Loneliness as a predictor of suicidal ideation and behaviour: a systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies

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ABSTRACT

Background: Suicide and suicidal behaviour are global health concerns with complex aetiologies. Given the recent research and policy focus on loneliness, this systematic review aimed to determine the extent to which loneliness predicts suicidal ideation and/or behaviour (SIB) over time.

Methods: A keyword search of five major databases (CINHAL, Medline, PsychArticles, PsychInfo and Web of Knowledge) was conducted. Papers for inclusion were limited to those using a prospective longitudinal design, written in English and which measured loneliness at baseline and SIB at a later time-point.

Results: After duplicates were removed, 947 original potential papers were identified, with 22 studies meeting the review criteria. Meta-analysis revealed loneliness was a significant predictor of both suicidal ideation and behaviour and there was evidence that depression acted as a mediator. Furthermore, studies which consisted of predominantly female participants were more likely to report a significant relationship, as were studies where participants were aged 16–20 or > 55 years at baseline.

Limitations: There was considerable variability in measures, samples and methodologies used across the studies. Middle-aged adults were under-represented, as were individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds. All studies were conducted in countries where self-reliance and independence (i.e. individualism) are the cultural norm.

Conclusions: Loneliness predicts later SIB in select populations. However, due to the heterogeneity of the studies further research is needed to draw more robust conclusions. Suicide death also needs to be included as an outcome measure. A focus on more collectivist countries is also required.

1. Introduction

Suicide is a global health concern with over 800,000 deaths by suicide worldwide every year (World Health Organization, 2017). In some countries one in nine young adults report making a suicide attempt (Wetherall et al., 2018). Progress in predicting suicidal behaviour has not improved markedly in the last 50 years (Franklin et al., 2017) and therefore identifying more specific risk factors for suicidal behaviour remains an urgent research priority.

There are many theories which offer explanations for suicidal behaviour. One such approach is the Integrated Motivational-Volitional Model of suicidal behaviour (IMV; O'Connor and Kirtley, 2011, 2018) which allows for the exploration of biological, psychological and social factors contributing to self-injurious acts. Psychological factors could be considered more enmeshed when compared to biological or social factors. Relative to psychiatric illness, psychological factors are comparatively under-researched. For the purposes of this review we focused on the psychological factor of loneliness in relation to self-injurious behaviour.

Loneliness is defined as ‘when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitively or qualitatively’ (Perlman and Peplau, 1981, p. 31). The distinction between social isolation and loneliness is important to highlight. Social isolation is outwardly visible to an onlooker; inferred by the lack of social proximity and engagement with others, though the individual themselves may not feel alone. By contrast, loneliness is a subjective psychological
state identified through introspection and thereby incorporates those who may feel lonely within a crowd (Bondevik and Skogstad, 1998).

Loneliness has gained increasing attention from national governments and public health organisations (UK Government, 2018; Loneliness Taskforce, 2018), with the recognition that worldwide, approximately 11–17% of the general population experience loneliness at some time in their lives (Beutel et al., 2017; British Red Cross, 2016; Victor and Yang, 2012). Loneliness has consistently been found to be associated with both suicidal ideation and behaviour in research studies (Hedley et al., 2018; Stickley and Koyanagi, 2016; Strayvynski and Boyer, 2001; Teo et al., 2018) as well as in more general systematic reviews (Calati et al., 2019; Musttaq et al., 2014). Furthermore, some studies suggest that loneliness is more closely related to suicide risk than perceived social support (Chang et al., 2017).

Cross-sectional research indicates that the frequency of loneliness is age-dependent (Batigun, 2005); being most prevalent in those <30 and >80 years of age (Yang and Victor, 2011); peaking in adolescence and old age (Qualter et al., 2015). These age ranges coincide with increased prevalence of suicidal behaviour (though not suicide death) in younger and older adults compared to other age groups (Nock and Prinstein, 2005; Turecki and Brent, 2016). This therefore suggests that demographic factors may influence the detection of loneliness predicting later suicidal ideation and/or behaviour (SIB). However, the nature of the relationship between gender, loneliness and SIB is less clear. Although men are three times more likely to die by suicide than women (Office for National Statistics, 2019), women are more likely to experience suicidal ideation or engage in self-harm (O’Connor et al., 2018). In comparison, gender differences in loneliness have been less consistent. Some studies have found loneliness to be more prevalent in men while others have reported the reverse (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg, 2010; Stokes and Levin, 1986), with a recent meta-analysis finding no gender differences in loneliness overall (Maes et al., 2019). Collectively, the evidence points to no gender difference in the association between loneliness and SIB cross-sectionally (Beutel et al., 2017). These findings therefore suggest that prospectively, age may be the only demographic factor to moderate the loneliness–SIB relationship. However, given that the concept of loneliness is likely to be culturally influenced, we also aimed to investigate whether the latter relationship is affected by geographical location.

To date, prospective studies investigating the relationship between loneliness and SIB are scarce; reviews have typically focused on loneliness as a risk factor for mental health difficulties (e.g. affective disorder), specifically excluding SIB as outcome measures (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). These prospective reviews have found loneliness to be a stronger predictor of later depression, when compared to anxiety or substance abuse as outcome variables (Beutel et al., 2017; British Red Cross, 2016; Victor and Yang, 2012). Loneliness has consistently been found to be associated with both suicidal ideation and behaviour in research studies (Hedley et al., 2018; Stickley and Koyanagi, 2016; Strayvynski and Boyer, 2001; Teo et al., 2018) as well as in more general systematic reviews (Calati et al., 2019; Musttaq et al., 2014). Furthermore, some studies suggest that loneliness is more closely related to suicide risk than perceived social support (Chang et al., 2017).

