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How the home features in young adults' representations of loneliness: The impact of COVID-19

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Abstract

Loneliness is a rapidly growing problem globally and has attracted a great deal of attention in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Young adults, and in particular, those residing in deprived areas are currently the loneliest group in the United Kingdom. Utilizing a novel-free association technique, young adults' experiences of loneliness were explored both prior to ($n = 48$) and during ($n = 35$) the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on social representations theory, a thematic analysis revealed that many young adults associated the experience of loneliness with their homes. Therefore, this comparative study aims to investigate how the home features in young adults' representations of loneliness, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic using a systematic qualitative methodology. Three salient themes emerged from the data in both periods: 'The Lonely Home,' 'The Socially Connected Home' and 'The Safe, Peaceful, Authentic Home'. 'The Lonely Home' and 'The Socially Connected Home' emerged as a dialogical antimony. Representations of home were similar across the two periods; however, there were some notable differences. In particular, the themes 'The Socially Connected Home' and 'The Safe, Peaceful, Authentic Home' were less frequently mentioned by the during-COVID-19 sample where the 'The Lonely Home'

was more frequently mentioned by the during-COVID-19 sample. Overall, discussion of the home was more negatively valenced in the during-COVID-19 sample compared to the pre-COVID-19 sample. This comparative, exploratory study alerts us to the nature of the role that home plays in exacerbating or ameliorating loneliness both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is an emerging public health crisis. An estimated one-third of individuals living in developed countries are affected by this condition (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). It is defined as a distressing feeling, which represents a discordance between the quantity, or the quality, of desired and perceived social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Moreover, loneliness is a subjective experience distinguishable from social isolation; being alone does not necessarily precipitate feelings of loneliness, and vice versa.

This common but nevertheless upsetting experience is a transient state for the majority of individuals. However, for some, it is a chronic affliction (Qualter et al., 2015). Myriad research correlates chronic loneliness with poor physical and mental health outcomes; these include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, psychological distress and depression (Cacioppo et al., 2010; Richard et al., 2017). Furthermore, results from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing demonstrate that lonely individuals are more likely to engage in health risk behaviours including smoking and physical inactivity (Shankar et al., 2011). Most concerningly, loneliness is a predictor of premature death (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Within the last few years, the loneliness problem has gained traction and, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become a highly salient topic in both the media and governing bodies' agendas. COVID-19 was deemed a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020. The United Kingdom entered its first national lockdown less than a fortnight later, on 23 March 2020. During this first lockdown, the entirety of the UK population was instructed to 'stay at home', and approval to leave was restricted to essential journeys only, in an attempt to curb the spread of infection. This enforced confinement to home compounded feelings of loneliness (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Thus, it is imperative to examine how the home features in representations of loneliness. Little is known about the impact of conceptualizations of home on loneliness in young adults, especially in light of the 'stay home' lockdowns and the work-from-home orders that have characterized the protracted COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the association between loneliness and the home to gain an understanding of how the home features in young adults' representations of loneliness both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Loneliness and young adults

The experience of loneliness has traditionally been assumed to disproportionately impact the elderly. However, more contemporary research has demonstrated that younger generations are highly vulnerable to feeling lonely (Franssen et al., 2020). With regard to age distribution, loneliness seemingly adheres to a complex, nonlinear trajectory, where elevated levels are present among young adults as well as older people (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016). The BBC Loneliness Experiment (2018) surveyed 55,000 people

globally, and discovered higher levels of loneliness in 16- to 24-year-olds compared with any other age group; a finding that held across different cultures and genders. Moreover, a contemporary survey by the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2018b) found that 10% of young adults living in England reported feeling lonely 'often', compared to only 3% of respondents aged 75 years and over. Thus, young adults are currently the loneliest group in the United Kingdom and therefore will be the focus of the present study.

There is a paucity of research suggesting *why* young adults demonstrate such high levels of loneliness. Matthews et al. (2019) found that lonelier young adults were more likely to have experienced social isolation and bullying in childhood. Moreover, the ONS (2018a) conducted a qualitative analysis looking at children's (10–15 years) and young adults' (16–24 years) experiences of loneliness. They identified a large number of factors that increased loneliness including exam pressure, educational transitions, bereavement, bullying, chronic illness, and disability. However, this study did not ascertain which of these factors have the greatest influence on loneliness (ONS, 2018a), nor did it distinguish between those impacting children versus young adults, thus leaving scope for further investigation.

Work on young adults prior to the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that their loneliness is caused by factors such as social comparison, which is exacerbated by social media, the pressure to 'fit in' and to work excessively, and transitions between life stages, such as leaving home and starting university or employment (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022). Furthermore, the experience of loneliness in young adults is constituted by interrelated negative thoughts and feelings such as overthinking and depression and a sense of isolation even when surrounded by people (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021)

Understanding how the experience of loneliness has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, in whom this effect has been most pronounced is of the upmost importance. The COVID-19 Social Study (Fancourt et al., 2020) measured loneliness levels in participants since the onset of the pandemic using the UCLA-3 (a shortened version of the UCLA-R) Loneliness Scale. Loneliness was found to be highest among younger adults (18–30 years); individuals who lived alone; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups; people of low socioeconomic status; individuals with diagnosed health conditions and those residing in urban areas (Fancourt et al., 2021). This has concerning and undesirable implications. For example, research by Lee et al. (2020) demonstrated that psychological sequelae of loneliness have been exacerbated among young adults as a result of the pandemic. It is perhaps unsurprising that this cohort have reported the greatest impact from COVID-19 given the critical role that socializing and peer relationships play during this stage of development (Brown et al., 1986). Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent restriction to performing many functions at home, particularly during lockdowns, present an opportunity to understand what impacts loneliness.

Conceptualizations of home

The association between loneliness and the home, as experienced by young adults, is notably absent from the loneliness research. The home is a place of powerful symbolic and psychological significance (Graham et al., 2015). Across a broad range of disciplines including psychology, philosophy, and architecture, the concept of home has been afforded considerable attention (Mallett, 2004). However, home is a complex and multifaceted concept making it particularly difficult to define. Coolen and Meesters (2012) proposed five facets of home to deconstruct this phenomenon. Within the context of loneliness, three are especially salient: the meaning associated with the physical structure, the spatial dimension of home and the temporal facet of home.

