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A participatory and creative exploration of autistic young people's experiences of loneliness

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ABSTRACT

This study sought autistic understandings of loneliness through qualitative design, expanding predominant neurotypical frameworks. We also addressed how 'not being lonely' feels, by exploring autistic-led strategies that promote connection and well-being. The sample were 26 autistic young people aged 12–24 years old, recruited from mainstream and independent schools and specialist colleges in the UK. The research questions guiding this exploration were a) how autistic young people experience loneliness; and b) what personal strategies promote feelings of connection and wellbeing. Creative and flexible methods of data collection were adopted, and Reflexive Thematic Analysis and participatory data analysis were used to analyse the dataset. The results show that loneliness was described by autistic young people as going beyond the well-known social and emotional domains, including less studied facets of existential, experiential, and positive loneliness. To understand these experiences, we might have to shift our focus from the individual to the behaviour of communities. These findings could support better formulation of interventions for autistic young people and can be a starting point for the development of more suitable measuring instruments.

Introduction

Loneliness is a complex emotion that everybody is susceptible to feeling sometimes (Willock et al., 2012). It is commonly conceptualised as the negative feeling that comes when we recognise our social needs are not being met (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Social and emotional loneliness defined respectively as the perception of inadequate social networks and dissatisfaction with the quality of social connections (Weiss, 1973), have formed the basis of standardised measures of loneliness. Although these approaches have been used successfully to promote positive outcomes, they are unlikely to give a holistic understanding of the many subjective experiences of loneliness, leaving large gaps in how loneliness is experienced for different people (Fried et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2023).

Autistic people have been described collectively as having high rates of loneliness (Deckers et al., 2017; Ee et al., 2019), and whilst many researchers have explored the topic, the meaningful and different ways in which autistic people experience loneliness and connection are not well understood. Early research by Bauminger and Kasari (2000) reported that having a best friend did not seem to lessen feelings of loneliness for autistic children, raising questions as to what contributes to meaningful experiences of connection and belonging. Subsequent research has reinforced the importance of appreciating this complexity.

Many autistic people have expressed a desire to have and maintain friendships (Gallup et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2017; Myles et al., 2019), however, some autistic young people describe pursuing friendships so that they can be considered 'normal' (Berns, 2016) and some have described preferring to spend time alone (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). These experiences should not be equated with feelings of loneliness. Although autistic individuals seem to define friendships similarly to their non-autistic peers, some autistic people have also described challenges developing and maintaining social relationships, including differences in social norms and communication styles (Black et al., 2024). Anxiety, fear of judgement and a poor self-image might also contribute to the development of relationships in which autistic people feel accepted and authentic (Black et al., 2024). These findings suggest that

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loneliness for autistic young people is not reduced to the presence or absence of social relationships but might be shaped by how autistic people feel understood and accepted. In line with this argument, Grace et al. (2025) found that loneliness felt by autistic adults can emerge from a lack of shared experiences and understanding from the wider population. These findings highlight that feelings of loneliness can go beyond a traditional conceptualisation of social and emotional loneliness.

Investigations of what is currently known about the topic indicate that loneliness has rarely been defined by autistic young people and that experiences of connection have been limited by measures of social relationships (Lisboa White et al., 2024). This means that existing scales, developed without phenomenological accounts of autistic identity and connection, may not fully represent autistic experiences (Lisboa White et al., 2024; Love et al., 2025). Overlooking autistic lived experience has been critiqued before (Caruana et al., 2021; Cassidy et al., 2018a, 2018b; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Grace et al., 2022; Milton & Bracher, 2013). The omission of autistic perspectives can reinforce a historical trend of defining autism based on social deficits (Milton et al., 2023) and risks offering "neurotypical help" (Elmose, 2019, p. 20).

This study recognised multiple realities of loneliness (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2017) and considered lesser-explored dimensions of the construct that come from feelings that are unrelated to social interactions. Existential loneliness, for example, can be defined as a feeling of being fundamentally separated from others or the world (Baek et al., 2023). Experiential loneliness is described when someone feels that their way of perceiving and engaging with the world is not shared or understood by others (Stein & Solomon, 2017). These types of loneliness can evoke sadness (Sand & Strang, 2006), alienation (Larsson et al., 2019; Sjöberg et al., 2018), and abandonment (Ozanne et al., 2013) and people can experience existential or experiential loneliness even when satisfied with the number or quality of social relationships (Bolmsjö et al., 2019; Larsson et al., 2019). In addition, when investigated through a philosophical lens, although painful, loneliness can be seen as a transformative experience that enables creativity, reflexivity, emotional growth and dialogues with the self (Mosé, 2018). This is not to be confused with solitude, which has been defined as being alone without distress or suffering (Tillich, 1963) and critiqued by philosophical perspectives as a term that 'impoverishes the comprehension of human experience' (Mosé, 2018).

Informed by these broader theoretical approaches, this study explored how autistic young people described their experiences of loneliness. The aim was to offer space for a revised conceptualisation of loneliness to include personal authorship from autistic people. The research questions guiding this participatory and creative exploration were: a) how do autistic young people experience loneliness? and b) what personal strategies promote feelings of connection and wellbeing?

Positionality statement and community involvement

We adopted a neurodiversity perspective, which recognises 'different' ways of thinking rather than characterisation by deficits (Sonuga-Barke, 2023). Participatory approaches enabled involvement of autistic people in project design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. This included knowledge exchange and up-skilling of participants (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021), where researchers learned from lived experience, and participants learned about the research process. The participatory approaches used in this research sought to create opportunities for autistic people to influence the research and to recognise their lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge, while acknowledging that there were institutional and academic constraints that meant that not all differences in power between researcher and participants were eliminated. Following the example of recent research (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2024; Fletcher-Watson, 2024), we have made levels of involvement explicit (Supplement 1), rather than treating participation as a binary condition.

