into the interactions they have with their friends in which they can only 'act' happy,, as discussed in the next section.

2. Performance

In this subtheme, I expand on the discussion of Burden by examining the performative aspect of feeling lonely. I look into why students are not encouraged to share their feelings, how they manage to hide them; and what kind of mechanisms go into maintaining a performance. While Rose never shared how she felt with her friends, Blue did at some point but she did not receive the reaction she needed:

***M:** do they (friends) know about it when you're feeling lonely?*

***Blue:** yeah, coz I probably start calling them a lot more *laughs**

***M:** do you ever say it oh I'm just calling you coz I've been feeling lonely or do you just talk about your usual conversations?*

***Blue:** I think I've told one of them, like yeah I am lonely, and she was worried about me because of what going through mentally at the time, but when you tell somebody something, and they are not feeling it at that time, they don't relate to it, so they just kinda forget about it and move on (...) so to keep bothering her about my loneliness when she wasn't feeling it, wasn't affecting her, I didn't want to change her positive experiences then to negative ones because I don't need her to feel empathetic,*

***M:** why?*

Blue: because why am I gonna upset her? Life is short and you get happy moments like less than you get the bad ones, so while she is in her happiness, she should stay in her happiness, I don't wanna change it,

Blue did speak about feeling lonely openly to a friend, what she received was a lack of genuine understanding. Blue interpreted it as her friend not being able to feel what she feels because the friend was happy. So, the friend forgot about Blue's loneliness immediately and did not follow it up in another conversation. All this means to Blue that even her loneliness is lonely, and only herself was feeling it. Not receiving empathy from a loved one only increases feelings of loneliness (Heatley Tejada et al., 2017), which could hinder the person from sharing again. Blue perceives her loneliness as the burden her friend has to carry for her, so instead of sharing, she decides to protect her friend's happiness bubble.

Both Blue and Rose do not wish to be the ones bringing negativity to a conversation and they do not want to upset their friends even though they are the ones who are upset. This parallels the feeling of self-perceived burden which patients needing palliative care feel (Geng et al., 2017; Ting et al., 2020). The self-perceived burden is defined as: " a multidimensional construct arising from the care-recipient's feelings of dependence and the resulting frustration and worry, which then may lead to negative feelings of guilt at being responsible for the caregiver's hardship" (Cousineau et al, 2003, p. 111). Although the latter example describes the experience of someone who requires constant medical care, students might feel that exposing their friends to their loneliness is enough to burden them with care.

I suggest then that participants are engaged in "emotional labour" (Hochschild, 1983) in which they have to manage how others feel about them instead of how they are feeling. Hochschild (1983) explains emotional labour in terms of performance. She presents two types of emotional labour strategies used by employees to portray a certain emotional expression: deep acting and surface acting. In deep acting, employees try to feel what they are performing e.g. joy and enthusiasm, while in surface acting, they only perform to meet the expectation of the situation. Using surface acting, Rose and Blue perform happiness and mask their feelings of loneliness.

Going through this emotional labour, both participants engage in a 'happiness' performance, and when they aren't happy themselves, they cooperate to maintain the show. Goffman (1956) terms this 'teamwork' where group members agree to act a certain way to maintain a certain image. Part of Rose's and Blue's cooperation requires that they hide their loneliness so they will not spoil the entire group's harmony. This is arguably troubling since it implies that university friendships revolve only around good times and the person who isn't feeling well becomes a 'killjoy': the person standing in the way of others' happiness (Ahmed, 2010). This person also disrupts the normative picture of being a carefree, and socially embedded student, an ideal many strive to be. This ideal becomes the dominant self against which all other students' experiences are judged.

Thus what makes a team is their allegiance to one image (Goffman, 1956), that of being happy. It is interesting to note that although these are friends, they tend to pretend that loneliness does not exist which might speak of how selective friendships in university tend to be (Discussed more in Chapter 2). If the student experience is designed as the best time for everyone, then all students by default, have the duty to be happy constantly. Ahmed (2010) maintains: "Going along with this duty can mean simply approximating the signs of being happy— passing as happy – in order to keep things in the right place." p.59. Therefore, the lonely student becomes the lonely figure that others want to avoid, and loneliness is portrayed as contagious which infects anyone close to the lonely body (Cacioppo, Fowler & Christakis, 2009). The lonely figure might also accumulate the affective value of disgust through affective spaces such as the media's representation of loneliness as a disease and burden (Sullivan, & Victor, 2018; Sullivan, 2019). The disgust accrued with loneliness puts the 'non-lonely' off and further separates the lonely individual from society (Tyler, 2008).

Young students are very much aware of the surrounding narratives and images around the lonely figure, and they try to avoid that even by making decisions that they do not want to make in the first place. Here is Silver entering a relationship only to not look weak following a breakup:

***Silver:** it just, maybe the fact that I just didn't want to speak to them about how I felt, I made it look like I am dating someone now, (..), but it felt like I didn't wanna be in a relationship again, because if it (breakup) happens again I'm just gonna feel terrible, again,*

M: How did you handle the breakup?

Silver: ah I pretty much, I didn't want to seem weak,

M: to whom?

Silver: I guess anyone, I wanted anyone to see me, to look just like I was natural,

The concept of face and facework (Goffman, 1967) is relevant here, Silver had a certain face to maintain and he engages in two forms of impression management with 'face' as the focal point. Goffman pictures daily interactions as a 'ritual game' p.31 in which everyone participates. The ritual indicates that "one's own face and the face of others are constructs of the same order" p.6. To clarify, the individual has two faces to account for: their face under "the rule of self-respect" p.11 and the others' faces under the principle of "considerateness" p.11. When one rule fails, Goffman argues the other one follows, he comments on how a "person who can witness another's humiliation (...) is said in our society to be 'heartless'", which, in turn, reflects negatively on their self-respect (1967, p.11).

Silver was afraid to lose his self-respect thus he resorted immediately to a new relationship; he was also afraid to let his loneliness humiliate him in front of others. Goffman (1956) was also aware of the fragility of performances and that's why he portrays speakers as always on alert and ready to rectify mistakes. Therefore, "a person will have two points of view- a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving others' face" (Goffman, 1967, p.14).

Blue had also face to maintain by protecting her self-respect and sparing others the trouble of having to deal with her. Still Blue has felt secretly lonely more often than she expected. Blue also figured she had to stop 'acting' lonely, but she understood this did not stop loneliness but only invited other negative feelings. Although performances indicate that students' selves are flexible, adaptable and changing, research has shown how this capacity can be profitable yet tiresome with the example of self-branding which involves "emotional labour and self-surveillance to ensure an appropriately branded persona" (Marwick, 2013). Indeed, while performance might ensure wider popularity and maintains the continuity of relationships, they let loneliness dig deeper in the student's life. This again brings to mind the idea of emotional labour involved in suppressing emotional injuries. To illustrate, veterans of world war II who were raised in a 'stiff upper lip' generation could only share traumatic

experiences once their dementia loosened their cognitive control (Capstick, & Clegg, 2013) which shows the amount of effort people make in maintaining a face .

Part of Blue's acting unlonely was concealing her emotions and pretending to be happy:

***Blue:** I am good at hiding my emotions, so I can understand why would they (her friends) forget because I could handle like I'm okay, so it's hard to read that through a message especially, and it only then when I open up that they realize okay, so you weren't actually feeling the way you were acting*

Blue thinks she is good at hiding her feelings; still, she was not entirely convinced a friend can forget her loneliness when they are constantly in touch. As identified in the literature review, Goffman's (1956) concept of region is useful here. The region is the space where performances take place refers to an enclosed space with a set of rules that guide performance and everybody within the space is influenced by the rules and encouraged to adopt them (Goffman, 1956). Regions are divided into back and front, or backstage and front stage under the theatre illustration. Blue acting that she is not lonely can be considered a front-stage performance in which she acts according to the rules which dictate that students should not be lonely. Performing is especially needed when the frontstage for Blue consists of her friends, and if one person complains of loneliness then it might threaten the image of the group and defeat the purpose of friendship. Acting/being lonely with friends can be considered 'dramaturgical disloyalty' (Goffman, 1956; p.208,209) which refers to one performer breaking the performance in front of an audience. I argue that in a group of students, they can be both performers and audience members; thus the 'disloyalty' is helpful in explaining why some students would rather wither in loneliness than share it with a group of friends. Arguably, some sort of performance might be needed since it is easier to spot loneliness in a close circle of friends than in a group of strangers (Luhmann et al., 2016).

Another example of how this front stage performance takes place comes from my second conversation with Rose, which was the first time we met face to face and she seemed happier. She only shared how happy she was with her social life, friends, and basically everything which

has no relevance to loneliness. It could be argued that Rose was also masking her loneliness with me. Although our conversation was about loneliness, Rose was on her front stage avoiding all signs of loneliness. It was until later in the end when I was checking up on that she said this:

Rose: *I don't know I feel like I'm annoying my friends I'm just like talk to me talk to me please like at some point they'll turn around and say no I don't wanna talk to you anymore*

M: *and you don't want to get to that point*

Rose: *no coz I don't wanna alienate anybody*

Although Rose felt safer sharing her loneliness with her home friends, she did not do it. Her choice not to share stems from a fear of being abandoned. She thinks she carries stigmatising luggage that is too heavy for a 'normal friendship', and that is why she keeps it in the backstage of her interactions. Feeling burdensome pushes students to perform independence and happiness to avoid abandonment because others will leave at the first instance, she shows vulnerability. Their departure (I don't wanna alienate anybody) becomes the result of her action of sharing, so if she doesn't share, they will stay. Performance might then become a must where the person learns how to maintain specific conducts from the "cues, hints and stage directions, and it will be assumed that he already has in his repertoire a large number of bits and pieces of performances" (Goffman, 1956; p. 79). The cues and hints students could pick up on is that whoever feels lonely and reaches out a lot could be labelled as an attention seeker. Loneliness becomes an abnormality in a youth culture that strongly encourages self-reliance, and frames emotional challenges as abnormal (Lynch, Long & Moorhead, 2018). Thus, the overall atmosphere between friends might encourage the sharing of positive events more than negative ones which again makes it hard to disclose emotional difficulties.

Blue's, Silver's and Rose's inhibition to share their loneliness questions the dominant narrative of friendship as a source of joy, safety and support (Dunbar, 2018; Seyfarth, & Cheney, 2012). This narrative is challenged by the difficulty of speaking of loneliness and the

constant anxiety around being abandoned easily or disposed. Normative friendship has already been questioned by the neurodivergent community, particularly autistic young people who find it draining instead of gratifying (Bertilsson Rosqvist, Brownlow, & O'Dell, 2015) which pushes us to rethink the popular definition of friendship and question its ideals and exclusionary criteria.

Even when the students attempt to share their troubles, it does not go beyond it has been a bad day or week, as observed in the following extract:

***M:** and when you are feeling lonely are these same people you trust in sharing this with?*

***Rose:** in person yeah but if I see them, I might say it's been a tough week some of them they are like like oh let's go have coffee and we'll make a plan*

Although these are people Rose called proper friends of four years in university, she could not share how lonely she was feeling. The conversation was always capped at 'a tough week'. A remedial plan would follow, but not an open conversation about the reasons and the sequels of this rough week. The student chooses passing or what Goffman (1967) termed 'the avoidance process'; that is a way of defending their face by keeping away from issues that could lead to "the expression of information that is inconsistent with the line he is maintaining" p.16. Goffman (1967) argues that passing is often achieved through the suppression of feelings until the speaker figures out "what kind of line the others will be ready to support for him." p.16. That is to say, it might be difficult for students to open up about loneliness when others do not know or are not equipped to carry on this type of conversation. Thus, if they choose not to speak about it openly, the student struggling abides by this collective desire.

Moreover, it is worth noting that loneliness was rarely named as it is, it was always referred to implicitly. Whether the students were avoiding being seen as a burden by me or were performing 'un-loneliness' when talking to me, or they were simply dodging the term by

distancing themselves from images of dependency; loneliness was strongly present in our affective atmosphere. The complexity of loneliness was still recognisable even without a clear mention of the term. When Barthes was grieving the loss of his mother, he wrote in his mourning diary (1977-1979): "A cold winter night. I'm warm enough, yet I'm alone. And I realise that I'll 'have' to get used to existing quite 'naturally' within the solitude, functioning there, working there, accompanied by, 'fastened to' the "presence of absence."p.69. The presence of absence is one way of understanding loneliness as a painful feeling that persists at every moment. All the extracts above communicate absence, even though those were my participants with the most friends and had an active social life. Still their 'solitude' shows that this experience is painful when it is enforced on the person, they craved support from their friends but did not know how to ask for it without sounding too insulting to the friendship, or without looking annoying and desperate. Another dimension of loneliness is the alienation imposed from the outside, which echoes a lot in participants' accounts. William James (1950) explored the painful experience, writing:

If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all. P293-294

James's (1950) description shows that there is an extra layer in loneliness that is enforced by others when one is being unacknowledged and purposefully unseen. This could also be applied to participants to show the depth of loneliness students might feel in avoiding sharing their loneliness and in going through the day feeling the absence of others who are already there, but yet unavailable and unwelcoming of their loneliness. Therefore, in order to continue being seen and to ensure that wouldn't get disposed of easily, students adopt happiness performances and keep their loneliness in the backstage of their interactions. If students abide by the rules guiding what topics to be shared and what not, they do not accept loneliness in others, and consequently do not accept their own loneliness and vulnerability. This leads me to my next subtheme where I explore Stigma as the binding concept between feeling like a burden and being pressured to perform.

3. Stigma

It was clear from most of my participant's accounts that speaking on mental health and loneliness in specific, wasn't easy to do. It was even clearer in our conversations where loneliness wasn't named as such but only referred to as 'it'. In this subtheme, I discuss stigma to bring together the two subthemes of burden and performance. I argue that the motivation behind a performative identity and the persistent feeling of being a burden is stigma. However, I go beyond a psychological understanding of stigma as an internal mechanism to a sociological perspective in which stigma is triggered and produced by society, culture and political systems; thus, it goes beyond a personal struggle or tragedy.

When continuing to explore how and when loneliness is talked about amongst university friends, Rose draws an exception of a friend who is already struggling with physical health problems:

*Rose: yeah, one of them online but she has a lot of health problems, yeah so every week is tough week *laughs* so you know that's kind of different, we do talk online (...) if I talk online to my uni friends it's usually it's about the society are you going tonight or do you wanna do this next week whereas my home friends it's: look at this funny video I saw, how are you, do you wanna book a holiday just random*

In othering her friend's loneliness, Rose was somehow avoiding being othered by peers for her own loneliness. Loneliness was her friend's issue only whereas for her not speaking about it helped Rose perform the non-lonely identity. As for their mean of communication, the university friends met and spoke more face-to-face than they did online. This mode of communication could conceal a lot of topics, especially the stigmatizing ones. Rose and her friends usually engage in positive topics online. The online mode might make connections easier for certain groups such as LGBTIQ+ (Hanckel et al.,2019) and people with acute mental illness (Naslund et al.,2016); still, my participant and many young people still find it difficult

to admit their loneliness. Social media could also help students explore their offline relationships which effectively reduces their loneliness (Thomas, Orme, & Kerrigan, 2020), yet again loneliness remains a line nobody crosses. The double use of social media to maintain friendships or create new ones is relevant to the digital self as a self-residing in a “betweenness” (Kerrigan and Hart, 2016). Drawing from Turner’s (1967) conceptualization of transition states, they argue that people on social media negotiate different identities related to both the online and offline world at the same time, always in a betwixt state. This means that whichever performance the student is trying to achieve and maintain would continue to be the same in both worlds.

Therefore, thinking of loneliness and connections as exclusive to one of the two worlds is futile, but seeing the state of in-betweenness help understand students’ daily negotiations of their loneliness and performances of belonging. Blurring loneliness in conversations might be a technique to avoid stigma, as people are quick to pick up on signs that indicate negative attributes such as weakness that makes a person “of a less desirable kind- in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak (Goffman, 1963, p.2-3)

Moreover, Blue spoke about not wanting to be seen or remembered as a friend seeking help for loneliness:

***M:** and would you want your friend or anybody to remember that you feel lonely and to follow it up in conversation?*

***Blue:** ah yes and no, no I don’t want them to remember it and like think of me in that way only, but yes because it’s like you care and you wanna follow up how I’m doing*

Later on, Blue shares that she is in constant touch with some of her friends, on three different platforms. She had some conflicted feelings about her friends constantly remembering her secret ‘loneliness’ or them forgetting it completely. She does not want to be reduced to a lonely friend, a figure which doesn’t go well with the confident, outgoing Blue, but at the same time, she wants to feel cared about. The idea of burden persists, with the person requiring care being stigmatised then lonely individuals can erroneously be stigmatised as

representing dependence. The stigmatisation can indirectly animate punitive measures such as further isolation (Carey, & Bell, 2022).

Using Goffman's analytical framework of Stigma, Blue and Rose perceive loneliness as a shameful feeling that needs to be hidden. The disclosure of this experience even with people considered friends might be seen as more risky than helpful. Goffman (1963) views stigma as the result of a mismatch between the stereotypes predetermined in society, and whether the individual meets or contradicts those fixed types.

What Goffman later termed as the 'normal' and 'deviant' is a useful concept here as well, but it is important to note that the two categories are dependent on the context where they are used. Goffman (1963) stresses careful attention to be paid to the context; one can be considered normal in one situation, and deviant in another. To illustrate, students are aware of the 'it is okay not to be okay' mental health movements discourse (Bennett, 2021) and might feel 'normal' for a few seconds when facing loneliness; however, when loneliness being hidden and only sociability being overly displayed, it is difficult not to categorize oneself with the deviants.

Students might be afraid of being looked down on because of other students' judgmental attitudes. In one replicate study carried out in an American college, students stigmatize their lonely peers and rate them negatively; as opposed to the general public who rated them equally as the non-lonely individuals (Kerr & Stanley, 2021). In another study by Rotenberg (1998), university students judged the loneliness of their peers as the product of their own social failure in university. This explicit discourse of blaming others for their own misfortune parallels what Goffman (1963) demonstrated in the analysis of how the 'normals' deal with the abnormal other. He writes: "We believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances." (p.5). Lonely individuals are indeed looked down upon for their 'inability' to have social connections (Lindgren et al., 2014), loneliness then is culturally devalued and shameful experience. The resulting stigma creates selective disclosure which later reduces the chances of an individual getting social support (Moseson et al., 2019)

Goffman (1963) offers the double perspective framing of a stigma in which he distinguishes the discredited and the discreditable. The former means that the deviance the person holds is visible to others, and the latter means that the defect is unknown and unseen by others. This is where the students find themselves trapped between keeping their anomaly to themselves and remaining in the discredited group, which constitutes all the normal; or sharing their experience with others, which will move them to the discreditable. The conception of self-stigma and public stigma could also be useful here with self-stigma being the result of the individual internalizing the public stigma and believing that they are a failure (Goffman, 1963). However, Goffman in his essay on stigma encourages a language of relationship so it is not easy to separate self-stigma from public stigma. A student can internally hold a negative view of themselves while remaining 'OK' in the eyes of others, but the constructed public stigma can still present a constant threat. Here are excerpts from Azure's and Orchid's stories to further illustrate how self-stigma and public stigma are inextricably intertwined. Orchid portrays public stigma in a figure she referred to as 'somebody' :

Orchid: *I think somebody that's not exactly a person. I think it's a crowd.*

M: *Crowd?*

Orchid: *Yeah. It's a society that I've imagined in my mind. Yeah. the society would judge me, anytime. (...) And when I feel lonely, feel alone. They will probably, they can gather in the crowd.*

M: *Yeah. So it makes you feel more lonely.*

Orchid: *Yes. So I want to find a crowded place instead*

M: *How is it that you want to find some crowded place?*

Orchid: *Like, watch the drama that is crowded (the name of a comedy-drama)*

To Orchid, the imaginary crowd that scolds her for non-success in making friends is heard more clearly when she is alone. Her loneliness creates a vast space which accommodates a crowd; but once she is able to join another crowd as in watching the soap opera, that somebody disappears. Ideally, she would fill the space with a friend, but in the absence of that friend, a drama is about five families, and their children can temporarily fill that space.

It is also not easy to settle on the nature of which stigma has the most consequences (for example in terms of jobs, and acceptance in society) the one resulting from a chronic somatic illness or a diagnosed mental condition. It is even more complicated with a feeling that has not been medically recognized as a condition, yet. This is where I find the modified conception of stigma by Link and Phelan (2001) focusing on the nature and consequences of stigma more relevant. Starting from a sociological view, they elaborate on Goffman's definition by emphasizing an important component, which results from attribute—stereotype relation that is discrimination. Discrimination results in a situation where the power relation is uneven, whether social, economic, or political. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that this power inequality allows for the rise of categorization which separates 'us' from 'them'; thus facilitates the rejection and expulsion of others from the intact social organization, be it workplace discrimination based on surviving cancer (Stergiou-Kita, Pritlove & Kirsh, 2016) or a mental health condition (Hampson, Watt & Hicks, R, 2020). Although some may argue that the language used in describing the stigmatized subject is itself stigmatizing to different degrees. For example, a person with cancer indicates that they are still one of 'us', as opposed to the psychotic in the second study, who is one of 'them' (Rüsch, Angermeyer, & Corrigan, 2005). Thus, stigma is particularly stronger among people with mental health issues, they can be disrespected, overly criticized and socially isolated by others (Ong et al., 2020).

Families and friends can experience second-hand discrimination, or what Goffman refers to as "courtesy stigma". This experience can heighten existing feelings of shame the individual has about the stigmatised relative (González-Torres et al., 2007). The courtesy stigma might be something friends of my participants wish to avoid in letting loneliness topic creeps into

their friendship group. Courtesy Stigma also brings to mind the image of the boys in William Golding's (1960) *Lord of the Flies*, who ridiculed and stigmatised the character 'Piggy' and perceived him as a burden. Piggy also on the other hand was influenced by the pack mentality and tried to belong which never worked out. Thus, the fear to share loneliness stems from fearing becoming an outcast and being rejected by others.

Although loneliness takes a toll on the student's well-being, going through that difficulty might seem safer than opening to others. Silver exemplifies in his story how he preferred to go through long months of painful loneliness rather than reach out to others.

***Silver:** but ah, and then when like she left and when we broke up, it just felt like, everything just suddenly stopped, and from February until, like even this like I won't say this semester, I'd say about probably June, like that was really hard at that time, and was like everything just like, first semester was so fast, went so quick, and the second semester was just so long, it felt like it was really difficult to even talk to people or anything*

***M:** and how did you handle that from February to June?*

***Silver:** I was just trying to look happy, but like, when I was home alone it just felt like, it felt like I weighed too heavy if you know what I mean... just like my body felt like it was so hard to move when I was like alone, it was just hard to get out there, not just the insomnia, but it was hard just to do anything alone, yeah, and I was craving like, even though I didn't wanna be with people, I was craving just to be with people, and that's where I found it really good like to solace in gyms, coz like ah, physical facts like blood pumping, and all things moving, but just the fact like oh there's always people here, I could just be like on the treadmill for an hour, and not feel alone, yeah, if I was like, or I spend a lot of time here in the library, just doing more work than needed to be done, but if I was home alone everything just felt a lot harder,*

Although Silver had a good support system in place and many people to reach out to if he wanted, he preferred to deal with his loneliness on his own. He perceived his loneliness as weakness, something unnatural, and could feel its visceral weight on his body. The paradox was that loneliness naturally makes him crave others while at the same time, its stigmatising character goes against his natural desire. The process Silver went through echoes to an extent the evolutionary understanding of loneliness. In this model it is hypothesized that a lonely brain constantly watches for cues of social threat in interactions, then it acts upon them resulting in prolonged loneliness (J. T. Cacioppo, S. Cacioppo, Capitanio, & Cole, 2015; S. Cacioppo, Balogh, & J.T. Cacioppo, 2015; S. Cacioppo, Capitanio, & J.T Cacioppo, 2014). This model might explain why Silver was avoiding talking to others or meeting new people, but it does not explain why Silver felt the threat in the first place. Cacioppo and Patrick (2009, p.28) also explain that although loneliness signals the urgency to seek connections, the primal fear of being alone distorts social cognition which results in more loneliness. While the evolutionary model addresses the natural desire to connect, and the hypervigilance of lonely individuals to threats; it does not address the social mechanisms that create more loneliness but instead places it all in the individual's mind. Stigma then, can be used as an entryway to understand how the social threat is constructed in the first place.

To Silver, the gym and the library are places that register belonging in his memory. Although he is there on his own, he knows he does not look lonely. The library and gyms are common spaces where people get together without necessarily being together. These places might shield the stigma of being alone as they accept individuals who go there alone and stay longer hours without company. Ahmed (2010) uses happiness as an affect linked to certain objects which gives away promises to anyone approaching and coming close to an object. The gym and the library give away a similar promise of happiness. This is also where personal memories play a part in anticipating an affect, recalling it and experiencing the feeling through thoughts even in the absence of the object (Ahmed, 2010; p.25). So, although Silver wasn't necessarily feeling happy in those two spaces, in his memory they register as spaces where loneliness isn't seen and his shame is guarded.

Although Goffman's work on stigma explains how individuals navigate and negotiate their spoiled identity, it cuts it off from the societal influences as Goffman calls for leaving out the

social and structural conditions in order to produce a focused microanalysis of interaction. Goffman's work lacks a wider understanding of "the social structures of normalcy and difference that create generalized stigma and attitudes of prejudice". (Hannem, 2012, p. 27)

In my participants' extracts, the threat students felt came from a threatening unstable environment that is hostile to vulnerabilities. Stigma wasn't a personal psychological problem stemming from inside the individual, rather it was a feeling that they have internalised. It becomes carved on their undesired bodies, and it has the potential to reveal the racist, sexist, political, and economic layers of the making of stigma (Tyler,2020). This conception takes attention away from the stigma produced in interpersonal communications and situates it within the wider context of power. Link, & Phelan (2014) add a useful concept "stigma-power" to show that in some cases stigma can be used as a tool to intentionally keep people in, push them away and pull them down; they used the example of people with psychosis who seem to internalize the stigmatizing cultural narrative around them resulting in them alienating themselves. This understanding of stigma could replace the evolutionary conceptualization of loneliness introduced earlier by Cacioppo and others. It means that 'lonely' individuals might alienate themselves further to protect themselves from further external damage, and not only because their brain is wired to be hyperalert to threats. Moreover, when speaking of Stigma, shame is inseparable. Shame traps people in stigma, as the works on abused women show (Baker, 2013; Strauss Swanson & Szymansk,2020). Thus stigma pins down loneliness on the individual and keeps it there. It disempowers students even more because it implies that it is an inescapable fate for those who are or feel different, implying that they are to be blamed for daring to differ. The weaponization of stigma is common when failure is displaced from an institutional level to a personal level, to avoid taking accountability of the daily structural violence enacted by systems (Greener, &Moth, 2022; Scrambler,2018). That is why stigma is never static and needs to be questioned within the context of where it is being employed (Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

Stigma can be very powerful that students such as Grey try very hard to escape it. Grey also believes that he causes his own loneliness and through resilience can get him out of the feeling:

Grey: *And it just, you know, became this thing that like now I do have a lot more friends than I ever had in my entire life. Yeah. But I'm still paranoid of that, you know, what if one day all of that just disappears like it has every single time? But I'm more comfortable with the fact that, like, lonely, for me. I'll only ever feel lonely, you know, if I make myself think like you know, I am going to be alone, if I think like that, that I will be. But if I think that, you know, that I can do something about it, then just try it*

M: *I see what you mean, so when you came to this room and when you saw the advertisement, you were aware that you were feeling lonely sometimes, right?*

Grey: *I was like I came here with the fact that, like, you know, I've definitely gone through my massive share of, like, loneliness. And there are still times when I do feel like it, but it's not as bad as it was. I've definitely, like, gotten mentally stronger because I felt all that pain. But because I've overcome it, I've become stronger because I've become more, I guess, aware of where I need to do to continue being, you know, stronger stuff.*

Grey draws out from an individual discourse of loneliness and fixing one's mental pain. This cognitive understanding of loneliness is dominant in the government and public health discourse on loneliness today (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2020). Similar to the cognitivist model of loneliness, social neuroscience coupled with the evolutionary model demonstrates loneliness as a person's subjective evaluation of themselves and others (J. T. Cacioppo et al., 2000). The coping mechanisms suggested by this approach are largely individual based, they include changing one's perceptions, expectations and sometimes even looks (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Grey adopts this individualistic way of thinking around his loneliness and he uses both narratives of self-blame and self-pride in sharing his experience. The pride Grey takes in becoming "mentally stronger" and overcoming the pain echoes the philosophy of self-help that is predominant in today's marketized societies; Rimke (2020) observes : "Late modern societies produce neoliberalism subjects that are socially incited to seek improvement or enlightenment by engaging in self-help projects that construct and reinforce individualisation and privatisation" p.38. Thus, it is not strange then that stigma too is usually

counteracted with resilience calls, a concept referring to the capacity to resist and recover from harm (Greenberg,2006; Sapienza, & Masten,2011) However, resilience becomes problematic when instead of solving an issue that induced the harm, it covers it; James (2015) comments: “instead of expending resources to avoid damage, resilience discourse recycles damage into more resources”p.7 and “the person who has overcome is rewarded with increased human capital, status, and other forms of recognition and recompense” p.7. Thus, individual resilience stands for individual triumph in society and becomes a model to follow; however, it should not be the only key to finding support and thriving in society. Further, Taylor (2018) argues that the discourse of resilience is inherently neoliberal because it individualises and normalises violence, dictating that victims manage on their own; it also places harm second. The resilience discourse also implies that any violence is self-inflicted. To illustrate, the stigma around loneliness, particularly among young people and men (Barreto, et al,2022; Kerr, & Stanley,2021) has been established with respondents engaging in a discourse of blame and ridicule which means attributing loneliness to laziness. The then minister of loneliness Mims Davies launched a campaign “Let’s talk loneliness” to end the stigma around loneliness in June 2019 (Abrams,2019) in which the solution was talking about loneliness more; this is an approach Tyler (2020) would oppose since it assumes that stigma can be erased through talks rather than addressing the inequalities which induce harm and make it impossible to seek support. Tyler (2020) also opposes charity- campaigns that imply that stigmatised people need to own their stigma and manage it better. Similarly, Parker & Aggleton(2003) oppose an understanding of stigma as an isolated phenomenon and argue that stigma is not a matter of a difference only, but it stems from, thrives on, and reproduces social inequalities; thus the solution should be a group effort to result in social change.

Therefore, in trying to remove the stigma of loneliness it is important not to focus on the individual stories of students as they might take responsibility away from the institution, society and the entire population of students. Similarly, Mad studies activists caution against focusing on personal stories of disclosure and recovery while ignoring all the structural issues causing negative impact and health and well-being (Costa, et al., 2012). Talking about loneliness is not enough but taking responsibility for including others starts with students and should be prioritised by the institution's plans for improving students’ well-being.

Also, efforts to normalise loneliness might not be appreciated by students because it indicates a lack of support, and loneliness definitely does not feel normal to the student experiencing it (Jeffreys & Clarke, 2022). Destigmatising loneliness is not the way because stigma in itself might be read as something to feel sorry for in relationships. Stigma plays a part in the production of loneliness. Instead of looking into destigmatization, the university needs to investigate the ways stigma was produced to dim down confessions of loneliness and invest serious efforts into looking at the issue from within the structure and not the individual. Therefore, efforts to destigmatise need to be analysed, who is engaged and why are they engaged.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at loneliness as a personal story. I answered the first research question: how is loneliness co-constructed in university?