The first facet refers to one's relationship with the place in which one lives. Indeed, many individuals attribute rich meaning to their home. For example, it has been depicted as a place of refuge and sanctuary, where people feel safe and secure (Moore, 1984). This can be ascribed to its ability to separate and protect individuals from the outside world. Moreover, the home has been proposed to reflect the

personal identity of its inhabitants (Lewin, 2001) and to be a symbol of selfhood (Cooper-Marcus, 1995). Freedom, security and warmth have also been posited as particularly significant qualities of the home space (Smith, 1994). Nevertheless, the impact that these attributes might have on the experience of loneliness, or indeed the sense of social connection, remains unexplored.

The second and third facets concern the spatial and temporal dimensions of home, respectively. The spatial dimension designates the home not as a singular structure, but rather as extending to a community, town, city or country. Each of these locations bears unique symbolic meaning for those who dwell in them (Mallett, 2004). The temporal facet acknowledges that some individuals consider the home to be the place in which they were born and/or raised, as opposed to their current place of residence (Coolen & Meesters, 2012). This is supported by Brink (1995) who differentiated the birthplace (the 'real' home) from the present-day dwelling (the 'present' home). Therefore, the concept of home is not necessarily a physical structure, but can be a feeling (Mallett, 2004). The theory of place attachment describes the emotional bond to a meaningful setting (Scannell & Gifford, 2017). Within the neighbourhood and community, this has been shown to positively influence well-being (Brehm et al., 2004) and therefore, may reduce feelings of loneliness.

Limited research has considered the negative connotations of home. For individuals who are subject to violence in the home, it is a place of fear rather than sanctuary (Mallett, 2004). Furthermore, families who have been through marital separation or divorce commonly associate the home with feelings of stress prior to, during and after the breakdown of the relationship (Anthony, 1997). Indeed, past or current places of residence are commonly associated with at least some negative aspects (Manzo, 2005). This suggests that the home is not an unequivocally positive setting, which may impact susceptibility to feeling lonely within it.

COVID-19-related lockdowns, globally, changed the way people used their homes. Many workers transitioned to home working. Similarly, children and young people were no longer permitted to attend school, college or university. As a result, homes were converted into offices and classrooms. The impact that working from home has on one's mental health has been contested (Oakman et al., 2020) and it is unclear in which ways loneliness would have been affected. Indeed, the current study aims to explore any links made between the home and loneliness before and during COVID-19 restrictions.

Social representations theory

Social representations theory (SRT; Moscovici, 1984) is a systematic method for exploring people's meaning systems (Joffe, 2003). It has been proposed as an apposite theoretical framework to facilitate a greater social–psychological understanding of the home (Moore, 2000). Originally, SRT was devised as an explanation of how individuals apprehend unfamiliar or threatening phenomena (Moscovici, 1984). However, it has subsequently established a broader conceptual basis (Moscovici & Duveen, 2000) and has been applied to the study of phenomena that are not necessarily threatening or unfamiliar in nature (De Paola et al., 2020). Concerning the current study, visual and textual representations of the link between loneliness and the home, as portrayed by young adults living in deprived boroughs of London, will be analysed according to SRT.

Social representations are widespread values, ideas or beliefs (Moscovici, 1972) about phenomena and arise from the interplay between individuals and groups (Moscovici & Duveen, 2000). They contribute to the evolution of a social order, which enables individual orientation to the social world (Moscovici, 1972). Moreover, they facilitate communication between members of a group. The formation of a social representation relies on two core processes: anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 1984). Anchoring involves relating new ideas to familiar concepts, whereas objectification is the act of transforming something unknown into something more tangible through means of images, symbols and metaphors (Höijer, 2011; Joffe et al., 2011).

The concept of themata is central to the theory of social representations (Liu, 2004). Themata (plural) or 'thema' (singular) are implicit level 'dialogical antimonies' (Marková, 2003), which drive surface level representations expressed in language. For example, concerning climate change, the antimonies of 'self/other', 'natural/unnatural' and 'certainty/uncertainty' shape the content of the representation that is produced (Smith & Joffe, 2009). The processes of anchoring and objectification are critical to this transformation (Liu, 2004). Therefore, themata reveal the building blocks that underpin common sense thinking and, in the context of the present study, will offer an in-depth understanding of the ways in which individuals conceptualize the home.

The current study

The current study aims to address a gap in the loneliness research field by investigating the relationship between loneliness and the home, as represented by a cohort of young adults (aged 18–24 years) residing in the most deprived boroughs of London; area deprivation correlates with loneliness (Victor & Pikhartova, 2020). The study comprised two stages of data collection; the first was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the second during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first (pre-COVID-19) stage of the present study took as its starting point the finding by the ONS (2018b) that young adults (aged 16–24 years) were the loneliest group. Moreover, the ONS (2018b) identified additional correlates of loneliness, which likewise informed this first stage: renting, living in a deprived area, being in paid employment and dissatisfaction with the local area. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers conducted a second stage of data collection, this time on a smaller scale. Thus, this study offers a unique opportunity to compare the experience of loneliness among young adults in deprived areas of London prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critically, the respondents were not specifically asked about their experience of loneliness in relation to the home. As a result, any references they made to the home being a loneliness-enhancing or loneliness-suppressing environment represent their stored, naturalistic associations.

Aims

(i) To understand whether young adults (aged 18–24 years) associate the experience of loneliness with their home;
(ii) To understand whether this has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research questions

(i) Is there a link between loneliness and the home in young adults, aged 18–24 years, living in deprived boroughs of London? If there is a link, what is the nature of the link?
(ii) Does this differ before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHOD

Participants

The pre-COVID-19 data were collected between May and August 2019. A recruitment agency was enlisted to select 48 participants. The aforementioned ONS (2018b) correlates of loneliness informed the selection of the purposive sample. An equal number of participants ($n = 12$) was recruited from each

TABLE 1 Participants' demographic information

	Number of participants	Race			London Borough			
		White	BAME	Prefer not to say	B&D	Hackney	Newham	TH
Pre-COVID-19 sample								
Male	23 (48%)	6	17	0	5	5	6	7
Female	24 (50%)	9	15	0	7	7	5	5
Other	1 (2%)	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Total	48	15 (31%)	33 (69%)	0	12 (25%)	12 (25%)	12 (25%)	12 (25%)
During-COVID-19 sample								
Male	11 (31%)	2	9	0	0	2	2	7
Female	24 (69%)	8	15	1	8	1	8	7
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	35	10 (29%)	24 (69%)	1 (3%)	8 (23%)	3 (9%)	10 (29%)	14 (40%)

of four London boroughs: Barking and Dagenham; Hackney; Newham; Tower Hamlets. These are the most deprived in London (Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government, 2019). Between June and July 2020—during the COVID-19 pandemic—the second set of data were collected. Since we had not asked the participants in the first study whether they consented to being contacted again, we had to draw a different sample for the second study. As a result, a social media campaign was employed to recruit new participants, matched to the first sample for age and location. Thirty-five completed the task. Table 1 summarizes participants' demographic information.

