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The many faces of entrepreneurial loneliness

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Abstract

Loneliness, involving a complex set of feelings that occurs when social needs are not adequately met, has been described as a worldwide modern epidemic. Despite its infiltration into all occupations, loneliness may be especially problematic for those in extreme occupations, such as entrepreneurs, who deal with acute levels of uncertainty, resource constraints, responsibility, and time pressure. Disparate prior findings suggest that entrepreneurs may be especially prone to loneliness, less prone to loneliness, or that they may have unique coping mechanisms that allow them to effectively manage loneliness. This conflicting evidence suggests that we have an incomplete understanding of loneliness within entrepreneurship, specifically, and extreme occupational contexts more generally. Integrating literature on loneliness, well-being, and entrepreneurship, we conduct a qualitative, inductive study analyzing over 9000 Reddit posts drawn from online entrepreneurship communities where individuals seek and offer advice on how to address entrepreneurial loneliness. In applying appraisal theory to interpret our findings, we discover that whereas some entrepreneurs experience loneliness as threatening and harmful, others experience loneliness as positive or irrelevant, contrary to existing literature that points to loneliness as wholly negative. As such, we uncover several different processes through which entrepreneurs appraise and cope

with their loneliness, as well as occupationally unique outcomes for entrepreneurs if loneliness is not coped with effectively. Our findings and emergent theoretical model of the loneliness process in this extreme occupation have important implications for research and practice regarding loneliness, well-being, and the psychological and mental health of entrepreneurs.

KEYWORDS
affect, appraisal theory, emotion, entrepreneurship, loneliness, well-being

1 | INTRODUCTION

"And I know I'm not the only one. I've seen the stats about how entrepreneurs are more likely to experience mental health obstacles. But WHY do entrepreneurs experience more mental health obstacles? Is it how we're wired? Is it the pressure? And, are there common things that make it worse for business owners? Is it stressing about payroll? Is it the loneliness and isolation at times? Is it not wanting to let people down? The long hours? The "hustle" mentality? The internal pressure to be a high-performer? The lack of a traditional break or PTO that 9-5 jobs have?" (Reddit data)

"There are many, many challenges to being an entrepreneur. Time, money, space, you name it. You're creating something out of nothing. But every entrepreneur faces the same challenge when starting a business: a tremendous feeling of loneliness. It's very lonely to stick your neck out there, to take on the world, even if you have a cofounder. You're in the trenches. You're trying to do something that has never been done before." (Fineman, 2013)

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 global health pandemic and "social distancing" guidelines, top health officials (from the United States (Murthy, 2017); United Kingdom (GOV.UK, 2021); Japan (Ryall, 2021); and Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021)), the popular press (e.g., Agarwal, 2018; Askew, 2015), and scholars alike have deemed loneliness a "modern epidemic" in need of treatment (Killeen, 1998). Loneliness, defined as "a complex set of feelings that occurs when intimate and social needs are not adequately met" (Cacioppo et al., 2006: 1055), is characterized by the experience of unpleasant feelings arising from one's perception of having deficient social relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). From its origins in psychology, we know much about individual and personal drivers of loneliness, such as factors that predispose (e.g., personality) or precipitate (e.g., divorce) loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1979), as well as general consequences of loneliness, including poor physical and mental health (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Gumpert & Boyd, 1984; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). In addition to limiting cognitive functioning (Murthy, 2017) and job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), lonely individuals have a higher risk of serious health issues, such as depression (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), suicide (Walling, 2022), and early death (Burke, 2009; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Worland, 2015). As such, it is important to understand the experience of loneliness and interventions that may address it, as well as contextual factors not yet elucidated by prior literature, including elements of the work context, that may trigger, attenuate, or escalate feelings of loneliness.

Despite a long history in psychology research (Masi et al., 2011; Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Weiss, 1975), the study of loneliness in the work setting has only started receiving attention in the last decade (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Given

that a significant proportion of one's social relationships occur at work, it is surprising that we know so little about loneliness in the work context. Further, research that explores loneliness in the workplace (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Silard & Wright, 2020, 2022; Wright, 2005b, 2012, 2015; Wright & Silard, 2021) focuses primarily on the experiences of employees and leaders in traditional organizational structures. This is helpful for establishing a generalizable understanding of workplace loneliness; however, this understanding may not apply to non-traditional occupations. We suggest that exploring loneliness within specific extreme occupations has the potential to test the boundary conditions of general workplace theorizing, as well as to extend existing theory by exploring novel pathways and processes through which heterogeneity within workplace loneliness experiences may occur. Extreme cases are well suited for exploratory research or studies designed for theoretical discovery, as they are often able to disclose more about the phenomenon under study than typical cases (Chen, 2015; Seawright, 2016). Further, workplace loneliness scholars have acknowledged that "antecedents and boundaries of the experience can differ depending on the context, situation, and environment" (Wright & Silard, 2021: 1063). As such, a contextualized understanding of differences in occupation-specific triggers, responses, and outcomes, as well as the processes through which they are connected, enables us to build upon and extend existing research on workplace loneliness.

Entrepreneurship is one such extreme occupation in which loneliness has been highlighted by the popular press as a significant issue impacting not only the health and well-being of entrepreneurs but also the health of the ventures themselves (Agarwal, 2018; Askew, 2015; Fineman, 2013; Hennessey, 2016). As our opening quotes emphasize and we detail further below, entrepreneurship can be an incredibly lonely occupation, one that the existing view of loneliness at work does not adequately capture given the extreme nature and occupational realities of entrepreneurs. Given entrepreneurship's importance in stimulating economic innovation and providing jobs (Shane, 2008) as well as the prevalence of entrepreneurs worldwide (16% of the adult population; Entrepreneur Statistics, 2022), understanding loneliness within this extreme occupation is an important concern for researchers and practitioners alike.