1.1. Current aims

This review had the following three aims:

i) to explore whether loneliness was a significant predictor of later SIB;

ii) to identify if the loneliness–SIB relationship varied as a function of socio-demographics (specifically age, gender) and/ or geographic location;

iii) to determine whether the loneliness-SIB relationship is mediated by depression.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Strategy

Five major psychological and medical databases (CINHAL, MedLine, PsychArticles, PsychInfo and Web of Knowledge) were searched up to 18th of December 2019 using the following search terms; (i) lonel* OR "perceived social isolation" OR "perceived social exclusion" AND (ii) suicide* OR "self-injurious" OR “self-injury” OR “self-injurious” OR “self injury” OR “self-harm” OR “self harm”. Data collection had finished before being registered with Prospero and therefore could not be listed on the website. PRISMA Guidelines (Moher et al., 2015) were followed (see Figure 1) where titles and abstracts were screened by the first author and an inter-rater check of 95% accuracy of 40 papers was conducted by a researcher external to the research team to ensure appropriate selection/exclusion of studies.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria required studies to be (i) an empirical paper, (ii) written in English, (iii) reporting a prospective design (i.e. where loneliness was measured as a predictor of later SIB at a future time point) and (iv) loneliness and SIB assessments were both measured directly. Studies reporting suicidal ideation and all forms of suicidal behaviours (including suicide death, non-suicidal self-harm and suicide attempt) were included. Papers were excluded if i) they were a review paper, ii) they explored assisted suicide, or iii) loneliness was inferred by using an indirect measure (e.g. living status). Any uncertainty regarding the inclusion or exclusion criteria was discussed between the study authors until agreement was reached.

2.3. Data Extraction

Study sample demographics, key measures, findings, analyses, confounding variables and author interpretations were extracted by the first author and collated on a data extraction sheet.

43% (n=9) of included papers were checked by an external researcher (a psychology graduate) for inter-rater reliability with 100% concordance after discussion.

2.4. Quality assessment

A quality assessment tool (see table 1) was designed specifically for this review based on the Quality Assessment Tool for Systematic Observational studies (QATSO; Wong et al., 2008). Quality assessments were based on the aims of this review and therefore any extensive analysis of measures used for other variables was not considered when evaluating each study against the quality assessment criteria. Quality assessments were completed by the first author and 20% of the papers were checked by another researcher external to the team for inter-rater reliability. Disagreements between the researchers were resolved via discussion with 100% post-discussion concordance. Quality assessment scores were calculated with higher totals reflecting higher quality studies (max score = 9).
2.5. Statistical analyses

Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (version 3, Borenstein et al., 2013) was used to conduct all meta-analyses, weighted by sample size. Moderation analysis was used to explore whether findings varied as a function of gender, age and quality assessment score. Due to the small number of studies, it was not possible to examine moderating effects for studies of suicidal ideation and behaviour outcomes separately. In each moderation analysis, averages were calculated for studies where multiple effect sizes were reported (e.g. across multiple timepoints or suicidal ideation and behaviour). In all cases where gender ratio was reported, this was done so using a binary scale. Subgroup analyses of gender were dichotomised based on gender prevalence within the sample (i.e., sample demographics were ≥50% female vs <50% female) as well as investigated continuously (i.e., % female in the sample). Moderation analysis of age was based on all studies where the mean age of the participant sample was reported and this was treated as a continuous variable. Analysis of depression as a mediator between loneliness and SIB was conducted using calculated r-values.

3. Results

As illustrated in Fig. 1, a total of 947 original studies were initially identified by database searches for potential inclusion in the systematic review, of which 20 met the review criteria. One further article was identified through a search of references of included studies, resulting in a total of 21 papers selected for the review. This included one manuscript that published two studies within the same paper (Kleiman et al., 2017), one study that reported only some of their outcome measures (Bennard et al., 2019), three papers that measured loneliness at two timepoints (Gallahger et al., 2014; Hom et al., 2019; Schinka et al., 2013) and a final paper that, despite being an editorial (Pietrzak et al., 2017), it was agreed between the review authors that this study should be included as it was consistent with the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this review. See Appendix A for additional information regarding these studies and how they are referred to within this review. In all, 22 studies from 21 papers are discussed in this systematic review, with 28 results regarding loneliness as a predictor of later SIB. Summaries of each study's sample demographics, measures...
used, findings and quality assessment score are displayed in Table 2.
Where relevant data were not available in the papers, authors of the studies included in this review were contacted for additional information for inclusion in the meta-analysis. In total, 17 studies (23 effect sizes) were included in the meta-analysis (see Appendix B for details of excluded studies). Effect sizes used were either reported by study authors or calculated by the authors of this review from information available in the paper. In order to effectively synthesise the findings from the papers included in this review, factors that influence the loneliness–SIB relationship were also critically examined in tandem with the aims outlined in the introduction. To investigate the extent to which loneliness predicts SIB, the results presented here are grouped by outcome variable (suicidal ideation vs. all suicidal behaviour including suicide death, suicide attempt and non-suicidal self-harm). The results of this review are separated by approach, with narrative summaries discussed in section 3.1 and meta-analytical findings discussed in 3.2.

3.1. Narrative Summary of Study Findings

This section discusses all 22 studies included in the review. The results are presented as follows:

i Identification of a loneliness–SIB relationship
ii Methodological quality
iii Evidence of a loneliness–SIB relationship in adjusted and unadjusted univariate analyses;
iv Moderating effects of socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) or geographical location on to the loneliness–SIB relationship;
v The role of depression as a mediator of the loneliness–SIB relationship;
vi Other confounding variables (e.g. psychometric measures used, follow-up duration, study sample size, recruiting sites) affecting loneliness–SIB relationship

3.1.1. Identification of a loneliness–SIB relationship

17 studies (20 analyses) explored suicidal ideation as an outcome, while seven studies (eight results) measured suicidal behaviour, this includes two studies which measured both suicidal ideation and behaviour at two different timepoints (see Table 2). Of the 20 analyses that explored suicidal ideation 12 results indicated that loneliness was a significant predictor variable. Additionally, Stein et al. (2017) reported an indirect pathway from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS) to loneliness at the same timepoint predicting later suicidal ideation. Gallagher et al. (2014; T2-T3) reported a significant association while Gallagher et al. (2014; T1-T3) did not.

Three (Junker et al., 2017; Nickel, 2006; Wichstrøm, 2009) of the seven studies (8 analyses) which explored any form of suicidal behaviour found loneliness to be a significant predictor. Studies which reported a significant association were all those which explored self-harm as the outcome. Of the six studies to measure suicide attempt, the only study to report a significant association with loneliness and suicide attempt was Wichstrøm (2009), however for this study suicide attempt and self-harm was measured as a single outcome variable.

3.1.2. Methodological quality

Individual quality assessment scores are reported in Table 2. The maximum score obtainable was nine. The mean score across the 22 studies was 5.18 ± 1.8 (range: 2 to 8). The lowest scoring domain was study design, where under a third of studies reported using representative samples.