Procedure

In the first phase of data collection, interviews were conducted at the participants' homes or in their local area, depending on where they felt most comfortable. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview commencing. Each interview was between 60 and 90 min in duration and, following the conclusion of the interview, the participants were fully debriefed. During the second stage of data collection, social distancing measures were in place. As a result, participants were sent all the relevant information, and necessary materials, via post. Ethical approval was obtained from the UCL Division of Psychology and Language Sciences Ethics Committee (REF Number CEHP/2013/500). All information has been anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Data collection

The Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) is a free association task, developed as a method for understanding the naturalistic thoughts and emotions that people hold in relation to social and personal issues (Joffe & Elsey, 2014). It was used since it aims to elicit participants' most salient thoughts and ideas, which are then comprehensively explored during an interview (Farrimond & Joffe, 2006).

In the pre-COVID-19 sample, each participant was provided with a grid consisting of four boxes. They were instructed to express what they associate with 'the experience of loneliness' through images and/or words (see Figure 1). Next, the participant was required to elaborate on each of their associations, in sequence, in an interview with the researcher. Questions such as 'can you tell me more about that?' and 'how does that make you feel?' encouraged elaboration whilst minimizing researcher interference. In a second task, using the same method, each participant was asked to identify one place where they feel most socially connected, and one where they feel most lonely (see Figure 2). They were then asked to elaborate on each of these associations. Finally, all participants received a questionnaire.

In the during-COVID-19 data collection, the participants were required to complete the same two free association tasks. However, owing to the social distancing measures in place at the time, participants elaborated on their choice of words/images in writing instead of in an interview. Similarly, these participants were provided with a questionnaire to answer following their completion of the free association task. This paper will focus solely on the qualitative component of the data obtained.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is an empirically driven method for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data sets (Joffe, 2012). The 'weak' constructionist nature of SRT lends itself to Joffe's method of TA (Joffe, 2012). Firstly, the data were methodically studied, with any salient patterns and ideas recorded. This informed the development of codes, from which a coding frame was devised. Establishing intercoder reliability is considered good practice in qualitative research, as it both enhances the transparency

INSTRUCTIONS

We are interested in what you associate with 'the experience of loneliness'. Please express what you associate by way of images and/or words. Please elaborate one image/idea per box. Sometimes a really simple drawing or idea can be a good way of portraying your thoughts and feelings.

Name:

FIGURE 1   Task 1 example of a free association grid (20-year-old female from Newham, White)

of the coding process and gives the analysis a systematic foundation (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). As such, it was utilized in this study. A second coder was familiarized with, and subsequently applied the coding frame to 5% of the total data (two transcripts from each study). Percentage agreement was 73%, which was deemed acceptable for this study (Campbell et al., 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The remaining data were then coded, and themes were generated. ATLAS.ti 8 software was used throughout, to assist the TA.

INSTRUCTIONS
Please think about your local neighbourhood and any locations or places that you associate with social connectedness or loneliness. Please choose one place in your neighbourhood where you feel most socially connected to other people and one where you feel most lonely. Think about those places – and now I would like you to draw and/or write your choices in each box below. Please also write what it is about that place that makes you feel the way you do.

Box 1 – Place you feel most socially connected	Box 2 Place you feel most lonely
Work I have a lot of colleagues and friends who I can interact with. It's easy for me as they're individuals who share their life experiences with me.	Home My family is great but it does come to a point where i struggle to socially connect. I feel things are more closed than an open book.

FIGURE 2   Task 2 example of a free association grid (24-year-old male from Tower Hamlets, BAME)

RESULTS

To capture the respondents' most salient representations, the results have been organized according to the pervasiveness of themes. There are three themes that encapsulate respondents' representations of the link between loneliness and the home. The following sections will be structured accordingly, presenting the results for each of the three themes from the pre-COVID-19 study, followed by the during-COVID-19 study and finally a comparison of the two studies. Network charts summarize the themes' codes. The more prevalent codes appear in a higher position. Comparisons were made across gender and race for each of the themes and differences in representations across the demographic groups are noted
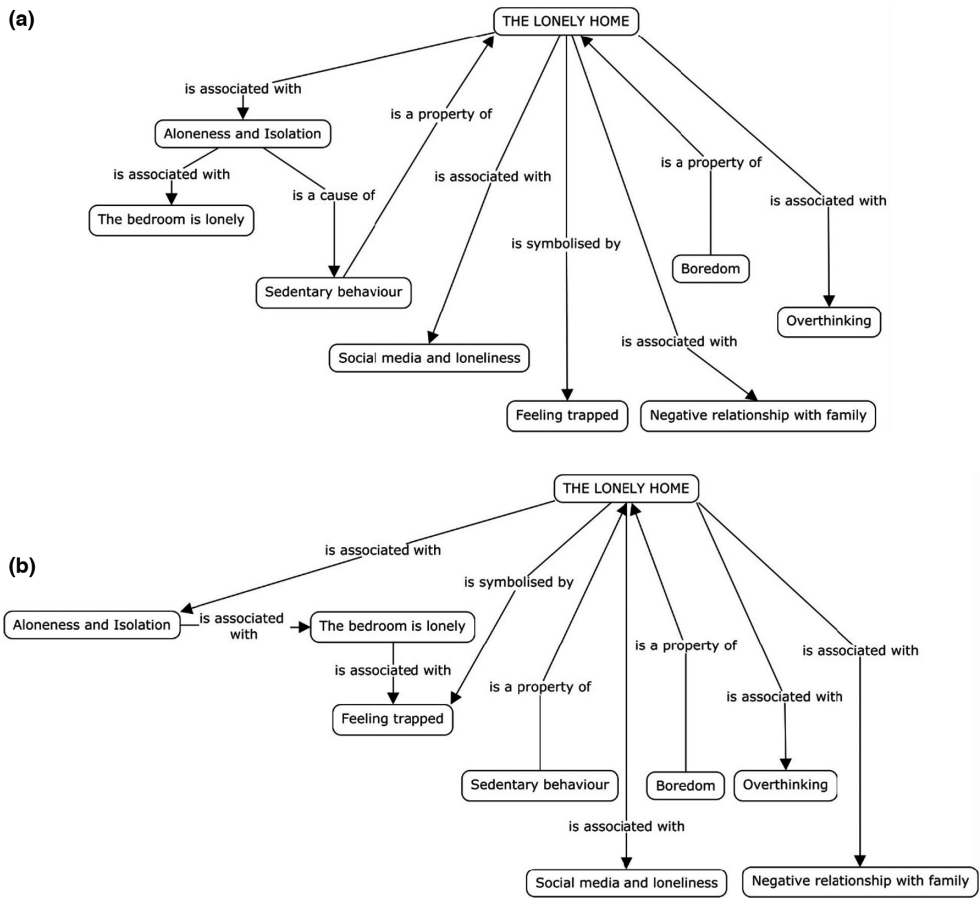
FIGURE 3 The lonely home. Panel (a), Pre-COVID-19; Panel (b), During-COVID-19

where they appear. Within the full range of interviews, 43 (90%) respondents in the pre-COVID-19 sample referred to the home, compared to only 19 (54%) individuals in the during-COVID-19 sample. Table 2 displays the frequency with which each theme was discussed by those individuals who mentioned the home.[1]

