INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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How Structural Factors Have Contributed to the 'Loneliness Epidemic' Among Youth in Australia: A Feminist Analysis

Contents

1. Foreword

I am a student currently studying a Masters in Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, and have recently started writing my dissertation on the so-called 'Loneliness Epidemic'. I am incredibly passionate about this topic as I believe it is a very serious issue facing our society today, especially for young people. Loneliness is an incredibly painful, alienating feeling, and I have found when talking to my peers, so many of us are left wondering - is this normal? Is this what life is supposed to be like? No doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has played a considerable role in this feeling, a result of strictly enforced isolations, the introduction of working from home, and the dreaded zoom classes for schools and universities across the country, however, there seems to be a general consensus that there's more at play. This didn't occur overnight. It feels as though this deep disconnect has been building and impending since the moment we were born; the pandemic was merely the straw that broke the camel's back as they say. The following is a copy of my writing and research to date, however, this work is very much still ongoing. If the committee wishes I would gladly provide an update at a later date throughout the hearings.

2. A Poem

Loneliness is pain

Loneliness is anguish

Loneliness is a hole in your chest

A weight on your shoulders

Loneliness is a draught and a dessert

Loneliness is being in a room full of people but feeling like none of them really know you, not really

Loneliness is heartache

Loneliness is breaking up with your partner and feeling like you'll never love or be loved like that again

Loneliness is moving away from everyone and everything you've ever known, and feeling like you'll never be at home again

Loneliness is growing up being told you're impossible to love and carrying that around with you for the rest of your life

Loneliness is pushing people away the moment things get hard

Loneliness is staying in bed all day because life feels too hard

Loneliness is pain

Loneliness is darkness

Loneliness is the root of all your anxiety, thinking nobody really likes me and I'm going to die alone

Loneliness takes your breath away; I literally feel like I can't breathe right now

Loneliness is grey skies and thunder storms

Loneliness is missing someone you can't have

Loneliness is desperate, despair, all-consuming

Loneliness is not having his hands on you, and it's all you can think about

Loneliness is emptiness, absence – isn't absence meant to make the heart grow fonder?

Loneliness is not having someone to tell your good news to, to celebrate with, to hold you while you cry

Loneliness is seeing something beautiful and having no one to share it with

Loneliness is cold

Loneliness is unwavering and unforgiving

Loneliness is gut-wrenching

Loneliness is crushing and debilitating

It's seeing a couple cuddling in the corner and suddenly missing him

Loneliness is a birthday away from home

Loneliness is not getting a text back from the person you can't stop thinking about

Loneliness is knowing you'll never kiss her again

Loneliness is knowing they just don't get it

Loneliness is shaking, losing touch

Loneliness is being used and abused (it happens often)

Loneliness is difference, misogyny, patriarchy, racism

Pushing us further and further apart

Loneliness is profit, disguised as independence

Loneliness is seeing videos of children being burned alive in their homes and no one wants to talk about it

Loneliness is never seeing your best friend again because they ended their life on Christmas eve

Loneliness is inescapable and insurmountable

Loneliness is pouring your heart and soul into a song that no one ever listens to

Loneliness is judgement, pressure, stress, depression

Loneliness is humbling, disempowering.

Loneliness is hopeless

Because what's the point in anything if you don't have love

Loneliness is all these things and more…

3. **Introduction**

 Loneliness feels as though it is the defining emotion of my generation - Generation Z. Not just according to news headlines and the government, but in the art we make and consume. Its effects are evident all around us, as a young person it feels hard to escape. When I tell my peers this is what I'm currently researching, the feeling of resonance is palpable. Of course the pandemic occurring during our 'coming-of-age' years has undoubtedly had an effect, however, its pervasiveness feels evidence of a larger problem.

