RESEARCH ARTICLE

'The threat is in all of us': Perceptions of loneliness and divided communities in urban and rural areas during COVID-19

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Abstract
Loneliness is becoming recognised as an important social issue with health and well-being consequences. The recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has likely impacted loneliness through increased social isolation, though the effects may vary across urban and rural locations, where the dynamics of social capital, community cohesion and community divide are likely to differ. This paper consequently examines the different and compounding impacts of isolating disasters, such as bushfires and pandemics, on social capital and loneliness in urban and rural areas of Australia. This article compares experiences of loneliness in rural/regional and urban areas of Australia moving from the aftermath of the 2019–2020 bushfires into the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews provide a complex insight into how loneliness is experienced across different locations. The key findings included a higher sense of social divide exacerbating loneliness in rural communities, higher levels of loneliness among participants who lived alone in either area. It was concluded that loneliness was experienced extensively among those who were single and/or lived alone, regardless of their geographical location.

KEYWORDS
community, COVID-19, loneliness, rural, social capital, social divide, urban
INTRODUCTION

The study of social and emotional loneliness has gained great traction in the last decade. In a country such as Australia, one in four Australian adults report some degree of loneliness, and one in two Australians report that they sometimes or always feel alone (Abbott et al., 2018). Concerns over the rise of loneliness and its impacts are growing, and recent events have greatly accelerated this anxiety. Specifically, the extensive emotional impact of the recent ‘Black Summer’ Australian bushfire crisis combined with the ongoing social distancing fall out from COVID-19 has made the social issue of loneliness more relevant than ever before (Banerjee & Rai, 2020, p. 1).

Contemporary society has had limited experience with such intense restrictions, though the impacts are telling; one in two Australians have reported feeling lonelier since COVID-19, with young adults aged 18–25 reporting the highest levels of loneliness during this time (Lim, 2020). It has been suggested that the impacts of the pandemic may be greater on those living in regional and rural areas of Australia renowned for their remoteness, isolation and different communal forms (Banerjee & Rai, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, the impact of the prior 2019–2020 Australian bushfire crisis that devasted many local communities was not assessed before COVID-19 struck; earlier studies of Black Saturday bushfires showed a rise in loneliness and anxiety among those residing in rural areas (Shepherd & Williams, p. 979). The combined impact of the Australian bushfires and COVID-19 upon loneliness in urban and rural areas remains unclear; it is possible that both disasters have together compounded loneliness.

These factors suggest a key problem that needs to be explored: what are the different (and possibly compounding) impacts of isolating disasters, such as bushfires and pandemics, on social capital and loneliness in urban and rural areas? We address these issues in this paper by comparing the experiences of loneliness between those residing urban and rural locations affected by such disasters. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, we examine the impact of differing levels and types of bonding and bridging social capital in each area, and the impact of communicative technology upon feelings of community and personal belonging, particularly during a disaster or a crisis. This paper reviews literature on the concepts of emotional, social and collective loneliness; briefly theorises on how these concepts relate to bonding and bridging social capital; and examines how these experiences may be exacerbated by a crisis. The methodology utilised within the qualitative research study will then be outlined, followed by a discussion of the research findings and a conclusion detailing the key themes identified, including the impact of bridging and bonding capital, a sense of belonging to place, and the take-up of new technologies on urban and rural loneliness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The nature of loneliness—emotional and social

Loneliness is a complex social concept, which manifests in multiple forms. Two of the most commonly cited varieties are emotional loneliness and social loneliness (Weiss, 1973). Social loneliness relates to an absence of a broad network of quality friendships (Franklin, 2012, p. 13), but it is perhaps a rise in emotional loneliness that is most concerning. Relationships Australia (2018, pp. 2, 22) defines emotional loneliness as a dissatisfaction with one’s current social relationships and found that nearly a fifth of the Australian population experienced such emotional loneliness on a regular basis.

2.2 Impacting loneliness: Urban–rural communities, social media and social capital

The experience of loneliness is not spread evenly, and is impacted by where one lives, in combination with other factors such as age and changing household composition. The 2018 Relationships Australia Report found that older
males over the age of 65 residing in rural areas were less likely to have experienced a lack of social support compared to older males in major cities (Relationships Australia, 2018, p. 13). The link between urban residence and changing households/family structures is also important. Declines in the nuclear family and a rise in lone-person households have been linked to an increase in the prevalence of loneliness (Snell, 2015, p. 61), and a 2012 quantitative report on social isolation within Australian cities identified this group as rapidly growing within urban environments, and vulnerable to social isolation (Kelly et al., 2012, p. 8). This highlights the importance of considering how well metropolitan cities meet the contact needs of those who reside in them, as urban residents living alone may not have immediate access to social support (Kelly et al., 2012, p. 10).

A further important factor impacting loneliness is the ubiquitous uptake of social media. A rise in digital connectivity is being matched by a general social decline in physical face-to-face connections (Patulny, 2020) and this brings potential to induce feelings of emotional loneliness (Patulny, 2020). However, there are also noted positive effects of online communication when it ‘stimulates’ rather than ‘displaces’ offline contact (Nowland et al., 2018). This is particularly important in remote rural areas, found in many parts of Australia. Berg et al. (2017), found that elderly individuals residing in rural areas were able to maintain better social networks through utilising social media, by maintaining contact with distant family members, enhancing the connectivity of the elderly with their rural communities, and allowing them to monitor events happening within their community.