The aim of this chapter was to examine the experiences of the participants who struggled with loneliness despite having a good social support system. Due to the performative nature of social interactions, I chose Goffman's dramaturgical approach to imagine how loneliness is navigated and negotiated amongst students themselves and with others. I aimed at examining how loneliness persists despite a student being well-surrounded by close others. I let the term 'burden' open up the discussion around how it feels to be lonely while having a group of friends. I explored how different contexts where the term burden was used such as public health and disability studies and how students internalise the deficient-based discourses to make sense of their loneliness. I also looked into the stigma around loneliness to make sense of why students felt like a burden, and at the same time were pressured to perform belonging despite their struggle.

This framework was the most suitable to explore how students were co-constructing loneliness as a relational experience rather than an individual one. One of the key findings was that students were quick to label their loneliness as a weakness and a personal failure; thus, they were quick to buy into erroneous government discourses which demonise vulnerable citizens in society. I argue that students adopt these discourses from neoliberal

systems which only acknowledge self-reliance and independence while demonising the need for others. Students begin to view themselves and arguably others from those lenses which made them more hesitant to seek help and comfort from their close friends.

Another key finding was the happiness performances students felt pressured to engage in with their friends implying that loneliness belongs only in the private realms of a person's life. Arguably, friendship is narrowly understood as relationships of good times only; whereas difficult times are swept behind to the backstage where minimum social interactions happen. Therefore, instead of having nourishing relationships, students find themselves engaged in the emotional labour of sustaining a happy face, on top of their loneliness. This makes sharing even more difficult and stigmatises loneliness further.

Finally, I found out that the stigma around loneliness was causing more loneliness in students. As opposed to the evolutionary model of loneliness, stigma is the actual threat that faces lonely individuals, it is not an internal mechanism constructed in their cognition; or an automatic result of their differences; rather, it is a political construction of the weak which is weaponised against individuals who do not meet the neoliberal ideals. Thus, in line with the politicisation of stigma (Tyler, 2008; 2020), I argue that although it is important to talk about loneliness more often, it is important to rethink how loneliness is spoken about. Normalization and resilience discourses should be avoided as they underplay the impact loneliness has on young people and reject taking into accountability the harms wider societal and institutional structures induce (discussed more in Chapter 5). Resilience discourses also imply that students need to sort it out themselves; and these discourses themselves cause further stigma. Indeed the stigma causes what it stigmatises, more loneliness.

In the next chapter, I review the participants' stories regarding their loneliness experiences in university social spaces.

Research Q3: How are connections made/unmade on campus?

Chapter 4: Analysis 2: Dealing with Burden: How students connect to Deal with Loneliness

Introduction

Silver: there's a group of people, I will near that group of people to make me look like oh I'm with them, just so other people don't think I'm just sat alone being weird. I sit with a group of people with no contribution, I just like sit there and just listen to what they say or I just zone off

The quote above from Silver shows the importance of belonging even if it meant he had to perform it when he did not feel it. Almost all participants talked about the importance of groups in the university. This sometimes-involved groups of people in student societies and sometimes groups in classes. I have interpreted these experiences using affect theory, specifically the work of Sara Ahmed (2010,2012,2015) on the sticky affect and the promise of happiness. I have also borrowed two concepts from postcolonial theory: Alienation of Franz Fanon (1952, 1961) and Othering of Edward Said (1978), to explore how otherness shapes the alignments that students construct through affect of loneliness in a postcolonial world. As such, have arrived at the theme of Dealing with Burden: How students connect to deal with loneliness.

In this chapter, I am moving with my participants from Loneliness as a Personal Burden (Chapter 3) to dealing with burden and the possibility of connection in which they could unburden. I will be analysing the different paths students take to find themselves alone or in groups where loneliness flows between the two. The theme's name, "Dealing with Burden", describes the importance of finding connections, the constant efforts my participants make, the difficulties they face along the way, and what happens when they arrive at "connections". To answer research question 3: how are connections between students made and un/made? I located three subthemes: first: Master Line and its Disruption ; second: The Formation of Groups (On The Making of Us); and lastly, the Barriers to Groups (On The Making of Them).

For the first subtheme: **Master Line and its Disruptions**, I exclusively focus on the student union (SU) as the context where connections are encouraged, and the promise of friendship is given (Master Line). I first trace where the promise comes from; then I demonstrated how students walk these lines to arrive at happiness and friendship (Following Master Line). After that, I analyse what happens when these lines do not lead to their promised destination (Disruption of Master Line), and I engage in a discussion on how the promise of friendship returns loneliness and disappointment. Later, I consider the production of loneliness in this exact failed process (Counter-narratives: Production of Lonely Lines and Disappointment). Last but not least, I show how students come to terms with loneliness. I argue that making friendships is not as straightforward a process as advertised.

Then in the second subtheme: **Group Formation: "On The Making of Us"**, I present my analysis of the stories of students who had a good experience at SU. I argue that the common cultural guidelines for making friends only work for certain students with already existing advantages, such as popularity, the willingness to drink alcohol, and belonging to the majority group of UK-domiciled students, specifically those who identify as British White.

Finally, in the last subtheme: **Group Deformation "On the Making of Them,"** I present the experiences of those positioned on the margins of making connections. In doing that, I argue that despite the apparent diversity in students' unions and universities, international students, to be specific, still feel excluded. I engage with Franz Fanon's concept of Alienation

and Edward Said Othering and propose intersectionality as a helpful lens in analysing how race, class, religion, and gender multiply some students' loneliness.

In this chapter, I focus on the social aspects of the student experience rather than personal and academic aspects (discussed in chapters 3 and 5). However, I acknowledge no clear dividing line between these layers. I argue that the student experience narrative, as it is commonly understood and performed, carries more harm than benefits to students, especially those who do not meet the normative whiteness standards.

Subtheme 1: Master Line and its Disruptions

'**Master Line**', as a subtheme, has been named after the concept of 'master narratives' (Lindemann, 2001) to reflect on the narrative my participants attempted to follow to find friends. Master narratives are defined as "the stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings (...) are often archetypal (...) master narratives exercise a certain authority over our moral imaginations" (Lindemann, 2001; p.6). Master narratives also determine the routines we later normalise through repeated engagement; thus, although master narratives restrict a person's agency by limiting their options, they also provide a sense of direction (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Master narratives might explain why many students are keen on joining societies. It can also clarify the expectations students have of their university and how they imagine their social life to be. In this research, Master narratives/ Line are the discourses positioning the university and SU as happy places.

Under this subtheme, I present an analysis of the master narratives around friendship in university, in which joining students' societies and finding a group of friends is a milestone. I name them Master Line and begin with the traditional narrative, then I explore how students follow this master narrative and the problems they face (***Following the Master Line***). Then I write about how students for whom this narrative did not work engage and negotiate those spaces. I, along with the participants, explore the construction of the 'weird' and the 'loner'

and highlight their significance in interactions (***Disruption of Master Line***). Later I write the production lonely lines, where I discuss the affect of disappointment and its relation with the promise of happiness (***Counter-narratives: Production of Lonely Lines and Disappointment***).

Master Line

The following quotes from participants show glimpses of the master narrative:

Grey: *The student experience it's definitely like one where, if you're in a group with friends and stuff, then it definitely seems like it could be really fun. And it can be like you go out often. You have people to talk to most of the time, and you're engaged.*

Azure: *(...) there are a lot of expectations that come with Uni I think on a lot of student's forums, people ask how they should behave, the forum is used predominantly for advice and GCSE that's how I came across it and on the sidebar there would be questions from people that received a lot of feedback, you feel intrigued so you just click and there are a lot of people like oh should I drink in university how do I find a boyfriend and all these things*

Both Azure and Grey had an already painted image of what the student experience looks like. Meeting new people and forming a group is one of the main indicators of success in this experience because it signals engagement and having a good time. Azure points out that this image is already roaming in forums used by secondary school students. This could show the significance of fitting in this new environment before one is there.

Therefore, master narratives can be seen as the discourses positioning university and SU as spaces where fitting in should be a priority. They could also be seen as unwritten codes for situating oneself and navigating at university. The student experience contributes vastly to the master narrative guiding students' expectations. The term student experience is generally used to refer to student satisfaction levels with the academic aspects of teaching and learning (Matus Rusu & Cano, 2021); however, I am focusing on the social student experience. The student experience is usually accordant with the traditional description of a higher education student as "white, aged between 18 and 21, originate from privileged social and economic

backgrounds, have wealthy parents, studied at fee-paying, private schools and travel away from home to university” (Chatterton, 1999, p.118) as opposed to non-traditional students who are usually first-generation working-class students and/ or are from ethnic minorities (Christie,2007). Although the profile of students has notably changed with the coming of other ‘ new students’ (Leathwood and O’Connel, 2003), including mature students and disabled students, the traditional student remains the norm against which new students are judged (Webb,1997). White students still constitute the majority of the UK-domiciled student body (around 54 %), whereas black students make up for less than a tenth (5.9%) and Asians also less than a tenth (9.2%) as per the 2021-2022 academic year (HESA,2023). This means that the traditional student could still be viewed as dominantly White.

Further, the social student experience is highly shaped around students who can afford it. The commodification of the student experience comes with the students' unions and off-campus businesses competing for students' expenditures in social events and even accommodations (Chatterton, 2010). Thus as a blurred overly-used term, student experience conceals social divisions and inequalities between students; specifically when students who benefit from the construction of it use it as an aspirational category that anyone could achieve unless something is internally wrong with them (Pötschulat, Moran,& Jones, 2021).

Students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those who do not fit the young and able-bodied student stereotype still aspire to but struggle to fit in the highly commodified social student experience as it is known today (Chatterton,2010). Moreover, students tend to internalise discourses around them, and in the UK student as a consumerist perpetuates an idea of a university student as someone with social, cultural and economic capital (Brooks,2021). This discourse inhibits students of lower economic backgrounds' sense of belonging even before they begin university. Further, the UK higher education policy also positions students in the UK as consumers who can make choices highlighting the quality of independence. This, in turn, makes students unwilling to seek help and support when they need it (Leathwood, 2006). Therefore, the student experience does not exist in vacuum (Sabri, 2011) , it homogenises students and their attainment capacities regardless of their ethnic, economic , religious cultural and familial differences (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010 ; Guiffrida, & Douthit,2010; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). It also disregards the fact that experience takes

place within different universities with different funding and support available, thus misleading students' expectations.

Therefore, the aspiration many students engage in overlooks the social, structural and economic inequalities and utilises belonging as an experience all students can achieve. The aspiration stems from the student experience of promising friendship, happiness, and social thriving. Ahmed (2006) proposes, “ ‘promise’ return (if we follow this line, then ‘this’ or ‘that’ will follow)” (p.17); thus, happiness becomes “ an aspiration within everyday life, shaping the very terms through which individuals share their world with others, creating “scripts” for how to live well” (Ahmed,2010;p.59). The promise and aspiration to happiness are depicted in Grey’s own words of what he thought his student experience would be(*it definitely seems like it could be really fun*). It is also clear in the questions students ask before joining a university on how to succeed socially in the university setting.

In student unions, the affect of belonging is not felt yet, but it is promised. Belonging becomes exclusive to those spaces and the advertised practices such as clubbing and drinking (discussed in subtheme2). Ahmed (2010) writes convincingly on how happiness becomes an object that people are directed to and moved by rather than an affect bestowed upon us or radiating from the inside:

To think of happiness as involving an end-oriented intentionality is to suggest that happiness is already associated with some things more than others. We arrive at some things because they point us toward happiness, as meaning to this end (...) The very possibility of being pointed toward happiness suggests that objects are associated with affect before they are even encountered. An objective can point us toward happiness without necessarily having affected us in a good way. p.27

If all students are oriented toward the object of happiness in student unions, it becomes difficult to think of other possibilities of belonging in other spaces. Plus, the more students adhere to or try to comply with a single master narrative, the more inequalities persist, and

loneliness lingers (discussed in subtheme 3). Arguably, the master line narrative has an underlying logic which might lead to and incite loneliness. In the next section, I examine how students follow the master lines and how these lines can be problematic and counterproductive to friendships.

Following the Master Line

What do the students exactly do in following the Master Line? In this part, I investigate if attending social events offer friendship by following the lines promised by the student experience (Master Line). Five of my participants followed the Master Line thinking they will make friends through student unions. Azure had some tips to try from an online platform for GCSE exams:

***Azure:** (...) the advice tends to be specific actions you should take and what to look for such as dress a particular way, if you want to make friends initiate conversations go to the debate society, force yourself to be in situations where you have to interact with other people (...) I went to the debate society and it was the worst thing I was doing it with this girl and she didn't want to talk to me and I didn't make any friends it was awful*

Azure went specifically to the debate society because debate would grant conversations with someone she just met. The student engaged in a debate might not look as desperate to find connections as someone standing alone amongst groups. Later, she was embarrassed by the specific interaction that happened and the overall failure to make friends. Although the debate society ensures students are talking to each other, they might not like each other based on their views.

Azure brought up the significance of online forums in drawing expectations around the student experience. The forum becomes a meeting point between prospective and current university students, and Azure felt that such popular posts concerning social life in university

would prepare her. The importance students place on belonging is not strange as studies show that social integration is key to students' satisfaction, especially those in their first year (Hughes & Smail, 2015; Strayhorn, 2018). However, research shows that many students make inaccurate expectations of university life and are usually disappointed as the year progresses (Briggs, Clark, and Hall, 2012; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Nadelson . et al., 2013). Moreover, asking how to act in university could mean that everyone reading the post assumes that there is a certain code of conduct to follow. Students might be unquestionably reproducing practices that do not necessarily work. This could also mean that many students deprive themselves of acting their usual selves. The student then crops out one aspect of their personality, adds another, and modifies their speech to fit in. The process students go through resonates with the concept of self-disciplining proposed by Foucault (1984), in which individuals take on the responsibility of self-regulation, adopting identities provided to them by social institutions through discursive practices. The key point I am suggesting here is that students begin transforming themselves into friendship material when they join universities and adapt to the script of the master narratives. In doing so, they are engaging in some of the 'technology of self' (Foucault, 1988) which

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness p.18

I also argue that this transformation is somehow enforced by the university in the structure and content of induction weeks, its advertisement strategies on open days, and the discourse describing student experience on their websites. Indeed the technology of self is "a process by which individuals are led to think about themselves, act for themselves, and transform themselves " (Rail, & Harvey, 1995, p.166), or else they risk deviation and being blamed for it. The transformation implies that it is the student's responsibility to fit and if they can't, their loneliness is individualised from a social problem to one person's failure (Burman, 2018). When following a single code of social conduct to have a good student experience, students might transform themselves into what the master narrative expects them to be. It could be

argued that in adopting lines that are not one's, students adopt dreams that are not theirs as well, and Deleuze (2006) warns against living other people's dreams and visions:

People's dreams are always all-consuming and threaten to devour us. What other people dream is very dangerous. Dreams are a terrifying will-to-power. Each of us is the victim of other people's dreams [...] Beware of the dreams of others because if you are caught in their dreams, you are done for.¹⁹ (Deleuze 2006: 318, as cited in Wojtaszek, 2018; p.7)

Then by aspiring to belong in following a certain code, students might not realise that they are building barriers around themselves and in the face of others. This converges with literature that describes disengaging from others as self-segregation in which the person is only comfortable with others who look the most like them and is not motivated to explore and get to know the unfamiliar 'other' (Andersson, Sadgrove, & Valentine, 2012) (also discussed more in subtheme 3). The self-segregation can also work in extreme ways where students return to their parent's homes after living in halls to completely disassociate from the student experience, which caused them unhappiness (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013). Thus, even with the social diversity and mix in university, opportunities for mixing are not as easy to achieve as the Master Line promises (Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012).

Another factor which might play against the fulfilment of the master line is the awkward structure of social events, which do not encourage spontaneity. In some cases, the structure of an event is counterproductive to the making of friends. Structured chats made Blue, another participant, leave a university society; she explains:

Blue: (...) and then this society is not what I had expected it to be, it's kind of just sit in a room and chat with your friends every Monday night, so I am like I don't have time to do that, if I wanted to sit and chat with my friends and I don't have to plan it from 6pm to 9pm on a Monday night, I can do that whenever

***Azure:** went to *society it was speed friending like speed dating but for friends. You meet from person to person and you talk to someone new supposed to be a way to make friends but then at the end of it everyone just goes (...) there will be a question at the table and we have to talk about that*

Blue's excerpt shows the awkward structure of friending, although it is well-intentioned but unsuitable. Friendship becomes an object that resides in a specific structure, but not others, and students walk toward it thinking they'll make friends there. Moreover, Azure's example illustrates how popular culture, such as speed dating, can also structure ideas for making friends. It frames friendship within these events as a transactional process, where all you need to do is show up to exchange in time for a friend (similar to money for a service). These structures and events mirroring the online dating scenes are arguably both capitalist and result in exclusionary norms that centre whiteness (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Hanson, 2022) and reproduce more social inequalities

Although many young university students consider speed dating trivial (Hollander & Turowets, 2013), the event's name succeeds at attracting individual students like Azure. Speed-friending, like speed dating, might be more successful since it shows the people attending are available and interested in the same purpose (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Azure expects she would leave the event with a friend; nevertheless, the layout of such events does not offer the basic elements of starting a relationship: time and understanding. The student in this event talks to different people, and the chatting is timed and structured around one prechosen question. In similar events, the person must quickly choose or eliminate another person. Students perhaps prefer rejecting others first rather than being rejected since being rejected lowers the relational value of a person and induces more loneliness (Leary, 2022). People are also more likely to avoid engaging further with someone they just met once they feel rejected (Jones and Barnett, 2022), even when the rejection is not explicit (Jones et al., 2016). This means that in choosing not to befriend someone, the student might escape being unchosen by others but still feel more lonely.

Moreover, the logic behind using speed-friending could imply that the students in the event could not make friends in 'natural' settings. In a study on the interaction between 30-45 years

old heterosexual pairs, participants were held accountable for being single for a long time, unable to maintain a long relationship, and failing to meet the one in real life (Stoke,2010). Events such as speed-friending (Azure) and structured chats every Monday (Blue) happen after freshers' week, which could imply that the students attending were unsuccessful in finding their groups immediately, thus the affect of disgust and shame following them everywhere (discussed more in the following subsection). Under all this pressure, not finding friends as fast as others and failing to find friends during the year, any potential for new relationships is buried before it sprouts, and the students leave the SU events feeling lonelier.

Although some societies' events are set to fail Blue was more fortunate as she already had other friends. This means the failure might have impacted her less than Azure, who relied completely on those structures. Similarly, Yellow counted wholeheartedly on societies to make friends, but she later realised it was not working:

***Yellow:** (...) I think they (societies) would help but I joined three of them and we don't meet really often when we meet, we are like three or four people nobody joins it is really hard I've been wondering what people are doing did they already have friends before coming to university*

Yellow questions whether student societies are the place where she can make friends; she also assumes that if not many people attend, then everyone else must have had existing friendships before coming to university. She felt disadvantaged for not being British, as all her friends were in her home country, so she assumed she was one of the few people without friends. Hence, she felt loneliness twofold, one of being in England (without new friendships) and the loneliness of being an outsider.

Following the previous point, even with various events and student societies to join, and attempting to join them, the student does not always find what they are looking for. Even when society appears to offer exactly what the student is interested in, and there is no pre-

set structure, it is not guaranteed that students will make friends easily. Yellow shares her experience and her surprise with the way societies do (not) work:

***Yellow:** I joined LGBTQ and Anime Society (...) but not many people were there, last time there were three of us, everyone said they were ill and with LGBTQ society it is almost the same we meet one two, or three times but not many people join*

Yellow thinks that more people with the same interest in one event could mean better chances of making a friend. Hence, even with all the elements that promise success: small group, same interests, an event explicitly structured for meeting new people; the promise of friendship is not automatically fulfilled for all students. The narrative circulating in SU implies that the drive to go to events is students wanting to be social; however, it is perceived differently by students. Students with existing friendships want to be more social together, whereas the drive for my participants was to avoid loneliness by joining a social setting and looking for friends. It can be argued that loneliness and sociability are antonyms, but one can be sociable by engaging in the social expression of loneliness, such as through poems (Rasmussen, 2020). Similarly, Orchid, Azure, Yellow, and Grey were all sociable in attempting connections in their loneliness. Unfortunately, in these attempts, it was the social place that isolated them further, and their attempts were unseen and invaluable.

From the excerpts above, it can be argued that making friends in societies is neither guaranteed nor a straightforward process. It can also be argued that student unions are not neutral spaces where all students have equal chances of belonging. Instead, they are “a product of social relations and practices which are themselves subject to change.” (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2016; p.487). It can also be argued that the affect of happiness is monopolised by student unions, thus situating those who ‘fail’ to belong on the margins. These margins are replete with various affect, such as disgust and shame, that the student internalises in their search for belonging. In the following section, I explore the affect of disgust more by examining how the students feel about themselves, and how others might see them when Master Line isn’t taking them to where it promised.

In this section, I examine how following the Master Line is difficult for many students. I look into how students who struggle construct themselves/are constructed as weird. I use the image of weird to begin shaking the Master Line while exploring the affect involved in misalignment: mainly disgust.

My participants went through a rollercoaster of emotions before joining events. Although the narrative around joining societies is inviting, approaching one and getting involved in its activities can be difficult. Being able to walk toward an event is one step; meeting new people and making friends is another step. Four of my participants have explicitly spoken about the mental labour that goes into this process. In asking Orchid, an undergraduate student of Chinese origins, about her most recent experience of loneliness, she shares:

Orchid: *just a few days ago in SU, want to go to an event, but I just find it weird to join it alone, especially in a really highly centralized place and everybody is socializing in groups and so I didn't have anybody in mind to go together (...).if I come into a room where everybody doesn't know each other that is fine .it's really hard to join groups and pairs and to make any new friends*

Orchid was not alone in feeling scared of going to events alone, Azure, Violet, and Silver all shared similar fear:

Azure: *it is hard to make friends I have more confidence when I am with someone else. Why can't people have signs on their foreheads saying there are my interests instead I went to someone started talking random crap they just be like ok what's wrong with this person*

Violet: *when in my first year sometimes students society put an event and get invited I don't know anyone anyway so I would maybe go or plan to go and then I back out and that like obviously I can't meet anyone if don't go but I'm scared to go because I don't wanna go by myself, that's weird..*

7

Silver: *you kinda like you overthinking it, you're like oh they don't wanna talk to you, don't be weird (...), it's just hard like in a room full of people, like if I make a mistake, I'm gonna be like an idiot in front of everyone,*

Orchid found an event at the SU and thought it would make her happy, but she could not find someone to accompany her. She thought she could not go alone because she would stand out as a lonely individual who might attract pity or disgust. This multilayer of feelings: excitement, fear, anticipation, and disappointment, was shared by Silver, Violet, and Azure. Imagining oneself alone amongst groups might be enough to trigger more loneliness even before the event takes place. Therefore, this is not known social anxiety that comes with meeting new people and fearing negative judgment (Arjanggi & Kusumaningsih, 2016; Jefferies, & Ungar, 2020) but rather a fear of looking like a failure even before speaking. It is also a fear of speaking and sounding like an “idiot”, approaching others and seeming “weird”.

Therefore, if the object of happiness resides in student unions, the object of disgust resides in the lonely body. Ahmed (2004) examines how the object of disgust is constructed in and by performative speech acts such as “That’s disgusting!”. She writes: “ To name something as disgusting is not only to transfer the stickiness of the word ‘disgust’ to an object that then comes to stick, but also to the subject... the disgusted subject is ‘itself’ one of the effects that is generated by the speech act” p.94. Similarly, the loner becomes the disgusting figure which disrupts the Master Line, the killjoys (Ahmed, 2010). However, for the lonely figure to accrue this amount of disgust, the different speech acts around them have to be circulated and received by a group which witnesses and validates this affective transaction. Thus, Ahmed (2004) argues that these speech acts generate communities “who are bound together

through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event” p.94. Disgust determines what students will be put in the margins, mainly those standing alone. Disgust also creates communities that define themselves as not disgusting or not lonely.

The construction of weirdness on the other hand, can be traced back to news media reports that popularly associate loners with school shooters (Bonanno, & Levenson, 2014) and serial killers in some cases (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013), which can lead to fear. The loner image also attracts pity as the one associated with middle-aged women tourists dining alone in restaurants (Heimtun, 2012). Similarly, the unusualness of the students standing alone and the groups' unwillingness to invite them might be similar to the popular culture around the crazy cat lady (CCL thereof). The anxiety surrounding the CCL can be traced back to the European medieval culture's gendered stereotype of witches and black cats (Schiesari, 2012), where women were prosecuted for purportedly sharing human blood with black cats viewed as demons (Parish, 2019). These images continued in popular shows today such as the character of Eleanor Abernathy in *The Simpsons* and Dolores Jane Umbridge in *Harry Potter* showing CCL as a mad animal hoarder who loathes humans (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018). The images of the disgusting animal hoarder, the useless old lady and the childless spinster (Thomson, 2012) all serve as negative stereotypes of failed white femininity, which marginalises independent, single women (McCubbin, & Van Patter, 2021). This is especially the case when the pets become infantilised to a status close but not identical to that of children (Cudworth, 2011), which assumes that the CCL is replacing the love of humans with the love of animals and that their animal hoarding is indicative of mental illness (Dauphiné and Cooper 2009). Hence, the CCL is marginalised for its offence of the heteronormativity of intimate space usually preserved for husband and kids; in her strangeness, she is reduced to subhuman (McKeithen, 2017).

Below is a meme shared with me by Blue, she emailed me around New Year's eve and told me that she was feeling particularly lonely during that time. She came across this meme and had a sudden realisation that unlike her siblings who were married or in relationships, she was the only singleton in the family. She did not necessarily meet anyone special during

university, and realised the coming decade would be a lonely one, unless she complied to heteronormative narrative of reproduction. The meme summarises expectations, reactions.

and realisations that are not necessarily framed as happy.



Moreover, the discourses around CCL and loners disturb the normativity of being in a coupledness and a friendship. The lonely figure might be looked at with contempt (Slonim, Gur-Yaish & Katz, 2015) and fear due to their perceived inability to reproduce, which directly threatens the future of society (Edelman, 2004). Thus, people are othered for not meeting a

standard, and in the eyes of the heteronormative, they may represent death and failure (Wilkinson,2019). The lonely figure's assumed failure becomes affective "an unhappiness-cause...those who cause misfortune or trouble rather than those who feel sad or wretched" (Ahmed, 2010; p.95). It could also be argued from a biocultural perspective that lone individuals are stigmatised for threatening the unity of a group (Neubrerg, Smith, & Asher,2000). This is also similar to the evolutionary perspective of loneliness, which claims loneliness is against continuity and unity, with lonely people more likely to make negative judgments about others (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, & Boomsma,2014). Although the latter argument is comprehensible when thinking about groups' safety and reproduction at times of war, it positions lone individuals as biologically inept and thus unworthy of inclusion. Arguably, the way loneliness is embodied in lone individuals undermines the ideals of socialisation at SU.

Thinking in terms of 'lines' (Ahmed,2006) again and how deviation from lines invokes panic, it can be seen that students are steered towards a single line of sociability and away from other different possible lines. When presented with only one line and the student cannot walk straight on it or is not invited to walk on it in the first place, they create their lines. These lines are usually made out of disappointment and a sense of failure, which counter the Master Line of belonging. I name them Lonely Lines to indicate that the return, in this case, is not happiness and friendship but rather acute loneliness. In addition to loneliness, the lonely figure threatens the promise of happiness because " To deviate from the line is to be threatened with unhappiness Deviation can involve unhappiness" Ahmed,2010; p.91. Loneliness here is not only the unhappiness of the lonely figure but also the unhappiness figure perceived by the group which does not want to be in proximity to it.

Disgust, failure and fear become sticky to the lonely figure. According to Ahmed (2015), "stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a 'withness,' in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together" (p. 91). This "withness" depends upon our orientations to particular objects, which directly links to the histories existing prior to encountering the object (2015, p.87). These orientations and their stickiness tend to be determined by the language framing loneliness as contagious. To illustrate, one of the dominant understandings

of loneliness in the literature by the loneliness neuroscientist late John Cacioppo or Dr Loneliness as he was known, suggest:

people have fewer friends, which makes them lonely, but it also drives them to cut the few ties that they have left. But before they do, they tend to transmit the same feeling of loneliness to their remaining friends, starting the cycle anew. (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009, p.988).

Although this language served as a vehicle in calling for government attention to the 'modern epidemic of loneliness' (Jeste, Lee, & Cacioppo, 2020), this discourse is unproductive in making young people more inclusive of each other as nobody wants to catch the contagion or to be the contagion (Batsleer, & Duggan, 2021). This view is consistent with the findings from the online world, where also people of low popularity have fewer chances of matching with dates than people of higher popularity (Konard, 2015), as perhaps nobody wishes to associate with the outcast.

It is also helpful to understand the emotions, expectations, and actions that students navigate as discourses rather than absolutes. Taking 'confidence' as an example, it is brought up as a feeling that comes naturally with the company of another person but not as a personal attribute. Therefore, confidence is arguably relational and embodied, being "created in co-action" (Gergen, 2009; p.99). Unlike the individual models of confidence (Perry, 2011), it is like many concepts, discursively constructed in relational processes, meaning it has many versions (Gergen, 1997). My participants needed a certain version of confidence required in the SU context. For example, Azure knew the format of pairs could protect her from being the 'weird loner'. Therefore, in the company of another person, Azure, Silver, Violet, and others ensure that people will not view them as abnormal even if they utter the wrong words. Arguably, students are invested in appearing a certain way: not weird, to avoid embarrassment and shame. Although shame can be productive in organising and maintaining relationships (Probyn, 2005), in the students' case, shame is an affect that orients them far away from potential connections, so it becomes counterproductive (More discussion on shame in Chapter 3).

In short, the discursive construction of normativity in Student Unions implies that it is a place for groups only, where weirdness becomes understood as an attribute of lonely students. The non-conformity to the student union norms creates loneliness, and the figure of the lonely students becomes the object of loneliness to which disgust, pity, fear and shame stick. In the next section, I examine how students handle the disruption of the Master Line.

Counter-narratives: Production of Lonely Lines and Disappointment

So what happens when students follow the Master Line but it still doesn't work out? Here I discuss the affect of disappointment as a counter-narrative to the promise of belonging. I use counter-narrative as an analytical tool to trace storylines resisting the dominant cultural narrative circulating in student unions. Counter-narratives are "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect"(Nelson,1995; cited in Lindemann,2001,p.6). Counter-narratives are supposed to resist dominant narratives and are perceived to be more powerful in their opposition (Bamberg & Andrews,2004). They also have "the illocutionary force to *counter*; i.e., in one or another way, it not only contrasts with, but opposes, another narrative" (Bamberg & Wipff, 2020; p.73). This means that If the dominant narrative imposes happiness, counter-narratives could be seen as a story of hopelessness, and what gives it strength is what the storyteller chooses to do with it (Franklin,1990).

Almost all of my participants faced a different version of the student experience. Belonging is set as the norm that students should easily fall into; however, this norm did not work for the majority of my research participants. Their loneliness resists the master narrative of belonging and becomes the counter-narrative.