Feminists have long been, and still are, grappling with the meaning, ethics, causes and consequences of loneliness, as well as the troubling narratives around loneliness that obscure its political nature (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 4). From the romantic period onwards, loneliness has been a topic of study for artists (Keats, Wollstonecraft, Loy, Dickinson, Plath), philosophers (Shelley, Adorno, Levinas) and psychologists (Freud, Kinsey, Ellis) alike (Carroll, 2013, p. 4). The preoccupation with understanding, remedying and/or feeling loneliness is clearly not new (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 5). However, described as one of the most significant health challenges of our time, loneliness is evidently on the rise (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 24). Many feminist scholars, particularly those whose work is published in the *Feminist Loneliness Studies* special edition of the *Feminist Theory,* are working towards creating a better understanding of the ways that systems of oppression – white supremacy, settler colonialism, anti-queer bias, misogyny, neoliberal capitalism, and so on – create our lonely world. Contributors noted that up until this point there was no comprehensive feminist analysis of the structural conditions that both produce and intensify experiences of loneliness, and that they wanted to remedy this gap (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 3). I think this is incredibly important work within which to frame analysis of the loneliness epidemic among youth in Australia.

4. The 'Loneliness Epidemic'

4.1 What is loneliness?

Loneliness is generally acknowledged as a very subjective concept, and one that is hard to define (Killen, 1998; Strawa, 2022). Medical definitions of loneliness state that it is a subjective feeling of social isolation, and stress that it is more dependent on the *perceived* quality of one's relationships than the objective nature of them, (ie. someone can have many healthy relationships within their circle and still feel lonely), or a discrepancy between one's desired and one's actual relationships (Jeste et al., 2020; Killen, 1998; Lim, 2018; Vasan, 2022). Loneliness is not synonymous with physical social isolation, but rather a specific feeling of disconnection (Jeste et al., 2020; Killen, 1998; Lim, 2018). Weiss (1973), one of the first prominent scientists to define and investigate loneliness, suggests that it is a mechanism designed to promote proximity with other people, in that it made our ancestors

aware of their growing isolation between themselves and others, and thus their vulnerability to danger. Killen (1998, p. 763) builds on this theory and asserts that over the centuries, loneliness may have become on par with the 'fight or flight' reflex, in that it is no longer so functional in our modern society and has become destructive rather than useful to the human body.

4.2 Is there a loneliness epidemic in Australia?

References to loneliness specifically as an epidemic, date as far back as the late 1990's (Killen, 1998). While there is, of course, a long history of pathologized lonely subjects, more recently we have witnessed the emergence of a narrative where whole swathes of the population are positioned as potentially 'at risk' of loneliness. Loneliness has increasingly dominated headlines and policy agendas, positioned as a deadly epidemic sweeping across the population. An atmosphere of anxious apprehension where we are continually told about the risk of loneliness, warned that our lives are getting lonelier than ever before (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 24). The former US Surgeon General, Murthy (2017), describes loneliness as a "growing health epidemic". Confirming that loneliness is a serious public health problem worthy of governmental intervention, the UK appointed a Loneliness Minister, Tracey Crouch, in 2018 (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 6). Explaining the need for this appointment, Prime Minister Therease May noted that, "loneliness is the sad reality of modern life" (Yeginsu, 2018). There are, however, valid critiques of the framing of it as an 'epidemic', which will be addressed later in the paper (Chapter 3: Medicalising and depoliticising loneliness), however, I do not want to undermine the serious nature of this issue. Many health experts agree that there is an unprecedented rise in the suffering of loneliness worldwide and that this should be great cause for concern (Kent et al., 2023; Jeste et al., 2020; Strawa, 2022). While loneliness has traditionally impacted older cohorts the most, in the last couple of decades it has started to significantly rise in younger people (Lim et al., 2020). This is a signifier that the issue is getting worse, affecting more groups of people than ever before, and needs to be urgently addressed before there are detrimental long-term effects on individuals and communities alike. There is little academic literature on the loneliness epidemic in Australia specifically, however, there is ample research showing that loneliness is rising at an alarming rate within the country (Lim, 2018; Vasan, 2022). Additionally, loneliness has been identified as an emerging health problem in the country by health and government experts alike, specifically among young adults (Lim et al., 2020; Strawa, 2022).

