

Stories of Loneliness: Trauma, Resilience and Belonging Among Older LGBTQ+ Adults

Samara Suárez Hernández

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School of Health and Social Care
University of Essex

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Abstract

This thesis explores the lived experiences of loneliness among older—50 years-old and above—LGBTQ+ adults through a qualitative approach. While loneliness is widely recognised as a significant public health concern, existing research has largely relied on quantitative measures that risk reducing complex, subjective experiences to simplified metrics. This study seeks to move beyond such reductionism by centring the narratives and meanings attributed to loneliness by individuals themselves.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 individuals. Participants were recruited via social media, UK charities, snowballing, community venues and newsletter advertisement. A narrative thematic analysis was carried out. The findings portray participants' experiences of loneliness as embedded within narratives of trauma, resilience, and belonging.

Participants described performing façades to navigate heteronormative social environments, often concealing aspects of their identities to ensure safety and social acceptance. These performative acts were linked to experiences of social disconnection, invisibility, and internalised stigma. Systemic oppression, including heteronormativity and the enduring impacts of historical discrimination as well as individual and community resilience, emerged as central to understanding loneliness in this population. Through stories of queer loss and love, and an absence of choice, findings highlight the lasting effects of the HIV/AIDS crisis, social exclusion, and fractured community ties. Importantly, loneliness was not experienced as a static or singular condition but as a dynamic and relational phenomenon shaped by broader socio-cultural contexts. The search for belonging emerged as a key process, with participants forming connections in the absence of role models.

This thesis argues for a reconceptualisation of loneliness that moves beyond binary distinctions and instead recognises its fluid, intersectional, and socially situated nature. By adopting a queer feminist lens and integrating socio-ecological perspectives, the research

contributes to a more nuanced understanding of loneliness and calls for more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches in both research and policy.

Declaration

Declaration I can confirm that this thesis is an original piece of work conducted by the author.

It was completed and submitted as a requirement for the author's Clinical Psychology
Doctorate at the University of Essex. This thesis has not been submitted for any other
academic award.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter is structured to orientate the reader to the phenomenon of loneliness and its different conceptualisations in the literature. This chapter continues by contextualising the contemporary life of older LGBTQ+ adults in the United Kingdom (UK). To provide context for the population examined in this thesis, the term ‘older adult’ is defined and discussed. The chapter concludes with an overview of the theoretical context.

1.2. Loneliness

Loneliness has increasingly been recognised as a pressing public health concern, associated with a range of adverse physical and mental health outcomes. There is currently a rise in loneliness globally with around a third of people affected by this phenomenon (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). While everyone can feel lonely from time to time, frequent feelings of loneliness have been associated with both physical and mental health difficulties. For instance, loneliness has been linked with increased anxiety, sleep difficulties and cardiovascular problems, with people that are lonely becoming ill and dying at a younger age (Maes et al., 2022). Feeling lonely has also been associated with increased risk of depression, cognitive decline and Alzheimer’s disease (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), 2018). These findings highlight the importance of understanding this phenomenon. However, this is not simple task given that loneliness is a culturally silenced and stigmatised phenomenon. In the UK, 30% of participants identified that they would feel embarrassed to share their feelings of loneliness (DCMS, 2018).

The Five-Year Forward View (NHS England, 2016) of mental health in the UK stresses the importance of recognising loneliness particularly for older adults, while recognising this

phenomenon can affect people at any age. On this note, being aged 16 to 24 has been associated with higher risk of loneliness (DCMS, 2018). Alternatively, the recent findings from nine longitudinal studies encompassing 128,118 participants ages 13 to 103 from over 20 countries revealed a partial U-shaped curve in loneliness (Graham et al. 2024). These findings highlight that younger and older populations are both at higher risk of loneliness.

Psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1959) raised awareness of people's difficulty expressing loneliness, with those experiencing loneliness finding it impossible to talk about, while those who have experienced loneliness in the past struggle to describe it. To an extent she argued about human beings' fear of loneliness and high avoidance. Fromm-Reichmann (1959) further argued that this was replicated by scientists with the absence of a definition of this phenomenon. Since then, loneliness has been conceptualised in a range of diverse ways, varying by preferred language, social and cultural narratives. With no consensus on the definition there are known theoretical frameworks. Initially, Clark Moustakas (1961) proposed the view of existential loneliness as default condition of human existence, where the individual is ultimately and forever lonely. This framework has been criticised for being too vague, unclear and contradicting on how from infancy, the human being is attuned to others (Galagher, 2023).

Weiss (1974) introduced the emotional and social frameworks of loneliness. The emotional framework refers to the perceived absence of a significant other (*e.g.* spouse) while the social framework refers to the perceived presence or absence of quality friendships or family connections (Weiss, 1974). Following from these frameworks Dunbar (2014) introduced collective loneliness, referring to an individual's social identity and active network (*e.g.* group, school, team, community). Cacioppo et al. (2015) characterised these frameworks as three 'dimensions': intimate, social and public.

The cognitive framework defines loneliness as a subjective, unwelcomed feeling of lack or loss of companionship, happening when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want. (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). The cognitive definition has been the most used in research, highlighting the perceived discrepancy between the desired and actual social relationships.

However, as Cacioppo et al. (2015) argued these frameworks omit the fact that feeling lonely does not necessarily mean being alone and how one can feel alone in a crowd or in a marriage. While living alone has been found to increase the risk of loneliness, those who live alone may not necessarily feel lonely (Mind, 2019). Being alone can be an enjoyable experience associated with freedom, creativity and spirituality (Long et al., 2003). Additionally, Ost-Mor et al. (2024) introduced the idea of Positive Solitude (Ost-Mor *et al.*, 2024) to explain how people can use their solitude to engage in meaningful activities. Hence, research has highlighted the importance of differentiating loneliness from social isolation and solitude (Wigfield et al., 2022; Cacioppo et al, 2010).

Loneliness refers to the subjective experience and quality of social connections, while social isolation is the objective measure of social contacts (Bauer et al., 2025, Wigfield et al., 2022). The frameworks and dimensions discussed often focus on a quantifiable or operationalisable definitions of loneliness in that they provide a basis for measuring antecedents along with the physical and mental health consequences. This implies an underlying assumption that loneliness has a universally understood meaning that can be captured by quantitative methods.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) has been the most used questionnaire in loneliness research. This unidimensional measure was initially developed for young adults (Maes et al., 2022). Although the UCLA scale is the most used measurement for loneliness in

older adult research, evidence on whether it accurately and consistently captures loneliness in this age group remains limited and inconsistent (Maes et al., 2022). Understanding loneliness remains a complex challenge, particularly when considering marginalised populations whose experiences are shaped by intersecting forms of social inequality. Maes et al. (2022) findings raise the question of whether as researchers we need other forms of capturing loneliness for this population.

As with other quantitative measures of loneliness, the UCLA contains items that do not appear to directly measure loneliness (*e.g.* ‘I am an outgoing person’), nor directly capture the subjective experience of loneliness (Maes et al., 2022). Additionally, the UCLA scale repeatedly positions loneliness as located within the individual (*i.e.* using descriptives: ‘I feel’, ‘I am’) and their access to relationships (*e.g.* ‘There are people I can talk to’). In doing so, it largely omits consideration of broader social structures, and contextual factors (*i.e.* discrimination or exclusionary institutions) that shape opportunities for connection.

More recently, loneliness has been viewed as a highly subjective, idiographic experience with a multidimensional nature. For example, Tanskanen and Anttila (2016) proposed that loneliness is based on individualistic appraisal occurring also in the presence of company and characterised by a lack of meaningful social relationships rather than the magnitude of a person’s social network. Along similar lines, Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2014) emphasise the subjective experience of loneliness, conceptualising this phenomenon as a feeling arising from the lack of meaningful social connections or a sense of belongingness. They further highlight loneliness as a pervasive and distressing phenomenon affecting individuals across various age groups and population. These conceptualisations of loneliness raise questions about what constitutes as meaningful and emphasise the subjective nature of this phenomenon. Along these lines, one of the limitations in loneliness research raised by Graham et al. (2024) is the absence of exploring the quality of relationships.

The frameworks discussed above and the stigmatised view of loneliness suggest that loneliness is not a simple, fixed or straight forward phenomenon. Thus, further research that allows for space to capture subjective experiences of loneliness within different populations is needed. While frameworks are important, in their report about tackling loneliness the DCMS (2018) emphasises how this phenomenon can mean different things to different people. This is in line with, Graham et al.'s (2024) conclusion: 'However, few predictors of changes in loneliness over time were found, suggesting that loneliness is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that requires more nuanced and individualised approaches to understand and intervene' (p.593). Furthermore, the frameworks and definitions of loneliness presented above omit the consideration of how structural regulatory systems (*e.g.* laws, diagnostic classification) can influence feelings of loneliness. This is particularly relevant to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other (LGBTQ+) older adults who navigated historical contexts in which their identities were constructed as mental illness within psychiatric systems and their sexual practices were criminalised and morally stigmatised (Pereira & Banerjee, 2022).

1.3. LGBTQ+

In recent years the umbrella term LGBTQ+ has been used in the literature to capture the experiences of those that do not identify as heterosexual. This language reinforces the assumption that heterosexuality is the socially expected identity, rather than recognising it is numerically the most common one. The LGBTQ+ term encompasses several communities with each having their own experiences and contexts.

'We live in the current moment through the past. To study the presents means necessarily confronting fragments of the past' (Plummer, 2010, p.176). To understand the LGBTQ+ community, it is essential to consider the historical, legal, and mental health contexts

in which their experiences are situated. Given how vast this is, it is important to acknowledge that this thesis does not capture all the context but rather provide some insights. Older adults in the LGBTQ+ community encountered times when their gender identity and sexual orientation were considered mental illnesses and their sexual practices were judged as criminal or vicious (Pereira & Banerjee, 2022). Over two-thirds of today's LGBTQ+ older adults have faced discrimination and victimisation on more than three occasions during their life (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011).

The historical-sociological context in which many older LGBTQ+ adults in the UK lived was characterised by criminalisation, pathologisation, and widespread social stigma. Many individuals from this generation, particularly those born between the 1940s and 1970s, grew up during periods when same-sex relationships were criminalised, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness, and experiences of discrimination, concealment, and family rejection were common. Many also lived through the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, a defining event in LGBTQ+ history that profoundly affected communities through widespread loss, collective grief, heightened stigma, and discrimination.

Although legislative reforms and increasing social acceptance have significantly improved the rights and visibility of LGBTQ+ people in the UK, these historical experiences continue to exert lasting psychological, relational, and community-level influences across the lifespan (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). Therefore, understanding contemporary experiences of loneliness among older LGBTQ+ adults requires consideration of the historical and sociopolitical contexts that have shaped their lives. The following section provides a chronological overview of key historical events and social changes that have influenced the lives of this generation of LGBTQ+ adults.

In UK law, the criminalisation of sexual relationships between men was formalised through Section 11 of the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* (1885), making all homosexual acts illegal, regardless of whether they occurred in public or private. This legal framework was relatively broad with low threshold of evidence such that showing affection between two men could lead to prosecution and a guilty verdict. The legislation applied to all same-sex relationships and was in place until 1967 when the *Sexual Offences Act* (1967) partially decriminalised consensual sexual acts between adult men in private in the UK. Stonewall riots in 1969 and human rights movements in the 1970s reflected the demand for further reforms to the law.

From a mental health perspective, in 1968 the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM II) described homosexuality as a mental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1968). During the late 1960s and the 1970s psychology research focused on understanding the causes and origins of same sex attraction with the purpose of preventing this (Ben Hagai & Zurbruggen, 2022). It was not until 1987 that the category of homosexuality as a mental disorder was removed from the DSM. Meanwhile, in 1992 the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) continued to include the diagnostic category of ‘ego-dystonic sexual orientation’ (World Health Organization, 1992). In this category, the person is not in doubt about his or her sexual preference, however, wishes it were different because of associated psychological and behavioural disorders. Whilst it may be considered unhelpful and stigmatising to classify homosexuality as a mental health disorder (as though sexual orientation is somehow intrinsically disordered), data indicates that LGBTQ+ groups are more likely to experience mental health difficulties. A meta-analysis of 12 UK population health surveys showed that LGBTQ+ participants had twice the likelihood of reporting mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety compared to heterosexual individuals (Semlven et al., 2016). The risk was higher for older non-heterosexual adults

(Semlyen et al., 2016). This meta-analysis pooled a large set of data from the UK population and sheds light on the heightened impact on mental health for LGBTQ+ older adults.

During the 1980s, the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic had a profound impact on the health, wellbeing and social networks of LGBTQ+ people (Kneale et al., 2019). Furthermore, in a homophobic context the impact of the loss of gay men to HIV/AIDS had on the LGBTQ+ community remained largely unrecognised by the wider society (Ryan-Flood, 2024). In the 1980s, older LGBTQ+ adults lived through their communities being reduced by death while also surviving to witness changes (Plummer, 2010). Ongoing homophobia and adverse experiences may have led this demographic to hide their gender identity or sexual orientation. For example, elder LGBTQ+ individuals continued to encounter challenges when accessing healthcare (Hash & Rogers, 2013). The legacy of the HIV/AIDS crisis remains particularly significant, especially for gay men who experienced profound loss, stigma, and community disruption. These historical experiences continue to shape contemporary understandings of identity, relationships, and loneliness.

In educational settings ‘the promotion of homosexuality’ was banned following the passing into law of Section 28 of *the Local Government Act* (1988). This led to the prohibiting of any favourable representations of LGBTQ+ experiences or role models from state education in the UK. For today’s LGBTQ+ older adults, who would have lived through this period, the implementation of Section 28 may have reawakened feelings of shame and invisibility rooted in earlier life experiences. The early 2000s brought major legal milestones for the LGBTQ+ community. *The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations* (2003) outlawed homophobic discrimination in the workplace. Other legal milestones were *The Civil Partnership Act* (2004), *Equality Act* (2010) and *Same-Sex Marriage Act* (2013) indicating a more progressive approach to LGBTQ+ rights in the UK.

Progress towards equity is not necessarily always linear. For instance, in December 2023, the Department for Education released draft guidance on *Gender Questioning Children*, which limits discussions around gender identity in schools. Similarly, recent UK supreme court decision in 2025 on defining terms in the Equality Act 2010, concluded that the legal definition of women for the purposes of this law refers to biological sex at birth. This decision means that transgender women, even those with Gender Recognition Certificates (GRCs), may not be legally recognised as women in single-sex spaces and services.

LGBTQ+ individuals have been found to have poorer overall experiences of health services and worse health outcomes (NHS England, 2025). It was only recently and for the first time, in July 2025, that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care commissioned NHS England to conduct LGBTQ+ health evidence review (NHS England, 2025). The purpose of the review is to deepen understanding of the healthcare needs of LGBTQ+ people, offer expert analysis and recommendations, and establish a basis for future work aimed at addressing health inequalities and inequities. The present cannot be fully understood without considering the past and the historical contexts that have shaped it (Plummer, 2010). The generations of older LGBTQ+ adults have lived through many changes and milestones, making their life stories particularly valuable when understanding experiences of loneliness.

1.4 Older Adults

The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over (WHO, 2022). This raises concerns particularly in Western countries where ‘cultures obsessed with youth’ persist and older people often report feeling irrelevant, invisible and ignored (Brennan, 2004; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022).

The World Health Organisation defines older age as individuals aged 60 and over (WHO, 2022). Initially, this was the age threshold for this research. However, it was changed

to 50. This decision was made in the basis of how LGBTQ+ individuals often experience age-related vulnerabilities earlier due to minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, from birth to the age of 12 those older adults now in their 50s grew up in a time when the DSM classified homosexuality as a sexual orientation disturbance. Hence, this research aimed to account for how this diagnostic classification may have influenced experiences of loneliness. In this vein, previous systematic reviews on LGBTQ+ aging indicated a lower minimum age of 50 years (Chen et al., 2020).

Besides chronic conditions like cancer, arthritis or hypertension, older people also experience psychological problems (Brennan, 2004). For instance, according to the Five-Year Forward View of Mental Health approximately 20% of older adults living in the community, and 40% of those residing in care homes, experience depression (NHS England, 2016). More recently, Wright et al. (2024) used a large and nationally representative sample of UK older adults and found that loneliness might also contribute to the increased risk of depressive symptoms in sexual minorities when compared with their heterosexual counterparts. These analyses rely on quantitative instruments to measure loneliness focusing on frequency without allowing space for those individuals to share the complexity of their subjective experiences and expand on the perceived quality of relationships. This research did not account for experiences of discrimination when exploring loneliness and depression. Moreover, the measures used in Wright et al. (2024) asked about sexual behaviours rather than individuals' attraction. This research also focused on binary expression of gender excluding those individuals that identify as trans or non-binary. Large sets of data such as those used for population research and meta-analysis are important to identify populations in need. However, further research is needed to explore the experiences of those populations, to ensure policy is also informed by lived experiences that account for context, meaning and nuance as well as broader population-based overviews.

Aging theories and the UK health care system have been criticised for failing to recognise the differences and diversity among older adults (Brennan 2004; Cronin et al., 2011). Cronin et al. (2011) argued that health and social care providers in the UK are often ‘sexuality blind’ treating all older age individuals the same. In this vein, Brennan (2004) recommended a holistic approach when supporting older adults moving away from common tendencies of generalising and neglecting the diversity of experiences. Within the idea of a holistic approach lies the importance of older adults’ psychosocial histories providing space for their life story which in turn can reduce feelings of invisibility (Brennan, 2004).

The relevance of capturing psychosocial histories can be further understood through Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory (Erikson, 1950, 1968), which proposes that development continues across the lifespan through eight interconnected psychosocial stages. Unlike theories that focus primarily on childhood, Erikson argued that development is a lifelong process in which earlier experiences continue to shape later identity, relationships and wellbeing, while recognising individuals' ongoing capacity for growth and adaptation. The theory adopts a lifespan perspective to understand the development of identity, intimacy, generativity and ego integrity (Maree, 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant to older adulthood, where individuals reflect on their lives, relationships and sense of meaning. Although Erikson's theory was not developed specifically for LGBTQ+ populations, it offers a useful framework for understanding how developmental tasks may be shaped by broader historical, cultural and social contexts. For LGBTQ+ older adults, experiences of criminalisation, discrimination and social exclusion may have influenced opportunities to develop identity, intimacy and generativity across the life course, with implications for experiences of loneliness.

This idea of a holistic and person-centred approach that provides space for psychosocial histories is further reinforced when exploring loneliness, first, given the inconsistent and

limited evidence of reliability of the UCLA scale for this age (Maes et al., 2022). Second, given the recent definitions that emphasise the subjective, idiographic and multidimensional nature of loneliness (Tanskanen & Anttila 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo 2014). Third, given the developmental nature of loneliness varying by life stage across cultural and historical contexts (Graham et al. 2024). Last, older LGBTQ+ encountered times when their sexual practices were criminalised and when their gender identity and sexual orientation were classified as mental disorders (Pereira & Banerjee, 2022). The importance of psychosocial histories is also in line with Plummer (2010) argument that when studying sexuality, the relevance of generations needs to be acknowledged. He argued the stories passed down are used to bond the generations together. Hence, when aiming to understand the LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences of loneliness a holistic, person-centred and generational approach are important.

1.5 Theoretical Context

Besides the outlined theoretical frameworks on loneliness this research is informed by the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), the Socio-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Queer Theory and Psychology (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022) and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

Prejudice and discrimination related to low socio-economic status, racism, sexism and homophobia are conceptualised as social stressors that are expected to have a significant impact stigmatised population (Meyer, 2003). Researchers have used the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 1995) to explain the higher prevalence of mental health problems among stigmatised minority groups (*e.g.* LGBTQ+ individuals) because prejudice, discrimination and stigma create stressful social environments. Social stress is often attributed to the mismatch or disharmony between the individual and their experience of society (Meyer, 2003). This model is informed by various sociological and social psychological theories. Minority stress is

conceptualised as unique, chronic and socially based (Meyer, 2003). It is unique in terms of the adaptation effort being larger compared to those not belonging to minority populations and additive to other general stressors; chronic as in having stable underlying social and cultural structures; socially based as in stemming from social process, institutions and structures beyond the individual.

This model captures the adverse consequences of coping with a minoritised identity within the continuum of distal and proximal stressors. Distal stressors include objective events and conditions, prejudicial conflicts while proximal stressors encompass individual responses and appraisals to these external stressors. For instance, discrimination and vigilance of feared possible negative events are classified as more distal along the continuum; while stigma threat, internalised homophobia and concealment of one's sexual orientation would be proximal stressors. Paradoxically one would conceal sexual orientations or gender identity to protect oneself, out of guilt or shame resulting in prominent levels of stress (Meyer, 2003). Besides leading to suppressed emotion, concealment also prevents from affiliating with others further limiting the possibility of group solidarity and cohesiveness that have been explored as resilient factors and coping mechanisms for minority populations (Meyer, 2003). Suffering discrimination can lead to internalising the experience and wanting to avoid further prejudicial encounters. Those who decide to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity usually isolate themselves, struggle to form relationships and connect with others from the LGBTQ+ community (Elmer et al., 2022).

The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) concludes that there is compelling evidence about there being a higher prevalence of mental disorders for LGBTQ+ individuals. This paper also alludes to the importance of both structural and individual sources of distress. A debate is started around perceiving LGBTQ+ individuals as victims of oppression and at the same time actors of resilience. This framework is not without limitations. Attributing LGBTQ+ loneliness

uniquely to holding a minoritised identity can limit the understanding of the broader social conditions that contribute to experiences of loneliness (Bauer et al., 2025). Additionally, Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen (2022) argued how the narrative of sexually minority group encourages an othering and oversimplifies all LGBTQ+ groups under one broad category of sexual minority. The model has been further criticised for its deficit-based approach without sufficient recognition for the positive outcomes and resilience among the LGBTQ+ population (Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2014). While the Minority Stress Model is a helpful theoretical framework it poses the risk of limiting the understanding of broader social conditions, othering, oversimplifying and prioritising deficits.

Even though, older LGBTQ+ adults have lived through systemic oppression and traumatic experiences many have been able to transform their negative experiences in a positive way. To explain this phenomenon this research will use the term ‘Adversity-Activated Development’ (AAD) introduced by Papadopoulos (2007). AAD refers to the positive developments that occurs as a result of being exposed to adversity. There are accounts of older LGBTQ+ individuals who found meaning in their suffering and were able to transform their negative experiences. Such accounts are not just a reflection of the strength and resilience of this community, but they also challenge the predominant discourse of viewing the LGBTQ+ population from a deficit approach, along with the incline to medicalise and pathologise human suffering. Therefore, this research will aim to capture trauma and resilience as well as AAD.

The Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) further extends from the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) by situating individual experiences within a multilayered context, acknowledging that stress and adaptation emerge through ongoing, bidirectional processes rather than fixed categories. An advantage of the SEM is that it integrates insights from psychology and ecology to conceptualise human experience as being shaped by multiple, interacting levels of influence. The present study adopts the interpretation of this model

presented in the recent systematic review on LGBTQ+ adults and loneliness by Bauer et al. (2025). In their work, the authors used the SEM to conceptualise individual wellbeing and loneliness as interconnected with relationships, communities, and broader social systems.

This view encourages the consideration of how relational; community and societal factors interact to shape subjective experiences of connection and loneliness. The relational level highlights the importance of close interpersonal relationships, such as family, friends, and romantic partners, which may be sources of both support and vulnerability. The community level draws attention to the role of social participation, access to inclusive spaces, and a sense of belonging within LGBTQ+ and local networks. Finally, the societal level situates these experiences within broader cultural and structural contexts, including social norms, discrimination, and policy frameworks that can either protect against or exacerbate loneliness. Bauer et al. (2025) stress the importance of examining macrosystems, as these influence the quality of social connections and, consequently, experiences of loneliness. This is particularly relevant to older adults in the LGBTQ+ community who grew-up in a time of systemic oppression (Pereira & Banerjee, 2022)

Using the SEM as a guiding theoretical framework allows research to move beyond an individualised and relational understanding of loneliness (Weiss, 1974; Dunbar, 2014; Perlman & Peplau, 1982) positioning it instead as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by intersecting social and environmental factors. This perspective supports a more nuanced exploration of how older LGBTQ+ adults experience loneliness, and how interventions might address these influences across multiple levels of the social ecology. However, it is not without limitations. In Bauer et al.'s (2025) scoping review the reviewed papers focus on two main types of social experiences—positive and negative—with the review conceptualising protective versus risk factors of loneliness. Hence, mirroring broader macrosystemic patterns that reduce social experiences to binary framing (*e.g.* positive/negative, right/wrong) and thus

overlooking the nuanced, meaning and contextual nature of individual experiences. This thesis argues that reducing experiences to binary opposites perpetuates dominant societal narratives that miss out on the contextualised understanding of experience. For instance, Bauer et al.'s (2025) shed light on a limitation of their research around the absence of depth about how loss and culture impact experiences of loneliness.

While the SEM provides a useful framework for understanding how individual, relational, community, and structural factors contribute to experiences of loneliness, an intersectional perspective further considers how these influences are shaped by individuals' multiple and interconnected social positions. The intersectionality framework, proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), argues that social identities are shaped through interconnected systems of power, oppression, and privilege rather than existing as separate or independent categories. Within psychology, intersectionality has increasingly been recognised as an important framework for understanding how multiple and interconnected social identities shape psychological experiences and health outcomes. Rather than viewing identities as separate categories, intersectionality highlights how social positions are mutually constructed within broader systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Shields, 2008).

Bowleg (2012) argued that psychological and health research examining inequality through a single identity category risk overlooking the complexity of individuals' lived experiences and the ways in which multiple forms of marginalisation interact to influence wellbeing. Furthermore, Abrams et al. (2020) highlight the relevance of intersectionality for qualitative research, arguing that this framework can guide researchers throughout the research process, including study conceptualisation, recruitment, data collection, and analysis. By attending to the dynamic and interconnected nature of identity, intersectional approaches allow researchers to develop more nuanced understandings of psychological experiences among oppressed populations. Therefore, the intersectionality framework provides a valuable lens for

exploring how intersecting social positions influence experiences of loneliness among older LGBTQ+ adults. In line with the intersectionality framework from a queer theory and psychology perspective, sexuality is historically constructed, fluid and can change as life context changes (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022). Queer and Intersectionality perspectives have been used in psychology research to understand sexuality from fluid, person-specific and context-dependent perspectives (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

The present research draws on Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) to explore the psychological impacts of stigma and discrimination, while adopting AAD insights (Papadopoulos, 2007) to move beyond deficit-based understandings and recognise the potential for new strengths and transformations to emerge through experiences of adversity. This research applied the SEM (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to understand loneliness within the multiple levels of relational, community and structural influences (Bauer et al., 2025). This study incorporated insights from queer theory and psychology (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022) about how sexuality is historically constructed and further draws on insights from intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to explore ways in which multiple social identities and contextual factors interact.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview

To provide an overview of the existing research, this chapter presents a meta-ethnography that explores what qualitative research provides about the subjective experiences of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults. This entails an introduction, methods, results and discussion leading onto the rationale for the current research.

2.2. Introduction

The phenomenon of loneliness is one of particular importance given the major public health concern and the absence of consensus with the definition. It is particularly relevant to older adults that identify as LGBTQ+ given the raise in aging population and the legal, political and social context that this population grew-up in.

A review of the literature on loneliness, older age and the LGBTQ+ communities was published by Fish and Weis (2019) suggesting that not having a partner, living alone and not having children increased risk of loneliness. This review also emphasised the difficulties that this cohort may experience in building relationships. Even though, this publication offered a great insight into the literature only 8.04% of the data were drawn from LGBTQ+ communities leading to potential overshadowing of their experiences. This review included both quantitative and qualitative data that often lead to an oversimplification of the qualitative insights. Fish and Weis (2019) focus on the individual and relational consequences of loneliness, failing to mention the role of macrosystems including social norms, discrimination and policy frameworks (Bauer et al., 2025). Moreover, the review identified objectively measurable variables (*i.e.* not having a partner, living alone, not having children) rather than exploring the quality of relationships.

In this vein, research conducted in the UK consistently identifies certain individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, marital status, living arrangements, physical and mental health status, ethnicity, and socioeconomic position) as being associated with increased risk of loneliness (DCMS, 2018). Recently, Victor and Rippon (2023) criticised how loneliness disparities often focus on isolated individual characteristics instead of adopting an intersectional perspective that accounts for multiplicity of identities, and how these intersect to shape social health outcomes. Furthermore, existing research is mostly cross-sectional when a life-course approach has been identified as important to understand loneliness in later life (Victor & Rippon, 2023). Finally, research has focused on individual level factors without sufficiently accounting for temporal influences and broader structural determinants (Victor & Rippon, 2023).

Quantitative research is highly valued by established bodies that advise on research funding, such as the National Research Council, for their ability to produce cause-and-effect insights and answer questions about what works (Polkinghorne, 2007). In the context of this thesis, quantitative research has insights into loneliness among LGBTQ+ older adults, identifying risk and protective factors. However, this research approach limits the possibility of the lived experiences of this community being heard and understood. This is particularly relevant when seeking to understand the subjective experience of loneliness and the quality of relationships for the elder LGBTQ+ population.

Whilst Fish and Weis (2019) and the findings discussed in the introduction chapter help to highlight the prejudicial impact in physical and mental health for older adults that identify as part of the LGBTQ community, research that aims to create a space for the experiences of this community is lacking. There are published reviews on LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences on a range of different areas such as palliative care, housing, sexual health, aging and COVID-19. However, a review synthesising solely qualitative studies that capture the experiences,

perspectives and voices of LGBTQ+ older adult community aiming to provide an understanding of loneliness has not been published. The need for this review is in line with recent research and conceptualisations of loneliness that move away from operationalisable and quantifiable definitions shifting the focus to the more nuanced, subjective and idiographic elements of this phenomenon that can explore the multidimensional nature and the quality of relationships rather than the quantity (Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo 2014).

Therefore, this literature review aimed to review qualitative research to aid understanding on the subjective phenomenon of loneliness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer aged 50 and over. The research question proposed was:

What does the literature say about the subjective experiences of loneliness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer adults aged 50 and older?

The findings from this review can help address gaps in the literature, inform further research and provide a framework for understanding loneliness. This in turn could help the development of recommendations for healthcare providers and policy makers, highlighting the specific considerations that may be necessary to understand and support older (50+) LGBTQ+ individuals during their later years.

2.3 Methods

Design

Building on the method developed by Noblit and Hare (1988) a meta-ethnographic approach was applied to synthesise the research articles. The main objective of this approach is to synthesise interpretive research providing a new interpretation rather than a simple aggregation of data. The choice of writing a meta-ethnography was based on a range of factors. First, this approach can synthesise a range of qualitative studies focusing on a phenomenon.

Second, the aim of this review is developing a new conceptual understanding that goes beyond Bauer et al.'s (2025) review on protective versus risk factors of loneliness.

Search Strategy

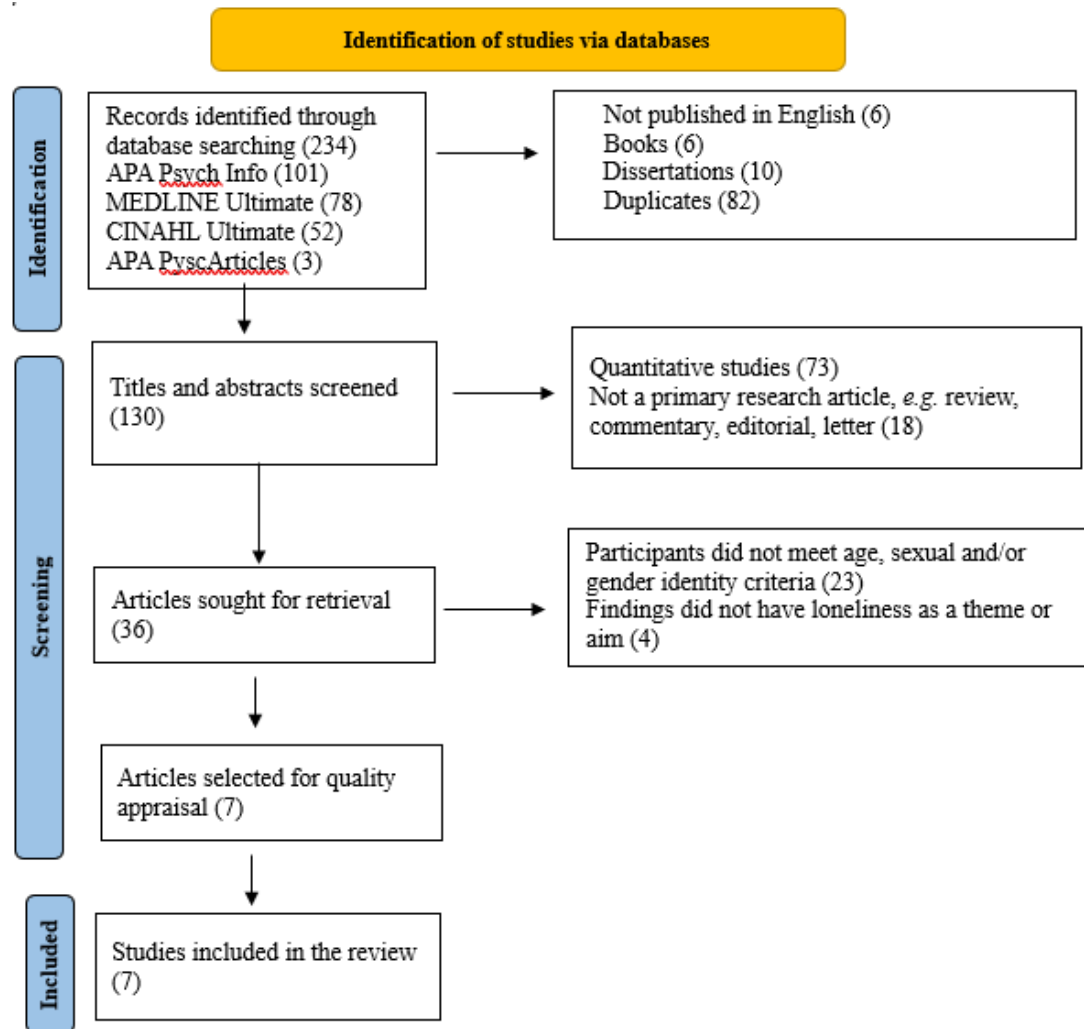
Four electronic databases were searched: APA PsycINFO, CINAHL Ultimate, MEDLINE Ultimate and APA PsycArticles. The search was conducted in September 2025 with no limitation of year of publication. Synonyms used in the literature for 'LGBTQ+', 'Older Adults' and 'Loneliness' were identified with the aid of ChatGPT, an Artificial Intelligence tool. Refer to Table 1 for a display of the search terms and how they were combined.