3.1.3. Unadjusted Univariate Analysis

Across the 22 studies in this review, 26 unadjusted and nine adjusted effect sizes were reported, including seven studies that reported both adjusted and unadjusted results. Of the 26 unadjusted effect sizes (n = 20 studies) identified within the systematic review, half reached the generally accepted level of statistical significance (p<0.05). In those studies where a significant loneliness–SIB association was found, they tended to be European-based studies, to have larger than average sample size, and to include participants that were predominantly female. Six studies (seven analyses) explored the unadjusted relationship between loneliness and suicidal behaviour with only two of these studies finding a significant loneliness–suicidal behaviour association; these studies were also the only two studies to include self-harm without suicidal intent as an outcome variable (Nickel et al. 2006; Wichstrøm, 2009). However, it should be noted that Wichstrøm's (2009) measure of suicidal behaviour included both self-
harm and suicide attempt. By comparison, 11 of the 19 studies identified a significant unadjusted effect size between loneliness and suicidal ideation. This included all European studies which measured suicidal ideation, further trends were not identified.

3.1.4. Adjusted Univariate Analyses

Nine studies reported adjusted effect sizes, descriptions of the controlled variables are summarised in Appendix C. Four of these studies reported that the loneliness-SIB relationship remained significant after controlling for various demographic factors (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Bennardi et al., 2019; Junker et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2017). There was no discernible pattern of associations between control variables and the loneliness SIB relationship.

3.1.5. Age

Across all 22 studies there was evidence that the association between loneliness and SIB was age dependent. Participants ranged in age (at baseline) from 9 to 102 years old across the included studies (see Table 2). Studies exploring either younger (16 to 20 years, n=7; Groholt et al., 2006; Hom et al., 2009; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Junker et al., 2017; Lasgaard et al., 2011; McGraw et al., 2008; Wichstrøm, 2009) or older adults (≥58 years, n=5; Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Bonner and Rich, 1988; Joling et al., 2018; Pietrzak et al., 2017; Stolz et al., 2016) were more likely to identify loneliness as a significant predictor of SIB than studies with an average participant age either less than 14 years (Gallagher et al., 2014 T1-T2; Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013 T1-T3 and T2-T3) or between 23 to 54 years old on average (n=3; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2; Stein et al., 2017; Trakhtenbrot et al., 2016). Only two of the studies in this review directly explored age differences as a study aim and both used suicidal ideation as the outcome variable. Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra (2011) found that loneliness did not predict later suicidal ideation in those over 75 years of age but did in those aged 55-65 and 66-75 years. Bennardi et al. (2019) found that loneliness only predicted suicidal ideation in the participant group aged >60 years old in comparison to those aged under 60 years of age.

3.1.6. Gender

The collective distribution of men and women in the selected studies was slightly higher than that of the world population (The World Bank, 2019); mean (% female) 57.6 ± sd. 28.8. Only two studies focused on a single gender (Stein et al., 2017, male-only; Nickel et al., 2006 female-only).

Ten (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Bonner and Rich, 1988; Gallagher et al., 2014 T1-T3; Hom et al., 2019; Joling et al., 2018; Lasgaard et al., 2011; McGraw, 2008; Nickel et al., 2006; Stolz et al., 2016; Wichstrøm, 2009) of the 15 studies (20 analyses) that recruited predominantly female participants (>50% female participants) found loneliness to be a significant predictor of later SIB compared to three of the seven studies (eight analyses) that contained predominantly male participants.

3.1.7. Ethnicity

Nine studies reported the ethnicity of the study sample; eight studies included primarily white participants (Fulginiti et al., 2018; Gallagher et al. 2014; Hom et al. 2019; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Kleiman et al., 2017 Study 1; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2; Pietrzak et al., 2017; Schinka et al., 2013) while Salzinger (2007) recruited predominantly Hispanic participants (54%). Due to the variability of outcome measures and other participant demographics, no inferences could be made regarding the role of ethnicity in relation to the relationship between loneliness and SIB.

