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Loneliness as misrecognition, constrained mobility, and connection infrastructure: a qualitative analysis of 48 interviews with young adults in deprived London boroughs

Abstract

This paper analyses 48 interviews with young adults (18–24) recruited from four deprived London boroughs (Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Barking & Dagenham) in summer 2019. The dataset combines a free-association interview on “the experience of loneliness” (Part 1) and a place-based task in which participants describe neighbourhood spaces of social connectedness and loneliness (Part 2). Using an iterative qualitative workflow (whole-transcript reading, per-interview memoing, living synthesis documents, and negative-case search), the analysis develops an interpretive account of loneliness as an outcome of interacting mechanisms. Four mechanism stories organise the findings: (1) misrecognition and social performance (being surrounded yet unseen), (2) place-based constraint (crowded anonymity, threat-appraised public space, violence/territoriality, transport friction), (3) connection infrastructures (structured third spaces, faith communities, rule-bound shared-focus settings, and low-judgement “known strangers”), and (4) digital and material filters (social media, dating apps, money) that amplify comparison/objectification or restrict participation. The paper specifies boundary conditions (e.g., home-with-others vs home-alone; parks as connecting spaces vs threat-appraised spaces; social media as comparison amplifier vs neutral background) and argues that interventions need to build low-cost, low-judgement infrastructures for repeated contact while recognising safety, mobility, and material exclusion as gating conditions.

Keywords

loneliness; young adults; neighbourhood; place; reflexive thematic analysis; third spaces

1. Introduction

Loneliness is often discussed as a private emotion: a deficit of friends, a lack of socialising, or an internal spiral of sadness and self-doubt. The interviews analysed here complicate that picture. Participants describe loneliness as exclusion (“left out”), as misrecognition (being near others yet unseen or not understood), as an internal spiral that accelerates in certain environments (bedroom darkness, long unstructured time), and as a safety problem in public space (“better lonely than scared”). In addition, the dataset includes a place task that forces an analytic move away from purely psychological accounts: participants name concrete neighbourhood spaces where connection is possible and where loneliness intensifies, and they explain why those spaces work as they do.

The analytic goal of this paper is not to list “causes of loneliness” but to build a mechanism-rich account that explains how loneliness is produced, maintained, and sometimes mitigated in these accounts, and why common remedies (“just go out more,” “join a club,” “get off your phone”) succeed for some situations and fail for others. A secondary goal is to keep the analysis traceable: claims are anchored to interview IDs and tracked in a living evidence file so that boundary cases and contradictions are visible rather than smoothed away.

2. Data

The corpus comprises 48 interviews collected June–August 2019 with participants aged 18–24. Participants were recruited via a quota sample from four deprived London boroughs (Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Barking & Dagenham; n=16 per borough). Part 1 uses a four-box free association task about loneliness followed by interview elaboration designed to minimise content injection by the interviewer. Part 2 asks participants to name a neighbourhood place where they feel most socially connected and a place where they feel most lonely, followed by elaboration (“what is it about that place that makes you feel that way?”).

3. Method

3.1 Analytic stance

The analysis follows a reflexive thematic analysis sensibility (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Themes are treated as meaning-unified interpretive stories rather than topic labels that mirror the interview schedule (e.g., “social media,” “family,” “work”). Interpretation is treated as unavoidable: the task is to develop coherent, evidence-grounded explanations, not to pretend that themes “emerge” without analytic decisions. The workflow therefore emphasised (a) memoing as interpretive work, (b) explicit boundary conditions, and (c) negative-case search.

3.2 Workflow and tools (what was done, practically)

Analysis was conducted as an iterative loop over whole transcripts. Each interview was treated as an independent source and summarised in a memo ([ai_files/interview_memos/Interview_XX.md](#)). Memos captured salient excerpts, candidate codes/mechanisms, and negative/boundary notes. Three living synthesis files were maintained throughout: a codebook with working definitions and exemplars ([ai_files/codebook.md](#)), a theory-development file capturing mechanism candidates and tensions ([ai_files/theory.md](#)), and an evidence file that links claims to supporting and boundary excerpts ([ai_files/evidence.md](#)). A timestamped journal ([ai_files/journal.md](#)) recorded batches, file updates, and major analytic pivots.