There are also important community composition differences between rural and urban areas, with potentially different impacts on loneliness in urban and rural areas. In contrast to cities, the more homogenous nature of small towns may well facilitate stronger levels of community participation and more close knit ties, or bonding social capital (Putnam, 1993). The externally-isolated and generally more internally-integrated nature of rural areas suggests grounds for a greater sense of community connection within those areas (Ziersch et al., 2009, p. 14). The more familiar nature of smaller communities and towns implies that residents are more likely to know more people in the local area, which has been associated with a reduced likelihood of feeling lonely (Kearns et al., 2015). They are thus more likely to have higher levels of bonding social capital (Agnitsch et al., 2006, pp. 37, 41, 39).

In contrast, city life is characterised by secondary rather than primary contacts (Wirth, 1938, p. 12), and increased heterogeneity, density, loss of common values, and heightened feelings of social division on the one hand, but also more extensive instrumental and civic ties on the other. Such bridging social capital (Putnam, 1993) is likely to be more prominent in urban rather than rural areas (Agnitsch et al., 2006).

On the surface, it would seem that the bridging social capital characteristic of city life is unlikely to be as effective at alleviating loneliness. Bridging social capital is based on weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), opportunities and information exchange, rather than the strong ties, close friendships and emotional connections of bonding social capital. This implies that urban connections are less effective at producing the emotional ties that ward of the ‘social loneliness’ (Weiss, 1973) that comes with lacking close friendships, and potentially the ‘emotional loneliness’ (Weiss, 1973) that comes with lacking intimate partner and family connections as well.

However, there are two counterarguments to this surface claim. First, cities are not always homogenously alienating as some of the classical urban literature might imply. The presence of urban villages, ethnic communities and sub-cultures for example, implies the possibility of more bonded communities appearing in localised areas within cities. Second, the constrictive tight-knit social networks present in some rural isolated areas—or negative dark side social capital (Portes, 1998)—might also increase loneliness. This would occur if local bonding networks exclude or subjugate ‘others’ (e.g., from a different race, country, sexuality, socio-economic status, or ‘outsider’ status based on coming from a different geographic locale), whilst also cutting them off from wider bridging connections. Such ‘outsiders’ would not only experience social and emotional loneliness, but also ‘collective’ loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015) from the stigma of being labelled as an outsider, and having few possibilities for connection with like-minded people not immediately available in the local area.
2.3 Loneliness and social capital during a natural disaster

Disasters such as COVID-19 may increase feelings of loneliness if they drive a need for increased social support from a community that does not already facilitate strong social connections. To elaborate, Shepherd and Williams (2014, p. 953) link the resilience of communities after the Black Saturday bushfires in Australia to a strong sense of community, noting how community members within the small town of Marysville relied heavily on local shared values and connections to drive decision-making during the crisis (Shepherd & Williams, 2014, p. 967). However, negative social capital (Portes, 1998) is also evident in some disaster situations, potentially driving feelings of social and collective loneliness. For example, non-locals who attempted to help during the Black Saturday bushfires found it difficult to engage with the community when locals refused to relinquish decision-making authority (Shepherd & Williams, 2014, pp. 971–972).

The influence of COVID-19 in particular is unprecedented. COVID-19 has ignited concern for potential rising levels of loneliness due to social distancing and self-isolation regulations. The impact of restricting the movement of individuals worldwide has meant that many have become isolated from their usual social support network (Noone et al., 2020, p. 6). Directions to self-isolate and social distance to prevent the spread of the virus can have detrimental consequences, such as rising levels of loneliness and poor mental health (Galea et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics found a significant surge in levels of loneliness in the beginning stages of the COVID-19 crisis, with loneliness being reported as the key source of personal stress for Australians during the month of April 2020 (ABS, 2020).

An investigation into levels of loneliness among those residing in isolated rural areas compared to cities is essential. It has already been noted that the self-isolation of COVID has a bigger impact on those who are already lonely, isolated or secluded (Armitage & Nellums, 2020, p. e256). Following the reintroduction of Stage 3 stay at home restrictions for those in Melbourne, the most common reason for those breaking restrictions were to visit family or friends, indicating the risks that many are willing to take to alleviate feelings of social loneliness and isolation (Lim, 2020). Pre-existing isolation and fallout from COVID are likely to differ across urban and rural areas, not least because of their potentially different bonding and bridging community mixes.

It is also unclear how effective digital media has been in countering COVID induced loneliness. While COVID-19 has encouraged widespread use of social media to maintain social connections and reduce feelings of social loneliness, there is no evidence that social media is effective in compensating for the loss of face-to-face contact (Patulny et al., 2020). It is therefore crucial to investigate the impact of an absence of face-to-face contact upon levels of loneliness, particularly among those who reside in isolated areas. While the use of video-conferencing technology during this time of isolation has become more prevalent, there is limited research discussing the impact of social media and videoconferencing technologies in reducing feelings of loneliness during the pandemic, and whether this is of greater benefit for those living in urban or rural areas (Noone et al., 2020, p. 6).