Methods

Design in consultation with autistic people

Data collection methods were chosen through consultation with autistic adults ($N = 9$). Consultants were recruited from specialist colleges and universities. They evaluated seven possible methods of data collection drawn from relevant literature (e.g., Batsleer & Duggan, 2021; Hilário & Augusto, 2023; Lam et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2024; Li & Liu, 2023; O'Brien, 2017; Petty et al., 2023; Rossetti, 2007; Willig, 2017). Consideration was given to whether the methods produced written or transcribed qualitative data whilst offering different communication options, different places and times for contributing, their suitability for data collection within schools/colleges and their adaptability to be used online. The list of evaluated methods included interviews, focus groups, a public wall of thoughts, an anonymous virtual wall of thoughts, written diaries, photovoice, and art-based interviews. These methods intended to promote better and more meaningful participation (Lewis et al., 2024) and contribute for more fluidity and openness in the research process (McArdle, 2022); however, they offered only some options. Methods were ranked from most to least suitable. Panellists suggested offering participants a choice in how to engage with research. The three highest-rated methods were used: semi-structured interviews, art-based interviews, and posts on an anonymous virtual wall of thoughts.

Participants

A total of 26 autistic young people aged 12-to-24 years (M=17.11, SD=2.77) were recruited from specialist colleges ($n = 17$), selective schools ($n = 5$), independent schools ($n = 2$), and mainstream secondary schools ($n = 1$) in the UK. One participant was not in formal education. Specialist colleges were post-16 providers offering creative programmes for neurodivergent students. LLW contacted local education providers via email, who then liaised with parents and students interested in taking part in the study. Parents and schools confirmed a formal diagnosis of autism; the researchers did not directly access diagnostic records, which is acknowledged as a study limitation. Further characterisation of the sample is provided in Supplement 2. Ethical approval was received from the School of Education, Language and Psychology Ethics Committee at York St John University (ETH2324–0127), with amendments for participatory data analysis approved under (ETH2425–0015). Participants' names were anonymised unless they explicitly requested attribution.

Data collection

Participants chose one or more of three data collection methods and chose how they wanted to engage (in person or remotely; individually or as a group). All participants responded to the same study invitation and overarching research question but contributed their experiences in different ways. This resulted in 19 semi-structured interviews, five art-based interviews, and 14 written posts. Participants were offered refreshments and entry into a draw of two £ 25 vouchers. Sessions were led by LLW at the participants' education provider or [anonymised] University.

Semi-structured interviews followed a protocol (Supplement 3) designed by the research team and informed by literature (Smith, 1995). Questions explored participants' experiences and understanding of loneliness. Participants were asked whether loneliness was a positive or negative feeling, and which emotions were associated with it. Finally, participants were asked what feeling 'not lonely' meant and what the opposite of loneliness was. Interviews averaged 28 min and were audio recorded and transcribed.

For art-based interviews, participants created a piece of art relating to their experiences of loneliness using any visual medium (e.g. drawing,

collage, digital art). Art pieces were used to prompt conversation between the participant and researcher informed by the same interview protocol. Artwork took 40–50 min to complete, conversations averaged 21 min, were audio recorded and transcribed. Only the transcribed conversations were analysed.

The wall of thoughts was an anonymous Padlet with six prompts (e.g., "I feel connected when/if/every time I…", "Loneliness feels…") to which participants could respond with comments or images. Only the written comments were extracted for analysis.

Analysis

Data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2020). This suited the diversity, size, and complexity of the data and supported the incorporation of views gathered through participatory data analysis. Semantic and latent characteristics of participants' responses were of interest; therefore, both explicit and implicit meanings of the data were considered. A critical relativist perspective was adopted (Porpora, 2015), which meant valuing all modes of participation equally. On reflection, posts on the virtual wall of thoughts might have been assumed to offer more limited expressions of experiences but were in fact different but not lesser, often conveying nuance and emotional complexities of loneliness. This demonstrated the importance of offering multiple ways for participants to express themselves in line with their preferences and strengths. This allowed for alternative conceptualisations of loneliness, as opposed to a single 'truth' (Burr, 2015).

Coding

Coding was conducted iteratively using inductive and deductive coding (Terry, 2021). LLW developed and refined codes with the research team. During the second round of coding, a deductive approach connected the data with existing theories of loneliness (Byrne, 2022) including emotional and social loneliness (Weiss, 1973), existential loneliness (Bolmsjö et al., 2019), and experiential loneliness (Schmidt, 2023).

Phase one of participatory data analysis: evaluation of codes

All 26 participants were invited to take part in the analysis. Eleven chose to contribute and were presented with codes and data extracts from their own interviews, which maintained confidentiality between participants. A brief explanation of coding in qualitative research was given, followed by examples from the participant's own transcript. Next, participants were invited to engage in the evaluation of codes by agreeing, disagreeing, adding, or deleting codes. The aim was to enrich data interpretation rather than achieve coding reliability, by incorporating perspectives from key people (Abma et al., 2019).

Participants received a £ 20 voucher per session and refreshments were provided. All participatory research sessions were funded by the Waterloo Foundation (Ref no. 3876–7705).

Creation of candidate themes

Once participants' evaluations of codes were incorporated into the analysis, codes were combined according to shared meanings to create provisional themes (Byrne, 2022). Although themes were still underdeveloped at this early stage, a few of the core ideas were already strongly present. Examples included different ways to describe loneliness and how stigma and normativity can influence experiences of loneliness.