3.1.8. Geography

All studies were conducted in high income, Western countries, most commonly either in the USA (n = 9; Bonner and Rich, 1988;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Quality Assessment (QA) score</th>
<th>Sample demographics at baseline (n, % female, age)</th>
<th>Type of sample</th>
<th>Follow-up duration (average)</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Unadjusted</th>
<th>Adjusted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra (2011)</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>QA score = 6</td>
<td>Group 1: aged 50-65 years (n = 6,294)</td>
<td>Community sample</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>CES-D; ideation, 1 item (Radloff, 1977)</td>
<td>Ideation: Euro-D; 1 item (Prince et al., 1999) Behaviour: None</td>
<td>Euro-D (Prince et al., 1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bonner &amp; Rich (1988)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>QA: 4</td>
<td>Group 2: (n = 1,186) (54.5% female, age: 60 + years)</td>
<td>University students</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell et al., 1978)</td>
<td>Ideation: SSI (Beck, Kovacs &amp; Weissman, 1979) Behaviour: None</td>
<td>Self-Rating Depression Scale (Zung, 1963)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulginiti et al. (2018)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>QA: 7</td>
<td>N = 995 (59.9% Female; age: 11-18 years)</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al. 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: CDI (1 item) Behaviour: None</td>
<td>CDI (Kovacs and Preiss, 1992)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gallagher et al. (2014; T1-T3)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>QA: 8</td>
<td>N = 144 (72% female; Age: 13.52 ± 0.74)</td>
<td>Psychiatric inpatients either at risk to themselves or others</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al. 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: SQ (Reynolds, 1985) Behaviour: None</td>
<td>DISC-IV (Shaffer et al. 2000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gallagher et al. (2014; T2-T3)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>QA: 8</td>
<td>N = 144 (72% female; Age: 13.52 ± 0.74)</td>
<td>Psychiatric inpatients either at risk to themselves or others</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al. 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: SQ (Reynolds, 1985) Behaviour: None</td>
<td>DISC-IV (Shaffer et al. 2000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hom et al. (2019; T1-T3)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>QA: 6</td>
<td>N = 226 (89% female; 19.42 years)</td>
<td>University students</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell, Peplau and Cutrona, 1980)</td>
<td>Ideation: DSI-suicide subscale (Joiner et al. 2002) Behaviour: None</td>
<td>None</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Country (QA) Score (Max 9)</th>
<th>Sample Demographics at Baseline (n, % female, age)</th>
<th>Type of Sample</th>
<th>Follow-up Duration (Average)</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hom et al (2019; T2-T3) USA QA: 6 Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
<td>N = 226 (89% female; 19.42 years)</td>
<td>University students 74% White, 6.6% Black, 13.7% Latino 3.5% Asian</td>
<td>10 weeks</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell, Peplau and Cutrona, 1980)</td>
<td>Ideation: DSM-suicide subscale Behaviour: None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joiner and Rudd (1996) USA QA score = 6 Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
<td>N = 234 (43.1% female, 19.9 years)</td>
<td>University students Ethnicity: 62% Caucasian 17% Hispanic, 21% other</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell et al., 1978)</td>
<td>De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale (de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joling and O'Dwyer (2018) Netherlands QA score = 5 Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
<td>Group 1: 9 adults with depression and suicidal thoughts Group 2: 67 adults with depression and no suicidal thoughts Group 3: 116 with no depression or suicidal thoughts (70.3% female, 69.5 ± 10.4 years)</td>
<td>Live-in carers (adult community sample) Ethnicity NA</td>
<td>11.9 years</td>
<td>1 item from Young-HUNT 1</td>
<td>Ideation: None Behaviour: Hospital records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junker, Bjorngaard, and Bjerkeset (2017) Norway QA score = 5 Meta-analysis: No</td>
<td>N = 8, 946 no history of hospitalised self-harm (49.7% Female; 16 ± 1.08 years at follow-up)</td>
<td>Adolescent school sample Ethnicity NA</td>
<td>10.32 ± 6.45 days</td>
<td>EMA one-word affect label, 3 items</td>
<td>Ideation: EMA one-word affect label, 3 items Behaviour: None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1) Worldwide QA score = 2 Meta-analysis: No</td>
<td>N = 54 Attempted suicide within the past year (79.6% female, 23.24 ± 5.26 years)</td>
<td>Adult community sample Ethnicity: 81% North American, 19% European</td>
<td>21.3 ± 11.7 days</td>
<td>EMA one-word affect label</td>
<td>Ideation: EMA one-word affect label, 3 items Behaviour: None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) USA QA score = 2 Meta-analysis: No</td>
<td>N = 36 Severe suicide ideation or recent suicide attempt. (44.1% female, 47.74 ± 13.06 years)</td>
<td>Adult inpatient sample Ethnicity: 82% European decent, 5.9% Hispanic</td>
<td>10.32 ± 6.45 days</td>
<td>One-word EMA affect label</td>
<td>Ideation: EMA one-word affect label, 3 items Behaviour: None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langgaard et al. (2011) Denmark QA score = 7 Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
<td>N= 541 “ (60% female; 17.11 ± 1.12 years)</td>
<td>Adolescent High School sample Ethnicity NA</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell, 1996)</td>
<td>Ideation: SPS Suicide Ideation subscale (Call and Gill, 1989) Behaviour: None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGraw et al. (2008) Australia 204 “ (59.8% female; 17.4 ± 0.6 years)</td>
<td>Child community sample</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>UCLA-R (Russell, Peplau and Cutrona, 1980)</td>
<td>Ideation: 1 item; ‘I thought about hurting myself’ Behaviour: None</td>
<td>DASS-21 (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Quality Assessment (QA) score</th>
<th>Sample demographics at baseline (n, % female, age)</th>
<th>Type of sample</th>
<th>Follow-up duration (average)</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QA score = 2</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nickel et al. (2006) Germany, Austria and Poland</td>
<td>Group 1: N = 308 Patients with bulimia (purging type), no depression</td>
<td>Adult mixed samples (inpatient, outpatient and community)</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 82% Australian</td>
<td>Group 2: N = 425 Patients with depression, no eating disorder (female only; 28 ± 4 years)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>QoL, 1 item (Averbeck et al., 1997)</td>
<td>Ideation: None</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pietrzak et al. (2017) USA</td>
<td>N = 2,993</td>
<td>Adult veteran sample</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 78.5% Caucasian</td>
<td>No suicidal ideation (8% female, 62.4 ± 13.8 years)</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Short Loneliness Scale</td>
<td>Ideation: PHQ-9, 1-item (Spitzer et al., 1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1: N = 388 Patients with bulimia (purging type), no depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salzinger et al. (2007) USA</td>
<td>Adult mixed samples (inpatient, outpatient and community)</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 54% Hispanic, 38% black</td>
<td>Group 2: N = 425 Patients with depression, no eating disorder (female only; 28 ± 4 years)</td>
<td>6 ± 0.6 years</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al. 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: YRBS, 4-items.</td>
<td>Behaviour: YRBS, 2 items (Garrison et al., 1993)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group 1: N = 100 healthy, matched controls (35% female, 10.5 ± 0.9 years old)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shinka et al. (2013) USA</td>
<td>N = 832 (51.1% female, 9 years)</td>
<td>Child school sample</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 79% Caucasian, 10.5% African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al., 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: CBCL 1-item self-report (Achenbach, 1992); YSR 1 item, parent report from YSR (Achenbach, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QA score = 5</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schinka et al. (2013) USA</td>
<td>N = 832 (51.1% female, 9 years)</td>
<td>Child school sample</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 79% Caucasian, 10.5% African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al., 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: CBCL 1-item self-report (Achenbach, 1992); YSR 1 item, parent report from YSR (Achenbach, 1991)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schinka et al. (2013) USA</td>
<td>N = 832 (51.1% female, 11 years)</td>
<td>Child school sample</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 79% Caucasian, 10.5% African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al., 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: CBCL 1-item self-report (Achenbach, 1992); YSR 1 item, parent report from YSR (Achenbach, 1991)</td>
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<td>Schinka et al. (2013) USA</td>
<td>N = 832 (51.1% female, 11 years)</td>
<td>Child school sample</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 79% Caucasian, 10.5% African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>LSDQ (Asher et al., 1984)</td>
<td>Ideation: CBCL 1-item self-report (Achenbach, 1992); YSR 1 item, parent report from YSR (Achenbach, 1991)</td>
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<td>QA score = 5</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stein, Izhaky and Levi-Belz (2017) Israel</td>
<td>Group 1: N = 163, Ex-prisoner of Kippur War (Male only, 53.4 ± 4.4 years)</td>
<td>Adult ex-military</td>
<td>Ethnicity: 79% Caucasian, 10.5% African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell 1996)</td>
<td>Ideaion: SCI-90, 2 items (Dengatis and Cleary, 1977)</td>
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<td>QA score = 6</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stolz et al. (2016) Europe</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