Loneliness is the perceived distressing feeling, whilst social isolation can be objectively measured (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Wigfield et al., 2022). This is exemplified in loneliness frameworks (Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014) that acknowledge the emotional dimension of loneliness whereby one can be surrounded by people physically but still feel lonely and be alone yet not feel lonely. Additionally, the idea of Positive Solitude (Ost-Mor et al., 2024) identifies that people can be alone yet not experience loneliness and use their solitude to engage in meaningful activities. While solitude and loneliness are sometimes used interchangeably, they have different meanings (Ost-Mor et al., 2024). Solitude has been associated with the glory of aloneness (*e.g.* daydreaming, self-reflection) and loneliness has been characterised by the pain of aloneness (Rokach, 2025). Thus, this review intentionally focused on the phenomenon of loneliness excluding the terms social isolation and solitude.

Consultations with a librarian at the University of Essex were held to clarify doubts and strengthen the search strategy. The initial database search identified a total of 234 records. These were exported to Zotero, an open-source reference management software. Refer to Figure 1 to view the PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2020) illustrating the search process.

Table 1*Search Terms*

Search ID#	Search Terms
S4	S1 AND S2 AND S3
S3	lonel* OR "alone in a crowd" OR "loneliness and social connectedness" OR "loneliness and mental health" OR "loneliness and well-being" OR "loneliness and depression" OR "loneliness and aging" OR "loneliness and social support" OR "loneliness and subjective well-being" OR "loneliness and social relationships" OR "loneliness and quality of life"
S2	"older adult*" OR "senior citizen*" OR elder* OR "senior population*" OR "aged individual*" OR "geriatric population*" OR "aging population*" OR "golden ager*" OR "older people" OR "elderly population*" OR "senior communit*" OR "older generation*" OR "aging adult*" OR retiree* OR senior* OR "mature adult*" OR "gerontological subject*" OR "third ager*" OR pensioner* OR "later life" OR "late life" OR "older cohort*" OR "aged 50 and over" OR "50 years and older"
S1	LGBT* OR LGBTQIA* OR "queer communit*" OR "sexual and gender minorit*" OR "gender and sexual diversit*" OR "rainbow communit*" OR lesbian* OR gay OR "gay men" OR homosexual* OR bisexual* OR queer OR transgender OR trans OR "transgender individual*" OR "trans person*" OR "gender diverse"

Figure 1*PRISMA Flowchart*

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if:

- a. Peer-reviewed.
- b. Written in English.
- c. Sample of participants:
 - a. All participants of the study had to self-identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.
 - b. Aged 50 and above.
- d. Qualitative or Mixed Methods. In line with the review question these are the best approaches to obtain first-hand, subjective experiences given by participants, which quantitative methodology would not capture.
- e. Studies where the aim or at least one theme related to loneliness in the findings.

Studies were excluded if:

- a. Not peer-reviewed published research.
- b. Not in English.
- c. Non-LGBTQ+ samples or mixed LGBTQ+/non-LGBTQ+ samples.
- d. Sample of participants was younger than 50.
- e. Quantitative Methodology.
- f. Studies did not have an aim or at least a theme related to loneliness.

Screening Procedure and Study Characteristics

The initial database search displayed a total of 234 records. Following duplicate removal 130 records were screened for suitability. This involved reading the titles and abstracts to determine their relevance and eligibility. Quantitative research was not included in this review as the aim was to move beyond unidimensional, quantifiable and operationalisable definitions

of loneliness and align with more recent conceptualisations that account for the subjective, idiographic and multidimensional nature of this phenomenon with an interest on experience and the perceived quality of relationships instead of the magnitude (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Wigfield et al., 2022). This decision was also made given how quantitative research mainly measures loneliness with the UCLA scale and the evidence of reliability is inconsistent and limited for this age group (Maes et al., 2022). Previous reviews (Fish & Weiss, 2019) have included quantitative and qualitative research, which have led to the oversimplification of the subtle nuances within participants' experiences. The quantitative papers excluded summed a total of 73 (see PRISMA).

For qualitative synthesis there is no need to locate every available study but rather achieve a maximum variability resulting in a set of heterogenous studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The study characteristics (see Table 2) show that the papers are heterogenous in relation to context and geographical location. No study conducted in the UK was found in this search of the literature. The seven papers used qualitative methodology and were selected because they reported LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences. In terms of data collection some variability was present as of the seven studies three used interviews, two used focus groups and one of the papers used both. The resulting paper used a technological form of data collection through open ended questions in an online questionnaire. Variability was limited regarding the type of analysis given how most papers used thematic analysis.

Study sample sizes ranged from 5-124 participants. Overall, experiences were gathered from 323 older adults. The age range was from 47 to 89 with most studies reporting experiences from those in their 50s-70s and fewer participants in their 80s. This shows a gap in the literature for those in the oldest age bracket. While two of the studies do not share data on culture and ethnic background, from the papers that do we can conclude that the literature features predominantly White and Western participants. Except for Coleman (2018) that explores

African American experiences there is a gap in this review of non-western and racialised participants. Only two studies captured the views of transgender individuals with major representation of cisgender gay men and some experiences of lesbian and bisexual identities. The experiences of non-binary older adults were absent. Hence, the findings of these reviews are not representative or generalisable of the LGBTQ+ community.

Quality Appraisal

The CASP qualitative studies checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2023) was applied to assess and compare the quality of articles. Each article was appraised against the 10 questions within the CASP qualitative tool (see Table 3). For the purpose of this review the tool was not used to discard articles but rather to develop awareness around the strengths and limitations of each paper. In addition, this quality appraisal was also used to shed light on important criteria worth considering when conducting future research. The CASP tool does not come without its own strengths and limitations. For instance, this tool has been found helpful when highlighting the information needed in qualitative research eliciting transparency in how a study is reported (Long et al., 2020). At the same time, it produces less consistent outcomes between reviewers and is limited at judging aspects such as interpretation, evaluation or theoretical quality (Long et al., 2020).

There is an ongoing debate in the literature on whether to include mixed-methods papers when synthesising qualitative research. In comparison to standalone qualitative research mixed-method papers are less explicit at describing the research process and qualitative data analysis procedures (Atkins et al., 2012). In deciding whether to include papers using mixed method conducted by Czaja et al. (2015) and Pereira *et al.* (2021) it was important to consider those aspects along with the aim of the studies. Both papers' aims appeared in line with qualitative methodology. Czaja et al. (2015) and Pereira et al. (2021) also provided a thorough

description of their research process and qualitative data analysis. While some mixed-methods studies are heavily quantitative, these two papers placed great emphasis on qualitative data providing a thorough exploration of participants subjective experiences. Hence, both being in line with research question of this review.

Overall, the seven papers were methodologically rigorous and had a range of strengths including stating the aims, justifying qualitative research methodology, being transparent around data collection, providing thorough data analysis and giving a clear statement of the value. There were no studies that met all 10 items of the CASP tool. All seven studies could have been strengthened by elaborating on items 6 and 7 respectively: (6) Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered? (7) Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

The seven studies established analytical credibility by discussing the inter-coder reliability in data analysis. This is a strength and at the same time this convergence credibility can lead researchers to moderate their role in the interpretation of the data (Mc Allum et al., 2019). Six out of the seven articles use thematic analysis, interpretative qualitative research that embraces the view of humans creating their understanding of the world together through the way they interact and communicate with each other (Mc Allum et al., 2019). Two of the studies report the professional identities of the researchers (Ifrah et al., 2024, Hurd & Li., 2024). However, studies do not discuss the researcher-participant relationship or provide statements of reflexivity. Therefore, the studies do not include a section where the researchers critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence at distinct stages of the process. This is particularly crucial in enhancing the rigour of qualitative research to help account for potential bias or researcher influence. It is further relevant when using interpretive qualitative research to actively engage in dilemmas around subjectivity, impact, interaction and researcher positionality on data collection and analyses (Jamie & Rathbone, 2022). The absence of

detailed discussion regarding the researcher–participant relationship and reflexivity across the seven articles raised questions about how interpretations were developed and the extent to that the researcher-maintained awareness, sensitivity and competence about social differences. To address this, Burnham (2012) has developed the mnemonic Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality). By including reflections about visible and less visible aspects of identity researchers may have enhanced transparency and credibility about how their own perspectives shaped the research process and findings.

All papers mention both ethical approval and informed consent being obtained. However, they omit discussion around ethical issues raised by the study and how these were managed. Studies' rigour and credibility could have been further enhanced by researchers providing account on this area.

Three of the papers present limited information about recruitment strategy, research design and data analysis. The paper by Armengol and Varena-Manograsso (2022) has the strength of incorporating the role of cinema and culture to older gay man narratives however, there is limited information around recruitment strategy making it unclear of how and why the study included the five participants selected. On examining further limitations of the research papers Adan et al. (2021) did not share an explanation for their chosen research design. Not providing a justification for the choice of semi-structured interviews allows readers to consider how other methods of data collection such as focus groups could have also been in line with the aim of the study around identifying the needs of the older transgender community. The study by Czaja et al. (2015) elaborates on the process of data analysis, but it does not explicitly name the type of analysis being used. It can be inferred from their description of the analysis that a thematic analysis methodology was applied, but this is unclear. Describing the analysis is essential to enhance aspects such as rigor, transparency and replicability.

Synthesis of Findings

The objective of synthesizing qualitative research is ‘going beyond the content of the original studies’ (Thomas & Harden, 2008, p.3). The aim is not to offer a single truth or a summary of the findings but rather provide a new dialogue. Three distinct stages can capture the synthesis of the findings. These stages are not linear but rather involve some overlap. The plan was to extract and synthesise study findings according to the review question: What does the literature say about the subjective experience of loneliness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer adults aged 50 and older? It became apparent that only one study addressed this question directly. Therefore, the researcher read the introduction, findings and discussion to identify what the author of each study had interpreted about loneliness from the subjective experiences of participants. These interpretations included metaphors, phrases and key issues specifically about loneliness. For instance, when discussing the pain participants experienced from loneliness Coleman (2018) referred to a range of metaphors including the Trojan Horse, emotional void and the notion of being trapped with nowhere to return.

The next stage referred to by Noblit and Hare (1988) as ‘translating the studies’ involved identifying similarities, relationships (reciprocal translation) and contradictions, inconsistencies (refutational translation). This stage of the meta-ethnography reflected what Bondas (2025) described as being ‘in limbo in the jungle of misguided paths’ (p.1). It involved reading, re-reading and visually mapping out the relationships and inconsistencies between the papers. At this stage it was also important to refer to the characteristics of each study displayed in Table 2.

In the meta-ethnographic approach, there is an emphasises for the preservation of meaning. Hence, the second order constructs are those interpretations and explanations from the authors of the original studies (Britten et al., 2002). It became apparent that the relationship

between papers appeared reciprocal, even when specific concepts were not identified in a particular paper. From this synthesis the researcher then constructed third order constructs: The Vast Collective Ocean of Cultural and Social Structures, Relational Currents and The Individual as the Boat. These were obtained through combining the similarities across the papers to provide a new synthesised understanding. See Table 4 for an overview of second and third order constructs. The third order constructs were developed using insights from the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), and the theoretical perspective of the SEM (Bauer et al., 2025; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). As the last step a visual diagram was created to connect the authors interpretations to the research question. This was done with the objective of developing a line of argument (see Figure 2) that captured and provided a new conceptual understanding of loneliness through a visual framework.

Table 2*Study Characteristics*

Study	Sample	Data Collection	Analysis	Context
Ifrah et al. (2024)	N= 80, Age= 47 to 82, Ethnicity= NA Gender Identity= Cisgender male, Sexual orientation=: gay and bisexual	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic Analysis	Needs From Healthcare Services in Israel
Hurd and Li (2024)	N= 30, Age= 65 to 83, Cultural- ethnic identity =: American (2), English Canadian (10), French Canadian (2), Easter European (1), Western European (10), Jewish (1), multi-ethnicity (4). Gender Identity: Female cisgender (10), Female Transgender (5), Male cisgender (14), Male Transgender (1) Sexual Orientation: Gay (14), Lesbian (10), Bisexual (2), Asexual (1), Pansexual (2), Heterosexual (1)	Interviews	Thematic Analysis	Canadian Adults Perceptions and Experiences of Aging
Czaja et al. (2015)	N= 124 Age= 50 to 89, Ethnicity= Non-Hispanic White (88), Non-Hispanic Black (3), Hispanic (24), Other (5), Gender Identity= Male (92), Female (32), Sexual orientation= Gay (92), Lesbian (32),	Questionnaires Focus groups	Thematic Analysis	Concerns about Aging and Caregiving. South Florida
Pereira et al. (2021)	N= 35, Age= 60-77, Ethnicity= n/a, Gender= Male (35), Sexual orientation: Gay (24), Bisexual (11)	Survey with sociodemographic questions. Open-ended questions in online questionnaires	Thematic Analysis	Loneliness Perceptions. Portugal.

Study	Sample	Data Collection	Analysis	Context
Armengol and Varena-Manograsso (2022)	N= 5, Age= 62 to 68, Ethnicity= NA ", Gender Identity= Cisgender male (4), Sexual orientation=: gay (3), bisexual (3), Birthplace= Spain (3), Peru (1), Cuba (1)	Focus Groups Individual Interviews with a narrative focus	Thematic Analysis	Narrative (De)construction of older gay men in contemporary Spanish culture and cinema
Coleman (2018)	N= 30, Age= 50 to 75, Cultural- ethnic identity = African American (30) Gender Identity: Men (30) Sexual Orientation: men who have sex with men (MSM, 30)	Focus Groups	Content Analysis	Physical and Psychological Abuse among Seropositive African American MSM
Adan et al. (2021)	N= 19, Age= 64-83, Ethnicity= White (19), Gender identity = Transgender women (10), Transgender men (9) Gender attracted to = Male (2), Female (9), Both (6), Neither (1), All (1)	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic Analysis	Transgender Elders Perspectives on Aging. New York

Table 3*CASP Quality Appraisal*

Authors	Aims	Qualitative Methodology	Research Design	Recruitment Strategy	Data Collection	Relationship	Ethical Issues	Data Analysis	Findings	Value
Ifrah et al. (2024)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	?	✓	✓	✓
Hurd and Li (2024)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	?	✓	✓	✓
Czaja et al. (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	?	?	✓	✓
Pereira et al. (2021)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	?	✓	✓	✓
Armengol and Varena- Manograsso (2022)	✓	✓	✓	?	✓	x	?	✓	✓	✓
Coleman (2018)	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	x	?	✓	✓	✓
Adan et al. (2021)	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	x	?	✓	✓	✓

Table 4*Second and Third Order Constructs*

Second Order Constructs	Third Order Constructs
Hesitancy in connecting with trans community (Adan et al., 2021) Productive capacity imposed by society. Structural isolation intersects with class, Franco regimen (Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022). Lack of support systems in place for LGBTQ older adults. Intersected pathway to health embedded in cultural context determined by institutionalised practice (Hurd and Li, 2024). Deprivation from cultural, social and legal circumstances. Socio-cultural context of Israel value of parenthood. Little trust in health care system (Ifrah et al., 2024). Discrimination, ageism including in LGBT communities and lack of support of society at large (Pereira et al., 2021).	The Vast Collective Ocean of Cultural and Social Structures
Estrangement from spouse and family. Increased difficulty in finding romantic partners decreased likelihood of having children, limiting source of interpersonal support. Strong sentiment of community engagement, activism (Adan et al., 2021). Respond to social exclusion. Need for active involvement and create network of solidarity. Respond to social exclusion led to create support network and develop social agency (Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022). No one else to love me. Need for intimacy. Physical and psychological abuse that filled emotional void (Coleman, 2018). Not having family support. Fear about partner loss. Hispanic no concern- family oriented. Enhance social networks and social engagement vulnerable (Czaja et al., 2016). Familial rejection. The loss of friends and family. Importance of family of choice (Hurd & Li, 2024). Deprivation due to absence of nuclear family. Absence of romantic relationships and children (Ifrah et al., 2024). Not possible for relationships to last long, obstacles and anticipation of rejection. Difficulty making friends. Stable relationships making a difference. Sexual needs, spaces of invisibility (Pereira et al., 2021).	Relational Currents
Loneliness exacerbated by transgender identity. Detrimental effect on mental health (Adan et al., 2021). Self-isolation, retirement and own sense of loss (Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022). Pain from loneliness. Depth of loneliness needing to be filled. Like being trapped with no where to return (Coleman, 2018). Fear of loneliness and being alone. Loss of independence and being vulnerable (Czaja et al., 2016). Health – low energy, mobility and cognitive decline. Threat to emotional and mental wellbeing (Hurd & Li, 2024). Illness, depressed, physical health, decreased physical activity (Ifrah et al, 2024) Link of lonely and depressed. Cope with physical activity. Pride in identity whereas loneliness to being in the closet shut down aspects of identity, generating congruence (Pereira et al., 2021).	The Individual as the Boat

2.4 Results

The reciprocal synthesis produced three third order constructs giving an interpretative explanation of the phenomenon of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults aged 50 and over. The third order constructs are: The Vast Collective Ocean of Cultural and Social Structures, Relational Currents, and the Individual as the Boat. These constructs use the symbolism of the ocean, water currents and a boat to represent the multidimensional nature of loneliness specific to this population. The results address the criticism around the absence of temporal influences and broader structural determinants when understanding loneliness for the LGBTQ+ community (Victor & Rippon, 2023).

The Vast Collective Ocean of Cultural and Social Structures

In understanding loneliness, the alienation from social structures, norms and institutions is stressed as important in the included studies. The symbolism of the ocean was used to reflect the vast dimensions of sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in the different geographical locations. While three of the research papers were very explicit about how loneliness intersected with the political, social and cultural context (Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024) others mentioned the role of institutions through hesitancy of connecting with community (Adan et al., 202) and a broader identification of discrimination and ageism (Pereira et al., 2021).

From the theoretical context of the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) many of the instances of abuse experienced by the LGBTQ+ population are sanctioned by governments and societies through formal mechanisms. For instance, discriminatory laws like relegating homosexuals from the labour market in Spain (Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022) or informal mechanisms, including prejudice like the social implication of not having children in

Israel (Ifrah *et al.*, 2024). These influenced experiences of loneliness and limited the possibility to form meaningful relationships. Hence it is important to consider how the legal and cultural context shape sexuality and thus experiences of loneliness.

In their research based in Spain, Armengol and Varena-Mano Grasso (2022) highlight homophobia and classism impacting experiences of loneliness. Along similar lines, in Portugal, Pereira *et al.* (2021) identified the impact of ageism. In this vein, Bauer *et al.* (2025) discussed how men who experienced distal stressors within gay community groups experience stigma against older ages or ageism.

This third order construct is in line with psychological and sociological theories suggesting that a person must be seen in his or her interactions with the social environment as well as with the chronic and socially based elements of the minority stress construct (Meyer, 2003). The Vast Collective Ocean of Cultural and Social Structures is also in line with Bauer *et al.* (2025) conclusion on the importance of examining macrosystems, as fundamental contributors to the quality of social connections and, consequently, experiences of loneliness, while also integrating queer theorists view around the importance of understanding sexuality as historically constructed (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022). Hence, this construct expands beyond the emotional, social and cognitive frameworks of loneliness (Weiss, 1974; Perlman & Peplau, 1982) by shifting the focus from the individual and their interpersonal relationships to the influence and impact of the systemic structures.

Relational Currents

All papers referred to the relational aspect of loneliness. Some studies mentioned family in the sense of estrangement, no support, rejection and absence (Adan *et al.*, 2021; Czaja *et al.*, 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah *et al.*, 2024). Most studies made emphasis on romantic relationships particularly. Partners were referred to in the context of loneliness due to their

absence as well as their loss (Adan et al., 2021; Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024). Coleman (2018) went further at identifying the acceptance of abuse as some sort of Trojan horse for affection. While Pereira et al. (2021) described difficulties including those of anticipation of rejection. Referring to the theoretical underpinning of the Minority Stress Model interactions with others are crucial for the development of a sense of self and well-being, where negative regard from others leads to negative self-regard (Meyer, 2003).

Coleman (2018) being the only research paper that focusses particularly on African American population places emphasis on the experience of loneliness leading to an acceptance of physical and psychological abuse in romantic relationships that ‘fill an emotional void’ (p. 49). This finding adds to the wider research suggesting that Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals often face homophobic attitudes in their racial or ethnic communities, while simultaneously encountering challenges to their racial or ethnic identity within LGBTQ+ spaces (Meyer, 2003). Contrastingly, in Czaja et al. (2016) research Latinx did not identify with experiences of loneliness and associated this to their family-oriented culture. These findings highlight the need for an intersectionality approach to understanding (Crenshaw, 1989) and one that places emphasis on the importance of cultural context (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

Armengol and Varena-Manograsso (2022) discussed how as a response of social exclusion older gay men have an active involvement in creating support networks. This is in line with research around how minority populations have been associated with group solidarity, resilience and the importance of group affiliation (Meyer, 2003). This was also present in Adan *et al.* (2021) conceptualisation of a community engagement and activism or in the importance of families of choice raised by Hurd and Li (2024). Acknowledging the importance of community engagement and activism is in line with the concept of AAD (Papadopoulos, 2007) and literature around strength-based approaches when understanding the LGBTQ+ community (Cowand et al., 2025).

Partners were referred to in the context of loneliness due to their absence as well as their loss (Adan et al., 2021; Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024). This further aligns with findings of Fish and Weiss (2019) in the association of loneliness with not having a partner or children while failing to expand on the perception and quality of relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). The emphasis on the relational aspect is in line with the social and emotional frameworks of loneliness (Weiss, 1974) and that of Tankainen and Anitta (2016).

The metaphor of relational currents was applied to represent how there can be various relational currents from family, friends, romantic partners, children and community that can impact LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of navigating loneliness. These relational currents can take different directions and change over time. Besides using a socio-ecological view (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) this construct aims to capture how the experience of loneliness is not static, categorical or viewed as positive or negative but rather varies through life and with different experiences of relationships. Hence, moving away from the binary framework used in the Bauer et al. (2025) review. This construct aims to capture both the relational stressors and the resource of group solidarity for LGBTQ+ older adults. Hence, stepping away from deficit-based approach by recognising the agency and community engagement amongst the LGBTQ+ population (Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2014).

The Individual as the Boat

Across papers there was discussion about the impact of loneliness on the self. This varied across studies ranging from emotional, mental health and physical health. Most studies placed emphasis on the feelings evoked by loneliness with the predominant feeling being fear (Ifrah et al., 2024; Hurd & Li, 2024; Czaja et al., 2015). This is in line with Fromm-Reichmann (1959) argument around human beings being frightened of loneliness. Coleman (2018) framed the emotion as pain and referred to the health barriers. Capturing the inside feeling and the

outside impact on the body. In this vein, Hurd and Li (2024) and Czaja et al. (2015) referred to the physical decline. Whereas Pereira et al. (2021) and Adan et al. (2021) made a broader reference to mental health detriment including depression and anxiety in line with other research (Wright et al., 2024; Maes et al., 2022; DCMS, 2018).

Papers also mentioned identity, with Adan et al. (2021) stressing how loneliness is exacerbated by transgender identity. While Pereira et al. (2021) who shared experiences of gay man expanded on how being in the closet shuts down aspects of identity leading to loneliness. The construct of identity goes beyond the frameworks of loneliness that focus on social relationships (Weiss, 1974; Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). Additionally, Armengol and Varena-Manograsso (2022) and Czaja et al. (2016) referred to the stage of life by mentioning retirement and loss of independence. These are in line with Graham et al. (2024) developmental nature of loneliness varying by life stage.

Boats like human beings can have damages that can be directly observed by others (*e.g.* low energy, mobility, decreased physical activity) whilst also damages that are harder to measure (*e.g.* anxiety, depression, fear, pain). However, both can be intrinsically related (*e.g.* low energy and depression). This third order construct aimed to represent at a micro and symbolic level those individual experiences of loneliness as a combination of the mind, the body, the relational currents and wider ocean of sociocultural structures. The Individual as the Boat captures the recent definitions of loneliness emphasising the uniqueness of each individual's subjective experience (Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014).

Line of Argument

The line of argument conceptualises loneliness as a multidimensional, fluid and

subjective experience that LGBTQ+ older adults must navigate across their lifespan (see Figure 2). This visual framework aimed to highlight the complexity of loneliness with the influences of societal, community, relational and individual aspects.

An ocean is vast, covering about 71% of the Earth's surface. It surrounds and separates continents, playing a crucial role in regulating the climate, weather systems, and life processes. This symbolism was used to represent how macrosystems influence experiences of loneliness for the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, political regimens, laws and other systemic structures. What the visual framework also emphasis is how the condition of the ocean can further impact relationships (relational currents) and individuals (the boat). All studies referred to the relational aspect of loneliness. This took different forms including family, romantic partners, children, friends and community. Given how these relationships are continuous and can take different directions throughout life the symbolism of water currents was chosen to represent this. Additionally, water currents can be found within oceans and are influenced by the conditions in it. A boat is used to symbolically represent loneliness at an individual and microsystem level; the boat is both impacted by the conditions of the ocean and the water currents. Water currents can help or make it harder for the boat to navigate loneliness.

LGBTQ+ older adults' subjective experiences of loneliness are shaped by the conditions of the broader ocean in which they live — the political, social, and cultural context. The condition of the ocean then influences the relational currents (*e.g.* friendships, estrangement from family) and the boat (*e.g.* the individual mind and body). At the same time, the boat and the relational currents interact dynamically, further shaping how loneliness is experienced.

While some studies discussed loneliness within the different dimensions (Adan et al., 2021; Hurd & Li, 2024; Pereira et al., 2021) others focused on particular dimensions. For instance, Coleman (2018) in exploring the abuse of men that have sex with men discussed specifically

the need for intimacy and the acceptance of abuse. Thus, thinking about how particular relational currents have an impact on individuals experience of loneliness.

This visual metaphor aimed to represent the multidimensional, intersectional and complex phenomenon of loneliness as dynamic, not fixed or static and idiographic as each boat would face its own individual distresses and be affected by different relational currents within a vast ocean. Other professionals of multilingualism in psychological therapy have used the metaphor of the boat and the sea when describing their experiences. ‘You realised that you don’t have to be alone and you are not alone. You are still captain of your boat, but you are part of a fleet now. The sea is still wild, it is hard to navigate but there will be always a hand when you need one’ (Bermudez Otero et al., 2023, p. 11).

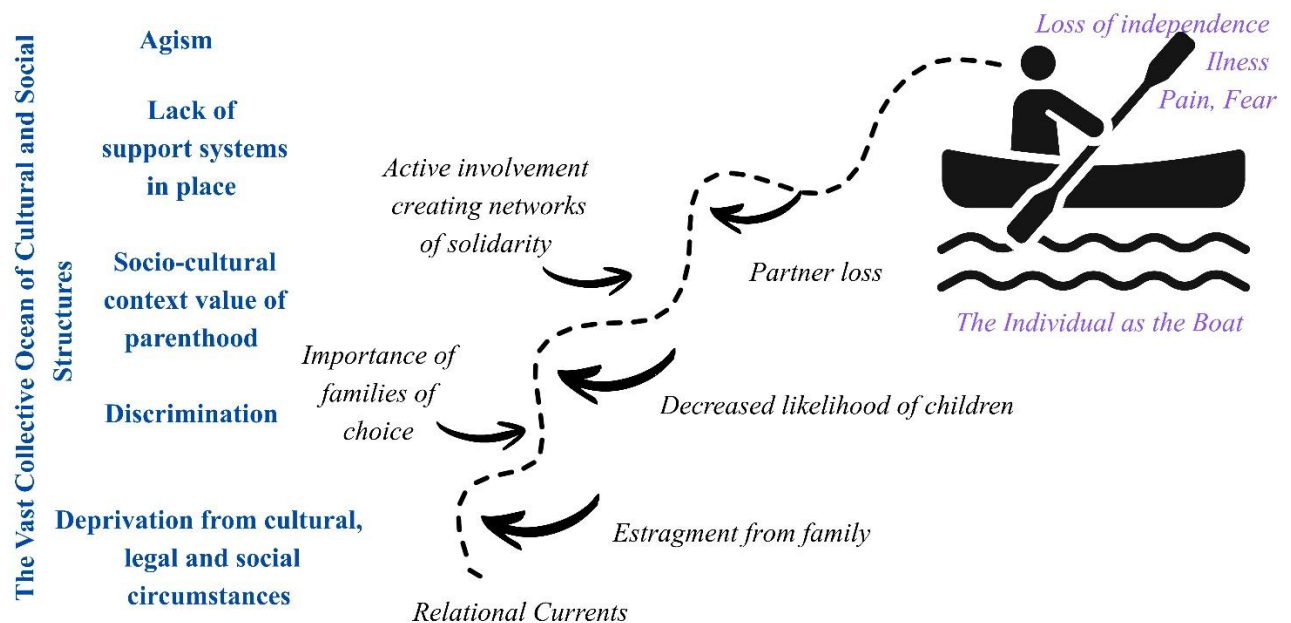
The framework navigating loneliness applies a holistic approach to older adults’ experiences of loneliness by allowing space for psychosocial histories (Brennan, 2004). Furthermore, this framework moves away from generalised aging theories that fail to recognise difference and diversity among older adults (Brown, 2009) aiming to reflect varied and complex experiences for the elder LGBTQ+ population. Thus, each older LGBTQ+ adult could have their own visual framework of them navigating the phenomenon of loneliness.

By combining elements of different frameworks and theoretical contexts this line of argument answers the research question: What does the literature say about the subjective experiences of loneliness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer adults aged 50 and older? First, it accounts for the multiple dimensions of loneliness (Cacioppo *et al.*, 2015). In this vein, a socio-ecological view is applied highlighting the relevance of macrosystems (Bauer *et al.*, 2025) and the impact of systemic discrimination (Meyer, 2003). It further incorporated the importance of relationships and community (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Weiss, 1974; Dunbar, 2014). While also accounting for the subjectivity of individual experiences (Tanskanen &

Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014) and adding the relevance of historical dimensions and a context-dependent perspective (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

Figure 2

Line of argument. Navigating Loneliness.



2.5 Discussion

The present literature review aimed to explore the subjective experiences of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adult. The symbolism of the ocean, water currents and a boat shed light on the multidimensional experiences of loneliness for this community. This line of argument intended to open a new understanding and highlight that loneliness is not a linear, quantifiable or a static phenomenon. This meta-ethnography suggests that there is potential to change policy and practice when understanding LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of loneliness as multidimensional involving structural systems, relationships, communities and the individual.

This framework fits with conceptualisation of loneliness as a highly subjective, idiographic experience with a multidimensional nature (Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo

& Cacioppo, 2014; Mind, 2019). The idea is that each individual creates their own representation of loneliness through this framework by personalising the vast ocean related to their geographical location (*e.g.* country, urban or rural) and historical context (*i.e.* the impact of law against same-sex acts, stigma due to the HIV epidemic). Similarly, individuals' relational currents vary (*i.e.* estrangement from family of origin, partner loss, joining an LGBTQ+ community). As does their individual experiences (*e.g.* illness, loss of independence). This framework aimed to move away from the notion of research treating the older LGBTQ+ population as a homogeneous group while also emphasising the influence of macrosystems on experiences of loneliness for this population.

In line with Meyer et al.'s (2003) Minority Stress Model this framework of loneliness captured structural and individual sources, while moving away from categorical distinctions into an ecological systems view and leaving behind the minoritised view. It further develops from Bauer et al. (2025) strength-based and ecological approach by progressing beyond the binary framework of positive/negative, aiming to capture the range and complexity of loneliness. The findings also aim to shed light on the influence of AAD (Papadopoulos, 2007) including social activism and families of choice when navigating loneliness.

The framework captured the relational component in line with the emotional, social and cognitive framework of loneliness (Weiss, 1974; Perlman & Peplau, 1982). The construct relational currents is also in line with Fish and Weiss (2019) findings around loneliness in the older LGBTQ+ community being partially attributed to childlessness and the absence of a partner. However, and like Bauer et al. (2025) it is also essential to examine the macrosystems at a societal level (*i.e.* laws, cultural context) as fundamental contributors to the opportunity of developing meaningful social connections. The Vast Collective Ocean of Social and Cultural structures in understanding loneliness also captured the unique, chronic and socially based

aspect of the Minority Stress Model that Meyer (2003) described as the underlying social and cultural structures.

The papers included in this review mainly discuss deficit-based approaches when conceptualising loneliness in elders of the LGBTQ+ community. This approach has been criticised in the literature for viewing sexual minorities from a problem saturated lens (Bauer et al., 2025). Moreover, a deficit framing may reflect broader heteronormative and medicalised discourses that historically pathologised LGBTQ+ identities. A few research papers mention AAD indirectly (Papadopoulos, 2007) when mentioning positive developments around relationships and community when explaining aspects such as social engagement and social activism (Adan et al., 2021; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024). However, only Pereira et al. (2021) discussed AAD approaches of individuals.

Like Wright et al. (2024) research the reviewed literature is under representative of those individuals that identify as trans or non-binary with only Adan et al. (2021) and Hurd & Li (2024) including representation of trans experiences within their sample. Interestingly in both these studies authors interpretations of loneliness encompass societal, relational and individual aspects. This is only true for Pereira et al. (2021) paper that specifically looks at the phenomenon of loneliness. This pattern could highlight a gap in the literature where few studies adopt an integrated, ecological approach unless they are either capturing the experiences of highly marginalised groups or exploring the inherently social experiences of loneliness.

Implications

This framework is not evidenced-based finding but is used as a visual aid to raise awareness and understanding about the interconnected systems that can influence experiences loneliness for the LGBTQ+ older adult community. In moving away from solely quantifiable measures, like the UCLA scale, this framework could be used in conversation between the

LGBTQ+ older adult community and healthcare professionals to explore the complexity and nuances of loneliness. As Brennan (2004) raised it is important to use a holistic approach when supporting the older adult population.