Phase two of participatory data analysis: evaluation of candidate themes

Nine participants agreed to contribute to the evaluation of internal coherence and the relevance of each theme to the research question (Abma et al., 2019). Participants were presented with a summary of provisional themes with illustrative quotes and were asked two questions: "Do the main ideas of this theme make sense together?" and "How much are these findings true to your experiences?" Participants responded orally and could also colour-in a 10-point-bar (1 =low, 10 =high). Conversations were audio 'recorded, transcribed and participants' views were incorporated into the analysis by LLW and discussed by the research team. For example, Charlie (18) said that alternative ways of connecting could sometimes "exacerbate feelings of loneliness" whilst Bethany (14) said that she appreciated connection with fictional characters, "This is very true to my experience. I can just watch telly and not need anything else". These contrasting perspectives added nuance to the findings.

Final generation of themes

To complete the analysis and help with visualising possible connections between themes and relationships with subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2022), a thematic map was produced (Supplement 4).

Results

Six subthemes were organised under two overarching themes (Fig. 1). The first overarching theme, *"Loneliness is a bit of a complex feeling": autistic perspectives of loneliness,* expands what is known about loneliness by, a) going beyond social and emotional domains; b) understanding non-traditional ways of feeling loneliness; c) acknowledging connection as a state rather than reducing it to social interactions; and d) exploring autistic young people's desire for social relationships. The second overarching theme, *"Everyone bullied me because I was different": systemic and structural factors that aggravate loneliness,* explores how a) exclusion and normativity can shape experiences of loneliness and connection and b) how connection can be co-created by accommodating environments.

A) "Loneliness Is a Bit of a Complex Feeling": Autistic Perspectives of Loneliness

Theme 1. Beyond the social and emotional domains: existential and experiential loneliness

For the autistic young people in this study, loneliness extended beyond the absence or quality of social relationships. Participants described forms of loneliness rooted in feeling fundamentally separate from the world (existential loneliness) and in feeling that their subjective experiences could not be understood by others (experiential loneliness).

Existential loneliness could be felt as a backdrop in autistic young people's lives, rather than a response to social situations. Participants described loneliness as an enduring way of being in the world across different contexts, regardless of the presence of others. "I feel lonely most of the time, even when I have no reason to" (anonymous post). Participants said they felt lonely "always… even now, throughout years of my life" (Tony, 17), at college, less so at home, but "everywhere" (Joseph, 20).

Loneliness was described as a feeling of being detached from the collective. For James (17), loneliness related to feeling different and unable to "naturally" fit in like other young people do, "It was mainly just like a feeling of not feeling normal (…) everyone else can just have a good natural whatever. Why am I not capable of that really?"

Being autistic was described by some as the reason why they feel different and unable to join peer groups. John (20) said he attended a different college from his high school peers because he is autistic. Bethany (14) said sometimes she feels lonely because she 'can't read' other people or their facial expressions, "So, I've got no clue what's going on". Being different was also perceived as a reason for not being liked

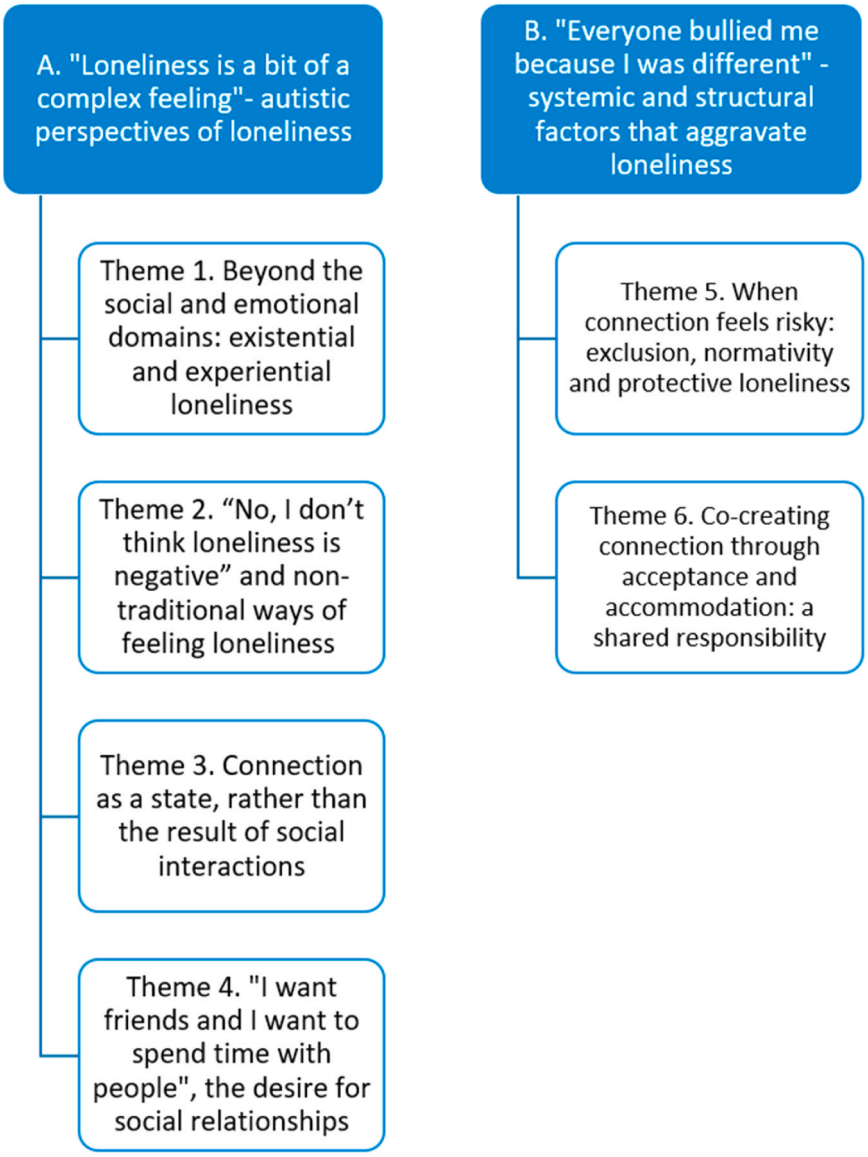


Fig. 1. Themes of Loneliness and Connection as Described by Autistic Young People.

despite trying "so hard to get them to like me" (Indiana, 17), and for being excluded, "I wasn't really aware how much people didn't like me (…) they definitely were judging" (Esther, 18).