Orchid: *I am a little bit disappointed because I've got some expectations that I should make more friends or make some. Actually, I'm lazy, I am a little bit afraid of the new relationship (...)I find it hard to be without a relationships*

Grey: *the part where I felt most isolated and alone was when I realised I need to be doing more to like you know, just meeting people but even though I did stuff it didn't seem like it was enough, and the more it didn't seem like it was enough, the more that lone barrier was closing in on me*

Violet: *(...) in my first semester I had a little bit more optimism in being involved in more things my first week when they give you the leaflets of all the things the uni does (...) I signed up for that I went to the event I never heard from them again. I thought oh that's really disappointing but when that happened a few times it makes you're going to all these things you're putting work into all of you are not getting anything from it*

Orchid speaks of the complex feelings involved in just attending one social event. She expects happiness, which comes from meeting new friends. The expectation becomes more demanding with the pressure to make many friends in a single setting. When the expectation isn't met, an instant feeling of loneliness occurs as Grey's strong feeling of isolation. The participants were promised happiness "through proximity to certain objects" (Ahmed, 2010; p.29) which, in their case, the object was friendship; however, as Ahmed (2010) proposes that "happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment" p.29. Expecting to make friends in student societies could also be a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) in which the student's attachment to an ideal is the very reason for their unhappiness and loneliness. Orchid, Grey and Violet are not only disappointed at the situation but with themselves for failing at belonging. Feeling disappointed for feeling lonely also brings a constellation of other negative feelings. This is what Ngai (2005) notes as the relation between an ugly feeling and irony, which is "an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling" p.10.

The participants implicitly blamed themselves for their loneliness and were even more disappointed. Failure is internalised within the participants feeling they are the problem. This is similar to welfare claimants with mental health issues being constructed as a burden and

then view themselves as such (Mills,2022). Loneliness, therefore, drives some of my participants to go to events despite sensing they might find more loneliness in a setting that is supposed to be full of potential friends. Thus, their loneliness aggravates by the fear of extra loneliness (Wilkinson, 2022) and the haunting feelings of failing to achieve the good life (Roseneil. et al.,2020). However, it is clear from the participants' excerpts that disappointment followed a real effort to do what was expected from them. Thus, disappointment can be a counter-narrative which resists the claim that lonely individuals contribute to their loneliness by not being open and trusting enough (Cacioppo, & Hawkley, 2005).

Moreover, Grey shares how his loneliness is not only the feeling of being alone, but it was the painful process of looking for a friend that led him back to the initial starting point. It is a fight against time for him and Violet:

Grey: *I needed to find someone quickly before I actually felt like I was isolated at that time, and even though part of that it did feel like I was, I had to just continue trying, like it was so hard to do that, because I didn't know what to do, there isn't like a philosophy of like making friends, it's just a natural thing, you have to wait for it, but I didn't know how long I have to wait to actually meet people here*

Violet: *I feel like when I wasn't making friends as quickly or the way as I thought I would maybe because that partly comes from contrasting what really is an adult life or children's life, people who say oh yeah we went together but that doesn't mean we have to be friends and I assumed oh were sitting we both do the same course then they can become my friend and that didn't happen*

Grey and Violet had this common experience of worrying about running out of time. They are torn between the normative narrative of finding friends (a natural thing; you must wait for it) and the actual narrative circulating in the university that focuses on finding people quickly to enjoy a limited time. One way of understanding this experience is to see these students as trapped in a linear understanding of time. Anderson (2011, p.99) suggests

understanding time as having a clear beginning and end makes reality dreadful and difficult to escape. This is especially true when time is understood as a unifying concept meaning “private time and public time are synchronised” (Collier,2006; p.106), and people think they are living according to a single understanding of time (Collier,2006). Moreover, the unifying time breaks people apart into efficient/inefficient (Collier,2006), or able to make friends, unable or socially connected/lonely in this study. Students might think that making friends is a race and that if others have succeeded, they are lagging. Belonging becomes a competition where only a few can succeed at the expense of others losing. Competition is a feature of the neoliberal market (Foucault,2008) which, when inserted into social interactions, causes “affective damage” (Anderson,2016, p.737). In addition, Hall and O’Shea (2013) state: “The individualisation of everyone, the privatisation of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn – has been paralleled by an upsurge in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression. “ p.6. The discourse of neoliberalism cast its shadows on loneliness, making it a result of a failed competition.

The students start university with a desire to be with others but then end up with the pressure that suffocates them, and a disappointment. It could be argued here that the process of looking for friends, as advertised by the master narrative, is what produces loneliness. It could also be argued that belonging becomes a construction with exclusionary assumptions that only work for some but not others, but then failure is attributed to the individual. Any understanding of loneliness as a personal problem and failure dictates that becoming unlonely is also an individual’s responsibility, even when that individual is driven to loneliness by structural inequality and left without resources (Wilkinson,2022). There is an irony in expecting individuals to fix their loneliness alone when connection requires more than one person willing to connect. Connection requires a community, and once the competition is introduced, students might only focus on personal gains.

Therefore, making friends is complex, and there is no single way to do it. Colliers (2005, p.256) cautions that “the arrogance of certainty”, such as that of master narratives circulating in universities, might destroy complex systems. Therefore, claiming that students’ happiness and success are in the single master narrative and designing one model of belonging excludes other components of complex experience. Students need to be reassured that the complexity of friendship is not be translated into rigid steps to allow more room for creativity and more

room for 'weird' ways to make friends. Acting with slowness (Sturmberg & Cilliers, 2009; Van Marle, 2009) is one way to counter the demands of the race toward belonging; it allows the student to question and set their own rules as opposed to the rules set by the master narrative.

In this next section, I examine what students could do with their counter-narratives.

Coming to terms with lonely lines

Although Grey knows there is no philosophy for making friends, it is difficult to remember that when the shared narratives around university break friendship down into boxes to check:

Grey: *But if you're someone who's new, like I was, you don't know anyone here, then it's much harder.*

Violet: *the university or all people give you this sort of like narrative of don't worry if you feel lonely in university because everyone does ,but sort of when you're here it just felt like that wasn't the case, I wasn't seeing that we all have the shared experience and we are comforting each other. it really felt like I was the only one just here by myself (...)Also people tell you don't worry If you didn't make friends in the first year, I made mine in second.. I ask how do you go because if you never talk to anyone and you just stay in your household how do you suddenly meet more people so I felt really disheartened by that because I felt like everyone was claiming this some big shared experience and it wasn't*

Rose: *when you're younger you have this conception what you mean you have loads of friends like you get invited to all of these things how can you say you're like.. (lonely) having a lot of friends is important*

Steel: *loneliness is when you have no friends that's what I thought and although it can be one thing now I realise I was thinking I find more people then I'll feel less lonely but then that wasn't the case*

Blue: *so I have learned now to try to delete the assumptions of what I think having load of friends is like , ok not to be lonely I need this many friends or I need to know this many people I need to be out this many times I'm really trying to get rid of any assumption and be like do what you actually need.*

My participants discussed feeling conflicted between what they heard, what they saw, and what they felt. The narrative they heard was that university is the place and time where you make many friends; they also heard and thought that more friends meant less loneliness. They saw that although loneliness was claimed to be a shared experience, nobody looked lonely. Part of this conflict is perhaps due to the university adopting a double-sided narrative which advertises the great student experience while at the same time normalising loneliness. This strategy echoes the UK government's construction of loneliness as an individual's problem, a feeling that "doesn't discriminate" (DCMS, 2018, p.3), but at the same time, putting responsibility for connection on individuals and communities that are already struggling with funding cuts (Jones et al., 2016; O'Hara, 2014). Further, Stenning and Hall (2018) criticise the government's Strategy for Tackling Loneliness because it fails "to acknowledge the role of austerity in exacerbating loneliness" and "appears to be written as if the last ten years of austerity haven't happened". When positioning loneliness as an individual failure to connect, the government does not take responsibility for the impact of support services cuts. Similarly, the university adopts a narrative which exaggerates the fun of the student experience while normalising loneliness and not taking into account how its advertisement strategies falsely promise happiness and belonging. This shifts the attention from structural and political issues which hinder connections in universities to the individuals finding themselves lonely and not knowing what to do.

Violet thought the shared loneliness would mean more students looking for connections like herself. However, she saw everyone making friends except herself, and she questions if

loneliness is shared. When one is lonely, and they do not even hear the term used in university, loneliness cannot be addressed. Therefore, the discourse of loneliness as shared and occasional only exacerbates loneliness because all students are trying to stay away from it (discussed more in Chapter 3).

Eventually, Violet, Grey, Blue and others stay home with their failed attempts questioning how you move from lonely to unlonely when Master Line leaves them in limbo. Although lonely individuals are blamed for being hyper-alert to social threats in the biology of loneliness literature (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), which in return exacerbates their loneliness (van Roekel et al., 2016), the participants arguably do not leave the house not because they are afraid of others, but perhaps because they are enveloped in shame, disappointment and a sense of failure. Probyn (2005) explains that belonging does not work equally for everybody; fitting in is easier with privilege and “assurance of status” (p. 39). The more invested a person is in belonging, the more shame they will feel. She continues to argue:

Most experiences of shame make you want to disappear, to hide away and to cover yourself. But the disjuncture of place, self, and interest can produce a particularly visceral sensation of shame. It is felt in the rupture when bodies can't or won't fit the place-- when, seemingly, there is no place to hide.” (p.39)

Thus, my participants would rather stay in their rooms than be engulfed by additional shame from a space that is not very inclusive of them. The disappointment leaves students questioning the proposed way to success: having many friends and going out many times. It is clear that the students struggle to convince themselves that many friends do not equal more belonging, and they use their felt loneliness to counter the imposed narrative by the university. In this case, loneliness is arguably not a body signal that something is wrong with our networks; it is not only an “adaptive biological capacity” (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, & Boomsma, 2014; p.16) but a signal that something is wrong with the way university life is prescribed for its students.

In acknowledging and dealing with disappointment, participants present themselves as psychologically mature persons who are able to face the harsh reality of their social lives in university. Further, they are able to readjust their expectations and show that the

disappointment does not prevent them from carrying on in the university. Still, it orients them away from spaces where they do not feel welcomed or happy. In a sense, these students show that while belonging has been a daily aspiration, they are not too attached to the promise anymore. They are now prepared to embrace their loneliness, however painful it is, and move on with their new understanding of the university. The new understanding can in itself be considered a counter-narrative to the usual stories of success in university. Further, it can construct a new potential of belonging, by simply not belonging to the vast student population.

In this next subtheme, I continue arguing that adhering to the dominant narrative (Master Line) can lead to loneliness, even when it works for some students and delivers the promise of belonging. I will look into the stories of participants who met their aspirations.

Subtheme 2: Group Formation: “On The Making of Us”

Some societies worked perfectly well for a few of my participants, Rose, Silver, and to some extent for Violet, Steel, and Blue. Despite the loneliness they experienced in other spaces, they spoke about the great experiences they had with students’ societies. In this section, I write about what has worked, for whom, and why. I show the conditions in which a society works under four scenarios. I begin questioning why it was successful for some students but not others. Although these are stories of ‘success’ (belonging), they are still intertwined with stories of loneliness.

I will write about Silver, an undergraduate male student who had two opposite experiences with two societies: I refer to them as X and Y. I will also write about Rose’s impressive success with one society. Later I engage with excerpts from Yellow’s, Steel’s, and Silver’s stories that show the significance of drinking culture in the framing of the university experience and explore how they navigated their way through.

Scenario 1: Luck or Privilege?

In asking about the friendships they made, Silver, Violet, Rose and Blue proudly shared their success stories with societies:

Silver: *well, you have to go meet people or you stop stuck knowing no one which gonna make your time much harder, it went well for me, I am quite good at making friends, but it is hard, but you do just have to put yourself out there, me and my roommates went to X society, but one of them didn't enjoy it, but I kinda threw myself out there and was talking to lot of people, and as hard as it is, I am good at it, but it is difficult, it's really hard*

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Rose: *I still go to societies where I met my friends, the first one back was last night actually (...) so like obviously I know them (university friends) through society, but we do nights out or we have lunch together we give each other birthday Christmas presents (...) and have this common interest in cheerleading*

Silver acknowledges that making friends in a society is very difficult. Then later, he attributes his success to his ability, unlike his roommate, who could not have a good time. Silver believes wholeheartedly in the narrative of having “to throw yourself out there”, but later we learn it is more than just that. Throwing oneself out there might entail an ableist narrative that is a:

Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities. ..fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable. (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996; p. 198)

In other words, it is only students that meet the normative standards, such as young, healthy and able-bodied that can throw themselves and quickly blend in without restrictions.

Rose believes that having the same interest (cheerleading) held her group of friends together. However, she might not be aware that the entire society now is exclusive of her group of friends and is not open to anyone else joining, especially when their group is well established. The grouping inside society can be noted from Yellow's experience of missing out on events because the society became exclusive to a smaller group of friends only :

***Yellow:** I haven't been to many of the B society meetings because I always missed them, we have a chat, but there are many people so it is always a mess, they usually go out and drink so they don't really uh write things on the Facebook page, it is like there is a smaller group who knows everything about the meetings so i dont know when the meeting starts or actually takes place*

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Another factor, which enables enjoying society, is having company when going to events. In contrast to students (Orchid, Azure, and Yellow) who went to societies alone and found it difficult to approach others, Blue and Silver had the company to feel comfortable. Moreover, Silver was friends with a key person: the society's president; he became popular by association. Popularity for Silver meant visibility, social powerfulness and being part of the group and apart from it simultaneously (Cillessen & Marks, 2011). Silver did not need to worry about initiating a conversation, the others approached him thus, and it was easier to throw yourself out there because the reception is guaranteed:

***Silver:** (...) even when I go to the X society now I've moved with the president of the society, and like through normal friends I met a lot of people knowing me, but yeah every time I go out with them I feel very comfortable*

Arguably, everyone wanted to be close to Silver because he represents a socially successful student figure. In proximity to Silver, other students near belonging and distance themselves from loneliness. This creates what Ahmed (2010) named the 'affective geography of happiness' p.97. She argues, "you might seek proximity to somebody out of hope that you will be infected by happiness" (Ahmed,2010; p.97). Similarly, Blue found it easy to start conversations with new people because she had her course mate with her all day, positioning them as students who already belong and are not desperate for friendship:

***Blue:** then we went to society, it was like an icebreaking session, we kind of knew each other, so we were getting to know other people, and then there were games and food, and then I don't know just laughing a lot*

It could also be argued from Rose, Silver, and Blue stories that the format of pairs and groups portrays that the student inside the circle is already sociable, and not desperate to make new friends. This only confirms that the lonely figure previously mentioned in subtheme 1 is a powerful and highly visible construction that orients students toward or away from each other. In representing the ideal of how a student should act in SU, groups and pairs meet the expectations of the master narrative (discussed in subtheme 1). Following certain standards of socialisation excludes other forms of connections. Thus, when entering the sphere of pairs and groups, 'successful' students distance themselves from the students joining events alone and their associated loneliness. Successful students steer away from unhappiness by refusing proximity to the unhappy subject (Ahmed,2010).

Sticking to groups and refusing individuals could be an attempt to protect their sense of belonging from the lonely subjects assumed to endanger the group; This is in line with Ahmed's (2010) proposition about defending happiness: "When happiness is present, we can become defensive, such that we retreat with fear from anything or anyone that threatens to take our happiness away"p.161. Loneliness becomes an object that pulls away or sticks students to each other; Silver and Rose show an example of sticking:

Silver: *umm I think because when I moved in with my friends, we're always so close, that, but when I was in my first year I was kinda forced to make friends, and in second year, you kinda like well I have this group, I don't need the other groups, or need to meet some people so much*

Rose: *there are 5 of us from the first year we are the same age and joined cheerleading (...) we stick to each other and do everything together*

The walls around the group tighten to secure loneliness does not creep in. The fences make it hard for other students like Grey to join, which exemplifies loneliness pulling students away from each other:

Grey: *But if you're someone who's new, you don't know anyone here, then it's much harder to fit into a group that's already been assorted unless you naturally fit in somehow. But if you force it, then you're just going to get pushback.*

Once groups are well established, it becomes challenging for other students to join them (as illustrated in the Disruption of Master Line section). Grey points out to fitting in 'naturally', whereas in reality, the term 'naturally' is replete with social inequalities that often go unnoticed by the same students who fit in 'naturally' (Pötschulat, Moran, & Jones, 2021). Although Silver and Rose are well settled in their groups, they also feel lonely sometimes in these circles (discussed in Chapter 3: Analysis 1: Personal Burden). They might be unaware that the very behaviour of sticking together suffocates belonging and generates loneliness. Sticking together could reduce their chances of meeting new people and having other sources of support when the group isn't always the source of joy. However, students are aware that just as they wouldn't leave their groups and invite new people in, other groups wouldn't invite them in as well. So they'd rather be lonely in the crowd rather than lonely on their own. They are comfortable in the group, and they would rather be the one in the group, the happy figure, rather than the one outside, unable to join, the lonely figure.

Scenario 2: Community

Whereas Silver and Rose, both White British students, looked specifically for friends in societies, Violet and Blue, from Black and Ethnic Minorities, were looking for communities:

Violet: *I joined the Z society so a lot of my friends are African so I went along, and I recognised those people like yeah my friend from home is also from Uganda, I felt like part of the community.*

Blue: *(Speaking about the only Black girl in her course) it was after the lecture we started talking about it, we had a very similar career goals, and music, there was a society meeting that night, (...)we went for lunch, then to two societies events which we were both members in*

Blue and Violet had a good experience in society because of the company they had and the sense of belonging to a community. In this case, student unions could work to offer freedom for students to create their own societies. Being the only two Black girls in their course in a mostly White university, Blue and Violet found recognition in each other, and the Z society; this mirrors the concept of recognition as mutual acknowledgement (Honneth,1996). The feeling of recognition was extended in Z society that was inclusive of BME students. The Z society is important to both students because the feeling of recognition was acutely absent in their majority-white Russell group universities (Discussed more in Chapter 5: Analysis 3: Institutional Burden).

Thus, BME students might need communities more because of the particular marginalisation they feel in universities. Even in the universities which received high national recognition for their work on race, BME students still felt unrecognised due to the colour-blind interpretation of inclusion (Madriaga,2020). This is especially true as inclusion in universities is being used a “selling point” without much consideration on what it means to be inclusive and how to act on it (Koutsouris, Stentiford, & Norwich, 2022; p.892). Blue, the girl she met in the course and Violet all feel particularly unseen and unacknowledged in institutions where whiteness is the

norm, and BME is a deviation (Madriaga & McCaig,2022). Meaning not all students belong by default of being a student. Here, the narrative of the student union as the place for friendship overlooks other layers of needed belonging that are essential for working-class students of colour. It also denies other forms of loneliness that are not linked to the classical definition of loneliness as the dissatisfaction with social relations (Weiss,1973, Peplau & Perlman,1982) but to a feeling of disorientation. The type of loneliness of being stuck in a liminal zone where a student travelled from home and had not arrived at their desired destination: another home at university. This might be similar to what Rasmussen (2020) called “loneliness of psycho-social liminality” p.653. This is a particular sense of loneliness that Tuareg economic travellers in North Africa feel in the middle of a journey crossing borders in the Sahara to accumulate money for marriage (Rasmussen,1997). The transition is not smooth, and the travellers find themselves away from home and from their destination, which drives them on the verge of insanity (Rasmussen,2020). This is the loneliness that arises from a spiritual and ritual that is blocked by the same social conditions which motivated it; in Tuareg’s case, it is poverty. The loneliness of liminality is mirrored in first-generation ethnic minority students who find difficulty in establishing a community away from home in a majority white universities (Pasztor, 2014; Phinney, & Haas,2003).

Scenario 3: Masculinity

Another way society can work is when the student stands out positively. In addition to his popularity, Silver benefited from another aspect, his ‘masculine’ physique.

***Silver:** the society was very like mismatch of people, when I walked in, I’m the biggest here, I’m alpha, there’s just some things that make me feel more comfortable, and more confident, (...) you have people who are like socially weird and they say weird things, and they do weird things (...)many other boys as well, they’re kinda like smaller, skinnier, you know have that hunched over (...) you kinda stand out, when you stand up right and push your shoulders back,*

Although somewhere in his story, Silver called himself socially awkward, in his moments of popularity, he represented the norm, whereas others were positioned as weird. Students

might adopt the logic of Master narrative/line when it works for them, thus determining and perpetuating what is socially acceptable and what is considered weird. Arguably when adopting unquestionably Master Line, students can exclude each other. Silver felt comfortable at the expense of others who were positioned as weird; he was comfortable because he wasn't weird. Silver was also the alpha in a classroom setting where he could eliminate the ones who did not fit in, which in return would strengthen his presence and his belonging.

***Silver:** they're very weird, and lot of them like are people who don't fit in, and then yeah, I come in, I'm the tallest, I wear short sleeves, I feel like I'm the natural alpha in the classroom, but maybe that's the reason why I don't fit within the S society*

The X society and the classroom were the perfect places for Silver to stand out and easily attract others. He felt comfortable when he felt secure in his manhood, and everyone knew who he was in that he represented the epitome of belonging. However, Silver acknowledges that he is not always the absolute alpha everywhere; he compares how he feels in his classes and X society to how he feels in the S society:

***Silver:** in the S society, there's so many people contesting for that spot, that I just feel like that already pushing me away coz I can't drink, and there's no point in me trying coz I know I can't get into that circle,*

Silver's masculinity is relational and context-based so is the loneliness and belonging he feels. That means masculinity is socially constructed and negotiated; Connell (2005) constructed a conceptualisation of masculinity divided into four social positions. First, hegemonic masculinity refers to the cultural norms sustaining male dominance. Second is subordinate masculinity which is the opposite of hegemonic masculinity visible in gay men treated as less of a man. Third is complicit masculinity, referring to men who are not dominant but still benefit from hegemonic masculinity. Lastly, marginalised masculinities concern men in precarious positions who are marginalised by the intersection of their identities, such as those with a racial identity other than white (Connell, 2008, p. 77). Connell's (2008)

conceptualisation shows how men engage in a world structured by gender inequality. Still, it is important to note that these masculinities do not function separately, and they do not apply worldwide (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, masculinity is mediated by class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and religion, which affects how it is performed (Connell, 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Research on loneliness in relation to men draws heavily from hegemonic masculinity to address men's help-seeking patterns and suicidality (Tang, 2014; Vogel et al., 2011). Men are positioned as unwilling to acknowledge and talk about loneliness refusing to show signs of weakness (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2018; Rokach, 2018). However, this understanding has been challenged by a specific study on male students' loneliness which showed that masculinity is not central to loneliness but rather a part of a cluster of factors (Vytniorgu, Cooper, & Barreto, 2023).

Although masculinity is plural, Silver did not meet the hegemonic standard that is considered "most honoured or desired" (Connell 2000, p.10). Thus his masculinity became 'marginalised' in the S society (Connell, 2020). Part of the marginalisation of Silver in S society was about not meeting the expectations of drinking; drinking can be an important gateway to manhood (Whitehead, 2008) which Silver could not go through. Thus he was aligned with men of marginalised masculinity, such as Muslims who abstain from alcohol (Probst, Manthey, & Rehm, 2017). This alignment is possibly given less value and more disdain in Western culture (Semmerling, 2008; Shaheen, 2003). Arguably, masculinity is contextual and performative; it requires conformity and sustained behaviours to continue (Hearn, 2004). Following the concept of dramaturgical task by Goffman (1977), Schrock & Schwalbe (2009) argue that "a male body is a symbolic asset" p.279 that predetermine "manhood acts" which in return construct and affirm the identity of a man. When Silver was the alpha in a room, he belonged, and he was visible; when he was not, he was excluded and became invisible. In X society, he performed 'hegemonic' masculinity and excluded others who would classify under 'subordinate' masculinity " *many other boys as well, they're kinda like smaller, skinnier, you know have that hunched over*". Surprisingly, Silver seemed unaware of how his performance as alpha could also make others feel lonely in the X society. Silver could only notice that contesting for masculinity excluded him when he was not masculine enough in the S society. Thus, Silver perpetuates the same isolating atmospheres in other settings. He copies the

same standards that excluded him in society S to other societies to exclude others who were again not masculine enough.

Scenario 4: Pubs and Drinking

Drinking occupied a central place in the stories of half of my participants. It is not strange as many students in Western universities correlate university with drinking (Bellis et al.,2022; Holstege et al.,2022; Vander Ven, 2011). Silver could not belong because he was neither a drinker nor the biggest person in the room. Unlike in the X society and the classroom where he performed hegemonic masculinity, in the S society, he is marginalized. I asked him if he wished to continue with the society:

***Silver:** No, it's very heavy drinking culture, and I don't drink, and they make you feel very guilty when you don't drink (...) they give you names when you don't drink, like misogynistic names like pussy or weak or coward, or like you're not having fun, and it's the reason why I don't go out, so I don't consider them my friends,*

Silver felt he was under a lot of pressure to drink in the sports society; he is made to feel guilty and unmanly. The shaming is directly linked to traits crucial in the kind of sports he does (physical strength and risk-taking). The ridiculing of women and other marginalised men also stands for these students protecting their 'hegemonic' masculinity (Connell, 1987,2020). This narrow masculinity grants them a community that is independent of others. However, Gough & Edwards (1998) see it the other way around: shaming others implicates "the dependence of dominant forms of masculinity on marginalised others" p.430-431. Thus, when Silver is called names, others show allegiance to their group by erasing him and his masculinity. Moreover, by targeting the student with the potential power to flip the table, the group protects itself from its feminine side (Gough & Edwards, 1998). It is important to note that multiple masculinities can be performed in one setting and that the hegemonic model is changing (Anderson & McComrack, 2018). In some cases, it is the expectation of the audience

that influences men's choice of which masculinity to the foreground. For example, in one of Love Island's seasons, a popular British reality show with 3.63 million viewers (BBC News, 2019), men created a society exclusive of men who had a full sexual encounter with women in the show (Nichols, 2019). Men were doing what they thought was expected from them, which allowed hegemonic masculinity to dominate. The show was heavily criticised for reinforcing gender norms, demonstrating sexist attitudes toward women (Denby, 2021), and modelling unhealthy patterns of relationships between genders (Porter & Standing, 2020). Similar to Silver and S society, the performance of hegemonic masculinity dominated when other students who did not drink were categorised as 'pussies' meaning feminine and unmanly.

Silver is also excluded because he is not the same age as others in the S society:

***Silver:** I'm not the big guy, but I'm bigger than half of these guys, they think they're tough as nails being in this society, but then they're just like still little kids away from home, I am a mature student, , and these kids are like 18, they think they gonna get tough and they know it all, but yeah just because I choose not to drink, and like their attitudes, it's just like not as fun as I thought it'd be,*

As a mature student who is not hyped about drinking, Silver feels doubly excluded. Mature students find it difficult to make friends through the traditional paths available to younger students (Fragoso, 2013). Even if they drink, their drinking style differs from the younger students. Thus, they are un(intentionally) excluded by younger students in social settings, and they feel like they are unable to contribute to the social culture of the university (Mallman, & Lee, 2016). Young students fit perfectly into the master narrative of having fun as a young person discovering adulthood, which means mature students are more vulnerable in the face of the master narrative and the social culture of university (Davies, 2001). It can be argued so far that drinking culture is important in students' life. Savic et al. (2016) define this culture as

the norms around patterns, practices, use-values, settings and occasions in relation to alcohol (...) drinking culture is thought to influence when, where, why and how people

drink, how much they drink, their expectations about the effects of different amounts of alcohol, and the behaviours they engage in before, during and after drinking. p.280

Rose could easily become a part of a group in society because they met regularly at the pub, which strengthened their relationships:

***Rose:** my friends from the society are all very nice, (...)usually one of us would suggest the pub at least once or twice a week they all call it the pub so it rubbed off on me (...) the SU bar seems quite nice even though I don't drink that much so I get a coke while they are having pins but we are just chatting which is nice (...) they usually complain if I sit there without a drink,(...) one of them bought me a drink and said you can't sit there without having a drink*

It is clear from Rose's excerpt that there is a compulsion to drink, whether alcohol or other drinks. The ritual requires that the group perform the same action: drinking together. The public house (pub) has been ingrained in the British drinking culture since at least the sixteenth century (Nicholls,2009); it is a place where conversations are relaxed, and communities' relationships are strengthened (Mount and Cabras, 2016). The pub presents an ideal that many, specifically British students, enjoy more than others do. Although the pub is a popular destination for socialising in the UK, accessing them is not always easy. Many international students, for example, modify their mobility at night to avoid the violence associated with drunkenness (Schartner, 2015). The focus on pubs as a socialising place creates a "psychological barrier" for international students to interact with home students (Montgomery, 2010; p.89). Students with sensory impairments also feel excluded from places like the pub (Goddard & Cook, 2021; Madriaga, 2010). Students who abstain from drinking for religious reasons and young people who do not prefer socialisation on alcohol feel excluded from night-time social interactions (Valentine, Holloway, & Jayne,2010). Even with the introduction of non-drinking events, they usually take place during the day creating "temporal segregation" between students who drink and those who do not (Brown & Murphy,

2020; p.223). Women also fear violence on nights out (Sheard,2011), especially when they are unaccompanied (Schwanen et al. ,2012).

For Blue, although she liked drinking, alcohol was one of the main reasons that drove her away from the Z society:

***Blue:** their events are mainly like going to the club, and I don't have the money and the energy for that, (...), it's tiring, plus I am the kinds person that I don't want to wear the same outfit over and over (...), so I will be buying new clothes for every week. I also drink quite a lot, so I'd be spending a lot of money on that, and i don't like how drunk people behave*

Although Blue can and likes to drink, she decides not to go to the Z society events because they revolve around alcohol. She cannot afford a clubbing lifestyle, just like many students who have to make difficult social life choices to stay within their financial means (Carr, 2005; Christie, Munro, & Rettig, 2001; Hordosy, Clark, & Vickers, 2018). Steel, on the other hand, spoke of a feeling of exclusion despite following the drinking culture. Unlike Silver, Blue and Rose, Steel was an international student who was able to negotiate belonging specifically through drinking and smoking:

***Steel:** I am friends by getting drunk and high with strangers, when I am sober they are not really my friends, they are not around*

It is difficult to escape drinking when the British drinking culture is characterised by heavy drinking, especially among students (Craigs et al., 2012; Gill,2022). Although the British do not necessarily drink more than other nations in Europe or the world (Cassidy, 2021), the drinking culture is important in many students' social lives in universities in Britain and the US (Wicki, Kuntsche, & Gmel, 2010). Many students view drinking as a ritual expected of them even before joining university (Supski. et al.,2017), and they think drinking is the fun aspect of university (Davies, Law, & Hennelly,2018). Moreover, many students tend to associate

drinking with overcoming anxiety and making many friends (Gambles,2022), which may position others who do not negatively, as if they refuse to integrate and be sociable (Conroy, 2014). The centrality of drinking shows in the student union's social spaces that are in the form of bars, pubs and clubs (Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012) and British nightlife is structured by global corporations which target young adults, many of which are students (Chatterton, & Hollands, 2003). Bar Crawl is an example of a themed night in which the students drink at different bars from early evening to 2 AM, increasing the risk of ill health and anti-social behaviour (Quigg, Hughes, & Bellis, 2013). Further, male university students tend to engage in heavy and dangerous drinking more than females (Bravo et al., 2017; Boyle, et al., 2016) for social motives and to meet masculine norms (Zamboanga, et al., 2015), which is similar to the S society construction of masculinity that excluded Silver.

Although some social bonding happens during drinking, Steel feels lonely again once sober. This shows that even if drinking is formulated as a social lubricant (De Visser. et al.,2013), it might not guarantee that the relationship will last outside the setting. This is especially true with the practice of pre-loading or pre-drinking or 'home-pub-club' drinking (Barton & Husk,2014). Pre-drinking is a common practice where young people drink in private spaces such as home before attending licensed premises to ensure they are tipsy enough to socialise with others in clubs and to dance confidently (Atkinson & Sumnall,2019). One could argue that if alcohol is necessary for socialisation, even before the student leaves their home, then socialisation could ends the moment the alcohol effect wears off.