It is essential then to investigate the impact of compounding disasters—bushfires and then more urgently, the pandemic—on loneliness in urban and rural areas, and to investigate the effectiveness of digital communication in alleviating loneliness among those in urban and rural areas during COVID-19 restrictions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Recruitment

Given the need to examine the impacts of isolating disasters, such as bushfires and pandemics, on social capital and loneliness in urban and rural areas of Australia, the key recruitment criteria for this study was to achieve a diversity of participants from different geographical backgrounds, and gather qualitatively diverse experiences of participants (Walter, 2014, p. 58). Participants from the study were initially recruited from Facebook contacts living in urban and remote regional areas of Australia that had in some way been affected by the bushfires and COVID-19. They were
further recruited through posts made to community groups in Wollongong, Sydney, the Bega Valley and the Southern Highlands, and to an online Australian COVID-19 support group named ‘Bridging the Distance—Sharing our COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences’. Further participants were picked up from Perth, Cairns, Berry, Shoalhaven and the Southern Highlands. In total, 16 participants were recruited into the study, which was sufficient to reach theoretical saturation and allowed for a reasonable representation of participants from both metropolitan and rural/regional areas. In total, there were 6 male participants and 10 female participants, with 8 from rural/regional areas, and 8 from urban areas. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 72 (median age = 40).

3.2 Qualitative methodology: Semi-structured in-depth interviews

A qualitative approach was preferred to provide important contrast to the majority of studies relating to loneliness, which adopt a quantitative methodology. Qualitative methodologies enhance the reliability of data by ensuring that it captures the world from the point of view of the research participants, rather than from the potentially biased perspective of the interviewer (Liamputtong, 2012, p. 11). The COVID-19 social distancing regulations made it necessary to conduct all interviews utilising videoconferencing technology; phone interviews were disregarded because of various interactive challenges, such as the inability to establish rapport (Drabbie et al., 2016, p. 119). Twelve field questions were developed regarding participant experiences of loneliness both before and during COVID-19, their perceptions of the local area, and their strategies for coping with loneliness. The data was analysed thematically by utilising the data analysis program, NVivo. A list of support services appropriate to each geographical area was attached to both the Participant Information Sheet, along with the Participant Consent Form. Pseudonyms are utilised within this article as to avoid disclosing the identity of participants.

4 FINDINGS—LONELINESS BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 IN URBAN AND RURAL LOCALES

4.1 Emotional preconditions: Loneliness and mental health

The impact of a disaster on pre-existing emotional states and conditions was a clear emergent theme from the interview process. Large-scale disasters can exacerbate existing mental health complications by aggravating existing fears and vulnerability (Galea et al., 2020) and the data gathered from the interview process suggested that was the case amongst the interview respondents, particularly from rural areas. The combined impact of the bushfire crisis and COVID-19 worsened pre-existing feelings of anxiety and loneliness among participants from isolated areas of the Bega Valley. Tina, who lives remotely within the Bega Valley, notes:

I have mental health conditions and one of my strategies for dealing with those is going out and being social and so not being able to do that has meant that I have to do other things that don’t work as well... My anxiety since the pandemic has just been so high. It’s also compounded by the bushfires. That whole time was such intense anxiety and then I feel like we barely had time to catch our breath (Tina, F, 42, Bega).

Similarly, Rachel from the regional town of Merimbula within the Bega Valley also reported pre-existing struggles with anxiety and loneliness, which were intensified by the combined impact of the bushfire crisis and the pandemic, as she said:

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1The Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) defines a Major Urban Area as having a population of 100,000 inhabitants or over (Hugo, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, in the context of this study, Wollongong and Cairns are to be considered urban areas.
I had to be treated for severe anxiety... I guess loneliness was kind of thrown in the mix of all of that anxiety as well... I sort of understood going into this new changed environment that it would be a challenge for me (Rachel, F, 44, Merimbula).

Tina and Rachel's experiences reinforce existing findings from the literature which suggest loneliness is often associated with symptoms of anxiety and can exacerbate existing depressive symptoms (Hare-Duke et al., 2019, p. 188). Further reinforcing existing findings, a Wollongong participant interviewed in the early COVID-19 restrictions reported increased levels of loneliness and anxiety due to the introduction of the University of Wollongong's transition to remote delivery of courses:

I think the anxiety I had before was nothing compared to what I have now. It would get washed away if I was at uni, if I was with my friends. Now, I have it from the minute I wake up (Cody, M, 22, Wollongong).

Cody’s inability to see his friends for support during a time of uncertainty caused him to experience loneliness and poor well-being. However, Cody was the only participant from an urban area to report any prior or current struggles with mental health, suggesting more vulnerability to mental health and loneliness issues in rural areas, both before and during COVID-19. We discount the possibility of interviewee selection bias impacting these results, as there are no obvious reasons why more vulnerable persons in urban areas would be more unwilling than those in rural areas to discuss these themes. The interview process clearly indicated that a disaster or a crisis can enhance levels of loneliness and contribute to and exacerbate poor mental health in all areas.