Most saliently, discussion pertaining to the home was more positively valenced in the pre-COVID-19 study compared to the during-COVID-19 study. This overall trend is comprehensively explored within this section, in conjunction with the more nuanced findings.

Since males and females were equally represented in the pre-COVID-19 study, whereas the during-COVID-19 study contained 69% females, the researchers examined whether the trend of the home being more positively valenced in the pre-COVID-19 than the during-COVID-19 data would hold when 35 respondents from the pre-COVID-19, matched on gender but otherwise picked randomly, were compared to the 35 respondents in the during-COVID-19 study. The trend is the same (see Table 3) with the pre-COVID-19 data being more positively valenced concerning the home than the post-COVID-19 data. Having allayed the issue of the gender imbalance in the post-COVID-19 study potentially influencing the trend shown in this study, the remainder of the paper is based on the full data sets.

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[1]References made to each theme are not mutually exclusive. During the interview, the same respondent may have identified one aspect of home as being 'lonely', while citing a different aspect of home as being 'socially connected' and/or 'safe, peaceful, authentic'.

TABLE 2 Percentage frequency of themes

Theme	Pre-COVID-19 percentage frequency (%)	During-COVID-19 percentage frequency (%)
The lonely home	84	90
The socially connected home	44	26
The safe, peaceful authentic home	42	11

TABLE 3 Percentage frequency of themes for a gender-matched subset of pre-COVID and during-COVID sample

Theme	Pre-COVID-19 percentage frequency (%)[a]	During-COVID-19 percentage frequency (%)
The lonely home	74	90
The socially connected home	34	26
The safe, peaceful authentic home	40	11

[a]Pre-COVID-19 data based on a randomly chosen 24 females and 11 males from the sample of 48 respondents.

Theme 1: The lonely home

Network charts (Figure 3) summarize the codes for Theme 1: The lonely home

Pre-COVID-19
The vast majority of respondents represented loneliness as the physical experience of being alone, as well as being or feeling isolated, when at home. Those who lived on their own often spoke about how the absence of company impacted on their experience of loneliness. Sadness and misery were associated with being by oneself at home. Conversely, those who lived with family or friends suggested that the demands of work and college, among other commitments, were a barrier to spending time together and contributed to them feeling physically alone and isolated.

> At home it does get kind of lonely because, everyone's just working, so it gets really difficult to see different family members…you get that lonely feeling because you have only one person to talk to, which is yourself.
>
> [Male, 18, Newham, BAME][2]

Moreover, the majority of respondents identified the bedroom as a particularly lonely room within the home. It was represented as having a range of functions extending beyond being the room in which one sleeps. These were nearly always solitary, such as studying or watching YouTube videos. It was commonly mentioned as a place to ruminate and isolate oneself from others. Specific features of the bedroom were felt to perpetuate feelings of loneliness, including it being dark and quiet; darkness was sometimes used symbolically to represent the experience of loneliness. The bedroom was frequently associated with feelings of depression and sadness.

> At night before going to bed, I sometimes, I have to cry myself to sleep because I'm lonely.
>
> [Female, 23, Barking & Dagenham, BAME]

Boredom was commonly associated with the experience of loneliness too, with many respondents suggesting that there was 'nothing to do' at home. This was exacerbated by being alone. Watching

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[2]Identifiers detail respondents' gender, age, borough and ethnicity, respectively.

TV/Netflix was identified as an activity in which individuals engaged, in an attempt to fill the void created by the boredom. Many associated being at home with unhealthy behaviours, including a lack of motivation and sedentary behaviour. Some respondents spent a great deal of time at home 'sitting around' on their phones; this was represented as a distraction from loneliness. Social media were associated with perpetuating feelings of loneliness by some of the respondents. This was particularly so for those individuals who described seeing photos and videos on social media of their friends enjoying various activities, and the feelings of disappointment and jealousy that arose from being excluded from such events.

> I just feel lonely because I see all these people [on social media] going out doing things and then there's me stuck at home in my bedroom.
>
> [Female, 22, Tower Hamlets, BAME]

During-COVID-19

Representations of loneliness as aloneness and isolation were highly prevalent in this sample. The majority of respondents made reference to spending time on their own indoors. For them, 'physical' aloneness was loneliness-enhancing. A small minority of respondents discussed feelings of aloneness and isolation in conjunction with feeling depressed, highlighting the adverse impact of decreased socializing on one's mental well-being. Many respondents described feeling like prisoners, locked inside their homes.

> A place where I feel most lonely is the house as there is not much to do in the day and I easily get bored and lonely. The padlock shows that I am trapped and can't escape the loneliness.
>
> [Female, 21, Newham, BAME]

The majority of respondents identified the bedroom as the place in which they felt especially lonely; the image of a bed—always an empty bed, or a single stick figure alone in the bed—was frequently used to illustrate this. The experience of loneliness was especially common at night and several respondents made a connection between difficulty sleeping and feeling lonely.

> When I'm trying to sleep at night is when I feel most lonely.
>
> [Female, 22, Tower Hamlets, White]

A minority of respondents implied that boredom impacted their loneliness. Notably, these individuals referred to the monotonous regularity of being confined to their homes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

> It is getting quite repetitive doing the same thing every day which is just sitting around at home.
>
> [Female, 18, Newham, BAME]

Furthermore, the home was considered a place of rumination by a minority of respondents. One such respondent referred to the lockdown when they stated, 'my mind drifts to what could have been if we weren't in a pandemic'. Poor familial relationships were presented as contributing to loneliness within the setting of the home.