Moreover, the meaning assigned to drinking in university might be contradictory as it orients students toward belonging through alcohol while excluding others who do not participate in the same practice (Supski, Lindsay, & Tanner,2017). Even when the student is not made to feel guilty directly, the implicit guilt and self-blame still linger in students who do not drink in a group of heavy drinkers. In this case, students construct themselves as out of the powerful norm of alcohol consumption (Nairn et al.,2006). Yellow felt guilt in her student accommodation, and it continues to haunt her as the main reason she is lonely. She shared:

Yellow: *one of the main issues is that I don't really drink not a total but i don't drink much so I don't really like to go out and party and drink and get drunk and I know that many people like to do that so i guess that is one of the main issues*

Yellow insists that not participating fully in the drinking culture excludes her, even after I tried questioning the quality of her roommates' friendships:

***Yellow:** my flatmates were always partying and drinking (...) they bonded this way when I tried to talk to them during daytime when they were sober I couldn't really connect or have a conversation*

From Yellow's story, drinking is not only a requirement for male students; female students might also feel the pressure of drinking, especially when females bond over getting ready together for nights out (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2019). The only difference is that in a male-dominated student society, Silver was more publicly shamed than Yellow was in her flat. Although Yellow has not been shamed by her flatmates, she was ostracised by them the day after. It was a regular ritual for Yellow's flatmates to party together, so in this case, Yellow was the abnormal flatmate who should either join or suffer the consequences of not being part of the group. Arguably alcohol is a "key technology in constituting friendship" (MacLean, 2016 ; p.95). Both Yellow and Silver felt very lonely in situations when they could not conform to drinking. In a study where students pretended to drink, gave excuses on why they did not drink, or only spent short times in drinking events, students were still invited to events despite their secretive choice of staying sober (Herring, Bayley, & Hurcombe, 2014).

Therefore, in alcohol-driven university culture, it is difficult to establish friendships or have a secure sense of belonging if one does not drink or drink as much (Griffin et al., 2009). Seaman & Ikegwuonu (2010) conclude in their report: "Alcohol has been granted a monopoly position in facilitating social activity in young adulthood" p.38 and transgressing from the norm of drinking might exclude students from the monopoly of belonging (Cheers, Callinan & Pennay, 2020; Conroy & de Visser, 2014). This finding is particularly interesting concerning the

increasing trend of non-drinking among young people in the general UK population (Bhattacharya, 2016; Ng Fat, Shelton, & Cable, 2018); it shows that drinking is still a dominant narrative, at least in universities during building social connections (Fenton et al., 2023).

In line with Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine's (2012) finding, it can be argued from the four scenarios above that the narratives of belonging produced within universities and student unions “reflect the positions of those who are particularly privileged as campus ‘insiders’—white, middle-class secular students whose lifestyle choices fall more closely into line with those propagated by commercial presences on campus. “ p.512. This means that what is considered normative student experience determines what practices lead to belonging and what practices lead to loneliness. This, in turn, creates the format of groups that some students succeed in fitting into, whereas others struggle.

Subtheme 3: Group Deformation “On the Making of Them”

In the previous two subthemes, I discussed how making friends in the student union is not as straightforward and as easy as the master narrative pictures it to be. I also discussed how following certain master narratives results in the inclusion of students who can ‘naturally’ fit in a while questioning what the term ‘naturally’ entails. I continue to problematise the ‘student experience’ and argue that it is not accessible to all students, at least not equally. In this subtheme, I argue that full allegiance to the master narrative might lead to racism only seen by the student being excluded. I examine negative social interactions and attempt to answer the question: What draws the distance between the individual and the group? In doing that, I use Ahmed's (2010) work interrogating racism through affect; showing how affect orients people away from certain groups. I also analyse the feeling of being recognised and simultaneously unrecognised for being different. I have interpreted these experiences using Franz Fanon's concept of Alienation (1952) and Edward Said's concept of Othering (1978) to show that university spaces as we know them today are discursively produced, and alienation takes once international students realises, they are not part of the normative discourse, and thus do not allowed to fully belong in these spaces. As such, have arrived at the third subtheme of group deformation.

All of the four international student participants encountered racism. This sometimes involved issues around the 'language barrier' & and sometimes it was linked to looking and sounding different. For example, here is Steel, exemplifying the feeling of being excluded because of his different accent:

Steel: (...) when I am reminded of 'where I'm from', (...) Feeling like people only talk to me when they need something from me, genuinely any interaction. It is quite contradictory the more I talk to others the more alone I feel and the less I talk the lonelier. I am an international student so my background is brought up a lot and emphasizes the fact I'm an outsider. Whenever I talk to strangers, my accent is brought up (...)

Steel is an international student from Europe who does everything that is supposed to help him belong (drinking, partying, joining societies); however, the same activities exacerbate his loneliness. Steel feels excluded in society because his difference is highlighted; he is recognised as the "other" who does not belong to the majority group. This resonates with Franz Fanon's work around self and others. Franz Fanon's work is classified today within Postcolonial theory because of his active engagement with issues around race, colonialism and later revolution against colonisers (Gibson, 2003). Postcolonialism, although a fair review of the theory, is beyond the scope of this research, is a theory that "draw attention to the false universalism of globalization and show how contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural practices continue to be located within the processes of cultural domination through the imposition of imperial structures of power." (Rizvi, 2007; p.257). In a temporal sense, post refers to the period after colonialism; however, ideologically, it is difficult to pin this period down. Post-Colonialism does not necessarily mean all forms of colonialism are removed once the colonisers leave, McClintock (1992) argues that post-colonialism is "prematurely celebratory" (p.87) when many nations are still trapped under colonisation today. Postcolonialism without a hyphen then refers to the legacies of colonial practices

which were founded on the purpose of eradicating the other and continuing to thrive thanks to the power these legacies hold.

In an attempt to decolonise the psyche, Fanon (1952), in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*, explores the cultural, economic and political eradication of Blacks and Arabs in France. He analyses the rigid binary between White and Black, with Black being “a white man’s artefact” p.12. Fanon (1952) argues that in the encounter between European colonisers and Black and Arabs, the markers of civilisation, worthiness and intelligence are shaped. It is on this basis that colonial society alienates and excludes; similarly, Young (2003) argues: “ White culture was regarded (and remains) the basis for ideas of legitimate government, law, economics, science, language, music, art, literature- in a word, civilization”p.2-3. Thus, it can be argued that the world today is still living according to a contract, as Mills (1999) puts it ‘racial contract’ in which dominant notions of humanity exclude and denies the existence of those who are not White. Arguably the world today is largely shaped around colonial categorisations; thus, the psychological alienation stemming from being ‘different’ persists. Alienation is made worse when the person feels alienated from themselves after being structurally driven to madness and alienation from the milieu where they live. Fanon noted this pattern of double alienation in his resignation letter as a psychiatrist in Algeria after realising that madness is inflicted by the violence of colonialism (Fanon, 1965). Steel’s feeling of double alienation is depicted in his loneliness increasing when he talks to others who make him feel different and when he doesn’t talk to anybody. When Steel speaks to others, he is alienated by them, and when he doesn’t talk, he is alienated from himself. Moreover, Steel feels almost abnormal in the presence of the ‘normal’ students situated here as home students. It is similar to Fanon’s (1952) observation of the Black child becoming ‘abnormal’ with the first encounter with the ‘white world’ p.143.

Steel: (....)*Societies made it worse, big groups of likeminded people that I felt really excluded from I don't 'fit in' big groups of likeminded people like societies nor want to anymore too draining I don't want to change myself to cater to others nor expect others to cater to me so I just do my thing and that's it*

Steel's feeling of exclusion can also be interpreted from a lens of Affect. His position is influenced by the majority in a university, which is home students. As a student who identifies with a broad categorisation of international students, Steel feels like his difference doesn't give him access to belonging. This links to Puwar's (2004) questioning of who can naturally fit in certain spaces; she states:

social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy. There is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time. While all can, in theory, enter, it is. certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked as trespassers " (p.8).

Steel does not feel like 'the rightful occupant' of student union space; he realises that belonging requires that he changes as it does not come naturally to him. Although the university and its social spaces can be considered 'throwntogetherness' (Massey 2005), where students from different backgrounds with different stories find themselves sharing a space, the social spaces of SU are not neutral. They are dynamic, negotiated, and filled with racialised, gendered, and classed meanings. These are spaces where whiteness is the 'somatic norm' (Puwar,2001) that is unnoticeable and privileged.

Moreover, incidents of racism define the boundaries in social spaces and determine who should and should not belong. Red shares one incident :

***Red:** some here people hate Chinese people because we wear the mask, they hate us,(...) someone in the street told me fuck you near my home maybe they think it is a joke, but I think this is not friendly I don't know what they think, it is very cruel for us, it's very bad for us,*

This excerpt was from one month after Covid19 was first identified in China. Although the population from Southeast Asia have been wearing masks long before the virus (Fearnley &

Wu, 2022), their mask became the object of hate or the 'Chinese virus' (Budhwani, & Sun, 2020; Su. et al, 2020) throughout the pandemic. The mask has already been associated with Asians since the outbreak of SARS; Sin (2016) explains: "The mask was invariably racialised and construed in the Western media as a distinctly 'Asian' phenomenon." p.92, and many Chinese students in the west have been subjected to Sinophobia or Anti-Chinese sentiment during covid-19 outbreak (Ma & Miller, 2021; Reny & Barreto, 2022; Wu, Qian, & Wilkes, 2021). Red was able to spot 'hate' in the racist incident. The hate Red pointed to was animated again with covid19 outbreak inducing perhaps other emotions of being invaded and swamped. Ahmed (2014) notes emotions of hate and fear are performative: they can produce objects 'sticky' with anger or fear. Emotions "both generate their objects and repeat past associations." (Ahmed 2014, 194). They create relations and reinforce associations with emotions that become sticky as if they were inherent. This is to say that racism does not come from plain ignorance but from an engineered selective knowledge of whom to hate. Red was discriminated against for being Chinese, or what perhaps was considered a threat. The 'natural occupants' of the land feel threatened and victimised by the presence of the different other as Ahmed (2015) maintains: "The ordinary becomes that which is *already* under threat by the imagined other whose proximity becomes a crime against a person as well as place."p.43

Although Red had one experience with explicit racism, he is affected by the sum of experiences encountered by other Chinese students. In describing the cruelty of such incidents, Red uses the term 'us' (*it is very cruel for us, it's very bad for us*). In using 'us' Red shows that the harm is done to a whole community. The literature indicates that after racism is made aware, it becomes part of the atmosphere even when it is not first-hand encountered (Yao, Briscoe, & Rutt, 2020)

Red: *the guy hit the girl and throw her into the lake, it s our friend, it's a WeChat group and the thing the university didn't do any real action to solve this.*

Racist incidents can be made worse with the university failing to recognise its impact on students; although it is not clear what Red and other Chinese students exactly expected from

the university. They perhaps expected an acknowledgement of something that was troubling them deeply. This converges with the literature that shows that Chinese students are deeply aware of how universities can be negligent of them being victims of racism (Yao, 2018). It also links to the mentality of 'business as usual' that universities adopt after racialised incidents (Briscoe, 2022). Racism creates an extra layer of loneliness, and the intersection of gender, race, culture and nationality plays out in what type of exclusion a student is subjected to. That is to say that although there is no privilege in loneliness, there is a privilege in what type of loneliness a student might feel. A student unhappy with the mismatch between the quality and quantity of their relationships (Perlman and Peplau, 1982) might not experience being hated for who they are or what they represent in the minds of others and might not feel that they are excluded for being different. In the following section, I analyse being excluded for speaking differently through the lens of 'linguistic racism'.

Language Barrier: Linguistic Racism

Linguistic racism is the racism triggered by an individual's use of language, accent and repertoire; it looks at what it means to speak as a racialised subject (Alim, Rickford, and Ball 2016). Linguistic racism is enacted when a person's rights are denied because of how they speak (Dovinch, 2017; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015). One of those rights might relate to education and respect. To illustrate this, the 'what works' agenda in school entails teaching kids from lower socioeconomic backgrounds how to speak and write properly reproduces anti-Black linguistic racism because Black children must modify their language practices towards linguistic whiteness (Cushing, 2023). Another example is from Corona and Block's (2020) study discusses how in the context of bilingual education, a Catalan-speaking student experienced racial microaggressions from her tutor, who insisted on using Spanish when talking to her. The student of Moroccan descent had denied her right to use Catalan and be Catalanian because she represents the 'foreigner' and looks nothing like a 'native'. Arguably access to the normative language in its standardised pronunciation improves one's chances of being accepted. Here are Orchid, Red and Yellow expressing how they perceive their language and its relation to the almost non-existing communications they have:

Orchid: *bit afraid because I'm a foreigner. My language is probably a little bit wordier.*

Red: *that made me feel a little bit lonely, I think my English is not good, so I feel afraid to talk to English people, especially when I first meet them. I talked to you for an hour I get to know you I think I'm not afraid of you now I feel comfortable and confident*

Yellow: *I think English people don't want to talk after I moved in the other flat they are all third years and they are really nice and quiet but again we don't really talk to each other two of them always come in the kitchen with headphones on so it is impossible to talk to them*

Yellow: *I noticed that in societies, there are mostly British people and not many international and the thing is I still struggling with the language and I feel like I cannot get better, especially with the accent (...) I really struggle to understand what people are saying especially if they are not directly talking to me they are talking to each other that's why I always struggle to join conversations at university(...) maybe that's why I'm struggling to make friends like I always ask people to repeat themselves coz I don't get what they are saying and maybe it is a bit annoying to them*

Although it is natural to be hesitant and anxious when communicating in a language that is not their first language (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Zhang, 2019), the participants were able to carry on conversations fully in English with me, which shows that the issue is not their language competence per se, but the environment surrounding its use. Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that “the question of whether members of racialised communities are accepted as appropriately engaging in these linguistic practices continues to be determined by the white listening subject, not by the speakers’ actual practices.” p.167; that is to say that the language competence of the participants was not defined in terms of their actual capability but rather how it sounded to the majority group. Yellow joins societies hoping to meet more

people to interact with in English. Still, since communication requires two parties, the other party were not as interested in talking to her or adapting the speed of their speech so she could understand. She feels excluded twice because the students not speaking to her and herself being the different one. She gives another example from her accommodation, a space where students are supposed to forge closer relationships. Although universities in the UK pride themselves on being diverse, intercultural communication does not happen even in living spaces (Andersson, Sadgrove, & Valentine, 2012). When Yellow's flatmates are not interested in having a conversation with her, walking in common areas with headphones, she starts to see a pattern. Seen from a linguistic racism lens, the rhetoric of the 'language barrier' that international students are framed within is saturated with Eurocentric assumptions in which English is the standard language. If there is any barrier, it is due to the person whose English is not a first language not using English as the 'native' speakers do. The judgment is made "according to the norms of those who (arrogate to themselves the power to) judge others by their languages." (Skutnabb-Kangas 2015,p.1). Fanon argues that speaking a language is an indicator of belonging when looking white is impossible, and enforcing others to speak the language of the colonial is a form of cultural genocide (Fanon,1952). The linguistic scene is a bit different today. However, language, the English language in specific, still holds immense power as it plays a key role in the internationalisation of higher education (De Wit,2019) and employability (Evan,2016; Soto & Pérez-Milans,2018). English becomes the dividing line between the white native-speaker citizen and the other: a homogenous despite being highly diverse, non-white, non-native, and non-citizen (Piller, Torsh, & Smith-Khan, 2021). Arguably, students who are not, or do not identify as White British, feel that their language and their culture are located inferior or at least insignificant and uninteresting. Orchid describes this feeling:

Orchid: *some of the white students are kind, they talk to me but I do feel that some invisible barrier. the only topic that I can talk with them is about the weather, they can talk with each other about their favourite stars and the events they love, many things anything. I feel that they're not interested to talk with me. And I sometimes would push myself to find some interesting topic about something.. It should happen naturally not just me googling topics. I want to shut up, that's what I feel*

Orchid feels that the type of conversation students start changes according to whom they are talking to. Her being positioned as the other white students could assume nothing in common between them and nothing interesting about her. Orchid even uses Google to find topics that interest them, and she gets tired because even that does not work out for her. Linguistic racism here is an exclusionary practice in which students might be excluded for not having access to the slang and local language (Tankosić & Dovchin, 2021); this was clear in Yellow's excerpt where she was unable to join a conversation and also afraid to ask other students to repeat what they said.

Thus, linguistic racism, even when not done in an explicitly discriminatory way, is a form of reductionism which allows the whiteness of an institution to dominate; it also normalises social inequality, which manifests in who gets to have and join a conversation and who does not. Moreover, it sets expectations and encourages certain practices which facilitate belonging to some and hinders it for others. The international students' participants seem to be somehow deceived by the diversity advertised by the universities since they hadn't made a single friend who is British, which echoes the experience of other international students in other studies (Brown, 2009; Brown & Richards, 2012; Wawera, & McCamley, 2020). It can be argued that diversity discourse is used as a mechanism to attract students and, simultaneously, protect the university from taking accountability for its failure to deliver the happiness promise (discussed in subtheme 1). Mena and García (2021) call this 'converse racialisation'. It is a mechanism that "shifts the directionality of semiotic indexes away from a particular 'race' or 'ethnicity' (including whiteness) and produces an apparent state of 'unmarkedness'" (Mena & García, 2021; p. 343). However, in reality, the whiteness of the institution is still dominant and is solidified with practices such as linguistic racism, which establishes a conditional hierarchy where being white and British/English is the most important marker of belonging.

I thus argue that the 'language barrier' is not an innocent, neutral concept. Students need to reconsider the assumption that the language barrier is the reason why they can't communicate with international students. Constructing the other as different and foreign without giving them a chance to explore similarities first only intensifies the loneliness

flowing into the university's atmosphere. International students also need to stop believing that their language is why they are lonely because it only exacerbates self-blame and feelings of failure. This is made even more difficult by the negative impacts linguistic racism has, such as a sense of inferiority, isolation, depression and trauma (Dovchin, 2020; McClanahan, McCoy, & Jacobsen, 2015; Piller, 2016)

Othering in classrooms

The experience of exclusion continues in academic spaces with 'us' and 'others' being clearly defined. One way of understanding the clear division between groups is Edward Said's (1978/1995) work on 'Othering'. In his book *Orientalism* (1978/1995), Said tries to destabilise the binary of Self/other. He explores 'Othering' as the creation of difference (the Us versus Them) to distinguish a dominating culture or group from an allegedly inferior 'other'. *Orientalism* became a key text in postcolonial studies; similar to Franz Fanon (1952), Said protests against the unjust division between the Self and Other, with him being positioned as Other in the Western context. What Said does well in his book is portraying the imaginative geography sprouting from colonial thinking, meaning geography is, as Carter (1988, p.xv) argues: "a theatre of its design". Said also maintains that the Orient and the Occident are created by men, with the Orient being constructed and counterfeited by the West (Said, 1978/ 1995). Postcolonialism tries to dismantle the theatre protesting its taxonomies, depicting the alienation resulting from categorising the world according to Western lenses. Othering can also be viewed from the feminist theory lens, where Simon de Beauvoir argues that women are considered other in a world where men define and dominate: "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (De Beauvoir, 2011; p.26). Othering then is the different state in a society where identities are categorised. Bauman (1991) maintains that the identity categories created dichotomies "woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native" (Bauman, 1991, p. 8). In this section, I am using othering to understand the exclusionary practices that move from/to and between social spaces of student unions and classrooms.

Orchid: *I've been there for three years. it's weird that even though in my course most are home students but white people and Muslim people were automatically divided really clearly. And they seldom talk to each other. They can talk to each other but are not really willing to, even though both of them are locals (...) another thing is that Muslim people don't use Facebook (....) they use WhatsApp and for the...we've got a course group on Facebook and messenger and no Muslim students joined,*

As an international student, Orchid can see the divide between local students; the divide extends to social media in which access to knowledge (course group) becomes specific to a certain group while excluding others. Therefore, the grouping behaviour moves from student unions to classes and seminars. The students still group together and rarely talk to others who are outside of their group:

Orchid: *I want to meet some new people, I used to be in the Muslim group they are so kind we know each other well. Then I joined the group of white students, they are so united, a set group and they were not really.. they welcome me, but not really paying much attention to what I'm saying and what I'm asking. They just did their thing there. So I just dropped out.*

Red: *these groups are on set mode, I cannot break this mode even when I want to talk to them. Yeah, it's just hard to get really to more communication. I think it just makes me lose more opportunities to make the effective communication.*

Yellow: *during the seminar, we discuss the topic in groups so like we are sitting maybe three or four people sitting next to each other they just start talking between them (...)you usually are free to join whatever group you want to or move around so even if I'm sitting next to them they wouldn't ask me to join most of the people*

Orchid, Red and Yellow are aware that once the groups are set, it is almost impossible to puncture them and join them. Red chooses the term effective communication because he thinks the small superficial chats and occasional smiles are not fulfilling. Orchid sees that although her course mates are welcoming, their welcome does not expand to actually appreciating her presence and contributions. The points made by Orchid, Red, and Yellow fit ideologically with the work of Canales (2000). Canales (2000. p.19) views Othering as exclusionary or inclusionary; the exclusionary process uses the power of the relationships in a dominant group to alienate people positioned as different, while inclusionary processes use the same powers inside a group to maintain and build stronger ties. Canales (2000) highlights that “the boundaries between exclusionary and inclusionary Othering are very fluid, with members of different groups, and even those within the same group, experiencing Othering in various ways”.p.20. This means that there isn’t always a clear cut between the two processes; however, for my participants, the barrier was almost visible and visceral, especially when the group closes on itself, treating the other as marginal, almost non-existent. The groups do remain close when their circle isn’t invaded by the different other.

Affect of hate (Ahmed, 2015) can also be used to interpret what Orchid, Red and Yellow mean to the groups they are excluded from. Ahmed (2015) argues that it is not hate that drives people away from each other but rather a shared love and alliance to a fantasy. Ahmed (2015) uses the example of white subjects alienating immigrants and biracial couples because they represent a threat to the white nation's unity. Arguably, Orchid, Red and Yellow might represent a threat to White UK-domiciled student groups. By disengaging from them and not giving them space to join, the white home students keep their territory safe. Ahmed (2012) portrays being the different one as “ an experience of not being white, of being made into a stranger, the one who is recognised as ‘out of place’ the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as a crime of threat.”p.2 Thus, students who are not British White might be positioned as not belonging, as others, or in Puwar’s (2004) words ‘space invaders’. Arguably the practice of grouping exaggerates social and cultural differences between students and reinforces the boundaries of belonging between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Loneliness thrives in environments where students are afraid to speak to each other and cannot see beyond their group. Even those inside groups can face the loneliness of being stuck in a group and afraid to meet others (Discussed in Chapter 4).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine how students make connections with other students in social spaces such as student unions. This chapter considered how connections could work or fail before being constructed. Starting from the Master Narrative, or Master Line, the popular dominant narrative around students' sociability was brought to the front. The expectations this narrative sets for all prospective students were analysed, and I showed how students embrace Master Line as the only way towards success in university. The stories revealed that Master Line promises happiness but leads to loneliness in both the process and destination. The promise of happiness and belonging was overly ambitious and awkwardly delivered through structures and events that were unhelpful and superficial. The stories also showed that any deviation from Master Line made the student a lonely figure which everybody else wished to disassociate from. The lonely figure accumulated an affective weight of disgust, pity and fear from the negative popular culture around loneliness and what lonely people represented. The affect circulates between the student standing alone and the groups they aspire to join, which thickens the student's loneliness. The stories also showed that there is a potential for counter-narratives of loneliness. Despite loneliness being an experience, all students wanted to avoid, my participants could utilise it to counter what is expected of them. They choose to save their energy and mental well-being by stopping seeking connections.

The chapter also considered stories of success, in which some participants enjoyed joining student union events and being part of a group. These stories were explored in four scenarios to see what actually worked and for whom. They revealed that finding and being in a group is easier for White UK-domicile students, with the exception of BME students who found a society representative of their identity. Whereas UK-domiciled students enjoyed being part of a group and enclosed themselves in those groups, BME students preferred a community to shelter them from the misrecognition of dominantly White institutions. Masculinity and its relation to popularity or loneliness is another key finding in this chapter. Masculinity signalled power and popularity and the ultimate belonging in a society where a student felt the most

seen. Masculinity was also a reason why he felt excluded in other societies that centred around physical strength and alcohol. The drinking culture, and alcohol specifically, was also a key factor in facilitating connections for many students while excluding other students who do not drink, cannot afford to drink, or simply do not drink as much.

From all four scenarios, it is evident that belonging is not just a natural feeling that comes to all students naturally. Belonging to a majority White university meant privilege and was more of a luxury than a right. Belonging meant power, and students could use that power to include and exclude whomever they saw fit. Belonging was also a competition that resulted in unequal loneliness levels among students. This competition is rendered inaccessible to international student participants whose stories revealed another layer of exclusion for being different. International students were categorised as the Other through the mechanism of linguistic racism in student societies and Othering in the classroom. They were not given sufficient chances to join conversations and were deemed as unable to participate in conversations by the definition of the White UK-domiciled students. Thus, international students were not considered friendship material, despite their continuous efforts to join events and their willingness to forge relationships with domicile students.

Although this chapter started with Affect, Alienation and Othering in mind, the emerging data invited various sources to explain the significance of what participants say. This took place through the use of 'plunder as a method' (Hughes et al. 2012, p.315), which enabled me to draw on various theoretical frameworks to make sense of and interpret the stories.

The participants' stories showed that one student's success is another student's failure when belonging is viewed as a personal attribute and a personal achievement. They also showed that there are invisible barriers between an individual and a group and groups among each other, which only the lonely student can see clearly and almost feel viscerally. While these barriers are negotiable and smaller for some students, they are higher and fixed for others.

RQ 3: How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness?

Chapter 5: Analysis 3: Institutional Burden: How Loneliness is Constructed by Universities

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I looked at loneliness in the social narratives of students' experiences; in this chapter, I look at loneliness as an institutional story. I address research question 3: How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness? In this chapter, I specifically focus on the university as a relational dynamic space where most participants felt isolated. I look into the specific interactions that make these physical spaces lonely and how the university system can prevent or contribute to feelings of loneliness.

I start with subtheme 1: Course layout, where I look into the structures of lectures, seminars, and individual study time. I employ concepts around space, recognition, and relational pedagogies to interpret the findings. I argue that whereas some practices are to be encouraged, certain course structures and dynamics between students and their peers/ staff depersonify students contributing to their continuous feelings of loneliness.

In subtheme 2: Belonging, is it for everyone? I question the discourse of belonging, which works for some students but not for others. I make use of posthuman scholarship, which destabilises the current understanding of belonging as a static concept. I also engage with a critique of diversity in university as more of a performance than an actual change in the higher

education system. I argue that belonging is more of a luxury than a right, and in its absence, my participants' loneliness densifies.

In the last subtheme 3: Ethical Loneliness of not being heard, I look widely at the university's responses to students who are struggling and, more specifically, the negative interactions between students and some staff which often go unnoticed. I argue that the staff and university response to students' struggling is more crucial than the normal day-to-day interactions. It can be the ticking point for students already on the edge.

I arrived at this theme "Loneliness as an institutional story" inductively from my participants' stories, I let emerging data push me towards an eclectic and interdisciplinary mix of theoretical resources and concepts which then informed my reading of the participants' voices. Research question three: "How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness?" has also significantly shaped the construction and direction of this theme.

The narrative thread of this chapter tells an institutional story of loneliness in which students navigate university buildings, university-based interactions, their expectations of belonging, and their feelings of being abandoned. This thread starts with loneliness and ends with loneliness.

Subtheme 1: Course Layout: Loneliness in the Structure

a-Lectures and Seminars

Eight of my participants shared the same observation about the impersonal nature of lectures. They found themselves amongst 150+ students in a lecture hall, where it was easy to become invisible. It is not unusual for people to feel alienated in overcrowded spaces, such as cities (Hammoud, et al., 2021) which could be linked to people being less likely to approach and help a stranger in big cities (Levine, et al., 2008).

Yellow, Azure, and Violet, among other participants, felt unknown and unseen in a large group where students had little interest and time in learning each other's names. It is especially

difficult to establish a sense of familiarity when these students only meet twice a week for two hours:

Yellow *I'm more of an introvert so I like being by myself when I want to, I only have lectures Monday and Tuesday so sometimes it happens that for five days after the lecture, I don't see or talk to anyone so if it is for a certain period of time it is okay but if it's long I start feeling lonely*

Azure: *I had a week of no social interactions, I went to my lecture, saw my flatmate for two minutes in the kitchen, and then she went back to her room like we didn't sit and talk yeah and another thing is I don't really have friends on my course so I don't talk to anybody*

Rose: *there were like 600 people so you wouldn't be with the same people from one week like from one semester to the next so it is kinda hard to maintain friendships or close friendships*

Red: *yeah coz that time I had like 3 times a week but this semester coz final year I only had lectures like a one-hour lecture twice a week so we'll just do the lecture and everyone leaves that's it*

Lectures and seminars are crucial to students who do not have a group of friends outside the university. Although Yellow does not mind being on her own, the enforced aloneness forces loneliness onto her. Moreover, lectures can also be the only opportunity where students had the chance to be with another human being as in Azure's excerpt. When these connections are not allowed to happen, the space becomes associated with loneliness. This echoes Davidson and Milligan's (2004) ideas on how space is understood through emotional interpretations while also affecting the way we feel. Therefore, students may be reminded of their loneliness during their lectures and leave the room with more of it. Students' description of the emptiness they feel during lectures echoes Olivia Laing's (2016) description of Manhattan as a lonely city. She writes:

You can be lonely anywhere, but there is a particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people (...) Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting that we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship. (p.3-4).