4.2 The role of friendship and social contact in alleviating loneliness

Close friendship is important for reducing loneliness, as close friends can provide emotional support, and alleviate feelings of both social and emotional loneliness (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006, pp. 11–12). Both urban and rural participants noted the importance of close friendship and regular contact with their social circle, although many did note that they were negatively impacted by physical disconnection with their friendship network at the height of COVID-19 restrictions. James, a Cairns resident, discussed the importance of having high-quality friendships, particularly in the event of a disaster or a crisis, as he said:

I’m quite fortunate to have one very very very close friend. In terms of crisis, I think you definitely need social support. Friendship is invaluable in times of crisis. You need to have social capital and social support to help you get through. Social capital has a major role to play in developing disaster resilience (James, M, 40, Cairns).

A number of urban participants only became aware of the poor quality of their existing friendships at the height of COVID-19 restrictions. Michael from Wollongong, who was interviewed at the height of lockdown restrictions, reflects on this:

I think that it’s definitely made me think a lot more about the [poor] quality of some friendships and maybe even made me realize that some of the relationships lack quality (Michael, M, 23, Wollongong).

Michael’s response (and those of other interviewees) suggest that the friendships formed among those in rural and regional areas were generally more supportive and representative of higher levels of bonding social capital in
those areas (Agnitsch et al., 2006). City residents were more likely to form weak ties gradually over time through
daily interactions with the same social circle, centred around shared activities. However, these weak tie connections
still mattered, as noted by Amanda who also resides in Wollongong city:

I had no idea how much the incidental relationships meant to me—the instructors and other members
at my gyms, the retail assistants I know at the shops I frequent... (Amanda, F, 27, Wollongong).

Amanda’s fondness for daily interactions emphasises that bridging social capital plays an important role in
connecting people within urban areas (Sørensen, 2016) and alleviating social loneliness in a way not previously recognised in the
loneliness literature.

4.3 | Isolation, distance and frustration during COVID-19

The vast majority of participants reported heightened feelings of isolation and frustration during the height of the
pandemic situation. However, the large distances in remote rural areas appeared to have a stronger impact on rural
loneliness. While Tina had experienced loneliness before COVID-19, her remote location left her feeling frustrated
with being unable to see her friends when social distancing restrictions were introduced:

I live kind of remote so if I want to see someone, I have to drive at least fifteen minutes to see one of
my friends... I think before the pandemic if I was feeling a bit lonely or a bit low I could call my friends
and be like ‘can I come over?’ or ‘can we hang out?’ and now when I’m feeling lonely it’s just like... I’m
feeling lonely, I’ll hang out with... my kids (Tina, F, 42, Bega).

In contrast, the city-dwelling Amanda noted that the introduction of self-isolation regulations allowed her to
escape from her usually busy metropolitan life:

Everywhere I go is so much quieter, emptier. I can run along the foreshore without dozens of people
all around me. I live close to the motorway and it’s quiet. I am thoroughly enjoying noticing the
animals slowly take over the backyard (Amanda, F, 27, Wollongong).

Amanda might be an outlier—she was the only participant to discuss her enjoyment of the COVID-19
restrictions—but her situation conjures an interesting comparison with Simmel’s (2012, pp. 2-4) negative description
of the rushed, punctual and impersonal nature of city life. This lifestyle was altered under COVID-19 restrictions,
with many individuals beginning to work from home at the time Amanda was interviewed.

4.4 | Partnerships, family and loneliness

The data indicated strong levels of loneliness among participants who were single or living alone. Married men and
women tend to report higher levels of happiness (Stack, 1998, p. 417), and potentially experience lower levels of
emotional loneliness from having a spouse as an intimate confidant who can provide a reassurance of worth and
emotional support (Vaux, 1988, p. 723). For example, Michelle from Wollongong recalls her family support:

I probably feel a bit lonelier more often, but I’m lucky I live with my husband and my little girl. We’re
not lonely because we’re together, but then of course, we miss it. You know, other people (Michelle,
F, 30, Wollongong).
Judith, who is single and lives alone, believed her living situation contributed to her increased levels of loneliness. When asked how often she felt lonely, she said:

Right now, I live entirely by myself in my house in the middle of nowhere and you're not really supposed to spend too much time going outside so it's a bit more now than it was in the past (Judith, F, 40, North Nowra).

The interview findings support existing data (Relationships Australia, 2018) showing that females living alone reported the highest rates of emotional loneliness among female respondents. Participants living remotely with their families did not experience such high levels of loneliness, as noted by Leah:

I live really isolated so I think that's why I don't feel as lonely because I am used to being isolated when I am at home. I think something to note is that I have a partner and two kids, so I don't feel lonely too often because of them. I tend to love being home and being isolated where we are. Looking at the wider Bega Valley, even before this I sometimes feel quite isolated and that does make me feel disconnected (Leah, F, 29, Bega).

5 | COMMUNITY COHESION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES

5.1 | Social divide and bonding social capital

A further key theme that emerged through the interview process was how disaster situations aggravate social divides within both urban and rural communities. Of note, while close-knit connections can be beneficial for promoting belonging in rural communities, they can also provoke these communities into raising barriers to entry and informational support from outsiders (Florida, 2003, p. 6; Graeff, 2009, p. 147), akin to negative (or dark-side) social capital tightening bonds to the point where social control becoming excessive and restricts personal freedom (Portes, 1998, p. 15). A disaster provoked ‘flair up’ in negative, exclusive bonding social capital, accompanied by a sense of social divide and personal anxiety, was particularly evident among regional towns within the Bega Valley, with many participants, such as Rachel, noting the impact of COVID-19 upon health anxieties and attitudes to the community:

The threat is in all of us. We are the threat. It’s in each and every one of us. And that changes the dynamic. So, when you go into a supermarket and you are the walking disease, then we aren’t coming together as a community and I don’t think you can (Rachel, F, 44, Merimbula).