Richard's (18) artwork (Fig. 2) and description illustrate how he often feels removed from the world due to a lack of fit between who he is and the world around him, "Well, what I did was (pause) I coloured myself to separate myself from the background because I, I've got my own colours, but everything around me just doesn't (pause) fit me".

Experiential loneliness reflected a sense that personal experiences remained inaccessible to others. Unlike emotional loneliness, it was rooted not in a lack of closeness but in feeling fundamentally misunderstood.

> It feels like I am the only person there, and I have all these thoughts and feelings like nobody will ever understand me, and nobody will ever understand what it's like to be me, nobody will listen to me. (Tony, 17)

Ashleigh (19) explained how her requests for accommodations have sometimes been ignored, contributing to feelings of loneliness, "that makes me feel even more lonely". Having her needs overlooked extended beyond the frustration with individual interactions and reflected a broader sense that her perspective remained inaccessible to others, "That makes me feel like I've got nobody that will actually ever understand" (Ashleigh, 19). Limited understanding of autistic experiences left some feeling unseen "almost like I didn't exist" (Esther, 18), suggesting that loneliness emerged from feelings of being unacknowledged by others.

In summary, loneliness was associated with feeling fundamentally separated from the world (existential loneliness) and from feelings that subjective experiences of being autistic cannot be understood or shared by others (experiential loneliness). These feelings are different from and can co-exist with feelings of (un)fulfilling social relationships (social and emotional loneliness).

Theme 2. "No, I Don't Think Loneliness Is Negative" and Non-Traditional Ways of Feeling Loneliness

Loneliness was not consistently recognised as a negative experience by participants, challenging traditional views and capturing alternative ways of experiencing it.

When asked about emotions, loneliness was not always recognisable or easy to describe. For example, John (20) characterised loneliness as negative but could not name emotions associated with it. Ashleigh (19)



Fig. 2. Richard's Artwork Illustrating Loneliness Beyond Social and Emotional Domains.

also struggled to name emotions but said she can feel it in her body, "physically, it feels like I can feel my heart just drop. And it feels like this pit in my heart. Or it even feels like my stomach's like empty. And I feel like I'm about to throw up." Similarly, Qamri (23) felt like crying and "throwing up a lot" when she felt lonely.

In contrast, for Indiana (17), loneliness was never "an all-encompassing feeling", rather, it was more of a new and learned behaviour that came with the realisation that having friends could be a positive experience. They reported that their younger years were "completely free" from feelings of loneliness, "I was just absolutely chill being on my own, and then I found friends and I was like, 'oh, this is kind of cool actually'" (Indiana, 17). Although participants named feelings commonly associated with loneliness, such as sadness and anger (Charlie, 17 and Parker, 17), others associated loneliness with boredom, including Max (12) and Adam (17), "dealing with nobody at all is really boring" (Adam, 17). Loneliness also led to ambivalent emotions for Manisha (17), who said "It's like (long pause) bored and happy at the same time". This ambivalence was also recognised by Sean (23), Georgia (15) and James (17), "I would say loneliness comes with both sides really" (James, 17). In addition, Kass (13) said, "No, I don't think loneliness is negative".

When participants described positive sides to being lonely, these appeared to come from being free from social demands. An absence of relationships, although challenging, seemed to create opportunities to focus on own interests or self-improvement. James (17) said that without having to worry about social interactions he had more time to practise on his musical instruments, "it meant ultimately, I could just basically be very good at what I did." Alex (15) said that feeling lonely makes him better at his craft, "it usually makes my drawings a lot more interesting".

In summary, whilst loneliness was often described as negative, for some young people loneliness was associated with multiple and conflicting emotions, with some positive emotions including happiness. Loneliness could feel like fewer social demands and like space to focus on the self and be creative. This was conceptualised as positive loneliness.

Theme 3. Connection as a state rather than the result of social interactions

This theme captured how feeling connected can emerge through experiences of presence, immersion, familiarity and authenticity, rather than social interactions. Feeling 'not lonely' was often understood as reducing emotional distress through experiences that fostered comfort, absorption, authenticity or quiet companionship, instead of focusing on increasing social interactions, "For me, the opposite of feeling lonely is when I'm like with somebody, and I'm feeling absolutely nothing negative" (Ashleigh, 19). Many autistic young people reported feeling 'not lonely' when engaged in personal interests, such as when focussed, "like in my own mind" (Evelyn, 15).

Connection through immersion was described as being involved with personal interests such as being active, cycling or walking. Participants also mentioned reading, writing, creating stories, playing a musical instrument, playing video games, role playing, model making, scrapbooking, travel planning, listening to music, painting, or dressmaking. For example, for Joseph (20) "even just doing something active" was enough for him not to feel lonely. Whilst Georgia (14) feels 'not lonely' when listening to music, playing the piano, being in her safe corner, or being with her cats or plants.