Laing (2016) asserts that even among a sea of people, loneliness can drown people noting that it is more about the connections than the mere presence of other bodies. Massey's (1997) concept of space is also important in understanding how certain places carry loneliness in them while others do not. Massey (1997) defines space as a product of social relationships affected by power. To her space and time are inherently linked, they are "simultaneity of stories so far" (Massey, 2005; p.11). This means that lectures are not lonely by default, but the loneliness in them is relational and ever-changing. The lack of daily meetings with others doing the same course affected my participants differently. Although all of them felt a sense of frustration with being unable to meet people from the course, first-year students such as Yellow Grey, and Violet, and MA students who started a new year course such as Blue and Red felt the most lonely in lectures. These are students who have not had the chance to form a group yet. The feeling of anonymity is echoed in the literature for example Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber (2007) report that not only lack of interactions creates a sense of anonymity, but it was also the empty interactions students had that reinforced a 'lost in a crowd' feeling. This is often related to students' "naive knowledge about" the rather than a "contextualized knowledge of" the university (Schutz 1964, p. 94; as cited in Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Meaning that students often have information about the university, which is often advertised as ideal but they have no practical knowledge about what the university is actually like. Magolda (2001) observes that campus tours for example, "subtly conveyed to prospective students the university's conceptualization of what is "normal"". p.32. Then students find themselves comparing their previous schooling experience and university, and as a result, first-year students might feel sharper loneliness. They are shocked by the differences between their previous schooling experience and university. Violet and Azure explain how difficult it is to make a connection with people you barely see:

Violet: *I have six hours a week, that's how many hours I was doing a day in school. Also, when you are in a classroom and you see the same 30 people every day or my*

whole year group in my school was like 160 I spent 5 years with them so I got to know every single one of them at some point so all I had to do is sit next to them in the classroom and get to know them. But in the university, there's like 500 people in my course and then I have two hours of the lecture we are listening to the lecturer and I'm not talking so I did not get to know anybody on my course

Azure: *in school, it's so different coz you are there for the full day in uni you have like an hour here and a lecture there, some people come to the lecture then bye that's it, some people aren't interested in making friends especially I think when people have an established group they don't really think about it*

Students might find it difficult to develop attachments in a 'hi-bye' university culture (Sovic, 2009), where conversations are limited to formal greetings only. Thus, they would look for other places to create friendships such as students' societies and their accommodations where longer attachments are more possible (Discussed in the previous chapter). Still, institutions can be good sites for students to develop friendships if more time for students to meet and talk is allocated or with small yet beneficial techniques such as talking to your partner. Steel made use of the first-ever conversations his lecturer encouraged:

Steel: *I was really lucky on my first day, I sat down and some guy came in late and sat next to me, and the teacher was like okay, talk to the person next to you and there was another guy behind us, we turned around we talked to him, and then all the three of us are living together, but most people in my class at that time didn't really speak to each*

Steel benefited from speaking to other students in the lecture and was able to establish a friendship that went beyond the course. He acknowledged that it was more about luck since others were not having good conversations. Two other participants Red and Rose were also particularly lucky to be in small groups for an extended period of time, where they could make good friends :

Red: *when you attend preessional class most of your best friends you know maybe come from there, you eat together you learn together in the space of a small class, we were only 17 students*

Rose: *In my course, there are only 11 of us we do some of the classes with history students so maybe 20 people in the seminar (...) because there are few of us so we are all close, we kind of have to when you see the same people every week so you have to be at least friendly*

When students see more of each other and have time to know and remember each other's names, It becomes possible for them to see each other as persons with names rather than passing images. Conversations are important in day-to-day life for many students because they are a form of mutual recognition. Parsons (2020) argues that one key part of mutual recognition is social practices of exchange, such as conversations. She then proposes that loneliness is the result of a deficiency in these exchanges, meaning people are giving less and less to each other, be it something intangible such as time, or material such as gifts (Parsons, 2020). Parsons' conceptualisation of loneliness could hold all students accountable to some extent for the shared loneliness in a lecture. If nobody starts a conversation, the conversation will never happen.

Most studies in the field of loneliness today are unable to fully explain how loneliness is affective; meaning how it affects others and gets affected by them. The nuance in the experience of loneliness is generally absent in today's unified definition of loneliness as a risk factor for poor health globally (Surkalim et al., 2022). When loneliness is understood as an individual cognitive assessment of the quantity and quality of a relationship (Perlman and Peplau, 1981), an opportunity to look beyond the individual is lost. An opportunity to see and acknowledge the accountability individuals have toward others is also lost in a fault-finding cognitive approach.

Again, students who were in smaller classes and met often could enjoy the fact that they know and are known by their classmates. However, it is important to acknowledge that the cases of Red and Rose are more of an exception than a rule. Not all students can be in a course where there are only twenty of them and get an opportunity to know each other's names.

Unlike all the other participants who felt lonely in lectures in the presence of the crowd, Rose was the only one to feel lonely in the absence of her classmates:

Rose: *The exam week was quite lonely literally everyone are revising, I just didn't leave my flat for like two weeks (laughs) I was doing was work I wasn't really talking to anybody about work*

Rose relies a lot on her friends from the course to guard herself against loneliness. Together with her course mates, they have established a group that is not accessible to others:

Rose: *there were few in uni, like girls who they were already friends and I was friends with one of them and sort of got hold into this group with them which was nice, we sat together, worked together and had some lunches as well*

Whereas Rose felt safe and established in her group both inside and outside the lectures, Yellow was struggling to even find someone to work with during seminars:

Yellow: *I talk to some people thanks to seminars now, when we usually discuss the topic there are many open-minded people but still it's difficult when we work in groups I always tried to join groups not many people ask you if you want to join. They see you sitting next to them and they just start talking to each other and don't ask you I don't know it I should expect them to ask me if they already a group of friend and they just want to work together*

Once students feel secure in their groups, they can become inaccessible to others. The group acquires a form of power that is similar to the cliquy social world of children in which children acquire popularity through stereotypical performances of gender (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). The power acquired through and by groups continues in adulthood as it guarantees protection and access to resources that are not usually available to individuals on their own (Brewer, 2011). In this case, Rose and her group had the power to accept or eliminate individuals if they wished and had protection from being isolated by another group. However, students like Yellow can feel powerless when others in the classroom do not include them in

seminar conversations. Genuine interactions or their absence determine whether or not the student feels alienated or engaged in a seminar (Case,2007; Mann,2010). Whereas Rose was fortunate to establish and work on genuine relationships with her course mates, Yellow was being looked over and ignored as if she was invisible.

b-Individual Study Time

Individual study time is one of the earliest matters introduced to new university students. Individual study time signals the transition from schools where the study years are structured to university where the student is responsible for structuring their own study schedule. Self-directed learning involves an ability and attitude that students adopt in organising their own learning process (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013). The university expects its students to know how to regulate their studies and time, however, studies show that many students do not know how to manage their studies effectively (Liew, Sidhu & Barua,2015; Pandey,& Zimitat,2007). Moreover, studies also show the nature of self-directed learning can potentially increase loneliness (Tacogue et al.,2022), which later on negatively affects students' academic engagement (Bek, 2017).

Thus being encouraged or even forced to adopt self-study as a more of learning while not having the tools for it could leave those students without friends with more time and aloneness. Yellow relies on the library for being amongst people rather than staying alone in the flat, but it does not stop her from feeling lonely:

Yellow: *at lectures, we have seminars so we usually discuss the topic of the day with other people so at least I get to talk to other people but then after two days of lecture I don't really talk to my flatmates I don't see them often so I'm just alone studying in the library*

Azure: *so last semester I had like an extended essay that was one module but there was only one lecture the whole semester and the rest is called research it yourself we have a tutorial with this*

Yellow and Azure, come to realise that days go by without them having a chance to speak to anybody. They still try, and they go to libraries to feel surrounded by others and to be “alone together” (Tuckle,2017; p.1). Nevertheless, some students like Steel, go to neither seminars nor libraries; he is worn out :

Steel: Yup, I rarely go to class, it's a waste of time, I can teach myself what I need to know, I'm only paying for a diploma

Steel found going to seminars and courses difficult because he felt overwhelmingly lonely there. A sense of belonging determines the extent that the student will be committed to a course (Bek, 2017; Reeve,2017). Also, Steel thought he could teach himself everything he needs to learn, so he saw no point in going to classes; here, self-directed learning becomes a way of learning dictated by loneliness; rather than his ability and attitude. He explains:

Steel: it's more of a constant feeling, to be honest, but yeah I think being in seminars I feel like i don't belong. my style is different, I learn better teaching myself, i don't really have much common ground with my classmates, they sit amongst themselves talking about trivial stuff that I'm aloof to, etc

M: So Steel, what is it about courses and other people that make you decide to stay in your room instead?

Steel: Small talk, interactions in general, I walk a lot but it's usually late at night so don't bump into anyone

Steel feels that his university does not deliver the promise it gives of good education since he believes that he can teach himself everything he needs to learn. Steel ended up living an acutely isolated life in his student accommodation and only preferred to go out when nobody was around. Steel was convinced that his mental health, as well as his education, was his own individual problem, and so was his loneliness. This conceptualisation of loneliness can be very harmful because one probable solution to loneliness is a connection, and the connection is

impossible to establish if the student is isolated in their own problems and feels like there is no way out. Steel's experience can be used to challenge the common understanding that physical proximity provides the foundation for relationships and thus diminishes loneliness (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Further, Steel's exhaustion resonates with Wilkinson's (2019) comments on "the right to be weary". She describes how those affected by austerity are slowly and steadily beaten when they face hardships every day. To Wilkinson (2019), being worn out is a mode of survival that resists violence imposed on people by systems; she encourages readers to "recognise the right to be weary, and to not instantly condemn weariness as inaction" p.164. Therefore, Steel's choice to retreat to his room could be a mode of resistance to everything that made him unhappy in university.

c. Positive interactions

Let us now turn to the positive social interactions between students and staff to show how crucial supportive relationships are in the student's life.

After having issues with a classmate, Blue was struggling mentally and could not do the group work; she was afraid the tutor would get the wrong image of her if her classmate shared her version of the conflict, they had in their group work. Blue was encouraged by her close friend to report the issue to the tutor:

***Blue:** she (the classmate) made it seem like I was in the wrong a lot, and it got to the point that I was worried that she might tell the lecturer because at that time I was also struggling mentally, so I wasn't able to do my work to the best of my ability. she's also my tutor and I had visited her about my struggles previously, so she can also see yeah okay you are struggling and then let me know about this*

For a student like Blue who struggles with acute anxiety, it was enough to know that she could trust her tutor to hear and understand her struggles. The concept of relational pedagogies is helpful in explaining how important it is to have a genuine relationship with tutors where the student feels safe. Relational pedagogy is "the systematic construction of appropriate relationships embedded within the schooling process" (Crownover & Jones, 2018; p.18).

These relationships are maintained through positive social interactions between teachers and students, where trust and safety are key components in the exchange (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004). Relational pedagogy succeeds more when educators consider compassion, genuineness and openness vital characteristics in their teaching identity (Morgan et al., 2015). Relational pedagogy is specifically important in trauma-informed pedagogy in which students come to education with pre-existing personal and social difficulties (Downey, 2007).

The impact of a good relationship with a tutor further shows in Orchid's experience with her dissertation tutor:

Orchid: *I have a dissertation supervisor, and we meet more often. He is really kind and friendly. he gives encouragement and positive feedback.*

Orchid speaks of another tutor who has a good reputation amongst students:

Orchid: *she's really nice and kind, all people like her I heard a story that one Chinese student feel so depressed about many things, and she had her as a personal tutor. She cried in front of her, for one hour.*

Orchid points out an important point which is the ability to be vulnerable with a personal tutor. Orchid shared this story she heard as an exceptional example of a genuine relationship between tutor and student with a lot of humanness and openness in it. Being able to cry to a tutor shows that the tutor provided the student with a safe space to cry in. The excerpt from Orchid echoes the concept of mattering in higher education and the importance of care in this setting. Caring here is not used to refer to an individual trait but a characteristic of relationships in education where care is relational (Noddings, 1992). Noddings (2012) considers caring as a “responsibility to one another [based on] mutual and spontaneous regard” p.232. Care that encompasses acceptance and empathy does benefit students and is crucial to their sense of belonging (Slaten et al, 2018). Students value their relationship with staff who are understanding, and it plays a significant role in those students finishing their degree (Carter et al, 2018; Kiltz Et al., 2020; Adeyele and Yusuff, 2012). Genuine relationships

with staff continue to have a long-lasting positive impact on students' careers and life (Busteed,2015). Further, care strengthens student sense of belonging and motivation (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007), especially for those who lack cultural capital (Tierney,199).

However, the neoliberalisation of universities poses challenges to care. Higher education enforces competition and performance at the expense of time spent on establishing relationships with students (Hill, & Kumar, 2011; Lynch,2014). As Quinlan (2016) argues: "discussions about intangibles such as emotions and relationships are often sidelined" within today's "current climate of marketization" p.108. The requirements to perform obstruct the establishment and sustenance of relationships based on pedagogical caring (Orr and Orr,2016).In other words, care is less about individuals and more about structural limitations on the formation of relationships. Minimum contact hours hinder the development of a genuine relationship between staff and students, and the connection becomes automated and devoid of genuine care:

***Orchid:** I only have 30 minutes but it's just really short contact so is definitely not enough to talk about my mental wellbeing. He just got a checklist. is your housing good or learning good? Everything is good?*

***M:** How do you feel about that?*

***Orchid:** He's nice but I wouldn't think about sharing my problems with him. He's really busy so I just don't do that.*

Orchid shares that her relationship with her personal tutor is very impersonal. Although the tutor is there to listen to her troubles, being limited by half an hour of meeting imposed that the conversation becomes a checklist. As Lynch (2010) observes that in order to be successful, an individual has to be "unencumbered by caring" p.63. Being reduced to a subject that generates profit and has to compete for their position affects the responsibility staff has toward their students (Lynch, 2006,2014); thus, the tutor wouldn't spend more time or have more meetings to be of more help to Orchid. Further, care is taken as something that belongs

to the private sphere, and emotion and is considered 'women work' (Anderson et al., 2019); which might leave the demanding task of caring unquestionably assigned to women and early career staff inducing unacknowledged emotional labour (Morley, 1998). This could partly explain why in the first example, the female lecturer 'allowed' the student to cry whereas the male lecturer was not invested in getting personal with the student. Although care is not exclusive to females only as many men are also engaged in caring relationships (Wallroth, 2016).

Regardless of gender, care is crucial in student-staff relationships and Carter et al, (2018) argue that the university needs to acknowledge the importance of pedagogical caring and allow academics to add it as a valued element in their work. It is important to note that not all lecturers adopt a neoliberal mentality, and they see students more than customers (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2020).

It can be concluded that if universities are to foster positive mental health on campus, they need to invest in more contact hours, whether lectures or seminars. These meeting points create opportunities for students to foster relationships and thrive in higher education (Quinlan, 2016). In addition, students value the connections they have with staff and their peers. A good tutor makes the student feel respected and important which in turn helps them cope better when challenged (Ross, et al., 2014). Students particularly appreciate tutors who care genuinely for them (Yale, 2019). Nevertheless, it is not always easy to guarantee that departments and faculties will allocate enough time to tutors and students to develop good relationships. The hours are especially difficult for staff to manage when they are working with large cohorts and already have heavy workloads (Walker-Gleaves, 2019).

Subtheme 2 Belonging: is it for everyone?

A sense of belonging positively affects many other aspects of their university experience such as academic motivation (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007), academic achievements (Pittman & Richmond, 2007), and student retention (Masika, & Jones, 2016). Students who belong are less likely to feel detached from their course and university when they are able to cultivate relationships on campus. Thus, belonging as a concept is often taken for granted as

unidimensional and static. In this section, I am going to trouble the dominant discourse of belonging as a homogenous feeling that all students can and want to achieve in university.

Belonging to a university is traditionally understood as a relationship between a student and a group of people inside an institution (Strayhorn, 2019). However, students from minority ethnic backgrounds do not necessarily conceptualize belonging from a Eurocentric view. Native American students for example view belonging as an extension of their principles of belonging at home which is unfortunately absent and invalidated in their institution (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). Students from the working class are also more likely to struggle with the concept of having to belong. Some but not all, have a fragile sense of belonging in elite universities which can also threaten their relationships with their home communities (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009.) Violet and Azure both first-generation students, working class, coming from an ethnic minority, struggled with “the ongoing feeling of belonging nowhere” (Bunn, Threadgold, & Burke, 2020; p.472). Violet and Azure’s experiences echo in the literature around students from black, and minority ethnic backgrounds (BME) feelings of lack of belonging. BME students in one study felt that their way of speaking was laughed at every time they spoke, while another feared that their extroverted personality would be misinterpreted as aggressivity and rudeness (Hammond et al., 2019).

Violet and Azure felt it was difficult to belong, they were students attending lectures and seminars but somehow have not managed to belong anywhere. Having a student identity was not enough to belong to as there were other barriers related to other aspects of their identities. Violet shares her experience in a world of people who look nothing like her:

***Violet:** it is better because a lot of unis have diversity programs and initiatives more, like BME students In but I think you still see a divide (...) all of my tutors some of them are even PhD students all of them have been white, one man is Spanish but still European and then only this year the head of the department changed and it s an African professor now and I haven’t met him because he is the head and he doesn’t teach me (...) it’s really hard for people to break in academia and then a lot of people*

don't have role models or people to tell them that's it's even an option so they don't even go,

What Violet is seeing is in line with what Gusa (2010) referred to as white institutional presence (WIP) which is a climate in academia where the dominant practices and culture are white. Whiteness becomes the normative ideology of the institution, which often continues without being questioned. It is important to note that I use whiteness as a way of understanding unequal social relationships not categories of people.

George Yancy (2015) in his letter entitled "Dear White America" draws attention to whiteness as the norm, meaning that when a person is white, they do not see themselves as race, they have the luxury to see themselves as humans, unlike people of colour who see race everywhere in their interaction with the white world. Unlike her course mates, Violet sees her colour clearly, and her colour stands between her and entirely belonging, she cannot be the chameleon. The whiteness of the institution becomes the 'normal' and 'natural' space for the students but not for others such as students of colour.

The notion of whiteness as a big part of the university experience positions students of colour against what is termed a 'white background' as in the words of Hurston (2000) "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background".⁹³ Johnson (2019) used the concept in academia to describe how such spaces are lacking sharply of people like her, other Black Muslim women. In such spaces, students of colour stand out in terms of feeling out of place, or as space invaders (Puwar, 2004) although spaces are open to diversity, it still implies a normativity of whiteness. Puwar (2004) argues that although you come into a space, it does not automatically mean you belong in this place, especially "when belonging means 'an undisputed right to occupy that space'" (Puwar, 2004;p1). The students of colour positions are questioned and they are in constant need to prove their deservedness against negative derogatory stereotypes (Cornell and Kessi, 2017; Fries-Britt and Griffin, 2007). Even when there is no explicit racial discrimination happening, the university climate is still alienating students who do not identify as the majority white (Gusa, 2010). Violet brings up a valuable point on the importance of representation in higher education. This resonates with the literature indicating that representation is crucial for BME students' sense of belonging and willingness to share their problems with someone who understands them; especially in Russell Group universities that are majority white (Alexander, & Arday, 2015).

Another reason why Violet, as a daughter of immigrants, felt the place was not made for people like her was that she came from a background where making an income is vital:

Violet: *I think it's getting better, especially in vocational courses like medicine law engineering things that parents can see oh it leads to this career so they are happy to support, things like politics or geography you have to be able to have that flexibility of looking for a job and not being so certain. I think that has less diversity because you have to be in a more privileged situation because your parents will take you until you find a job whereas as soon I finish uni I have to work that's all I can afford*

Violet did not have the support she wanted from her parents for choosing a degree that doesn't guarantee an immediate job. The lack of parental support weighs her down but what also happens at her university does not make her feel supported either. She notices the differences quite sharply when she attends guests' lectures:

Violet: *if I want to qualify for law that's the field I want to do how am I going to do that? a lot of lawyers come to university tell you if you work hard enough you can get there, but even if i work hard it is still 18k a year that I don't have and I think they are not as helpful or as realistic as saying oh we want all people but then how do they actually get this sort of people? because that is how others who are qualified lawyers are, their parents can pay for them that's why it stays, there are scholarships but they are very very few*

M: *that's a lot of things to worry about*

Violet: *yeah and then I think trying to think you do pretty much feel alone in that unless you are in the position when know someone is really going through the same thing with you and understands*

Violet feels lonely and unaddressed in the motivational speeches of visiting lawyers. She feels that the worries in her mind are not understood by others in the same space. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes a similar experience in her book "The Thing Around Your Neck" (2010)

where Akunna a young Nigerian woman who immigrated to the US feels very alienated as a result of culture shock and multiple encounters with racism. She is more weighed down by not being understood despite the efforts of her white boyfriend. Violet also feels as if she is in the wrong place. This aligns again with what Puwar (2004) terms “space invaders”⁵ where the bodies of women and racialized others are “aliens in territories they are not meant to be in” p.145. Although Violet's body represents diversity in the university, her presence ended in her body. She was still an unprivileged body in a mostly white institution that is inaccessible to people like her. The speeches of the lawyers do not address her, they sit better with students who can afford to do what those lawyers did. It is helpful to use Ahmed's (2004) definition of white institutions to explain the dynamics of inclusion or exclusion that Violet feels. Ahmed (2004) explains “we point to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and into others: white bodies gather and create the impression of coherence” p.35. Violet's body disrupts and is disrupted by the coherence constructed by the majority of bodies in her degree. Ahmed (2012) proposes that in such cases “Diversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of the organization*” p.34 which means, the university Violet goes to encourages applications from ethnic minorities who are not usually seen in elite universities to improve the image of the university. Ahmed(2004) argues that there the institution's performance of diversity isn't challenging enough to change racial inequalities. Violet might be accepted in a degree that is predominately white, however, it does not change that the process of becoming a lawyer involves many hidden fees that only well-off students can afford. Diversity becomes more of a token than a real change in making degrees such as law accessible to those who do not come from wealthy backgrounds. Changing the scene for students from ethnic minorities is possible in what Yosso, et al. (2009) describes as a “positive racial climate” which includes :

- (a) the inclusion of Students, Faculty, and Administrators of Color; (b) a curriculum reflecting the historical and contemporary experiences of People of Color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Students of Color;

⁵ The term ‘space-invader’ was originated by Doreen Massey in Space, Place and Gender (1994) where she described her experience entering areas exclusive to men.

and (d) a mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to diversity and pluralism

Students of the working class, in general, struggle in accessing higher education. Although many of them end up doing well academically (Reay, 2014) and continue to thrive personally with their values from home (Lehmann, 2009), issues around equal access are still being questioned (Reay, 2018). Yellow and Azure had unfair starts in their university experience, which made the transition harder. Yellow had a different starting point academically

Yellow: *I couldn't deal with the workload and I couldn't catch up with the others where everyone had already studied photography for at least a couple of years in A-level so lecturers didn't start from the basics they assumed we already knew something so I went back to technicians at the university three times to try to work and but I was really stressed really miserable because I knew nothing about photography I couldn't really catch up, so yeah I changed my course after one month*

Yellow found herself lagging behind academically, although she had some experience in photography, it did not match that of her peers and the expectations from her lecturers. Later on, Yellow changes her degree, adding another change on top of changing homes and cities is an additional stressor in a student's early journey.

Azure also felt lost in the first year of her university course and as a first-generation working-class ethnic minority student. Azure had additional struggles which eventually led her to take a year off on mental health grounds.

Azure: *I wasn't in halls I booked my accommodation quite late I didn't really know anything about the university courses, you get your results in August three weeks before coming to university and that's when your place at uni is confirmed so I was waiting for that but apparently a lot of people have booked their before that their accommodations months in advance but I booked after that, I didn't know that i'd be accepted and all of these things and I didn't know how the accommodation process works I didn't receive my student loan so I couldn't pay the deposit no one in my family had been to university before that's why I ended up not opting for halls and it was a*

confusing process and then the pressure made it worse and I did find that a lot of people were already talking to each other and made friends during the first weeks and that exacerbated the loneliness

This is where it is important to think of intersectional inequalities from the works of from the work of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) where multiple identity factors such as race, gender, and class multiply the struggle for some students more than others. Azure could not find a place to stay as most university accommodations were prebooked since the summer, her constant sense of not belonging eventually caused her to take a year off as she found adjusting to university life impossible. In using Massey's analytical concept of "extroverted places", Thomas proposes that universities use their power to create their own dominant narrative of student experience and discourses on student belonging which includes some groups and alienates others (Thomas, 2015). Azure missed every single narrative enacted by all other students: she did not book accommodation within the time university encourages (early booking), and she was not there during freshers' week to "find" her group, so she basically missed important milestones to belonging according to the university.

Unlike Azure who tried and could not belong, Blue felt that belonging was not a binary for her, it was there and not there at the same time:

Blue: *see, I don't feel like I don't belong, but I don't feel like I belong either, I just feel very indifferent about it, I haven't had the feeling oh I don't belong here, but I haven't had the feeling like yeah this is.. Oh no, actually, you the church lecture theatre I felt very good in there, I was like yeah, this is my favourite lecture theatre, I was actually really excited about being there,*

M: *how?*

Blue: *I just really enjoyed being in there, maybe because I haven't been to church in a while, I like this, I also like natural light, and the lighting in there is very natural, the lecture maybe, because that module is the closest to my undergrad, so I felt like I actually knew what I was doing in that room*

As students walk and navigate through different university buildings and experiences, belonging becomes a journey rather than a destination, a nomadic process through “nebulous, multiplicitous, and shifting places and spaces of higher education institutions”(Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2019, p.14). Blue doesn’t remember offhand that she belongs, it is not a feeling that she gets every day. Still, there were moments in time and place in which she connected to a space (the church lecture theatre). This example encourages a different interpretation of belonging “from the fixity of *being*, to dynamic narratives of belonging in higher education (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2019, 1). Similarly, Thomas (2015) proposes that belonging could be conceptualized as a “lived, complex process, shaped by the power relationships inherent in social structures, continually renegotiated in contested space” p.41. This understanding does more justice to students who want to belong but cannot, it offers an alternative where non-belonging is not the entire fault of an individual. Moreover, physical spaces can represent different things for different people (Elwood,2008), as the church space stands for familiarity and comfort (Cohen-Zada, & Sander, 2011) to Blue, for others, it is a symbol of oppression and power (Pettit, 2020), or it could just be a space that is plain alien (Kinnaman, & Hawkins, 2011).

There are also students who do not wish to belong, and it is not necessarily a negative thing. Winstone, et al.(2022) give an example of how some students find it overwhelming to go to popular social spaces. Thomas(2015) also observes that mature students are often excluded from spaces tailored according to the youth's preferences. These differences that often go unnoticed challenge the rigid understanding of belonging. .

Subtheme 3: Ethical Loneliness of Not Being Heard

Other than university infrastructure and course structure, four of my participants shared negative experiences with their tutors and university mental health services. When going through difficult times, the response of the university makes or breaks the student. It is

important to note that although the form and designated time of interactions with the tutors are in the hands of university management, the quality of the interactions can matter more than the quantity for the students. So what happens when the students feel let down by their university in general and tutors in specific? I choose ethical loneliness as an answer.

Ethical loneliness is a concept developed by Jill Stauffer (2015). She defines it as

The experience of being abandoned by humanity, compounded by the cruelty of wrongs not being heard. It is the result of multiple lapses on the part of human beings and political institutions that, in failing to listen well to survivors, deny them redress by negating their testimony and thwarting their claims for justice. p.1

Unlike the overly used definition of loneliness as inconsistency between the quality and quantity of relationships, ethical loneliness is characterized by multiple rounds of neglect by the social world. The person experiencing ethical loneliness is failed and let down multiple times by others. Stauffer (2015) highlights how feeling abandoned is linked directly to ethical loneliness “This feeling also rises a sort of social isolation in which survivors suffer from isolation and lack a feeling of belonging” p.124.

In order to understand Stauffer's concept better, it is important to explain the foundation on which she bases her interpretation. Stauffer is inspired by Emmanuel Levinas' (1905-1995) ethics of responsibility to the Other⁶ (as referred to by Stauffer, 2015, p.46). According to Levinas if we are to understand a social world, we have to see it through our relationships with others, and how our intersubjectivities meet, interact and affect each other. Harm is one of those potential effects; when acknowledged, it means everyone is responsible for each other's survival (Stauffer,2015). Stauffer uses ethical loneliness as an analytical strategy to show that both safety and harm are the results of how humans behave toward each other. She also argues that when a self is subjected to injury and is destroyed by the world

⁶ According to Levinas, an Other with a capital letter refers to an undefined group that is unknown to the self; whereas others with a small o is the group whose characteristics are known. I use Other in explaining Levinas's ideas and Edward Said's work elsewhere in my analysis.

surrounding it, the self does not heal alone, but in cooperation with other selves (Stauffer,2015). One essential way that could hinder healing is when people refuse to hear others' stories of harm (Stauffer, 2015).

Stauffer then distinguishes between hearing and listening. Listening is hollow but hearing is responsive. When people learn to listen they work collaboratively to create the conditions for healing (Stauffer,2015), especially since human relationships have the potential to destroy and build (Stauffer, 2018).

An example of an unpleasant interaction with a member of staff happened to Orchid when she lost a close family member in her home country :

Orchid: *He had cancer I had to go back and I didn't know what to do, who to ask, or, how to do it, and I contacted my personal tutor, he just says go to the department and fill out forms and that's it. And importantly, he gave me the wrong information I had to find it. I had to go to the Student Union in person and find the right information.*

M: *How did that make you feel?*

Orchid: *Disappointed, he did not say sorry for your loss, but yeah I was not the only one many students faced the same issue*

Orchid went through two rounds of neglect, the first one where she received zero empathy from her tutor, and the second one where she got the wrong information and had to chase it down on her own. It is easy to feel insignificant when one's grief is dismissed and treated just like any other inquiry email.

Rose also noted that the quality of interaction with the personal contact determines her satisfaction with the course

Rose: *the guy who is the head of our courses is terrible. He doesn't respond to emails if he does respond he just says if you read the course handbook you'll find the answer rather than answering the question (...) we think he took the position because he gets more money not because he cares*

M: *so who would be the first person you go to if you needed extra support*

Rose: *it should be the head of the course, he is our academic and well-being advisor, but none of us like him so we don't talk to him about that*

The attitude of the personal tutor deters all the students in their group from sharing their personal struggles. The one and the first gate of their problems being communicated from student to institution is closed; thus, their problems go unheard by the university. When students are treated as administrative tasks, it constructs the feeling that they are only extra trouble, a burden. Rose's story with the tutor is an example of failed listening; that is, when powerful bodies that are designed to listen fail to hear (Stauffer, 2015) the victims of violence are abandoned by the exact institutions that are supposed to help them.

In addition to not being heard by the university, there are students who are not seen. Red and his large cohort were simply not remembered:

Red: *I attended a lecture and our teacher forgot the time, the course time is 9 o'clock but it's 11 o'clock 70 people waited for an hour but she didn't come she didn't respond we contacted, she only replied two hours later and said maybe we can reschedule next week.*

Although all people are prone to forget, the reaction of the lecturer does not match the seriousness of her mistake. Assuming that rearranging a different time will fit the heterogeneous population of students with their different responsibilities, and knowing that most students are forced to accept the alternative, could be seen as a lack of consideration by the lecturer. Moreover, waiting for an hour with a large group of students, and not receiving any reply could make the students feel insignificant and invisible.

Although ethical loneliness has been mainly applied in research on major traumatic events such as rape and war crimes (Swemmer, 2019; Schulz, 2018)) I am applying it to micro events to explain the effect of small acts of violence, and gestures of neglect that might lead to bigger

harmful incidents such as suicide. Suicide only sounds alarming when it occurs; however, if examined carefully it is not difficult to follow the track leading to it (See Mills, 2018 for a critical account of suicide caused by austerity in the UK). Loneliness is established as a risk factor for depression (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010), but also loneliness does not come out of the blue. For example, a student in Bristol in 2018 committed suicide after being forced to present in front of a large group despite her social anxiety (Phipps, 2022) . Nevertheless, this student's suicide was not the result of a single event but a long exposure to multiple rounds of neglect by the university . Suicide was always an option for one of my participants. Unlike all my other participants, he lost all faith in being helped by the university. In asking him how he knows he feels lonely :

Steel: *So if I'm in class, for example, I get the intrusive thoughts, hands get clammy, pit in my stomach, I'll drink water, If it persists I normally go outside and have a cig*

M: *what do you mean by intrusive thoughts?*

Steel: *Thoughts I can't control, mostly suicide, can be anything though*

Steel feels overwhelmingly lonely in classes which quickly escalates to intrusive thoughts. Ethical loneliness entails the notion of 'losing trust in the world' (Stauffer, 2015, p.61) and the feeling of a 'destroyed image of the world' (p.49). Steel mirrors a similar pattern of ethical loneliness in the university context. He lost his trust in the university and he believes nobody can help:

M: *have you ever reached out to anybody when you were feeling terribly lonely?*

Steel: *I don't have one, I don't really do, it is not their job to fix me (...) it has to come from within me*

Steels believe that nobody can help him and that the solution is in his hands only. Steel is perhaps adopting a neoliberal logic where the person in difficulty is expected to get themselves out of their trouble (MacLeavy,2011; Haylett,2003). Steel does not wish to be dependent, especially since dependency is stigmatised (discussed more in chapter 3). Valentine & Harris, 2014 argue: “discourses of individualization have gained such traction because they enable the holders to believe they can protect themselves from poverty and dependency through their own efforts and therefore to have a sense of security in an insecure world” p.91. This could mean that in rejecting others, Steel tries to protect his dignity and values which are battered by the hopelessness of the institution, and the loneliness he can’t escape.