Rachel’s response highlights the pivotal theme of the emergence of a divided community in light of a disaster situation, which can potentially lead to an increase in levels of individual loneliness. While Leah reported feeling a strong sense of community within the wider Bega Valley region, she noted that this sense of community did not extend to outsiders:

There is a weird local versus transplant kind of vibe... I think the pandemic has brought people closer, but it’s shown a divide between locals and tourists. I think it’s getting a lot bigger because of the pandemic and how people responded to tourists in the bushfires (Leah, F, 29, Bega).

A sense of social division was more common, but not limited to, rural areas. Susan from Wollongong described how her frustrated emotional state was a result of community tensions due to the impact of COVID-19:
I think my frustration has become more intense since the pandemic... There’s so much fighting everywhere and people dobbing in neighbours and pointing fingers (Susan, F, 38, Wollongong).

Susan’s response indicates that the effects of COVID-19 have the potential to make individuals not only lonelier, but distrustful and anxious, as evidenced through the panic-buying of goods that occurred when lockdown restrictions were introduced across Australia (Patulny et al., 2020). However, there was little evidence of people being cut off from useful information and suggestions from wider informal bridging networks (Sørensen, 2016, p. 393). The present study also revealed only positive examples of bonding social capital in response to the bushfire crisis. Martha, who resides in the regional Shoalhaven town of Coolangatta, noted the strong sense of community within her town when confronted with bushfires:

I ended up being a little mini evacuation centre... There was a night where a whole lot of other people from North Nowra were evacuating and I kind of ended up being a sort of meeting place (Martha, F, 50, Coolangatta).

Martha’s response suggests that while a social divide between locals and outsiders became evident in rural areas as a result of COVID-19, the bushfire crisis brought rural communities closer together. Instances of social divide were not reported by urban participants. This potentially reflects on the differing impact of bonding and bridging social capital; I turn to this latter form next.

5.2 Community support and bridging social capital

Positive examples of bridging social capital and civic volunteering were evident in experiences reported by city dwellers. Community participation was prevalent among those residing within the Wollongong area, particularly among female participants in the study. This gender difference is interesting in the context of findings by Patulny and Wong (2013, p. 222) that men do not receive social support to the same degree as females because they do not prioritise developing informal bonding social networks to the same degree as women. The experiences reported here, though, showed female participants building bridging social capital with the wider community. Amanda from Wollongong explained how the impact of COVID-19 brought the broader community closer together than ever before:

It was just like suddenly everyone was so loving, patient, supportive and worked together as a team like never before. Many of us became more active in broader issues affecting the community, like preparing gift bags for the crew of the Ruby Princess2 (Amanda, F, 27, Wollongong).

Amanda’s response shows how voluntary community activities and bridging social capital can alleviate feelings of social loneliness, via volunteer work bringing urban communities together to form meaningful attachments (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006, p. 12). In contrast, a rural respondent from the Bega Valley noted that the social distancing restrictions made her hesitant to interact with her community, as she commented:

It’s made me feel worried about intimacy and contact and made me feel paranoid about what I am doing wrong or right and it’s created a discomfort around people (Leah, F, 29, Bega).

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2The Ruby Princess is a cruise ship that was linked to 18 COVID-19 related deaths and roughly 700 infections, and was allowed to dock off the coast of Wollongong at Port Kembla, with crew quarantined onboard (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).
Both responses support the argument made by Sorensen (2016, p. 396) that those in urban areas are more likely to possess higher levels of generalised social trust and belong to a greater variety of community networks in comparison to rural dwellers due to their diversified social spheres, and this diversity seems to generate many opportunities to alleviate loneliness. In contrast, some in rural areas remained hesitant to connect with others, particularly outsiders to their rural communities, resulting in feelings of loneliness.

5.3 | Shared experiences and community cohesion

The theme of community cohesion resulting from a shared disaster experience emerged throughout the interview process, particularly among the participants who resided in urban areas. For example, Amanda focused mainly on the positive cohesive qualities of the pandemic crisis:

That I haven't lost my job has inspired me to do a lot of campaigning to help those who are struggling. This has included reaching out to my neighbours, giving gifts to friends and family, initiating sharing meals, sharing toilet paper (Amanda, F, 27, Wollongong).

Amanda did not report heightened feelings of loneliness; it is likely that her interactions with and commitment (in particular) to supporting her community alleviated any feelings of social loneliness that could have arisen during this time. In contrast, Carol shared a negative perspective of community cohesion within her community in rural Bowral. The experience of this shared crisis led her to recognise the need to support her elderly neighbours, although she did not believe that there was a broader sense of community within her regional town as a whole:

There’s no sense of community... I’ve got an elderly couple who live across the way and I offered to help take them to the doctors or get them anything they need. They were just blown away... Down here in Bowral I see a sense of every man for himself. Particularly when this whole lockdown started (Carol, F, 50, Bowral).

The responses from participants indicate that the shared experience of a disaster situation can increase feelings of community cohesion, in turn reducing feelings of social and collective loneliness, although it is worthwhile noting that negative community interactions can also occur in a disaster situation, increasing feelings of isolation, particularly in rural areas.