Diverse types of changes could be implemented at distinct spheres of the model depending on the individual experience. For instance, given the importance of the relational aspect around families of choice and the estrangement of families of origin having policies at a structural level that are more receptive to a wider definition of family could help when navigating experiences of loneliness. An example of this in practice could be replacing next of kin, which is often a restrictive term that assumes biological or marital ties, with person of significance, nominated support person or chosen family to include friends, partners and carers. To address and reduce, distal stressors within health care systems it is crucial for health care providers to access training and gain knowledge about LGBTQ+ older adults' difficulties while also being responsive to historical contexts of discrimination and rejection. For instance, training staff to employ inclusive language along with being curious and non-judgmental about older adults' gender identity and sexual orientation could help reduce inequity. These changes within policy and healthcare practice could in turn facilitate the conditions of the ocean, further influencing relational currents and thus, how the individual boat navigates loneliness.

Strengths and Limitations

The Flow diagram in Figure 1 and Table 1 provide the reader with the opportunity to replicate the search process. To further critically examine the quality and applicability of the review, readers should refer to Tables 2 and 3. The review could have been strengthened by carrying out a hand search of reference lists of key papers and expanding on the search engines (*e.g.* Google Scholar). However, unlike in meta-analysis where the focus is on including all available studies to make predictions, in meta-ethnography the emphasis is on understanding

and explaining experience by selecting studies that meet the inclusion criteria rather than including them all (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The studies were mainly based across the US, Canada, Iran, Spain and Portugal. Variations in geographical locations of the studies might make the findings more transferable while also harder to synthesise. The diverse geographical locations represent a variety of cultural and social contexts. However, there are significant differences between such countries, meaning it is difficult to directly compare LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of loneliness, given the cultural and context disparity. The literature mainly represents Westernised countries, hence not being transferable to the loneliness experienced by those LGBTQ+ older adults in non-Westernised geographical locations.

A further strength of the findings of this meta ethnography is the transferability of a visual framework that uses constructs like the ocean, water currents and boats that can be understood by diverse populations within the LGBTQ+ older adult community that differ in class, ethnicity, age, education and race. Finally, the framework presented offers a holistic approach to understanding older adults by incorporating individual, relational and societal constructs that follows Brennan (2004) recommendation of moving away from common tendencies of generalising and neglecting the diversity of experiences.

The aim of meta-ethnography was not one of summarising and aggregating to the literature but rather offering a new conceptual insight. The researcher is aware that some relevant content to this meta-ethnography might have been lost due the missed data bases and searched terms along with the inclusion/exclusion criteria. For instance, the search terms did not include social isolation or solitude which are used interchangeably in the literature. Hence, leading to the potential of important research being missed. Excluding these terms was an intentional decision of the review as it aimed to follow the conceptualisation critique discussed

in the introductory chapter and literature recommendations on the importance differentiating between loneliness, social isolation and solitude (Wigfield et al., 2022, Rokach, 2025). Including these terms would broaden the scope beyond the focus on loneliness that could reduce the relevance and conceptual clarity of the present review. In aiming to tackle the criticism of qualitative meta synthesis being simplistic (Thorne, 2017) this review was grounded on relevant theoretical frameworks and offers a visual model that aimed to capture the complex, multidimensional, non-static and dynamic phenomenon of loneliness for the LGBTQ+ older adult community.

The line of argument proposed should be interpreted with caution as it is not an evidence-based finding but rather an attempt to provide a new conceptual framework and it may fail to capture all members of the LGBTQ+ older adult community, for instance elders that identify as transgender and queer. The research reviewed is also overrepresented of White and Western individuals mainly in there 50 to 70s. Furthermore, only Czaja et al. (2016) mentions differences between lesbian and gay experiences, commenting also on the cultural differences. Meaning, the studies and thus generally this review is limited by capturing LGBTQ+ community as a homogenous group when each identity and individual would have a subjective experience of loneliness.

Meta-synthesis has also been criticised for moving too far from the original context (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This criticism is relevant to this review and a limitation given how only one of the research papers focused specifically on exploring the phenomenon of loneliness with the other papers included loneliness as one of their various themes. On the contrary, this gap in the existing literature provides an appropriate platform for further research exploring LGBTQ+ older adults lived experience of loneliness, with attendance to the individual, relational, community and structural dimensions.

Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) highlighted how meta synthesis are limited to losing the richness of participants' experiences. While the research was interested in understanding the subjective experiences of loneliness for the LGBTQ+ older adult community, the second order constructs are those of authors interpretations. All papers fail to offer a section on reflexivity considering the relationship between researchers and participants. This creates a gap in understanding how relationship and biases may influence the interpretations. It is essential for qualitative research to actively engage in dilemmas around subjectivity, impact, interaction and researcher positionality on data collection and analyses (Jamie & Rathbone, 2022). This is further relevant given the method of analysis where participants' experiences can often be decontextualised and pulled apart into meaning units (Mc Allum et al., 2019).

This review was conducted by a lone researcher. Hence, potential methodological bias may have shaped the analysis. The interpretations of a different colleague or supervisor may have differed. Non-peer-reviewed, unpublished and systematic review papers were not included. Given the small number of studies exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ older adults and loneliness, it might have been helpful to include these.

Future Research

This comprehensive literature search only identified one study that specifically explored the phenomenon of loneliness in LGBTQ+ older adults using a qualitative approach with interest in subjective experiences. This study was based in Portugal. Hence, the literature search did not identify any studies based in the UK that used a qualitative approach to specifically explore the subjective experiences of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults. Given the discussed gaps in the literature, the papers reviewed and the relevance of understanding loneliness for this population it would be important for future research to explore this phenomenon.

Future research should aim to capture the experiences of those underrepresented in the literature such as people age 70+, from the global majority and those that identify as trans and/or queer. Understanding individual meaning and stories is particularly important given how psychological theories like the Minority Stress Model (Meyers, 2003) have been criticised for othering, oversimplifying along with being deficit-focused (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen (2022). It has been identified as of further importance to offer a holistic approach for LGBTQ+ older adults' psychosocial histories allowing space for their life story which reduces feelings of invisibility (Brennan, 2004). In this vein, Graham et al. (2024) also highlighted the importance of understanding loneliness across the life course. Thus, future research could consider experiences of loneliness as a whole accounting for context, generation, temporality changes and agency.

2.6 Conclusion

Loneliness is an area of public health concern in this aging population. The framework proposed provides a tool for understanding individual, relational, community and societal factors that can contribute to experiences of loneliness for the LGBTQ+ older adult population. Moving away from categorical and binary models, the framework used the metaphor of ocean, water currents and a boat to represent the multidimensional and dynamic nature of loneliness. This meta-ethnography can help raise health care providers and policy makers awareness of the multidimensional challenges experienced by this community that encourages them to adapt their practices and policies so that the LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences and needs could be further understood. Findings also highlight the gaps within the literature including an absence of UK qualitative studies that explore the subjective experiences of loneliness for the LGBTQ+ older adult population and a lack of representation of people aged 70+, transgender, queer, non-binary and individuals from the global majority.

Chapter 3. Methods

3.1. Overview

The previous chapter presented a meta-ethnography and introduced a visual framework for understanding LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of loneliness. It concluded with the need for further qualitative research in the UK exploring the subjective experiences of loneliness for this population. This chapter begins with the discussion of the epistemological stance and positionality statement of the researcher. Other aspects of the study are presented including design, procedure, measures, analysis and participants. The chapter ends with some ethical considerations and plan for dissemination.

3.2 Epistemological Stance

Clarifying the philosophical stance underlying a study is integral to social science research. It provides coherence between research questions and design while simultaneously influencing how the researcher conceptualised and interpreted the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Traditionally, psychology often aligned with positivism assuming that accurate and objective knowledge about the world through sensory experiences could be gained. Positivism seeks objectivity, neutrality, and generalisable conclusions through hypothesis testing, aiming to uncover causal relationships and make predictions (Charmaz, 2008). It also assumes that researchers can remain completely detached from their data, thus not influencing the results (Charmaz, 2008). Few psychologists today adhere strictly to logical positivism. Instead, many adopt various post-positivist approaches that acknowledge the role of interpretation in developing theories and conclusions (Madill et al., 2000).

Interpretivism focuses on discourse and its impact, viewing reality as a subjective and discursive construction rather than objectively accessible knowledge. From a stance where social realities are not fixed, plural and emerging from interaction where individuals attribute diverse meanings to a same phenomenon (Mc Allum et al., 2019). Thus, the focus of interpretive research is on the meaning that people give to their subjective experiences placing an emphasis on the process. Critics argue that interpretivism emerged as a strong reaction to positivism, suggesting that it dismissed the notion of objective truths in favour of multiple perspectives and discourses (Mc Allum et al., 2019).

Between these two poles there are a range of epistemological positions, including social constructionism. This approach proposes that knowledge is not objective or fixed but emerges through human relationships and historically and culturally situated social processes (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). Social constructionism highlights three main ideas: reality and morality are socially constructed, language shapes how we understand the world, and discourse is political and practical (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). These can encourage open conversation, question oppressive systems and increase awareness of the limits of traditional ways of thinking. However, this approach also shares similar critiques to those mentioned above about interpretivism.

The main aim of this research was to explore the meaning and subjective experiences of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults. The researcher's aim is to gather an understanding of how the constructs of social network, mental health, LGBTQ+ identity, discrimination and coping relate to the subjective experience of loneliness. This research adopted what Shank (2005) referred to as a lantern approach, shedding light on the participants stories by using semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation. For the purpose of this thesis and aligning with the aims the researcher adopted an interpretive focus and a social constructionist approach to knowledge. Hence, understanding that loneliness, sexuality and gender are not static, but

rather than their meaning and limits depend on social interaction, culture, language and wider systemic influences such as social norms, legal frameworks and policies (Wilkins et al., 2014). In relation to the topic of this thesis, this approach emphasises how loneliness, gender and sexuality are influenced by broader social discourses, including a time when LGBTQ+ identity was highly stigmatised, criminalised and silenced.

3.3 Positionality Statement

A researcher's positionality influences a range of aspects of the qualitative research process including the design, questions, the process of interviewing and analysis (Yip, 2023). Thus, the importance of the researcher being transparent about their identity and positions by engaging in reflexivity. In this section, I shift from referring to the 'researcher' to using 'I' to acknowledge my personal position and reflexive role in the research process. As a novice researcher, I am not fully aware of ways that my identity, and those of participants have been socially constructed. I hope the following statement is transparent in clarifying the reasoning behind my approach to the subsequent research.

I am a 28-year-old white other female and a trainee clinical psychologist. I grew up on an island; Gran Canaria and I am an only child from a working-class Canarian family. I have always been in relationships with members of the opposite sex. From the early age of twelve I witnessed the difficulty of sharing same-sex attraction and gender transitioning in proximate family member and friends. I was told stories about my grandfathers' opposition to same-sex relationships, but I have also witnessed experiences of acceptance and integration. I have reflected on how for younger and older generations sexual preference and gender identity can remain as a stigmatised known secret. These life experiences have influenced my approach to the research. For instance, highlighting my interest in understanding how cultural context impacts sexuality and gender expression.

My mother, Nieves, passed away from lung cancer when I was 18. This experience was very sudden resulting on an ongoing process of grief that can feel lonely at times. Her loss brought me closer to family and friends while at the same time encouraging me to pursue a new adventure. This experience reinforced my value for community and connection. Shortly after my mother's death, I moved to the UK and begun an undergraduate degree in psychology. I am a first-generation college student and the first member of my family to migrate outside of Spain. These personal experiences have led me to experience loneliness and connection at different moments of my life. I am grateful to have found a community of friends in the UK, where I feel a sense of belonging and them consider family. I am aware that my views of loss, connection and community have influenced my values around belonging and social support. Thus, further influencing my interest on these aspects when approaching the current research.

Spanish and in particular the Canarian dialect are my first learned languages, the language I use to communicate with my family and loved ones. English is a later-learned language and the one I use in my professional career. This can often create some emotional distance, acting as a protective factor and a barrier when researching about loneliness in a UK context. Even from a linguistic perspective, loneliness means *Soledad* in Spanish when translated directly this means sun+age. The word *Soledad* enables me to access a deeper level of emotion. I believe spoken and aesthetic language are an essential aspect to reflect on throughout this thesis.

On a professional level, when I completed my undergraduate degree, I worked as a special needs teaching assistant in a school where I learned about the value of different forms of communication other than language. I also noted a constant wish to belong among students. This reflection, my personal experiences and a second post as an Assistant Psychologist (AP) informed my initial interest on the topic of communication, loneliness and belonging. The AP role was contextualised in supported living environment for individuals experiencing a range

of mental health difficulties. It is hard to explain the experience you gain from supporting individuals that are mostly marginalised from society. Within this environment, it was not uncommon for individuals to have experienced different forms of trauma including discrimination, abuse, abandonment and rejection. During this work I learned the value of community engagement. Moving into completing a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner postgraduate course I worked with adults that experienced moderate mental health difficulties. Within this post I continued to see how loneliness impacted the wellbeing of a range of service users particularly those that had been marginalised by society due to their culture, ethnicity, sex, gender and age. I had the opportunity to work with a few older adults who I found to be extremely grateful of having meaningful conversations and who often shared difficulties coming to terms with the concept of aging. From these work experiences my initial interest to exploring loneliness and connection for older adults developed.

Merton (1972) defined as insiders those members of specified groups or occupants of specified social statuses while he described outsiders as non-members. In other words, insiders are researchers who's Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012) gives them a sense of lived familiarity and outsiders those without prior personal knowledge. The literature has suggested that some of the advantages of being an insider are easier access to the community, more insightful questions, an element of trust and an understanding of language nuances (Holmes, 2020). The debate in the literature also highlights the disadvantages of being an insider as the potential for a narrow perspective, being overly sympathetic, assuming greater knowledge that can lead to overlooking details and the absence of an external perspective (Holmes, 2020).

Recently, researchers have moved away from the binary approach to insider/outsider positionality. Instead, there is a move towards these positions being understood as fluid and within a continuum of multiple dimensions (Yip, 2023). For instance, when conducting this

research, I often felt an outsider because of culture, age, gender and sexuality differences. I felt like an ‘insider’ when I connected with participants through my own experiences of loneliness, loss and migration. The insider connection also arose when connecting my research to experiences of working therapeutically with older adults, mental health, sexuality, gender and loneliness. I have been part of the journey of friends and family members that identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and position myself as an ally. Using a fluid and continuum (Yip, 2023) approach made me reflect on how within each interview my positionality changed. For instance, during one of the interviews I felt like an insider and an outsider when a participant shared their experience of living in a different country to family members. I could connect with some of the circumstances and not with others. Hence, the continuum of multiple dimensions moved constantly through participants interviews. The element of time was also an interesting aspect. Throughout the research process experiences of loneliness varied for the researcher as so they appeared to vary throughout participants’ lives.

3.4 Design

While numerous research papers have investigated LGBTQ+ older adults and loneliness, these have mainly applied a cross-sectional and quantitative methodology. In a recent review published by Bauer et al., (2025) on LGBTQ+ adults and loneliness 75% of the studies drew on data from population-based surveys and used a cross-sectional design. Quantitative methods are frequently considered useful for examining the relationships between predefined variables and aiming to draw broad, generalisable conclusions. Established institutions involved in advising around research funding, for instance The National Research Council, place high value on quantitative research that can produce generalisable, cause-and-effect relationships and answers questions around what works (Polkinghorne, 2007). In line with the phenomenon of interest and population being explored quantitative approaches have

provided valuable information around the percentage of LGB elders that feel lonely, those living alone, not having a partner or children. Overall, quantitative research has provided objective measurements of loneliness, identified risk and protective factors, and allowed comparisons across subgroups of LGBTQ+ older adult (Fish & Weis, 2019). However, research on loneliness within the LGBTQ+ community has been criticised for the cross-sectional design when a life-course approach has been stressed as important to understanding loneliness in later life (Victor & Rippon, 2023). These researchers raised a further critique about quantitative research focussing on individual objectively measurable factors (*e.g.* living alone, not having a partner or children) without sufficiently accounting for temporal influences (*e.g.* life stage, policy changes over time) and broader structural determinants (*e.g.* heteronormativity). Additionally, recent definitions of loneliness and research papers have argued the importance of understanding the perceived quality of relationships instead of the magnitude (Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Wigfield et al., 2022).

Listening to peoples' stories, holding multiple perspectives and the feelings this evokes is a complex process and require extensive resources. Often human beings look for certainty in data and wider systems, such as policy makers and, rely on this data to inform policies. Nevertheless, publications on evaluation research highlight the growing significance of interviews and personal narratives (Polkinghorne, 2007). The most detailed questionnaires about loneliness are checked against just one simple question: Do you feel lonely? (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010). This can reflect how to understand loneliness there is an interest in the persons feelings. Therefore, it is often that by trying to define someone's loneliness in a quantifiable way (*i.e.* statistics, scales, percentages) their narrative and the nuances of their experience are dismissed or overlooked. Recognising that loneliness does not have a single operational definition or agreed gold standard, but is instead a subjective personal experience,

highlights the challenge of capturing its breadth and complexity using a limited set of predefined questionnaire items (Jylhä & Saarenheimo, 2010).

Qualitative methods have been found valuable for understanding areas that are under-researched, lack sufficient theoretical development and explore subjective experiences where open-ended, exploratory questions are more appropriate (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Even though research to increase understanding of older people within the LGBTQ+ community has evolved over the past decade, little research is available in the UK on the experiences of older bisexual individuals (Jones et al., 2018) or of older trans people (King et al., 2019). Likewise, there is an absence of research that captures the experiences of older LGBTQ+ individuals from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (King et al., 2019) or from less favoured socio-economic status (Heaphy, et al., 2004). It is important for this research to reflect the diverse experiences, capture intersectionality and give voice to the mentioned under-researched groups.

Given how the voices and stories of older LGBTQ+ adults are often absent in the literature, under-researched and the meaning of loneliness is subject to each individual's attributed meaning qualitative methodology was deemed suitable. The aim is to provide an understanding of the individual stories of loneliness. Employing a qualitative methodology enables this study to investigate the intersection of mental health and loneliness, exploring their reciprocal influence within the individual narratives of participants. Hence, the choice to employ a qualitative methodology was guided by the area of interest, the research aims and a social constructionism approach to knowledge.

3.5 Procedure

Initially, to be eligible for participants were asked to be aged 60 and above. In line with the World Health Organization's definition of older adults (WHO, 2022), whereby 60 years of

age is located as the lowest threshold. In addition, the younger participants aged 60 would have been born in 1957 and potentially have some memories of the political climate leading up to the *Sexual Offences Act* (1967). This criterion was intended to capture participants who not only lived through this legal milestone but also had a personal sense of its impact on themselves and their communities. The age criterion was extended to 50 years to include individuals who grew up during a time when homosexuality was still pathologized within historical psychiatric frameworks (*i.e.*, classified as a ‘sexual orientation disturbance’ in the DSM II). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals often experience age-related vulnerabilities earlier due to minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and previous systematic reviews on LGBTQ+ aging indicated a lower minimum age of 50 years (Chen et al., 2020).

The focus in qualitative research is on deep understanding. Thus, it is not necessary or helpful to obtain a statistically representative sample (Frank, 2010). Guided by this principle, this study used purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants who could contribute to the research question. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants that meet the criteria in terms of age, sexual orientation and gender identity while also reaching those with experiences of loneliness. Snowball sampling refers to participants taking part in the study being asked to share the research with people in their social networks that might be interested in engaging. As Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) discussed snowball sampling can be especially effective for identifying and recruiting individuals from seldom heard populations. Their study stresses that this method allowed the main researcher to access networks and social connections that might otherwise remain out of reach, making it easier to recruit participants from less visible communities. However, this sampling approach can lead to a sample that is broadly similar and interconnected. To mitigate this, it was important for the researcher to approach recruitment through various avenues.

Given the limited research available in this area the main researcher consulted charities and organisations on the recruitment approach. Staff members within these organisations and charities assisted in promoting the study to potential participants. For instance, staff members posted an excerpt of the present research in the Westminster LGBTQ + letter. Another avenue of recruitment was through LGBTQ+ older adults' groups, charities, and organisations. For instance, an LGBTQ+ social group played a pivotal role in recruitment. This group began informally and was then sponsored by the local SAND (Safe Ageing No Discrimination).

Social media has been found to be an efficient and cost-effective tool for recruiting seldom heard populations (Phillips & Spratling, 2024). The choice of social media platforms for recruitment was tailored to the specific population being targeted, with LGBTQ+ older adults typically favouring Facebook. The main researcher created a Facebook profile to contact public LGBTQ+ groups through social media. Colleagues and lecturers within the field also played a role in enhancing recruitment by sharing the recruitment poster with potential participants that met the inclusion criteria.

The main researcher also engaged in face to face direct and indirect strategies of recruitment. One of these strategies was visiting LGBTQ+ bars and having discussions with owners about the project. If consented the researcher placed a poster in the bar or social space. Another enjoyable part of the research was attending Brighton Pride and having informal discussions while also dancing and celebrating the LGBTQ+ community. The researcher also joined an intergenerational LGBTQ+ in person meeting hosted by a peer-led group as part of familiarising themselves with the community.

For the sample to be inclusive of ethnic minorities the researcher aimed to include people with diverse cultures and religious affiliations. The researcher is proficient in both Spanish and English, thus interviews could be conducted in either language. To ensure that

individuals that identify as queer, transgender and bisexual were also included in the sample the researcher used inclusive language in recruitment materials that explicitly invited individuals who identify as bisexual, queer and transgender to participate in the study. In addition, the research poster clearly stated that the research aimed to represent diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

Prior to scheduling the interviews, participants were emailed the consent form (see Appendix B) and participant sheet (Appendix C). In wanting to ensure that participants had time to reflect on the information and did not feel pressured, they were asked to email the researcher when and if they wished to take part. When participants got in touch and sent their signed consent forms, they were reminded of their choice around the style of interview either standard or through photo elicitation. The interviews were a one-off lasting between 1 hour and 15 minutes and 1 hour and 53 minutes, with a mean duration of 1 hour and 25 minutes.

At the start of each interview, and in line with Fraser's (2004) recommendations a climate of trust was established through discussion of confidentiality, disclosure of the interviewer's interest in the research, and opportunities for participants to ask questions. The researcher used an interview topic guide (see Appendix A). Participants were asked demographic questions around their age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious affiliations and geographical context (current and where they grew-up). These questions did not have a heteronormative or limited gender categories (e.g. male, female and other) which can other participants (Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). Considering the importance of language and staying away from othering participants were asked the demographic data through means of open questions (*e.g.* What is your sexual orientation? What is your gender identity?). This format was selected as a way of using participants preferred language to describe their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Participants were then asked about their decided interview choice. Some predetermined questions were asked as part of the interview (*e.g.* What does loneliness mean to you?), but predominantly the interview was conducted in a conversational style. The interview topic guide included broad and open-ended topics to encourage participants to use their own words when sharing their experiences. The topic guide included the following topics: loneliness, support network, mental health, LGBTQ+ identity, aging, coping, homophobia and discrimination. Interviews were conducted via video or telephone in line with participants preference. With the use of Microsoft Teams interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. To preserve anonymity, participants and the people to whom they refer to have been given pseudonyms, and detailed demographic information has not been provided. Participants that chose the photo elicitation option emailed their images prior or post interviews. To avoid any pre-empted opinions around the images, the researcher did not open the emails with the images until after the interviews had been concluded.

3.6 Measures

The data of the present study was collected by means of semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen as it offers the flexibility to delve into participants' answers, allowing for a thorough exploration that capture the subtle personal experiences and viewpoints of LGBTQ+ older adults that more structured interview formats would overlook (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aid of a topic guide (see Appendix A). The idea was to have an area of interest and potential questions but to encourage an open conversation that is person-centred. Having an interview topic guide provided a level of consistency across interviews.

At the start of the interview participants were asked about the type of interview they had chosen to engage with. The recruitment poster gave participants the choice between a

standard semi-structured interview and the possibility of bringing up to five images that could help them share their story. The anthropologist Collier (1957) proposed the use of photo methods to understand human phenomenon. Since he published his initial report academics have made use of this method to elicit detailed, emotional and highly reflective experiential accounts not readily accessed by other methods (Fritz & Lysack, 2014). The technique referred to in the literature as photo elicitation, the incorporation of images into interviews, elicits deeper narratives and presents as an alternative to the traditional interview approach. Photo elicitation has been found to bridge cultural worlds between participants and researcher, enhance rapport building and foster participant agency, empowerment and creativity (Craig et al., 2021). This participant-driven approach can help the interview focus on participants perspectives and lived experiences. It can also allow participants to use images to convey emotions and experiences that may be difficult to articulate, especially if they are speaking about them for the first time. For LGBTQ+ older adults, images can shed light to aspects that may not be visible to the researcher, making this method useful for exploring experiences of loneliness that are often stigmatised and difficult to communicate (DCMS, 2018). Engaging with images can also facilitate access to emotional experiences that participants have described as emotionally cathartic (Craig et al., 2021). This may be particularly important when discussing loneliness, stigma, and the negotiation of identity throughout participants' lives. Encouraging visual methods of expression (*i.e.*, using photographs taken by participants) is also in line with the social constructionism approach to qualitative research (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). In this study, three participants decided to use images when sharing their experiences, two others made use of art, film and props while the rest narrated their accounts through concrete and metaphorical language.

A characteristic of how humans attribute meaning is that we interpret the events arounds us in terms of connections and relationships (Crossley, 2000). When the first and consistent

question in the interview asked participants: What does loneliness mean to you? The researcher was exploring how participants relate loneliness to other experiences, people, or contexts—that is, the connections or relationships that constitute its meaning. This question was based on the interest of the research on the subjective experiences of loneliness (Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014) from a social constructionism approach. Being asked this, often prompted participants to share their own meaning and experiences of loneliness. This question moves away from understanding loneliness as a single quantifiable and objective reality inviting participants to share their own meaning and experiences of loneliness.

The areas of interest in the topic guide were informed by previous research and the literature review findings. Asking about participants' support networks was relevant given how the emotional, social and cognitive frameworks of loneliness place an emphasis on relationships (Weiss, 1974; Perlman & Peplau, 1982). In expanding from family, friends and partners the term network aimed to also include groups, communities and other meaningful relationships (Dunbar, 2014). This topic is also in line with more recent definitions of loneliness which highlight the importance in understanding the perceived quality of relationship instead of the magnitude (Tanskanen & Anttila 2016; Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2014). In this vein, Bauer *et al.* (2025) review applied a SEM (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) approach to stress how loneliness is interconnected with relationships and communities. Furthermore, all the reviewed papers included relationships (*e.g.*, family, friends, partners, community) when discussing loneliness (Adan et al., 2021; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso 2022; Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024; Coleman 2018; Pereira et al., 2021).

Mental Health was relevant as previous quantitative research has found feelings of loneliness to be associated with increased risk of depression and anxiety (Maes et al., 2022; DCMS, 2018). Semlyen et al. (2016) meta-analysis emphasised the heightened impact on mental health for LGBTQ+ older adults. This was further evidenced by the reviewed qualitative

research (Adan et al., 2021; Hurd & Li, 2024; Pereira et al., 2021). Additionally, the main researcher being a trainee clinical psychologist inclined her interest in this area.

The topic guide asked participants about how their LGBTQ+ identity and age related to experiences of loneliness given how these are some of the demographic characteristics of the researched population. Alongside this Adan et al. (2021) found that the trans identity impacted feelings of loneliness and Pereira et al. (2021) argued about the relevance of pride and being in the closet when understanding experiences of loneliness. Aspects of aging including retirement, vulnerability, loss of independence, health related difficulties were also relevant to older LGBTQ+ adults experiences of loneliness (Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Czaja et al., 2016; Ifrah et al., 2024). In moving away from a deficit-based approach that views sexual minorities from a problem-saturated lens the researcher was also curious about participants agency and coping strategies. This question aimed to expand understanding around individual and community discussed strength-based approaches (Pereira et al., 2021; Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2014) and capture AAD (Papadopoulos, 2007).

Finally, participants were asked about experiences of homophobia and discrimination. This was viewed as important given how older LGBTQ+ individuals grew-up during a time where same-sex attraction was viewed as a mental disorder and criminalised (Pereira & Banerjee, 2022). Beyond this research has shown how this population have faced discrimination and homophobia (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011). When researching specifically about the subjective experiences of loneliness research has highlighted for the need of considering broader structural determinants and macrosystems. (Victor & Rippon, 2023; Bauer et al., 2025).

3.7 Analysis

In the initial proposal reflexive thematic analysis' (RTA, Braun & Clarke, 2019) was identified as suitable approach given its flexibility and accessibility. This approach has been found valuable in examining power dynamics and contextual influences (Terry et al., 2017). RTA is also aligned with the interpretive epistemological stance and questions of this research. This analysis was also common in those articles included in the literature review. However, in the process of data collection it was striking how participants made meaning of loneliness across distinct stages of their lives. The importance of storytelling and temporality became apparent. Particularly the continuum of the past, present and future, indicating that the data was more in line with a narrative analysis approach (Lindsay, 2006). In understanding the difference between thematic and narrative approaches it was important to note how the data is analysed. In thematic analysis the data is decontextualised and pulled apart into meaning units whereas, in narrative analysis the data is considered as a whole and there is an incline to preserve the integrity of the text (Mc Allum et al., 2019). Narrative analysis also accounts for Victor and Rippon (2023) criticism of LGBTQ+ older adults and loneliness research by encouraging a life-course approach.

This thesis applied Sarbin (1986) definition of story: 'A story is a symbolised account of actions of human beings that has temporal dimensions. The story has a beginning, middle and an ending. The story is held together by recognisable patterns of events called plots. Central to the plot structure are human predicaments and attempted resolutions' (p.3). Through the narrative paradigm Fisher (2017) argues how storytelling is one of the first universal language skills that children develop across cultures and time. In line with co-production theory, individuals with lived experiences must participate in the storytelling of their trauma, difficulties and views (Frank, 2010). In this vein, Russel & van den Broek (1992) described how the act of telling one's story enables people to organise and represent experiences as meaningful wholes. Storytellers share their narrative in a linear (*e.g.* chronological) or in a non-

linear manner. Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Besides the stated above, narrative analysis was particularly relevant given the focus on an older population where a holistic approach that allows space for psychosocial histories is encouraged to reduce the feelings of invisibility produced by a culture obsessed with youth (Brennan, 2004). This approach is further relevant when thinking about the social, cultural and legal aspects that the LGBTQ+ older adult community phased in the earlier years of their life. The meanings individuals make of life events occur in social context and historical time. Narrative analysis is also in line with social constructionism approach to knowledge as its emphasis how voices and stories of participants ultimately shape the outcome of the research (Gergen, & Gergen, 2008).

In aiming to ensure narrative fidelity it was important to bear in mind the limitations of spoken language to convey meaning and identify the value of figurative language (Polkinghorne, 2007). Besides the use of photographs and images in the interview process participants used art, metaphors, props and scenes from films to share their experiences of loneliness. From the perspective of narrative fidelity these forms of aesthetic language are key elements of the analysis (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Furthermore, they enabled participants to share emotional and highly reflective experiential accounts while also fostering agency (Fritz & Lysack, 2014; Craig et al., 2021). Polkinghorne (2007) referred to how our understanding of a situation is not always consciously accessible. Throughout the interviews participants reflective gaze opened space to aspects of their experiences that differed to those presented at the start of the encounters. I am aware of how my interaction with participants and the topic of the interview construct how and what participants decided to share. Given that the data collection was limited to a single interview, there is possibly a hesitance in revealing themselves to a stranger leading them to filter out those parts of their experiences that they

want to keep to themselves or that they believe would present as socially undesirable self-portrait.

A sense of privilege and responsibility for participants' generous sharing of their life stories also led me to preserve their narratives. Feeling overwhelmed and lacking expertise in this approach I decided to enrol in a narrative analysis course. This course allowed for the development of understanding around principles and different models. The process of data analysis followed Fraser (2004) outlined as a proposed guide, the researcher reflected on the following seven phases of analysis for each interview (see example in Appendix G).

Phase One: Hearing the Stories, Experiencing Each Other's Emotions

This initial phase commenced during data collection where the researcher typed their reflections and feeling following each interview. The entries to the reflexive log (see example entry in Appendix E) provided a space for the researcher to identify the initial sense, the emotions evoked and reflect on further insights about herself. This phase highlights the importance of the researcher's active role in data collection and analysis.

Phase Two: Transcribing the Material

The interviews were transcribed by Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The researcher then listened the audios or videos while reviewing and proofreading transcripts for accuracy (see Appendix F for an example transcript). Following participants' preference, the interview recordings produced either an audio or a video with audio file. This produced a range of differences in the transcribing processed. For instance, the seven interviews that had video with audio files allowed for non-verbal communication to be included in the transcripts (*e.g.* facial expression, gaze, gestures). While, for the remaining three interviews more attention had to be paid to capture details such as vocalisations (*e.g.* crying, laughter). With both modalities I felt able to re-experience some of the emotions evoked at the time of the interview and noted having more

space to listen, feel and reflect as the need to actively ask questions was removed. This space allowed for further reflections to be added in the reflexive log (see example entry in Appendix F).

Phase Three: Interpreting Individual Transcripts

I continued to immerse myself in the data by watching the interviews, reading the transcripts, and reading and listening simultaneously. The next step was annotating themes, main points, vocal inflections and chosen words for each of the narratives. For example, at the start of the interview when asked about the meaning of loneliness one of the participants, Matthew, narrated the loss of his partner to lung cancer at a later stage of his life. Although he did refer to other earlier experiences and future worries, he referred to this narrative on numerous occasions throughout the interview. This specific event appeared to be the main point that could be deciphered from his narrative about loneliness. In this instance, it was essential for the researcher to reflect, by using a reflexive log, on the extent to which these interpretations were grounded in the interview data, and how they may have been influenced by her personal experience and feelings of losing her mother to lung cancer.

Phase Four: Scanning Across Different Domains of Experience

Interviews were examined for intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural aspects. As per Fraser's (2004) definitions, the intrapersonal involves narrators revealing an inner dialogue, the interpersonal describes interactions with others (*e.g.* friends, family, counsellors), cultural aspects refer to popular culture (*e.g.* movies, actors, places) and structural aspects include broader social systems and institutions. The researcher reflected on the resonance between this phase of the narrative analysis, the SEM (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and the literature review's line of argument (refer to Chapter 2, section 2.4). All interviews incorporated elements of all the dimensions.

Phase Five: Linking ‘the Personal with the Political’

This phase involved a focus on participants social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012) as well as the intersections of these identities and experiences. For instance, from the start of the interview one of the participants, Aisha, voiced how intertwined the challenges of class, sexuality and race were for her. In the interview she described the change in socio-economic status throughout her life and how having economic resources impacts feeling of loneliness to some extent.