Research on entrepreneurial well-being (Stephan, 2018; Wiklund et al., 2020), ill-being (Williamson et al., 2021), and negative emotions associated with entrepreneurship (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011), has suggested that entrepreneurship can be an especially lonely journey (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984; Hennessey, 2016) due to the extreme nature of this occupation. Entrepreneurs must simultaneously deal with multiple extremes (Stephan, 2018) including extremely high workload, hours worked, intensity of work, sense of responsibility, decision autonomy, time pressure, risk taking, job uncertainty, and resource constraints when operating in complex, uncertain, and dynamically changing environments (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Stephan, 2018; Williamson et al., 2021). Further, empirical research has found that entrepreneurs tend to work alone and lack traditional co-worker social support from supervisors or employees (Williamson et al., 2021). The confluence of these factors, rather than each individually, makes entrepreneurship a unique and extreme occupation that elicits strong emotional and cognitive reactions such as stress, anxiety, and loneliness (Lerman et al., 2021; Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011). Whereas some occupations share some of these individual elements, such as work intensity (e.g., computer coders), social isolation (e.g., principals; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010) or a sense of responsibility for others (e.g., CEOs in traditional organizational structures), the convergence of these factors in a socially isolated environment may make entrepreneurs especially vulnerable to the consequences of loneliness. The combination of these factors results in entrepreneurship being the leading occupation in number of hours worked (Williamson et al., 2021), where strong identification of entrepreneurs with their ventures (Mmbaga et al., 2020) leads to difficulty disengaging (Williamson et al., 2021) and weak boundaries between work and life outside of work, which may have deleterious effects on entrepreneurs' ability to relax, recover, and connect with others (Williamson et al., 2021); all factors that otherwise could help them cope with loneliness.

Currently, however, there is little consensus as to whether and how entrepreneurs experience loneliness, as the few studies that look at the entrepreneurial context have largely disparate findings. For example, entrepreneurs' high levels of both job demands and job control (Stephan & Roesler, 2010) have been argued as both the source of loneliness (because others cannot possibly understand; Akande, 1994) and the cure for loneliness (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Shepherd et al., 2020). These contradictory perspectives make it evident that our understanding of entrepreneurial loneliness and the link between loneliness, autonomy, and coping is opaque, yet important. We seek to understand the experience of loneliness in the entrepreneurial occupation in order to offer novel theoretical insights to the literature

on loneliness, specifically in identifying the boundary conditions of existing knowledge, as well as in building new theory regarding the processes through which individuals interpret and cope with loneliness in extreme occupations, and with what effects.

In order to address the gaps and inconsistencies in the loneliness literature and examine entrepreneurial loneliness in depth, we conducted an inductive exploratory study. Inductive research is typically used for generating novel theorizing, especially concerning processes or when dealing with socially constructed realities of individuals (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 1998). Given our interest in the processes through which individuals experience loneliness, and the little existing theorizing related to loneliness in extreme occupational contexts, our exploratory inductive approach is appropriate. We analyzed 9273 posts within online Reddit communities of entrepreneurs to examine how entrepreneurs talk about the loneliness they experience, when and why it occurs, its outcomes, and what suggestions they offer one another for coping with loneliness. Such online communities are considered a "safe space" to discuss concerns and offer suggestions because individuals are anonymous and untraceable (Meurer et al., 2022; Schou et al., 2022) making it an ideal context for our study.

We make several contributions with this work. First, we contribute to the growing literature focused on loneliness and how to combat it (e.g., Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Wright & Silard, 2021). Despite extensive work that has been done to understand population-level and demographically based variations in experiences of loneliness (e.g., Barreto et al., 2021) with resulting recommendations for individual (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984; Perlman & Peplau, 1982) and community (Fong et al., 2021) efforts to address it, research addressing occupational factors associated with loneliness is still nascent. This research has primarily focused on school principals and teachers (Allison, 1997; Cubitt & Burt, 2002; Dussault & Barnett, 1996; Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997; Lam & Lau, 2012) or individuals (employees and leaders) within established corporations (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2021; Murthy, 2017; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Silard & Wright, 2020, 2022; Wright, 2005a, 2005b, 2012, 2015; Wright & Silard, 2021), such that it does not adequately capture the extreme workplace context and occupational realities of entrepreneurs (Stephan, 2018; Williamson et al., 2021). The theoretical model we build through our inductive qualitative approach may, therefore, not only extend our current understanding of occupational loneliness but may also have implications for other extreme occupations.

Second, our study contributes to the growing literature on entrepreneurial well-being (e.g., Stephan et al., 2022) and mental health (e.g., Wiklund et al., 2020) by studying loneliness and its specific impacts on well-being (or lack thereof). Given that the consequences of loneliness include low job commitment (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), severe health problems (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984), and even death (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), its potential influence on both the entrepreneur and their venture could be severe, and thus is worthy of study. Exploring loneliness adds to a growing trend of unpacking the influence of illnesses and pathologies, such as stress (Cardon & Patel, 2015), burnout (Fernet et al., 2016), depression (Hessels et al., 2018), and mental disorders (Wiklund et al., 2020), on entrepreneurs. In this study, we specifically examine how entrepreneurs experience the presumed overwhelming negative experience of loneliness (Wright & Silard, 2021), and how they cope with it in order to maintain (or at least not completely diminish) their well-being.

Third, our work has practical implications to help coach and guide entrepreneurs concerning how to combat this common yet potentially debilitating aspect of their work and life (Williamson et al., 2021). Our findings concerning coping mechanisms that entrepreneurs have found effective can be incorporated into entrepreneurship education programs to help current and future entrepreneurs anticipate the loneliness experience and successfully mitigate its detrimental effects. These findings may also yield insights for policy makers in providing better counseling and mental health treatment, as well as opportunities for social connection that might diminish the incidence of loneliness or its effects for entrepreneurs as well as those in other extreme occupations. We expand on these practical implications in the discussion section below.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As a subjective construct, loneliness is a self-perceived relational deficiency (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Perlman & Peplau, 1982), that occurs when individuals feel they are deprived of desired interpersonal relationships and social interactions (Wright, 2015; Wright & Silard, 2021). Prior research has uncovered several causes and consequences of loneliness, as well as recommended interventions to combat loneliness. We review these briefly to serve as a set of "orienting points" that helped us develop our research questions, methodology, and direction for exploratory analysis, as is typical in inductive studies such as ours (Nag et al., 2007).

2.1 | Causes and consequences of loneliness

Factors that contribute to loneliness range from individual characteristics to influences outside the control of the individual (Wright, 2015). For example, individual traits, such as aversion to social risk-taking, low self-esteem, shyness, and physical attractiveness may predispose individuals to loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Demographic and contextual factors also influence loneliness, as older individuals (Newall et al., 2009), diverse individuals (those who feel like an outcast within a social group), and socially isolated individuals are more likely to experience loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2014; Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Further, those who experience stressful or demanding work may be especially at risk for loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2014), such as those in extreme occupations, including entrepreneurs.