Although only one participant had acute experiences of loneliness leading to extreme thoughts, I felt it is important to write his part to enact an ethical hearing (Stauffer, 2015). Many people might find the topic of suicide unsettling, especially when we think we are incompetent to deal with it, and that it only happens to others but not us. We like to cling to secure thoughts and that the world is a good place or else we will have to face the fact that misery can also happen to us. By us, I refer to the people who feel safe in their relationships. The point is, that ethical loneliness could also be enacted if we are too careful not to incite upsetting stories from participants. We indirectly reject hearing their stories to protect ourselves from a harsh reality. Steel politely requested I relax with him if I wanted to help him feel comfortable during our conversation. Perhaps this was Steel’s attempt to ensure he was heard and understood properly:

M: *I am sorry, I really don't want to be the person bringing all those feelings*

Steel: *You aren't, they exist within me. Nothing to apologise for*

M: *what could I for example do differently for you to feel differently?*

Steel: *Don't walk on eggshells when talking to me. I'm okay*

Therefore, I cannot provide a full picture of ethical loneliness from my research if I do not touch on suicide and the small, accumulated events that could lead to it. I argue that thoughts about ending one's life do not stem only from depression because depression is preceded by life events and so is loneliness. The loneliness Steel shared with me was something he'd experienced more among students in university rather than on his own when he is at home trying to distract himself from it :

Steel: *I try to distract myself, binge a lot of Netflix, I like Horror*

M: *oh does it make you scared at all when you watch too much horror stuff?*

Steel: *Nah, puts shit into perspective, shows that things could be worse, nice to feel ya know (...) I listen to music pretty constantly*

M: *does it help?*

Steel : *Ish , beats the silence*

Although the concept of ethical loneliness as developed by Stauffer is not directly related to the daily loneliness experienced by students; it is a broader concept applicable to different sorts of violations. Stauffer (2018) does not object to the wider application of her concept and she notes “ there will always be people who fit in those categories—of not having secure possession of one's own sense of safety in the world” p.723. I will discuss ethical loneliness along with the concept of slow death (Berlant, 2007) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011). By doing so I demonstrate that the concept of ethical loneliness can help to understand the effects of social responses from the university body on students' sense of visibility (belonging) and invisibility (loneliness).

In *Slow violence*, Nixon (2011) built a case on the environment's condition in a postcolonial world, his thoughts are valuable in explaining how some forms of violence do not classify as such because they do not happen immediately, but in lapses. He argues that violence is not a singular event since it continues to spread harm even decades later. One example Nixon (2011) relies on a lot is the long-term effects of industrial disasters such as what happened in Bhopal 39 years ago when the whole city became a gas chamber following the emission of deadly gas from a pesticide factory killing tens of thousands of people then. Its deadly effects still continue today with no accountability being taken by the US officials and the Indian government. Therefore, looking at the prolonged timeline of violence, its regenerating effects, and how it is purposefully ignored by neoliberal systems, slow violence challenges the readers' understanding of what violence means, whose tragedy counts, and what happens to those harmed and abandoned. In applying it to the context of the university, loneliness could be one consequence of the slow violence practised against students. With "little things" and "quasi-events" piling up (Povinelli, 2011; p.132-133), the students might end with loneliness that has no beginning and no end. Loneliness becomes what Povinelli(2011) terms a "slow catastrophe" p.160. Slow catastrophes result in exhausted bodies. Further, In writing on worn-out bodies, Berlant (2007) explains her concept of Slow death as "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" p.95. Exhaustion becomes the ordinary day-to-day life as people work under conditions that require self-management and work against it. Rose, Orchid, and Steel do not choose to speak up for what they perceive as negligence from the university, they keep moving forward trying to manage their 'individual problems' until they realize they are stuck at one point and deteriorating from there. They try to find the help they need in themselves, but they cannot find anything and the process is exhausting and leads them nowhere. Thus, as some students make the unfortunate choice of ending their lives as an escape, those who remain alive are slowly withering every time their struggles are not heard. Whether by being left to wait for months to get a counselling appointment or with the impersonal relationships between staff and students, or not being able to be part of a group (discussed in chapter 4), these students are worn out by their lonely loneliness.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine the experiences of the participants with their tutors, other students and the university as a whole. Due to the complexity of these interactions and the importance they have in harbouring or preventing loneliness, I chose to examine university spaces from a relational point of view to see how spaces become shaped by interactions (Massey, 1979, 2005). One of the key findings was that spaces are never neutral, but rather negotiated between students and staff. The participants counted on the academic spaces as probable places for connection, but that was difficult to achieve given the impersonal nature of learning and teaching. Big numbers of students meeting only few hours during the week wasn't encouraging for students to establish connections. The participants who were fortunate enough to be in small classes had more positive experiences because they were able to recognise and remember each others' names.

The interactions between students and staff were also crucial in feeling like students mattered to their universities or did not. Participants who had positive interactions with tutors, or even hearing about other students' positive experiences were appreciative and more settled in their relationships with their departments. Participants who had negative experiences felt that they were insignificant and worthless in the eyes of the institution. Loneliness thrives in these gaps where communications break down, or take place in distant cold environments. Relational pedagogy matters significantly in these situations, and could hamper and reduce feelings of disconnectedness that students carry with them in university spaces. The self-directed learning wasn't conducive as well in improving students feelings of connectedness but still drove them to spaces such as library where they could be alone with others students.

Another key finding was that belonging was not an automatic right to all students. I used concepts around nomadic belonging and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to show whereas many White students could feel at 'home', with students that look like them,

lecturers that look like them and inspirational stories similar to theirs, BME students still struggle with feeling out of place. BME students constantly felt like the “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004) confirming that belonging is an issue of power and privilege as Finn, and Holton (2019) affirm: “assumptions of rootedness and fixity glosses over important issues around power and contestations over which students have the right to belong in higher education in particular ways.”p.6

The last key finding was the ethical loneliness (Stauffer, 2015) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011) students experience when they go through small acts of negligence and unacknowledgement by the institutions. The aforementioned concepts allowed me to understand the accumulative effects of the harmful negligence practised by some staff and the university system as a whole in structuring tutorials , relationships between staff and students and designing courses that are not necessarily inclusive of all students. Participants did not only experience loneliness in their private spaces or social settings, students are also experienced ethical loneliness resulting from multiple rounds of failed hearing in university buildings. Lacking support and understanding from insinuations forces them to take matters into their own hands, thus internalising the slow violence they have been exposed to and blaming it all on oneself.

The framework I used was the most suitable to explore how students wellbeing was not only determined by their personal relationships or their social lives outside of lecture halls and seminar rooms. Students’ loneliness is part of a bigger problem where all human actors are involved. Students loneliness indicates institutional failure to deliver the promise of happiness (discussed in chapter 3) to its students, especially when this promise was used to lure them into these spaces.

Chapter 6 - Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

This thesis set out to deeply understand the loneliness experiences of university students in the UK. The thesis was a journey enveloped in loneliness, except for when my participants and I spoke about loneliness. Compared to when I started, although I would like to believe that I have answered my research questions, I still cannot claim full knowledge of loneliness and overly generalise it to all university students in the UK. However, in the following section, I summarise the findings of this research in answering the research questions while thinking about common intersecting themes. After that, I answer the overarching question:

What are the students' experiences of loneliness in university? using the participants' words which were not used elsewhere in the thesis. I will also try my best to answer what loneliness is, as this has been the question I have kept getting since the start of this PhD.

Summary of Findings

In this part, I offer a summary of the key findings of each analysis/discussion chapter.

Research Question 1: How is loneliness co-constructed in university?

Chapter 3: Personal Burden: How Loneliness is Co-constructed by Students in the University.

Loneliness is not just an individual experience that results from a mismatch in relationship quality and quantity (Peplau & Perlman, 1981). Loneliness signals fault in students' relationships with their close friends and others they haven't met yet. Loneliness also resides in the relationships they succeeded in making and resides within the students when they are alone too. In this chapter, I specifically looked at loneliness as a personal story. It circulates between individuals and groups and certainly does not exist in a vacuum. I was interested in students who had many of what they called close friends and were 'succeeding' and thriving socially in the university but still felt lonely. These were the students whom, if you had saw laughing and hanging around with their peers, you would never think they were feeling lonely.

This sphere was interesting for analysis because it showed how loneliness could overpower students who were afraid to use the term. It also shows how loneliness is framed as a 'wrong, ugly or even shameful' secret to be kept and never shared with others (Dahlberg, 2007), not even the people they trust. In this chapter, it was clear that students perceived their vulnerability as a weakness and failure. They were afraid of being abandoned for being a burden. What was more interesting is that they saw and interpreted someone else needing support as a burden too. They would justify the needs of others, such as someone who is disabled, someone who is chronically sick, or someone who just fails at being independent. Whether students believe that deep in their hearts, it was a narrative they bought from neoliberal systems which only recognise independent and self-reliant individuals. Students internalised neoliberal ideology, which increases people's loneliness by replacing a sense of connection with a sense of competition (Becker et al.,2021). Students perceived being in university as the best time to be independent, so any feelings of dependency they had, even if small and natural, threatened their image as young and alive. Loneliness was a term more suitable to the elderly, the ill and the disabled, but not the young, healthy, able-bodied students who should be living their best times. Independence can be perceived as counterproductive to connections; this neoliberal ideology can only be achieved by disconnecting from others and never needing them during moments of vulnerability (Scharff, 2016; Teo,2018). Independence is significantly unfitting when moments of weakness outnumber moments of strength in an already stressful university environment and during stressful times such as the Covid-19 outbreak (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017; Debowska et al.,2020; Savage et al.,2020). Thus one can argue that constant exposure to the neoliberal ideology constructs loneliness as a personal issue. Students later juggle these discourses and adopt that definition of loneliness which makes it hard for them to reach out, no matter how well-connected they are. Hiding the loneliness 'secret' from each other and not being encouraged to share only weakens the friendships they are part of (Corsano,2017; Frijns et al.,2013). In protecting their secret, students engage in a 'happiness' performance, or as Ahmed (2010) calls the "happiness duty" p.7, in their daily social interactions with their friends. They keep loneliness in the backstage of these performances while only bringing happy attitudes to the front stage to maintain their face (independent, resilient, and self-sufficient) (Goffman,1956).

Stigma was the binding explanation linking both performance and burden together. Stigma constructed the burden and drove the performances of 'un-loneliness'. However, stigma, in this case, was not just a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) but rather a social-cultural political production of a neoliberal system which induces harm and then reduces it to a matter of shameful secret that individuals struggle with on their own (Tyler, 2020). Thus, it is unfair to encourage students to speak about their loneliness to fight the stigma without support and acknowledgement of culpability from the system. I then suggest that students start talking about loneliness in their smaller groups to create change in their personal lives. Whether this change is small scale in their relationships, where they bring up the topic of loneliness and confront it with their friends while also risking losing one or two friends who do not care for them enough. Tyler (2020) notes that: "While stigma is a disabling inscribed in bodies, places and communities in ways that often leave profound and permanent scars, understanding the wounds of stigma as social and political the forging of networks of care and solidarity" p.29. Therefore, students need to embrace and introduce their vulnerabilities and utilise stigma productively. Students can bring their vulnerabilities out to the front stage of their performances so that other friends in the group also feel safe enough to share their loneliness. Loneliness should not stay in one's backstage and should not be perceived as a threat to one's face. Similarly, in the words of bell hooks (2018) : "We cannot know love if we remain unable to surrender our attachment to power if any feeling of vulnerability strikes terror in our hearts. Lovelessness torments" p.99.

Students might also need to re-examine what kind of narratives they are adopting and reliving around what it means to be a student, who counts as fully human in these narratives and who doesn't count. Therefore, loneliness could be used as an opportunity to strengthen one's friendships because it signals more maintenance work on the relationship rather than a fault in individuals.

Research Question 2: How are connections made/unmade on campus? Chapter 4 Dealing with Burden: How students connect to Deal with Loneliness

To see how students deal with the burden, chapter 4 explored how students established connections on campus. In particular, this chapter examined how students experienced and navigated specific university spaces such as student unions and seminar rooms. Student unions were described by many students as spaces where you find connections in university. However, they are not necessarily experienced as spaces where connections happen. Connections were challenging to navigate because, for many students, it is a matter of succeeding or failing without in-betweens. The stories showed that a Master Line is underlying the famous 'student university' narrative. This narrative depicts university students as socially successful, extroverted and confident young people. Students could tell that this image was favoured by the university (Vytniorgua, et al. ,2023) and strived to become the person in the advertisement of the university culture. Thus to fit in in this environment, students carefully selected which behaviours to show when navigating the space and what behaviours to avoid. The stories showed that popular university culture promises happiness and belonging to students, but the moment students follow Master Line, they face many disruptions.

The first disruption shows that making friends is not as easy or straightforward as Master Line entails. The students would attend events which were designed to meet new people; the events, however, did not prove helpful because they were structured around temporary chats and speed-meeting other students. The essential elements of constructing a relationship, such as time, attention and understanding, were absent.

The second disruption shows that in trying to achieve the ideal student image, participants who go to events alone are framed as weird by themselves and others. The lonely figure accumulates an affective value of disgust, fear and failure. They become "an unhappiness-cause...those who cause misfortune or trouble rather than those who feel sad or wretched" (Ahmed, 2010; p.95). Then others want to disassociate from the lonely figure by keeping a distance.

The final disruption of the master narrative is the result of the two previous ones. The stories demonstrated that lonely lines or loneliness is the arrival point. Hence, loneliness serves as a counter-narrative (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004) to the promise of happiness and belonging in Master Line. Loneliness opposes the promise of belonging and reveals that the master narrative used by universities is partly why students feel lonely. That is to say if there was no dominant narrative around social success, students might have found different ways of connecting with each other without the pressure of meeting people quickly and sticking with them for the duration of the course.

That is not to say that the Master Line is set to fail everyone; it worked for some student participants. The second subtheme examined four scenarios where student unions' events could offer belonging. The first scenario shows that some students belong 'naturally' to these events. However, when the term naturally is broken down, the scenario shows the student was enacting self-confidence that attracted other students. Self-confidence was not a fixed attribute but instead built from this student's already being popular in the society, physically attractive, and being a UK-domiciled student. Similarly, the other student enjoyed the events because she was part of a friend group in the same society. That is to say, although student union events are open to all students, individual students do not have only to navigate the emotions of walking to a new place and being perceived as weird; they are also faced with another hurdle that is well-established groups who 'own' the society and do not allow others into their group. The other two remaining scenarios show that societies also work for students who do not feel acknowledged by majority White institutions. Student unions offer them an opportunity to establish their societies, and in these societies, they find their communities. The last scenario shows that alcohol facilitates belonging in a university culture driven by alcohol consumption (Gambles et al., 2022). Students who did not wish to participate in the drinking culture felt excluded, and students who could not afford it felt their chances of continuing engagement in society vanishing.

Finally, in the last subtheme around Alienation (Fanon, 1952) and Othering (Said, 1978), the stories of international students, in specific, were examined carefully to understand the additional layer of loneliness they were experiencing. International students were also subjected to linguistic racism (Alim et al., 2016), in which they were perceived as subjects unable to speak and be understood. The stories revealed that the term 'language barrier' was

how these students were defined as deficit incompetent users of English. This positioned them as students who cannot be befriended despite their continuing attempts to join conversations. The geography inside the seminar rooms changes and gets to be determined according to what the West imagined the East to be (Said, 1987), thus creating borders difficult to cross by international students. This racism took place in student union events and seminar rooms where the practice of grouping with similar people continued. The stories show that the state of postcoloniality in universities still affects students' daily life as friending becomes a practice facilitated and available exclusively to the majority group through imperial linguistic power. The international student would feel estranged from themselves and their surroundings, as their existence is defined and invalidated by the white other (Fanon, 1952).

Therefore, the promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010) and friendship in the stories of students led to cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). This means that students who were pursuing this goal according to the prescribed student experience narrative were more likely to end up with sharper feelings of loneliness. The promise of happiness got everybody involved in a competition to find a group, and once all participants engaged in this game, establishing connections became a matter of exclusion rather than inclusion; students would instead lock their group and exclude others from their circle rather than be the ones excluded. The practice of grouping perpetuates certain practices of friendship and whiteness, a heteronormative that draws much of its power from excluding racial minorities, students of lower economic backgrounds (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2016), and students who are not already part of a group.

Loneliness then becomes an affective object that brings certain subjects together who align away from loneliness and others who seem to be more affected by loneliness: such as the individual standing alone, the weird one, the international student on the margins, and the BME student in a majority White university. Loneliness then moves subjects and realigns them into lines that are already power and value laden. The student unions became a space of loneliness rather than belonging, and the more participants tried, the unfit and lonelier they felt. As for participants who enjoyed being in their groups, it only worked in those settings; as we learned in Chapter 3 on Personal Burden, despite the outward performances of belonging, participants still felt lonely and did not know what else to do. In those moments,

they were also thinking about meeting new people and finding new friends, which brought them back to the same loneliness sphere of the students who were never 'lucky' enough to be part of a group.

Research Question 3: How does the structure of the university influence/host the experiences of loneliness?

Chapter 5: Analysis 3: Institutional Burden: How Loneliness is Constructed by Universities

To answer this question, I looked into the interactions between students, students and staff, students and the physical spaces. I examined the course's layout and its relationship to students' loneliness. I looked at loneliness in lectures and the loneliness arising from self-directed learning, and the positive/negative interactions happening in those spaces. Loneliness was hosted by the impersonal nature of lectures, where many students gather in one room for two hours and leave immediately after. Further, the imposed isolation needed for self-directed learning, which takes place most of the week; and finally, the impersonal nature of personal tutoring. Most participants shared that it was difficult to talk to other students during and after the lecture. However, lectures were the only opportunity for students without social support to be with other students in the same space. The individual study time, which constituted a big part of their course, also invited loneliness, this was even the case for students who labelled themselves as 'introverts'. What they believed was their type of personality did not matter anymore because it was not their choice to be alone. Although the participants did not find an opportunity to speak to other students within their structured courses, they appreciated positive, genuine interactions with their personal tutors. These interactions are encouraged by relational pedagogies (Crownover, & Jones, 2018) and they are essential for students to feel seen and understood. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case for all students due to the structural shapers of the tutor-student relationship, in which there isn't enough time dedicated to developing this relationship, and the pressure put on academics determines their level of engagement with their students. The stories also show that the tutors' distant and cold attitudes are perceived by students as neglect and lack of respect. These structural issues translate into 'ethical loneliness' (Stauffer, 2015), in which the

loneliness students are already going through gets doubled by the loneliness of not being heard. The harm caused by the university's structures gets internalised by students and labelled as loneliness, the individual issue. This is where students find themselves unable to share and unable to get support, which takes us back to loneliness as a personal story, the stigmatising burden a student carries alone.

Moreover, in this chapter, I argue that belonging is more of a luxury, a privilege, than an automatic natural right. Students from BME backgrounds struggle more in institutions that are not designed with them in mind. They are part of a course but always feel like 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004) where their natural right to belong is always questioned. Last but not least, I look into how ethical loneliness (Stauffer, 2015) links to the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011), in which violence is a continuous process that does not get picked up on when it is small and insignificant. However, this violence's damage lies in its slowness as it leads to a bigger injury that becomes hard to track down and hard to remedy. I show how the two concepts link by drawing on the excerpts of one participant who had suicidal thoughts during seminars. This student gave up on all kinds of support from the university after many attempts of trying to get help; he also followed the guidelines for making friends set by the student experience narrative (Chapter 3); however, none of that worked for him. By linking the two aforementioned concepts, I show how university systems can practice their own kind of slow violence on students, which later on gets ignored only to double the harm of loneliness that students are going through. I argue that the structural constraints on developing genuine relationships between students, students and staff do indeed host loneliness. It also feeds into the unproductive neoliberal narratives of success and failure as personal responsibilities where university wash off their hands of their students' and staff's mental well-being.

Application and Implication of the Research

The broader implications of this thesis are considered in this part of the thesis, including the implications for knowledge production (original contributions to knowledge), implications for methodologies (contributions to research methodologies), implications for practice (recommendations for educational policymakers and practitioners) and implications for future research.

Theoretical Considerations

This research project is the first of its kind in-depth narrative study on loneliness in British universities. It is also the first to have a diverse sample of participants from various backgrounds: UK domicile, International students, White and Black and Ethnic minority students.

This research was an exploration of loneliness and life in the UK by an outsider to this context, I come from a different culture and continent, yet I could use loneliness as a point in common between myself and my participants, especially since I was also lonely in the beginning and during the design and production stage of the project. I was also primarily lonely during the beginning of the analysis and sometimes during the writing-up phase. Therefore, this research project could be original in that it was carried out by another lonely student, unlike quantitative studies, which measured loneliness in scales tested on lonely students and not with them as part of them. This research's originality also lies in how the participants' story link to each other without them necessarily going through the same experiences. To illustrate, there was one society in which students had various experiences ranging from acute loneliness to complete belonging. My narrative analytical approach allowed me to analyse each story separately for more minor themes and then link them under bigger ones using a narrative thread. This approach allowed me to maintain the details of each story, what made it different simultaneously, and highlight the common issues. My approach resulted in the following theoretical contributions:

Loneliness as a responsibility – loneliness was more than an individual experience but a responsibility students have towards each other. Meaning one student's loneliness is an indicator of failure in all student-population relationships. Loneliness does things and moves people. Loneliness does not simply stick to bodies but circulates within and around bodies socially and materially (Ahmed, 2015). Loneliness becomes the sticky object in the context of the university; it attracts emotional attention, whether attachments or misalignments. The affect of loneliness creates attachment toward or away from other objects and groups; it attracts emotions such as shame, disgust, and fear while boundaries between student groups become well-defined. The ties between the object and the affect can, however, be undone if they are recognised as harmful; the object is not simply a cause of feeling but is the affective value we assign to objects that shape the feelings and experiences we have. In other words, students could start to think of loneliness as a feeling that isn't shameful and start to see opportunities for befriending the lonely individuals who stand alone in social unions events or on the edge of conversations instead of seeing them as contagious lonely objects. Students could also think of befriending few people and could resist the master narrative implying that happiness exists in groups. The master narrative pictures happiness in groups who live together, go out together, and only talk to each other, unlike pairs or individual students who do not necessarily have to/can belong. Loneliness then could be defined as failed, imagined, pre-determined attachments that hold a promise of happiness. Loneliness could also be the ties students get preoccupied with while ignoring other possible attachments. Students might not realise that loneliness also lies in those exact attachments they establish (grouping practices) because it doesn't allow them to be vulnerable. Instead, these attachments require constant performance of belonging that sustains the group harmony and maintains its distance from the lonely figure. If the tie is undone, the multiplicity of potentials is unleashed, and loneliness can slowly fade away.

Loneliness as accountability- The social and racial injustices causing some students to feel loneliness more than others imply that a sense of accountability needs to be added to the definition of loneliness. Instead of defining loneliness as dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1981), loneliness can also be defined as the small

acts of negligence which students and individuals outside the university practice on each other. Framing loneliness as an experience that only happens to those who are not trying hard enough to socialise further cuts bridges of communication and understanding between students. Also, framing loneliness as a personality attribute of someone who can't just be happy with their existing relationships denies the effect, negative or positive, students/people have on each other. To illustrate, the moment students buy into the popular narrative of the great 'student experience' of the social butterfly, they engage in practises of inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion entails only accepting students who look like them while excluding others who are imagined to be different, alien and strange. Thus, students need to question their personal behaviours when this narrative works for them; they also need to examine their actions of befriending others who seem safer and more similar in looks, colour, class and ethnicity. Perhaps with this careful examination, students who succeed at the master narrative can share their belonging with others, and they could also open the doors of their groups to new people because by inviting those who are different, the student can travel worlds in one conversation. As beautifully expressed in the words of bell hooks (2003):

To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination. Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, revelling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community. P.197

Loneliness as a structural failure - The narrative thread revealed that unlike the popular understanding of loneliness as an individual subjective perception, loneliness is a structural failure in society that prioritises immediate self-gain at the expense of belonging. As many students are busy trying to find a friend for themselves, they miss out on opportunities of

being the friend other needs. This research also indicates that loneliness does not come to individuals in the same way as the psychological definition assumes. Loneliness can result from social and racial inequalities, which construct the lived reality for many students. These inequalities are sustained by systems and individuals who (un)consciously enjoy the benefits of being positioned higher than others. These daily injustices and systemic isolation only thicken BME students' experiences of loneliness. Therefore, loneliness among university students goes beyond the stress of transition, personality attributes and social skills. There are structural issues that students face when moving to university, such as racial microaggressions by peers, complete disregard by some university staff, and the exclusive nature of the dominant social activities. These issues induce more loneliness in students of ethnic minorities than others.

Loneliness as a potential - Loneliness is not a personal experience, as it has the capacity to move people closer or away from each other. It also stigmatises the person feeling it and eliminates them further. As an experience of isolation, loneliness becomes an identity marker in the small world of the university, indicating who is fully human, capable and independent and who isn't. Braidotti (2013) writes that an egocentric view of the human eliminates all other beings who do not meet the narrow criteria. She observes:

All other modes of embodiment are cast out of the subject position and they include anthropomorphic others: non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, nonhealthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced peoples (...) All these 'others' are rendered as pejoration, pathologized and cast out of normality on the side of anomaly, deviance, monstrosity and bestiality. (p.68)

It is clear that Braidotti calls for extended relationships instead of barriers; these relationships do not involve one type of humans only (the healthy, able-bodied, young..) but also other creatures. In bringing our attention to the importance of viewing animals beyond the human-animal division, she (2013) notes: "This vital interconnection posits a qualitative shift of the relationship away from species-ism and towards an ethical appreciation of what bodies (human, animal, others) can do" p71-72. Recognising the bond humans have with others who are not human is a significant similarity between posthumanism propositions of Braidotti and

that of indigenous people. In indigenous knowledge, the land, for example, is a living matter where spirits, the living and unliving, interweave (Dei, Karanja & Erger, 2022). Ultimately, humans are not the superior species anymore but part of a wider net where others are as invaluable; thus, boundaries become meaningless (Bardiotti, 2013). Once boundaries are removed, opportunities for becoming are limitless, Bardiotti (2010) explains: “A figuration renders our image of thought in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity; as such, it can be taken as a dramatisation of processes of becoming” p.410. Loneliness could be thought of as a process of becoming rather than a static way of being. It could be seen as an opportunity to delve into new worlds and make new connections with others who we usually wouldn’t create a community with. If the human-to-human connection did not work, loneliness could be the driver towards connection with the land, space, and animals.

In short, this thesis invites a relational slow understanding of loneliness in which loneliness ‘epidemic’ amongst young students does not arise entirely out of personal, private tragedies and problems. It is the result of performances of the neoliberal able self, the result of commodified happiness and the result of socially and racially unequal systems of socialisation and education. The persistent loneliness speaks on how hesitant students are about their vulnerabilities becoming public; it also speaks on our failed ethics of hearing. Therefore, loneliness is a fault in relationships and not individuals; loneliness then holds accountable everyone in those relationships for not starting a conversation or not inviting others to a conversation that was already going on. Instead of pinning it down to individuals and letting their stories die with them if they decided the world was too lonely for them, loneliness should be slowly talked to, slowly heard and slowly understood.

Methodological Contributions

As I started with the African Storytelling tradition at the start of my thesis, I would like to end with one from the Algerian Amazigh Indigenous North African Folklore.

I would like to share the story of “ Ghriba” ⁷(or female stranger as translated to English), who is the eldest child in a family that lost their mother and lived with their old frail father. Ghriba became responsible for her younger siblings and father at an early age; she would go to the forest to collect firewood, and farms to herd the sheep of other people. She returns home at the end of the day when it is dark. In the darkness, the forest monster knocks on the doors of families whose mothers and sisters did not return yet; if he heard a baby crying, he would mimic the voice of his mother so that the children would open the door. Ghriba and her father knew the monster and took precautions; they had agreed that whenever Ghriba returned home, she would stomp the floor with her foot that has ankle chain bracelets and knock on the door with the arm wearing the rattle bracelet. That is how her father would recognise her. One day, Ghriba was attacked by bandits, who stole her bracelet and ankle chain accessory. Darkness has set, and she was unusually late; her father started worrying about her and did not know her whereabouts. Ghriba managed to escape the robbers, but when she got home, all bruised and traumatised, she had no distinctive sounds to make so her father could recognise her. She started knocking on the door as tears dropped down her face, begging her father to unlock the door while the forest monster looked at her from a distance. Her father asked her to make the distinctive sounds, and she told him she was assaulted and the jewellery was stolen from her. She cried, telling him: “Please, Father, open the door, I am scared of the forest monster” he replied, “ I am also scared, daughter Ghriba”. They both thought deeply and hard to find something else to help recognise each other, a story, a secret, but nothing came out. Ghriba was and remained Ghriba (a stranger), not only to a community that could help her and her family but to her own father. Ironically, it was only the monster of the forest who knew everybody because he could mimic their voices, but still, he couldn’t mimic their stories. One of the many lessons from this story is that parents should cultivate richer relationships with their children, not only one that is based on economic benefits. However, another lesson could be that stories can help us survive so that whenever danger looms, and whenever we are at a loss of material objects of happiness, safety and belonging, we still have something that brings us together. The stories we tell each other make us recognisable. Moreover, in the stories we share, we humanise our troubles and our

⁷ This story was also beautifully interpreted by the late kabyle artist **Idir** in a song entitled: **A Vava Inouva** in 1991

loneliness. Stories can situate pain outside of the personnel to the surrounding community, then bring them back to us as a resolution, which we all should take part in their making. Stories also build communities that stand together and survive dark, cold nights despite the presence of mythical monsters and non-fictional colonisers⁸.

Therefore, stories could be used not just as a methodological approach to understanding human experiences; they could also be used as a way to create the change we want to see in the world. In my thesis, the stories countered loneliness and buffered its impact on students. In other words, it might be worth it to create innovative research methods and tools, such as co-production research methods coming from indigenous communities (Zurba et al.,2022; Weaver,2023), trying to bridge the gap between Western and indigenous knowledge. In designing and engaging with relational productive research methods, researchers can ensure they give something back to the people and communities they study.

Originality in Ethics

Loneliness is clearly not an easy topic to talk about among students. Still, rather than classifying it as a 'sensitive topic', I argue that the approach needs to be sensitive, and that mercy should be instilled in each data collection stage. This is not because loneliness has an inherent sensitive nature but because of what following research ethics guidelines to the letter could do to participants.