Phase Six: Looking for Commonalities and Differences Among Participants

By looking for commonalities and differences within and across interviews, interviews were broadly categorised by the researcher under two narrative themes: stories about trauma and resilience and stories about searching for belonging.

Phase Seven: Writing Academic Narratives About Personal Stories

As opposed to seeking a single true interpretation, the researchers accepts that stories can be represented in many ways and aimed to approach the analysis with humility. Hence, the rationale for selecting stories was documented to enhance transparency, recognising that these choices may reflect the researcher’s own emotional responses and meaning making rather than those of the participant. The researcher selected stories were participants discussed subjective experiences of loneliness in line with the aim of the research. The narratives shared the results section are also those were participants shared emotional and highly reflective experiential accounts (Fritz & Lysack, 2014; Craig et al., 2021) along with those that move away from a minority and deficit-based approach to also highlight participants agency, resilience and strengths. In line with narrative fidelity principles of aesthetic language stories that made use of visual arts were included in the findings (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

3.8 Participants

There is no predetermined sample size in narrative research. While the CASP (2023) tool assessed qualitative studies on data saturation — the point that no new themes emerge — this concept is less straightforward in narrative research. Frank (2010) argued that a story is never final because individuals are continuously making meaning through dialogue. From this lens, aiming for data saturation could go against narrative inquiry by closing stories. Instead of data saturation, narrative fidelity has been proposed as a set of emerging criteria for evaluating narrative research (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Narrative fidelity involves addressing betweenness and believability. Betweenness involves acknowledging the bond between the researcher and the storyteller, and between the story and the context of the story. While to demonstrate believability stories must be a reasonable portrayal and resonate with the audience experiences. Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) also emphasised the similarities of narrative fidelity and art, placing value on aesthetic language with a focus on how the story is being shared rather its content. Aesthetic language often takes the reader to feel and imagine through symbolism, metaphor and imagery.

A total of 10 individuals participated in this research. The words participants, storytellers and narrators are used interchangeably. Interview-based qualitative research adopts relatively small sample sizes to preserve the distinctiveness of each participant's voice (Robinson, 2014). Evidence from existing literature also support the use of small samples when conducting narrative analysis. The paper by Robinson (2014) commented on a review of peer-reviewed qualitative studies synthesised and identified narrative inquiries employing between three and ten participants. Taken together, these methodological principles and published examples support the sufficiency of a purposively sample of 10 participants were depth along with personal, social and cultural context are prioritised over breadth. The demographic

characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. This outlines the basic context from that each participants narrative is performed. All information shown was presented as it was verbally communicated by the participants at the start of each interview. To preserve anonymity pseudonyms were used for participants and for the people they talked about in their stories (*e.g.* friends, partners, and family members). Specific geographical locations were replaced with broader regional descriptors. The ages of participants were described at the time of the interview. While most participants lived alone, had no children or current partners, there was also a small representation of parenthood, partnership and not living alone.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was sought from the University of Essex Ethics Committee. The research proposal was reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 1 and awarded a favourable opinion on the 5th of August 2024. All participants were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix C) that included the purpose of the research, procedure, potential risks and benefits. The participants were asked to provide informed consent (see Appendix B), this entailed them being aware that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point with no consequences. Consent was also obtained at the start of each interview, as recommended by the Health Research Authority (HRA, 2018).

To preserve anonymity participants names were coded using a pseudonym. Participants were asked if they had a preferred pseudonym they would like to use. All participants declined this invitation to choose their pseudonyms. The recorded interviews were stored in a password protected device that could only be accessed by myself. Sharing this prior to starting the interview was key, as for instance one of the participants shared their concerns around preservation of his identity. Participants were reassured that any identifiable information would

be removed from the thesis. Furthermore, participants were made aware that the research could be published.

The researcher was aware of the power dynamics as the researcher while also holding an awareness about differences including but not limited to sexual orientation, gender identity and age. Gill *et al.* (2008) discussed the pressure that participants experience during qualitative interviews. In addition, I recognised the existence of historical discrimination and stigma faced by this community (Fredriksen-Goldsen *et al.*, 2011). Thus, I aimed to provide an inclusive and non-judgmental environment by being respectful and sensitive about the diverse identities and experiences. As interview processes are often daunting, I ensured that the interviews were held in participants location of choice and with sufficient privacy. Participants were made aware of the systems for storing tapes and the amount of time that they would be stored before being destroyed. In addition, the researcher was aware that some participants may have experienced trauma, discrimination and stigma throughout their lives and approached topics in a trauma-informed way. For instance, participants were encouraged to make a choice around preferred interviews and their stories were prioritised. The researcher also made sure to ask throughout about participants wellbeing. If participants became emotionally distressed, they were offered breaks, time to pause and breath. The researcher made use of some of her clinical skills around active listening and validation. Participants were thanked for their generosity in sharing their experiences, time and images. This appreciation was mentioned during the interview and after in an email. This is in line with, my values and the social constructionism approach view on the importance of establishing a caring relationship (Gergen, & Gergen, 2008).

The researcher was curious and open to explore intersectionality. They engaged with online webinars hosted by the Centre for Intimate and Sexual Citizenship (CISC) at the University of Essex. Additionally, an important and enjoyable part of the research process was engaging with LGBTQ+ media and literature. The researcher also attended an LGBTQ+ inter-

generational event hosted by a charity. This engagement throughout the research process helped enhance cultural competence, address blind spots, develop knowledge and engage in an active reflective process.

Through the interview process some ethical dilemmas emerged. An ethical consideration arose when some participants, who used photographs to elicit their stories, shared identifiable images via email. Although an image release form was in place (see Appendix D), several of these photographs included participants' faces that risked compromising anonymity. The images functioned as prompts to facilitate participants' storytelling rather than as data. To safeguard anonymity and uphold ethical principles of confidentiality, I decided for images to not be reproduced in the findings.

Another ethical consideration arose when one participant was unable to return the signed consent form via email due to limited understanding of digital technology. To address this, after various conversations I arranged to exchange the consent form via post. While this ensured that informed consent was still formally obtained, it introduced a potential confidentiality concern, as it required the disclosure of personal postal information. Following the consideration around implications of this carefully and discussion with the participant, who expressed comfort with the arrangement and consented to sharing their address for this purpose. This adaptation reflects the need for flexibility in accommodating participants' accessibility needs, while balancing these against confidentiality considerations.

Following the first five interviews, recruitment ceased. To recruit further, an amendment was submitted to the ethics committee with an updated version of the recruitment poster that included a picture of myself and further information around the interview options and the time interviews would last. This format presents a more sensitive approach to the research by aligning with principles of transparency. A second amendment made was to extend

the participants' age cut-off to 50. This enabled the inclusion of a broader cohort of LGBTQ+ older adults who, despite being younger at the time of decriminalisation in 1967, were still significantly shaped by subsequent periods of stigma, discrimination, and legislative change. This decision is consistent with existing LGBTQ+ ageing research, where 50 years is frequently used as the threshold to account for both historical cohort effects and the earlier onset of health and social inequalities within LGBTQ+ populations (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011).

Reflecting on betweenness, acknowledging the bond between the researcher and the storyteller, is particularly relevant to one of the interviews whereby the storyteller was someone I had not previously met, but was expected to encounter at a social event. This raised questions about how to uphold confidentiality while also navigating the reality of shared social spaces. Prior to the interview we were both aware of the later encounter. At the end of the interview, I addressed this directly with the participant, offering them the choice regarding how they would prefer to interact in a future mutual social context. This included the option that I act as a stranger to protect their privacy. This collaborative approach placed control with the participant, aligning with ethical principles of respect, autonomy, safeguarding and confidentiality. The participant shared their preference, choosing that I acknowledge them in mutual social spaces. The researcher reflected on their dynamic and dual role and made use of supervisory spaces to consider appropriate boundaries and responses.

3.10 Dissemination

During the process of recruitment, the researcher asked an independent, peer led, self-help group for older (50+) LGBTQ+ persons, about the barriers and challenges for people engaging with research. In aiming to mitigate some of the expressed views, around how people where often not informed about what happened to their stories, participants were informed

about the findings of the study being incorporated into a final-year 40,000-word thesis, for my Doctorate at the University of Essex. They were also informed about findings of the current research being presented at the Essex University Postgraduate Research Conference and then available on direct access in the Essex University Research Repository.

As part of preparation for publication an amendment is to be submitted to the ethics committee allowing a chance for participants to review and share their views on the findings chapter. One of the expressed views of LGBTQ+ older adult population was: 'Why bother?' 'What difference will our sharing them make?'. In aiming to address this and enhance the practical applications of the research, a summarised report could be shared with local health and social care services, including care homes, residential settings, day centres, GP practices, and LGBTQ+ charities.

Consultations and presentations of key findings will be offered, promoting a collaborative approach to better support this community. I aim to write this thesis for publication in a journal article format and submit to *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* in the first instance. My findings could be used to contribute to publications such as the Open Access book, 'Transforming LGBTQ lives' and the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Age and Aging*.

Table 1*Sample Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Religion	Geographical Area Born	Current Geographical Area
Michael	64	Male	Gay	White European	Atheist	East Coast	Northwest
Peter	83	Male	Gay	White British	“Part of the team”	Northwest	West Midlands
Elsa	73	Trans Women	Bisexual	White Scottish		West Midlands	West Midlands
Owen	69	Male	Gay	White English	Buddhist	Southeastern	West Midlands
Matthew		Male	Gay	White British			
Martin	59	Male	Gay	White British	Christian	East Midlands	West Midlands
Pascal	59	Male	Gay	White British	Christian	West Midlands	West Midlands
John	50	Male	Gay	White European	Christian	Southeastern, Portugal	Southeastern
Alisha	62	Female	Lesbian	European and Asian	No	Southeastern	Southeastern
Mark	62	Male	Gay	Mixed European	Christian	Southwest	Northwest

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1 Chapter Overview

The previous chapter provided an overview of my epistemological stance and positionality statement. These were followed by the design, procedure, measures, analysis, participants, ethical considerations and dissemination. The present chapter illustrates the findings of this thesis. Following the principles of narrative analysis the aim of the presentation of the findings was to preserve participants narratives and avoid decontextualising the stories shared. To ensure that this aim was met, each participant, or narrator, is introduced. An overview of the narrative structures is then provided. The findings from participants stories are subsequently presented through two major narrative themes each with subthemes.

4.2 Narrators Summaries

To honour the individuality of participants stories and alluding to the narrative fidelity criteria of betweenness (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995), the importance of acknowledging the bond between the story and the context of the story, this section presents a summary of each narrator. The narrative thematic analysis identified themes across accounts however, the following vignettes aim to preserve the uniqueness of each participant and their context. While vignettes are grounded in participants narratives it is acknowledged that the researcher played an active role in how these accounts were summarised.

Michael's Story

Michael's narrative started with the assertion 'I don't feel lonely anymore' establishing a present resolved identity before retelling stories of loneliness as experiences in the past. His narrative was non-linear, often shifting between childhood experiences, midlife and recent years. Being a member of a small family with a partial migration background, Michael described concealing his sexual orientation given the fear of losing his parents' approval. He referred to the homophobic attitudes within his social context during his childhood and backlash following the HIV epidemic. Michael identified feelings of loneliness in the age range of 30-40 because of how he was excluded from normative life expectations (*e.g.*, marriage, children). Michael referred to a turning point in his life following a health scare. This led him to lose weight, increased his confidence and love for himself. Having a friend come out as a lesbian also encouraged him to share his sexual orientation. For Michael loneliness was embedded within a broader story of fear of rejection, a performing façade, internalised homophobia and relational learning. In the absence of early role models, interpersonal experiences during adulthood offered an alternative narrative, enabling loneliness to be re-

storied as an experience that could be acted upon rather than endured. The recurring narrative of Al-Anon, a peer support group for people affected by another person's alcohol use, provided a framework through which the fear of rejection and 'Need to be needed' could be explored. In Michael narrative loneliness was positioned as an emotion that called for a change in attitude and active engagement.

Peter's Story

Peter's narrative was linear, using photographs to move through chronological life events. He returned to the theme of how much he enjoyed the art of performing both at the beginning and end of the interview. Within a context of being a war baby, the eldest child and in the absence of economic resources Peter's narrative was dominated by a declaration of never feeling lonely as a child and always considering himself special. With enthusiasm he shared multiple stories of his acting career. His narrative of loneliness was presented through concrete moments in time. One of these moments was in 1984 when having to live a double life given the risk of job termination if his sexual orientation became known. The other core moment that Peter identified with feelings of loneliness was in 1994 when he was given six months to live following an HIV diagnosis. In Peter's narrative loneliness was positioned as situational and short-lived. His stories of loneliness were followed by positive life changes of connecting with his values and interests including travelling, acting and social activism.

Elsas's Story

Elsas's storytelling was shaped by a non-linear structure and metaphorical language (e.g. *'I'm still the toddler on the floor playing with my marbles'*). When asked about loneliness she narrated how being the youngest of four, with a five-year gap to her next sibling, led her to experience herself as an only child. She described her sexual orientation as contingent on life stage, positioning it as fluid rather than fixed. Elsas's late wife was as a central narrative anchor.

Meeting her wife was the primary turning point in the story and her death followed a transformative period, during which Elsa underwent gender-affirming surgery. In Elsa's narrative loneliness was related to anxiety and boredom. She constructed loneliness as something she could respond to actively. Her narrative highlighted relational difficulties alongside avenues of artistic expression, including drama, poetry, and music.

Owen's Story

Owen's shared how being an only child for the first seven years of his life gave him a 'certain amount of resilience' to be on his own. His initial claim of never feeling lonely was elaborated through concrete experiences throughout his life. In his narrative of loneliness, he described experiences of homesickness, losing his partner to the AIDS epidemic, unemployment and depression. The evolving nature of his narrative is mirrored by his conceptualisation of loneliness first described as a disconnection and then gradually layered with additional meanings such as the absence of choice. Owen's storytelling referred to a befriending group and 'the power of the web' emphasising the value of interpersonal relationships and interactions in his life narrative. For Owen the interpersonal relationships go beyond the LGBTQ+ community also involving activities like karaoke or his Buddhist practice.

Matthew's Story

Matthew's narrative of loneliness began with the loss of Thomas, his partner, to cancer. Throughout the conversation, recollections of Thomas's sudden and traumatic loss re-emerge, shaping the narrative arc and contextualising subsequent events. This story of loss and loneliness captured a range of dimensions including interpersonal component of missing their company and reflections about the healthcare system. Through a non-linear structure Matthew's narrative was also constructed of subplots around experiencing feelings of

loneliness from an early age, absence of relatable figures growing up and finding these connections during adulthood. He also spoke about the importance of work throughout his life.

Martin's Story

Martin's narrative incorporated his multiple identities as someone who was adopted, a gay man, a father, a partner and a priest. He used placed-based metaphors and significant relational events as symbolic anchors to narrate experiences of loneliness. Growing up in a rural community, his childhood story of funfairs served as the narrative origin and was revisited across the account. The cyclical movement between past and present was emphasised, when Martin used placed-based metaphors as a mirror of his sense of self. Loneliness was repeatedly constructed as involving the adoption of a persona and accompanied by an ongoing search. The narrative highlighted intrapersonal wonderings about institutions such as the Navy, Army, and NHS, acting as 'replacement families,' that offered structure and belonging. Martin's children and path as a priest were also key aspects of his narrative. Following the interview, he emailed through images that connected with his stories of loneliness.

Pascal's Story

From the start, Pascal highlighted 'I am used to being lonely, but it's not an issue in my life'. Pascal's storytelling was linear; he brought his teddy bear as a prop to give structure and emotional depth to a narrative that began in early childhood when he had a stammer. A recurring thread across his narrative was the impact of bullying throughout his school years and at work during early adulthood. This was followed by a turning point in the narrative – an attempt to end his life and the start of his religious path that led him to become a priest. Throughout his narrative Pascal speaks about escapism through travelling and books. Towards the end of his narrative Pascal used a highly emotive film scene as a narrative device to convey meaning around his understanding sense of self, religion and concealment of sexuality.

John 's Story

John positioned loneliness as a present and ongoing experience. His narrative placed emphasis on oppression and stigma through stories about employment, mental health, sexuality, religion, physical health and migration. His storytelling was rich in metaphoric language, fragmented and non-linear, moving from present day reflections to childhood memories. A key aspect of John's narrative was the movement between countries, including early life in the UK, a return to his parents' country of origin at age 12, and a later, his chosen return to the UK at age 20. These geographical shifts were linked to experiences of loneliness and belonging. Childhood relocation was narrated as somewhat traumatic, while adult migration was framed as challenging agentic act. John's narrative became more vivid, detailed and coherent when he drew on cultural conventions and described two of his paintings that, for him, represented loneliness. His artistic expression served as narrative anchor through which loneliness could be articulated.

Aisha 's Story

Aisha's storytelling was non-linear and cyclical. She returned to her experience of loneliness at Christmas, creating a recurring narrative thread throughout the interview. In her narrative Aisha emphasised loneliness being intertwined with the political context, class, race, sexuality, motherhood and immigration. Experiences of loneliness were also embedded within stories about her experience as a child from an immigrant family, the absence of interest in difference during childhood and earlier working years, the bullying her son experienced at school and as lesbian mother not being invited to parents' events. Aisha's narrative was characterised by how during an undeniable oppressive and homophobic time, cultural events and spaces acted as a sustainment. Connecting with social activists, writers and poets was shared as an interesting and thrilling experience. Communities have changed throughout her

life and at present there is a conscious intention to maintain connection. In Aisha's narrative loneliness was positioned as requiring action and resources.

Marks's Story

Marks's storytelling was non-linear. He used a few photographs when sharing his narrative. Mark emphasised the privilege and importance of having an accepting support system of family and friends during his early years. He narrated a story set in his childhood about his mother providing a message of acceptance and respect for same-sex relationships. Loneliness was narrated as more salient in early adulthood, particularly during their twenties and thirties—a period he described as having reduced agency and marked by societal hostility toward gay men. This was conveyed through a story including vivid imagery of dead flowers and graffiti, evoking the hostility during the AIDS epidemic. Despite these instances, Mark highlighted moments of community and camaraderie, where others 'rallied around', providing social connection and affirmation of identity against homophobia. At the same time, certain aspects of loneliness were tied to later stages particularly through romantic relationships. Through his narrative, Mark situated his experiences of loneliness and connection within a historical, social and interpersonal context, illustrating both the protective role of early acceptance and the ongoing negotiation of identity in environments that could be hostile or excluding.

4.3 Narrative Structure

Narrative Structure refers to how as humans we organise our story across time-linking past, present and future – and how we position ourselves as passive or active agents within those experiences (Crossley, 2000). When asked the opening question: What does loneliness mean to you? some participants positioned themselves initially as passive agents offering a

definition of loneliness. While others responded by sharing a story that situated loneliness within their lived experience, hence positioning themselves as active agents.

Although, the opening question was framed in the present tense, many accounts were oriented in the past. Several participants initially distanced themselves from loneliness (*e.g.* ‘I don’t feel lonely anymore’—Michael). For some, sharing their narrative accounts involved returning to childhood as a way of orienting the researcher to the broader arc of their story (*e.g.* ‘So I was a little boy. I’ll tell you my story’--Pascal).

Michael, Peter, Elsa, Owen and Pascal made sense of how being or feeling like an only child gave them a sense of self-reliance or resilience around being on their own. Their stories of loneliness as well as Marks were linked to later stages in life, while Aisha, John, Matthew and Martin identified with experiences and feelings of loneliness from an early age. Aisha and John both highlighted in their narratives of loneliness the social and cultural challenges embedded within migrant family contexts.

4.4 Narrative Themes

The participants interviewed told stories about loneliness that were interpreted as broadly fitting two narrative themes: stories about trauma and resilience and stories about searching for belonging. Participants did not tell stories in only one of these themes and often moved between the two. The narrative themes are presented along with original extracts from narrator’s stories showing how the nuances and language of participants have been preserved. The original extracts also aim to meet the criteria of believability where stories are a reasonable portrayal and resonate with the audience experiences (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

In keeping with a narrative framework participants’ voices are privileged with minimal researcher interpretation. Following participants’ suggestions these narrative themes aim to be

a resource to those LGBTQ+ older adults experiencing loneliness. The hope is that stories from relatable others can bring a sense of meaningful connection.

While the narrative themes are grounded in participants stories it is acknowledged that the interpretative process was shaped by the researchers personal, clinical and academic positioning. The findings illustrate how participants made sense of their experiences of loneliness, thus aligning with the research aim. Although each participant's story was unique, these themes highlight common narratives present across stories.

Stories about Trauma and Resilience

Narrators' feelings of loneliness were connected to their storytelling of traumatic experiences that often co-existed with resilience. Tearfulness and laughter were present within these narratives whereby in many instances also involved metaphors, and artistic expression. Most participants were able to tell these stories coherently and in narrative order, demonstrating reflection and meaning making of the experiences over time. This narrative theme has three subthemes: performing a façade, queer lives and queer loss and in the absence of choice. The idea is that all three subthemes are composed of stories of trauma and resilience.

Some participants shared how they found themselves performing a façade from an early age. While for others this was noticed in early adulthood in the context of workplace environments. Early adulthood was also characterised by a time when participants faced queer loss, queer love and an absence of choice. In their stories some participants highlighted how their experiences of loneliness were intertwined with other forms of their identity (*e.g.*, migration, unemployment, physical health, mental health, *etc.*). Individual and community resilience were common across narratives.

Loneliness was felt in the presence of relational, sociocultural, health and occupational related traumas. Stories moved through different domains of experience: intrapersonal,

interpersonal, cultural conventions and social structures. Even though these domains could be interpreted as stemming from this narrative theme, each story is unique to each participant, and their wider generational, historical, social and cultural context of the narrative is important when understanding these stories. When reading the extracts I recommend that the reader return to the storyteller's summaries from a more person-centred and contextual understanding.

Performing a Façade. Participants stories of loneliness involved the suppression or alternation of their sexual preferences to meet external expectations. Narrators used different terminology including – a façade, putting up a wall, hard shell or putting on a persona. While some participants shared never disclosing their sexual preferences with family members others who did face estrangement or distancing. This was different for Mark who had the support from family from an early stage.

The historical context of the narrators' experiences is crucial, highlighting a period in which societal and institutional norms prohibited or inhibited openly identifying as LGBTQ+. Hence, performing a façade and engaging in performative acts are seen as a survival strategy developed in response to the fear of rejection, homophobic climate, microaggressions and heteronormative pressures within social structures (*e.g.*, health care, work, police, *etc.*). Even though this strategy reduced risk of exclusion, showed individual resilience and was protective for participants at the time it involved having less authentic connections, hiding parts of themselves and in many instances the emotional cost of loneliness.

Most participants' narratives suggest that performing a facade involved far more than suppressing or altering their sexual orientation, it encompassed the ongoing management of identity, behaviour, and self-presentation to navigate social expectations. For instance, Matthew and Martin told stories about putting on an extroverted act for other people from an early age. Whereas Michael, Elsa, Pascal and Owen shared stories about the concealment of sexual preferences. In telling these stories they incorporated dialogue making the interpersonal

experience feel alive. Contrastingly, Peter and Mark shared stories around not feeling lonely or having to engage in performative acts during school years. They associated this to having supportive peers. Geographical location during adolescence was also mentioned by Aisha and John as key in the possibility for authentic self-expression of same-sex attraction.

In the following story Martin's repeated experience of hiding alone at the funfair illustrates a form of loneliness that remained unacknowledged.

I think initially I was in a very busy family. I was still quite lonely. So, to give you an example of that. I'm one of my triggers if you like. So, one thing I absolutely, it makes me cry to this day. I have to avoid them like the plague, are fun fairs. I absolutely avoid them and I get very tearful, even thinking about fun fairs. So, here was me a really popular guy when I was growing up. So, my early teens before I left home and we lived in a very rural community. About 10 miles away from my school and most of my friends lived 10 miles away. The other side of that school. So, the school was in the middle, so between their houses and my house, it was probably about 1520 miles because a lot not many people lived my side. I went to the school, but at that school loads of people came from the other side to that school. So, all my friends were there. And then every year we'd have an annual fair, and the fair was on my side. But of course, that was a long way for all my mates to come from their house. Just, you know, to catch a bus, to go to a fair. On my side of town and for years and years and years I used to go to the fair by myself from the age of about 10-11 and I would... I'm getting tearful thinking about it (laughs)

(pause, tears come out of his eyes)

I told you it was triggering. For years I would just hide myself away (pause)

at the fair and then I would catch the bus. And my sisters, because they were there with all their girlfriends, they'd be having a hell of a party.

They'd be like, sisters: oh, how's the fair?

Martin: Oh, great. Great. Great.

Sister: Didn't see you.

Martin: Oh, no, we got on all those baby rides, and we got the water and the roller coaster and the whatever it was (laughs)

Back in the day, I probably did that yeah, five years or more. And just recently in New York. I don't know where we went to. Is it Rhode Island? Probably, yeah or Long Island. Anyway, we were in New York about three or four weeks ago. And of course, there was this bloody fun fair (laughing), And you know, James (partner) said: oh, should we stay for the rides? Should we stay for the fun fair?

And I was like absolutely not and now I really... nothing would get me to one. And I think. It sort of amplifies that loneliness. Of being a child, not really fitting in. Exploring your sexuality, not knowing that you're exploring it. Having nothing in common with the other guys, being the life and soul of the party at school with loads and loads of mates who would be mortified or just would not believe that story at all. But I've got loads of mates because of my shyness and my hiddenness ... they'd be astounded by that story. (Martin)

While the funfair is typically associated with collective enjoyment, Martins meaning making of his repeated solitary attendance and subsequent performative act of enjoyment highlight that past experiences of loneliness continue to impact him in the present. Martin describes being 'the life and soul of the party' with 'loads and loads of mates', which indicates quantity of social connection. However, this sits alongside feelings of shyness, hiddenness, not

fitting in or having anything in common. This tension suggests that the outward identity functions as a performative act or performing facade, rather than an authentic expression of self. It highlights both the skill involved in sustaining the performance and the psychological cost of loneliness for living behind it.

For some narrators the loneliness around performing a façade came into play in the context of employment given oppressive social structures, homophobic comments of colleagues and the absence of common activities. This often-led participants to not feel able to share themselves authentically and form meaningful relationships at work. For instance, Peter and Aisha both worked in the education sector. Their experiences of loneliness were closely related to their jobs as teachers. While Peter highlighted the impact of an oppressive system Aisha talked about the interpersonal and cultural domains of her experience.

The loneliness comes in to play a little bit because I had to lead a double life. In order to progress in education then it was not OK to be gay. You could be sacked for being gay. (Peter).

When I was at work, I worked as a teacher for quite a long time, and I wasn't particularly out at work. I started work in sort of about 1990, and I definitely you know, I think people knew I was a lesbian, but it was... It wasn't very... I did feel separate from my heterosexual colleagues, actually, that was also type of loneliness. We did things differently socially. They would have a culture they're going to the pub and they'd go out together. I did lesbian things, but at work I didn't feel I could talk about my world at work. And I wasn't really out of work very much ever till my last teaching job in the two first decade of the 2000s. (Aisha)

[Researcher: What do you thin, maybe stopped you from being able to share at

work?]

I think it was just we lived in different worlds. There was heterosexual world, there was lesbian or lesbian and gay world to some extent, and I would never go to work and say, oh, I went to pride at the weekend or I went to this really great club in my first job, I worked in (name removed for anonymity). Unbelievably, from 1992 to 97, the longest I worked in teaching and there was one other person there identified as lesbian. I did go to a lesbian club with her once. But it's just like no one was interested. It was life was much more heteronormative. People had families, they had children or they were older people. The older black teachers, never really came out to them just didn't do it. They were sort of, you know, there were these sorts of maternal women, Asian, the Caribbean, African women. But I'd never wonder the thought of coming out to them in in the 1990s. Which is lonely, you know? And I had a partner, but they kind of vaguely knew I had a partner, but I didn't go into any detail. It was, yeah, lonely. That is a lonely experience or lonely or just feeling very outside of something that is loneliness. Yeah (Aisha).

For some participants like Elsa, Pascal and Martin at different points in their lives the loneliness around performing a façade and not sharing their sexual orientation was framed as a choice, where other forms of their identity took priority including being a father, practicing religion or being in a long-lasting relationship. Through retelling the scene of a film Pascal shared his decision to stay closeted and prioritise his religious path.

I don't know if you've ever seen the film Priest, it's so one of the main actors. It's set in Liverpool and it's a Roman Catholic priest. He he's just starting in his in his professional career and it's the son of Bill Roach that plays Ken Barlow. It's his son Linus Roach that plays the priest, and it's called Priest. Some of the opening scenes

are about an old Roman Catholic priest that's basically been told it's time to retire and he's quite he's quite angry about it.

He says: What a waste of a life.

And this young priest confides in him about his sexuality.

And he says to him: Get out while you can Greg. Love who you want for who you are.

And the young priest turns.

I'm going to cry (pause)

Aye.

The young priest says: I can't give it up. I know that God wants me to be a priest and I can't be anything else, and that really resonates with me (Pascal).

In this excerpt Pascal draws on the scene of a film to articulate and externalise an experience that resonates with his own. Pascal deeply felt a religious vocation and commitment to the path of being a priest. This was a highly emotive moment in the interview and sheds light on the importance of cultural artifacts to communicate meaning. The story captures the intersectionality between sexual orientation and religion.

Queer Loss, Queer Lives. Narrators shared stories of loneliness following experiences of loss throughout their life. Experiences of loss were multi-layered, involving health scares and loss or disruption of friendships and intimate relationships (*e.g.* AIDS epidemic, breakups, *etc...*). When sharing these stories most participants reflected on the impact of these experiences on their physical and mental health. Stories of loss were often followed by learning and life changes (*i.e.* a move towards beliefs and values). These were understood by the researcher as examples of individual and community resilience.

Most participants shared stories of loneliness arising from relational loss, adding dialogue to their stories which brought the interpersonal domain of the experience to live.

Reflecting on the experiences of this generation, stories of loss often involved the impact of the AIDS epidemic from an individual, relational and community perspective.

But then... (pause) I thought I might have done a bit after my third partner died.

This was the one I always thought was going to be for life sort of thing. We bought a flat together, but he died within two years. It was the AIDS epidemic sort of thing.

And after that, I suppose, again, I was surrounded by people, but I did feel a certain loneliness. And I actually had a year off work from depression because of not just that but the whole AIDS situation so that sort of loneliness, depression. I don't know if it sorts of leads into each other. That was well I had friends around me, but you lose something that way it's sort of. It's a shock to the system (Owen).

Owen continues his narrative by referring to the multiple experiences of loss he experienced at the time of the AIDS epidemic. Highlighting the negative attitude of social structures, the frightening times and at the same time the community resilience showed through the togetherness of the gay community.

I remember losing loads of friends. I mean, I didn't go to all the funerals. I remember being at loads of funerals and I still had friends, but it was a frightening time. When it first started, we didn't know what caused it or how it was transmitted or anything.

There's a lot of negativities from people, like governments and what have you. Though ironically, of course, it actually drove the gay community together more you know sort of so ... But yeah, it was quite a frightening time you know (Owen).

In a different vein to the rest of participants who shared stories of loss about loved ones, Peter shared his experience of how being diagnosed with HIV evoked feelings of loneliness.

And again, second time in my life when I got that diagnosis. I felt it was the end of the end of it. If I was going to be at, you know, I'm going to die and be definitely that for that matter. And so that was a... (pause) that was the time when I really felt lonely. The fact that I thought I was this, is just me. You know? Why me? Why me? You know, I was angry because I just started this fabulous new life and it was welcoming me. I felt part of. And I thought, I'm going to lose all that. Maybe one of the factors is the fact that I was a long-distance runner. You know, because most of the people, let's face it but most people that have contracted HIV in 1984 are no longer with us (Peter).

When sharing this story, Peter uses the word 'that' to refer to HIV, creating a distance from the diagnosis. I also observed how loneliness moved in the interview from being previously named ('the loneliness') to being felt ('I really felt lonely'). Towards the end of the story, Peter tried to reflect and develop meaning of his survival to the HIV diagnosis. Following this story of loneliness linked to a health-related traumatic experience, Peter continues his narrative:

The thing is that I'm really glad about that because of it, HIV, that I've done some of the things that I have done, which is probably the time to move on to the next slide. Now this is, can you recognise this? (Peter)

[Researcher: Is that Australia?]

Correct. in front of Sydney Opera House and in the harbour and this, it is a nice photograph. That is why I chose this one. I am not alone. I mean I'm alone, but I don't feel lonely. Not in the least. Having survived for 20 years with HIV, I thought I wanted to do something special (Peter).

Here Peter expressed being alone and not feeling lonely. He reflects on his resilience to explore new possibilities following being a long-term survivor of HIV. Similarly, to other moments in the interview this is an example of how in Peters narrative feelings of loneliness

arising from traumatic experiences were followed by individual resilience. Similarly, Michael described how facing a health scare that led him to lose weight, share his sexual orientation and actively seek connections.

Participants also shared stories of relational loss in more recent years of their life. In most of these narratives there was a sense of unrecognised loss and harm by social structures that appeared to impact participants' experiences of loneliness.

[R: I guess my first question is always around what does loneliness mean to you?]

Well, when Thomas died in 2016. We've been together for 40 years. He died of (pause) lung cancer, which had spread to his brain. I met him, I mean, he came for one night and stayed 40 years, so (pause) That's (pause) I think, well, I miss most. It's just a feeling of having him in the flat. Not being with him, because (pause) We (pause) mostly stayed in separate rooms, and just came together now and again. Um... And then every now and again, he pops his head around the door and says:

Do you want a cup of tea?

I suppose I just miss (pause) the physical contact, just the hugs. Because I haven't had any physical contact, really, since he died. You know, 3 years before he died, because. We didn't know he had cancer, and that was... Thomas to the illnesses, he didn't want to be touched. Um... And it was made worse because his GP misdiagnosed him throughout, until... Right until about 3 weeks before he died, he was still being misdiagnosed as having a trapped nerve when it was cancer. And then his death was even worse in hospital, St Mary's Hospital. In Paddington, which is a major hospital. The treatment he got was appalling. He wasn't washed for 3 days. And... Yeah. Before we went to... permanently delay the hospital. He got in such pain I called the ambulance and the ambulance couldn't give him anything stronger than paracetamol unless he agreed to go to the hospital and first, he wouldn't go,

but then, when I had to call him another time. The pain was so bad, he did go, and then, of course, he never came home. But it was a very painful death, and I... I can remember him lying in bed here and saying.

In pain and saying: help me, help me.