Emerging research and popular press on loneliness suggest that it is critical to better understand the loneliness phenomenon because of its far reaching and significant psychological and physiological consequences. Loneliness often co-exists with poor health indicators such as insomnia, being physically inactive, and smoking (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984; Hawkley et al., 2009; Theeke, 2010), high blood pressure, increased stress hormones, and decreased immune functioning (Burke, 2009; Cacioppo et al., 2014; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010), as well as back pain, headaches, and chest pain (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984). Additionally, lonely individuals may experience anxiety, depression (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), cognitive decline (Burke, 2009; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), and burnout (Fernet et al., 2016). Lonely persons are also susceptible to interpersonal maladjustment and social withdrawal (Russo, 2018), making their social isolation more likely and more intense over time. In a meta-analysis, loneliness was found to be a greater health risk than smoking, obesity, exercise, or nutrition, with loneliness being associated with a 26% increased likelihood of death (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Further, loneliness is on the rise, with researchers predicting a loneliness "epidemic" by 2030 (Linehan et al., 2014). Clearly, loneliness is a prevalent and important public health concern (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) for all individuals, regardless of their work environment.

In addition to these individual mental and physical health outcomes, loneliness can also have deleterious implications for organizations. Loneliness has been associated with lower job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), reduced task performance at work, diminished creativity, and impaired executive functioning involving decision making and logical reasoning (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Murthy, 2017). Venture performance may also be impacted, given that a previous study found that companies run by "lonely" managers were outperformed by their "non-lonely" peers (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984). Loneliness is thus not just an issue for individuals, but also for organizations and for society.

2.2 | Alleviating loneliness

The literature on loneliness has suggested several intervention strategies that may help alleviate loneliness and its consequences, such as directly improving one's social skills, generating greater social support, creating more opportunities for social connection, and diminishing maladaptive social cognition (Masi et al., 2011). Alternatively, strategies can involve altering one's desired level of social contact, actual level of social contact, or the perceived importance

of the gap between desired and actual social contact (Peplau & Perlman, 1979; Wright & Silard, 2021). The longevity and effectiveness of these approaches has been debated, with findings showing that some coping mechanisms actually contribute to greater levels of loneliness and despair (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004). Additionally, the opportunity to enact many of these coping behaviors may be severely limited or enabled depending on one's occupational context. As such, we suggest that coping with loneliness may be different in extreme occupations such as entrepreneurship compared to traditional employment.

2.3 | Loneliness specific to the entrepreneurial occupation

Practical evidence indicates that loneliness is one of the biggest challenges entrepreneurs faces (Agarwal, 2018); however, empirical results are mixed. Some prior studies have found that entrepreneurs experience high levels of loneliness and lack interpersonal support (Grant & Ferris, 2012), with serious adverse effects on their levels of stress (Akande, 1994), burnout (Fernet et al., 2016), and overall venture health (Gumpert & Boyd, 1984). However, contradictory evidence proposes that entrepreneurs are better able to cope with loneliness and avoid its negative impacts due to occupational assets such as autonomy and the ability to shape one's work environment (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Shepherd et al., 2020). These discrepant findings and a lack of contemporary evidence concerning the experience of loneliness for entrepreneurs suggest the need for an exploratory, inductive study of entrepreneurs to address three research questions: (1) what is the experience of loneliness like for entrepreneurs, including factors that are specific to entrepreneurship as an extreme occupation?; (2) what are the effects of loneliness on entrepreneurs and their businesses?; and (3) how do entrepreneurs cope with the loneliness they experience, in order to mitigate its negative effects? In short, we sought to better understand what has been called the "peculiar" experience of loneliness for entrepreneurs (Askew, 2015) in order to help resolve the mixed findings from prior research, account for the cognitive processes through which individuals interpret loneliness, and expand on existing knowledge concerning loneliness at work by exploring it in an extreme occupation.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Sample and study design

We conducted our study using data from Reddit, an online community-based forum, consistent with prior computational inductive theorizing about coping in this journal (Sajjadiani et al., 2022), as well as work that focuses on communities of entrepreneurs (Meurer et al., 2022; Schou et al., 2022; Williamson et al., 2022). Social media platforms are a commonly used data source for psychology researchers because they reflect how millions of individuals use language to express themselves, representing "tremendous value for psychologists to better understand and predict human behavior" given that they "create a stage for users to communicate who they are, what they do, who they interact with, what they dream about, how they feel about the current state of the world, and more" (Lawson & Matz, 2022 p.47; See Appendix A for more detail). Such platforms are particularly useful for topics involving sensitive emotions that can be captured unsolicited, creating greater ecological validity (Lawson & Matz, 2022) and authenticity due to posters' anonymity (Amaya et al., 2021). The following quotes from our own dataset reflect entrepreneurs' use of Reddit to disclose sensitive feelings about their loneliness:

> "Don't delete this, people need to see it… when we as a community only discuss the easy stuff, like the big wins, we're not painting an accurate picture. This is part of the experience and it belongs."

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TABLE 1 Reddit sub-communities included in dataset.

Sub-reddit	Members	MatchingTop-level Posts	Replies
r/Entrepreneur	1,398,424	226	7130
r/EntrepreneurRideAlong	213,337	43	614
r/Entrepreneurship	40,161	12	40
r/Entrepreneurs	19,090	3	7
r/Entrepreneurbook	139	0	0
r/EntrepreneurPH	2593	0	0
r/EntrepreneurConnect	2059	0	0
r/EntrepreneurCanada	497	0	0
r/EntrepreneurJerk	20	0	0
r/startup	77,687	11	83
r/startups	1,017,551	49	1055
Total	2,771,558	344	8929

Note: We searched these subreddits for posts where the Title or the Body of the top-level post included keywords related to the two terms "lonely" and "isolate." While the specific keywords used for the search were ["lonely," "isolate"], these terms are automatically expanded by reddit's default search stemming. This means that these terms also cover the words lone, loneliness, isolated, isolation, and isolating.

Once a top-level post in the selected subreddits was identified to contain one of the search terms, that post along with all comments/replies to it were downloaded. The only filter applied to Replies was to skip ones marked as [deleted] by the user or [removed] by the moderator, as well as to skip any replies that contained no text (generally, images, or emoji replies).