To illustrate, I share two incidents that challenged my understanding of ethics during the project. The first incident was after getting my ethics approved after I promised that I would only speak about loneliness and not touch upon mental health issues, I made it a mission not to 'trigger' my participants' mental struggles. When doing the fieldwork, I realised how silly and selfish that was of me as a researcher. I was the one to decide what topics to speak about and what topics to ignore while believing I could dissect, pick and choose other humans' struggles. I was making individual decisions of care (Noddings,1984) without asking my participants what they would find triggering; instead, I avoided the topic altogether. In focusing on loneliness, I tried to be very careful; if I heard diagnostic terms such as depression,

⁸ The story of Ghriba is taken from the times when Algeria was colonised by the French. Young men and heads of the family were either forced to immigrate to France to work or joined the Algerian Resistance Fighters then passed away during/because of the continuous war. Women were then left to look after the children and the elderly in the family.

I did not address them in my questions. I quickly pass and pretend the term did not catch my attention. I realise today that by unacknowledging another person's full pain, the researcher practices the same ethical loneliness (Stauffer,2015) that other systems practice on individuals who are already abused. By following ethics guidelines to the letter, researchers only protect themselves.

The second incident was during covid-19, and my data collection continued. Everyone in the PhD community envied me then and said I was very lucky to research loneliness during covid-19; loneliness must be everywhere I looked, and so were opportunities to publish on the topic. Nevertheless, it all sounded wrong in my heart; why would I want to induce more loneliness by talking about loneliness during specifically lonely and scary times? Still, since I had research to finish, I checked up on my participants to see how they were doing and if they were willing to continue talking about loneliness. The majority of those who responded were happier, and some were struggling even more. Thus, I couldn't ask either if they wanted to continue participating in the research.

Although I could still carry on my research with no significant change in my ethics application, I could not bring myself to remind those who were happy of loneliness; and add more loneliness to those who were struggling. One participant, in particular, shared that all he wanted was a hug after a month of not having any human interaction, I couldn't offer a hug or any helpful words of support in such a situation. It is indeed difficult for the researcher in a virtual setting to show empathy and act sympathetic (Hanna,2019). I felt guilty because while I had a good support system at home, my participants were struggling with a different kind of loneliness alone. Even though it looked like a good opportunity to explore more aspects of loneliness, it was unethical in my view. I was also afraid I would not understand their loneliness anymore since I was not lonely. I was afraid I would not know when to stop anymore. The worst thing I could do to a person who is already struggling with loneliness is only to show further interest in their loneliness but not in them as whole beings. Indeed, researchers working with 'sensitive' topics can also be emotionally impacted by the experiences of their participants (Dickson-Swift et al.,2009). Thus, I decided to stop my data collection until the world was back to 'normal'.

As I could not separate myself from those stories, and they couldn't be separated from me, my researcher identity did not matter. My responsibility toward my participants made me refuse to gather more stories of loneliness while it was the ultimate period of isolation, it was my way of making sense of and honouring my participants and the stories shared with me. Research with an indigenous epistemology acknowledged that relationships are a way of thinking about existing and a way of existing to survive with morals and grace (Akan, 1999). Because those relationships can be built on much pain, research on painful experiences should adopt an indigenous non-western relational and intuitive approach. Researchers should also acknowledge that one's story is the story of everyone (Iske, 2013); so rather than distancing themselves from worlds that they aren't necessarily born in, researchers should embrace that by default, if knowledge is shared, we all have a responsibility that goes beyond ethics institutional guidelines. I have felt a lot in my research; many of the decisions I made in my methodology were out of feelings rather than pure 'reasoning'. Similarly, the indigenous theory embraces intuition and senses (Cordero, 1995), and I believe today that the intuition I followed protected my participants from more harm.

Having gone through this experience, I propose a decolonial understanding of ethics. I encourage others to rethink what a 'sensitive' topic is and to whom it is sensitive; in particular, I encourage them to ask who this framing of sensitivity protects, is it, researchers or participants? Does it protect participants if it decides for them what to share and what not? I argue that continued fixation with guidelines while not questioning the categorisation of sensitive topics only makes these topics difficult to engage with, thus spreading more silence around salient issues.

Moreover, I add the concept of 'mercy' to the other researchers' obligation on the ethics guidelines (honesty, integrity, respect). I draw from an Islamic understanding of mercy as a virtue that should be enacted with all beings, human and non-human (Surah Ghafir verse 40:7). Mercy is a virtue that must come first before knowledge. To illustrate, it is stated in Quran that the prophet Muhammed was sent to all living beings as mercy, and before he shared his knowledge with others, he had to be merciful first. Arguably, Mercy should encompass all aspects of knowledge, from the process of production to the end result.

Therefore, if mercy isn't ingrained in the approach to research, the knowledge obtained from the project can do more harm than good. Indeed, more knowledge should also enact more mercy, particularly in our approach to researching loneliness. As participants trust the researcher as a fellow human, not knowing that sometimes their academic interests and desires for career gains can distort their humanity; we, as researchers, know what kind of harm we could induce. We also know our way of going around it while still getting the data we need. However, if Mercy is ingrained before knowledge of rules, we can almost guarantee that all research is beneficial.

So, can stories heal?

Even though the qualitative work around loneliness is very important in hearing others, the interview format still defined the limits of the discussion. This is where my proposed methodology: narrative inquiry, adds value. There is a sense of fragility, saving face, and privacy that a person guards in their loneliness. Narrative inquiry gave that fragility time to untangle by co-creating new meanings of what it is like to be lonely.

As stories can revive pain, they have the potential to heal and empower the participant (Hyden, 2013). I was sure in my research that just speaking to another person who listens will silence loneliness in that setting, and it will give meaning to their experience; this is called "a measure of emotional-spiritual healing" (Baldwin 2015, p.184). Moreover, I was confident that my experience gives me the privilege to understand, thus, to support, at least in those initial stages of data collection.

Therefore, I propose more narrative inquiries into topics similar to loneliness. Narrative inquiries allow researchers to hear different stories and participants' voices spoken for and oppressed in the wordings of quantitative measures. When hearing these stories, a different understanding of loneliness appears; loneliness becomes less miserable than the statistics show it, and it becomes less definitive of who a person is and a feeling that comes and goes instead of an experience that resides within those who failed. Moreover, personal engagement with the topics could also be used as an opportunity to carry out meaningful

research; although it can be very difficult at times to continue projects that are personal to researchers, the pain has the potential to be turned into genuine, meaningful conversations.

Applications to Professional Practice

Besides the theoretical and methodological implications of this thesis, it is important to consider the implications for professional practice.

One of the findings discussed earlier was that students did not wish to speak about their loneliness publicly. What was common in students' stories was that they did not have a full understanding of why they felt the way they felt; they did not know if others were feeling the same thing but assumed they had to act happy, which did not help with their loneliness. This could be used as input into what support they would like to be provided with. In this section I focus on student support in universities I will present three considerations for practitioners.

Similar to loneliness research co-produced with young people (Batsleer, & Duggan, 2021) resulting in the Loneliness connect us report (Batsleer, Duggan, Mcnicol, Spray, & Angel, 2018) and university students in Exeter (Cooper & Jones, 2022); this research could be turned into a **series of co-produced workshops** targeting university students. The workshops could follow the order of the analysis/discussion chapters of the thesis. The students could be asked to explore their loneliness on three different levels: personal (between themselves and their friends), social (how they feel in social events and why they socialise the way they socialise) and institutional (could there be any opportunities for befriending people that are different from you). Students could also be asked to reflect on their behaviours and approaches when befriending others or wanting to join a group. Students will need to think if they are excluding anybody in the process of including themselves and others who are similar to them. Students could also be asked to explore their understanding of loneliness and pick out what is stigmatising about it; they could think about how their own conceptions and assumptions

affect how they view themselves and others who might need support from them. Further, students should be asked about possible counter-narratives that can resist how loneliness is understood amongst young people, and together with student wellbeing practitioners, they could think of ways how to spread and actualise those counter-stories.

Students could also think about solitude and promote these experiences as a normal part of university life.

Moreover, students could be asked to explore options of befriending course mates and share what kind of approaches would work best for them. Then students would be invited to think about navigating similarities and differences in approaches to learn how to approach each other best. Students could then co-produce a toolkit or a template that would be shared on social media platforms and invite other students to participate in these conversations. An example of a good online promotion for loneliness is the Lonely Not Alone Co-Op foundation campaign launched with nine young people who chose yellow socks as a sign of hope and a way to show awareness of loneliness. The socks' almost invisible nature, yet their bright colour communicates how loneliness feels to them and others (Banks, 2019). The campaign is present on social media Tik Tok which makes it more accessible to young people (Mortimer, 2020).

Another consideration for practitioners could be introducing a **social prescribing team** on campus, as in the case of the University of Manchester. This team can connect students to university assets such as sports centres and social groups. It also connects them to community assets such as yoga classes and volunteering opportunities in the community. This team could be especially useful to international students who are new to the university and the country (found on the University of Manchester Counselling and Mental Health Service webpage). Although this team follows an individual approach to solving loneliness and it is placed under counselling services, thus functioning within a medical model of mental health (Drinkwater, Wildman, & Moffatt, 2019); it can act as an information provider to students who wish to try socialising outside the university and student unions. This could be especially useful as one of the findings shows that students get demoralised when the Master Line doesn't work for them. Trying socialising activities outside the university could expand the narrow definition we have of the student experience today.

The findings from this research could also be disseminated in education conferences and talks with policymakers attending. The university needs to consider and invest in a **student mentoring scheme**, especially since the student body is diverse. Hence, the mentoring scheme needs to be sensitive to and should reflect the diversity of the student body. The student mentoring scheme already proved helpful throughout the years, not only in not only improving students' academic attainment but also in improving their well-being and easing levels of anxiety and stress (Collier, 2017 ; Lee & Bush, 2003; Lechuga, 2011; Snowden, & Hardy, 2013). The mentoring scheme could help new students adjust their expectations of the university; this is especially important as many students come to university with unrealistic expectations of their academic and social life (Maloshonok,& Terentev,2017). Some universities, the University of Sheffield included, have a living mentor in their university accommodations, which means this scheme could move and be appropriated to all study programs in the university.

Moreover, the university management needs to increase the staff and students' **contact hours** but not at the expense of the heavy workload that staff already have. This is important because students need to feel they are seen and heard (Cunningham, Vernon and Pitman,2020), and personal tutoring plays a significant role in this process. Students appreciate genuine relationships with their tutors (Gravett & Winstone, 2022), which is key to their belonging to the institution (Ahn & Davis,2020; Thomas,2012.) The institution has this role to play because care requires materiality and investment; it “depends upon adequate resources: on material goods, on time and on skills” (Tronto, 1993).

Meanwhile, tutors could rethink their approach to communication with students and not homogenise them into one group (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). This could be achieved through attunement and responsiveness (Dall'Alba, 2009) and ethical hearing. The tutor could tune in with the student's unique life experiences and respond to them accordingly rather than grouping them together under one title. Responsive attunement entails “*responding to the particularities and complexities of a situation on the basis of tuning in to others and things in the social and natural worlds, with reflexivity*” (Dall'Alba, 2020; p.32). Thus it goes beyond empathy as it implies informed decision-making about when and how to respond while remaining reflexive about this interaction. Moreover, ethical hearing needs to be enacted by tutors as it is in itself a learning process. Stauffer (2018) writes, “Hearing means actively

opening up your mind to being challenged, unsettled, to hearing what you may not want to hear, to admitting that you don't have things figured out already.” p.729. Thus if universities provide more contact hours, or even during the short personal tutoring meetings, staff could modify their approach to hearing and responding to fully use the limited interactions they have with students.

Student-staff partnerships could further enact this approach and allow for closer relationships between students and the university. It already proved helpful in creating genuine relationships where students felt like they belonged (Gravett, Yakovchuk,& Kinchin, 2020; Harrington, Flint,& Healey,2014).

I am hopeful that things can be changed via within-institution approaches. These are suggestions for small yet meaningful actions that can be done at the level of institutions.

Ideas for Future Research

In this section, I point to some directions that future research could take. These directions are the product of themes touched upon within the thesis, but they were not developed further, either because they were beyond the scope of the thesis or because there was not the space to get more data on these specific topics. In this section, I will focus on the different types of students whose stories were not part of this research. I would like to invite other researchers to engage with these students as it has the potential to understand loneliness even more.

One topic explored in the thesis was the issue of BME students' lack of belonging in mostly Russell Group universities (Arday, Branchu, & Boliver, 2022; Quyoum, Powell, & Clark,2022). However, my study was limited to self-selecting students at mostly elite Russell Group universities. Therefore, future work could look specifically into the experiences of students who go to post-92 universities with more diversity to see if groupings still apply and if it does in what forms and in what shapes. It could also look if BME students still feel excluded in universities that are more or so diverse than Russell Group. Further, future research could explore the sense of belonging to the institution in these universities, to its staff and its curriculum. Understanding the loneliness experiences of students from different ethnic and socioeconomic classes who go to different universities, such as conservatories and

metropolitan universities, as well as the long-distance learners and those who commute daily, is also worth studying because it can show what the student experience narrative means to them and where they position themselves in terms of belonging. Loneliness within the disabled students' community could be explored in greater detail to see how their loneliness clashes with the views of themselves and the university and explore what other students think about them. This research only touched upon disabled students when one participant drew a comparison between herself and her disabled friends. The comparison was based on neoliberal ableist definition of independence versus dependent. However, their views and voices were not explored because none of my participants were disabled. Still, their stories are important, especially since many disabled students feel socially isolated in universities (Sachs, & Schreuer, 2011), and even more outside university (Macdonald et al., 2018; Olsen, 2018; Tarvainen, 2021)

Exploring loneliness in these students would strengthen intersectional analyses of youth loneliness as the young disabled experiences of loneliness are not well explored in the literature. An intersectional analysis of loneliness further confirms that "loneliness is political" (Wilkinson, 2022). Moreover, as I was the one to choose the research questions and formulate my narrative interview questions, I have not had a lot of space open for student participants to co-design research questions that were more relevant and useful to them. Future research could consider more use of co-production research when engaging with young people. Co-production could also be useful in learning how to design a sensitive approach to topics such as loneliness.

Last but not least, another topic that more attention should be paid to is the interactions between students and non-human others, such as objects, technology, animals and nature. Research into the materiality of loneliness could show how students manage to find connections beyond what is expected of them in the student experience master narrative. For example, research on the benefits of green spaces and students' well-being already shows that nature has a restorative function (Lu & Fu, 2019; Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020) both inside and outside campus (Astell-Burt et al., 2022). Research on animal companionship and young people shows that animals could reduce loneliness (Black, 2012; Hartwig & Signal,

2020). However, there was minimum focus on youth in education and their relationship with animals. If more research is done in this area, we could have a less bleak understanding of loneliness and even more learn on its potential that could free students and equally people from expectations. It could also strengthen their resistance to systems that are designed to drain them. Thus, future research could use new materialist ontology that is made exactly for the movement, the undone, and the becoming. Deleuze and Guattari's work could provide a different perspective on loneliness and offer solace from "being" lonely as they differentiate between "being" and "becoming", with the former as a confining concept, whereas the latter is freeing. "Line of flight" is another concept used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe the possible multiple lines which resist the structure and reopen the potential for different actions, feelings, and intensities that are usually locked in static deterministic ways of understanding oneself.

Conclusion

This final chapter provided a summary of the key findings of each analysis chapter and the common themes across the chapters of this thesis. It also discussed the wider implications of this thesis in relation to theoretical contributions, methodological contributions, applications to professional practice, and future research. I would add the small actions I am planning to carry to enact my responsibility to those who shared their stories with me. One such action is to share these findings in an accessible format with the secondary school and university students. Moreover, I would like these stories to reach a wider audience in various formats: such as conference proceedings, academic papers and stories oral (podcasts) and written . I would like this research to reach secondary school students and BME youth centres in Sheffield and other cities if possible. Equipping myself with the relevant training and knowledge which is available at the Centre for Equity & Inclusion, at the University of Sheffield and its partners, such as the Racial Justice Network in Leeds, is what I aim to do next. Secondary school students could benefit from talks on university and loneliness even before they choose the university route. The BME youth could teach me knowledge that isn't available in academia, and I could return the gift by creating spaces for them to share their

experiences in academic spaces and to get acknowledgements for their time and knowledge from the University projects funding. The chances of this research having an impact on young people is higher when it is co-produced and done in collaboration with them rather than imposing my own academic 'expertise' on them.

This brief section draws the thesis to an end. To do so, I would like to share the photos capturing moments of loneliness and belonging that my participants shared with me between November 2019 and November 2020. We have not had a proper chance to meet and speak about these photos together after the Covid-19 breakout, which changed most people's scenes and daily lives drastically. However, I leave the space for interpretation, making sense and connecting with these photos to the reader. Like the opening of the thesis and following my African storytelling tradition, I am honoured to pass the turn of speaking to the reader now. They are welcome to take the story of loneliness from this point and use the photos plus the excerpts from the participants describing their photos, to story loneliness in their own ways.



And I can hear the leaves' sounds, I saw the grey sky, many clouds, a lot of leaves. Trees there is a really big round there. I went there every time to the same place, the same spot there. So I went there and I asked the trees inside my heart, I just ask them because I can't tell people, I just ask the tree and the sky “ do you know, do you know I really, really want to go home? Do you know that? Can you hear that?” I did, I did ask them sincerely inside my heart and obviously, there is no response. So then I went back home and then yeah, I feel a little bit, a tiny bit better.



when I run again, I went to the same point in the park. And finding the same trees, same sky, same clouds. And I have recalled that night that I asked them sincerely “do you know I really do you really want to go home?” And today when went there, I was unconsciously smiled. Actually, I was laughed and I feel is funny for myself and funny to be asking this. But I still, from the inside of my heart, I asked, I told them that do you know I can go home now? I'm so excited. I just share this good news with the trees, with the grass, with the sky where the cloud with the nature of the good news. I just laughed and alone. And I know some runner was passed by me. I know they might think I'm crazy. That ah, yeah, I'm crazy. I'm crazily happy.



People outside my window, turning lights on, probably having dinner together and watching something. I am here, alone in the flat, feeling lonely and wishing I was on the side of the street, in one of those houses, one of those rooms eating, talking and not having to look outside the window again



So there's one day, um, I feel I'm not I'm not quite sure whether it's lonely or sadness or anything in all. It's really-complicated. A mess inside my mind. I think it's two weeks ago and at that time, I think I'm really homesick. I think I -have went through a long term of homesick

cause since this summer, since I know I can't go back home during the summer, I have tons of dreams. I have tons of dreams about the people I met back home, so many people, even though familiar, unfamiliar, good relationships or bad relationships, all of them every day I can have different dreams and seeing different people there. And so it sounds a little bit funny, but actually, I felt really sad when every time I accidentally dreamed of the people I met back home.



Then I feel pretty lonely and empty. When I woke up from a noon nap. I usually do the nap. Um, I will set a clock for 30 minutes, but I usually delayed and then woke up to an hour. So every time I woke up after a noon nap. I feel extremely empty. And even though I didn't feel hungry, I want to eat a lot of food because feeling a kind of emptiness. And I don't like often wake up from a noon nap, I would have a lot of dreams in my head, quite a crowd and quite noisy in my dreams. A lot of people talking and different things happened. But when I woke up, there is nobody. My room is completely dark, and it starts raining, and I'm the only one in the house. The sole one in the whole.



This is from the corridor of the flat, the last door is the kitchen i don't know .. I think it is different here with flatmates it is not like home we always are good flatmates, but we usually share like stuff for the kitchen like dish soap stuff like that we put it together and split the money

I think for English people they don't do it did that with a girl from my first flat and i just asked her do you want to share them I can give you money and share it or do you prefer me to get mine and yeah , she told me it s okay it is the same if you want to share, but we couldn't really

like organise it like talk again about it and give her the money and anything so at the end I just went out and bought my stuff



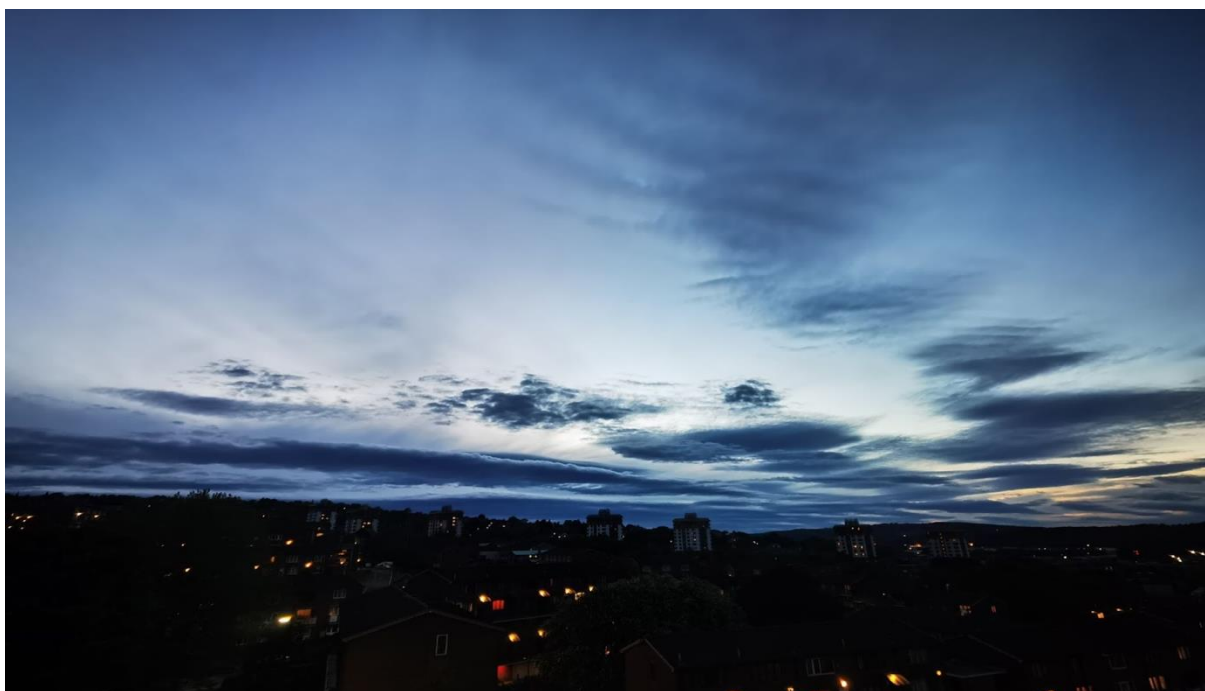
This is my shopping bag, I always carry it alone. Sometimes it is heavy and I can't carry it alone, I feel like crying but I can't I have to go back to my accommodation before it gets late and dark. it s just the same things over and over me by myself just studying going to university going food shopping cooking it is just the same things over and over



Can you see all of these people returning home from work? Their day just ended, whereas mine never started. I felt lonely and empty all day, and I know I will continue to feel this way until I fall asleep



I think each hole in my body was blocked. And I don't know and just feel like I need something flowing. So I went out for a walk in the meadows. I live near the meadows is a big park, and I always ran there. I really like the park, when I came there, so whatever, um, when I'm happy when I'm sad when I'm lonely, when I watch whatever I felt, I feel running is the best way to do so. I just run. That night, I was simply just walking and slowly running. And I remember was that night, so so dark and few people there in that big park. because I was scared of being attacked or something accident. So I was always keep a kind of appropriate distance from the crowd with other people, not close but not too far.



Early February 2020. This is a photo my participant and I took after a long dog walk in the Peaks. I invited her to my favourite place in Sheffield, and there was no speck of loneliness that day.

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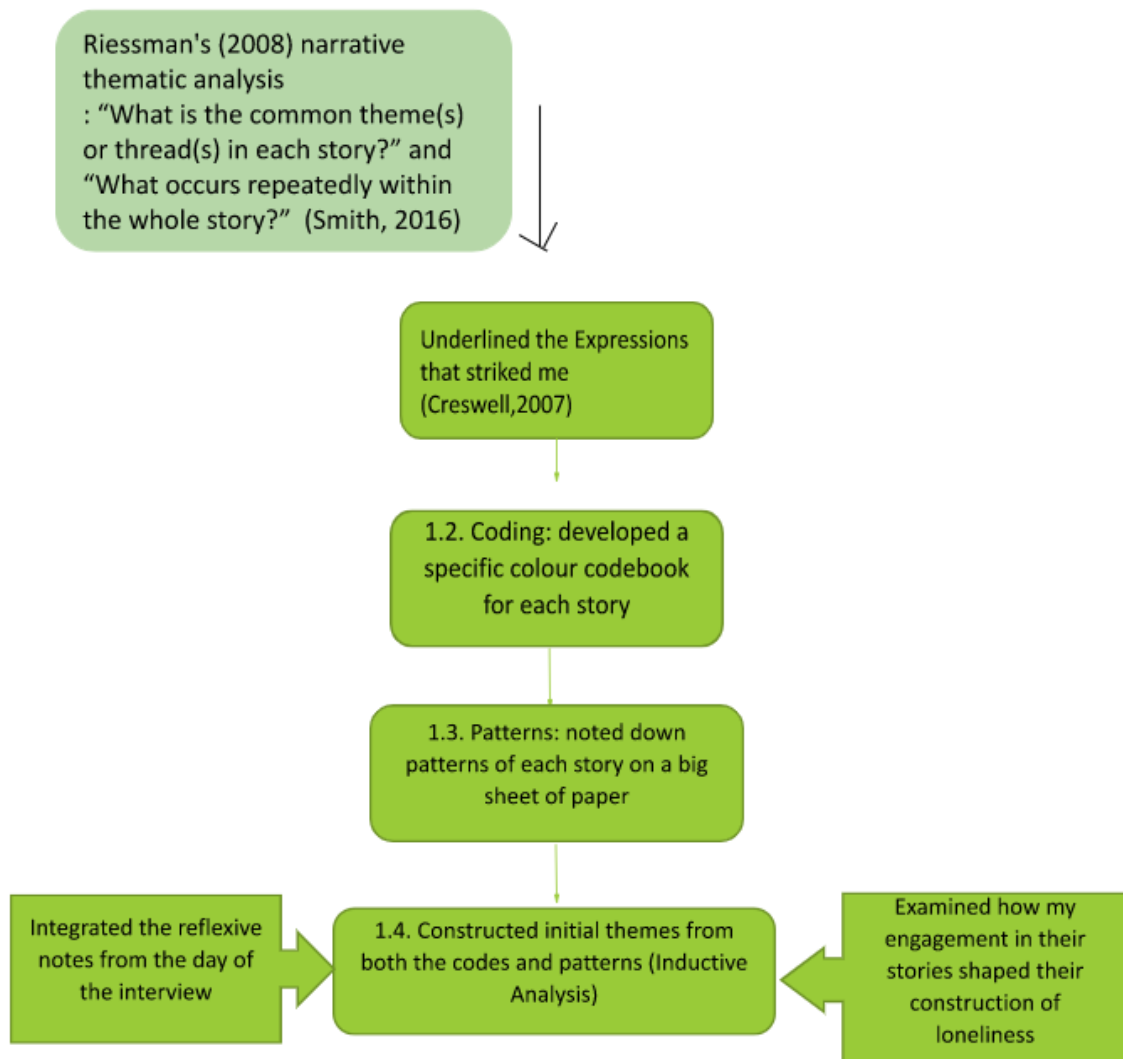
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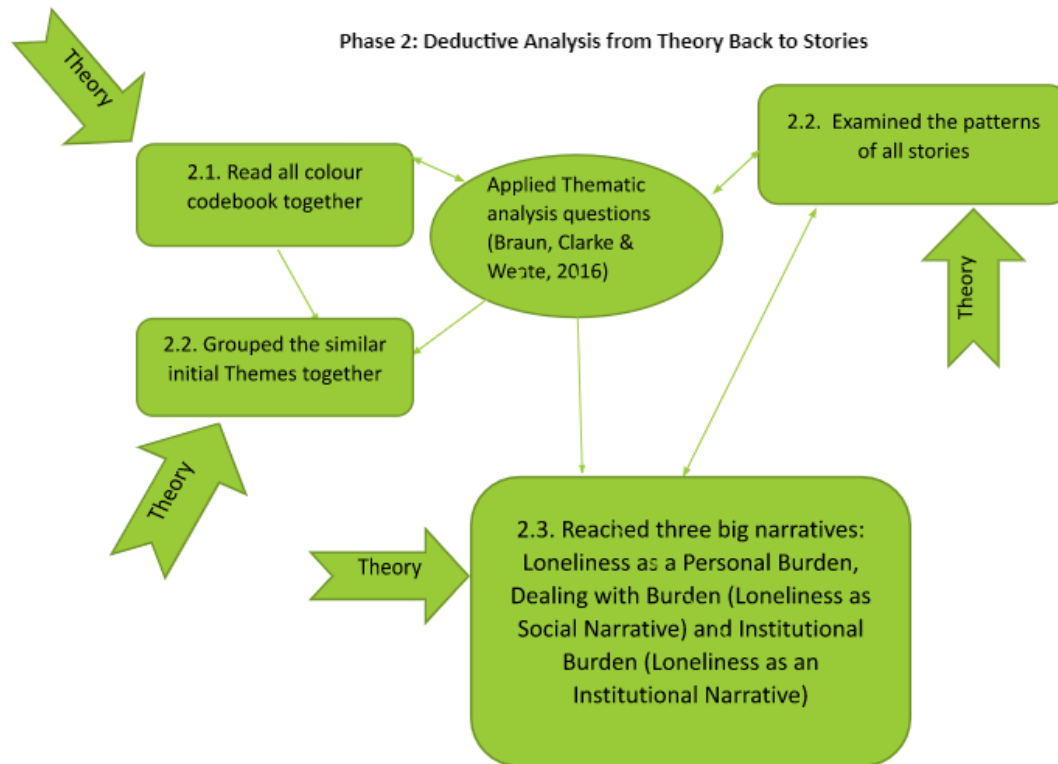
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Appendices

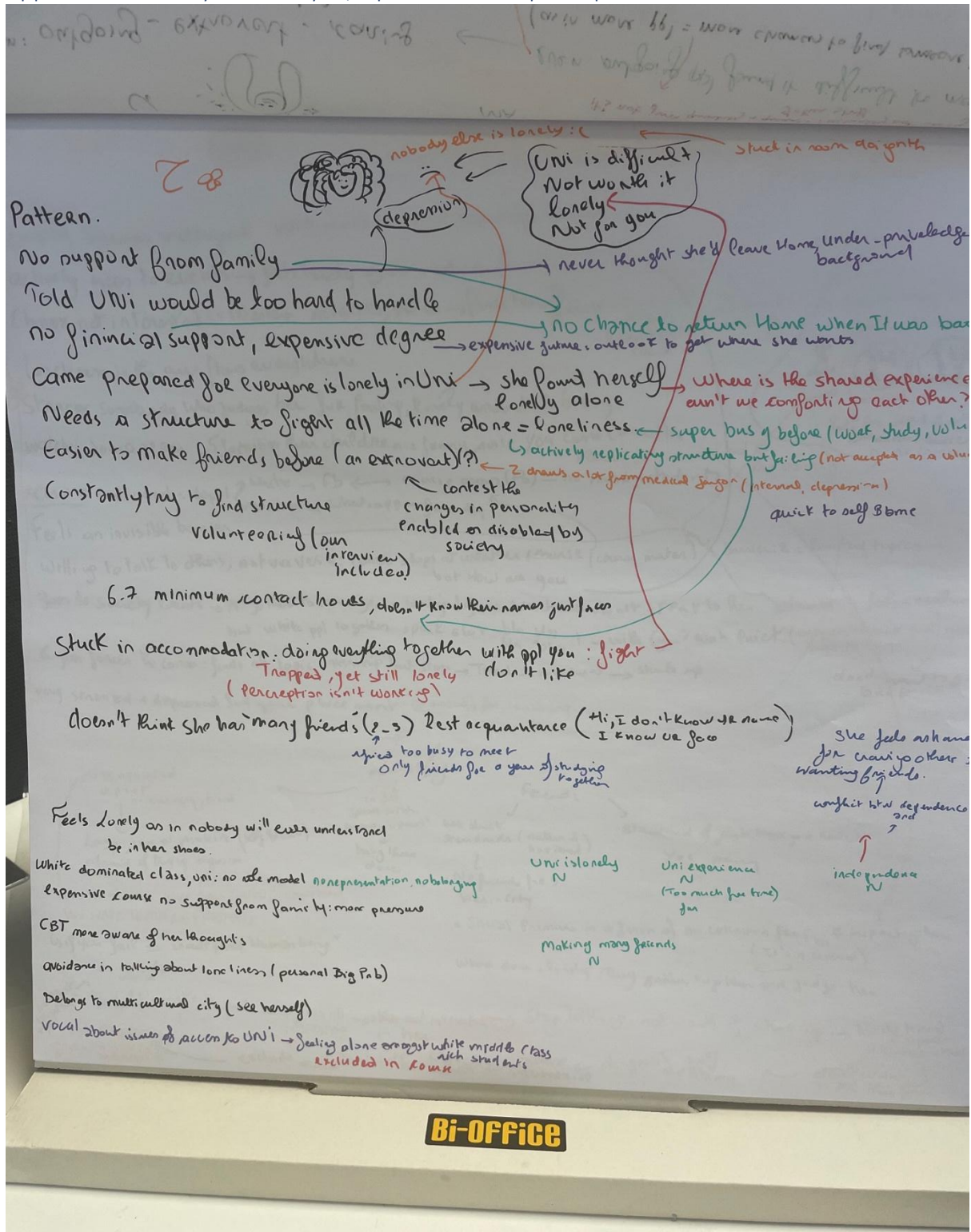
Appendix 1: Analytical Method Diagram / Phase One: Inductive Analysis: Themes from Stories