While there is limited academic literature or research that mentions a 'loneliness epidemic' specifically, there has been a lot of news media using the term (Lim, 2020; RACGP, 2024). The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP, 2024) published an article earlier this year called *Loneliness Epidemic Plaguing Young Australians,* citing that approximately 42% of people aged 15 – 24 were psychologically distressed in 2021, a significant increase from 18% a decade earlier. Furthermore, government and health experts across the country have acknowledged that there are alarming rates of loneliness that need to be addressed (Lim et al., 2020; Strawa, 2022). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare released a publication in 2023 in relation to social isolation and loneliness, nominating it as a

prevalent and concerning health issue for the Australian Government. They found that the frequency of social contact, including both in person and online has been declining across all age groups in Australia for decades (AHIW, 2023). Additionally, the 18th edition of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) report was released in February of this year, and examines data gathered between 2001 and 2021, tracking more than 900 households and 17,000 people across the country (RACGP, 2024). They noted that since around 2008 the proportion of those aged 15 to 24 who report feeling lonely has steadily increased over time, with a significant acceleration in 2015 (Wilkins et al., 2023, p. 170). Between 2019 and 2020 loneliness increased even sharper, certainly because of the pandemic (Wilkins et al, 2023, p. 170). It is also noted that many of these figures are likely to be higher than reported due to the stigma surrounding identifying as loneliness (AHIW, 2023, p. 28). This data shows that there is a concerning rise in loneliness in Australia, in a cohort that has typically not been affected in such a way and is a great cause for concern.

4.3 What are the effects of loneliness & potential harms of an epidemic?

It is incredibly important to study the current rise in loneliness as there are a large number of severe side effects associated with increased levels of loneliness (Jeste et al., 2020; Killen, 1998; Lim, 2020; Vasan, 2022). Feelings of loneliness specifically, even if one is seemingly embedded with a rich social network, cause significant harm to one's physical and mental health (Lim, 2018; Strawa, 2022). Higher loneliness has been found to correlate with increased sleeping difficulties, poorer quality of diet and overall poorer perceived health (Vasan, 2022). Physiologically, loneliness increases our risk of decreased immunity, increased inflammatory response, elevated blood pressure and heart disease (Kent et al., 2023; Lim, 2018). Mentally, longitudinal investigations have also shown that loneliness is a risk factor for generalised anxiety disorder, major depression, and dementia (Jeste et al., 2020; Kent et al., 2023; Vasan, 2022). It can also lead to decreases in cognitive health, and faster progression of Alzheimer's disease (Lim, 2018). Furthermore, sufferers have been shown to cope with loneliness by resorting to over-eating, drug and alcohol abuse, and other practices that are regarded as being detrimental to their well-being, and as such, may reduce their life span noticeably (Killen, 1998, p. 766). The fact that loneliness appears to be affecting people at a much higher rate at a much younger rate is also of significant concern, as this could lead to even more severe side effects over time. Additionally, a higher rate of people suffering from such a long list of physical and mental ailments at such a young age is likely to have long-term consequences on our society and communities. Research has also shown that loneliness can be contagious and spread through a community very quickly (Lim, 2020).

Even before the pandemic began, health and medical institutions warned of the dangers of loneliness. For example, the American Psychological Association and the UK National Health Service fear the impacts of loneliness, with many experts noting that loneliness increases the risk of premature death by approximately 30 per cent. Ill health is often assumed to be one of the primary causes of loneliness because it may, for example, impact one's mobility or demand isolation. Unsurprisingly then, elderly people, who are particularly

vulnerable to ill health and to acquiring disabilities and impairments, report that "loneliness is the single most important predictor of psychological distress".