Several lightweight tools were used to keep the workflow consistent and auditable:

- A timestamp script ([ai_files/tools/timestamp.py](#)) to produce stable timestamps for log entries.
- A markdown wordcount script ([ai_files/tools/wordcount_md.py](#)) to measure main-text length during drafting.
- Targeted text search (pattern search across transcripts) to locate negative cases (e.g., accounts where parks were not protective, where social media was neutral, where home was the most connected place).

Batches were selected to test and revise developing ideas. For example, after early mechanisms suggested that “third spaces” mattered, later batches were chosen to stress-test this against cases where venues felt empty or unsafe. Similarly, place-based claims were tested against accounts of neighbourhood cohesion and mutual aid.

3.3 How the theory developed (from early codes to a coherent account)

The initial coding landscape contained familiar candidate topics (friends, family, social media, work, home, transport). Through iteration, two decisions reshaped the analysis. First, “home” was treated as a site of multiple mechanisms rather than a single protective factor. Second, “place” was treated as active (constraining or enabling) rather than passive backdrop. Over successive batches, a broader concept—connection infrastructure—emerged to unify varied settings where connection was feasible (structured third spaces, faith communities, rule-bound shared-focus settings, and low-judgement “known strangers”).

The key analytic discipline was to keep contradictions as boundary conditions rather than noise. Where one participant framed a mechanism strongly (e.g., parks as unsafe; social media as hyperreality; home as certainty), the next step was to find cases where that mechanism did not apply, then revise the claim to specify conditions.

Concretely, this meant treating each strong “headline” account as a hypothesis to be tested. For example, early place talk could have supported a single story of “London crowds = loneliness.” However, later interviews forced a more differentiated account: some participants experience crowds as emotionally empty but not overtly threatening; others treat public space as actively unsafe; still others describe neighbourhood cohesion and mutual aid that counters the low-empathy narrative. Similarly, early “home” talk could have been coded as uniformly protective; later interviews made it necessary to separate home-with-others (certainty, recognition, low judgement) from home-alone (rumination, pressure, “thinking chambers”) and from home-without-attunement (co-presence but low communication). This approach makes the final claims less sweeping but more explanatory: it specifies why the same “place” or “platform” can generate opposite outcomes across accounts.

Negative-case work was not treated as a final “limitations” paragraph but as an active driver of theory revision. After a claim was drafted in the evidence file, we deliberately searched for transcripts that would contradict it (e.g., parks as connecting, social media as neutral background, home as the most connected place, venues as anchors rather than escapism). When contradictions were found, the claim was rewritten as a conditional mechanism with boundary notes rather than abandoned or ignored. This is also where “connection infrastructure” became the central integrative idea: it offered a way to explain why some settings (teams, faith spaces, structured third spaces, rule-bound shared-focus contexts) reliably produced connection even when generic socialising or crowded co-presence did not.

4. Findings: four mechanism stories (with boundaries)

Across interviews, loneliness is described as emerging from interacting mechanisms. Four interpretive themes organise the account.

Theme 1 – Misrecognition and the labour of being “acceptable”

Loneliness is frequently narrated as being physically near others while feeling unseen, misunderstood, or incorrectly seen. This is not simply “no friends.” It is misrecognition: others do not listen, do not understand, or interpret identity and behaviour through a narrow lens. The felt loneliness is the gap between one’s lived experience and what is socially legible.

One pathway is invalidation. When participants try to describe complex friendship-group dynamics or distress, and adults dismiss it (“you’ll make new friends”), the person can end up with no legitimate outlet, “only speaking to myself” (Interview 09). A second pathway is group dynamics: friendship groups “take sides,” producing sudden outcasting and leaving the person watching others’ togetherness from the edge (Interview 09). A third pathway is performance:

having to dress, speak, or behave in a way that will be accepted, producing a split between a presented self and a self that can be “myself” only in particular niches (Interview 45).