Appendix 2: Analytical Method Diagram/ Phase two : Deductive Analysis from Theory Back to Stories



Appendix 3: First layer of analysis, a pattern in one participant's narrative



20 min Tutorial a year

School → great teachers → cry to in tutorial supportive, kind, open minded | shows sympathy in email (re busy)

→ Bad teachers → Program director: gives wrong info - no sympathy, no sympathy for your loss

→ Bully: force you to answer, confront, target the shy + quiet: scared, depressed, cry to

checklist → joined into groups for the whole semester (excluded by group) = less opportunities to meet others

is this good? Yes or no? → group work groups are dangerous, not helpful

* no interest in your stories even when they are forced to hear them

* sees a gap between him and others → actually try to fill him with convo doesn't stick with chinese group still the only friend she met is chinese

* Family issues → required therapy → sensitive topic → makes tweets rest seven like months

grief + hate

Run Back to the UK: not happy but not that depressed!

difficult relationship with father, growing up alone, lonely child

+ one good friend from home constant chat → best time of the day: keeps her from loneliness

cousin These for each other

* The "someone" she could "monish" more when there are groups and friends and she's not

→ when relationships alone she feels independent

disappointment

space of loneliness

using groups to meet with friends and family

connected direct

using social media

to like group and post

the group is full of friends and family

avoiding space of L → avoiding them

Loneliness as in void emptiness: writes diary, schedule

filled with friends

just

run

suspect

loneliness

eg. food

family in tears of light, no one to return to (very lonely) + not being one of the ppl in traffic returning home

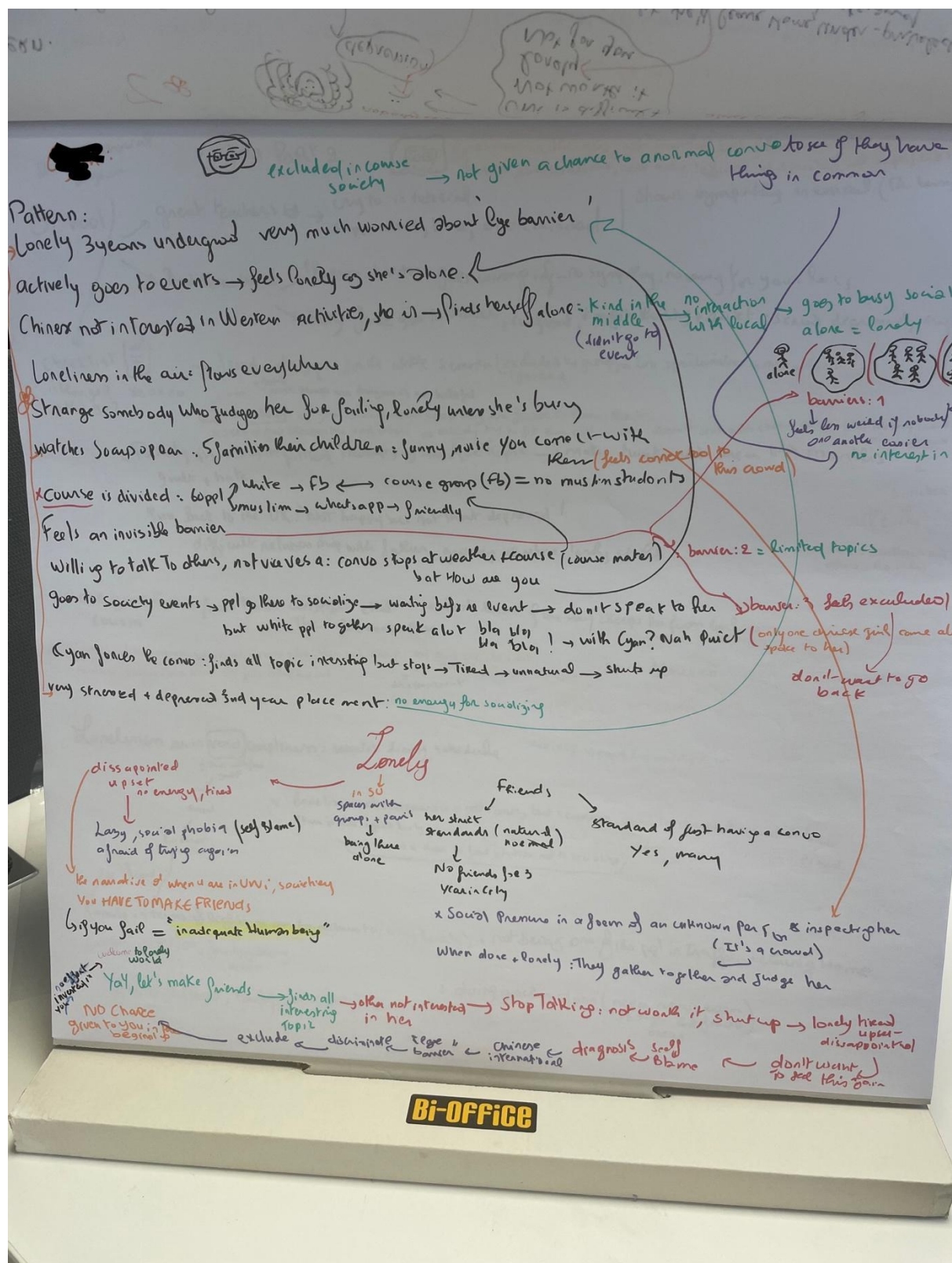
sun set, light on, family gathering dinner

 alone, lonely, away from home

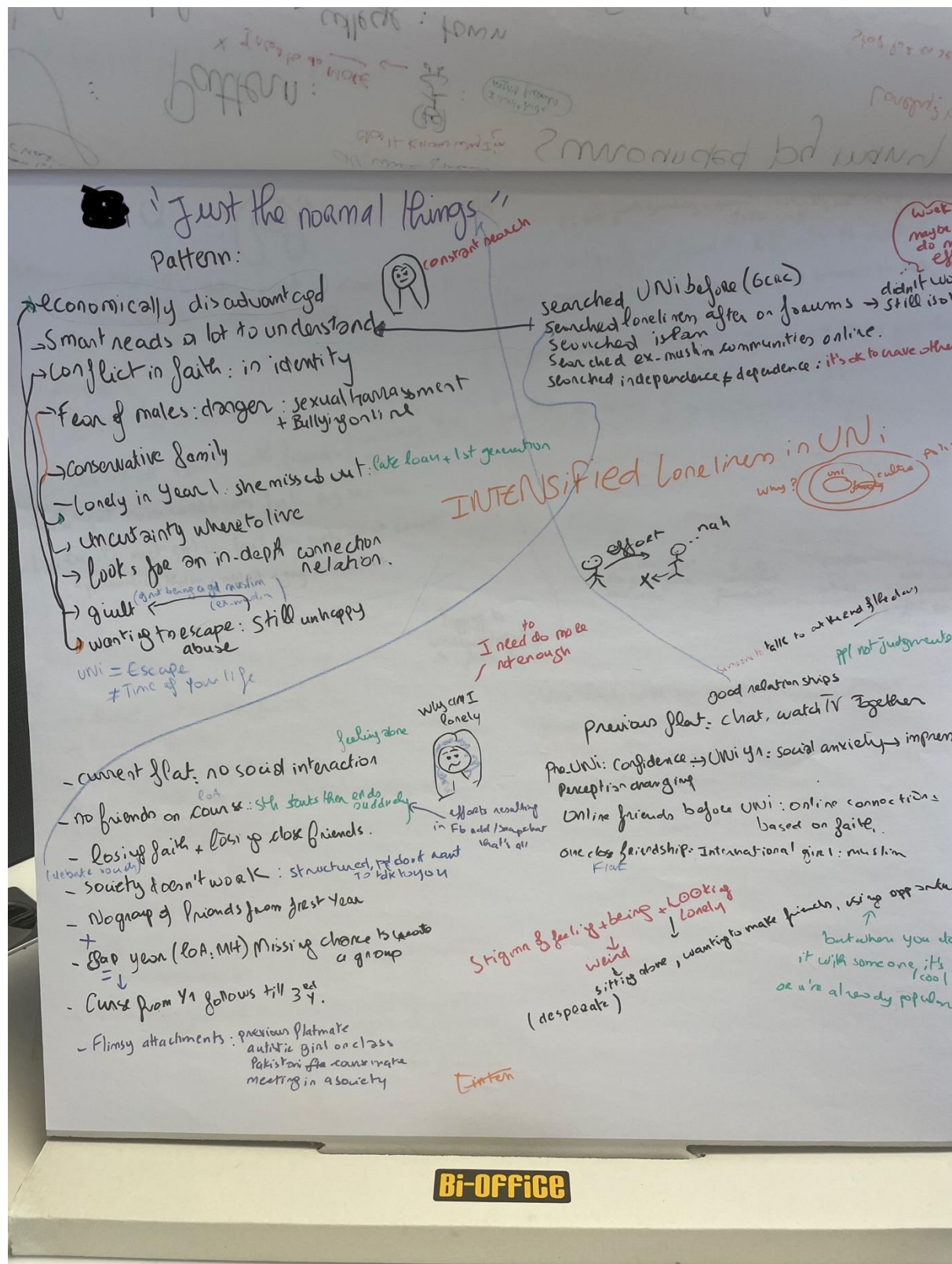
+ doing grocery alone (never again even though the food is cheap)

Bi-Office

Appendix 5: First layer of analysis, a pattern in one participant's narrative



Appendix 6: First layer of analysis, a pattern in one participant's narrative



Appendix 8: Example of one participant's colour codebook

Grey Codebook

Offering one's Flesh to detach from loneliness

Bold/ encircled on paper : Find striking

Yellow: Experience of loneliness

Antonym of Loneliness : what is it like not to be lonely

Green: making connections : how they are made

Barrier to connection : what hinders them from happening

Blue: disadvantages of being him, little parts that constructed loneliness in the past

Discourse/ assumption of loneliness: how does loneliness happen to you

Self-blame discourse : your mistakes

Fear of being lonely: destiny

Structure helpful for making friends: more like settings in university, a situation where right ingredients are put together

Structure unhelpful for making friends: accommodation (Eg)

Student Society related : views

Student experience : the ideal discourse

Groupings

Shallowness, impersonal relationships

Looking for connections : active attempts

Finding connections : moments they felt connected-belonged

Friend definition example of friends

Fear of losing others

Burden- fear of sharing : stigma

Care being cared for/ caring for others

Cutting relations/ being cut by others

Appendix 9: Example of another participant's colour codebook

Steel Codebook	
Cocooning at a safe space after trying everything	
Yellow:	Loneliness
Green:	how it happens: triggers
Dark Blue:	the length of the feeling
Pink:	unhappy with relationships with mates
Red:	Being reminded that he is an outsider
Blue:	never feeling like he belonged
Orange:	Factors of loneliness (according to D)
Mustard:	official diagnosis of depression
Afternoon blue:	futile attempts
Dark blue:	giving up on people
Grass green:	accepting loneliness
Light Yellow:	excessive alcohol consumption during the week + smoking/coping: distraction from loneliness
Dark red:	appearance of loneliness on the body in public
Grey:	degree related dissatisfaction with class
Theme of suicide: thoughts he gets at class	
Light orange:	not surviving on small talks
Greenly green:	drinking: the easy way to make temporary friends
Soft <u>yellow</u> :	Being a bother: burden
Nice orange:	individual discourse
Dark pink:	going out to see others after exams (bit contradictory to the person who loves night to avoid people)
Bluey green:	coping unhealthy during covid19 restrictions
Light pink:	moments of relationality
Bright green:	covid 19 complications

Appendix 10: Second layer of analysis: mapping common themes

Common Theme 1: Place, accommodation.
 LINK
 J: lonely in flat + bit course
 a: lonely in new flat + Very lonely in course
 na: Lonely in flat + course

Appendix 11: Second layer of analysis: mapping common themes

CT 2: Stigma
 LINK
 J don't talk about it
 Fia Looking Lonely desperate 3rd year
 Luma still invisible to feel stigmatized
 avoided the word in the interview but not in online
 Links → Burden + being annoying → Fear of being abandoned not cool
 → annoying to family
 → 1st year, 1st 3 months

CTB : Link . individual Study Time : Less classes .

Sam : small course : friendly with everyone : pub : undergrad soo : lucky enough to belong to a group

Fia : Big course : even with 40 in class no group + study space was cosy

Law : change course : big class, ^{grouping} more interactive but limited talks (grouping) study + chat

Less hours in classes : Less interaction or even seeing others .

companied to school
came ppl everyday

Lonely in flat : not seeing anybody .

CT Link 6: **unrecruited Efforts** (could be linked to Self-Blame)

Lam: has her group: they stay in touch but have no time to meet.

Fia: constantly looking: societies events, talking to course mates

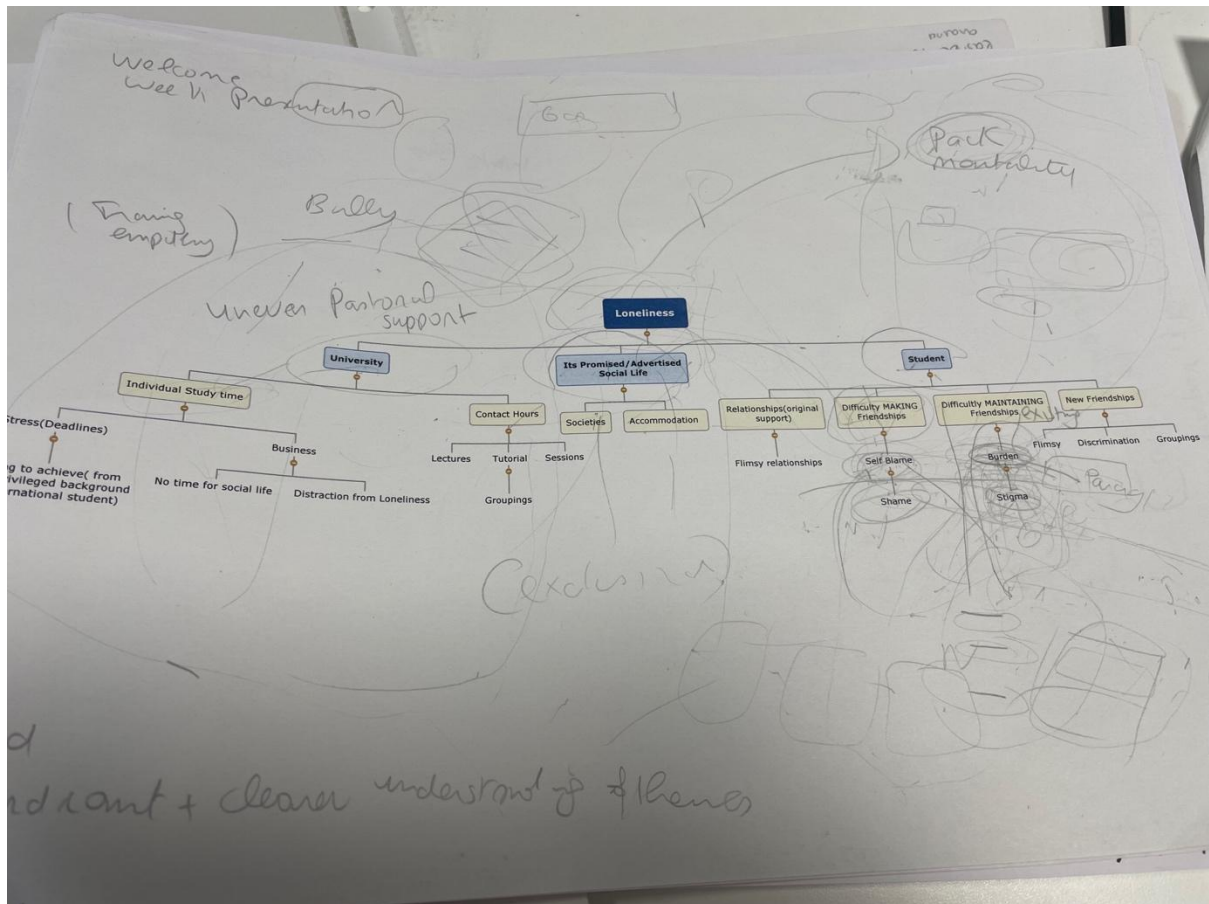
Lau: active seeker: societies, invites for course mates to travel, coffee

course $\xrightarrow{\text{bridge}}$ Lunch $\xrightarrow{\text{talk about other stuff}}$ pub chat $\xrightarrow{\text{friendship}}$

Talk about Uni x Srops $\xrightarrow{\text{L + Fia}}$

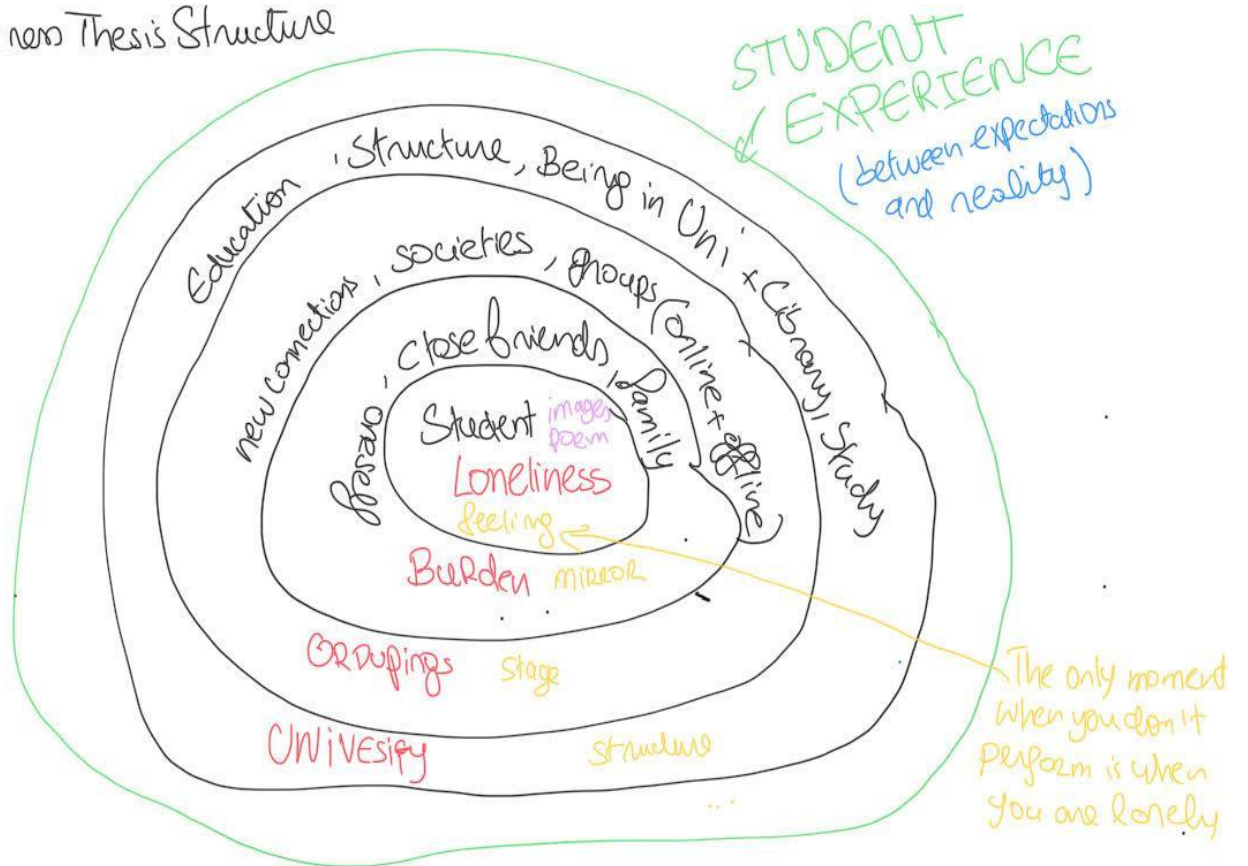
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Appendix 14: Mind map of provisional themes

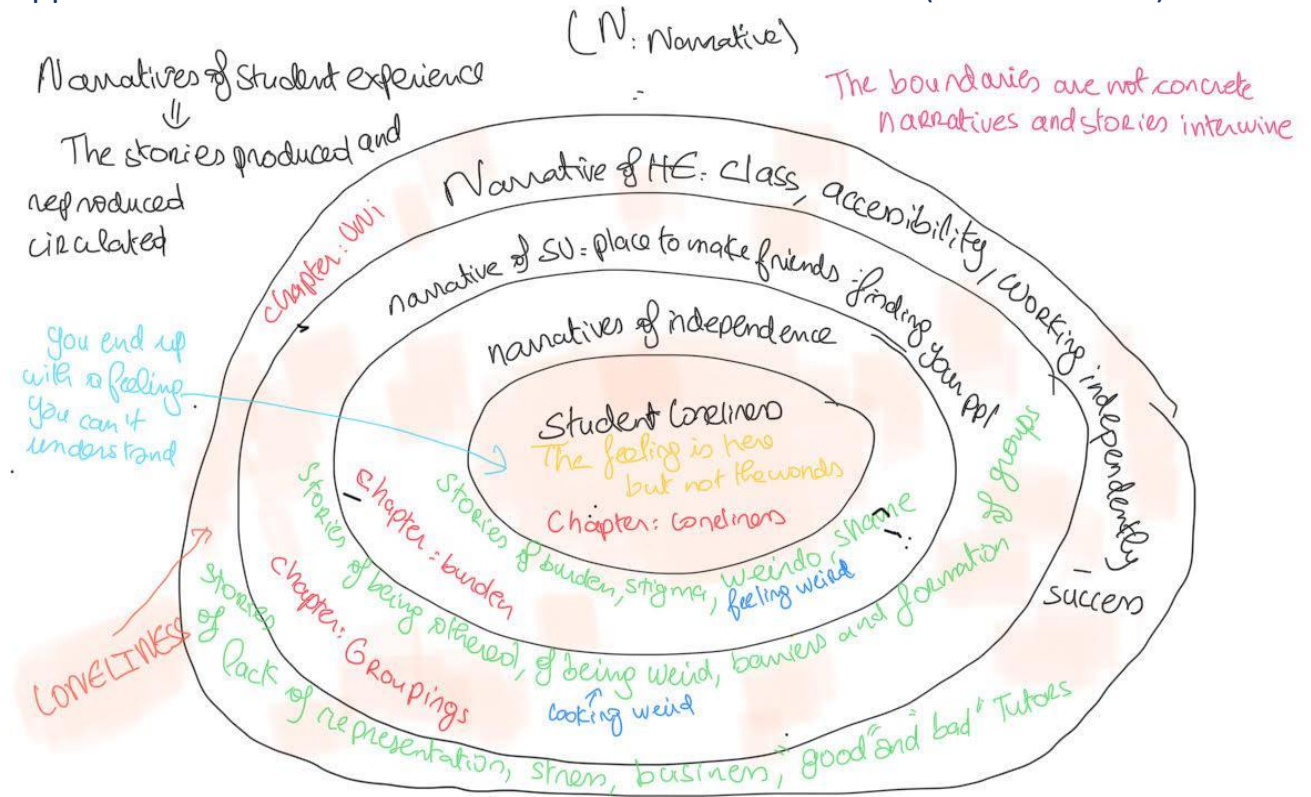


Appendix 15: Loneliness Thesis structure

Loneliness Thesis Structure



Appendix 16: Narratives and stories in relation to loneliness (Narrative Glue)



I see loneliness as a feeling an individual ends up with, but they pick it up from different spaces, they do not understand it necessarily, but they feel it. Loneliness travels through different layers and not all students pick loneliness from the same spaces in the same way.



PLEASE HELP ME UNDERSTAND LONELINESS

I am a doctoral student in the School of Education and I am looking for undergraduate and Master students who have been **feeling lonely recently** or **often** during university. Is this you? If so, I would really like to chat to you and potentially ask you to participate in a number of conversations. These can take different forms (face-to-face, phone/skype calls, written communication such as short stories/ letters, diary entry, or even artwork!). Our communication can take place whenever it suits YOU. You can talk to me for as much as you want, as often as you want for the duration of four months. Stories you share will help me to understand how loneliness is developed and prevented in university.

IF INTERESTED, PLEASE EMAIL
mlemmouchi1@sheffield.ac.uk

ALL “HOT” DRINKS ON ME!



Let's be Lonely Together: Co-Constructing Narratives of Loneliness with University Students

Students 'Information Sheet

The University of Sheffield is conducting independent research for the British Red Cross and Co-op. The research aims to understand more about the connections that people have with other individuals and organisations. We have asked you to take part to help us understand more about the connections and relationships you have with other people, and what services and activities you are involved with. The research is funded until January 2019.

This information sheet explains why the research is being carried out and what it would involve for you.

The aims of the research and why you have been asked to take part

This study aims at understanding how feelings of loneliness and belonging are developed among students during university times and in different university environments. It also seeks to explore ways of changing the university culture to make loneliness less of an issue. You have been asked to take part in this research because you have experienced feelings of loneliness during your studies in the university. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation or to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please let the interviewer know. Please contact me on the details provided at the end of this sheet.

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to participate and then change your mind at a later date, please let me know, using the contact details at the bottom of this sheet, and the data you have supplied will be destroyed.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

You will be asked to take part in a couple of conversations. this will take place once every four weeks for four months. The conversations will last between 30 and 60 minutes, but they might be longer if you want them to. The researcher will be happy to talk to you about the research and answer any questions you may have prior to the interview.

If you agree to take part, we will ask you to sign a consent form at the start of the first conversation. If you would like this form, or any other documents related to this research in another format (example, electronic version), please let us know before the first conversation. You will still be asked for a consent after two meetings, if you feel that you have had enough, you are free to stop whenever you want.

The conversations aim to be informal, and the questions will provide you with an opportunity to discuss your experiences. If you are unsure of anything, the interviewer will be happy to discuss. If you do not wish to answer a question, please just say so, and the interviewer will skip to the next question.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantage or discomfort. The potential physical and/or psychological harm or distress will be the same as any experienced in everyday life.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will have a positive impact on raising awareness of loneliness and lifting some of the related stigma. It is also hoped that the research findings will be transformed into useful knowledge for developing preventive or remedial programmes in the university.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Your rights and privacy are important to us and the researcher will collect, handle, process and store your responses in a way that is consistent with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). We stress that no personal information you give will be passed to any organisation other than the researcher, who will treat it as confidential. The information collected from you will not be used by the researcher for any other purpose. You will not be named or identified in any report or publication arising from this study.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information

can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

With your permission, we would like to audio record all the conversations. This will allow the conversation to be listened to again, if needed. We will ask your permission and inform you when we have begun recording. If you do not wish to be recorded we will respect your wishes and proceed without recording. The audio recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis purposes. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

Everything you say / report is confidential unless you tell us something that indicates that you or someone else is at risk of harm. We would discuss this with you before telling anyone else. You will not be named or identified in any report or publication arising from this research. Any notes taken during the interview will be typed up and securely stored (the written notes will be destroyed). The audio recording will be transcribed by the researcher, and the transcribed data, along with the audio recording taken during the interview, stored securely on the researcher's password protected computer, in a password protected file, within 48 hours of the interview taking place. If we decide to report individual quotes or personal circumstances in the research reports or any future research, these will be anonymised, and when referred to, a pseudonym will be used. All data, including your responses, will be disposed of securely six months after the study ends.

You have the right to contact us at any time to request access to any information we hold on you, and we will provide a copy of that information free of charge.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is funded by The Algerian Government of Higher Education.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been (will be) ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by The School of Education.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If you wish to raise a complaint about any part of the research, you should contact the researcher, in the first instance (details provided at the end of this information sheet). Should you feel that the complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the Head of school Elizabeth Wood, who will then escalate the complaint through the appropriate channels. If you wish to contact Elizabeth Wood, please telephone 0114 222 8172. If the

complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, information about how to raise a complaint can be found in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>. If you do not have access to the internet, please call 0114 2226400, where further guidance will be offered.

Contact for further information

Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

If you require further information about this research, please contact the researcher Manel Lemmouchi who will be able to answer your queries, on email: mlemmouchi1@sheffield.ac.uk, address: School of Education, 241 Glossop Road S10 2GW .

Thank you.

Appendix 19: Research Consent Form



Let's be Lonely Together: Co-Constructing Narratives of Loneliness with University Students

Participant Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. If you have any questions, please refer to the information sheet provided or ask the researcher. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep and refer to at any time.

		Ye s	N o
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. (If you will answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
2	I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include the researcher (Manel Lemmouchi) interviewing me and recording the interview with audio equipment.		
3	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. I am aware that there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
4	I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project		
5	I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and accessible only to members of the project team (namely the researcher's doctoral supervisors).		
6	I understand that short extracts from the conversations I have, as part of this project, may be included in any write up or dissemination of the research.		
7	I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs made by the researcher only. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		

8	I understand that the interview transcripts will be disposed of securely following successful completion of the viva (expected date of September 2022) or within 3 years from now, whichever is sooner.		
9	I understand and agree that the quotes will not be destroyed.		
10	I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the researcher should my contact details change		
11	I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 20: Letter of Approval



Downloaded: 21/05/2023
Approved: 30/10/2019

Manel Lemmouchi
Registration number: 180131158
School of Education
Programme: PhD

Dear Manel

PROJECT TITLE: Let's be Lonely Together: Co-Constructing Narratives of Loneliness with University Students
APPLICATION: Reference Number 030978

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 30/10/2019 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 030978 (form submission date: 27/10/2019); (expected project end date: 01/10/2022).
- Participant information sheet 1071065 version 6 (27/10/2019).
- Participant consent form 1071064 version 5 (27/10/2019).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

ED6ETH Edu
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy>
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