(continued on next page)
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study/Country</th>
<th>Quality Assessment (QA) score</th>
<th>Sample demographics at baseline (n, % female, age)</th>
<th>Type of sample</th>
<th>Follow-up duration (average)</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trakhtenbrot et al. (2016) Israel</td>
<td>QA score = 7</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: No</td>
<td>Group 1: N = 53, history of medically serious suicide attempt (MSSA; 41.5% female, 37.6 ± 12.25 years)</td>
<td>Adult psychiatric inpatient sample Ethnicity NA</td>
<td>5.6 ± 2.53 years</td>
<td>UCLA (Russell 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wichstrøm (2009) Norway</td>
<td>QA score = 4</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: Yes</td>
<td>N = 3,906 (56% female, 16.5 ± 1.9 years)</td>
<td>School-based general population Ethnicity NA</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>UCLA; 5-items (Russell et al. 1990)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BDI = Beck Depression Inventory; BDI-Y = Beck Depression Inventory for Youth; CBCL = Child Behaviour Checklist; CDI = Children’s Depression Inventory; CES-D = Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; DASS-21 = Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale; DISC-IV = Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children; DSQ = Depressive Symptom Inventory; EMA = Ecological Momentary Assessment; EURO-D = Euro-depression scale; LSDQ = Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire; MIN = Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview; PHQ-9 = Patient Health Questionnaire-9; QoL = Quality of Life Questionnaire; SI = Suicide Behaviour; SI = Suicide ideation; SLC-5 = Hopkins Symptom Checklist; SCL-90 = Symptom Checklist-90; SIQ = Suicide Ideation Questionnaire; SPS = Suicide Probability Scale; SSI = Scale for Suicidal Ideation; T = Timepoint; UCLA = UCLA Loneliness Scale; UCLA-R = UCLA- Revised Scale; WHO CIDI = World Health Organisation Composite International Diagnostic Interview 3.0; YRBS = Youth Risk Behavior Survey; YSR = Youth Self-Report.  

* Sample size and demographic data recorded at follow-up.  
† Studies which share the same sample population from the NICHD study.  
†† Suicide behaviour data was excluded due to insufficient data, see Appendix A for details.
participants were recruited from and duration of the follow-up. Detection ofaloneliness-SIB relationship are summarised below. These

3.1.9. Other factors associated with the loneliness-SIB relationship

2017; Trakhtenbrot et al., 2016) or worldwide (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1–T3; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Lasgaard et al., 2011; Nickel et al., 2006; Wichstrom, 2009). Eight European studies identified a significant univariate relationship between loneliness and later suicidal ideation (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Benard et al., 2019; Joling et al., 2018; Lasgaard et al., 2011; Stolz et al., 2016; Wichstrom, 2009). Groholt et al. (2006) did not identify a significant loneliness-SIB association however this study also had the smallest sample size. USA-based results were more equivocal, with five of the nine studies reporting a significant loneliness–SIB association including Gallagher et al. (2014) who reported a significant association in one analysis (between Time 2 and Time 3) but not in another (between Time 1 and Time 3).

Of the remaining studies, those conducted in Israel (Stein et al., 2017; Trakhtenbrot et al., 2016) or worldwide (Kleiman et al., 2017 Study 1) found that loneliness was not a significant predictor of SIB, while a significant association between loneliness and later suicidal ideation was identified in the Australian study (McGraw et al., 2008).

3.1.11. Suicidal Behaviour Measures

Suicidal behaviour was measured in seven studies in this review (see table 2) with a total of six different measures. Five studies measured attempts to die by suicide (Groholt et al., 2006; Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013; Trakhtenbrot et al., 2016; Wichstrom, 2009), Schinka et al. (2013) was the only study to measure both suicide attempt and self-harm using one question while Wichstrom (2009) measured these separately with one question each. All studies used self-report measures with the exception of Junker et al. (2017) and Trakhtenbrot et al. (2016) who used hospital records. No studies included suicide death as an independent outcome measure. Of the seven studies to measure suicidal behaviour, three identified a significant association; this included the three studies where self-harm was included as an outcome variable (Junker et al., 2017; Nickel et al., 2006; Wichstrom, 2009). These three studies also had among the largest sample sizes and were based in Europe.

3.1.10. Suicidal Ideation Measures

As noted in section 3.1.1, 17 studies recorded suicidal ideation (see table 2). Seven studies employed a single-item measure taken from a larger psychometric assessment (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Fulginiti et al., 2018; Joling et al., 2018; 2008; Pietrzak et al., 2017; Schinka et al., 2013; Stein et al., 2017; Stolz et al., 2016) of which four identified loneliness as a significant predictor of later suicidal ideation. Studies which used a subscale from a wider measure (Bennard et al., 2019; Hom et al., 2019; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Lasgaard et al., 2011) consistently found an unadjusted univariate association between loneliness and SIB. Salzinger et al. (2007) measured suicidal ideation based on four items from a larger measure and found no significant association. Two studies (three results) using a bespoke questionnaire (Bonner and Rich, 1988; Gallagher et al., 2014, T2-T3), found a significant association whereas Gallagher et al. (2014, T1-T3) did not. The remaining three studies employed either a one- (McGraw et al., 2008) or three-item (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) non-validated suicidal ideation measure. Of these studies, only McGraw et al. (2008) identified loneliness to be a significant predictor of SIB. Overall, 12 of the 17 studies that measured suicidal ideation found loneliness to be a significant predictor, however this reduced to ten studies once some studies controlled for other factors (see section 3.1.4).

3.1.12. Loneliness Measures

Ten measures of loneliness were utilised across the studies included in this review. Six studies employed a single-item loneliness assessment; either an unvalidated one-word ecological monetary assessment (EMA; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2), an unvalidated single-item question (Junker et al., 2017; Stolz et al., 2016), or used a validated item from a wider psychometric measure (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra., 2011; Nickel et al., 2006). Only studies which used EMA (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) did not identify loneliness to significantly predict later SIB.

The four studies (9 results; Fulginiti et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2014, Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013) which utilised the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDQ), all recruited participants aged ≥18 years in the USA. Only Gallagher et al. (2014, T1–T2) found a significant association between baseline loneliness and later SIB.