Of course, the great psychological harm that people who are suffering from loneliness face cannot be understated. I myself have felt great pain due to social isolation and feelings of loneliness and would not wish the same feeling upon anyone. More research into the causes of rising loneliness could help other people avoid feeling this way, and hopefully create a better world for people to live in. Loneliness can often be a dysphoric and painful feeling, as feelings of loneliness turn inwards, a one's sinking sense of failure at inability to connect to the world. Yet feelings of loneliness and disconnection can also turn outwards, accumulating in resentment, revenge, 'incel' even violence. Think, for example, of how the figure of the incel has been introduced into popular lexicon. Incels emerged within misogynistic online cultures, where outcast 'loners' 'celibates' male teenagers began to label themselves as 'involuntary' after resentfully being unable to find girlfriends. Here, feelings of loneliness are projected outwards. This violence and hatred has been directed most forcefully towards women, with talk of 'incel uprising' and a 'war on women'. Compulsory coupledom and toxic masculinity combine, often with devastating consequences (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 24).

5. Medicalising and Depoliticising Loneliness: What's really causing it?

As articulated by Carroll, "loneliness is surrounded by an anxious idea that lonely people need to be policed and cured" (2013, p. 51). I, along with other feminist scholars resist the idea that lonely people themselves are a problem to be solved. Drawing from Cvetkovich's analyses around depression as a public feeling, loneliness – like depression – is a political, cultural, and social phenomenon (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 16). Medical and psychiatric definitions and descriptions of the consequences of loneliness tend to dominate because they come from privileged fields of studies that are presumed to be objective. Medical or psychological definitions of loneliness tend to ignore and depoliticise how structural forms of oppression breed loneliness; the responsibility to change lonely feelings or circumstances is exclusively placed on lonely people themselves (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 8). Echoing ableist, neoliberal suggestions that people with mental health disabilities should just 'get a meditation app' or 'get out of bed and go for a walk', trite recommendations that lonely people should just 'join a club', 'spend time with family' or 'phone a friend' also dominate popular media and consciousness (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 8). However, if an epidemic is occurring this does little to address why and instead individualises the problem. Consequently, recommendations tend to provide individual health-approach solutions, such as psychological therapy or medication, leaving it up to the suffering individual to pull themselves out of the situation (Kent et al., 2023; Killen, 1998; Vasan, 2022). These recommendations fail to address the root of what is clearly a systematic problem. Additionally, a recent study in Australia found that many people feel they do not have sufficient information to manage their health, have issues actively engaging with healthcare providers navigating the healthcare system, and finding good health information (Vasan, 2022).

These suggestions are not enough for several other reasons too. For example, they depoliticise loneliness and they do not work to remedy so many structural causes of

loneliness. We need definitions, analyses and understandings of loneliness that refuse to uphold neoliberal ideologies or to sidestep the important anti-oppressive work that needs to be done to quell the bad feelings that typically come with loneliness. As Jones describes, "loneliness discourses are too often individualised and pathologized, placing a responsibility to be more resilient on individuals and communities that are struggling". We must trouble the idea that medical or psychiatric intervention, neoliberal achievement, an app or a traditional heteronormative nuclear family unit will 'cure' loneliness and make us feel 'happy' (Ahmed, 2010) (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 9). Interestingly, even though there is a cultural fear of loneliness and loneliness "has the potential to devastate society" (Carroll, 2013, p. 5), society continues to be structured in such ways that breed and compound loneliness (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 8).

There are a variety of factors that lead to a higher risk of loneliness, and as such it is hard to determine exactly what the cause of this epidemic may be (Jeste et al., 2020; Strawa, 2020). The majority of the current research is from a health perspective, and as such focuses on individual causes of loneliness, rather than any social or structural explanations (Jeste et al., 2020; Killen, 1998; Strawa, 2022; Vasan, 2022).

Wilkinson (2022, p. 24) notes that feminism can help us challenge prevailing framings of loneliness: where loneliness is still so often equated with aloneness and positioned as an individual feeling of lack and longing. Loneliness is, by its very nature, structurally created (p. 10). The term 'structural' resonates with feminist scholars invested in analysing structures (of violence, oppression and privilege, for example) (p. 8). It is crucial, then, to consider how individual feelings of loneliness form part of, and are shaped by, dominant social formations, or an emergent 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1978). Feminist work on affective life has long highlighted that we cannot view feelings and emotional life as somehow existing beyond 'the structural', but rather we must examine their continual entwinement (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012). Belcourt and other theorists, including Mosley, draw our attention to the fact that loneliness is intimately connected to the killing projects of settler colonialism and white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Laing politicises her loneliness, saying "we must understand that many of the things that afflict us as individuals are in fact the result of larger forces of stigma and exclusion, which can and should be resisted. Loneliness is personal, and it is also political" (Laing, 2016, p. 18). Rather than punish ourselves for feeling lonely, we ought to recognise the ways in which the violent systems we are lodged within cultivate loneliness (p. 13).