Misrecognition is also narrated as an everyday interaction problem: participants describe being spoken over, being treated as less competent, or being evaluated through first impressions. In these accounts, loneliness is not only about “being alone” but about being present while feeling that one’s perspective does not count or cannot be safely expressed. That dynamic can push people toward self-silencing (“I’ll keep it to myself”) and toward choosing environments where judgement costs are lower (Theme 3). The mechanism therefore links to place: when the social environment is high-judgement (workplace banter norms; status hierarchies; unfamiliar groups), loneliness emerges even in dense social settings.

Misrecognition also appears as competence judgement. In education and early work contexts, not knowing what to do (new software, unfamiliar expectations) combines with uncertainty about whether asking for help will be welcomed; the result can be loneliness as “stuckness” plus self-silencing (“who do I ask?”; fear of seeming stupid or incompetent). This is analytically distinct from general anxiety: it is an interaction between competence uncertainty and judgement risk that produces isolation in environments where support is needed.

Boundary conditions sharpen the claim. Close ties are not always the safest disclosure context. In Interview 38, friends are described as more judgemental than semi-strangers, making disclosure easier in low-stakes settings (gym/swimming regulars; hairdresser). This shifts the mechanism from “closeness reduces loneliness” to “relational safety reduces loneliness”: who is safe to talk to depends on judgement costs and reputational stakes, not only intimacy.

Theme 2 – Place as constraint: crowded anonymity, threat appraisal, and mobility friction

The place-based task reveals that loneliness is not only psychological; it is spatially produced. Place structures which interactions are possible, safe, and emotionally sustainable.

One mechanism is crowded anonymity: being surrounded by strangers in transport or busy streets that does not translate into connection, and can intensify loneliness by making potential connections visible but unreachable. A second mechanism is threat appraisal in public space. Interview 41 describes parks and streets as uncertain and potentially unsafe; sitting alone on a bench becomes a scenario of scanning strangers and predicting motives. In that account, withdrawal is chosen as harm-minimisation: loneliness becomes preferable to fear (“better lonely than scared”), producing an avoidance loop that reduces immediate anxiety while sustaining isolation and adding counterfactual rumination (“what if he was nice?”).

Third, mobility constraints are structural. Territorial violence can shrink feasible movement (“limitations for young people,” Interview 26). Transport friction can make participation difficult (e.g., hard routes to campus; long commutes). Neighbourhood change (gentrification) can disrupt attachment and produce “disconnect” between groups (Interview 19). Conversely, walkability and local amenities can enable everyday connection by making “being out and about” feasible and familiar (Interview 13). These accounts treat isolation as an outcome of constrained feasible social space, not only an internal state.

The place mechanisms also interact with identity and judgement. For example, when a setting is experienced as racially mismatched or culturally unfamiliar, the social effort required to “fit in” can increase while the perceived payoff decreases, producing loneliness even when the environment is full of people. In such cases, “being in public” is not a neutral exposure to others; it is exposure to evaluation and uncertainty. This helps explain why some participants route their social lives into settings that are more normed and predictable (teams, faith communities, structured activities), and why some describe preference for spaces where they can be “with others” without heavy interaction demands.

Boundary conditions again matter. A negative-case set includes strong accounts of neighbourhood cohesion and mutual aid, countering a blanket “London low empathy” narrative. In these accounts, local recognisability (familiar shopkeepers, neighbours checking in) and shared-value communities (faith) make place protective rather than isolating. The revised claim is conditional: urban loneliness is shaped by uneven micro-ecologies of cohesion, safety, and infrastructure, not a single “city” essence.

Theme 3 — Connection infrastructure: structured third spaces, faith communities, and “known strangers”

Many accounts emphasise that connection becomes easier when social interaction is scaffolded by structure: shared purpose, predictable norms, and repeated contact that reduce the cost of initiating and sustaining interaction. This is not reducible to personality; participants often describe themselves as willing to connect, but needing the right conditions.

Several infrastructures recur:

- Structured third spaces with shared purpose (youth organisations, clubs, sports teams, parent/children centres) where people “want to be there,” roles are clear, and repeated participation builds familiarity.
- Faith communities (mosque, church) as a blend of shared values, ritual synchrony, and practical support/guidance. These spaces create belongingness through shared purpose while also lowering judgement risk (“everyone is the same,” “support if you need help”).