5.4 | Sense of belonging to place

The data suggested that a sense of belonging to place and generational history alleviated feelings of loneliness. MacDonald et al. (2020, p. 5) found that rural communities are more likely to contain extended families who remain in the area, creating a close-knit community, and potentially increasing levels of bonding capital. This dynamic was evident in the present study. In contrast, no participants from the city reported a sense of belonging to a local place. Cody, who grew up in the rural town of Griffith and later moved to the city of Wollongong, commented on the differences between rural towns and cities as he said:

I grew up in a small rural town called Griffith, and it was a very close-knit town in terms of families who had grown up from generations way before mine. I guess just the fact that it was close-knit meant everyone knew everything about you. One little mishap, one little mistake. It was known the next day. It’s the biggest curse (Cody, M, 22, Wollongong).
In tight-knit rural and regional communities, a breach of community trust is likely to result in social exclusion and create a higher incentive to commit to the integrity of the smaller community. By comparison, individuals in urban areas are more able to engage in acts that might breach the trust of a community undetected (Sørensen, 2016, p. 395). Cody’s experience in Griffith demonstrates the presence of a constraining form of bonding social capital. On the other hand, history and ties to place in rural communities can provide residents with social stability. This is demonstrated Rachel’s comments about her childhood town of Bega, and the change when she moved towns:

I think because that’s where all my childhood memories reside when I’m in Bega, I feel very safe... My partner wanted to move to Merimbula... When we moved here, I had a very tough time finding the same sense of belonging as I did in Bega (Rachel, F, 44, Merimbula).

These findings suggest a requirement for policy interventions aimed at facilitating community cohesion and trust. Recommendations along these lines will be further discussed within the conclusion of this article.

6 | TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND LONELINESS

6.1 | Videoconferencing and social loneliness

Whilst a preference for face-to-face communication was displayed among both rural and urban participants, the majority expressed some satisfaction with utilising video calls as a short-term method of alleviating social loneliness. The results support the argument made by Noone et al. (2020, p. 6), who state that videoconferencing technologies are useful in alleviating loneliness during a time when physical distancing is compulsory. Carol, who lives alone, provides a key example of the positive impact of videoconferencing technologies, particularly among those living in rural areas:

I’ve got friends who live in New York and we had a virtual cocktail party one night. I was sitting there drinking my coffee because it was 10 am in Australia. It was a lot of fun. I’m a big user of social media (Carol, F, 50, Bowral).

Carol, who was interviewed when the first lockdown restrictions came into effect in New South Wales, reported being an extremely social person in general, and did not report feeling particularly lonely using technology. This was potentially due to her regular reliance on social media to maintain her social connections, augmented now by video-conferencing technology allowing people to see body language and shared expressions (Noone et al., 2020, p. 6). However, some urban participants reported a frustration with an inability to interact with others face-to-face. Cody notes:

There are times when I kind of sit there in my room talking to a video chat. No actual human interaction happening. I get off and I still sometimes feel a little bit claustrophobic. I haven’t left that room in like five hours (Cody, M, 22, Wollongong).

As argued by Moody (2001, pp. 394–396), overreliance on online communication can contribute to emotional loneliness as a large number of online relationships can end up replacing higher quality, existing face-to-face connections. Burholt et al. (2020, p. 8) also note that newer technologies such as video calls are used less frequently by the older population, who prefer telephone and email contact when face-to-face contact is not a possibility. Such findings were supported by the interview findings, whereby the younger population was more accepting of video calls.
as a method of communication, and older cohorts reporting struggles with adapting to this new form of technology. For example, Tina expressed contempt for videoconferencing, as this led her to feel socially disconnected:

> I hate talking on the phone, I hate videoconference calls. My friends are always like, ‘why don't we do a Skype call?’ I hate that. I've been disconnected in those ways (Tina, F, 42, Bega).

While online communication was seen as an effective medium for maintaining social interaction for some, many participants believed online forms of communication would be more isolating in the long-term. These findings support Nowland et al. (2018, p. 71) contention that digital communication and social media technologies are most effective in reducing loneliness when enhancing existing relationships or forging new connections (i.e. the stimulation hypothesis) but are counterproductive when used as a substitute for real-life physical interaction (the displacement hypothesis).

### 6.2 Working from home and loneliness

Both rural and urban residents reported a dissatisfaction with an altered, digital working environment as a result of pandemic restrictions, suggesting that these changes in work patterns have made individuals feel increasingly lonely. The rural and urban residents interviewed, particularly the older cohort, relayed their unhappiness with the isolating impact of working from home:

> I don't want my office in my home... Mentally, it's taken a bit of a toll. I don't think social media is a good tool for overcoming loneliness because I don't think it promotes connectivity at all. Face to face discussions enable empathy but I don't think social media enables emotion[al connection] (James, M, 40, Cairns).