And there was nothing I could do. On one occasion, that was happening. The district nurse was here. But they don't carry drugs anymore, and the... GP had said he didn't need any morphine. Well, of course, he did. He should have been here for use by the district nurse when he needed it, but... So, he died in pain, unnecessary pain. Because the GP... Cooked it up, the hospital cooked it up. And ever since then... I keep thinking, you know. I should have done more, I should have done more, but I just didn't know what to do (Matthew).

The above stories that Peter, Owen and Matthew narrate are examples of feelings of loneliness arising when faced with loss. In telling their stories of loneliness participants also shared a process of ongoing reflections, meaning making and processing. Narrators connected their past experiences with current feelings and thoughts. In these narratives, loneliness is related to relationships while also felt in the presence of others. Alternatively, there is also space for being alone and not feeling lonely.

In the Absence of Choice. The absence of choice, agency and power was highlighted by participants in multiple contexts as having a direct connection with experiences of loneliness. For some narrators this came in the form of social exclusion (*i.e.* not being invited to social events), normative pressures (*e.g.* marriage, children), expectations (*i.e.* the gay scene focusing on sex, Christmas as a time of togetherness), unemployment, migration, physical health and mental health. The complexity and intersectionality within different domains of experience were very present for some participants when sharing stories of loneliness. In

sharing these stories participants also spoke about what had been helpful often, making reference to collectives.

I was unemployed for a while between jobs about two years and I couldn't afford to go many places. I was forced to be on my own. I wasn't that lonely, but I was more lonely than I would have been normally. I mean, I got some support from my local trade union club, they used to give me sort of some free drinks once a week sort of thing you know. It's like a coming to the club I did feel slightly lonely then, but basically, I was forced to be on my own. I couldn't afford to go uptown. I couldn't afford to you know ... I felt enclosed I felt things pushing back and I sort of like not claustrophobic but yeah, slightly claustrophobic I was in my flat all the time. I think it's not exactly specifically for older people I have a perception that sort of gay spaces or LGBT spaces are shrinking mainly because younger people maybe are using apps and things like bars or what have you are closing down I think when I was unemployed, not being able to go into places like that because I couldn't afford it. If the places aren't there in the first place. I think there is room maybe for social groups. It doesn't have to be in a bar, but it can be, but perhaps more social groups are all LGB, but certainly for older LGBT plus people. So that they don't... Yeah, so they don't have to be on their own. (Owen).

Owen's narrative of loneliness connects with the absence of choice when faced with unemployment. In this excerpt he talks about LGBTQ+ spaces and uses the phrasing 'so they don't have to be on their own'. His narratives of loneliness sheds light on the importance of differentiating forced from chosen loneliness and to the importance of community resilience. Owen links the past world of the story to the present world of the storytelling. Throughout his narrative Owen uses vivid, metaphorical and embodied language - such as 'enclosed', 'pushing

back', 'claustrophobic' offering readers a window into the emotional and physical intensity of his experiences.

Some narrators clearly highlighted how their experiences of loneliness were not only related to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Aisha, John and Michael's stories of loneliness were closely related to being a member of an immigrant family and the displacement from extended family. These experiences were shaped by circumstances beyond participants' control within contexts of limited agency therefore reflecting an absence of choice.

I felt very lonely as a child at times, and I think some of that is because we were an immigrant family and we had no, you know, I had a grandmother who I loved in Sweden, I had grandparents. I didn't. My mother was an only child, but I had a lot of family in Sweden and actually I lived there for a year and a half when I was three and four. So, there was a loneliness and missing them, but that was about my parents as migrants (Aisha).

Aisha, John and Elsa's stories of loneliness highlight that the absence of choice, agency and power through intersecting social identities can inform experiences of loneliness. Aisha's narrative is notable for representing a particular intersection of identities—mixed-race, women, lesbian, motherhood, age and professional status.

I think there was a bit of a loneliness about being a mum as a lesbian. It's all obviously social infrastructure of tea groups and mums groups and I think we didn't quite get invited to the same things or people the straight women would all have friendship groups and we'd feel a little outside things, but then we had a lesbian mums group, so you know, it's always been the antithesis available. So, we had a lesbian mum's group. We still have friends in that group, but there wouldn't, isn't... There weren't mums in that group who had children at our child's nursery or school, so

there was just a sense of being a bit on our own and forever ever. And I think we had our son 22 years ago. I think things have shifted a bit around acceptance of non heterosexual families in schools and nursery settings, but it was them at times you could feel lonely. We think. Why aren't we sort of part? You know why? Why are these other mums doing these things? Why haven't we been invited along and you know, it could also be because we're I'm a psychotherapist, my partner is a psychotherapist, we're also we're a little bit scary. We're a bit old. We were older mums. I imagine some people felt a little bit something all right? I don't know. Didn't ask them. Maybe. So that was a little bit of loneliness at times (Aisha).

My son got homophobically bullied at primary school and secondary school, so that was a slightly that knows actually, in secondary school, the mother parents really stepped up actually, and they all came forward and they said they were horrified about what was going on actually and that their children had told their parents. Well, it still makes me cry (removes tears from eyes) . So, children told the parents about what was going on with our son, and the parents are really supportive, so potentially that could have been lonely, but it was more horrible than lonely (laughs) (Aisha).

In sharing the above stories Aisha narrates the loneliness experienced through interpersonal traumatic experiences around the absence of choice through social exclusion, bullying and homophobia. In this narrative she also highlights alternative collective parental support as helpful. For John, his feelings and experiences of loneliness were ongoing at the time of the interview. His narrative highlights the complexity and multidimensionality of loneliness not only being about his sexual orientation as a gay man but also related to living alone, being a migrant, unemployment and experiencing physical and mental health

difficulties. The absence of choice and agency come across in John narrative as so did his individual resilience.

[R: So, I guess the first question is, what does loneliness mean to you and how does that look like in your story?]

Well, I mean it's been difficult these last couple of years. In terms of obviously living alone, trying to work, trying to work (location), trying to find work, trying to be as a gay person, as a gay man, obviously lots of health problems as well. So, it's it kind of makes an impact on your life, on your, on your physical life, on your private. So yeah, it's been. Yeah, it's been quite lonely and quite. Surreal at times, you know. So yeah, I mean, obviously I don't live with my family, so it's hard for me as well. Obviously, they can't... They used to travel, but you know, they're elderly, they're elderly parents at the moment. I'm trying to look after them from afar. So that makes things difficult. So yeah, it's. It's hard, it's hard. (John)

[R: You said in the last couple of years, what do you think it is about the last couple of years?]

Health. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, it's like, it's very complex because as an artist, I like to express myself. I can be an introvert like I can be an extrovert and that really is quite hard. Living on your own and then having different mental health issues. (John)

In a similar vein, the intersectionality of loneliness come across in Elsa story through the absence of control, agency and choice around her anxiety and physical health deterioration. At the same time, she used metaphor to share her agency in making a choice about the environmental conditions and not being involved a relationship.

I got tinnitus and it's getting worse every day, so I've got to be careful and I choose. I tend to choose open mics that are either acoustic or quite low volume, you know. But it's very difficult. I mean, anxiety is something that comes at me from left field, if you like and that is perhaps is brought about by loneliness, because when I'm with other people, you're distracted from it. And I think this is what this is, what is attractive the human race about friendship. That it means you can park your, your worries and the things you don't want to think about, which are generally for most people in their private lives. And then they can, they can sort of, they become subsumed in that and then they they're able to talk with their friends either about what their friends want to talk about or just have a good time, if you like. But to me, the only thing I have in my life which does give me problems is anxiety. And I tend to exaggerate things in my head. Obviously, health and just general worries, and I can be a bit anxious, and I think some of that has come about from loneliness. But then if I was to say I wouldn't it be great if I had a partner or if I had a family? I mean, I've got a family, I've got a I've got an existing brother. He lives in (name of country) though (laughs) But I have a sister and her family, and I know them quite well quite well, but they are about they are about 40 miles away. And I'm still very much out on a limb. I'm still the toddler on the floor playing with my marbles. And you know the rest of whoever, whether it be friends, family are drifting round on the outside and. I make no bones about it. I don't really try to get involved with people because I know that's where I am. (Elsa)

Stories about Searching for Belonging

Narrators' feelings of loneliness were connected to their storytelling of searching for belonging. These stories often involved artistic representation through visual metaphors,

symbolic props, or popular culture. This theme is divided into two subthemes: absence of role models and finding connection.

Participants shared stories about often feeling different growing up in the absence of a relatable other within their interpersonal relationships (*e.g.*, family members, friends), cultural conventions (*e.g.*, the media representation), and social structures (*e.g.*, work). This often-led participants to become self-reliant and independent. They shared distancing themselves physically and emotionally. In some instances, this distance could also be observed in how they shared their narratives. Participants continued their search for belonging. Most participants stories were marked by narrative shifts about finding connection and belonging at later stages of their life. These connections and sense of belonging took different shapes and forms: cross-generational connections, community spaces and shared interests. Shared interests were frequently of a creative nature. Participants also shared narratives about a feared loneliness in the future and their planning to prevent this from happening. To illustrate this theme the researcher presents Matthew's story with the aim of taking the reader through the emotional arc from the absence of a relatable other to the finding of a meaningful cross-generational connection. Then, each subtheme will be explained in further detail.

Gradually you realize you're different, but you don't know what the difference is. I can remember... My dad and my brother. The Sunday Mirror used to be called the Sunday Pictorial. I mean, they didn't have nudes, but... I can remember my dad and my brother pointing out of them,

saying: cool, look at that.

and I'm thinking to myself: what are they all about?

I think that's when I first realized I was different. I must have been, I don't know, 6-ish, something like that. And Stephan (brother) got a bit older. And then realized...but yes,

I did like looking at men. And... By the time... going to ground school. I knew I was going, but... I didn't know anyone else. Nothing happened at school, um... When I started work. That's right. I'm sorry, I was 16. And, uh... started going out, and... was really horny as a teenager. Of course. Going out looking for... and lucky that one of the first people I met lived in the area I'm living in now. And... he was... uh, a radiographer at Hammersmith Hospital in London. And... He was a good influence on me, and uh... He later moved to Vienna. His partner told me he'd gone through his things, and he'd found awards he'd got for all the research he'd done, and he'd never mentioned it. Um, but that... radiographer was a really good influence.

[R: What do you mean by a good influence? Do you want to say more?]

For a sensible person to talk to. Well, just to be general talking and giving his opinion, and whatever. So, I think my feelings of loneliness from when I was very young, because I didn't know anyone else who was like me. And I only met people that were like me when I started work and started going out to clubs and things like that. (Matthew)

Absence of Role Models. Participants shared stories about the absence of a relatable other or role model within their family and school systems. This absence was often replicated in broader cultural conventions (e.g. media) where there was a specific portrayal of gay men that felt unrelatable to participants. The absence of role models and broader cultural conventions led participants to feel uncertain about who to talk to often creating distance between them and others. In sharing these stories some of the participants introduced different characters: family members to whom they felt quite different to or actors of the time. This absence of role models often evoked feelings of loneliness and difference while also leading to self-reliance.

As I say, because I never came across any other gay people. And to be honest, I never sought them out either, because it always of all the images you see of gay people in the, in the sort of media and public press, it always felt like I wasn't like any of those. There were no, you know, the, the biggest difference now is I would say there are far more role models of what I would call ordinary people. Now, for younger people to see than there were. (Michael)

Alternatively, Mark shared a different story to the rest of participants. Even though, he did not have a role model that would share same-sex attraction, he spoke about the relevance of geographical location and how his mother did have a conversation with him at an early age about a same-sex scene. In a way she may have role modelled a sense of acceptance.

My mum especially was accepting generally living in (location) You did come across other people, but she...

She used to say: you should be tolerant of other people who are accepting you.

Like the play I was mentioning before. So, we watched the first half and then I went to bed. I was about ten. She talked to me about it the next day so that she did think she did find an unusual sight to see two men in bed kissing, but we should be accepting and respectful of their relationship, which is quite something in 1974 so. I always knew she would be OK. She'd always told me she'd love me, whoever I was. (Mark)

For most participants the absence of a relatable other often led to distance - physically, emotionally and narratively. Participants described creating a physical and emotional separation from others. The physical distance took different forms including leaving the family home, travelling and frequently changing jobs. Creating this physical distance often came with an exposure to a range of different experiences while at the same time limiting emotional

closeness. Physical and emotional distance continued to be a theme for some participants at the time of the interview, where it served as a protection mechanism.

I grew up in a really rural setting. I left home as fast as I could and as soon as I could, I left home when I was 16. In retrospect, you don't know it at the time, but I left home and I joined the Royal Navy and nobody in my family has ever joined the Royal Navy ever, ever, ever, ever. – I was going from all female environment to a nearly all male environments. So, there's something about that I think about going from an all-female environment to an all-male environment and there's something about going away as far as possible and to a young 16-year-old, (location) was about as far away as you could get. It was the sea and when I saw the bright lights of (location) this city centre is a 16-year-old and in those days, you used to have to go in uniform. My god (laughs). What a life that was. (Martin)

While all the other narrators shared stories about leaving the family home, Pascal expressed being in the same home as he grew-up in and enjoying being on his own. For him like for others travelling and escapism were a form of coping while keeping others at an emotional distance.

I quite like going home and being on my own and I'm invited to things, but often I think, oh, I don't want to go, and I think this is going back to my childhood where I just wanted to escape. So, so as I say am I lonely? Maybe you think I am lonely I don't know. If I am it has not affected me, I do a lot of things to escape. I think I travel a lot. I've travelled the world literally and that, I suppose, is an escapism in a way you can be who you want when you're with a group of people that you've never met, but I integrate on holiday quite well with people and I do love my travelling but my sexuality that I said hadn't been spoken of it would be so much easier to be a straight man. I don't like being gay. (Pascal)

In sharing their stories of loneliness participants also created a narrative distancing by locating loneliness as something in the past. For John, who related with experiencing loneliness at present in the absence of role models he created distance by expressing loneliness indirectly through his art and the use of metaphorical language.

I did a painting or represents loneliness. I've done various at the moment. So, I've got a painting where I did when I was in a park in (location) and there was like a tree. A big old tree that was broken it you know it was broken because of a 'tempestad' a 'tempestad'. Because of a storm. And it looked like a monster sort of thing, and they had this big branch And so I put myself. I got in between the branch. I was actually with the friends, 2 girls, friends of mine that were artists. And we were taking pictures of these trees, and we saw this massive, bigger that was destroyed, you know. But it was interesting. Now this like, big branch. It looked like a hand (gesture), And I went and I sort of stood in between the branch and there was inside the branch, and the hand was, like, covering me.

And it felt very, very kind of like that. I was on my own. And I thought, you know, I was alone. And it was kind of like a solitude being in solitude. So that felt like loneliness in the form of being secluded. That represents, that represents loneliness in a way. So, I've got that picture there with the trees and being hugged in a way, but in the middle of nowhere. (John)

Finding Connection. These stories of absence of role models and creating distance were then often followed by a search of belonging and finding connections at later stage of life. Often growing up in a family system without a relatable other and in a society with homophobic attitudes, these connections appeared an essential part of participants lives. Participants narrated how loneliness often came with the action of finding and making connections. For those participants who felt able to express their sexuality at an earlier stage of life these

connections were often in person and cross-generational in nature. In the absence of a role model or relatable other these interpersonal connections often involved a sense of advice and sharing information.

I discovered the gay scene shall we say you know I actually... I actually sort of discovered a thing called a befriending group. It's a move of elder gay men, only men in those days, who help younger gay or unexperienced gay people like me to get onto the scene what it's like because it can be very frightening. First time you go into a gay pub, it can be very, very frightening. And they sort of took you along and. You met somebody who's flat, had a cup of coffee, then we went along and it gradually introduced me to that sort of scenario. And eventually I made friends, I made loads of friends, I've made friends, partners and all sorts of things that sort of. You know, I was a very sociable person. So didn't really get lonely. (Owen)

For those participants like Michael for whom expressing their sexual orientation came at a later point in life, a friend coming out and LGBTQ+ older adult groups was significantly relevant. The nature of these groups being run for the members by the members was key.

The most significant thing, I think, was the fact that I came across, um, an older LGBT start up group in (name removed for anonymity). So, the guy who's our chairman went to a conference, and this is we're now 15 years old. So, it was 15, 16 years ago. And they were identifying then that there were a lot of isolated older LGBT people and that older thing I'd probably say isn't a specific age. But you know, the one thing I would say is through that I've come into contact with far more people who I would say are exactly like me. They aren't the typical stereotypes of gay men and gay women, I suppose to some extent. (Michael)

In this excerpt Michael refers to finding an older LGBTQ+ start up as ‘the most significant thing’ and moves on to emphasise the value of relatable others. A narrative shift occurs, from perceived absence; ‘I wasn’t like any of those’, to the finding of similarity and connection. Some participants like Mark, made the connection between past and present moments of difficulty leading to the importance of community and connection. Participants highlighted the value of connection throughout their earlier life experiences and in the present older age, connecting this to the socio-political climate.

So, I think the camaraderie in the gay world has come back partly because we're getting older and partly because of the changing climate, unfortunately, especially in America, which seems to be coming here to some degree. So, I think there's no awareness.

[R: Mm-hmm. Do you want to say more about the camaraderie and the idea of it coming back?]

When I had to travel home with the graffiti, that's when people really did rally round. And each small town had its own community group. And you really did feel part of it almost because you were fighting the enemy in a way. (Mark)

In response to structural oppression and homophobia some of the members talked about their active role in creating, chairing and volunteering in LGBTQ+ spaces. Being part of groups was of particular importance to all participants. Group involvement was not strictly limited to the LGBTQ+ community, they were often involved creative activities (e.g., art, music, dance, poetry, film, books, playing instruments), and religion.

The worst thing about loneliness that I have is boredom. But on the other hand, it's something that I'm very good at. At dealing with. So, I really kind of get bored to the extent that I feel that I need company. I just need to develop an interest in something, and I know where a lot of those interests are. And that has been honed by my

transition. I get up every day and it's a fresh day and I feel that there are things that I need to do and I want to do and I do get involved with other people. I mean, I'm a musician and a singer and I go to events, open mics and things like that. And I've got a few friends. And we go to gigs together, just locally, occasionally. We do go. I mean, I've got a friend in Cardiff and we I'm very close to this person. It's a man. And but I've known. I met him in the transgender community and we'll always be friends. But he's a carer for his partner, so that that is just sort of, you know. But we go to open mics together, but not very often because of the distance. And then I write poetry. So, I'm involved with poetry groups. (Elsa)

Through this excerpt Elsa sheds light on the range of different interests and forms of connection as well as some of the limitations including distance and ill health. Overall, participants narratives about finding connection are all related to the value of having a shared experience, acceptance and belonging. They involved both face to face and online connections. Narrators shared feelings of fear about the possibility of facing loneliness in the future. This fear did not appear paralysing but instead participants shared stories about their agency around planning to preserve belonging in the future.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Chapter Overview

The previous chapter provided the reader with the stories of participants and findings of this thesis. This chapter provides a summary of the findings. Then, narrative themes are contextualised with relevant literature. I reflected on the process and my role as the researcher. Strengths and limitations are discussed followed by potential implications. To conclude suggestions for future research are offered.

5.2 Summary of the Findings

This study sought to address the gap in the literature by aiming to explore the experiences of loneliness amongst LGBTQ+ older adults in the UK. Addressing the subjective nature of this phenomenon: ‘What does loneliness mean to you?’, was the first and central question of the research. Interviews also explored how social networks, mental health, LGBTQ+ identity, age, coping mechanism and homophobia may have played a role in participants’ experiences of loneliness.

Adopting a social constructionist standpoint, this study conceptualised loneliness as a multidimensional and dynamic experience shaped by historical, cultural, relational, and individual contexts (Crossley, 2000). This perspective highlights the role of language, power, relationships and social context in how loneliness is understood, experienced and narrated. For the researcher, it was particularly important to move away from a pathologizing and problem-focused approach highlighting participants strengths and agency in the findings.

Participants’ narratives moved across intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and social domains, reflecting the multiple, interacting levels emphasised within ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This alignment points to the relevance of the framework in

understanding LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences of loneliness. The multi-level focus is also consistent with Fraser's (2004) narrative analytic approach, which emphasises scanning narratives for different domains of experience.

The use of a narrative approach that accounts for past, present and future was particularly relevant given how the LGBTQ+ older adult population have lived through ongoing discrimination and victimisation across the life course (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). In this vein, previous research has emphasised the importance of understanding health and social impacts of the discrimination and marginalization this population have faced over their lifetimes (Hurd & Li, 2024). Hence, situating participants' accounts within their historical, social, and relational contexts deems suitable and important. This analytic orientation also aligns with queer and intersectional theories which emphasise sexuality and gender as historically constructed, context-dependent, relational, and person-specific (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). While also, accounting for how sexualities are specific to timings and generations (Plummer, 20210).

The findings of the narrative thematic analysis were organised into two overarching narrative themes. The first theme, **Stories about Trauma and Resilience**, comprised the subthemes *performing a façade*, *queer loss*, *queer love*, and *in the absence of choice*. The second theme, **Stories about Searching for Belonging**, included the subthemes *in the absence of role models and finding connection*.

The findings aimed to meet the narrative fidelity criteria of betweenness, believability and value of artistic expression (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). To ensure betweenness I provided extracts of the reflexive log and shared a summary of storytellers' context. While to demonstrate believability the results involved unchanged extracts of participants stories that aim to resonate with the audience experiences. The connection between narratives and art was

shown through the emphasis of stories that included aesthetic language (e.g. imagery, metaphor and/or symbolism).

Expanding from Bauer et al.'s (2025) binary conceptualisation of social experiences (positive/negative) the findings contribute to the literature by contextualising participants' experiences of loneliness through a nuanced and dialectic perspective. LGBTQ+ older adults represent a generation whose lives have unfolded across both adversity and strength. This is represented across the two main themes where participants in sharing their feelings and experiences of loneliness alluded to both trauma and resilience, as well as absence and connection.

An interesting pattern within participants' narratives was the tendency to initially deny feelings of loneliness and narrate past experiences. This was different to the findings on loneliness from the studies in the literature review that were based outside the UK (Adan et al., 2021; Coleman, 2018; Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024; Pereira et al., 2021). One possible explanation for this difference relates to the narrative methodology used in this study, which encouraged participants to reflect on their life stories. This in turn allows for a more in-depth reflection on past experiences. However, this pattern could also reflect broader UK specific cultural norms. In the UK, loneliness is highly stigmatised, with individuals often feeling embarrassed and reluctant to openly acknowledge this feeling (DCMS, 2018). A recent UK survey, conducted by the Marmalade Trust, showed that while 82% of UK adults identified with experiencing loneliness, 61% had never told anyone (Ipsos, 2025). These findings may explain why the experiences of loneliness are expressed differently compared with older LGBTQ+ adults experiences of loneliness outside of the UK. Stigmatised emotional experiences may be easier to share with others once they are perceived as having been overcome. Locating loneliness as a past experience allows individuals to narrate it as something they have moved past, which may feel easier than narrating present feelings of

loneliness. While this observation should be interpreted cautiously, it may suggest that cultural norms surrounding the expression of loneliness vary across geographical contexts. Interestingly, participants who described current and ongoing feelings of loneliness were predominantly those with migrant backgrounds. From a Minority Stress Perspective (Meyer, 2003) the ongoing loneliness experiences may indicate a collision of intersecting stigmatising experiences. Together, these interpretations highlight that methodological approaches, social differences and cultural factors may shape the ways in which loneliness was experienced, narrated and understood.

5.3 Stories about Trauma and Resilience

Trauma can be understood as a response to events or experiences that are overwhelming or threatening, exceeding an individual's ability to cope, and resulting in lasting emotional, cognitive, relational, or physical distress (Herman, 1997). As outlined in the LGBTQ+ section of the introduction, there was a collection of significant and damaging historical events that directly impacted the LGBTQ+ community such as the criminalisation and pathologisation of homosexuality and the AIDS epidemic. As Plummer (2010) expressed 'History lives complexity and pluralistically in the present' (p. 187). Hence, loneliness emerged not as an individual deficit but as a historically, generational and structurally produced experience. Many studies have shown how storytelling along with renewing a sense of meaning, order and connection to their life can help individuals cope with traumatic experiences (Crossley, 2000).

LGBTQ+ older adults lived through changes towards social and legislative equity. Participants stories of loneliness stemming from traumatic experiences were often followed by participants ability to cope and adapt. This is in line with Meyer's (2015) view of resilience within the minority stress framework recognising the ability to cope with adversity and adapt in the face of social disadvantage. Forms of social disadvantages experienced by some of the

participants (*e.g.* homophobia, socioeconomic inequality) limit individual resilience. Hence, this research contributing to LGBTQ+ loneliness literature by placing resilience in an ecological context and conceptualising community resilience as how communities further the capacities (*e.g.* social resources) of individuals to develop and sustain well-being (Morland & Willox, 2004). This view moved away from the individual traits of participants to also emphasis to the importance of community resources. Systemic oppression and societal invisibility will limit many in the LGBT community in identifying and affiliating with the community and, by extension, as Morland and Willox (2004) could deprive them of community resilience.

Performing a façade

This subtheme aims to capture the stories of participants when engaging in performing acts in a social setting. The conceptualisation of performance is in line with Goffman's (1959) metaphor of society as a stage where individuals take up roles depending on the social setting. This is relevant to LGBTQ+ older adults who grew up during a time of homophobia and systemic oppression. Within this context performing a façade—adopting heterosexual identities, suppressing same-sex desire or carefully adapting self-presentation—can be understood not simply as strategic adaptation but as responses to structural threat and stigma. In his work, Goffman (1959) explored how encountering stigma can lead individuals to hide parts of themselves from social life. The vigilance required to hide core aspects of the self may constitute a form of cumulative or minority stress-related trauma (Meyer, 2003).

Across the narratives participants described engaging in performing acts around others and concealing aspects of their identities, an act that served not only as a personal protective strategy, but also as a representation of the broader pressures of societal exclusion and invisibility. This is in line with queer theorist's view about sexuality being historically constructed through social processes and discourses (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

Participants narrated experiences around performing a façade as evoking feelings of loneliness. These stories were contextualised during a time where sexual attraction and gender was heavily framed through a binary and othering terminology (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

For those narrators sharing stories from a young age there was a clear relevance around the importance of fitting in with peers and siblings which remains consistent with the general population findings about higher levels of loneliness at a young age due to challenges in establishing identity (Graham, et al., 2024). The façade protects and maintains social connection while also protecting the silenced emerging sexual identity (Glen, 2004). Loneliness is conceptualised as the psychological cost of sustaining the performance. Martin's story of funfairs exemplifies how loneliness is not about the magnitude of social connections emphasising the importance of differentiating between social isolation and loneliness (Wigfield et al., 2022).

Participants who did not experience feeling of loneliness at an early age related to gender or sexual attraction shared stories about the acceptance of peers or the unstigmatized visibility of the LGBTQ+ community within their geographical location. These differences in narratives highlight the value of social context (*e.g.* school, peers, *etc.*) and geographical context within the UK (*e.g.* coastal city vs. rural areas) in shaping experiences loneliness and identity development. The rural-urban spectrum was also examined as an underlying macrosystem in Bauer *et al.* (2025) review. These findings emphasise the need for holistic approach to understanding loneliness that takes into account the diversity of experiences and the social environment (Baur et al., 2025; Brown, 2019; Brennan, 2004).

Beyond the importance of establishing identity and intimate relationships systemic oppression was particularly relevant within participants stories of loneliness in early adulthood. Participants told stories about living a double life, living in a way that is deliberately secret,

hidden, or concealed, often to avoid judgement, rejection or punishment. Stories of loneliness when performing a façade and living a double life are partly in line with Pereira *et al.* (2021) findings on how these contribute to experiences of invisibility, reduce social contacts and increased the risk of loneliness. Many of the loneliness experiences that arose from performing a façade in early adulthood were located in the workplace environment where same-sex attraction was condemned with employment termination or otherness. Participants' stories were temporary situation before the introduction of the *Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations* (2003). The stories of Peter and Aisha surface experiences of a time in the UK when there was an absence of legal workplace protections against homophobic discrimination.

In line with the findings of the literature review (Section 2.4) and Bauer *et al.* (2025) review this subtheme places emphasis on the relevance of macrosystems as fundamental contributors to the quality of social connections and, consequently, experiences of loneliness. Participants shared experiences of loneliness occurring predominately during young adulthood to midlife, this finding differs from the general population findings of loneliness (Graham, *et al.*, 2024). This difference could be explained by the elder LGBTQ+ population needing to engage in performative acts and perform a façade to avoid homophobic discrimination in the workplace. This contribution from the findings could highlight the importance of socio-legal contexts when aiming to understand experiences of loneliness, for instance how for LGBTQ+ older adults in the UK young adulthood to midlife was not necessarily a period of stability but rather a time of structural threat.

Not all participants related concealing their sexual orientation and performing a façade with experiences of loneliness. For instance, some participants shared how they compartmentalised their religion, parenthood or long-lasting relationships from their same-sex attraction. Morland and Wilxon (2004) argued that people need their identities to be recognised as a matter of psychological and social significance. They further discussed the importance of coherence and

social endorsement as integral to gay self-identification (Morland & Wilxon, 2004). However, the narratives of participants illustrated experiences where identity is silenced, and sustained through ongoing negotiation with religion, profession, relationship or parenting. For instance, those participants, like Pascal, Elsa, Martin, John and Aisha, for which at different moments of their life's other areas of identity (*e.g.* faith, parenthood, marriage, immigration) were given higher importance than gender and sexuality. This is in line with Glenn's (2004) conceptualisation of rhetoric silence through which LGBT elders may choose to remain silent about their sexual orientation or gender identity for a range of reasons. Through the different experiences of performing a façade, silence about gender or sexual attraction acts as a form of communication.

Overall, this subtheme highlights the need for holistic approaches to understanding loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults that move away from generalisability to understanding diversity of experiences, structural factors and socio-cultural contexts (Baur et al., 2025; Brennan, 2004; Brown, 2019). In exploring participants' narratives around performing a façade, it became evident that past experiences of loneliness were not discrete events but ongoing influences that shaped present experiences. This is in line with Plummer (2010) understanding of generational sexualities where he argues about the past being present in the current moment.

Queer Loss, Queer Love

Participants shared stories of loss connected to feelings of loneliness. The stories in this subtheme are in line with Tanskanen and Anttila's (2016) and Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2014) conceptualisation about loneliness occurring also in the presence of company. Additionally, narrators' stories about the loss of relationships fit with the social, emotional and cognitive frameworks of loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Weiss, 1974). Alternatively, Peter's story

sheds light on the potential loss of the self when facing the possibility of dying following an HIV diagnosis.

Loss and bereavement are traumatic experiences. During midlife, the death of partners and friends to the AIDS epidemic was a particularly painful time for LGBTQ+ older adults and associated with mental health difficulties (*e.g.* depression) and loneliness. In the context of homophobia, the impact of the significant mortality of gay men to HIV/AIDS was underrecognized by the wider society (Ryan-Flood, 2024). The narratives of participants reflect how loneliness arising from loss can be intensified by social invisibility. This is in line with Butler's account of unmournful lives (1995), where she argued how within a society with cultural norms that forbid homosexuality, the loss of same-sex love becomes unacknowledged through a prohibition that is constantly reinforced and repeated across society. Participants' experiences suggest that during a time when LGBTQ+ relationships and identities are made invisible, their loss may likewise be denied public recognition. This is particularly relevant to the stories of loss participants told about the AIDS epidemic.

When sharing stories of loss, some participants commented on the reciprocal influence of loneliness and depression. This is consistent with Pereira's et al. (2021) findings however, in their research these feelings were about older age while in this study they were related to past experiences associated with the HIV epidemic. This difference could be explained by how in the UK HIV cases rose in 1980 initially and predominantly affecting gay and bisexual men while in Portugal the epidemic was strongly associated to injecting drug use, especially in the 1990s with the widespread of heroin use. These differing transmission patterns and timings shaped social narratives and policy responses. Hence, this may explain how stories of loneliness and depression from the AIDS epidemic remain present for this generation in the UK. Alternatively, the differences could also be explained by methodological variations. The online questionnaires and the generally present focus questions that Pereira et al. (2021) used

for their data collection may have led to more present oriented concise responses. Whereas, the semi-structured interview approach may provide more space to discuss historical experiences, making the nuances of loneliness, loss and depression more visible in the findings.

General population findings associated later-life increases in loneliness with lost relationships and partner bereavement (Graham et al., 2024; DCMS, 2018). These findings are comparable to those reported by Hurd & Li (2024) and Ifrah et al., 2024 about the intersection of loss and loneliness, where LGBTQ+ aging is marked by the loss of social connections due to the passing of loved ones and the physical distance from others (i.e. friends moving away). The stories within this theme also highlights the importance of romantic and friendship relationships when understanding loneliness for this population. In further contributing to the literature, of how LGBTQ+ older adults' loneliness can be exacerbated by the absence of grief recognition within dominant social discourses. This is consistent with Butler's theorisation of unmournful lives (1995). Participants experience of loneliness in later life due to loss romantic partner were also accompanied by stories of misdiagnosis and poor treatment from the health care system. This is in line with research indicating that LGBTQ+ individuals have been found to have poorer overall experiences of health services (NHS England, 2025). Matthew tragic 's story of loss highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the unmet needs of the LGBTQ+ elder community.

Moving away from viewing the LGBTQ+ community from a pathologising and problem saturated lens this theme also included stories that like Pereira et al. (2021) highlight strength-based approaches. Peter's story speaks to AAD through the narration of positive development and transformation through travelling. It further exemplifies individual resilience expanding from the literature review which focused mainly on relational strengths (Adan *et al.*, 2021; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Czaja et al., 2201; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024). When sharing stories of loss participants also highlighted the importance of community

resilience (Morland & Willox, 2004) particularly around the gay community coming together during the AIDS epidemic. In this vein, Butler's (1995) discussed the importance of challenging gay melancholia, also referred to as depression, by making public and political the grief over those who died from AIDS. By openly grieving these losses, communities created collective spaces that resisted invisibility and acknowledged LGBTQ+ lives that social discourses left unrecognised.

In summary, the narratives of loss and loneliness shared by participants are in line with theoretical views of loneliness occurring in the presence of others (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Tanskanen & Anttila, 2016). These findings are closely related to the theory of unmournful lives (Butler, 1995) suggesting how feelings of loneliness were exacerbated by the absence of recognition in dominant discourses of queer loss and queer love. The stories of loneliness arising from loss are embedded within the UK context of the HIV epidemic. More recent experiences of loss and loneliness were discussed highlighting the harmful impact of the healthcare system in the UK. In line with Morland and Willox (2004) this subtheme also accounts for stories of AAD, individual and community resilience following experiences of loss.