> Me and my mum have a love/hate relationship. She loves me but is dismissive towards my mental health. We argue a lot.
>
> [Male, 24, Hackney, BAME]

Comparison

The majority of respondents across both studies represented the experience of loneliness as aloneness and isolation, as well as identifying the bedroom as being an acutely lonely space within the home. Across both studies, the respondents suggested that feeling trapped was associated with loneliness, although this symbolism was most prominent in the during-COVID-19 group. The pre-COVID-19 sample tended to speak about being trapped in relation to mental health problems or family troubles, whereas the during-COVID-19 sample used words such as 'claustrophobia', 'imprisonment' and 'escape' to represent that they felt physically trapped at home. A minority encapsulated this idea through the use of images, such as a padlock or stick figure staring longingly out of a window. Respondents suggested that social media were a source of loneliness, and in particular mentioned that they experienced feelings of jealousy and sadness from watching their friends out socializing, whilst they were at home. However, social media were more pervasively associated with loneliness in the pre-COVID-19 sample compared to the during-COVID-19 sample.

Theme 2: The socially connected home

Network charts (Figure 4) summarize the codes for Theme 2: The socially connected home

Pre-COVID-19

A substantial minority of respondents suggested that they enjoyed spending time connecting with family members at home. Some of these individuals highlighted the importance of having a
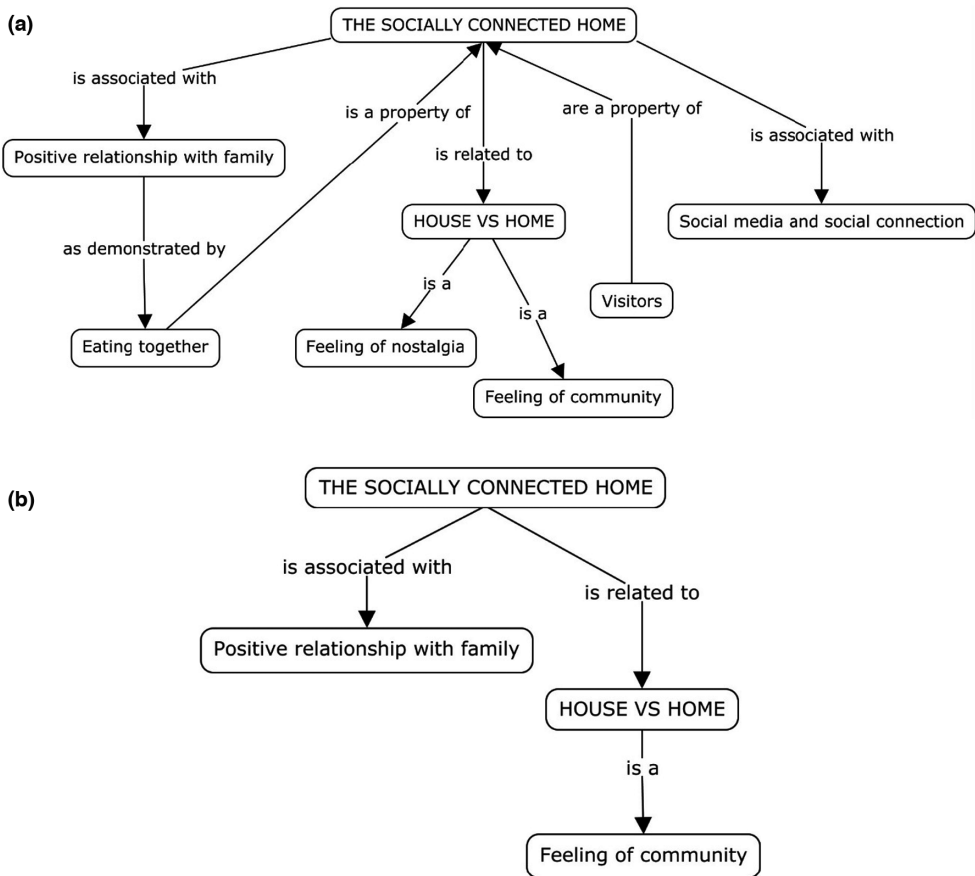

FIGURE 4 The socially connected home. Panel (a), Pre-COVID-19; Panel (b), During-COVID-19

supportive family. Furthermore, knowing that one was loved and cared for was considered to elevate social connection.

> For the most socially [connected] place I wrote 'home' because, of course, home is where the heart is. It's where your family is, it's where you're most loved.
>
> [Male, 18, Barking and Dagenham, White]

In conjunction with this, a small minority of respondents suggested that they enjoyed eating meals with their family. Moreover, one respondent visualized the 'ideal' family as one that shared meals together. Meals were an opportunity to connect with other family members.

> I just get along with my family…like when we eat we're always together, we just discuss our day or we just talk about anything.
>
> [Male, 18, Newham, BAME]

A minority of respondents suggested that using social media at home facilitated social connection. Phones were the preferred medium for accessing social media. Social networking sites such as Instagram and Snapchat, as well as WhatsApp, were popular among those who judged social media to engender connection. Furthermore, the home was represented as a socially connected place in the presence of visitors, including members of the wider family and friends. The portrayal of the home as a 'hub' for congregating and celebrating with others resonated with a minority of respondents.

> Everyone always meets at my house, so it's nice because we all come together.
>
> [Female, 18, Newham, BAME]

A small minority of respondents spoke about their home in relation to the place that they were born or their family home, as opposed to their current place of residence. Several respondents who had moved to London from a different part of the United Kingdom, or another country, spoke about their 'home' (the place from which they had departed) with a strong sense of nostalgia. They discussed their positive memories of this 'home' and a desire to visit those whom they had left behind. A small minority of respondents, only of BAME origin, represented home as being a sense of community; this encompassed the local estate or neighbourhood. They referred to their neighbours as their 'family' and reflected on both the positive and negative memories that were embedded within their local area.

> The estate that I grew up on, and the area that I grew up in, is the place I feel most socially connected because…it's like my mother, it's like my father, it's like my grandparents, it's like my girlfriend, it's like my brother, it's like my sister. I learnt, I bled on that estate, I cried on that estate, I've been happy on that estate. You know, that estate's home to me.
>
> [Male, 23, Hackney, BAME]

During-COVID-19

Some respondents represented the home as a socially connected place, mentioning the positive relationship they had with their family as the reason for this. These young adults reflected on the 'silver-lining' of the pandemic; an opportunity to spend more time together. The home was viewed to be socially connected as it facilitated communication between family members.

> At home, you have people you feel comfortable with and you're able to talk to.
>
> [Female, 18, Barking and Dagenham, BAME]

Home was linked to a sense of community within this sample; however, this view was not widely shared. One respondent used the illustration of a block of flats to portray their representation of the socially connected home: neighbours surrounding and supporting one another.