This relates to the argument presented by Konrath (2013, pp. 12–13) that social media encourages lower levels of empathy in comparison to face-to-face communication. He argues that face-to-face contact motivates mutual kindness through non-verbal signals—such as facial expression—while digital communication omits important social information about individuals, resulting in a sense of anonymity, and thus disconnection. Similarly, Rachel reported increased feelings of loneliness as a direct result of working from home, as she said:

> I have meetings every day... It makes me feel lonelier because it's hard talking to people through a computer screen. You don't get verbal and nonverbal cues that you would when you're face to face with someone... I know it's a funny thing because I'm more connected to these fellow employees than I ever have been, but yet I feel more isolated and more lonely because of the way we are communicating (Rachel, F, 44, Merimbula).

A few respondents described positives aspects of working from home. While Judith was an outlier in this case, she reported increased happiness as a result of working from home:

> I teach karate, and I switched my dojo to an online dojo. It helped me to have a much better outlook and not feel lonely. It has really bonded us; we've stayed really strong and close-knit. I'm loving it! (Judith, F, 44, North Nowra).

Judith, who lives remotely, felt that working from home enabled her to stay connected with others, and this eased her feelings of social and potentially collective loneliness. The responses overall showed mixed attitudes
towards changing social and working environments. While rural participants evidently felt isolated due to an increased reliance on videoconferencing to communicate, many urban residents positively embraced working from home, and this in turn reduced their feelings of loneliness.

6.3 Social media, social support and physical contact

The importance of social support and physical contact during a time of crisis was displayed through the interview process, although this support was hindered due to limited avenues for face-to-face communication during COVID-19, resulting in emotional and social loneliness. Amanda believed that utilising social media enabled her to provide emotional support to those who were struggling to cope with the crisis, as she said:

It definitely catalysed developing strong bonds on social media. A lot of people I know are going through terrible things related to the COVID crisis—loss of jobs, income, debts, relationship breakdowns... We are really there for each other. Also, to lose my connections at my gym was a huge loss for me. Fortunately, I found Les Mills On Demand and the associated Facebook page and I have become involved in a really nice international online community with that. Also, the Bin Isolation Outing page is a great laugh (Amanda, F, 27, Wollongong).

Amanda’s use of social media to assist her in maintaining her face-to-face connections demonstrates the positive outcome of Facebook use, which can provide opportunities to maintain friendships, reinforce social ties, and identify available community resources (Yavich et al., 2019, p. 11). Online technologies can provide social support to those who are isolated, although the older population may experience disparities in accessing digital resources, and the use of social media to address loneliness may therefore not be effective for every age group (Armitage & Nellums, 2020, p. e256). For example, one participant had to adapt to communicating over social media at the height of the pandemic restrictions,

I’ve had to adapt. The only social media I do is keeping up with some people on Facebook. It’s surprising how some people are much more open to communication through social media and exposing themselves more than they would face to face. Social media has been very good for helping people (Rick, M, 72, Perth).

While the older population noted having to adapt to communicating online, those aged 30 and under, such as Amanda, displayed a preference for social media:

I like to communicate digitally on things that I find are a bit full-on for me so I can do it when I feel ready and I can have some time to think about how to respond. For example, I have a friend who is an alcoholic who has just come out of a relationship and needs a lot of emotional support. I am also in communication with one of the crew on the Ruby Princess... I have to be in a resourceful state to give them the attention they need (Amanda, F, 27, Wollongong).

As discussed by Rick, some individuals (such as Amanda) were more open to communicating online than they were in a face-to-face situation, and the interviews revealed this was more common among urban residents. Communicating online could be perceived as less confronting in comparison to face-to-face communication, due to an absence of eye contact through a textual conversation, which can lead to more direct and relaxed conversations (Yavich et al., 2019, p. 11). This form of communication may very well therefore alleviate loneliness among those who struggle to interact in person with others, and the results indicated was more common in urban areas.
This article has addressed important issues in contemporary research into loneliness and isolation in the context of disasters. The interview process indicated that social and emotional forms of loneliness were experienced among both rural and urban participants at the height of the pandemic restrictions. However, those in rural areas experienced relatively higher increases in loneliness during the pandemic, while the loneliness of those in urban areas was offset by more volunteering and a greater connection to their communities.

The impacts of the pandemic were not felt equally by all. Participants who were single or living alone in rural or regional areas reported stronger feelings of loneliness in comparison to those in both areas who were partnered or living with their family. For some, this loneliness during the pandemic crisis intensified pre-existing mental health conditions. Loneliness was intensified within rural areas of the Bega Valley due to the compounded emotional impact of both the bushfire crisis and COVID-19. The interview findings demonstrated that those in rural areas dealt with more significant increases in social and collective loneliness in light of COVID-19 restrictions than their urban counterparts. While many participants in urban and rural areas agreed staying in contact with others through social media and videoconferencing technologies at the height of pandemic restrictions somewhat alleviated social loneliness in the short-term, many nonetheless revealed feelings of isolation after frequent usage of digital communication. A dissatisfaction with a shift to online working environments and social activities suggested that changes such as the switch to online university classes, as well as working from home, have made individuals feel lonelier and more isolated within their own homes. Overall, the loneliness alleviated by the ‘stimulation’ effect of increased widespread use of videoconferencing technologies did not offset the loneliness ‘displaced’ by the loss in physical and face to face contact.