In doing so, they invite us to think about how loneliness is caused by other forms of oppression, such as transphobia, ableism, sanism, interphobia, capitalism, classism, economic precarity and neoliberalism. The connection between systematic inequalities and loneliness is too often ignored and undertheorized (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 10).

This work attempts to reframe loneliness as a structural condition, rather than as a personal failure or a failure of community, which I want to build on and use as the methodological framework of my research. I have identified the main structural causes and factors I want to

consider below. I have split them up for ease of reading for the moment , however, acknowledge that many of these are inherently connected in nature.

5.1 Capitalism & Neoliberal Government

What is so often absent in government depictions of 'the loneliness problem' is any consideration of the wider mechanisms that condemn people to lonely lives, when infrastructures fail, when people find themselves violently cut off from the world and abandoned by the state. For, as Esther Hitchen (2019) highlights, individual feelings of depression and loneliness cannot be separated from state policies that have cut people off from their social worlds. Hitchen goes on to map out the ways in which the uneven geographies of austerity have resulted in what she terms 'shrinking worlds'. Austerity measures in Britain have resulted in the closing down of spaces of vital social infrastructure: with cuts to local authority budgets leading to closures of public libraries, parks, community centres and care services. Austerity has resulted in the closure of vital spaces of connection, especially for those isolated and cut off in other ways, such as the closure of Sure Start children's centres for new mothers (see: Jupp, 2021). Thus, as Hitchen (2019) notes, '[t]he loss of such urban commons embodies a grinding loss of world […] our collective worlds begin to shrink, slip, and slide away' (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 31).

Austerity has cut away at the social infrastructure that people need to maintain their sense of connection to the world. Popular depictions of the 'loneliness epidemic' frequently speculate on the conditions that might have resulted in a rise in loneliness, such as family breakdown and technological shifts, but they often fail to give space to other far more integral causes of social isolation, such as the restructuring of the labour market, the rise in zero hours contracts, mounting housing insecurity, family separation as a result of a hostile immigration policy, the violence of racial capitalism and the securitisation and privatisation of public space, all of which limit our capacity for connection (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 32).

Through her own research on housing insecurity and welfare reform in Britain, Wilkinson (2022, p. 32) notes that she has seen how state actions and state inactions can sever our connections, cutting people off from their social networks, creating a weary existence of staying afloat, the daily grind. Precarity and hardship chip away at our sense of connection to the world. Perhaps, then, at times the language of loneliness is used when we should in fact be talking about structural abandonment, precarity and alienation under late capitalism (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 32)

Additionally, the groups who report intense feelings of loneliness are often those who have been cast out by the state – displaced people, young mothers, disabled people. Recent research into loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted that those with a low household income, those who are unemployed, those with lower rates of education and those from minority ethnic groups are more likely to report feelings of loneliness: inequality and marginalisation are key risk factors for loneliness (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 32).

It is important to note the ways that forms of capitalism intent on keeping our heads down looking at our phones or computers, buying products and working longer hours rather than organising collectively have a profound role to play in fostering loneliness (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 5). Colonised life under capitalism is also so intensely about consumption… people who are not recognised as formal artists are often scoffed at, especially if they do not attempt to monetise their creations (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 12).