> People live near each other and can easily meet people and become friendly with your neighbours. Sense of community is present.
>
> [Female, 19, Tower Hamlets, BAME]

Comparison
Proportionally more respondents[3] in the pre-COVID-19 sample mentioned the link between the home and social connection. Having a positive relationship with one's family was represented across both studies. Eating together, an instantiation of these good relations, was discussed only by the pre-COVID-19 sample. A further representation among the pre-COVID-19 sample was the presence of visitors in the home and the ways in which they elevated the social connectedness of the space. This association was entirely absent in the during-COVID-19 sample. A minority of the pre-COVID-19 sample represented social media as a form of social connection at home. The during-COVID-19 sample did not make this association.

Theme 3: The safe, peaceful, authentic home

Network charts (Figure 5) summarize the codes for Theme 3: The safe, peaceful, authentic home

Pre-COVID-19
A large minority represented the home as an authentic, safe and comfortable space. Some respondents considered the home to be a non-judgemental space, where they could be themselves and were accepted for this. Words such as 'genuine' and 'real' were used, suggesting that the respondents felt that they were their most authentic selves at home. They alluded to feelings of authenticity by stating that they could display their 'true' emotions at home, in addition to making more explicit statements such as 'I can just be who I am' and 'I can be myself'.

> I just feel that at home is where I can…be myself and just be connected to what I love.
>
> [Female, 18, Newham, BAME]

A number of respondents identified the home, and in particular the bedroom, as a safe place. There were several references to the local area being unsafe (including problems concerning gangs, drugs and violence) as well as the world, more generally, being a dangerous place. The home was considered to afford some protection from these dangers.

> Your natural instinct is run home, you know, a place where you're safe.
>
> [Male, 24, Tower Hamlets, BAME]

For a minority of respondents, comfort was a notable characteristic of the home. Whilst some considered the home environment to be an emotionally comforting place, others identified certain physical attributes of the space, such as its warmth, to be comfortable. Happiness was associated with a comfortable home. Likewise, the home was associated with peace and sanctuary by a small minority of respondents. This demonstrates the calming aspects of the environment.

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[3]Direct comparisons made between the two studies are represented as proportions because the sample sizes differ.
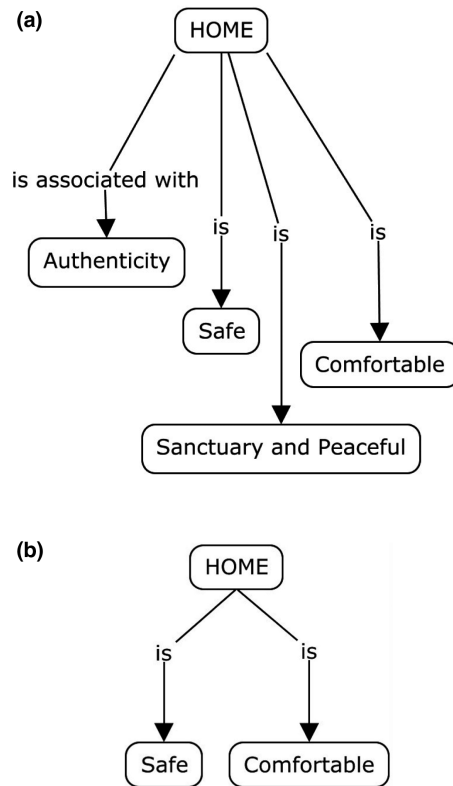
FIGURE 5   The safe, peaceful, authentic home. Panel (a), Pre-COVID-19; Panel (b), During-COVID-19

> You realise just how strong you're connected to your house and the comfort and the peace that comes from being within it and among the people inside
>
> [Male, 23, Hackney, BAME]

During-COVID-19
A small minority of respondents touched on the final theme 'the safe, peaceful, authentic home'. Notably, only female respondents of BAME origin made this association. Comfortable was implied within the context of feeling relaxed and content in the space. Furthermore, safety was discussed in relation to the home affording protection from COVID-19. Fear was attached to the outside, whereas the home was portrayed as being a defence against the deadly virus.

> This person is unable to go play outside due to the fear of catching COVID-19.
>
> [Female, 18, Newham, BAME]

Comparison
A larger proportion of respondents in the pre-COVID-19 sample made reference to the theme, 'the safe, peaceful, authentic home', compared to those in the during-COVID-19 sample. Respondents from both studies described the home as a place in which they felt protected from danger, though the dangers were to do with gangs and the like pre-COVID-19 and to do with COVID-19 itself during-COVID-19. Within the pre-COVID-19 group, some respondents associated home with authenticity. Conversely, no individuals in the during-COVID-19 sample referred to this. Among the pre-COVID-19 sample, a small minority of respondents represented the home as 'peaceful' or 'sanctuary'. This association was absent in the during-COVID-19 sample.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to elucidate how young adults, aged 18–24 years and residing in deprived boroughs of London, represent the link between loneliness and the home. To our knowledge, this is the first study to consider the relationship between loneliness and the home, as represented by young adults. Overall, the vast majority of respondents in the pre-COVID-19 study, and a small majority of respondents in the during-COVID-19 study, discussed the home. Salient thoughts and ideas could be categorized into three overarching themes: 'the lonely home', 'the socially connected home' and 'the safe, peaceful, authentic home'. Remarkably, a large majority of individuals, across both studies, considered the home to be a place deeply infused with loneliness. This is contrary to the plethora of research that presents 'home' as a wholly positive concept (Coolen & Meesters, 2012). Some respondents did consider the home to evoke social connection; however, this was not as widely represented as the more negative aspects. Finally, some respondents associated the concept of home with authenticity, safety or peacefulness; however, this too was less frequently expressed than the lonely home idea.

Social representations theory points to themata facilitating understanding of the drivers behind lay people's thinking; themata highlight the important role dichotomies play in shaping common sense (Smith & Joffe, 2009). Drawing on this concept, a particularly striking finding within the studies reported in this paper is the paradoxical relationship between the themata 'the lonely home' and 'the socially connected home'; it was not uncommon for the same respondent to cite one aspect of home as 'lonely' meanwhile attributing 'social connection' to another. Cognitive polyphasia describes the state whereby an individual employs multiple systems of knowledge to make sense of a particular entity (Provencher, 2011). This section will explore these dialogical antimonies in greater detail.