Other immersive strategies included positive self-talk, "Um (long pause) I don't know, I guess I talked to myself' (Esther, 18). Other participants described having a rich inner life, including experiences with lucid dreaming, daydreaming, and visual activity in their minds. They reported not missing people when involved in these activities and being content on their own, "Again, I don't feel lonely all that often. Sometimes I'm just really happy in my own company" (Indiana, 17). Georgia (15) also talked about immersing herself in different imaginary scenarios and not desiring social interactions when doing so, while Max (12) described creating people when feeling bored or lonely, and felt positive about his ability to be immersed in his imagination. Similarly, Richard (17) reported creating imaginary realities and described daydreaming as soothing, "Every time I feel lonely, I just think of anything that goes in my head. I have a really strong imagination." Some participants were clear in their preference for alternative types of connection over social connection, "I don't think happiness comes from people. I think it comes (pause) from your hobbies and things like that" (Kass, 13).

Relationships with fictional characters were described as providing a sense of connection without social demands. This included connecting with characters in video games, TV shows, movies or books, and with objects such as teddy bears or toys, "I want to say most of the characters (pause) I can relate to in ways besides loneliness and stuff' (Ben, 17). However, Qamri (23) described fictional connections as being only distractions when she is feeling lonely, not enough to replace her desire

for relationships with people.

Connection through shared presence was described as having parallel interactions, which consisted of taking the role of an observer or simply feeling the presence of others. Examples included listening to friends having a conversation, watching others playing video games, listening to people going about their day, or quietly sitting next to a family member who is busy with an activity, “Just being able to, like, hear people doing their own thing, this makes me feel less lonely” (Ashleigh, 19).

Closeness to nature and pets were mentioned by some as safe and non-judgemental forms of connection. Interactions with pets offered space for authenticity, “They definitely don’t judge you” (James, 17), and some autistic young people saw pets as good substitutes for human relationships, “I just need the cat and I’ll be fine” (Parker, 17). Other participants said they would still need human friends, despite pets being mentioned as a valuable support when lonely.

Connections with reduced or predictable social demands, like friendships with a selected group of people, appeared to prevent stress related to social interactions. For example, Georgia (15) shared her interests with only a few people, while James (17) is “very careful in who I choose to be my friendship group.” Adding to this, Laura (17) said the opposite of being lonely is, “being with a small group of friends (…) usually specific people.”

This theme described ways in which participants felt ‘not lonely’ through experiences that promoted presence, familiarity, immersion, and authenticity. Rather than understanding connection as solely social, this theme suggests that the opposite of loneliness is meaningful connection, which may or may not involve other people.

Theme 4. “I want friends, and i want to spend time with people”, the desire for social relationships

This theme was associated with unfulfilled social needs and descriptions of loneliness that closely aligned with how social and emotional loneliness are described.

Loneliness was most frequently described as negative, complex and related to the absence of others, “Well, loneliness is the thing where you don’t really talk to people and you just sit there doing nothing” (Max, 12). Participants reported feeling lonely when they did not have anyone to talk to, when they were unsatisfied with their social network, "I didn’t really have anyone to talk to at all. Still now, I don’t have any friends”, (Alex, 15), reflecting social loneliness. They also described being unhappy with the quality of relationships, closely aligning with emotional loneliness, “Well, I felt like I was (pause) by myself. Like physically, but also emotionally, like there wasn’t anyone there for me, almost” (Jacob, 17).

Some participants described a desire for relationships, particularly a wish to talk to and spend time with others, “Well, to be honest, I want friends and I want to spend time with people” (Sean, 23); “Sometimes, I do genuinely just wanna talk to people as well” (Indiana, 17), demonstrating that some participants valued social connections and expressed a desire for friendships.

B) "Everyone Bullied Me Because I Was Different": Systemic and Structural Factors that Aggravate Loneliness

Theme 5. When connection feels risky: exclusion, normativity and protective loneliness

This theme captured how persistent negative social experiences and neuronormative expectations can shape autistic people’s experience of loneliness and connection.

Participants shared experiences of being excluded and bullied for being different, “Everyone bullied me because I was different” (Parker, 17). These experiences shaped later relationships, leading some to view others negatively or as untrustworthy, “You do sometimes start to think very, very negatively of people” (Sean, 23); “Real friendships, they don’t exist” (Alex, 15). Many autistic young people described accepting or choosing loneliness over relationships that failed to recognise or accommodate their needs, “I chose to be lonely because I couldn’t handle other people” (Adam, 17). Tony (17) also added,

> …it's like being alone is the worst thing imaginable, but right now in this moment, after the horrible things that have happened today, it might be the best thing to do.

Aligned with Tony’s (17) framing of loneliness as a protective response in moments of distress, Georgia (15) also described being “safer” when lonely.

Alex’s (15) experiences of bullying and exclusion made him socially cautious, “I’m a lot more careful of what, who, if I choose anyone to be my friend”, while others adopted self-protective approaches such as hiding emotions, “I do put on a more happier like personality when I’m out” (Parker, 17).

Failing to meet neuronormative expectations made participants feel responsible for their loneliness, “I’m not very good at actually, um, socialising with people properly” (Sean, 23); “I’ve never really been able to [connect to people]” (Charlie, 17). For some, this sense of responsibility made loneliness feel like a punishment for failing to meet expectations. Alex (14) visualised loneliness as being “in a cell” (Fig. 3). In his description, the doorway was “bricked up” and there was a sign that said, “Punishment room”, “Feels like you’re being punished for every time you’re stuck being alone”.