Ten studies (11 results) used a form of the UCLA Loneliness scale of which eight results reported a significant association (Bennard et al., 2019; Bonner and Rich, 1988; Hom et al., 2019, T1–T3; Hom et al., 2019, T2–T3; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Lasgaard et al., 2011; McGraw, 2008; Wichstrom, 2009). Neither of the studies from Israel (based on psychiatric inpatient or veteran ex-prisoner of war populations), or from a Norwegian hospital (Groholt et al., 2006) found a significant loneliness-SIB association, while all studies which recruited from the general population in other countries did. The remaining two
studies used the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (Joling et al., 2018) or the Short Loneliness Scale (Pietrzak et al., 2017) and both identified loneliness as a significant predictor of suicidal ideation.

3.1.13. Sample Size
Sample sizes in the selected studies ranged from 36 (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) to 12,107 (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011) with the median sample size across the studies being 291 participants. Sample sizes ≥186 participants had a tendency be more associated with a significant loneliness-SIB association.

3.1.14. Generalisability of Sample Population
Six studies stated that their study sample was generalizable to the target population (Bennardi et al., 2019; Fulginiti et al., 2018; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Junker et al., 2017; Lasgaard et al., 2011; McGraw et al., 2008). However, these studies also reported significant participant attrition (>40%). A further four studies (Bonner and Rich, 1988; Pietrzak et al., 2017; Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013), either reported significant participant attrition (>40%) or did not comment on attrition in their study. Nickel et al. (2006) and Salzinger et al. (2007) reported that their samples did not reflect their target populations. As three quarters of the studies included in this review were not likely to be representative of their target populations, the findings from these papers may not be generalisable to their respective populations.

3.1.15. Recruitment site: Geography
11 of the 14 studies which recruited exclusively from the general population identified loneliness as a significant predictor of later suicidal ideation (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Bennardi et al., 2019; Bonner and Rich, 1988; Hom et al., 2019; Joiner and Rudd et al., 1996; Joling et al., 2018; Lasgaard et al., 2011; McGraw et al., 2008; Stolz et al., 2016) or behaviour (Junker et al., 2017; Wichstrom, 2009). Of the three general population-based studies which did not identify loneliness as a significant predictor, two were from the United States (Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013) and two contained sample sizes significantly below the median (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1; Salzinger et al., 2007).

Of the three studies (4 results) which recruited exclusively from psychiatric inpatient populations, only Gallagher et al. (2014, T2–T3) found that loneliness was a significant predictor of later SIB. Additionally, Nickel (2006) recruited a combination of inpatient, outpatient and community-based participants with a larger sample size and identified loneliness as a significant predictor of later suicidal behaviour. Pietrzak et al. (2017) and Stein et al. (2017) both recruited from veteran populations with contrasting results, however the heterogeneity of those studies made it impossible to infer the reasons for the conflicting findings.

3.1.16. Follow-Up Duration
Follow-up duration ranged from an average of seven days (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) to 12 years (Stein et al., 2017). Loneliness was commonly found to be a significant predictor of SIB between one month to five years after baseline loneliness assessment (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Bennardi et al., 2019; Bonner and Rich, 1988; Fulginiti et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2014; Hom et al., 2019; Joiner and Rudd, 1996; Joling et al., 2018; Lasgaard et al., 2011; McGraw, 2008; Nickel et al., 2006; Pietrzak et al., 2017; Stolz et al., 2016; Wichstrom, 2009). Of the 18 results within this timespan, only four results were not significant (Fulginiti et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2014, T1–T3; Schinka et al., 2013, T2–T3 ideation; Schinka et al., 2013, T2–T3 behaviour). Commonalities between these non-significant results included the recruitment of some of the youngest participants within this review and all studies used the LSASQ measure for loneliness. Only two of the studies with follow-ups of less than a month (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) yielded non-significant results, while only one study (Junker et al., 2017) of the six which measured beyond five years found a significant result. A distinguishing feature of Junker et al. (2017) was that they recruited significantly more participants than the other studies where follow-up was out-with the 1 month-5-year timeframe.

3.2. Meta-analysis
17 studies were included within the meta-analysis to explore the association between loneliness and later SIB. However as there were differences in data availability across the studies, the number of studies reported within each section of the meta-analysis varies.

The meta-analytic findings are described as follows:

i Identification of a loneliness-SIB relationship
ii Methodological quality
iii Moderating effects of socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender) on the loneliness-SIB relationship;
iv The role of depression as a mediator of the loneliness-SIB relationship;

3.2.1. Association between loneliness and SIB
Effect sizes for the overall study samples were entered into the meta-analysis irrespective of whether the outcome was ideation, self-harm or suicide attempts. To prevent over-representation of study samples, overall effect sizes were calculated for studies where loneliness was measured at more than one timepoint. This resulted in 17 studies with one effect size calculated for each study. With the exception of both Bennardi et al. (2019) who controlled for multiple demographics and health factors, and Junker et al. (2017) who controlled for age, all effect sizes were unadjusted. A random effects model illustrated that loneliness was a significant predictor of later SIB (r = 0.21, 95% CI: 0.14–0.28, z = 5.97, p < 0.001). Although there was significant statistical heterogeneity across the studies (I² = 97.5%, Cochran Q: 647.501, p < 0.001), there was no publication bias (Classic Fail-Safe N = 4473; z-value = 31.84998, p < 0.00001) as illustrated by the funnel plot in Fig. 3. Two papers (Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013) measured both suicidal ideation and behaviour as outcome variables. To avoid over-representation, these papers were excluded from the moderation analysis to explore any statistical difference between loneliness predicting suicidal ideation compared to behaviour. Moderation analysis revealed that the effect sizes for suicidal ideation and behaviour were significantly different (Q (1) = 181.566, p < 0.001) with fixed effects models showing that that loneliness was a stronger predictor of suicidal behaviour (r = 0.28, 95% CI: 0.23–0.3, p < 0.001, n = 6 studies) than suicidal ideation (r = 0.16, 95% CI: 0.15–0.17, p < 0.001, n = 13 studies).

3.2.2. Methodological quality
Moderation analysis indicated that the quality assessment score was not a statistically significant moderator of the loneliness–SIB relationship.

3.2.3. Moderating effect of age
13 studies provided sufficient data to explore whether age moderated the association between loneliness and SIB. Moderation analysis indicated that age did not statistically affect the loneliness and later SIB relationship. However, there was a dearth of studies covering mid-life (25 to 55 years; see Fig. 4).