- Rule-bound shared-focus settings (e.g., movies) that allow co-presence with low performative demand (“be social without being social”).
- “Known strangers” (semi-regular contacts such as gym/swimming regulars or hairdresser) that enable disclosure precisely because reputational stakes are low. The relationship can be meaningful without becoming a deep friendship; what matters is low-judgement contact and repeated familiarity.

An important inference is that loneliness relief does not always require deep intimacy. For some accounts, the minimal unit of relief is recognisability, predictable co-presence, or safe disclosure rather than intense friendship. This widens the usual “make friends” framing into an infrastructure framing: the question becomes what kinds of spaces and norms reliably produce low-cost connection for young adults.

Two further refinements follow from this. First, infrastructure can be “thick” or “thin.” Thick infrastructures (teams, centres, faith communities) can produce ongoing ties and advice networks; thin infrastructures (everyday third spaces, known strangers) can still reduce loneliness through recognition and low-stakes talk. Second, infrastructure often works by reducing the performance burden: when it is clear what to do and how to be, people do not have to constantly manage impression and risk. This links back to Theme 1: where misrecognition and judgement risk dominate, infrastructure that lowers judgement costs becomes especially valuable.

Boundary conditions complicate venue-focused interventions. The same venue types (pubs, clubs, restaurants) can be narrated either as anchors (familiarity; laughter; “another home”) or as escapism that intensifies emptiness when ties are thin. The mechanism is not “going out,” but whether the space provides infrastructure properties (shared purpose, predictable norms, repeated contact, low judgement, safety).

Theme 4 — Digital and material filters: social media, dating apps, money

Digital platforms are narrated as dual mechanisms. Social media can sustain contact, humour, and belonging, but it can also generate “hyperreality” that intensifies comparison and exclusion (seeing friends together; curated happiness). Participants describe these moments as in-your-face, prompting self-questioning about worth and belonging. Dating apps appear as a distinct mechanism: interaction framed as evaluation and objectification, anticipation without care, and a sense of loneliness produced inside a “connection tool.”

Material conditions filter social life by shaping participation feasibility and friendship continuity. Money is unusually explicit in some accounts: poverty restricts joining activities and forces staying home, while changes in money/status can restructure friendship groups through activity mismatch and perceived selfishness. This is treated as a structural relational filter rather than a universal

driver; it becomes analytically important because it links loneliness to what is practically feasible, not only what is emotionally desired.

Boundary conditions prevent overclaiming. Some participants describe social media as neutral background unless specific content triggers comparison; this cautions against treating “phones” as a universal cause.

5. Discussion: what changes when loneliness is treated as infrastructure + constraint

Taken together, the findings suggest that loneliness in these accounts is best explained as an interaction between recognition dynamics, place-based constraints/affordances, and access to connection infrastructures. This reframes common advice. “Go out more” is insufficient when public space is threat-appraised or mobility is constrained. “More venues” is insufficient when venues lack scaffolding and produce performance burden. “Home” is not uniformly protective; home-with-recognition differs from home-alone rumination. Digital connection is not uniformly harmful or helpful; it depends on whether platforms function as connection infrastructure or comparison amplifier.

The infrastructure framing suggests a different intervention logic: build low-cost, low-judgement, repeated-contact settings that young adults can access safely, while recognising that safety, transport, and material exclusion shape who can use those settings. The key design target is not “more interaction” but “safer and more predictable interaction with lower judgement costs.”

6. Limitations

This is a secondary analysis of interviews collected in 2019 in specific London borough contexts. Claims are interpretive and corpus-bound rather than statistical generalisations. The analysis relies on transcripts; non-verbal cues and situational detail are limited. Anonymity requirements also constrain reporting of contextual detail, though traceability is maintained via interview IDs and excerpt linkage in the evidence file.

7. Conclusion

Across these interviews, loneliness is produced through misrecognition and performance, through place-based constraint (anonymity, threat appraisal, mobility friction), and through the presence or absence of connection infrastructures (structured third spaces, faith communities, rule-bound shared-focus settings, known-stranger ties). Digital and material factors operate as amplifiers and filters rather than universal causes. A practical implication is to design and support low-cost

infrastructures for repeated, low-judgement contact while addressing safety and mobility constraints that gate access to connection.

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