In total, 9273 entries were coded, comprising of 344 original posts and 8929 responses.

> "It really does feel exceptionally lonely and you're reminded of it even more when you try to explain yourself to others who don't share your entrepreneurial mindset. That's one of the major reasons I jumped on Reddit and these sub-reddits in particular. A lot of people on here share similar experiences and woes, which makes it a good place to not only feel 'heard' but also to feel empathized with."

We chose the Reddit platform to collect data because it is designed to enable discussion among individuals by organizing posts and comments into conversations within subreddits, or streams, focused on specific interests. Entrepreneurs use of Reddit is extensive, given that at the time of our study, the Subreddit "Entrepreneur" had 1.7 million subscribers and averaged 700 comments daily (*R/Entrepreneur Subreddit Stats (Entrepreneur)*, as of December, 2022). Within such communities, individuals post content which others respond to, encouraging online dialogue around specific topics. We searched the subreddits "Entrepreneur" and "Startup," which collectively represented 2.7 million subscribers, for the word "entrepreneur," "startup" or their variants in the community's name (see Table 1 for the specific communities and their membership), and then searched for all original posts with the word "lonely" or "isolation" and their variants[1] in the title or text of the original post. Because we did not expect the loneliness of entrepreneurs to vary based on specific time periods or geography, we pulled all active posts that met these criteria as of February 15, 2022 (encompassing 12 years of active posts). We then reviewed each original post to ensure the content was focused on the loneliness of the entrepreneur (two authors independently did this review with 96% agreement; disagreements were discussed and resolved). Of the 743 original posts identified, 399 were removed because they did not focus on loneliness of entrepreneurs (e.g., isolation referred to a chemical process). For the 344 remaining posts, we retrieved all comments in the thread, which resulted in 9273 comments, including the original posts.

3.2 | Coding and analytic process

Our analysis builds on the tenets of inductive theory building (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 1998; O'Kane et al., 2021), through the employment of several analysis techniques (uncovering patterns, building codebooks, reflecting on theoretical templates, etc.) to ensure trustworthiness in our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pratt et al., 2022). Our approach is best described as "methodological bricolage" (Pratt et al., 2022), which involves combining multiple analytical processes and tools to create a tailor-made approach to inductive analysis. We engaged in "bottom up" coding, in which themes emerged from the data, through line-by-line coding of each of the 9273 Reddit comments and organizing codes into themes through three stages of analysis, detailed below. As is common in inductive research taking an interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), especially in qualitative psychology research (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we relied heavily on thematic analysis. This approach involves systematically coding an entire dataset, collating codes into potential themes, and reviewing, revising, and defining each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once we retrieved all comments pertinent to our topic, we iterated among coding, exploring, and verifying our data (Saldana, 2015). We integrated techniques from the Gioia approach (Gioia et al., 2013) to grounded theory in order to visualize our analysis process, using a data structure to communicate our systematic coding.

In Stage 1, we engaged in line-by-line open coding of all the comments by applying informant-centric codes to direct statements and using "in vivo" (in the commenter's own language) as well as our own descriptive codes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We allowed our codes to emerge from the analysis instead of developing them a priori (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). To ensure coding agreement between the two coders, both co-authors initially simultaneously coded over 10% of the data (N = 964 comments).

In Stage 2, we engaged in axial coding, drawing connections between codes and organizing codes into emergent, higher-order themes which we discussed and refined (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). We did so by comparing our initial codes for patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, we noticed that commenters recommended lonely entrepreneurs "go to the gym," or "get a hobby," which we organized into second-order theme of "engaging in activities" to cope. Themes were then reviewed, reconciled, and clarified, resulting in the creation of a detailed codebook that included each code, its definition, exemplar quotes, and clarification of distinctions between codes. Using the codebook and themes identified in the previous step, we re-coded the first 964 comments to ensure our coding scheme was consistent. Any discrepancies in coding were identified using the coder agreement feature of QDA Miner and discussed, enabling us to refine codes and definitions to ensure agreement and consistent use. Each co-author coded roughly 4000 additional comments, engaging in constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with the codebook and existing themes, revising themes, and applying additional codes as they emerged. New codes were discussed between co-authors, added to the codebook, and organized thematically. Our analysis reflects an iterative rather than linear approach by moving between data and analysis (Levitt et al., 2018).

In Stage 3, once the full sample of 9273 comments was coded and organized into second-order, axial themes, we then worked to condense those themes into overarching dimensions representing theoretical explanations for the themes we uncovered. In this stage we iterated back and forth between our data and the literature, exploring multiple theoretical templates (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), to "try on" theoretical frameworks to see how they fit with our data and emergent themes. For example, in understanding how entrepreneurs explain or describe their loneliness experiences, we explored control and attribution theories, ultimately finding fit between our data and appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lerman et al., 2020). Similarly, we explored various theories regarding coping styles (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), and ultimately returned to appraisal theory and its explanation of how primary and secondary appraisals incorporate both (1) what people think about something in their environment (here, loneliness) and (2) what they intend to do (or have done) about it. We aggregated emergent themes within our data into dimensions, such as classifying "making connections" and "engaging in activities" as "secondary appraisals." Throughout this process we created and refined multiple iterations of the theory we present here. This coding process resulted in 36 descriptive first order codes organized into 14 emergent themes and aggregated into five overarching dimensions. Figure 1 depicts the data structure (Gioia et al., 2013) revealed through our coding process.

Stage I: Open coding (descriptive, not in vivo codes)	Stage II: Axial coding (organizing codes into themes)	Stage III: Aggregate Dimensions (organizing themes into dimensions)
Burden of responsibility	Unique Occupational Factors	Factors Associated with Entrepreneurial Loneliness
Lack of co-worker support		
Social maladaptation		
Lack of time	Lack of Resources	
Need to grind		
Social isolation	Isolation	
Cognitive isolation		
Physical isolation		
Not lonely	Irrelevant	Primary Appraisals of Loneliness
Denial of loneliness		
Loneliness is a good thing	Benign Positive	
Loneliness is stressful	Stressful	
Threat to future well-being		
Impact on physical health	Outcomes Consistent with Loneliness Literature	Outcomes of Loneliness
Impact on mental health		
Impact on productivity/performance		
Occupational exit	Unique Outcomes of Stressful Appraisals of Loneliness for Entrepreneurs	
Venture failure		
Make/deepen like-minded connections	Making Connections	Problem-focused secondary appraisals
Find a mentor, co-founder, or employees		
Working in co-working /shared spaces		
Make/deepen non-work connections (e.g., friends/ family outside of work)		
Travel/sports/hobbies/classes to meet people	Engaging in Activities	
Get a side-hustle or job		
Set boundaries	Changing Mindset	
Accept responsibility for loneliness		
Get a pet	Making Connections	Emotion-focused secondary appraisals
Find status peers/buy friends or partners		
Engage in digital connections		
Travel/sports/hobbies/classes to feel better	Engaging in Activities	
Stay busy/work harder		
Use alcohol/drugs to escape		
Take care of physical health		
Take care of mental health		
Change attitude/reframe negative emotions	Changing Mindset	
Regulate emotions by focusing on the future and delaying gratification		

FIGURE 1 Data structure.