3.2.4. Moderating effect of gender
All 17 studies were included in the moderation analysis to explore loneliness predicting SIB as a function of gender. Overall, fixed-effects moderation analysis indicated that in the majority female studies (n = 13 studies) loneliness accounted for 15.5% of the variance in later SIB (95% CI 0.14, 0.167, p < 0.001) whereas in majority male studies (n = 4) loneliness accounted for 34.4% of the SIB variance (95% CI
However, there was significant heterogeneity across both groups of studies ($Q_{15} = 314.884, p < 0.001$) and a mixed effects model showed there was no significant difference between the dichotomised groups (males vs females) or when gender was reported as a continuous variable (percentage of sample being female).

### 3.5. Depression as a mediator of loneliness and later SIB

16 studies were available to explore whether depression mediated the association between loneliness and later SIB (see Appendix C for a list of included studies). For studies with multiple results, a single correlation value was calculated between each combination pair of the three variables (loneliness, depression, SIB). Models were run from a correlation matrix and specified in MPlus 8.4 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017) using maximum likelihood estimation. Of the 16 papers that were included in the present analysis, the number of studies from which data were provided was as follows; associations between loneliness and depression ($N = 6$), depression and SIB ($N = 11$) and loneliness and SIB ($N = 16$). Based on this the following estimates were entered into the meta-analytic mediation model: (1) the average association between loneliness and depression ($r = .3617$), depression and SIB ($r = .3227$) and loneliness and SIB ($r = .1713$). The sample sizes ranged from 78 to 12,107, the median sample size was 387 and the average was 1862. Based on the average sample size the relationships between loneliness and depression ($\beta = 0.362, p < 0.001$), depression and SIB ($\beta = 0.300, p < 0.001$) and loneliness and SIB ($\beta = 0.063, p = .007$) were all significant as was the indirect effect from loneliness to SIB via depression ($\beta = 0.109, p < 0.0001$). Based on the median sample size the relationship between loneliness and depression and depression and SIB remained significant but loneliness and suicide ideation/behaviour was now non-significant. However, there was still a significant indirect effect from loneliness to SIB via depression ($\beta = 0.109, p < .0001$).

4. Discussion

This review aimed to synthesise findings from existing studies pertaining to whether loneliness predicted later SIB, and if so, whether socio-demographic factors were associated with this relationship or depression acted as a mediator. Of the 22 studies (28 results) that met review criteria, 14 studies (15 results) found that loneliness was a significant predictor of later SIB. There was also evidence that depression mediated the loneliness and later SIB relationship. Of all studies considered within the narrative component of the review, the loneliness-SIB association was more frequently observed in studies that were predominantly female in composition and age-dependent effects were evident.

The finding that loneliness predicted later SIB fits with several theories of the emergence of SIB. For example, the IMV model (O’Connor and Kirtley, 2018) argues that loneliness may act similarly to social isolation which is included in the model. If so, loneliness may act as a motivational phase factor; increasing the likelihood that entrapment, a key precursor of suicidal ideation, develops. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS; Van Orden et al., 2010) also suggests that loneliness in the form of thwarted belongingness is an important predictor of suicidal behaviour.

Loneliness was more strongly associated with SIB in the longer term compared to in the short-term. This may relate to the stability of loneliness, if present over long time being more pernicious, although this requires more detailed investigation. The moderation analysis revealed that loneliness was a stronger predictor of suicidal behaviour than of suicidal ideation. It is important to note though, that although suicide attempts were assessed in many of the studies, no study measured suicide death. Additionally, the potential lethality or suicidal intent of the suicidal acts were not investigated in the review. The meta-analysis also found that depression mediated the relationship between loneliness and later SIB. Further research is required to determine the
potential mechanisms through which loneliness may lead to depression.

Of the subsample of studies included in the moderation analysis exploring gender as a moderator of loneliness and SIB, no statistically significant difference was identified. However, when considering all studies included this review, a large majority of studies comprising of mainly female participants identified loneliness as a predictor of later SIB compared to male-dominant studies which remained at chance-level. However, it is important to note that the male participants were particularly under-represented in this review. Despite this, any potential gender differences may be affected by social stigma which is associated with self-reporting loneliness in male populations (Borys and Perlman, 1985; Nicolaisen and Thorsen, 2014), with those of Western countries reportedly being less accepting of men disclosing loneliness. Nicolaisen and Thorsen (2014) suggested that the De Jong Gierveld measures may be the only studies to detect gender differences due to their assessment of social and emotional loneliness separately, however only one study here used the scale and did not explore gender differences. Finally, all studies in the review reported gender on a binary scale, which may have affected the findings. Future research investigating the loneliness-SIB relationship may benefit from reporting the loneliness-SIB relationship in non-binary populations when capturing demographic information.

With regard to age, observations made in this review supported existing research (Victor and Yang, 2012) in that the loneliness-SIB relationship was more likely to be identified in those aged 16–20 or >58 years at baseline, thereby suggestive of a U-shaped trend. It may be that these two age groups coincide with when loneliness peaks across the lifespan as major transitions in social status occur: school graduate (e.g. student to young adult/labour market) and working adult to retiree. Nicolaisen and Thorsen (2014) argue that at these social transition timepoints, individuals spend more time focusing on their next role in society, thereby loosening ties with existing social supports (e.g. school friends, colleagues). As the transition progresses, new bonds are established and the maintenance of former social bonds become more difficult. If these new bonds are not formed, or social identity is not suitably adjusted, this may create an opportunity for loneliness to develop.

Despite this age-related trend, two studies (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Bennardi et al., 2019) noted a ‘drop-off’ in the loneliness-SIB relationship in adults aged approximately 65 years old. It could be argued that the transition from working adult to retiree had already happened for those aged >65 years old, where these populations had already adjusted to their new role in society, leading to this loss in the loneliness-SIB association. Both Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra (2011) and Bennardi et al. (2019) postulated this observation was perhaps due to loneliness being considered ‘an on-time event’ (Ayalon and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011) due to the limitations associated with older age (e.g. diminishing social life, the death of older and frailer friends and family, one’s own limited health and mobility) while trying to maintain a social life.