There is a significant amount of data that supports the idea that this neo-liberal value model has played an instrumental role in the phenomenon. According to British historian Alberti, beginning at the turn of the 19th century, industrialisation reduced social connectedness and spawned loneliness (Jeste, et al., 2020, p. 553). People with disability, carers, people from a migrant or non-English speaking background, and lower-income households are more likely to report problematic experiences of loneliness or social isolation (Strawa, 2022). Research has also shown that loneliness is more common among racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation minorities (Jeste, et al., 2020, p. 554). This shows that the phenomenon is affecting the financially and socially vulnerable members of our society the most. Situational causes of loneliness include inadequate transport, poverty and low income, all of which are common in today's society under neo-liberal government (Killen, 1998, p. 765). The extent to which stigma and other social factors contribute to this finding needs to be evaluated (Jeste, et al., 2020, p. 554). Furthermore, the HILDA report offered insight into financial pressures, finding that approximately 26% of Australians reported working when mentally and physically unwell (Wilkins et al., 2023, p. 170). This would undoubtedly lead to detrimental health effects for people who are already suffering and potentially highlights the stress placed on individuals under a capitalist system, where individuals have to prioritise making money over their own health.

5.2 Heteronormativity and the Nuclear Family Model

As Ahmed (2010) illustrates in *The Promise of Happiness,* oppressive and discriminatory systems – such as compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood – attempt to convince us that cultivating a reproductive cisheternormative nuclear family is the path to a happy and lonely-free life. Despite, for example, so many accounts of the lonely, unhappy, unfulfilled heterosexual (house)wife, the idea dominates that the only way to be happy is to be oriented towards this specific familial structure and to be together with others in very specific ways (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 13).

Cultural constructions of loneliness are hence founded upon, and   help found, heteronormative logics. Loneliness serves to orientate us; it directs us down a path that we are told will lead us away from a potentially lonely existence. In her work on queer orientations, Sara Ahmed notes how we are directed down the 'straight line' (2006: 174), a collective alignment towards heteronormative visions of the good life: to coupledom, marriage, the nuclear family, and a presumed happily ever after. For, as Ahmed notes, '[f]ollowing lines […] involves forms of investment. Such investments "promise" return (if we follow this line, then "this" or "that" will follow)' (2006: 17). Yet the lines we take are not just shaped by the promise of happiness, but by the fear of loneliness. The fear of loneliness shapes and limits

the paths that our lives can take. Certain attachments, we are told, contain the promise to alleviate loneliness; romantic coupled love is still positioned as the primary way to find meaningful connection (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 26). People are convinced to settle down and start a family, for which they then have to provide. Thus, the capitalist cycle is further perpetuated by the relentless rules that tell us this is the only way to live and have a family.

5.3 Colonisation and Western Imperialism

Indigenous thinkers like Belcourt have much to offer to those of us invested in understanding the structure of loneliness. As Belcourt succinctly writes, "loneliness is endemic to the affective life of settler colonialism" (2017, p. 98). They are and have been working to image what sovereignty looks like – not only in terms of re-imagining what it means to think about borders engraved like scars on the land, but also the limitations of what it means too about the boundaries of our bodies, the boundaries of connection to one another (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 10).

Many authors also reimagine what being with others can look like, especially beyond our human-centric or speciesist mindset (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 13). Simpson's ecology of intimacy encourages us to understand how interconnected and interdependent everything is which can, in turn, recalibrate how we understand what it means to be others; it can prompt us to reach out to others and, perhaps, to organise against violent and killing systems (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 14).

5.4 Digital Technology and the Rise of Social Media

Another one of the problematic reasons constantly cited within Australian research is the overuse and accessibility of technology. Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less from Each Other,* examines the ways that new technologies are "changing us as people" and creating new forms of loneliness, prompting us to think about the complicated ways that capitalism finds to produce products that facilitate in moving us away from each other rather than towards each other (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 5). However, I think it is important to note that the root problem identified here is still capitalism, and not the technology itself. Additionally, many scholars gesture towards the ways in which technology can help maintain social relations and quell the bad feelings that come with loneliness (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 7). Many researchers also theorise that increasing disconnection is a result of the rapid growth of technology and social media (Jeste et al., 2020; RACGP, 2024) They argue that although technology may have improved our quality of life in many ways, it has also disrupted traditional avenues of social connection (Jeste et al., 2020, p. 553). Information overload, 24-hour connectivity, countless but sometimes harmful social media relationships and heightened competition have elevated the level of stress in modern society (Jeste, et al., 2020, p. 553). Dr Cathy Andronis, Chair of the RACGP Specific Interests Psychological Medicine, has put much of the distress down to internet usage and online interactions, stating "with the daily avalanche of too much information, too many choices and unhelpful distractions online, people are exhausted and overwhelmed… Young people are distracted by social media which sucks them in, often for

materialistic or consumer purposes – our phones are addictive and time-consuming" (RACGP, 2024).