During this process, we used several analytic techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to query the data including memoing, diagramming, use of questions (basic questions, sensitizing questions, temporal questions, spatial questions, etc.), comparisons, and dialogue between co-authors. Our approach was highly iterative involving several analytic moves (Pratt et al., 2022), which are displayed in Figure D1 in Appendix D. By coding the entire corpus of Reddit data on entrepreneurial loneliness, we ensured data adequacy (Levitt et al., 2018), rather than relying on theoretical saturation to guide the termination of our data collection. Importantly, inductive research does not aim for statistical generalization to populations (e.g., all entrepreneurs) as would be possible with quantitative data collections with random samples, but instead strives for theoretical generalization, such that the general processes and mechanisms uncovered can be used to advance our understanding of existing theories (Yin, 2012), here specifically theories related to loneliness.

Throughout all steps of our coding, thematic analysis, and iterating between the data and existing literatures, we used many of the computer aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) techniques described by O'Kane et al. (2021), leveraging Provalis software (specifically, QDA Miner and Wordstat), in order to better understand our rich textual
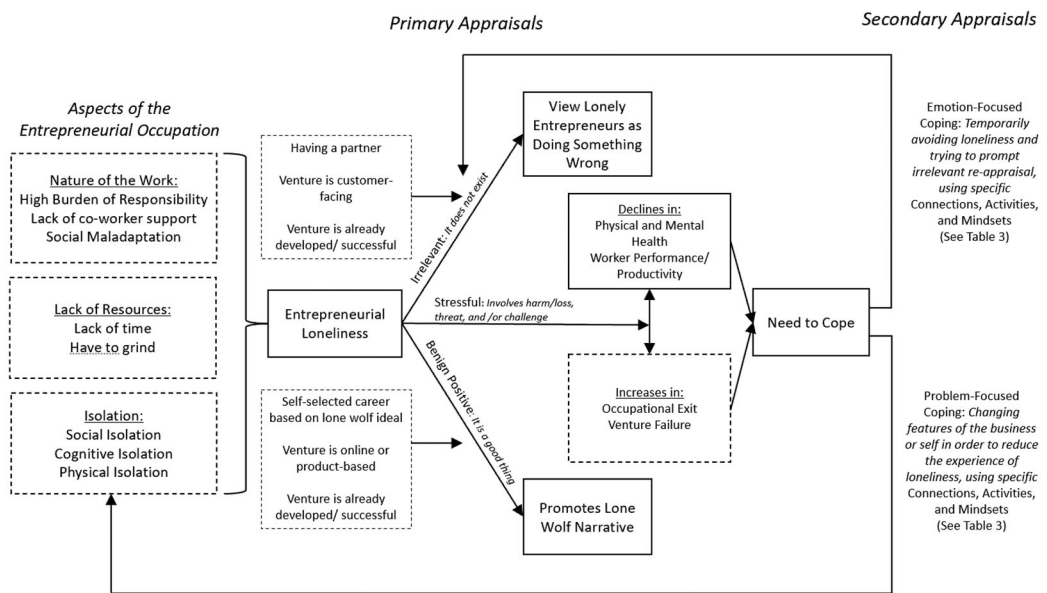
Dashed boxes represent our findings of novel aspects of loneliness for the extreme occupation of entrepreneurs

FIGURE 2 Pathways of entrepreneurial loneliness. Dashed boxes represent our findings of novel aspects of loneliness for the extreme occupation of entrepreneurs.

data, including text retrieval of various codes and categories, examining co-occurrence frequencies, exploring 2D and 3D plots of codes and categories, and topic extraction. These tools enabled us to uncover patterns in the data, build our codebook within the software, and make comparisons across codes in our dataset of over 9000 comments. CAQ-DAS software not only helps to make the qualitative analysis process less messy and time-consuming, but also adds transparency to the process (O'Kane et al., 2021).

Throughout our analysis, we engaged several common validity procedures in order to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the language of Creswell and Miller (2000), we leveraged five validity procedures: member checking, disconfirming evidence or negative cases, thick description, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity. See Appendix B for a detailed explanation of these procedures. Additionally, we used tables to construct a chain of evidence (Yin, 2012) that can be used to support our findings (See Tables C1–C5 in Appendix C).

4 | FINDINGS

Our data analysis process resulted in the construction of a conceptual model outlining the experience of entrepreneurial loneliness (see Figure 2), which demonstrates the complex and diverse processes through which entrepreneurs may feel, think about, and respond to loneliness. We found that appraisal theory provided explanatory power for the experience of entrepreneurial loneliness; by applying this theory to our data we are able to illuminate expected and unexpected processes through which loneliness is experienced by entrepreneurs, including some that contradict widely accepted beliefs that loneliness is always negative (Cacioppo et al., 2006). In our findings below, we discuss aspects of the loneliness process that are unique to the occupation of entrepreneurship, which we denote with dashed lines in Figure 2.