Personal characteristics that made it difficult to conform to neurotypical expectations of social behaviour were identified as contributing to loneliness, “I tend to get mixed signals quite easily with my autism” (Sean, 23). Some participants shared that anxiety could make them nervous to engage in social activities, “It’s a mix of my anxiety and depression. I just close myself off. And I don't really like opening up” (Parker 17). In contrast, participants who felt they possessed ‘typical’ social skills described feeling less lonely. Indiana (17) described finding it easy to make new connections despite displaying behaviours that might be seen as odd, “I think I’m pretty good at being social. I’m (pause) awkward obviously sometimes, but I generally know how to socialise”. James (17) said working on his social skills improved his

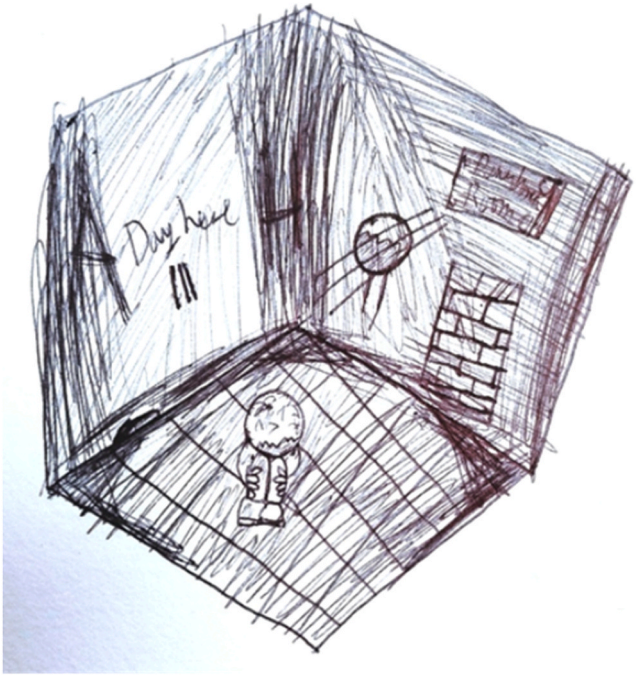


Fig. 3. Alex’s Artwork Illustrating his Experiences of Loneliness.

social experiences, by talking less about this personal interest. Showing personal engagement and initiative was mentioned by Parker (17) as strategies used when he wants to socialise, "Well, (pause) I'm not wearing my headset for one (chuckles). And (pause) I try to start up conversations with people". By adapting communication styles and adopting 'typical' ways of socialising, James and Parker felt social interactions became easier, illustrating how participants viewed connection as partly dependent on their own efforts and on meeting neurotypical expectations.

Pressure to display 'typical' behaviours and having a lower social drive compared to peers were mentioned by participants as things that make them feel different. Participants felt uncomfortable by being seen on their own. Laura (17) explained that being alone only feels lonely when others can see it, while Charlie (17) added "I usually sit at a table by myself, and then it (pause) as well as feeling lonely, I look really lonely as well". For these autistic young people, appearing lonely could feel more difficult to manage than loneliness itself.

This theme summarised how repeated negative social experiences and neurotypical expectations could contribute to autistic young people's feelings of loneliness.

Theme 6. Co-creating connection through acceptance and accommodation: a shared responsibility

This theme illustrates how autistic young people's experiences of connection were shaped by whether they felt accepted, understood, and able to be authentic. The accounts reinforce the concept of loneliness beyond social and emotional domains and suggest that existential and experiential loneliness may be reduced when needs are recognised and accommodated.

Participants described how accommodating environments fostered self-regulation, which in turn made feelings of connection easier, "In my old school they had, um, a quiet room, and I liked being in there, cos it was lonely, but in a nice way" (Kass, 13); "I think I like the silence" (John, 20). The quiet room described by Kass and the silence described by John were restorative, whilst the school corridors were experienced adversely, "I don't miss being pushed around in hallways" (Kass, 13). Evelyn (15) had a similar experience suggesting that hostile environments make sustaining friendships or engaging socially difficult. She felt her everyday needs were not met, and she struggled to manage the school environment and the complexity of social relationships, "having to navigate that every day and, like, the sensory things and the friendships just became difficult".

In contrast, Jacob (17) mentioned how he can feel connected when there is reciprocity and acceptance, "When you've found your people, the group that you fit in with, then you feel very welcome, you feel involved, you feel like people actually want you to be there." Similarly, Parker (17) mentioned the positive side of being part of groups that offer a sense of community, "It makes me feel happy, like I'm somewhere where I belong." An anonymous post on the wall of thoughts said that connection is felt when "people want me to be with them", demonstrating the importance of reciprocity in fostering feelings of connection and belonging.

Being acknowledged and feeling valued were mentioned as essential for connecting with others. Joseph (20) expressed how important it is to be seen by his peers and felt that their empathy can encourage connection, "I want people to know I actually exist." Trust, understanding, and warmth were also mentioned as important elements that contributed to social connection. Richard (18) said he did not feel lonely at college due to having a network of people who seemed to care for him, "[Lonely] at college? Not really because like there's people here, I can actually talk to, and they've told me loads and loads of times I can talk to them." Family and friends were also mentioned as a source of support and understanding, "If I feel upset or anxious, then I can count on my friends, and they don't judge me for it" (Qamri, 23); "My family are absolutely brilliant. If I didn't have my family, I don't know quite where I'd be" (James, 17).

Participants often appreciated time on their own and felt that a balance between time alone and being with others was needed, "You crave a little bit of attention, but then you don't always want too much of it" (Sean, 23). Part of this balance could be allowing time and space for decompression after sessions of intense social demands, such as a full day at school. These were experienced as necessary rather than reflecting social withdrawal or loneliness. Some participants felt these needs were recognised and supported, which meant their environments were free from neuronormative social expectations. Georgia (14) said her need for decompression after school is well understood and supported by her family, while Charlie (17) described how she likes being in her room after college because "it's just where I go because everything's like quieter there". These accounts suggest that reducing loneliness may depend not only on increasing opportunities for interaction, but also on creating environments in which autistic ways of regulating social energy are accepted and accommodated.