Additionally, the current study aimed to investigate whether representations differed prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, there was a strong trend in the direction of the home being conceptualized more negatively in the during-COVID-19 study than in the pre-COVID-19 study. The dominant theme in both studies was 'the lonely home'. In the pre-COVID-19 study, 'the socially connected home' and 'the safe, peaceful, authentic home' were less frequently represented than 'the lonely home'. In the during-COVID-19 study, this finding was even more pronounced: The home was seldom represented as either socially connected or safe, peaceful and authentic. Ideas generated across both studies were broadly consistent despite the differing contexts, although there were some divergences.

The lonely home or the socially connected home

Aloneness/isolation was the single most prominent representation of loneliness in both the pre-COVID-19 and during-COVID-19 studies. This substantiates the assertion that loneliness is a psychological manifestation of social isolation, which reflects one's dissatisfaction with the incongruence between desired and perceived social relationships (Yanguas et al., 2018). Interestingly, in quantitative research, the constructs of loneliness and social isolation are often presented separately (Valtorta et al., 2016). However, in the current study, social isolation was frequently viewed as a component of the subjective sense of loneliness. The bedroom was identified as a distinctly lonely room within the home and was almost always associated with being alone. Corroborating previous research on the relationship between loneliness and depression (Beutel et al., 2017), the current findings revealed that respondents associated being alone in one's bedroom with this distressing emotional experience. Indeed, this aligns with the broader loneliness literature, which relates perceived isolation to myriad adverse psychological outcomes (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Secondly, respondents' use of symbolism to depict their experience of loneliness was highly salient. For example, the home was viewed as a place of entrapment in the current study. Feelings of imprisonment were represented among the during-COVID-19 respondents via symbols such as the padlock. This aligns with research that suggests that individuals experienced 'pandemic-induced

claustrophobia' from confinement to their homes (Sanderson et al., 2020). Respondents also reported that 'feeling trapped' at home contributed to their loneliness in the pre-COVID-19 sample. However, the idea of 'entrapment' was more strongly conveyed by the during-COVID-19 sample. The current study's finding therefore contradicts existing literature, which proposes that the concept of home is synonymous with freedom (Darke, 1994). Evidence of symbolism, such as 'feeling trapped', confirms the suitability of the social representations approach, since it values the symbols in which people's experiences are couched.

Another particularly prominent finding pertains to the role of social media in perpetuating feelings of loneliness. In line with prior research (Verduyn et al., 2015), the passive consumption of social media, including 'tapping' and 'scrolling' through Instagram and Snapchat, was proposed to increase loneliness in the pre-COVID-19 study. Feelings of jealousy and envy emerged when one sat at home alone, while observing peers out socializing together. However, this association was less prominent in the during-COVID-19 study, perhaps because socializing was prohibited during lockdown. Social media consumption, in relation to the fear of missing out (FOMO), causes loneliness (Hunt et al., 2018). Nevertheless, high levels of loneliness persisted among young adults' throughout the lockdown (Bu et al., 2020), despite FOMO arguably reducing. Therefore, the current findings indicate that social comparison is not necessarily the major contributing factor to loneliness, contrary to previous research (Yang, 2016) though such comparison may occur in people's minds even in the absence of reminders of what their peers are doing.

However, the home was also considered to generate feelings of social connection. Pertinently, social media use at home was also discussed in relation to feelings of social connection. Arguably, this substantiates the phenomenon of cognitive polyphasia. Indeed, some respondents proposed that social media enhanced social connection, consistent with previous research (Shaw & Gant, 2002). The interviewees described 'communicating' and 'bonding' with, or 'talking' to, friends and others. This implies that the ways in which young adults engage with social media, whilst at home, may influence whether the home is a loneliness-supressing or loneliness-enhancing environment, which corroborates recent research (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021; Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022). Interestingly, the association between social media and social connection was completely absent in the during-COVID-19 study. Lisitsa et al. (2020) demonstrated that, when compared to older adults, young adults reported increased social media use, but reduced social support seeking, during the COVID-19 pandemic. A decline in support seeking behaviour may explain why social media interactions were not considered to evoke social connection among the during-COVID-19 respondents. However, the lack of mention of social media in relation to social connectedness could equally be explained as an artefact of the method; respondents may have taken social media for granted during COVID-19, and hence did not mention them. It is not only social media that may have been taken for granted during this time. The home itself was mentioned considerably less in the during-COVID-19 study, which may indicate that it was so normalized that it did not feel salient.

Furthermore, particularly notable were references to positive relationships with the family, which were similarly represented at the two time points. Associations between favourable familial relations and social connection are consistent with findings from previous research (Bruce et al., 2019). Moreover, eating meals with one's family illustrated these positive relationships, and was considered to amplify the home's social connectedness by interviewees in the pre-COVID-19 study. Conversely, this idea was absent in the during-COVID-19 study. This corroborates research showing that well-being is increased in those who consume meals alongside others (Yiengprugsawan et al., 2015). Overall, the current study demonstrated that family support enhances social connection and therefore may decrease vulnerability to loneliness, aligning with wider literature, which shows family support reduces emotional loneliness (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013).

Historically, home referred to one's village, town or birthplace; however, its meaning has since evolved and it is now more commonly associated with the walls in which one lives (Moore, 2000). Nevertheless, the more traditional meaning of home appears to have persisted. In line with Ahmed (1999), the present study showed that the home extends beyond the physical dwelling. It was considered

by some respondents to be the community or neighbourhood in which one lives, the place in which one's family resides or the country of birth. This implies that some respondents associated home with a feeling, rather than the building in which they currently live. Therefore, the current study's findings substantiate the theory of place attachment (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Brown & Raymond, 2007), which posits that feelings of attachment to certain places foster well-being (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010) and thereby may inhibit loneliness.

The safe, peaceful, authentic home

While the lonely versus socially connected home can be seen in terms of a dialogical antimony, no opposite was widely evident concerning the 'safe, peaceful, authentic home'. However, the researchers propose a possible antimony 'abusive home', due to the significant rise in domestic violence rates recorded during lockdown. There was no evidence of this theme in the data but this may have been due to the taboo of discussing such issues. Studies have shown a likely 22–40% rise in domestic abuse during the first lockdown (Anderberg et al., 2021; ONS, 2021). Factors such as stress, unemployment, reduced income and restricted access to social support may have contributed to this rise (Campbell, 2020). Those experiencing domestic violence would not feel safe, peaceful or at liberty to act authentically when 'trapped' in their home with their abuser. Future research may explore this paradoxical relationship.

Overall, the current theme of 'safe, peaceful, authentic home' was mentioned by some of the respondents in the pre-COVID-19 group, whereas it was nearly absent in the during-COVID-19 sample. The reason for this difference could be that, although young adults from the during-COVID-19 sample felt safe regarding the pandemic while at home, lockdown restrictions meant they were forced to stay at home longer than desired and the negative feelings associated with this challenge could have diminished their sense of comfort and authenticity.