Appraisal theory stems from the highly influential transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lerman et al., 2020), which explains how individuals cognitively evaluate stressors using both primary and secondary

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appraisals. Primary appraisals concern how important or significant a potential stressor is for well-being (including *stressful*, *benign/positive*, and *irrelevant*), whereas secondary appraisals focus on what can be done about the stressor, manifesting in specific ways of coping, involving "changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: p. 141). Coping mechanisms involved in secondary appraisals typically reflect either *problem-focused coping*, where individuals attempt to resolve the root cause of the problem, or *emotion-focused coping*, where individuals either avoid the problem or address its symptoms temporarily without resolving the source of the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

We organize our findings to first focus on novel occupational factors inherent in entrepreneurship that informants related to their loneliness experience (including unique occupational factors, lack of resources, and different types of isolation). Second, we articulate three primary appraisals for loneliness seen in our data, including benign-positive, irrelevant, and stressful (including harm/loss, threat, and challenge). Due to the surprising prominence of two non-stressful primary appraisals, we further explore factors associated with such appraisals. Third, we discuss the process by which stressful primary appraisals are associated with secondary appraisals, specifically, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping responses unique to the entrepreneurial context. We found that both problem and emotion focused coping responses involved making connections, engaging in activities, and/or changing one's mindset, however, the specific coping activities and effectiveness of coping varied based upon whether problem or emotion focused coping was engaged. We also identified different paths through which coping fed back into the experience of loneliness and/or its primary appraisal. Below, we ground our findings in evidence through the use of quotes from our Reddit data. In order to promote methodological integrity and show fidelity to our data (Levitt et al., 2018), we include in-text quotes that facilitate the point we intend to make in the words of the Reddit entrepreneurs (power quotes), as well as in-table quotes (see Appendix C) to validate the relevance of such points (proof quotes; Pratt, 2008).

4.1 | Occupational factors related to entrepreneurial loneliness

Within our data, individuals talked about their loneliness in relation to unique occupational factors of entrepreneurship, revealing the entrepreneurial occupation, rather than forces outside of work, as the primary trigger for feelings of loneliness (see Table C1 in Appendix C for representative quotes). We found that unique occupational factors (e.g., lack of co-worker support), lack of resources (primarily time; Baron, 1998), and isolation (social, cognitive, and physical) inherent in entrepreneurship drove entrepreneurs' feelings of loneliness.

4.1.1 | Unique occupational factors

Informants were clear in explaining that the entrepreneurial occupation is unique from other forms of employment. For example, entrepreneurs elaborated on their differentness in posts such as the following:

> "The modern world is lonely, and the entrepreneurial life is even lonelier."

> "Loneliness is ONE of the things that DOES happen to folks like us, simply because we are so … "driven" to reach our goals and make our dreams come true."

> "The entrepreneurial journey is lonesome. It also takes a massive toll on personal relationships. It is great to have peers, but in the end, plan on taking this trip alone."

The unique occupational factors driving feelings of loneliness primarily consisted of the exceptional burden of responsibility entrepreneurs face, their lack of co-worker support, and social maladaptation, or biased perceptions of social interactions, due to the demands of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs in our study felt a substantial burden of responsibility, which they perceived as unique to entrepreneurship. This burden was often discussed in relation to power dynamics or power distance, in that entrepreneurs felt responsible for the well-being of their business and their employees, such that they could not fully connect with individuals inside or outside their business. They also experienced high pressure of decision-making responsibility (Wright, 2012) that could not be shared with others, leaving them vulnerable to feelings of loneliness. The following quote reflects this burden of responsibility entrepreneurs carry:

> "It doesn't have anything to do with your social life. It's that you can't confide in others at your company what problems you're experiencing. You are the leader. You must show confidence and appear to know what you're doing even if you are just as clueless as everyone else what to do next. You can't complain down the chain. Everyone looks to you for answers and leadership and sometimes it feels like you're just winging it. There's not that many people who have the same experiences as you so it's sometimes hard to find others to talk about these issues with. You can have a great social life but still feel rather isolated at work just because there's nobody else at your same level."

Entrepreneurs also acknowledged that many of the support systems found in typical employment were not available to them, such as support from co-workers, mental health resources, or a stable paycheck. The following quotes outline this deficiency as compared to traditional employment:

> "Entrepreneurs are less likely to have available access to mental health support networks such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) or evidence-based mental health training and courses compared to employees."

> "People I know don't understand that when you're an entrepreneur there is no 'water cooler', so to speak. You have to put in extra effort to make a circle of friends and colleagues, because there's no natural way to meet them at 'work'."

Further, prior research on loneliness has uncovered that lonely individuals may develop maladaptive social cognitions, which are biased perceptions of social interactions that make it more difficult to connect with others, reinforcing one's loneliness (Masi et al., 2011). Maladaptive social cognition can result in irrational beliefs that others are a threat within social interactions (Young, 1982). In our data, we found that entrepreneurship creates a unique social maladaptation wherein engaging in entrepreneurship sometimes introduced biased cognitions, such that entrepreneurs saw engaging in social interactions as a threat to their productivity, leading them to find little value in social interactions and subsequently withdraw from them. The following quotes illustrate this maladapted mindset and resulting self-isolation:

> "I just noticed that I don't care anymore about people, I just view them as a waste of time for example if I talk to my friend that's time I could have spending working."

> "Haven't had a meaningful long term relationship for over 6 years mainly due to working on my business and thinking it as a 'distraction'."

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4.1.2 | Lack of resources

A second set of factors driving feelings of loneliness for entrepreneurs stemmed from a lack of resources, primarily the lack of time entrepreneurs have for connections outside of their work. For example, one entrepreneur on Reddit expressed his experience that "*my life consists of constant fights with friends, family, my GF because I don't have time for them.*" Many of the entrepreneurs in our dataset expressed that this lack of time for things outside the business occurs because they feel they always have to "grind" or "hustle." The need to "grind" refers to putting in significant amounts of hard work, discipline, perseverance, and grit in order to be successful (Kuratko et al., 2023), often in a tedious or laborious manner (Witt, 2003), which leaves individuals short of temporal or cognitive resources to devote to other tasks. Going beyond the need to grind, entrepreneurial hustle has been described as "an entrepreneur's urgent, unorthodox actions that are intended to be useful in addressing immediate challenges and opportunities under conditions of uncertainty" (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 1002). Interestingly, whereas other research talks about hustle as an outcome of stress and a way of dealing with challenges involved in starting a business (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Lerman et al., 2022), our informants instead talked about the need to hustle and grind as an unavoidable form of pressure which caused them greater stress, left them with less time for family and friends, and greater loneliness. The following quotes illustrate this pressure and "have to grind mentality," which resulted in entrepreneurs trading off time with social connections in order to work on their businesses:

> "we only have so much time in a day to do things. You decided to spend that time on your dream which is perfectly fine. But that came at the cost of not keeping up your social life. Similarly, if you focus on being social, you'll have less time to work on your dream. Nothing can be done about it, it's all about the trade offs."