Participants who reported less loneliness described being authentic and accepted by people and environments who valued difference. One participant posted on the virtual wall of thoughts that connection is related to being able to be authentic and safe at the same time. They completed the prompt "Connection feels" with the anonymous post: "… like I have a safe space where I feel less tense and more comfortable a space where I feel I can be myself'. Bethany (14), who did not feel lonely, painted herself as a red rose amongst blue roses (Fig. 4). When asked whether she wanted to be like the blue roses she replied, "No, I'm happy being this one." Rather than reflecting only individual resilience, Bethany's account illustrates how being supported to embrace her autistic identity enabled her to experience difference without feeling isolated or excluded. She belongs as the red rose.

This theme showed that reducing loneliness involves more than improving social skills or increasing social opportunities. Recognising and accommodating autistic ways of communicating, relating, and regulating, including personal preferences for being seen and being alone, can contribute to feelings of belonging and less existential and experiential loneliness.

Discussion

This participatory study used flexible and creative methods to understand experiences of loneliness and connection for a group of autistic young people. The results expand the concept of loneliness by adding autistic perspectives.

Our findings agree with previous research that understands loneliness as multidimensional (van Tilburg, 2021; Korzhina et al., 2022). In this study, loneliness was defined beyond social and emotional domains (Weiss, 1973), to include feelings that emerge from a lack of fit in the



Fig. 4. Bethany Stockdale's Artwork Illustrating her Experiences of Loneliness.

world or a lack of shared understanding. From this revised perspective, the absence of social relationships represents only one aspect of loneliness. Experiences of understanding, acceptance and belonging become equally important as they can underpin existential and experiential loneliness.

In literature, existential loneliness has been defined as the awareness of oneself as an isolated individual (Yalom, 2020). It includes experiences of not being understood at a deep, authentic level (Bolmsjö et al., 2019; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). It is felt when people feel fundamentally separated and alone in the world, despite having others around (Larsson et al., 2019). This study showed accounts where loneliness was felt like a constant and was understood as an isolation that comes from living within environments organised around neurotypical expectations. It is the experience of feeling permanently different from others.

While existential loneliness reflects a sense of not belonging in the world, experiential loneliness refers to feeling that subjective experiences cannot be shared or understood by others (Stein & Solomon, 2017). This can include feelings of non-belonging when life experiences are perceived to be different from what is considered 'ordinary' or 'typical'. This type of loneliness was described when participants felt their individual needs were unseen or ignored or when people did not seem to understand what it is like to be them.

The inclusion of these domains of loneliness in understanding autistic young people's experiences supports previous research that emphasises the complexity of loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Motta, 2021; Schmidt, 2023) and the challenges of defining and measuring it (Maes et al., 2020; Morrison & Smith, 2017; van Tilburg, 2021). Despite this complexity, research on loneliness for autistic young people has been limited to using standardised loneliness scales that may not capture autistic phenomenology (Lisboa White et al., 2024). Although existential, experiential, social and emotional loneliness have overlapping emotions, such as emptiness, abandonment, and isolation (van Tilburg, 2021), this intersection can lead to different forms of loneliness being treated as equivalent. By narrowing investigations of loneliness for autistic young people to a 'typical' experience, autistic experiences are not legitimised (Milton, 2012; Whitehead, 2023). Besides ignoring feelings of existential and experiential loneliness, this approach could inadvertently support interventions that simply increase interactions with others, or social skills training interventions with the intention of changing autistic behaviours to suit normalised views of connection (Hull et al., 2024).

Besides well-known feelings of sadness (Cramer & Barry, 1999; Kwan et al., 2020), loneliness was characterised in this study as an ambivalent experience, with a multitude of emotions, which could be both positive and negative. The use of creative methods in this study allowed participants to express themselves whilst minimising a priori assumptions, allowing descriptions of loneliness that challenge current understandings. Participants described feeling boredom when lonely and happiness when lonely and we heard how loneliness feels in the body as a somatic expression (Stickley et al., 2016).

Loneliness was sometimes described as a positive mental state, where individuals feel challenged by the separation from others whilst maintaining an affirming inner focus. This is conceptually different from solitude, which is defined as choosing to be physically separated from others in a strong interaction with the self (Weinstein et al., 2023) and does not include suffering or distress (Tillich, 1963). Positive loneliness is able to combine the pain of an unmet need to belong with the comfort of solitude. "True loneliness" has been described by philosophers and clinical psychologists as an essential condition of human existence (Perlman & Peplau, 1982, p.126). This perspective was recognised by Moustakas (1961) who talked about the pain and despair associated with loneliness but also acknowledged it as a creative and productive force that allows meaningful awareness of the self and engagement with deeper aspects of life. Nietzsche (2009) discussed states of loneliness as constructive and essential for creative originality. For Kierkegaard (1992), loneliness is unavoidable, but when endured, becomes a pathway for self-understanding and authenticity. These alternative perspectives of loneliness challenge and expand dominant understandings and may help change stigma around loneliness, as well as how autistic people feel about themselves when with or away from others.