While I agree that social media will have inherently played a role in this phenomenon, I also think there is an inherent bias here. The assumption that technology and social media use is the cause does not align with any concrete data. In fact, the report prepared by AHIW found that in many cases there were positive impacts associated with social media use in all age groups (AHIW, 2023, p. 32). While there are also reports of negative impacts, it appears to be very dependent on how the individual chooses to use the technology (AHIW, 2023, p. 32). I also agree that social media is a vessel for pushing materialistic and consumer purposes, but I do not believe the blame here lies on technology or reducing social media use per se. Rather, as previously mentioned, the blame here lies with no-liberal governments, who have worked hard to entrench materialistic values and performance measures in every institution, and the very structure of social media itself, which relies on selling products and holding people's attention.

5.5 The After-Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Isolation

Due to the sudden spike in reported loneliness around 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is also frequently cited as a leading cause (Vasan, 2022; Wilkins et al, 2023). While this certainly played a role in exacerbating the issue, it was clearly already prevalent beforehand, and is continuing in a concerning way (Strawa, 2022; Wilkins et al, 2023). Furthermore, I believe, and hope to prove through my research, that the severe effects that COVID-19 has had on our society, are due to the way it has been structured under capitalism. If we had built a society that valued and relied on community more, then perhaps we would have been able to handle the emergency better. I want to address this as it is one of the main factors currently discussed within the Australian research and government reports. Characterised by loneliness, isolation, anxiety and fear, the pandemic has undoubtedly been an exceptionally challenging time. However, to borrow from Carroll, the pandemic merely accentuated "the everydayness of loneliness and its potential to be political" (2013, p. 4). I want to challenge the current narrative within Australian literature that COVID is primarily to blame by identifying the way it has purely exacerbated an already existing issue.

6. Moving Forward

Unfortunately, not enough is being done to curb this urgent issue (Killen, 1998, p. 766). The report prepared by AHIW noted that there is little research into what works to resolve social isolation and loneliness (AHIW, 2023). In the last few years, the Australian government has acknowledged the problem of rising loneliness in the country, dedicating $46 million to the Community Visitors Scheme, a program that connects older adults with volunteers (Lim, 2018). While these investments are a welcomed first step, what is required is a further research that will help develop a better understanding of loneliness and how it is experienced on an individual, community, and societal level (Lim, 2018). Scholars note that rather than researching individual causes and effects, it would be more helpful if researchers could look for structural ways to help fix this phenomenon (Killen, 1998, p. 767). Even if action was

taken to reduce loneliness, it might not work, because the only way to make people less lonely is to make society more caring, and this will take more than just a few token government interventions (Killen, 1998, p. 769). It really comes down to caring, a word that is increasingly neglected and ignored in today's society (Killen, 1998, p. 769).

I hope to fill this gap with my research, identifying structural causes that have led to this epic rise in loneliness, and looking towards societal changes that can be made to address it. This is clearly a health issue that is affecting people on a systematic level all around the world, and cannot be solved with individual behavioural changes, as much as the current research suggests. Rather, recommendations and research in the future need to focus on what can be done at a structural level to address this structural issue. There is also clearly a lack of research into the loneliness epidemic from a cultural perspective. Hopefully, I will be able to use my own experiences and expertise to improve our understanding of loneliness and help people like me.

One way we can resist these systems and subdue the bad feelings that come with loneliness is to make, unleash our creativity unashamedly – to do so is, as Simpson reminds, to live, to resist colonial and capitalistic forces and to exercise our autonomy (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 13).

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