In the Absence of Choice

Loneliness has been characterised by the absence of choice or control over social connections (Wigfield *et al.*, 2022). The term absence is consistent with the social, emotional and cognitive frameworks of loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Weiss, 1974). Participants' experiences of loneliness were connected to the absence of choice and agency by integrating forms of oppression (*e.g.* racism, sexism, homophobia and classism). The subtheme of loneliness given then 'absence of choice' can be understood as an intersectional phenomenon, where agency is shaped—and often restricted—by the simultaneous operation of gendered,

economic, sexuality, familial, and socio-cultural power structures. Building on Crenshaw's (1989) formulation of intersectionality, participants' accounts of migration, physical and mental health, unemployment, motherhood, and bullying illustrate how marginalisation operates through intersecting social positions rather than discrete categories. Crenshaw (1989) argued that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism; similarly, participants' narratives suggest that the loneliness experienced given the absence of choice cannot be understood through a single axis of sexuality and/or gender.

Unemployment and migration have been found to exacerbate feelings of loneliness (DCMS, 2018). The narratives of participants about loneliness and unemployment can reflect how social and economic structures limit access to resources. This in turn further limits possibility for social connection and opportunity to develop meaningful relationships. The research in the literature review did not mention the impact of unemployment when discussing loneliness. One possibility to explain this could be how the research on loneliness conducted by Pereira et al. (2021), focused on the experiences of white middle-class and educated LGBTQ+ older adults. Whereas this research interviewed participants that were or had come from working class backgrounds. The aims, research question and analysis of the other reviewed papers (Adan et al., 2021; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Coleman, 2018; Czaja et al., 2021; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024) may further explain the absence of this finding when discussing loneliness. The narrative analysis approach and the questions asked gave the opportunity for participants to reflect on earlier experiences of loneliness. Narrators often referred to stories of unemployment and financial difficulties during their 30-50s. These narratives are important given the absence of representation of poor, working-class, and minority ethnic LGBTQ+ stories (Ryan-Flood, 2024). While most participant reported financial security at present migration, was an ongoing trigger for participants feelings of loneliness. Like the studies in the literature review (Adan et al., 2021; Armengol & Varena-

Manograsso, 2022; Czaja et al., 2016) participants narratives shed light on the importance of community spaces and community support (*i.e.* LGBTQ+ trade unions facilitating access to resources whilst also being a place to visit) when experiencing loneliness within contexts of migration and unemployment. These findings highlight the importance of understanding how social differences can influence experiences of loneliness while also emphasising the need for community resources.

Graham et al.'s (2024) quantitative findings of loneliness take the form of a U shape, meaning those at a young and old age of the spectrum are at higher risk of loneliness. The findings of this research shed light on participants' experiences and feelings of loneliness located within mid-adulthood (30-40s). These experiences of loneliness were closely related to the absence of choice in different contexts. For instance, participants shared stories about social exclusion or unemployment. This narrative differs from the findings about this age being associated with stable and satisfying social networks and roles (Graham et al, 2024). In the UK, Section 28 in *the Local Government Act* (1988) prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality. This was not repealed in England until 2003, contributing to the silencing and stigma of the LGBTQ+ community specially in education and public sectors. The long-lasting effects of this socio-political context could contribute to Aisha 's narrative of loneliness about the absence of choice and agency when experiencing social exclusion as lesbian mum or when her son experienced homophobic treatment in the school setting. These narratives can be further understood through a woman of colour feminist lens, which highlights the multiple forms of oppression faced by women of colour navigating queer identities (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

John narrative reflected on how employment, sexuality, migration, physical and mental health interact to influence experiences of loneliness. For most of these domains, there was an outstanding absence of choice. From an intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), these

experiences may reflect how multiple marginalised identities and social positions, create unique and intertwined forms of marginalisation that shape complex experiences of loneliness.

Taken together the stories shared in this narrative subtheme, emphasise the importance of understanding the multiple levels that influence experiences of loneliness. Hence, highlighting the relevance of the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and Fraser's (2004) approach to narrative analysis. Furthermore, these stories stress the importance of individualised and nuanced approaches to understanding the complexity and dynamic nature of loneliness (Graham et al., 2024). This underscores the significance to the population that has and continues to face systemic oppressions.

Choice was also relevant to participants who shared being at peace with living alone, not having a romantic partner or sharing their sexuality. From a Positive Solitude (Ost-Mor et al., 2024) perspective these narratives may reflect how people can be alone yet not experience loneliness, using their solitude to engage in meaningful activities (*e.g.* spirituality, creativity). The element of choice played a significant role in shaping experiences of loneliness. Whether loneliness was experienced as imposed or voluntary appeared to be a crucial factor in how it is felt and was interpreted.

Different from Graham et al. (2024) findings on the general population U shape of loneliness, where the younger and older population are at greater risk, participants narratives of loneliness were situated in early adulthood, midlife and the younger spectrum of older age. The narratives in this subtheme suggest the influence of choice in shaping experiences of loneliness. Additionally, intersectionality and multidimensionality are key frameworks to understanding the impact of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults.

5.4 Stories about Searching for Belonging

Loneliness is not just about a reduction in social contacts or change in relationships, but also about an individual's identity and sense of belonging (DCM, 2018). Belonging as defined by the American Psychological Association (2018) refers to the feeling of being accepted or approved by a group or by society. This theme highlights the relevance of exploring the search for belonging when seeking to understand experiences of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults.

The social, emotional and cognitive frameworks of loneliness allude to the construct of relationships (Weiss, 1974; Perlman & Peplau, 1982). Cacioppo & Cacioppo's (2014) understanding of this phenomenon also included the relevance of connection and belonging. Considering these with the findings of the reviewed literature (Adan et al., 2021; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Coleman, 2018; Czaja et al., 2021; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2021), it is not surprising that relationships, connection and belonging are key aspects to understanding LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences of loneliness. Participants' stories often represented a search for belonging that was characterized by the absence of role models and creating distance eventually, the finding of connection through relationships, communities and interests.

In the Absence of Role Models

Using a post structural theory framework individuals come to know themselves through social categories constructed within social processes and discourses (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022). For older LGBTQ+ generations there was a significant absence of representation in popular culture and a limited access to role models (Ryan-Flood, 2024). The absence of a visible and positive role models at early age can limit the opportunities for interpersonal affirmation. Furthermore, the absence of these could limit the possibility for meaningful social relationships. From a Minority Stress perspective, Meyer (2015) argued the importance of identifying with others through seeing yourself as similar and connected to them. From this

lens, the absence of role models within family systems and cultural representations along with the pathology of same-sex relationships by legal, social and psychiatric frameworks contribute to LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of loneliness when in the process of situating their own identities.

Through the term rhetorical silencing Glenn (2004) argued that marginalised experiences are omitted from dominant discourses shaping what is seen as legitimate, visible, and possible within society. During a time when LGBTQ+ identities and narratives were consistently excluded, there was limited representation in the UK of authority positions (i.e. politicians) and cultural visibility (*e.g.* actors). In turn, this contributes to an absence of role models, not only as a practical lack of mentors, but also as an absence of identity-affirming cultural scripts. Growing up with an absence of visible LGBTQ+ figures can reinforce feelings of marginalisation and powerlessness (Glenn, 2004). Thus, the loneliness felt given the absence of role models can be understood through structural silencing and pathology, narrowing both collective recognition and possibilities.

In discussing the phenomenon of loneliness within this population previous research has accounted for familial rejection and limited family support (Adan et al., 2021, Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024; Ifrah et al., 2024). The findings of this research contribute to the literature by proving an example of an experience of family acceptance while contributing to the loneliness literature by further expanding on the absence of role models at a cultural and structural level. This is particularly relevant from an ecological systems perspective which emphasis on the role of macrosystems when understanding LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences of loneliness (Bauer et al., 2025).

The end of this subtheme captures the stories of how in the absence of role models participants created distance by leaving the family home, travelling and using artistic

expression. While leaving the family home is not unique for this population and generation the absence of positive role models could further influence the wish to leave and the search to belong. For those who decided to stay with family, creating distance by travelling appeared key. In Pereria et al. (2021) findings travel was framed as a coping strategy to reduce feelings of loneliness. Alternatively, in the absence of role model John distanced himself from loneliness by aiming to understand and express this phenomenon through art. The value of aesthetic language is also in line with principles of narrative fidelity (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

Finding Connection

Social connections are a human basic need, essential for health and wellbeing (Bauer *et al.* 2025; DCMS, 2018). Research has shown the importance of strong connections and belonging for the LGBTQ+ community (Morland & Willox, 2004). Similar to the research in the literature review (Adan et al., 2021; Armengol & Varena-Manograsso, 2022; Czaja et al., 2016; Hurd & Li, 2024) the findings highlight the importance of connection through participants stories of social engagement and social activism. Furthermore, and in line with Armengol and Varena-Manograsso, (2022) the findings emphasis how participants navigated loneliness and embraced vulnerability by developing social energy in response to oppression and social exclusion. In this vein, and similarly to Czaja et al., (2016) findings this subtheme stresses the importance of enhancing social networks and social engagement for this population. Participants stories also highlighted the need for physical spaces to increase the opportunity of forming meaningful connections.

Distance from family networks limits LGBTQ+ elders' opportunities for intergenerational relationships (Brown, 2009). Hence, the importance of this study adding to the research by discussing the value of cross-generational connections. These can be further understood through the term queer lineage introduced by Ryan-Flood (2024). This term refers

to meaningful cross generational connections, not romantic or sexual. Queer lineage places emphasis on sharing information and stories among individuals of the LGBTQ+ community and on LGBTQ+ older adults functioning as mentors and role models for the younger generation of LGBTQ+ people. Participants narratives of connections with LGBTQ+ older adults role models were characterised by a transmission of knowledge and opportunity for meaningful conversations. Differing from Pereira et al. (2021) and Bauer et al. (2025) findings which highlighted gay community groups experiencing ageism, the cisgender gay men in this sample referred to the value of cross-generational connection with older gay men.

Rather than focusing solely on romantic partners, friends and communities' participants shared their earlier experiences of intergenerational connections. This finding adds to the research reviewed and reflects how in the UK LGBTQ+ older adults have lived through rapid legal and social change—from periods of criminalisation, the AIDS epidemic, to the recognition of same-sex relationships—and may have highly appreciated the sharing of knowledge from older generations. It is likely that the narrative approach also contributed to this finding, as it encouraged participants to reflect on the quality and significance of relationships across the life course rather than solely reporting on the experience of current relationships. While queer lineage, is not unique to the UK, its relevance in this study may reflect a combination of cultural context, and methodological approach, highlighting the importance of intergenerational connections for the LGBTQ+ community when navigating experiences of loneliness.

The relevance of participants' narrative about finding connection through queer lineage and LGBTQ+ community spaces to navigate loneliness is in line with Wainberg et al.'s (2026) recent publication on the future of the DSM. This report emphasised the importance of peer-led support and LGBTQ+ community centres, particularly for those experiencing stigma or familial rejection. Through listening to the narratives of participants in the study the researcher

argues that these initiatives should be offered despite stigma or familial rejection given the structural discrimination and silencing that this community has experienced. Additionally, these connections appear essential in the absence of media representation and visible role models for the elder generation.

This research offers a more nuanced narrative to Fish and Weis's (2019) findings around how not having a partner, living alone and not having children increased risk of loneliness. Most of the sample in this study met all these criteria and did not identify with feeling lonely at present. The difference in loneliness and childlessness could be understood through difference in cultural context. For instance, in Israel the social-cultural context of familial and pro natalist values prevails (Ifrah et al., 2024). Thus, shedding light on how the meaning of childlessness could be culturally constructed rather than universally predictive of loneliness.

On a different note, most participants attributed the present absence of loneliness to their meaningful connections with the LGBTQ+ community, faith and different forms of creative expression. Hence connection was not limited to the LGBTQ+ community but was rather diverse. In line with Bauer et al.'s (2025) findings, belonging to a group with shared interests, beliefs, and/or identities appeared to be key for narrators. Similarly, Wigfield et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of participation in meaningful activities. It was interesting to notice how most participants engaged in artistic expression (*e.g.* theatre, poetry, art, music). This could possibly be related to how for this repressed generation, art has become a form of expression and connection.

5.5 Self-reflexivity

Throughout the research process, I have often viewed myself as an outsider given my age, heteronormative relationship, and cultural background. The difficulties with recruitment emphasised the barriers when reaching a population that has faced marginalisation and

discrimination. This initially evoked impostor feelings about power and how I represent the oppressive dominant heteronormative society. On various occasions, I felt I should not be researching the experiences of LGBTQ+ older adults, without any shared lived experience of generation, older age, culture or LGBTQ+ identity. Whilst these feelings and thoughts have led to ongoing self-questioning as a researcher in this area, they have also led to an increased awareness and learning. In this process, I found Yip (2023) view of positionality as fluid and within a continuum helpful. Reflecting on positionality by keeping a reflexive diary, while having ongoing discussions with supervisors and colleagues has been of immense importance. I also recognised the privilege of listening, learning from, and sharing participants stories.

Throughout the interview process I was often aware of the generational differences between myself and participants. This highlighted my lack of knowledge about cultural conventions and language. This echoes Plummer (2010) work on generational sexualities where he argued how individuals from one generation may struggle to fully grasp the cultural references of a different generation. Besides the relevance of learning about the historical context and the pathologizing damage of my profession it was key for me to engage with cultural content. For instance, reading novels by Bernadine Evaristo and Alan Hollinghurst. Even with this knowledge developments, I was aware that the gap in understanding language and cultural references would remain. Partially, this shaped the decisions of how I approached the research. For instance, the relevance of capturing the historical and generational context along with the importance of portraying participants narratives by preserving their language and storytelling. The design and narrative approach aligned with my cultural values about respecting and appreciating the elderly. Additionally, and in line with my personal values the methodological approach enabled me to prioritise the voices of a population that has often been silenced by societal discourses.

During data collection, I often found myself experienced both sadness and joy when listening to participants narratives. The sadness I felt was in response to the discrimination, systemic oppression and rhetoric silencing these population had experienced. Whilst the joy was considering experiences of individual and community resilience. It felt important to capture both through the findings. This was also done to address participants' feedback about the importance of moving away from problem-saturated narratives and minoritised views in which the LGBTQ+ older adult population is often portrayed. Additionally, after reading Plummer (2010), I reflected on how the dialectic of participants' experiences mirrored a generation that has witnessed profound social change—living through times of discrimination and marginalisation (*e.g.* AIDS epidemic, workplace homophobia) as well as subsequent major advances in LGBTQ+ rights (*e.g.* same sex marriage, the Equality Act 2010).

Going through feelings and experiences of loneliness myself before and throughout the research process meant that I often found interviews highly emotional. My own experiences of loss and chosen migration evoked both feelings of loneliness and connection when listening to participants. These experiences could have impacted the selection of stories when analysing and presenting the findings of this research. Therefore, it was important to understand the relevance these stories had with the wider literature and theoretical context.

Coming from a culture and family where the elderly are viewed with respect and authority along with English being a second learnt language meant the writing process surfaced a range of insecurities. For instances, around the research doing justice to what participants shared. Besides, principles of narrative analysis highlighting the importance of emotional and reflective stories with a value aesthetic language (Fritz & Lysack, 2014; Craig et al., 2021; Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) I also believe that English being my second learnt language led me to place high value on emotional-laden stories and visual arts (*e.g.* film, art, photography). These, ways of communication go beyond spoken words and concrete language evoking

feelings in the listener. Furthermore, my value of connection and my own experiences of community along with my strive to move away from a pathologising frameworks and place emphasis on the strengths, agency and resilience of participants influenced how the thesis is presented.

5.6 Strengths

The researcher approached recruitment through multiple avenues including social media, LGBTQ+ support groups, newsletter, snowball and pubs. A notable strength of the recruitment strategy was its inclusivity, enabling the study to reach participants through a range of platforms. Addressing one of the identified gaps in the literature review, this research incorporated the stories of participants aged 70+ which have often been absent. Even though, these narratives only accounted for one-fifth of participants (20%) the in-depth interviews allow the findings to capture the systemic oppressions (*i.e.* discriminatory work policies against gay and lesbian teachers) along with the individual and community resilience of this age group. Given the absence in research of bisexual (Jones et al., 2018) and trans older adults (King *et al.*, 2019) it is a strength that this research incorporated the experience of one participant that identified with both these identities. Similarly, narratives of financial strain, unemployment and immigration are key aspect of this research given the gap in representation of poor, working-class, and minority ethnic LGBTQ+ research (King et al., 2019; Ryan-Flood, 2024).

A notable strength of the thesis was its emphasis on participants choice. This was aimed from the start when providing participants preference for interview type (*i.e.* standard semi-structured interview or photo elicitation). Choice was further emphasised throughout the interview process when welcoming participants preferred forms of expression (*e.g.* paintings, teddy bear, films, photographs, and metaphors). The value of choice is particularly significant for a community that has often been silenced and oppressed by social discourses.

The analysis was changed in response to participants' narrative forms of expression, prioritising their storytelling and language. It felt particularly important to place participants at heart, allowing space for their wisdom, resources and agency. Narrative analysis further allowed space for the stories of participants in a system, culture and profession where older LGBTQ+ adults have been and are frequently disempowered. This is particularly relevant when looking at Brown (2009) critique of dominant groups (*e.g.* gerontologists and queer theorist) not hearing the voices of LGBTQ+ older adults. Reading participants' narratives could be helpful for others within the LGBTQ+ community experiencing loneliness. This is especially meaningful given the increase interest in LGBTQ+ older adults and the younger generations response to queer narratives (Ryan-Flood, 2024). Participants stories of loneliness could act as a form of archetype for LGBTQ+ history while also adopting an indirect form of queer lineage.

In qualitative research, the focus shifts from generalisability to transferability. To ensure transferability the key is a careful and detailed description of participants, contexts and generations (Drisko, 2024). The narrative approach of this study encouraged transferability given the emphasis on context. This was further strengthened through the storytellers' summaries and the discussion throughout the research about the LGBTQ+ older adults' generation. In contrast to capturing LGBTQ+ community as a homogenous minoritised group (Meyer, 2013) and loneliness as a universal construct that can be quantified (Russell, 1996), semi-structured interviews, narrative summaries and participants stories highlight the subjective nature of loneliness for this population. In addition, they emphasise how meaning is shaped by socio-cultural and legal contexts alongside individual differences.

The preset study explored under researched experiences of older LGBTQ+ adults and loneliness. The findings alluded to Graham et al. (2024) conclusion around the complexity and dynamic nature of loneliness needing more nuances and individualised approaches to reach understanding. Through a social constructionist standpoint and narrative approach participants

stories were situated within a historical, social, political and cultural contexts which can challenge the dominant unilateral discourses of loneliness in minoritised populations. In this vein, the findings move away from generalisable aging theories that do not recognise difference and diversity of experience among LGBTQ+ older adults (Brown, 2009) by reflecting on their varied and complex narratives.

5.7 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The researcher will discuss limitations about the recruitment materials, design, data collection, sample and findings. It is acknowledged that the limitations are seen from the researcher's perspective and further limitations could be identified by readers.

The wording of the recruitment poster could have limited who felt invited to participate in the research. While initially older age was operationalised using the WHO (2022) framework this was later changed to 50+. The age criteria was based on previous systematic reviews on LGBTQ+ aging (Chen et al., 2020) and how LGBTQ+ individuals experience age-related vulnerabilities earlier due to minority stress (Meyer, 2003). However, following a comment raised by one of the participants the researcher reflected on how experiences of aging can be socially and culturally mediated. Research within the LGBTQ+ community has questioned the framework of age along with the older and younger terminology. For example, research has shown that a trans life course is not necessarily linked to chronological years (Almack & King, 2019). In this vein, using the umbrella term LGBTQ+ may have only reached more connected older individuals who are confident in taking part in research (Almack & King, 2019).

Given that psychological research in the 1960s and 1970s often focused on identifying the causes of same-sex attraction with the aim of preventing it (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022), it is particularly important for contemporary researchers to advocate for collaborative

approaches that involve LGBTQ+ communities in the research process. Regarding the design of this study, the researcher has reflected on the limited Patient and Public Involvement (PPI). The study could have benefited from involving the LGBTQ+ older adults when designing the semi-structured interview topic guide, ensuring collaboration from the earlier stages of the study. This could have emphasised the notion of doing research with or by the public rather than to, for or about. Additionally, involving participants in the interview design has been found to ensure that questions asked by the researcher reflect what is considered most important for the population in question (INVOLVE, 2015). Considering the flexible application of the topic guide, narrative approach and space to bring other relevant questions and topics, it is hoped that participants experienced the process as collaborative and felt able to reflect on what they considered most important. The researcher is aware of how participants stories were not only shaped by their own meaning-making process but also by the questions asked, prompts provided and the interpersonal dynamic between the researcher and participants. Hence, some experiences may have remained untold.

Recruitment for this study was challenging, with a resulting sample size of 10 participants. This could be understood given how loneliness is a stigmatised phenomenon, with British citizens finding it difficult to share feelings of loneliness (DCMS, 2018). It could also reflect the researchers challenges to access the community as an outsider (Holmes, 2020). Although the sample size is appropriate for narrative research where the focus is not on data saturation but on narrative fidelity (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Robinson, 2014) it does limit the transferability of the findings. Even though the research reached participants with diverse identities the sample was mostly, 80%, cisgender gay men. Like the articles in the literature review the sample mainly shared the experience of White and Western individuals. Even though the research findings account for how some social conditions (*e.g.* unemployment, migration) impact experiences of loneliness participants were able-bodied and relatively

healthy at the time of the interviews. Overall, the transferability of the findings may be limited to older LGBTQ+ adults with relatively greater levels of social and structural privilege. As Brown (2009) has argued the lack of random, transferable samples of LGBT individuals is often noted in research and can partly attributed to the relatively small number of older people openly identifying as LGBTQ+ and the challenges posed by their invisibility in a society shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity. Participants volunteered to engage in the research, and it is possible that a substantial proportion of the sample were comfortable articulating their sexuality and experiences of loneliness, which particularly shapes the range of narratives captured by this study.

In the initial stages this research planned to use Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke., 2019). Hence, a semi-structured interview topic guide was developed accordingly and intended to elicit patterns across participants' experiences. However, in the initial stages of data collection it became evident to the researcher that participants' accounts were storied and temporally organised, indicating that the data closely aligned with a narrative analysis approach (Lindsay, 2006). In response to the nature of the data, and consistent with qualitative methodological flexibility, the analytic approach was adapted to narrative analysis. While this shift represents a strength in terms of responsiveness to the data and participants, it also led to certain limitations. Narrative interviews are often characterised by fewer, broader prompts designed to facilitate extended storytelling. In contrast, the existing interview guide contained a range topic areas reflective of its original alignment with RTA (Braun & Clarke., 2019). To ensure methodological consistency across participants interviews, the guide was not changed following the analytic shift. Although this supported comparability across interviews, it may have shaped the structure and flow of participants' narratives, potentially constraining the degree to which accounts unfolded organically. As such, the narratives analysed were generated within a semi-structured topic guide framework that balanced thematic coverage with narrative

exploration. Hence, possibly this influencing the choice for narrative thematic analysis. This should be considered when interpreting the findings, as different interview designs may have produced differently structured stories.

A further limitation of this research is the absence of member checking. This is in line with the narrative fidelity construct around believability (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Even though, the findings are grounded in participants stories the researcher acknowledged that the interpretative process was shaped by the researchers personal, clinical and academic positioning. The analysis involves a range of decisions which are made by the researcher. For instance, what stories are shared and how themes are developed. Consistent with qualitative and narrative approach this research does not claim objectivity but instead offers a theoretically informed interpretation grounded in the data.

Overall, these limitations situate the findings within the relational, contextual, and interpretative framework in which they were generated. While transferability may be limited, the study offers in depth information and life-course perspectives about participants' experiences contributing to the literature on loneliness within an LGBTQ+ older adult population. This research also ensured that policy is informed both by subjective experiences as well as broader population overviews. Future research may benefit from exploring similar narratives across more diverse populations and settings to further develop and extend these insights.

5.8 Implications

The following implications for practice, theory and research are based upon participants' narratives and the narrative themes of this study. These were further connected to theoretical context, the 10 Year Health Plan (UK Government 2025) and community-based mental health initiatives.

The findings of this thesis highlight the fluidity, multidimensionality and subjectivity of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults individuals in the UK. Expanding from solely quantifiable measures, like the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) this research emphasised the importance of the historical, political, social and cultural context when understanding loneliness for this population. The temporality in which participants shared their narratives highlighted the dynamic and context dependent nature of loneliness for LGBTQ+ elders. As humans we understand the present by learning about the past (Plummer, 2010). The generations of LGBTQ+ older adults have lived through many historical moments and experienced the changes in legislation and the social world. This makes their narratives particularly valuable for understanding LGBTQ+ experiences of loneliness. In helping to understand this populations experiences these findings encourage further research in the UK to use a socio-ecological approach incorporating queer theory and intersectionality principles.

Drisko (2024) argued how transfer is a way of thinking that is developed inductively (*i.e.* by reading participants stories and the narrative themes) applied deductively to other situations (*i.e.* understanding older LGBTQ+ adults in health care contexts or informing policy about loneliness). The researcher argues that the life-course and generational perspective of the findings are important when understanding loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults. This is in line with Plummer (2010) argument about the past being present in the current moment. The theme stories about trauma and resilience illustrated how this generation's experiences of loneliness were often impacted by societal discourses and institutions which silenced this population's sexual identity, losses and choices. The historical and ongoing structural oppressions faced by this generation along with the shared narrative about searching and finding connection place emphasis on the importance of community initiatives and public spaces (*e.g.* peer-led support groups and LGBTQ+ physical spaces). These findings highlight the importance of having policies that advocate for funding into community initiatives. This is in line with two of the

core shifts of the 10 Year Health Plan, a long-term strategy published by the UK government that identified areas of change and improvement for the NHS, around prevention and community (UK Government, 2025). As a preventative way to tackle loneliness community mental health initiatives are relevant. This is consistent with previous research, conducted in Canada, which has highlighted the need for more LGBTQ+ inclusive, trauma-informed, and gender-affirming healthcare and social services (Hurd & Li, 2024).

A clinical implication of this research is the importance of considering creative and arts-based approaches when working therapeutically with LGBTQ+ older adults. Throughout the interviews, participants often communicated their experiences through aesthetic and metaphorical language, drawing on imagery such as paintings, film scenes, photography, and metaphoric language to convey meanings of loneliness and belonging. These narratives suggest that loneliness may not always be communicated through literal language. Creative approaches may therefore help bring visibility to experiences that are often unseen or difficult to articulate. Health and social care professionals, as well as researchers, are encouraged to welcome creative approaches, including visual art, photography, film, storytelling, or other mediums, to support individuals' preferred ways of communicating and provide opportunities for meaning making beyond direct verbal expression. This may be particularly valuable for a population whose experiences have often involved invisibility, stigma, and social silencing.

Integrative Community Therapy (ICT), developed by Barreto et al. (2022) in Brazil, is a community-based intervention with a narrative focus aimed to enhance resilience and social support. The findings of this study display stories about trauma and resilience while also elaborating on the search for belonging. ICT could offer a structured community-based approach to address loneliness among the LGBTQ+ population. By providing spaces for peer support and shared reflection, ICT challenges legal and social discourses that fail to acknowledge the needs of the LGBTQ+ community, aligning instead with participants

suggestion about community spaces. Furthermore, and in line with queer lineage (Ryan-Flood, 2024) and the narrative approach of this study ICT emphasizes peer-led dialogue and collective storytelling. Participants' experiences of loneliness highlight the importance of interpersonal, cultural and structural dimensions suggesting how interventions fostering structured opportunities for narrative sharing could be beneficial. While ICT has not yet been formally implemented or evaluated in the UK, the principles align with evidence-based approaches to community support (UK Government, 2025) suggesting it could be explored as a potential intervention for navigating loneliness among the LGBTQ+ population.

A further implication of these findings lies in their potential to offer recognition, validation and a sense of connection to other LGBTQ+ individuals. In line with the narrative theme searching for belonging participants stories could act as a form of archive that enables connection. The documentation of stories of this research adds to a continuing legacy of UK based LGBTQ+ history. This is something that narrative approaches are distinctively positioned to achieve. In this way, this research can be uniquely used as an archive of a collection of history and stories for future generations to learn from, allowing for the continuation and support of queer lineage. A link from past and present generations to the present and future generations.

5.9 Invitations for Future Research

This research offers various significant and novel findings relevant to enhancing the understanding of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults. It encouraged further research to use narrative approaches empowering participants voices, language and allowing space for nuances and context. The finding of how midlife, ages 30-40, is a life stage of frequent experiences of loneliness for this population could be explored further. In line with this, further research could explore the view of LGBTQ+ loneliness as a historically, culturally and structurally constructed

experience. Such findings might offer insight into how past experiences can influence present feelings of loneliness and impact future engagement with health and community services.

The findings of this research reflect how multiple experiences of oppression can influence experiences of loneliness. Research exploring the experiences of older adults from the global majority, with a disability and from lower socio-economic backgrounds is needed. On a different note, research that captures the experiences of older adults who identify as non-binary, trans and bisexual is necessary.

If the findings and implications of this study are supported by participants, then using a narrative approach with organisations could be a useful approach to support the development research, policies and frameworks that aim to understand loneliness for the LGBTQ+ population. Moreover, future research could investigate the feasibility and acceptability of ICT in UK contexts, with adaptations to ensure LGBTQ+ affirmative and culturally appropriate delivery.

5.10 Conclusion

This research's findings share participants stories about trauma and resilience and searching for belonging. These narrative themes indicate how silencing social discourses and systemic oppression are closely related with LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of loneliness. Participants' narratives expand from the existing literature by highlighting the importance of AAD, queer lineage and community resilience. To understand loneliness, it is essential that greater representation is given to LGBTQ+ older adults experiences across their lifespan.

The research further emphasises the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective when exploring LGBTQ+ older adults' experiences of loneliness. These experiences are not only shaped by sexuality and gender, but by the interaction of multiple forms of

inequality and social identities, including age, health, socioeconomic circumstances, ethnicity, migration histories, and relationship experiences. These interactions influence exposure to structural inequalities and opportunities for connection

Dissemination of research that includes the stories of LGBTQ+ older adults experiences of loneliness is needed for equitable change within overarching heteronormative communities and systems. Interventions that ensure funding into community initiatives and spaces are recommended. Ecological systems, queer, and intersectional perspectives provide a critical lens to understand how multiple social, structural, and identity-related factors shape experiences of loneliness among LGBTQ+ older adults. Research, theory and practice implications are necessary to challenge the structural stigma and rhetoric silencing LGBTQ+ older adults has and continues to face.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Interview Topic Guide

- Introduction
- Demographics:
 - participants age.
 - gender identity
 - sexual orientation
 - ethnicity
 - religious affiliations
 - geographical context (current and where they grew up)-
- Ask participant if they brought pictures representing loneliness and inquire about them.

- Understanding Loneliness:
 - Explore participant's personal definition and experiences of loneliness.
 - What does loneliness mean to you?
- Support Network:
 - Identify individuals or groups that form the participant's support network (family, friends, support groups, etc.).
- Mental Health and Loneliness:
 - Discuss participant's mental health and its relation to their feelings of loneliness (*e.g.* anxiety, depression).
- LGBTQ+ Identity, age and Loneliness:
 - Explore how participant's LGBTQ+ identity has contributed to their feelings of loneliness throughout their life.
 - Age/ Stage of Life. Changes over the life course and how the current stage of life impacts on loneliness.
- Coping Mechanisms and Support:
 - Inquire about strategies or resources participant utilizes for coping with loneliness.
- Impact of Homophobia and Discrimination:
 - Explore the impact of homophobia, prejudice, ageism and other forms of discrimination on participant's life in general, and specifically on their feelings of loneliness.

Probes (to facilitate greater dialogue)

- What led to that...
- Can you say a bit more about that.

Appendix B- Participant Consent Form



Consent Form

This is a consent form to participate in the research titled:

Exploring Loneliness Amongst LGBTQ+ Older Adults

I, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated 22/03/2024 for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.	☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal will be destroyed.	☐

3.	I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.	☐
4.	I understand that my fully anonymised data may be published in an academic journal as well as presented to local health and social care services. If interested, a copy of the final report will also be sent to me.	☐
5.	I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future, and may be shared anonymously with other researchers	☐
6.	I give permission for the anonymised interview transcripts to be deposited in the University's Research Repository so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals	☐
7.	I understand that the photographs/images I provide for the study might be used for a photographic exhibition.	☐
8.	I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix C- Participant Information Sheet



ETH2324-0943, VERSION 3

[Date]

Information Sheet

Exploring Loneliness Among LGBTQ+ older adults

My name is Samara Suarez Hernandez, and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at The University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The proposed project aims to explore the experience of loneliness for individuals aged 50 and over that identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. This research is being conducted as part of my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am being supervised by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Susan Mc Pherson.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate because you identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and/or Queer and you are aged 50 or over. I will be aiming to interview between 20 to 30 people.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to provide written consent by signing a consent form. The consent form will clearly highlight that your data will be kept completely confidential and that you are free to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason. You will be given a unique participant number and if you wish to withdraw your data from the study at any point, please quote this number and your data will be destroyed. Withdrawal will have not impact your access any service, organization and/ or social media group.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be invited to engage in an interview lasting approximately 60 minutes in a location of your choice. The location can vary from online, telephone, your home or a room at a charity/ organisation you engage with. You will be invited to bring photos that represent for you loneliness and how this may interact with your social network, mental health, experience of discrimination and what has helped to reduce loneliness. You will be asked questions about your experiences. If you consent to do so, the interviews will be audio recorded, to aid with data analysis at a later stage.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

An hour of your time will be required in addition to any potential time travelling to the organisation/ service if that is your preferred location. Engaging in an interview about your experiences may bring difficult feelings up for you.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I cannot guarantee any specific benefits from taking part in the study. There is the potential that you could benefit from sharing your experience and contributing to raising awareness and understanding about the experience of loneliness for LGBTQ+ older adults.

What information will be collected?