The concept of positive loneliness should not be interpreted as suggesting that autistic people generally prefer to be alone, that loneliness is inherently beneficial, or that painful experiences of loneliness should be reframed as positive. Rather, it highlights the importance of distinguishing between being alone, wanting to be alone, and experiencing loneliness. Research with autistic adults has suggested that greater self-acceptance of autistic differences may be associated with reduced loneliness, with some participants describing this as developing over time (Grace et al., 2025). Similarly, in the present study, young people who described positive loneliness appeared to use periods of being alone as opportunities to engage with things important to their sense of self. This does not mean that they did not desire or value social relationships, but rather that being alone could not be assumed to equate to traditional understandings of loneliness. For these young people, even when being alone was not necessarily by choice, aspects of the experience could be desired.

Stigmatising views of loneliness are stronger for young people because being social is particularly valued during adolescence and young adulthood (Barreto et al., 2022). Understanding and supporting autistic young people to be positively lonely at times might be valuable for promoting wellbeing and spaces for authenticity, disassociating shame from different ways of feeling connection and belonging. Personal strategies for positive loneliness might include being with pets, in nature, having parallel, imagined, fictional, and online connections. Activities might include being immersed in interests such as painting, drawing, planning, model making, playing a musical instrument, listening to music, reading, writing, watching television, sewing, designing clothes, or exercising. Using imagination, daydreaming, and immersion in vivid imagery were also mentioned as validating. When previously researched, without input from autistic people, some of these strategies had mixed evaluations (Lisboa White et al., 2024) with researchers considering some of them as maladaptive (such as, Adamo, 2004; Halsall et al., 2021), and others pointing to their potential for promoting wellbeing (notably Acker et al., 2018; Berns, 2016). The current findings are an invitation to consider these personal ways of feeling connected as meaningful and valid. This is one of two essential suggestions, the second being to prioritise approaches that reduce unquestioned social demands and environmental stressors that contribute to how autistic young people feel different from and misunderstood by their peers (Heasman, 2018; Milton, 2012).

Autistic young people in this study who felt social and emotional loneliness, talked about the desire to belong and feel included by peers, and how this can be accompanied by hesitance due to many previous negative social experiences. Bullying of autistic people is well documented (Horgan et al., 2022; Milton & Sims, 2016; Weiss & Fardella, 2018). Especially during adolescence, young people develop an increased awareness of difference and of the stigma associated with autism (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), which can exacerbate the intensity and occurrence of these negative social experiences at this phase of life. For some young people in this study, self-imposed distance from peers often came accompanied by shame, inadequacy, guilt, and personal responsibility. Repeated experiences of rejection and discrimination can contribute to internalised stigma (Botha & Frost, 2020), which in turn, can lead to more isolation and less quality of life (Turnock et al., 2022).

We suggest evaluating when and how to intervene based on autistic young people's experiences of loneliness and connection, working collaboratively with and considering autistic young people's needs when planning support interventions (Elmose, 2019; Pellicano & Stears, 2011). In practice, this means accepting different ways of feeling lonely or connected and releasing autistic young people from 'typical'

expectations. Our findings support previous research that shows that some autistic young people can have a lower drive for social interactions (Sumiya et al., 2018), and that stigma associated with aloneness is sometimes what interferes most with wellbeing. Autistic young people will blossom if they feel accepted and valued (Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Mesa & Hamilton, 2022).

Many of the hindrances to social connection mentioned by our participants are created socially. Shifting our focus from the individual to the behaviour of communities and societies might be the key to better understanding and addressing loneliness (Morrison & Smith, 2017). This shift in perspective is not new to other areas of autism research. Differences in sociality are not located within the individual but seen as "historically and culturally situated in discourse" (Milton, 2012, p. 886). The proposed shift from medicalised views to neurodiversity in autism science is an effort to challenge deficit-based investigations, moving the focus from the individual to their broader contexts (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; Sonuga-Barke, 2023). We propose a similar shift in paradigm when investigating loneliness for autistic young people: moving the focus from individual social deficits to personal preferences and the contextual structures that support meaningful connection for autistic young people. To achieve this, people supporting autistic young people can borrow compassion-informed practices from the educational and therapeutical fields that suggest actions such as noticing distress, active listening, curiosity, and empathic responses (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Conclusions

To conclude, our findings suggest that autistic loneliness includes social and emotional dimensions but extends beyond the absence or closeness of social relationships. We offer a revised conceptualisation of loneliness that is multidimensional and includes existential, experiential, and positive loneliness. Existential loneliness arises from feeling fundamentally different in the world; experiential loneliness arises from perceptions that others cannot understand autistic ways of experiencing the world; and positive loneliness is a challenging but meaningful choice that allows autistic people to engage in alternative forms of connection. These forms of loneliness are shaped by the degree to which autistic young people feel understood, accepted, and able to exist.

Such insights have implications for research, theory, and practice. Research and theory should move beyond defining loneliness only in terms of social relationships, and these findings offer a starting point for multidimensional conceptualisations and assessment tools. Practically, they can inform the development of interventions that better align with autistic needs (Beames et al., 2021) and recognise positive loneliness and autistic strategies of connection as legitimate.

Strengths and limitations

Although efforts were made to be inclusive, the study is limited to perspectives from autistic young people in the United Kingdom who could engage with oral or written communication required by this research design. We acknowledge this is not representative of all autistic people. We also value research conducted by autistic researchers, who determine all stages of study (Botha, 2021). In addition, future research could consider ways to give participants greater control over how they express their experiences within research (e.g., Kakoulidou et al., 2026; Pavlopoulou et al., 2026). For example, rather than only choosing from a menu of creative activities, participants could be invited to suggest their own ways to participate, or be given opportunities to revise their choice throughout data collection. This is particularly relevant to epistemic justice and could further redistribute control over knowledge production (Catala et al., 2021; Fricker, 2007).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Luciana Lisboa White: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emma Tecwyn:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Stephanie Petty:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.rin.2026.100086.

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