> "I think new entrepreneurs often find themselves isolating themselves from others because they can't shut off the grind."

> "Anyone ever grind and grind and grind and suddenly you wake up…. oh shit i'm lonely as hell."

4.1.3 | Isolation

Finally, entrepreneurs in our sample talked extensively about the isolation inherent in the entrepreneurial occupation as a major factor associated with feelings of loneliness. This included feelings of social isolation, cognitive isolation, and physical isolation from others. Socially, entrepreneurs found that they had lost touch with many social relations and had difficulty making new social connections due to their intense focus on their businesses. This left them socially isolated, contributing to feelings of loneliness:

> "Since I've became more successful, the less friends I have."

> "Your friend circle gets very very small, it's amazing how it's the same for everyone. You get cut down to a few friends and go SUPER solo."

Even when entrepreneurs had people they could spend time outside of work with, such as friends and family, they experienced cognitive isolation and a sense that others could not understand the unique experiences associated with entrepreneurship. Many entrepreneurs in our sample expressed a specific disconnect with others in that no one, not

even their close family members and friends, could understand where they were coming from or what they were going through, as illustrated in the following quotes related to cognitive isolation:

> "Today I feel like I am an island isolated from everyone. I can't talk to people that I go out with or that I know of about my challenges cause they live a very different reality since they are not entrepreneurs."

> "It's a lonely road even my wife doesn't understand me. It's a battle."

> "I have tremendous respect for solo founders. These guys undertake a very lonely journey where nobody else can relate to their problems or achievements for that matter. When you have a bad day, you can't really explain it to someone because the feeling is unique to your situation and when you reach a milestone, you can probably celebrate it with your friends and loved ones but they would never truly understand how big a deal it is for you to have achieved that milestone."

Finally, the physical isolation involved in starting and running a firm was also related to entrepreneurial loneliness. Much of the physical isolation described by individuals in our dataset stemmed from working from home and not having a workspace in which they could connect with others.[2] The following quotes illustrate how entrepreneurs' physical isolation manifested in feelings of loneliness:

> "I spent a few years working from home, alone. I did not expect to miss the social connections of workmates anywhere near as much as I did. It is very lonely, especially early on."

> "One benefit of being an entrepreneur is you get to work from home on your own time. But what comes with that over time is loneliness and isolation."

The unique occupational factors, lack of resources, and isolation outlined above were fairly universal and appeared well understood and accepted among entrepreneurs. As such, there is evidence in our data that there are factors unique to the occupation of entrepreneurship that are associated with high levels of loneliness and that differ from existing sources of loneliness discussed in the literature (e.g., personality, physical attributes, changes in social relations such as breakups). Despite the commonalities in factors associated with loneliness throughout our data, we found considerable variation in how entrepreneurs appraised these factors and experienced loneliness, as well as how they responded to it. Our findings are consistent with Transactional Stress Theory (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which notes that there is considerable intrapsychic variation in how individuals appraise stressors (Lerman et al., 2021). We explore this variation in primary and secondary appraisals for entrepreneurial loneliness further below.

4.2 | Primary appraisals of loneliness

Consistent with appraisal theory, we saw evidence of three distinct primary appraisals of loneliness for entrepreneurs: irrelevant, benign positive, and stressful (reflecting seeing loneliness as involving harm/loss, threat, or challenge). We discuss each primary appraisal of entrepreneurial loneliness next, and provide representative quotes in Table C2 in Appendix C.

4.2.1 | Irrelevant primary appraisals

One of the largest surprises in coding and analyzing our data was finding evidence that some entrepreneurs found loneliness to be irrelevant. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 32), "when an encounter with the environment carries no implication for a person's well-being, it falls within the category of irrelevant…nothing is to be lost or gained in the transaction." Whereas appraisal theory acknowledges the existence of irrelevant primary appraisals, the majority of research using appraisal theory focuses on stressful appraisals (as they elicit coping responses) and overlooks irrelevant ones. Instead, we found what we initially perceived of as "negative cases" (Hymer & Smith, 2022), those eschewing feelings of loneliness, were actually quite meaningful for understanding variation in susceptibility to entrepreneurial loneliness. For example, some informants took the position that entrepreneurs should not be lonely:

> "If you're feeling lonely you are doing something wrong - creating your own business/company should be a good, positive feeling!"

> "Running is business is like the least lonely job you can do. You are constantly in communication with suppliers and manufactures, agencies, couriers, employees, support agents, customers, customers, CUSTOMERS and now also customs officials. Not to mention friends and family who want you to give them hours."

Those who appraised the potential loneliness of entrepreneurship as irrelevant found no need to do anything about it (by definition), so there was no associated secondary appraisal. Further, the narrative depicting an irrelevant appraisal made it seem as if entrepreneurs who were experiencing loneliness were doing something wrong. We return to this notion, including the stigma and harm perpetuating such an appraisal and dogma of entrepreneurship might create within the entrepreneurship community, in the discussion below.

4.2.2 | Benign positive primary appraisals

The second surprising primary appraisal pattern in our data involved entrepreneurs appraising loneliness as benign positive, contrary to much of the existing literature that showcases only negative implications for individuals experiencing loneliness (e.g., Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Wright & Silard, 2021). A benign positive appraisal occurs "if the outcome of an encounter is construed as positive, that is, if it preserves or enhances well-being or promises to do so" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 32). Entrepreneurs in our sample who expressed this primary appraisal did not think loneliness was irrelevant as did those above, but instead found loneliness as something to embrace, primarily because it enabled them to spend more time focusing on their business and themselves. The following quotes illustrate the view from some of our entrepreneurs that loneliness was in fact a good thing:

> "I prefer to be alone most of the time as I don't want others to distract me from what I completely love doing."

> "I work alone and love it, no more meetings, working to other people's schedules… no pointless phone calls or explaining my decisions."

Some even went so far as to say it is *necessary* to be lonely as an entrepreneur, so that individuals are able to dedicate the time it takes to build a new venture and develop the resiliency to handle the ups and downs of entrepreneurship:

"In a way, you have to be lonely when you start. You have to have nothing else to give, so you work on your business because of boredom and lack of personal relationships."

"I wouldn't discount the loneliness. You are one out of a small number (when you consider the larger population) that can actually dictate your life. It's nice to have others around, but sometimes they can hinder your success. If you find yourself in difficult situations and can repeatedly dig yourself out, you have a great quality (resiliency). Embrace challenges and learn from them. Use those lessons learned as you continue forward, but don't let it stop you."