While the initial focus of this article was to investigate individual loneliness within urban and rural communities, the issues of distinctly different urban and rural forms of social capital and divided communities was an unexpected and pivotal theme to emerge from the interview process. While positive examples of bridging social capital were evident in smaller urban areas, such as Wollongong, participants in rural areas noted that distrust and anxiety resulting from COVID-19 had contributed to feelings of isolation and disconnection. This finding can be related back to the social capital literature, with rural residents experiencing a ‘flair up’ in negative bonding social capital, and a hesitancy in trusting trust tourists and newcomers to their community during COVID-19 (i.e., outsiders). In contrast, it was noted by both urban and rural participants that the bushfire crisis brought communities closer together. In further contrast, COVID-19 had several positive cohesive effects on urban communities, in encouraging more volunteering and a heightened sense of inclusive community. These findings demonstrate that greater social loneliness resulted from experiences of community division in rural areas, while experiences of community cohesion in urban areas eased social and collective loneliness somewhat.

### 7.1 Policy implications and recommendations

Some policy responses to COVID-19 isolation have been decisive. Medical institutions and universities across China opened online platforms to provide counselling services for patients impacted by COVID-19, identifying the provision of support to aid feelings of isolation and loneliness as essential during this time (Duan & Zhu, 2020, p. 1). However, policy responses to rising loneliness in countries such as Australia have not been so comprehensive, with little focus on specific urban/rural community issues. There is certainly scope to support personal interventions already suggested for adolescent youth dealing with heightened anxiety and loneliness from COVID, such as maintaining contact with family and friends and establishing routines (Branquinho et al., 2015).

However, policy initiatives which aim to facilitate well-being through enhancing opportunities for community engagement (and not just individual-focused solutions) will also be beneficial in solving the social issue of loneliness within different community contexts. The present study revealed that rural and single people are more
vulnerable to loneliness in such disaster contexts, and such vulnerable groups should be recognised through initiatives that aim to enhance feelings of cohesion and belonging. These might include community-based interventions and implementing social spaces, such as community gardens, which can encourage citizens to work together to share knowledge and develop friendships. Interventions such as Men’s Sheds can also encourage social interaction through shared, meaningful activities (Muir & McGrath, 2018, p. 171). With COVID-19 restrictions in mind, innovative technology-based solutions which encourage local socialisation through videoconferencing and social networking may also alleviate feelings of loneliness (Gardiner et al., 2018, p. 150).

7.2 Future research directions

While this study project offered an in-depth analysis of loneliness in urban and rural areas during COVID-19, there are opportunities for further development. Recruiting a larger number of participants from a large-scale metropolitan area with extended lock down (e.g., Melbourne), would have provided a wider range of data. Nevertheless, the interview process supports the argument that loneliness in urban and rural areas can impact happiness and well-being, and it is therefore a significant sociological issue that requires acknowledgement in further research. Future research should be directed towards, in particular, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions upon the experiences of loneliness of those living alone, as well as the impact of community division upon loneliness in rural areas.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data is not publicly available and is available upon request due to information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Script + Questions

Thanks for being a part of this study. To start with, I would just like your confirmation that you consent to taking part in this interview, and that you consent to this interview being recorded. I would also like your confirmation that you have read and have access to the participant information sheet and a copy of the consent form, and that you have had the opportunity to ask questions. You will remain anonymous to protect your privacy, and the data collected from this interview will be stored on a password-protected computer. Participating within this interview...
carries the risk of causing emotional distress, and you are therefore free to withdraw from the interview at any point. Your refusal to participate will not affect your treatment in any way, or your relationship with the University of Wollongong.

For this interview, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your experiences with loneliness, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are no right or wrong answers, and please feel free to give examples of specific experiences to support your answers.

[READ OUT THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS]

1. On a weekly basis, how often do you experience feelings of loneliness?
2. Generally, when you experience loneliness, how intense are these feelings for you, on scale of 1-10? Do you believe that these feelings of loneliness have been intensified by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic? In what way?
3. In your personal experience, has where you live impacted how often you experience loneliness and isolation (i.e., your house, street, suburb, town or city)? In what way?
4. Are close friendships and family connections generally essential to the maintenance of your well-being? Are they more essential in the event of a crisis such as a natural disaster or pandemic? Why do you think this is?
5. During the bushfire crisis in New South Wales, did you feel as if the events of this disaster brought you closer to others? Or did it make you feel more lonely and isolated? In what way?
6. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with the overall quality of your social relationships (i.e., your friends, family, neighbours or associates that you don't live with)? Do you feel as if the recent social distancing regulations have impacted or improved the quality of your social relationships? In what way?
7. Do you feel as if there is generally a strong sense of community and belonging within your street, suburb, town or city? Why do you think this is? Has this changed during the COVID-19 crisis?
8. Do you feel as if the enforced limits regarding staying at home, moving around your community and interacting with others due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made you feel lonely?
9. Have the social or economic effects of COVID-19 impacted your health in any way, for example through stress, or changes in an exercise routine? In what way?
10. Have you lost your job, or much of your income due to the COVID-19 crisis? If so, has that impacted on your ability to be social, or to maintain your social networks? (i.e., afford to go out, have workmates to go out with, etc)?
11. Has interacting with others through digitally mediated forms of interaction, such as social media or video conferencing, made you feel less lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you prefer this method of interaction more than face-to-face interaction?
12. Do you feel as if the COVID-19 pandemic has increased your feelings of unhappiness, due to the introduction of self-isolation and social distancing regulations? If so, how significantly?