Demographic comparison

Responses were analysed according to the demographic categories of race and gender. The majority of participants across both studies were of BAME origin; thus, the findings offer unique insight into how BAME individuals represent loneliness and the home. Notably, the proportion of BAME participants in the current study accurately reflects the racial composition of the areas investigated. Interestingly, when comparing BAME and White responses within both the pre-COVID-19 and during-COVID-19 samples, social representations of home were largely similar. Regarding gender, in the during-COVID-19 study, only female respondents of BAME origin represented the home as being 'comfortable' or 'safe'. These respondents explicitly discussed their fear of COVID-19 in relation to the protective quality of home. Research has demonstrated that fear of COVID-19 was more severe among females (Broche-Pérez et al., 2022) and that BAME individuals were at a greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and had worse clinical outcomes from it (Pan et al., 2020). This may, in part, explain this finding. However, future researchers might investigate further the relationship between gender, race and representations of the home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19

Remarkably, the thoughts and ideas that respondents associated with loneliness and the home were broadly consistent across the two studies, exemplified by the absence of new representations in the during-COVID-19 group. This is particularly surprising given that individuals were effectively confined to their homes during the pandemic, and social life was highly constrained. This finding

implies that there is continuity in the social representations of home, divorced from the context. Arguably, this is unsurprising considering that social representations are abiding worldviews. Loneliness is, by definition, subjective and some people will experience higher levels of loneliness than others, regardless of their current circumstances (Mund et al., 2020). The present study's finding attests to this idea, insofar as the home can be associated with inherent loneliness, unaltered by context.

Limitations and opportunities

A key limitation relates to the two study samples. Whilst we endeavoured to successfully match the two samples in terms of gender, borough and age, we encountered difficulties in achieving this, in part due to the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place during the second round of data collection. As a result, there was a considerable gender imbalance between the two samples; many more female respondents participated in the during-COVID-19 sample, compared to male respondents, whereas the genders were equally represented in the pre-COVID-19 sample. We therefore performed an overall analysis of the presence of the three themes in a gender-matched sample of 35 respondents from the first and second studies and found that the trends in the results were the same (presented in Table 3). A recent meta-analysis by Maes et al. (2019) discovered that levels of loneliness were similar for males and females across the lifespan. Nevertheless, the underrepresentation of males in the during-COVID-19 study is a limitation.

Secondly, the during-COVID-19 study lacked the full elaboration of free associations of the pre-COVID-19 study. This was primarily due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Respondents could not be interviewed in person due to social distancing rules, and therefore, the GEM was adapted; the respondents elaborated on their associations in writing, but this meant that the responses were far less detailed. Thus, only tentative conclusions can be drawn when comparing the two samples and, across all three themes, we see less elaboration in the during-COVID-19 data. However, the first stage of the GEM always involves the participant sitting alone and writing down their initial thoughts and ideas. As such, the fundamental free associations, which are the springboard for the elaborations, were generated in the same way across both samples.

The contrast between the two ways of getting participants to elaborate on their free associations either in an interview or in writing had the unintended consequence of casting light on the GEM and how best to use it. When analysing the data, it became apparent that the complete free association activity, which involves elaboration of one's grid by means of an interview, gave rise to more conceptual and nuanced thoughts and ideas, compared to the adapted free association task. In other words, more subtle nuances of meaning are elicited, more readily, through the traditional approach. For example, 'nostalgia' and 'sanctuary' were associated with the home in the pre-COVID-19 study but were entirely absent in the during-COVID-19 study. Without the probing of the interviewer, less tangible ideas were not freely available to the respondents. It has previously been suggested that, in the presence of the researcher, interviewees are less likely to elaborate freely due to social desirability effects and therefore, when respondents elaborate in writing, there is a lower risk of researcher influence (Joffe & Elsey, 2014). However, the present study has demonstrated that, without the interviewer, one is less likely to obtain rich data. In view of this finding, when conducting future research using the GEM, careful attention must be paid to considering how respondents are asked to elaborate their free associations; on balance, an interview appears to be the optimal method.

Future research and implications

Despite its limitations, the present study provided a unique opportunity to explore how young adults represent the link between loneliness and the home and whether this differed between the

pre- and during-COVID-19 periods. It demonstrated that the home contributes to feelings of loneliness. Additionally, it offered unparalleled insight into the value of the GEM as a method for eliciting social representations.

One direction for future research would be to conduct a post-COVID-19 study, using the same 35 respondents that took part in the during-COVID-19 study. Participants' responses could be compared across the time points. Thus, a more complete understanding would be obtained of the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness in the context of the home.

A second direction for future research would be to explore on a larger scale, the degree to which social comparison contributes to the experience of loneliness. Our study found that, contrary to previous research, social comparison may not be a major contributing factor to loneliness, as high levels of loneliness persisted in the absence of FOMO. Future researchers are invited to further explore this phenomenon, to provide some clarity on the impact that social comparison has on loneliness and to explore whether social media use is necessary for social comparisons to dominate. Perhaps social comparison exists, whatever the dominant media of the day.

A third direction for future research would be to investigate how different groups of young adults, for example, those living in the least deprived boroughs of London, or those residing in rural as opposed to urban areas, represent the link between loneliness and the home. This would shed light on how different groups conceptualize loneliness' link to the home and could inform who should be targeted by interventions.

Moreover, as research evolves, we recognize that interviews can be conducted remotely, for example, on platforms such as zoom. Thus, future research should prioritize the use of virtual methods for elaboration of free association data, such as that generated by the GEM (Keen et al., 2021). This could provide a unique opportunity to study hard to reach communities.

CONCLUSION

Loneliness disproportionately impacts young adults and, in particular, those living in deprived areas (ONS, 2018b). This study is the first of its kind to investigate the relationship between loneliness and the home among young adults (18–24 years) living in deprived boroughs of London. Moreover, it offers a unique comparison of this experience prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that the home is a deeply lonely place for many young adults. However, this experience is not shared by all in this group: The home is also considered to engender social connection and feelings of safety, peace and authenticity. Remarkably, with respect to the categories within which the home was discussed, the pre-COVID-19 and during-COVID-19 findings were largely similar. However, the valence was pointedly different; negative associations to the home were more prominent in the during-COVID-19 study, arguably as a consequence of the extreme confinement resulting from the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Isabel Sawyer: Formal analysis; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. **Sam Fardghassemi:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Project administration; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. **Helene Joffe:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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