Commonalities across studies were also observed in terms of geography. Most of studies in this review were from Europe or from the United States, however virtually all of the European studies found a significant relationship between loneliness and later SIB while USA-

Fig. 4. Age as a continuous moderator between loneliness and later SIB.
Combined effect sizes for all studies with multiple outputs (i.e. Gallagher et al., 2014, Hom et al., 2019; Salzinger et al., 2007; Schinka et al., 2013)
based results were more variable. Research comparing the prevalence of loneliness across continents is limited, therefore there is little room for speculation regarding observed or hypothesised differences. Despite this, it is important to highlight that the European-based studies often had larger sample sizes than other countries in this review, as well as having more female-dominant sample populations. The findings here suggest the loneliness-SIB relationship is more detectable in studies with larger participant sample sizes (potential small effects). However, as females were over-represented in this review and the range of geographical locations of studies was limited, it is not yet possible to infer whether geography or gender moderate the relationship between loneliness and SIB. Lastly, while most studies used interviews or paper questionnaires to assess the key measures, two studies used EMA (Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 1; Kleiman et al., 2017, Study 2) and these were outliers in respect of trends observed (e.g. gender and follow-up duration). Thus, the mode of measurement may influence whether a loneliness–SIB relationship is detected. Therefore, future research is required to better understand whether EMA studies of loneliness are exploring something different from traditional study measurement scales.

4.1. Limitations

The considerable heterogeneity across the studies means that the aggregate findings discussed here should be interpreted with caution. Although this review finds evidence that loneliness may predict SIB, the definition of suicidal behaviour and its constituent terms (e.g. self-harm, suicide attempt) varied considerably between studies (as illustrated by Nickel et al., 2006 see Appendix A). Furthermore, no studies included suicide death as a distinct outcome measure. For example, although Groholt et al. (2006) excluded participants who were deceased at follow-up, their study did include two participants who died by suicide. Meanwhile Trakenbrot et al. (2016) included all participants who died by suicide within their suicide attempt group but did not make any comparisons between those who had died or survived. These limitations prevent this review from fully exploring the extent to which loneliness predicts SIB in relation to the full range of suicide attempt outcomes. However, this does illustrate that suicide death as an outcome variable is lacking in the extant literature.

With regard to predictors of a loneliness-SIB association, female-dominant studies typically had larger participant sample sizes and were usually based in Europe. Observationally, these three features (gender, locality and sample size) were consistently associated with identifying a significant relationship between loneliness and later SIB so it is not possible to distinguish which of these elements is the most influential. Meta-analysis did not reveal any of these features to influence the loneliness-later SIB association, however certain factors must be considered when interpreting these results. For example, male populations were under-represented in this review. Furthermore, studies with a participant baseline age of less than 18 years old accounted for half of the results considered here, and no study with a mean participant age between 24 and 55 provided sufficient data to be included in a meta-analysis investigating age as a moderator.

Finally, an exclusion criterion for this review was that studies must have been available in English, therefore not all published works on the topic of loneliness in relation to later SIB may have been included. This may be reflected by the absence of studies based in Asia or Africa, where papers on this topic may have been written in a non-English language. Additionally, all studies were from Western countries where self-reliance and independence (i.e. individualism) is the cultural norm. Research indicates that when compared to collectivism, individualism is a protective factor against loneliness (Lykes and Kemmelmeier, 2014), which would suggest that the loneliness-SIB relationship may be stronger in countries not addressed in this review. Due to the lack of collectivist countries included in this review, comparisons could not be made to identify whether these results were limited to individualistic populations or were internationally applicable.
4.2. Conclusion

In conclusion, loneliness was shown to predict future SIB in both the narrative review and meta-analysis. There was evidence of a loneliness and later SIB relationship among those aged 16 to 20 years, or over 58 years at baseline and in participant samples that were predominantly female. However, these differential relationships were not supported by moderation analyses in a subsample of the studies. Mediation analysis found that depression acted as a mediator of the loneliness to later SIB relationship. Finally, it was observed that loneliness was particularly predictive of later SIB in the short to medium term (up to five years). No prospective studies specifically measured suicide death as an outcome measure and future research would benefit from studying more collectivist cultures.

Conflict of Interest and Authorship Conformation Form

All authors have participated in conception and design, of the study article, revising drafts of the manuscript critically for important intellectual content and all authors approve of the final version. This manuscript has not been submitted to, nor is under review at, another journal or other publishing venue.

The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript

Contributors

HM, JE, RN, EF and RO all made valuable contributions to the development of the study aims. EF advised and guided all meta-analyses. RO and JE guided the conception of the study and development of the final manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jad.2020.05.004.

Appendix A. Clarification of included studies

1. Kleiman et al., 2017 contained two studies with separate methods and participants so was split for the purpose of this review and are referred to as: Kleiman et al., 2017, study 1) and Kleiman et al., 2017, study 2).

2. Nickel et al. (2006) refers to their outcome variable as ‘suicide attempts’, however the authors of this review believed the criteria set by Nickel et al. (2006) was more reflective of suicide behaviour in general and is therefore categorised as such in this review.

3. Pietrzak et al. (2017) is a letter to the editor instead of a peer-reviewed article. As this paper met all study criteria and was still published in a peer-reviewed journal, it was agreed between the review authors that this study would be included.

4. Bennardi et al. (2019) did not provide results on suicidal behaviour due to lack of data, therefore only the results regarding suicidal ideation are considered for this review.

5. Gallagher et al. (2014), Hom et al. (2019) and Schinka et al. (2013) all reported two effect sizes between loneliness and later SIB, where loneliness was measured at different timepoints (referred to as T1 and T2) and SIB measured at a single later timepoint (T3). These results are therefore referred to based on their timepoint of loneliness and SIB assessments and where appropriate, their outcome measure (ideation vs. behaviour). See Table 2 for further details.

Appendix B. Reasons for studies not included in the meta-analysis

- Two authors (Stein et al., 2017; Trakhtenbrot et al., 2016) did not respond to review authors request for further information.
- One author (McGraw et al., 2008) no longer had access to the raw data to be included in the meta-analysis.
- Two studies (Kleiman et al., 2017, study 1 and 2) used Ecological Monitory Assessment (EMA) which is unsuitable for the analyses of the current meta-analysis.

Appendix C. Studies included in the mediation analysis of loneliness and SIB as a function of depression

Ayalon and Shiovitz (2011); Bennardi (2019); Bonner and Rich (1988); Fulginiti et al. (2018); Gallagher et al. (2014); Groholt et al. (2006); Hom et al. (2019); Joiner and Rudd (1996); Lasgaard et al. (2011); McGraw et al. (2008); Nickel et al. (2006); Pietrzak et al. (2017); Salzinger et al. (2007); Schinka et al. (2013); Stolz et al. (2016); Wistrum (2009).

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