You will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire that will include your age, sexual orientation, gender identity and ethnicity. You will be invited to engage in an open

interview and share information about your experience. The interview will be transcribed by myself the main researcher. Your information will be anonymised and any identifiable information (demographics) will be stored separately from your interview responses. You will be asked to bring photographs/ images that can illustrate your life experiences. These photographs/images might be used for a photographic exhibition.

Will my information be kept confidential?

The information you provide will be kept confidential and will be securely saved in a Box folder or transferred to a University of Essex secured shared drive. Data files will be encrypted. If you disclose information that leads me to believe that you or others are at risk of harm, I may have a duty of care to inform an appropriate authority.

The two supervisors mentioned above and me will have access to your research data, both during a project and after it has been completed. The anonymised research data will be deposited in the University's Research Repository. They will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

Informed consent from you will be obtained if you decided to participate. The Data Controller is the University of Essex and the contact will be, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you want to take part, please email myself at ss23165@essex.ac.uk.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

It is hoped the findings from this research will be published in an academic journal as well as presented to local health and social care services. Results will be anonymised and that they will not be identifiable. It is hoped that the photographs/ images will be displayed in a photographic exhibition within the University of Essex. If you are also interested, a copy of the final report will also be sent to you.

Who is funding the research?

Health Education England as currently undergoing training to become a Clinical Psychologist, which involves undertaking this research.

Who has reviewed the study?

Reviewed and ethically approved by the University of Essex Ethics Committee. They have granted the research safe and ethical to participate in.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Samara Suarez Hernandez, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Camille Cronin (camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk). If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University of Essex Research Integrity Manager, Mantalena Sotiriadou (email: ms21994@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the header of this document.

Samara Suarez Hernandez (ss23165@essex.ac.uk)

Department of Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Wivenhoe Park

Colchester

Essex

CO4 3SQ

Appendix D- Image Release Form**IMAGE RELEASE FORM**

Project Title: Exploring Loneliness Among LGBTQ+ older adults.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read and understood the information above regarding the use of the photographs/images that I have produced as part of my participation in this study. I understand that these photographs/images will be used for public display on a project website and other academic publications. I understand that these photographs/ images might also be used for a photographic exhibition. I was given the opportunity to ask questions, and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

If the photographs/images include persons that can be identified, I confirm that I have received consent from them for them to be included, and that they understand how the photographs/images will be used. I provide written confirmation from the person involved.

I hereby consent voluntarily for the investigators to make free use of the photographs/images for this purpose. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF ANY PERSONS FEATURED IN PHOTOGRAPHS

Signature

Date

Signature

Date

Appendix E - Reflexive Log

Very emotive interview, felt in different moments a rush of sadness. Connected to the idea of always wanting to be around people, to avoid the danger of being with myself.

Travelling and distance as an escape. Touched a nerve in me, in my experience of leaving home when I was young, in how I run away and fill my life with things to not have to face me? my sadness?

Crying after the interview. Calling a friend and travelling to her house. The insights the interview evoked led me to arrange support via emailing personal tutor and booking a therapy session.

Appendix F- Reflexive Log 2

When listening to the interview I paid attention at how it started, unfolded and ended. Found interesting the full circle of the narrative. How the participant started with a story of him at age 16, “knowing I was a bit different” and ended the conversation with him at age 16. The unfolding of the story appeared to connect the past and the present.

Further insights about myself- The storyteller spoke about finding replacement families in in big institutions. This thought evoked a reflection around me finding replacement families within academic institutions and friendships developed. From an early age found a family of friends in school. This was replicated when I moved to university in England, through a postgrad course and now in the doctorate. The eternal student because learning environments have provided with replacement families at times of loneliness.

Appendix G- Example Transcript

Transcript

22 September 2025, 10:09am

● started transcription.

Researcher 0:03

I guess before we start, I ask people some few demographic questions around their age, sexuality, where they live. Is it OK with if we start with that before?

Aisha 0:04

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yes.

Researcher 0:19

One moment. So, I guess the demographic questions are around your age?

Aisha 0:26

I'm 62.

Researcher 0:28

OK, your gender identity?

Aisha 0:33

A female woman.

Researcher 0:34

Yep. Your sexual orientation?

Aisha 0:36

I probably will call myself a lesbian still.

Researcher 0:44

And your ethnicity?

Aisha 0:51

European and Asian.

Researcher 0:53

European and Asian, OK. And any religion affiliations. Are you part of any religion?

Aisha 0:55

No.

Researcher 0:57

And geographical context. So, I guess that's a little bit about where you grew up and if that's changed at all to now?

Aisha 1:00

Nope.

(shares geographical location)

Researcher 1:13

OK, brilliant. So, I guess my first question to you is, did you decide in the end to bring any visuals that would help you share your story?

Aisha 1:25

No, I've been very busy, very busy. And if I had, I couldn't think of any.

Researcher 1:31

Yeah, really, that's fine. Totally fine. So, I guess my first question, so I don't have any set questions. It's more themes than just going with where the conversation goes.

Aisha 1:40

Cool.

Researcher 1:50

What does loneliness mean to you?

Aisha 1:54

OK.

Yeah.

I'm in a way... It doesn't mean anything to me, but I guess I have had experience of feeling lonely at times. I don't think I'm a very lonely person.

Researcher 2:03

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 2:17

Let me think. And then when I thought, you know, when I saw you doing this, I thought there are particular lonely experiences I would describe as loneliness that I think come out of being a lesbian, I think.

Researcher 2:28

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 2:32

And then at the same time, their experiences of the opposite of loneliness to come out of being a lesbian. And I, you know, I've, I've had had a partner for 30 years. I've had a child. I'm yeah, quite middle class and sociable. So, on one level I yeah, I'm...

I've always had resources I think to overcome feeling lonely, but I, you know, I could talk and talk about this. I think there are points when I think I felt lonely and I thought, but then there are all kinds of reasons for feeling lonely, I think.

Researcher 3:05

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 3:14

I think situations that might lead to feeling lonely and I can't really separate out.

I think, well actually there are class issues because I didn't grow up middle class. I'm very middle class now, but I wasn't. There are class issues. There are issues around race and sexuality. So, they're very intertwined.

Umm.

Let me think I'm just thinking and also family of origin. That or it's also intertwined I think.

So I came out when I was 24. I was at Uni, I was in (name of place) it was. It wasn't a lonely experience. It was a very sociable experience. Being a lesbian in (name of place) in the 1980s.

Umm.

But.

And I come from a kind of family with.

What would I say?

There's a level of there's some mental illness, there's some autism, perfectly nice family. I've got two siblings who are doctors in the (name of institution)

Researcher 4:33

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 4:34

That my mum worked for the (name of institution) My dad worked for the (name of institution) My parents split up, they.

So...

I've often felt lonely at Christmas, for example, because only in the sense of people will talk about their Christmases and their big family get togethers. And I've never had big family get togethers with my family origin at Christmas.

Aisha 5:00

For various complicated reasons, my mother is Swedish and she moved back to Sweden. My dad died. My sister married. Somebody had three children already, and then she had two

other children, my brothers, mentally unwell. So that, you know, it's not really to do with my sexuality.

Researcher 5:13

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 5:18

I'd say so, coming up to Christmas, like lonely, sad, something. Not part of something. Not being part of something. And I, you know, I've done things about that, so I guess.

Researcher 5:24

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 5:32

But you know, as a family, we were a family with one child, 2 parents we could do. We feel lonely at Christmas. Sometimes we can feel a bit lonely, as in the sense that other people do these amazing things have a very sociable at Christmas and meet extended family and family extended family. And we had don't have my partner actually my partner.

Aisha 5:51

But also in circumstantial, my partner, we used to go see my partner's mother at Christmas, but she was quite homophobic, so she we didn't go there the first few years and we had a baby. And then at some point she was OK with us going there. She lived in a retirement community, so when we stayed with that, we could stay in this flat. That belonged to the retirement community.

Researcher 5:56

MMM.

Aisha 6:11

After a while, she could cope with the idea that was her daughter, her daughter's partner and their child.

And then so my partner also hasn't. Her sister moved to America. And so, we don't see this. So, there's, there's there was no extended family in this country. So, I think that's what made

us feel lonely. But we've chosen to do things about that and go and see our other members of our extended family around the world and.

Researcher 6:26

Hmm.

Aisha 6:36

Which I guess takes resources. We've had the resources to go to the states to see my wife's family and I have family Mauritius. I have family in Sweden, and I just make and it takes an effort to go and see them, but I've done that.

Aisha 6:52

Slightly in order to not feel that lonely, you know, to, you know, to not feel, to see people who are my family. But it takes effort (laughs)

Researcher 7:03

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 7:06

And I think there was a bit of a loneliness about being a mum. As a lesbian. I think there was a little bit of there. It's all obviously social infrastructure of tea groups and mums' groups and.

Researcher 7:11

Hmm.

Aisha 7:20

I think we didn't quite get invited to the same things or people the straight women would all have friendship groups and we'd feel a little outside things, but then we had a lesbian mums group, so you know, it's always been the antithesis available. So, we had a lesbian mum's group. We still have friends in that group, but there wouldn't, isn't.

Researcher 7:24

Hmm.

Aisha 7:39

There weren't mums in that group who had children at our child's nursery or school, so there was just a sense of being a bit on our own and forever ever. And I think we had our son 22 years ago. I think things have shifted a bit around acceptance of.

Researcher 7:44

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 7:56

Non heterosexual families in schools and nursery settings, but it was them at times you could feel lonely. We think. Why aren't we sort of part? You know why? Why are these other mums doing these things? Why haven't we been invited along and you know, it could also be because we're I'm a psychotherapist, my partner.

Researcher 8:11

Hmm.

Aisha 8:15

As a psychotherapist, we're also we're a little bit scary. We're a bit old. We were older mums. I imagine some people felt a little bit something all right? I don't know. Didn't ask them. Maybe. So that was a little bit of loneliness at times. My son got a homophobically bullied at primary school and secondary school, so that was a slightly that knows actually, in secondary school, the mother parents really stepped up actually, and they all came forward and they said they were horrified about what was going on actually and that their children had told their parents.

Well, it still makes me cry (removes tears from eyes) . So, children told the parents about what was going on with our son, and the parents are really supportive, so potentially that could have been lonely, but it was more horrible than lonely (small laugh). And now we're older. We just like.

Researcher 9:05

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 9:08

Yeah, we have more time now. We're not working so much. We have. Well, I still work, but there's more time to be sociable. So, I think some of the loneliness is about just working, you know, having a child working, not really having time to be so sociable, spending all the weekends, recovering.

Researcher 9:20

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Aisha 9:28

But yes.

So sometimes I can feel a bit lonely at the weekend and like if my partner's doing something else, it's just now. It's just an interesting experience because I think, OK, I feel a bit lonely. What am I going to do about that? I don't. You know, I don't kind of collapse into a.

Researcher 9:45

Hmm.

Aisha 9:49

I it's like I know I've got resources, and I can think about what to do about it or whether I just want to enjoy the space and the alone time. So that's what that's my history with loneliness possibly.

Researcher 9:52

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 10:05

I thought. I think I had. I felt very lonely as a child at times, and I think some of that is because we were an immigrant family and we had no, you know, I had a grandmother who I lived in Sweden, I had grandparents. I didn't. My mother was an only child, so I didn't.

Aisha 10:22

have cousins. But I had a lot of family in Sweden and actually I lived there for a year and a

half when I was three and four. So, there was a loneliness and missing them, but that was about being my parents, are migrants.

Researcher 10:33

Hmm.

Aisha 10:38

Really. And it was like there was in that was life before there was. You could only even make a phone call. Very rarely. You know, you couldn't just WhatsApp people and phone them and do this. Yeah. So, if I it was in that situation today would be and you couldn't fly. It was very expensive to travel.

Researcher 10:46

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 10:58

So I think you can just get a Ryanair flight over to see them.

Researcher 10:58

MMM.

Aisha 11:02

But that's so much my son had experienced so much less of that he. So, then his grandmother was in Sweden, and we were there we went there a lot because it's so much more affordable. So yes, that's me and loneliness.

Researcher 11:17

Thank you for sharing those experiences and I think as you said at the beginning, it really kind of shows the intersection and the different times in your life for different reasons. And I wonder you were saying as a child being.

Researcher 11:36

Away from your family or having a migrant family. And I wonder how you remember that loneliness as a child like.

Aisha 11:38

Hmm.

Yes.

Was it lonely? Yeah. Was it boredom. Was it loneliness? How do I remember it? Well, I think just knowing that there were some more people around, I wouldn't be feeling what I was feeling if there were more people around, then I would.

Researcher 11:50

MMM.

Hmm.

Aisha 12:03

I wouldn't have just had to be dealing with myself. There'd be more stimulation and.

Researcher 12:08

MMM.

Aisha 12:13

I don't know. I guess it was just a yearning for different people. I don't. You know I don't. Maybe it's that me as me as an adult is putting that on that. But I think an emptiness.

Researcher 12:22

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 12:24

Maybe being emptiness and boredom.

Aisha 12:31

Hmm.

And I've also thought of another phase. Actually. When I was at work, I worked as a teacher for quite a long time, and I wasn't particularly out at work. I started work in sort of about 1990, and I definitely.

Aisha 12:39

Mm-hmm.

You know, I think people knew I was a lesbian, but it was. It wasn't very. I did feel separate from my heterosexual colleagues, actually, that was also type of loneliness. We did things differently socially. They would have a culture they're going to the pub and they'd go out together. I did lesbian things, but at work, I've.

Researcher 13:07

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 13:11

It was. I didn't feel I could talk about my world at work.

Researcher 13:14

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 13:17

And I wasn't really out of work very much ever till my last teaching job in the two first decade of the 2000s.

Researcher 13:26

What do you think? Maybe stopped you or from being able to share your world at work?

Aisha 13:33

I think it was just we lived in different worlds. There was heterosexual world, there was lesbian or lesbian and gay world to some extent, and I would never go to work and say, oh, I went to pride at the weekend or I went to this really great club in my first job, I worked in (location)

Researcher 13:44

mmm

Aisha 13:49

Unbelievably, from 1992 to 97, the longest I worked in teaching and there was one other person there identified as lesbian. I did go to a lesbian club with her once.

But it's just like no one was interested. It was life was much more heteronormative. People had families, they had children. Lots of the other. My colleagues or they were older people.

Researcher 14:03

Them umm.

Hmm.

Aisha 14:18

The older back teachers that never really came out to them just didn't do it. They were sort of, you know, there were these sorts of maternal women, Asian, the Caribbean, African women. But I'd never wonder the thought of coming out to them in in the 1990s.

Which is lonely, you know? And I had a partner, but they kind of vaguely knew I had a partner, but I didn't go into any detail. It was, yeah, lonely. That is a lonely experience. Or lonely or just feeling very outside of something that is loneliness. Yeah.

Researcher 14:38

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Do you think that's means to you that you're feeling outside of an experience?

Aisha 14:56

Yeah.

Yeah, just me on my own here. Here I am. I'm the only person who has this. You know who. Or I can't talk about what's important to me, cause somehow there's nothing around me that is signalling that it's OK to talk about that or that somebody's interested. And it was a time when everyone would say, oh, you've got a partner, he blah, blah, blah, blah and.

Researcher 15:12

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 15:24

It was just the kind of, yeah, just nobody's saying. Your partner, your partner, he or she, they people just wouldn't say that in those days so.

Researcher 15:30

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 15:36

Yeah, lonely (laughs) That was a lonely experience.

Researcher 15:38

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 15:41

Or yeah, I don't. Yeah. And there was. Yeah. No, we didn't talk. Those of us who are lesbians, we did not talk about our partners at work and there was a lesbian and gay support group there at (name of school)

Researcher 15:50

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 15:56

And even then, yeah, we didn't. We just didn't say how it wasn't that how we're going to feel better about being at work. It was just very tentative. Just knowing we're there for each other.

Researcher 16:08

Do you think that's changed? I think I guess I'm thinking of a historical context and yeah.

Aisha 16:14

Well, I imagine it really, really has, but I guess I'm not in a workplace now. I work for myself and that while I work in the therapy centre where I where I, you know, I can trust people not to be.

Researcher 16:22

Hmm.

Aisha 16:32

I guess homophobic, but it's. Yeah, it's like we know I work in a place I says with so much about difference. Like there's a lot more acceptance. I'm not really lonely.

Researcher 16:35

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 16:47

In that way where I work, but I'm most lonely around race because it's a very wide organisation I work in, I think.

Researcher 16:48

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 16:54

So that's when I've. Yeah, it's about being a person of colour. I think a lot more about being a lesbian in in me at the (name of place) where I work but not in my practise.

Researcher 17:02

Mm-hmm.

I guess you said at the beginning that it's a lot about the intersections and you're sharing now that maybe the loneliness comes through a different lens.

Aisha 17:15

Hmm.

Hmm.

Hmm.

Well, it's it. Well, it's me. It's me. I don't have different lenses in a way. So, I guess, yeah, I guess I'm not. You know, you haven't said what is your experience of being lonely as an LGBT person, I guess.

Researcher 17:35

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Aisha 17:37

So that's me putting that on that, but for and that's being older and a bit like you know, I don't care this is who I am. I can talk about who I am. But when you're sort of new and you're just starting out and working, you're in your 20s.

Researcher 17:46

mmmm.

Aisha 17:53

It's a very you and you want to fit in. It's a different experience, I think.

Researcher 17:57

Hmm.

Hmm.

Researcher 18:03

How is it talking about these experiences of loneliness?

Aisha 18:08

Well, I know this is my job, so I'm kind of OK about talking about anything about my life. I think I was thinking it's interesting to reflect on where I've been and what that's been like and how I'm different now and.

You know, I think it's been an interesting thing to reflect on. That's why I thought, oh, I'd quite like to talk about that. Someone wants to know. I just because.

You know, I don't think I've got lots of kind of emotional baggage about it, but I I'm sort of interested in my own experience.

Researcher 18:44

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 18:49

You know it wasn't, and it hasn't been, you know, might be feel traumatic if I'd never talked about it to anyone. And if I was a very, I am quite an introverted person. But if I was a very shy person who.

Who didn't know how to talk to things about things? It might be felt very loaded, I guess.

Researcher 19:09

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 19:10

But I you know, it's OK. Yeah. So good. So, it's a good thing to talk about it.

Researcher 19:12

Just checking, OK.

Aisha 19:19

Yeah, I feel I'm. Yeah, I'm. It's in. It's a kind of I feel curious. It's OK.

Researcher 19:30

Just checking. Yeah. So, I think some of the.

Aisha 19:31

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I appreciate that.

Researcher 19:42

So I think some of the Themes that I had in mind for this out the network, the support network around you, and I guess you've talked a little bit about coming out and how that was in (name of place). And I guess maybe thinking about.

Different points in your life how that support network has played a role on the feeling of loneliness.

Aisha 20:04

Yes.

Yes.

Yeah, yeah, I guess I always had friends, but there was a point in. So, there was a point when I started teaching full time and I didn't have a partner.

And sort of. When I was about 26, I had the experience of going from being working, part being a student, working part time, having, you know, just starting work was a lonely time, but also quite teachers. I had to work so blooming hard. So, you know, they're mostly 12 hours a day I remember.

Researcher 20:40

Hmm.

Aisha 20:47

So feeling lonely then? But then I got into a relationship and then that kind of helped sort it that out.

Researcher 20:49

No.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 21:00

Sorry, what was the question? Community support group. So, I have getting in a relationship was and then actually that's a relationship split up and I moved into a place in my own on my own and then I was lonely.

Researcher 21:01

Yeah, yeah.

Aisha 21:12

I was only, but it was also that phase coming up to being 30 when.

You start getting more, you don't want to be in the gang because I was in a gang of what was then called black lesbians. You know, I had, you know, there were a lot of us. And then we started kind of individuating and falling out with each other.

And then I was, and that was after I was in that relationship with somebody for three years. And I think I relied on that relationship a lot. So, all right, then, when I came out of that relationship and lived on my own, I felt really lonely because I think I just, I've left a lot of people behind.

Aisha 21:54

I'd left a lot of people behind. My heterosexual friends are starting to have children.

Researcher 21:59

mm mm

Aisha 22:03

So I was very lonely for a year and then I got into another relationship. So, it's been my answer to everything get into a relationship (laughs) No, I yeah, I'm being a bit flippant, but I,

you know, some people aren't that into relationships. But I think relationships have been important to me because I haven't because I'm not having any extended family to rely on really.

Researcher 22:07

mmm

Aisha 22:23

And that's what's.

It's what's worked with me. I, you know, appreciate it doesn't work for everybody, but I obviously like being in relationships so but.

Researcher 22:30

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 22:38

Yeah. So that community of lesbians, it's got smaller, though. Some of those women are still in my life, and I'm really good friends with them. But I didn't feel part of a broader. But then I was also there. Then there was the black Lesbian and gay community that.

Did stuff throughout my 30s, so there was.

Even though the kind of supports, because structure wasn't really there, they used to be organisations and things you could be members, members of, and then they all lost their funding and they weren't there and.

Researcher 23:03

Hmm.

Aisha 23:13

we were still loosely friends. We were there for each other.

Researcher 23:16

mmm

Aisha 23:18

And then some of us started having children a bit later on.
So there was that community and then there was a lesbian parenting community and.

Researcher 23:29

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 23:33

But it's like, yeah, it's sort of a word. Just recently my partner used to run something called the (name of group) and they've, which was a centre of people HIV and AIDS and just recently somebody made a film. They've got together to make a film about that.

Researcher 23:41

mm mm

Aisha 23:48

And we were just reflecting on about how in the 90s, what a lot of lesbian and gay community there was, it was probably a lesbian, gay and trans. It probably was at that time because no one really identified as queer or into.

Researcher 23:54

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 24:04

Into nonbinary wasn't a thing so much that that that yeah, we that community really went.

Researcher 24:12

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 24:13

So there were points and we were also much younger. So, in our 20s and 30s in the 80s and 90s, there was much more of a lesbian and gay community that I felt part of. And how am I if they're feeling part of that community? But then I had a child. So, then I was part of another community.

Researcher 24:25

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 24:32

So it sort of has changed my who? My support network is, but I think that it was a Phase I think a few years ago where I guess my son was getting older where I thought well most both me and my partner thought right, we need to work on.

Researcher 24:35

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 24:48

Friendships and it was also around COVID we thought, well, who are our people around us? Who is it? We know that we need to that we can rely on. So, it has been a conscious thing to think right. We are going to talk to these people and say you know do you do you want you know.

Researcher 24:49

Hmm.

Aisha 25:08

Can we agree there to be there for each other in emergencies and things like that so it with that it's needed thinking about hasn't just developed organically, which I sometimes I think it must do for other people, but.

Researcher 25:10

MMM.

Hmm.

Aisha 25:23

Yeah, we've had to. We've had to think about, OK, we don't have extended family. What are

we going to do to feel that we don't have extended family in this country. What are we going to do to feel that we have? There are people there. We have a network that we can.

Researcher 25:23

Yeah.

Yeah.

Aisha25:40

Somehow benefit from?

Researcher 25:43

There's something about what you said that has made. Oh, my. Yeah, I guess. How get made me goosebumps and a bit teary. And I wonder if that's about, I'm also an immigrant in this country. So, I don't know if there's something about that.

Aisha25:52

Hmm.

Hmm.

Researcher 26:04

And I guess that conscious.

Aisha 26:07

Hmm.

Researcher 26:08

Conversation with your partner and who are the people that we have?

Aisha 26:09

Yes, yes.

And we grew up here and we still have that. But also, I think we didn't think like where we should live, where should we live so we can be near our friends. You know, I've got a close friend. Well, (name of person) who I've known since I was 11 and she lives in (name of area). I live in (name of area) We would see each other much more.

Researcher26:16

Hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 26:34

I think we didn't think like when we bought this house in (name of area) we didn't think it would be good to live nearer. I think my partner did more, but her friends moved out. So, her friends moved out from (name of area).

Researcher 26:36

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

MMM.

Aisha 26:53

Whether they move back to (name of area), she's got three friends who moved to (list of places) So there was also that we had to people we thought would be there. You know, it's like the friend who moved to (name of area) She was there the night before. We, I gave birth to our son.

Researcher 26:57

MMM.

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 27:12

She came to help us and like the other one, (name of friend) and (name of friend) one of them is our child's son. They moved to (name of place). So, there's also that thing in (name of place) where you think people are going to be around and then cause, they've been around for 30 years in your life and then they've gone to live 80 miles away.

Researcher 27:26

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 27:32

Yeah. So that was also, yeah, well, you keep losing friends living in (name of place). I guess that's true. Lots and lots of places. But there's also that to bear in mind, people, you and lots of other people you just think are going to be here. I guess the white people, people of colour.

Researcher 27:45

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 27:48

None of them have gone anywhere in white. I think about it. Yeah. Oh, no, no. I've got actually one of my closest friends moved from retired and moved to (name of place) She's black.

Researcher 27:51

Hmm.

Hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 28:04

But yeah, so we also there's also that that we that we've got to look at who's left.

And really, make sure we, you know, work on those relationships.

And it was, you know, we was only two. There's two women, both lesbians who live nearest to us and three. That's the third one we that we've had to have those conversations with. Let's just say, look, we, we see you as part of our support network is that OK with you.

You know, can we be there for each other?

Mm-hmm.

Researcher 28:38

Yeah. So, I guess again, a change throughout the years?

Aisha 28:42

Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Interesting. Interesting to think about.

Researcher 28:49

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 28:49

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Researcher 28:52

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 28:54

You know, because when you first started thinking, talking, I thought there's this kind of image of lonely, lonely LGBT plus people. And what are they like wandering around being lonely? But it's more complex, isn't it? And I've got a friend, (name of friend) who has always lived on her own.

So who grew up in care, and she's always lived on her own. And when I think about it and she's, she's also having a disability. She has very severe dyslexia. So, she's only. She's only had one job that she got made redundant from. So, she's always mainly lived on benefits all her life. But she has a massive network of friends. If I think about it.

Researcher 29:19

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 29:29

And she has, you know, she has people who feed her, give her money when she needs to, and she's sort of, yeah, you know, in a kind of healthy way. But yeah, so people I know are very.

Researcher 29:34

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 29:45

Work things out, and maybe it's partly living in (name of place). There isn't that sense of being isolated and some not being able to get to places.

Researcher 29:46

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 29:57

Hmm.

Researcher 29:57

Wonder what made you think of your friend when you were talking about this?

Aisha 30:01

Well, I was just thinking that people are different, you know, even in my, in our support network of people, people have very different lives.

Researcher 30:08

MMM.

Aisha 30:09

And one of our friends, one of those friends that is, that is in a relationship and the and another one is not in a relationship and really wants to be in a relationship and her child has just gone to uni. So, she's on her own. So also, aren't people's needs have changed over time and availability.

.

Aisha 30:29

Think availability to how much time people have to put into.

Researcher 30:30

MMM.

Hmm.

Aisha 30:35

You know, there's also time that feeling that we never have enough time with people who are our friends, and you have these little snippets at times. So, having to be quite purposeful about making sure that you make time for people, because if you don't make time for people, how are they going to be part of your support network?

Researcher 30:39

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 30:56

Prioritising time, you know, valuing the time together, not just thinking you have to be there and expect you to be there for an emergency.

Researcher 31:00

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 31:06

Mm-hmm.

Researcher 31:07

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. I guess interesting thing about the support network and that relationship with loneliness.

Aisha 31:10

Hmm.

Hmm.

Researcher 31:18

Because a lot of people being alone is not necessarily feeling lonely. Sometimes you can feel lonely when there's a lot of people around you.

Aisha 31:18

Yeah.

Yes, I mean, God, I like being alone (laughs) because my partner works from home. I'm quite pleased when she's off doing something else, like us. I'm alone, but I think that sometimes I feel it's more sometimes it's. I wonder if it's sort of FOMO. It's like I hear of other people doing things.

Researcher 31:32

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Hmm.

Aisha 31:48

Well, the Christmas thing, if no one ever talked about Christmas, I wouldn't have that particular kind of loneliness. But it's like people and clients will come and they go. You know what it's like at Christmas, when there's 12 of you for dinner and I want to say no, I don't know what that's like.

Researcher 31:50

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 32:05

I know what it's like when there's three of us for dinner, maybe a fourth person has come to join us, but and yeah.

Researcher 32:13

Is it something particular about Christmas?

Aisha 32:17

But I think it's just a. It's in your face, then they're an advert to these big groups of people having Christmas together. People talk about, you know, when they get together with their extended family and sleeping on mattresses on the sleeping on the floor. And I've never had that experience.

Researcher 32:22

Hmm.

Aisha 32:33

Of a big extended I did actually. There were times when we went to Sweden, when I was in in my early late teens and we went to my grandmother's or my great uncle. So, I have had those experiences in Sweden, maybe.

Researcher 32:42

Mm-hmm.

MMM.

Aisha 32:50

You know have had them. So, there is a memory of Christmas where you've got together with people who had known you all your life and then because of problems in my family, I stopped going. I was never invited to see my mother at Christmas from when I was about 20.

Researcher 32:53

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 33:07

When my father died from when I was 30, actually.

Researcher 33:10

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 33:11

So it's not like I've never had. So, it's just a really since I got together with my partner and her mother died that we just thought, oh, it's just us, just the three of us here. And then when people just assume the Christmas means.

Researcher 33:15

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 33:27

For me, what it means for them, which is a lot of people, but actually Christmas for me, is I now think of it as a very quiet time, but we do nice Christmassy things, but it's very it's a day when on the couple of days when we don't see anybody usually.

Researcher 33:36

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 33:44

And it's and I. And I now like it. But there's been that transition to making it an OK time has involved a sense of it's almost a scary loneliness. It's like, oh, goodness. Really only us three, nobody had nobody.

Researcher 33:52

MMM.

Aisha 34:01

We have nobody. We have that kind of link with who's said come for Christmas.

Researcher 34:07

MMM.

Aisha 34:08

You know, of course we could travel to California to see my sister. Sister. We'd be welcome there, but no one else has said that because they're busy. I guess with their family and their and.

Researcher 34:17

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 34:23

Yeah, we're sort of even within our friendship network, people just go on and on about their nephews and how they saw them at Christmas. The pardon me, it's like, no, I don't really want to hear about you when you're going to sisters at Christmas, because that isn't available to us.

Researcher 34:38

Hmm.

Aisha 34:39

So my you know it's.

It's it lonely because it's painful or is it painful because it's lonely? Just that feeling of being missing it like this is not. Yeah, because I'm quite sociable. So, I kind of quite like the idea of getting together with people. So that's why I feel a bit sad because it's really.

Sounds like it's a nice thing and we do our own pre-Christmas things and we do see our

friends, but yeah, that's the point of the year. I think it hits me most, but that is very much to do with our circumstances. You know, both my partner and I are.

Researcher 35:03

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 35:17

Parent my three of our parents had no siblings, were single children alone so that we have. I have cousins, but they're in (name of place) They're the only cousins I have. My partner has no cousins, so we it's also because that that layer of family, we don't have a lot of it.

You know, I have two sips live inside that I have difficult relationships with. My part of a sibling lives in (name of place) Yeah, it's so there's a lot of things that contribute.

Researcher 35:47

I guess that you said it at the beginning, it's not that simple. There are so many different layers and experience of loneliness, yeah.

Aisha 35:54

Hmm. Hmm. Hmm.

Researcher 36:02

And I wonder like how, perhaps in the layer of your LGBT identity, how do you feel that influence your loneliness? You talked a little bit about that experience of working and not being able to share that.

Aisha 36:15

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Researcher 36:20

And I wonder if there's been any other moments of your life.

Aisha 36:31

Hmm.

I don't know. Possibly not.

Researcher 36:35

Hmm.

Aisha 36:52

I didn't go to Mauritius where my dad was from till my dad died. I went to Mauritius and I wasn't out there until I met my partner and had my son. So that was, just them people not really knowing that was a lesbian about and they're being whole feeling like they're bits of my life. I couldn't talk about with them. I guess that was a lonely experience.

Researcher 36:57

Hmm.

Aisha 37:03

So I think actually, you know, having said, oh, extended family, great, my experience is an extended family where I am was for a long time I was the only lesbian and then amazingly, someone who's actually my third cousin is a lesbian. And then she's another third cousin's a lesbian.

So when they when they came over the other year and there, we are in our 60s, she's in her 50s on them. It's like finally we had this bond as you know we're related and we're all lesbians. That was a really lovely. You made me realise what an amazing thing it is to have.

Aisha 37:35

To be actually related to other people and lesbians is a very amazing thing that we didn't really experience till our 60s.

But it's tricky because in Sweden all my relatives are white, so they don't have this experience of being mixed race.

But I you know, I think.

I think I think it's changed as people are more come, you know, as societies become less homophobic it's hard to say whether it's for me or it comes from them. But I remember one year going, going there about I don't know 10 years ago and somebody who was in her 70s saying, oh, it's LGBTQ plus month in (name of place) this.

Aisha38:18

Month. Have you been into the events you know, just in a normal way. We're having a pride month probably having Pride Month in (name of place) with a straight relative and it was just that never happened earlier in my life. So that just makes it that little bit.

Researcher 38:30

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 38:33

You just kind of relax a bit and feel less other.

Researcher 38:36

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 38:40

Just it just, you know, just the heterosexual people that, you know, being able to talk about anything to LGBTQ, plus just normalising it, it makes a huge difference.

Researcher 38:53

Mm-hmm.

What do you think that difference is?

Aisha 38:58

Which is just something you can just. I can relax a bit. I'm not holding. I think I feel safer.

Researcher 39:06

MMM.

Aisha 39:07

Just that I don't that and the sort of gap between us is less I feel seen at least because I grew up, we grew up with so much homophobia and there was so much people would be so homophobic that I think I was coming out because, you know, I was, it was very us and them

Researcher 39:13

MMM.

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 39:27

feeling very guarded and I don't feel that as much about people anymore. I just feel there's an acceptance of people has all kinds of gender identities, all kinds, etcetera. In a lot of spaces, obviously not in all spaces. So, I just feel more human actually.

And I think if you if you feel if you are dehumanised, that is a lonely experience, if you're otherised. If you think that person is talking about themselves as they are, if they're the only type of person and they're not recognising that, we're all people. That is a very lonely experience. But I think obviously we internalise that.

Researcher 39:51

Hmm.

Yeah.

Aisha 40:02

Do that to us, but I it was very hard not to do that to ourselves. I'd say in the 1980s and the 1990s, and I'm sure it still is for a lot of people to just accept they're normal.

Researcher 40:04

What made it hard back then, I guess if you think about those experiences of, of homophobia, of, of being othered

Any stories that come to your mind, any, any moments that come to your mind?

Aisha 40:26

Well, there was. There was the whole Tory government. Who was, you know, gay people weren't acceptable. Politicians would say gay people are not normal, you know they can't. And gay people shouldn't have children. And there were lots of stereotypes about lesbians.

Researcher 40:42

Hmm.

Aisha 40:51

Umm.

We just weren't. You know, we they were like knowing there were people in power, intelligent people who are willing to say, you know, heterosexual people are OK gay people are not OK had a huge impact. Massive.

You know massive, there was like no rainbow flags. And then suddenly there's this switch and suddenly you go into like a doctor's surgery and everyone, there's got bloody rainbow flag on. On one level, it's nice, but, you know, on another on one level, you think they're trying,

Researcher 41:17

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 41:31

They're what's the kind of signalling, signalling, signalling they're trying, but you don't still know when you go into any public service, how you're going to be met.

Researcher 41:37

Hmm.

Aisha 41:45

You know how you know how LGBT positive people are going to be?

Researcher 41:49

Mm-hmm.

MMM.

Aisha 41:54

Umm.

Yeah, you know, it's nice, but it's so it's like it was, it was a very hostile environment. I'd say for being a lesbian till about, you know, suddenly after the Equality Act, I think things it's really only really started changing in the mid teens of this century.

Researcher 42:07

Mm-hmm.

MMM.

And I guess political context, I wonder how was it like for you to I guess in your experience of motherhood?

Aisha 42:18

Yes.

Mm-hmm.

MMM.

It was. It's a very it's a good it's a positive thing. Well, what can I say? It's just.

And it's hard to say cause. I'm older, wiser. You know, more confident, but yeah, it's like if some of the new neighbours move into our road and we need to introduce ourselves and say, well, this is me and this is my partner, you still don't quite know what they're thinking.

It's still. You don't know what, how they're going to perceive that or what their experience is. So still a sort of little gap there I think.

But in my experience, nobody, nobody, nobody has been homophobic towards me for a long time for us. And but where, you know, I was really sad that since I worked in education, I worked in education. I was very into lesbian gay politics.

Researcher 43:12

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 43:21

I was really shocked by how my son, you know, badly my son's schools dealt with homophobia from other kids towards my son. He's not even gay. He has lesbian parents, but there was a gay teacher at my son's primary school, gay teacher, a gay head teacher. And he, it wasn't dealt with.

Researcher 43:40

Yeah.

Aisha 43:41

My son, my son would get into trouble for hitting kids who'd been homophobic to him, and he'd get into trouble and they would just. Yeah, it took. We really had to explain to them and they'd say no, we're very gay Positive. We've got. Look, there's a Stonewall poster on the wall.

He actually got excluded for school once because he when he hit somebody once, dude, there

were a lot of Christian, Chris, very kids from African Grand African Christian churches in (name of place) who were intensely, intensely homophobic.

Researcher 44:15

Hmm.

Aisha 44:15

And one day my son had enough and punched one of them, and then he got excluded from school. And then then he, the other child, was asked to write him a letter to say and to apologise. And the child said I'm not sorry. Sorry for what I said to you. And they gave the letter to my son that. No understanding at all.

Researcher 44:34

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 44:34

School that no understanding, basically because the schools are so, you know, focused on other things. But I think that's changed and then suddenly a couple of years later, the transgender kids suddenly popped up at school that. But we know, oh, strangely, they hadn't been there before, apparently. And suddenly schools having to deal with massive complex issues about what children are allowed to wear and how you don't have to. You know you have to move on from calling everyone boys and girls, so suddenly things shifted very quickly to my sense. But by that time my son was out of secondary school.

Researcher 45:11

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 45:11

Just after.

Sorry, what was your question? I think it's changed. So, things changed very quickly somehow.

Researcher 45:20

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 45:21

Yeah. And, you know, he was like, couldn't even. Couldn't, couldn't we? Then he started secondary school. We couldn't even go together as parents-to-parents evening because my son didn't want us to be seen having two mothers. And then by the time he got about 16.

Researcher 45:37

Yeah.

Aisha 45:37

All his friends were going on pride. All the straight friends, and he was it made him quite angry. Not surprisingly, that suddenly, you know, being gay is like really cool. But when he started that school, it really wasn't.

Researcher 45:48

Mm-hmm.

How was that experience for you? I'm imagining. Yeah, that instance where your son is like, please. Or don't. I don't want to see you together because this is happening.

Aisha 46:01

It was just it was. It was upsetting. It was just very frustrating to know the world to change so little, you know, and also, I've gone backwards. I think that, you know, I don't think schools were taking that seriously. And actually, it was. It was really sad, really frustrating, massively frustrating because there were schools that would have dealt with that better at the time.

Researcher 46:07

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 46:21, but it just wasn't a priority for the school and that's when my son was in year eight, so he was 12/13. And then when he got to year 11, he was 16. They had a new deputy head or knew somebody who'd looked at my son's files and he came and apologised.

And he recognised that the school had been really out of order about it, you know, because we could have sued them if we were that way inclined. You know, obviously it was too a little bit late, but it was like at least somebody had acknowledged.

Researcher 46:46

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 46:55

That the school had done a really had really mishandled that situation and had been homophobic basically and colluded with homophobia.

So it's kind of good to know. It's good to know from what I pick up that it's a much harder.

Things are not quite as bad as that anymore in most places, who know anyway in that school in London maybe, you know, I'm sure it's stuff still happening in places.

Researcher 47:06

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 47:24

But it was also there was a school where a head teacher came out as gay. And I thought that's also very transformational because that didn't happen for a long, long time that teachers were openly. Well, I wasn't out as a teacher at all. And I did come out of town when I was working at our (name) college to this group of 16-year-olds. And then I really wished I hadn't.

Researcher 47:30

Hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 47:43

Because they were so horrible at that or some of them was just this couldn't, you know, just take that as a piece of information.

Researcher 47:43

Hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 47:52

They were, you know? Yeah. And that one was 2004. It was still. Yeah, it was still really hard to say to a group of 16-year-olds at a college. Yeah, I'm a lesbian. I have a partner, woman partner. Get over it.

Researcher 47:57

OK.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 48:09

And that, I guess that was entire (name) was the particular kind of communities, but still and I think today and my sense is that you know it wouldn't, they wouldn't have got away with that.

Researcher 48:18

Hmm.

Aisha 48:20

Mm-hmm.

Researcher 48:21

I guess because you've been I guess on the different sides of the pictures as a teacher and then as a mother. And I guess seeing the change and not change in the experience.

Aisha 48:25

Hmm.

Yes, yes. Yeah, that's a lot. So, a lot's gone on really.

Researcher 48:36

Yeah.

Yes.

Oh, just checking in. How are you feeling now that, I guess.

We've continued with the conversation, and you've continued to reflect on different moments of your life.

Aisha 48:58

I'm OK. I've talked about this stuff a lot. I think. I mean, my partner and my son, we've processed this stuff a lot.

And we've always been like, I guess, quite political, quite actually my first job I had after UNI was at something called the (name of place). So, I've always been, it's always been like what I've been engaged in, actually. What's it like to be a lesbian or a lesbian of colour?

Researcher 49:16

MMM.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 49:31

What are we dealing with? So, I guess it's, so I'm used to talking about this.

Researcher 49:36

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 49:38

And also used to like reflecting a bit on how am I doing? What's it like? What's it like being, you know, going to a meeting at school and thinking you're the only lesbian parents? Sort of. Get you just you. Yeah. And then finding your people. So I will say that to young people now who kind of who I work with or you know, dealing with stuff like what you actually need is a community and to feel like you're not on your own with your identity or your sexuality and you know, also go and meet people. Don't just have a community online.

Researcher 50:06

Hmm.

Aisha 50:13

Just actually go and have friends that you can rely on. Make some friends.

Researcher 50:14

Hmm.

Yeah.

Aisha 50:22

Have actual real people in your life don't just rely on social media for you for your support.

Researcher 50:25

Mm-hmm.

What do you think is the difference of having actual human contact or friends?

Aisha 50:38

Then then you have relationships. You have relationships, you have relationship skills. You know what it's like to relate in a way you can't, you know you.

Researcher 50:40

MMM.

Aisha 50:51

You know you have 3D experiences.

I'm putting you. No, it's real. It's sort of, you know, it's going to affect you in here. It's not going to be just a name. You like somebody you message regularly, and you don't even know how tall they are or what their voice sounds like.

Researcher 51:06

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Yes.

Aisha 51:15

It's just. Yeah, I think as you human beings, we need to, we need to be parts of groups, you know, you know and then a person-to-person way it's not. Yeah, we're not.

Researcher 51:24

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 51: 31

We're not. You know, we're not designed to only experience something on through the medium of a computer or a phone.

Researcher 51:37

Mm-hmm.

OK.

Aisha 51:41

I guess it's good for our nervous system to go out and have a cup of tea with somebody.

Researcher 51:43

And I wondered maybe thinking a little bit about, yeah, the tea or the people around you, I guess what do you feel has maybe helped in lessening those feelings of loneliness, in coping with experiences of loneliness?

Aisha 51:49

Hmm.

Hmm.

I think it's being with people and talking about them and talking about our experiences and being with people who share where we share experiences and we can have a laugh about them because some of the things we experience are so outrageous it makes us.

Researcher 52:16

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 52:17

Laugh or you have to laugh.

Yeah, I think that's, I know, I guess reading about other people's experience, but you know mainly just being with people and the I think that's when I feel lonely when I haven't got people to talk to who will understand, I think that's the difference to me. So, if I know there's somebody I can go and talk to and they will listen and understand what I'm talking about, that makes all the difference.

Researcher 52:42

Hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 52:44

That's all the difference, and I guess that's why the Christmas thing is a bit strange because it's like everybody seems to have something here Christmas, everybody or the people who are very lonely don't want to talk about it. So yeah.

That's. I've never really. I'm banging on about Christmas. I've never really found anyone to talk about and some really crap when there's just three of you at Christmas. Well, you know, which obviously way better than there just being one of you.

Researcher 53:05

Yes.

And I wonder how many people there are in that situation that don't necessarily talk about it.

Aisha 53:18

Yes, yes.

Yeah.

Yes, I mean, I spent, I thought I spent Christmas on my I was lonely enough. There were two Christmases when I lived on my own. When I met up with friends at Christmas, and that was still quite a lonely experience. But I did meet up with friends.

And there was a new year, one new year in my life. I've had to spend on my own. It was, I think I was more interested in it than it was like an interesting experience.

Researcher 53:48

Hmm.

Aisha 53:50

I had to on some level, I probably didn't have to, but it was.

Yeah, I don't like it. What I learned about myself is I want to be with people when there are events, I get very envious. I remember going to with a friend to Gran Canaria one day, one year at New Year, and wet the whole town. Did New Year together, and I thought that would be my idea. That's my fantasy I wanted, you know, wherever.

Researcher 54:03

MMM.

Aisha 54:17

Everyone's does a similar thing, so I think there's also I think in London people do such different things and they all went outside and we all went to the square in the town at midnight. I thought that's my and I know that people do things like that. It can feel. I think I can feel a bit lonely here thinking, wow.

Researcher 54:20

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 54:36

If it was like, we'd all know what we were doing, you wouldn't have to run around trying to work out the party to go to. But it's sort of laid out for you, I think. Yeah, like being it's that immigrant thing. Being in (name of place) like everyone does something different. I think we felt a bit lonely at Christmas, my mother being Swedish.

Doing Swedish Christmas in (name of place) we there was my family. My mother would invite one of her Swedish friends often, but the fact that the only was only asked in Christmas Eve in Sweden in (name of place) was also a lonely experience in a way. And then like none of my friends would share our customs.

Researcher 54:56

Hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 55:17

That was a type of loneliness.

Hmm.

When I was with my family and maybe his family friend, but we were, it was the fact that we celebrated something that none of my friends celebrated.

Researcher 55:33

Hmm.

Aisha 55:36

Yeah. Now obviously and now things that people have much more international people talk about like food cultures, not when I was growing up in the 60s, so nobody in England either knew or cared about what people ate in Sweden at Christmas or that it was England was so insular. I know it's racist now, but they really nobody had.

Researcher 55:48

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 55:55

They've been to Sweden they and even if you told them people weren't interested because

England has a way of like, well, like, then even more so not being open to difference. But yeah, that was also.

Researcher 56:00

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 56:11

Like sort of being very individual, I guess when you're young, being very being different is a lonely experience often can be.

Researcher 56:16

Hmm.

MMM.

Helena 56:20

And sometimes I get very envious about big people. I know who's like, very big Caribbean families where, like lots of people emigrated and they have their aunts and their uncles and these big families. And I think, oh, that would have been an interesting experience of.

Researcher 56:27

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 56:35

Migration when you sort of a part of a community.

But then we so we made our lesbian black lesbian and gay community. We did make that and that, you know, I still know a lot of people in that community, even though we don't might not do much together. So like, if I go somewhere in (name of place), I may meet someone from that community. That's sort of nice.

Researcher 56:44

Hmm.

How was it making that community for you? And like, how did it come along that you were like, I want to make this, this community of black lesbian?

Aisha 57:10

I don't know what if that was it.

How was it? I think.

It was amazing. In fact, it was just incredible because there were a lot of people in London, a lot of amazing people. Like, I don't know if you know the poet Jackie Cage. She was part of that community. Bernardino Barista was part of that community.:36

Angela. Angela. What you call Adua Ando was part of that community. First, they were just amazing people who have gone on to do amazing things who I think were like they were sort of pioneers or somebody called a Dennis.

It's also like they were very so I wasn't quite as brave and as amazing and as talented and clever. They're all a little bit older than me and they are so and then they then there were a whole lot of other women who obviously weren't brilliant writers. And but it's just. But it was meeting a lot of amazing people.

Researcher58:06

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 58:10

And who were very, very brave in a way that I will because they were. There are people often who were part of the Caribbean community, was it was deeply homophobic and they were, you know, organising marches against some protests against all sorts of things.

Researcher 58:18

MMM.

Aisha58:26

And they they'd also dealt with way more racism than me. Way more homophobia.

So it was incredible in a way, because I met incredible people. But then I remember we had a conference that was a national Black lesbian conference that 200 lesbians came to, and it was just very diverse. But also, it was like such a diversity of people. It was a really interesting experience.

Researcher 58:47

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 58:53

And then there was a mixed-race group in that, and that was also very in just.

It was like diverse in all kinds of ways around race and class and culture. It was exciting.

Really exciting.

And also at that time we got we was like state funded, we got public money, we got money from councils, we got money from the (name) that funded all kinds of things and there was a lesbian centre in in Camden that was run by the.

You know, the London government paid for, so we also had places to go. And so, I had a lot of experiences that were transformational, I think.

There was this year we had Audrey Lorde came to speak in (name of place) like it was just very incredible time with incredible people.

Researcher 59:40

And.

Hmm.

Aisha 59:47

And lots of connections between like the black lesbian and gay community and the black lesbian community in New York. So, all the kind of poets and writers would come over amazing. It was. It was very life changing and amazing.

Researcher 59:56

Yeah.

Yeah.

And makes me think about that sense of community and being able to share your experiences with people that have different, similar experiences, but you're space to hear that.

Aisha 1:00:15

But I think culturally brought me into contact with people I might not have come across. Pratibha Palmer was another, just like people who were right. Very, very. It was of kind of real flowering of creativity about like, you know, that sort of lots of experiences around race and.

sexuality that was like, you know, in a way. It's. Yeah, when I talk to young people now, they're amazed that we had all that way back in the 80s.

Researcher 1:00:38

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:00:41

And like, yeah, we all knew who Audrey Lorde was, and now she's like, kind of. Now she's popular again. It's like, yeah, this is happening. People are wandering around. They're now in their 60s and their 70s and older. We that was our world.

So also, yeah, there was all this kind of oppression, but there was also and then there was AIDS. So, lots of oppression, but like culturally, there was a lot of amazing stuff that sustained us, I think.

Researcher 1:00:55

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

It's really amazing to hear because yeah, I guess when you didn't live at the time, there's assumptions that you can make because of the political context that you mentioned or because of the time. And I guess hearing that other narrative of what was there?

Aisha 1:01:21

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And yes, and all. And I think one of the things you recognise that's happened is that then the funding went and then we kind of lost, didn't have our spaces. So, it was hard to keep that community going in the same way.

Researcher 1:01:45

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:01:49

But that so everything kind of died down and then it's like it's re flourished again. It's like suddenly it's like, oh, right, we were right all along. All like, yes, what we had to say is of value to everyone.

Researcher 1:02:02

It's interesting though, cyclical process.

Aisha 1:02:03

Hmm.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Researcher 1:02:07

Leave and come back.

Yeah.

Aisha 1:02:12

Hmm.

Researcher 1:02:14

I guess, yeah, we're getting to the end of, of the time together. And I wonder, yeah, if there's maybe been any changes from when you start, did the interview this morning when I this morning an hour ago when I asked.

What does loneliness mean to you and?

Now talking about them. Yeah, any reflections that you've had about the space and about sharing bits of your story?

Aisha 1:02:45

Well, I think I've enjoyed joining the dots actually joining the dots. It's been.

Researcher 1:02:49

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:02:52

And it's been interesting to sort of unpick some of the layers in it. Really. What is what is.

Researcher 1:02:56

MMM.

Aisha 1:03:00

That what is what is loneliness and where does it come from? And what? What's fed it? What have I? What how it's how a sense that could be called. Loneliness is maybe inspired and motivated me to do things.

Researcher 1:03:15

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:03:16

This sort of how I've sought to not be lonely, both in terms of I guess, acting and in the world and.

Researcher 1:03:21

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:03:27

Like in reframing things like the Christmas thing, I just thought, no, I'm just going to give what this takes me, which is peace, and the fact that I don't have to go anywhere. I don't want to go, and I don't have to. I don't have to have the pressure that other people have. Just that. But it takes some work, you know, that I had to work with.

Researcher 1:03:30

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:03:47

I've gotten got it to work for me.

Researcher 1:03:50

Hmm.

Aisha 1:03:55

But.

That it's complex. You know I'm not. You know, I'm a social person. I think is good at relative, reasonably good at making connections with people, but that doesn't mean I'm not lonely at times, but that it the loneliness is a stimulus to go going out and.

Researcher 1:04:08

Really.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:04:17

And finding new people or new things.

Researcher 1:04:21

I think, yeah, loneliness is quite a universal experience. I think everyone has felt loneliness and it can mean different things for different people. Like you said, like it's your story. It's been about Christmas, and it's also been about.

Your son and the experience of homophobia you had at school or like you not being able to share bits of yourself. So yeah, I guess it's really. I think it's really interesting and meaningful to me to be able to hear people's story through all of these different angles.

Aisha 1:04:59

Yeah, yeah, no, it's an interesting topic, brings up a lot about identity, I guess, identity, connection, relating kinship society.

Researcher 1:05:08

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Aisha 1:05:15

You know how you know that? Lots of political? Yeah, I guess it's getting away in mindset, but there's a lot of politics involved. I think in my experiences of loneliness and the opposite.

Researcher 1:05:35

Because, yeah, I guess we're not individual. We're part of, yeah, social context, historical context, a geographical context.

Aisha 1:05:45

Absolutely. I think geographical context is quite a big thing. Really. Yeah. Migration. I'm so I just stand very. I think migration is a hard thing in terms of loneliness, I think.

I just think people shouldn't, really if they can help it. Not, yeah, it's we've got so used, I think, you know, the privileged people who think about migration is a choice we've got so used to the idea like, you know, well, you know, we're going to go and I'm going to go and fly and work on the other side of the world.

Researcher 1:06:16

Hmm.

Aisha1:06:17

And I'm thinking, no, don't do that. If you've got a choice, don't do it. Why would you do it? It's not. It's not. I don't think we're meant to live like thousands of miles away from the people we grew up with, or the people, you know, our parents. If we've got them.

Researcher 1:06:19

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:06:33

It's tough. People don't really talk about how tough it is.

Well, especially people who migrate and then can't, you know, afford to stay in contact with the people where they came from? I think. I don't think in the West we talk about it enough. Hmm.

Researcher 1:06:50

in what ways is it tough for you, I wonder?

Hmm.

Aisha 1:07:01

Just thinking when I go and see. And maybe its because I idealise but when I go and see my cousins in Mauritius. There's always, there's intergenerationally. There are people around.

They are known in a special way by a group of people that we grew up and we didn't grow up having that feeling. And also, like when people go and.

Researcher 1:07:15

Hmm.

Aisha1:07:17

Just to have communities where they live with, but I guess it's a bit like that here now for myself but live in communities where they're known by the people around them, it's I think we need that.

Researcher 1:07:24

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:07:28

But it's very.

It's psychologically it's a lot to overcome managing life without anyway for me and a lot of people I talk to, I mean some people, I guess it maybe suits them completely to just leave their where they came from behind, but I think.

That's it's still tough. People who don't know you, people who don't speak to have the same accent. People who don't recognise the same food. It's all so much difference is it has a big impact, I think. But also, I think I think as my dad came here on his own.

Aisha 1:08:03

When he was 21, he came to be in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. So, there's a photo of him and his platoon, like 200 whatever fighters of RAF men, and he's the only brown face in this whole thing. And then and he didn't go back to Mauritius ever.

Researcher 1:08:03

Hmm.

Aisha 1:08:21

And I think what I never talked to him about his experience of loneliness, but I imagine he must have been so lonely when he died. Haven't quite got that age where I could really want to have a chat with him. But it's such a.

And then I went back to where he came from and discovered this very. I thought he'd come from nothing because he didn't really talk about his family origin as if they meant anything to him. But this whole community, I just thought, wow, he really came from something.

That he chose to whatever reason make this break from and there's a lot there that I could have benefited from growing up just in terms of people and relationships and information.

Researcher 1:08:53

Hmm.

Aisha 1:09:07

So you know, and it's having people around.

Researcher 1:09:10

Mm-hmm.

Aisha 1:09:10

But I guess you know, I guess my cousins who live there, they feel doesn't mean they don't feel lonely, but maybe they don't feel lonely in that petite. And I know they kind of feel sorry for us being here and being so not that I want to be felt sorry for, but they see us as very.

Very on our own, which we are compared to them because they are embedded in these groups. But then again, I've had a lot of freedom. I can go and make friends with whoever I want and, but it takes, I think it takes some effort.

Aisha 09:44

It's not necessarily easy to be the daughter of migrants and to sort your life out, you know, to have it takes effort and work and thinking about in my experience.

Researcher 1:09:44

And I guess you've said that you didn't necessarily have a conversation with your dad about, oh, it was for him or I guess maybe what the reasons were for leaving and how he felt. And it's interesting to, I guess think about.

How that that experience of loneliness was for the people you know.

Aisha 1:10:19

You know, I think that's why I became a psychotherapist. First. I first I did a geography degree because the places are very important to me. And then I became a psychotherapist because, like, no. Yeah, no one in my family origin really talks very much about these very big experiences.

So I wanted to work in a profession where people really talk about things and really try and work out what the things mean to them because there was a lot of silence, like growing up.

Researcher 1:10:36

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Very interesting. That connection. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I guess in in some level hearing you talk and being away from my family and being a migrant here.

I guess connects with me in in a level of experience and it's really connecting to hear it from someone else, yeah.

Aisha 1:11:12

MMM.

Yeah. Yeah. And I think it's tough today. But my dad was here in the 1940s and 1950s and 1960s. It wasn't, you know, there wasn't even any anti racism legislation when he was here. So that's it being painful to even think about, you know, how what his experience of loneliness might have been? I don't know. You know, he went to pubs a lot and drank, you know, he wasn't an alcoholic. But I know he went to pubs a lot. And maybe that was his way of coping with it was just.

Researcher 1:11:32

Mm-hmm.

Hmm.

Aisha 1:11:45

Yeah.

Researcher 1:11:46

Cause there's an energy in pubs that even if you don't know, there's a lot of people,

Aisha 1:11:51

Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And he was a man. So, I don't know what, you know, he was a man of it. Yeah, just. No, no idea really so much I wanted to know.

Researcher 1:12:03

Yeah. Thank you for, you know, sharing that.

Aisha 1:12:04

Mm-hmm.

Yeah, you're very welcome. OK, I think I've given you a lot to listen to now.

Researcher 1:12:13

Yes, yes, I hope it's been an experience where you felt safe to talk and you felt comfortable to share.

Aisha 1:12:22

Yeah.

Absolutely that and I'm good at creating that for myself. So, I'm yeah, thank you. I appreciate you for listening. Feel like I've said a lot. Yeah, that's been really interesting. Reflecting on them all those experiences.

Researcher 1:12:33

Thank you.

Aisha 1:12:41

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I had no idea. It wasn't. Yeah, I didn't quite know how it would go. I just thought, oh, I know a few things about that. I hadn't really thought about. A lot of this before I started talking.

Researcher 1:12:41

Yeah.

Yeah, there's something about when you're talking and sharing stories that can create. Yeah, those reflections and those insights about your, your story. And yeah, if you feel like you, there's people around you that might benefit.

Aisha 1:12:56

Yes.

Hmm.

Researcher 1:13:11

From reflecting on their stories around loneliness. Please. Yeah, do share the poster. And if there's any questions that you have as well.

Aisha 1:13:13

Hmm.

Hmm.

Yes, yes, I will do that. I have shared it with a few people, but I will encourage them to do it.

Researcher 1:13:27

Yeah, because interestingly enough, and I guess there's been a lot of people, a lot of gay men, but not necessarily, you know, lesbian women or, you know, a lot of white.

Aisha 1:13:36

Hmm.

Hmm.

Researcher 1:13:44

British people and I guess there's something different with the intersection, the layer of difference.

Aisha 1:13:45

Hmm.

Yeah. So, I've been encouraging my friends to contact you.

Researcher 1:13:58

Yeah. Thank you so much.

Aisha 1:13:58

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes. Yeah. You don't want it all to be white.

Researcher 1:14:02

No, no. Yes. Yeah, cause. There's a lot of research about that already. So, I guess you want to bring the different voices and the different stories.

Aisha 1:14:09

Yes.

Yes, yes. Have you been in touch with various groups in London?

Researcher 1:14:18

Yes. So, I've been because I did Facebook page and kind of, I guess a few organisations have decided to e-mail the research to the participants.

Asha 1:14:25

Oh, right, OK.

Hmm.

OK. Yes, OK. Good. OK. Yeah. Yeah. What's your Facebook page called?

Researcher 1:14:36

Yeah, I'm welcoming any ideas that you might have of any organisations.

Umm.

Aisha 1:14:46

And I because I could share it.

Researcher 1:14:50

It's my name and then it has like the poster of the research on the on the background.

Aisha 1:14:57

OK. Yeah. OK, I'll. I will get all the details right. OK, sort that out. Yeah.

Researcher 1:15:02

Yeah. If you think of any organisations that you feel might be helpful and you want to share them more than welcoming.

Aisha 1:15:05

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah, OK. Yeah. How long are you researching? How long? What time period are you spending on collect doing the research?

Researcher 1:15:16

So I've been collecting now I think I have a month more of interviews seeing where because it the I the timeline is that it's published next year in April in that area.

Aisha 1:15:21

OK.

OK.

Wow. OK. Yeah. OK.

Researcher 1:15:32

So I guess they're wanting us to finish recruitment within the next. Month or so.

Aisha 1:15:40

Yeah. OK. Well, OK, right. I'll get on to people about that then, yeah.

Researcher 1:15:44

Yeah. Thank you so much, Aisha.

Aisha 1:15:46

OK. Thank you. Very interesting to talk to you. Let be interested to hear how you get on with it. Yeah.

Researcher 1:15:48

Thank you.

Yes. I'll share it.

Aisha 1:15:56

Oh yeah, look forward to reading that. OK, well, good luck with it. Good to meet you.

Researcher 1:15:59

Any choices for your pseudonym?

Aisha 1:16:00

I don't mind.

Researcher 1:16:13

OK. Thank you for today.

Take care. Have a good day. Bye bye.

● **Researcher** stopped transcription.

Appendix H- Example of Analysis

Aisha – reflective entry post interview

- Goosebumps and tears as she were talking about being away from family- projection of self if I stayed in this country.
- How people in power – school approach homophobia
- Check in throughout
- Not being part of something - Christmas, when non invited to mums' groups.
- Feeling of intimidation at the start - psychotherapist

Reflections when listening back.

- Feeling of privilege at the idea of having a large family to celebrate Christmas with and friends that show interest for cultural difference
- Feeling a sense of warmth about being part of the change, of heterosexuals that have an interest in understanding homosexual experiences, bridging between cultures.
- Curiosity and even though during many times of this research process feeling disconnected, loss, like an imposter can see that this in a way can mirror to a small degree how some of my interviews have felt like in heteronormative environments at work.
- Migration as a choice. 'No don't do that, why would you do it. Don't think we are meant to live miles away from who we grew up with. Its tough, people don't talk

about it enough' Made me reflect on my choice to move away from family, on the loneliness I experience when being away and missing out on my grandma's birthday, a funeral, my dad's operation. Wondering about the duality of the experience on one side exposure to different experiences, finding my own chosen family and on the other side the loneliness of being away. The feeling of being known, the stories. The sadness every goodbye. My privilege of being able to go home a few times a year.

Phase 1

What 'sense' do you get from each interview?

- Intertwined (not feeling part of something fomo – Christmas, as a lesbian mother)
- I feel lonely – what am I going to do about that?
- Parents as migrant.
- Feeling very outside of something that is loneliness.

How are emotions experienced during and after the interview?

- Initially intimidated, goosebumps and emotional at conscious effort to think about who our support network are, not meant to be away from family during a time where every year it gets harder to be far away.

How does each interview tend to start, unfold and end?

- Start - It doesn't mean anything to me, but I guess I have had experience of feeling lonely at times. Intertwined. Christmas, having resources to do something about feeling lonely. As a mother, migrant. Within the first 10 min – “So yes, that's me and loneliness”.
- Unfold – opening about instances in mid life when felt lonely (reaching 30s) – relationships as the answer, friends moving away, less othered and safer in later life.

- End – cyclical. Christmas really crap when its 3 people at Christmas. at an early age – being different can be a lonely experience. Funding died down and then flourished again. Reframe experience of Christmas – take the peace. Painful to think about experience of dad and loneliness. Interesting reflecting on all the experiences.

How curious do you feel when you listen to the narrators? Very curious particularly thinking about all the different dimensions of experience.

How open are you to developing further insights about yourself, including insights that are derived from raking over past experiences that are painful? Painful insights around the idea of people moving away, as a first-generation migrant – when listening back

Phase 3

What are the common themes in each transcript?

- Not being a part of something, being othered – Christmas.
- Homophobia in school.
- Being a migrant.
- Not sharing my world.

Are there ‘main points’ that you can decipher from particular stories?

- Christmas, being a lesbian mother– not being part of something.
- No interest around experiences,
- What am I going to do about that, resources?
- Change throughout life span and the value of communities.

Where are the vocal inflections? What might they signify? (variations in pitch, tone of voice)

- variation noticed when describing experience of son facing homophobia and of father at the end.

What words are chosen and how are they emphasized? What kinds of meanings might be applied to these words?

- Having resources
- Being othered,
- Not being able to share my world

What other vocalizations and non-verbal gestures are present?

- Tears
- Silences

What contradictions emerge? No contradictions noticed

Are there notable silences, pauses or gaps? If so, how might they be distinguished and what might they suggest (for instance, disagreement, boredom, distress?)

Are there any other useful ways to disaggregate the stories and lines? If so, which form of disaggregation will be used?

- Story about Christmas, being different when young, people not caring about difference.
- Story about being a lesbian mother.
- Story about son facing homophobia.
- Story about doing something about it, recruitment of friends.
- Story about people not showing an interest in difference – sexuality, culture,
- Story about not feeling part of something, could not share my world, missing out.
- Reflection about loneliness experience mid way through life late 20-40
- Stories about finding relatable others in the family later in life.

Phase 4

Are there aspects of the stories that highlight intrapersonal experiences that are concealed from others? If there are, what bearing might this have?

- I think I feel lonely – what am I going to do about that.

Which parts of the stories relate to interpersonal relationships and interactions? How do they relate to the other aspects of the stories?

- Interactions at work
- relationships as a salvation
- change of communities throughout life

Are cultural conventions – or transgressions to cultural conventions – evident? If so, what are the effects? Is there any evidence of popular culture emerging in the stories? If so, what is it?

- poets and writers – Audry Lorde, Bernad Evaristo ...
- “There was all of this oppression but culturally there was a lot of amazing stuff that sustained us”.

Are social structures – institutionalised or otherwise – present? If so, how do they appear and what is being said about them? Tory government. Who was, you know, gay people weren't acceptable. Politicians would say gay people are not normal, you know they can't. And gay people shouldn't have children. And there were lots of stereotypes about lesbians.

- Change with the equality Act after the mid teens of this century.
- School – incredibly sad how school dealt with homophobia, excluded from school. No understanding. Colluded with homophobia. Later acknowledged.
- Intelligent, people in power saying that heterosexual people were okay.

- Touri government – gay people where not acceptable, not normal, gay people should not have children, stereotypes.
- Government funding of the lesbian and black community spaces.

Phase Five

This phase involved a focus on participants social graces, as well as the intersections of these identities and experiences.

- Oppression – class issues growing up, race and sexuality, parents being migrants intertwined, homophobia.
- Privilege – middle class, sociable, resources, culturally amazing stuff that sustain us, funding of spaces.

Phase Six

- Commonality around – with two of the other participants commonality of migration, communities, social activism, exclusion, loneliness within education sector as a teacher
- Difference – homophobia experienced by son, loneliness as a lesbian mum, Christmas, black lesbian mum.

Phase Seven

1980 Being a lesbian in
(location) sociable

2004 still very hard to
say to a group of
students

Heterosexual people
talking about anything
LGBTQ related – feels safer,
seen

As a child very
lonely

Missing them

Emptiness,
boredom

Other people
more
stimulation
does not have
to deal with
myself

Immigrant
family – father
experience of
loneliness

1990 work

At 26 starting work, long
shifts, no partner and
heterosexual friends
starting to have children

I did not feel I could talk
about my world at work

Outside of something

I can't talk about what is
important to me –
nothing is signalling that
its okay to

Much more of a lesbian
Community resources

Loneliness of being a
lesbian mum, – feel
outside groups, on our
own

Why haven't we been
invited along

Parents stepping up –
made me cry, more
horrible than lonely

(location)– not being
able to share parts of
myself

Now What
do I do
about that
or enjoy
the space

Point of the year where it hits me. Coming up to and Christmas throughout life - not feeling part of something, no extended family in this country (have the resources to not feel that lonely). Sad. Missing out. Nobody knows or cares.