Entrepreneurs who viewed loneliness as benign positive tended to perpetuate their loneliness. Just as with the irrelevant primary appraisals, these appraisals did not lead to the need to do anything differently, so secondary appraisals were not discussed. Instead, benign positive appraisals of loneliness promoted the lone wolf narrative associated with entrepreneurship.

4.2.3 | Factors associated with non-stressful primary appraisals

Given the surprising findings that some entrepreneurs in our data found loneliness to be irrelevant or benign positive rather than stressful, we further investigated comments related to such appraisals to better understand individual or business factors associated with non-stressful primary appraisals of loneliness.

Individual-level factors that seem to promote non-stressful primary appraisals include self-selecting into entrepreneurship because of the desire to work alone (associated with positive appraisals), or alternatively, having a business partner (associated with irrelevant appraisals). Entrepreneurs who emphasized their choice and self-selection into the occupation in order to be alone and to work for themselves tended to appraise loneliness as positive, saying things such as:

"I remember how much it sucks having a job. How much I hate dealing with idiot bosses and incompetent coworkers. Then I smile and realize that I am in total control of the work space."

As an entrepreneur and an introvert…it is heaven. With a splash of socializing with vendors and clients every so often.

In contrast, other entrepreneurs noted that loneliness was irrelevant because they deliberately chose to start their venture with a partner, making comments such as:

I don't believe in being a "solopreneur." In almost each of my projects I had a partner to take part of the load, mostly on the technical side of things or sometimes financially. It doesn't have to be a lone journey.

I build my business with my husband so it's just a part of the relationship. It's not really lonely for me at all. So I suggest that you go find a life partner to immediately mesh with the business.

In addition to these individual-level factors, two venture-related factors appear to be associated with non-stressful appraisals of loneliness. First, it appears that the type of business impacts how one appraises loneliness. For example, one Redditt poster said, "*Entrepreneurship can be lonely, or it can be the opposite, it depends what sort of business you create*" whereas another commented on the combination of their personality and the type of business they run, saying, "*I am a lone wolf and it's worked out really well for me. I think it depends on your personality and what kind of startup you have.*" As we

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investigated further what kinds of types of businesses might be associated with non-stressful appraisals of loneliness, we found that it was the fit between venture form and personality that influenced one's appraisal of loneliness. For those that did not want to interact with others, venture forms that did not require much interaction with others, such as online or product-based businesses rather than in-person service-based businesses made loneliness non-stressful. For example, one entrepreneur commented:

> I run multiple profitable software products with no investments, no team, and even no computer science degree.…One of the cons of having a team is also that people are strong inputs whereas what you need most of the time is isolation. You need to think strategically and to do that, you need to be alone.

On the other hand, we found that entrepreneurs who desired social and physical connection through their venture viewed loneliness as irrelevant because they were constantly engaging with their customers. These individuals chose business models that were customer-facing with a high level of necessary engagement with stakeholders. For example, one said:

> My question would be how DO entrepreneurs get lonely? I think for you to be driving your business to success, constant engagement is key, whether through social feeds, in person, making sales calls, collaborating, or seeing people in educational environments. If you're lonely as an entrepreneur, I would challenge you to look at how you are investing your time, and create time somewhere to engage people intentionally.

This points out the importance of self-selection of individuals into the occupation of entrepreneurship in anticipating and mitigating potentially stressful appraisals of loneliness. This is consistent with arguments by Patzelt and Shepherd (2011: 236), who said that "in knowing and anticipating the emotional challenges of their future occupational role (Begley, 1995; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Shane et al., 2003) only those individuals who believe that they can work long hours, are stress resistant, can accept high levels of loneliness and social isolation, have high frustration barriers, and are less fearful about failure may transition into self-employment." It is interesting that individuals who desired no contact and those who desired high levels of contact with others could both view loneliness as irrelevant. It is possible that these individuals were able to create business models that matched their needs for connection, whereas those who experienced loneliness as a problem did not have the right alignment between their desired level of connection and their business model.

Finally, we found many entrepreneurs that appraised loneliness as irrelevant or positive because they had experienced loneliness in the past but were able to persevere to build successful businesses. When these entrepreneurs reflected on their previous experiences, they appraised loneliness as non-stressful (as we note later, this may be a retrospectively biased view), reflecting a temporal component to one's appraisal of loneliness. The following quotes reflect this:

> Over the last 10 years I've gone from making $30-40k a year to nearly $1 m a year with my business…It immensely reduces financial stress, opens up your options, allows you to help others… so no, not lonely at all.

> I've been doing business for 12 years. I was insanely lonely and tortured by business for maybe 4–5 years… I thought I was in for loneliness for the rest of my life… It was hard to get people that were the right fit to join my team, it was hard to get enough money to afford the first person, But slowly it happened and now my team is around 7… I no longer believe "it's lonely at the top" is real…In short though, for me there was something amazing on the other side of the loneliness and despair. I've found

the validation of having people that I got along really well with that want to be on my team has (for me) completely squashed the old trope "it's lonely at the top."

4.2.4 | Stressful primary appraisals

The third pattern of appraisals that emerged from our data involved individuals who found the loneliness they experienced as an entrepreneur to be stressful, which included appraisals that loneliness involved harm or loss, a threat, or a challenge to the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Whereas harm/loss appraisals concern harms that have already been sustained, threat appraisals "concern [potential] harms or losses that have not yet taken place but are anticipated" and are characterized by negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 32–33). Harm/loss appraisals of entrepreneurial loneliness surfaced through entrepreneurs describing feelings of stress and anxiety stemming from the grind, uncertainty, and loneliness of the entrepreneurial occupation:

> "The majority of my day is spent alone, I'm someone that needs to be around people. (I go to the gym daily, and coffee shops etc., but this still doesn't cut it) I guess all this grind has brought me to a point of uncertainty and confusion which I never thought it'd lead me to. Stress, anxiety and feeling down are all emotions I feel daily, even though on paper everything is great."

They also noted the toll loneliness could take on their physical and mental health, viewing loneliness as a threat to their future well-being. Several comments emphasized worries about health issues that could stem from loneliness, including depression and burnout:

> "I am worried that the social isolation will bring me to legitimate burnout."

> "The thing that I fear most about entrepreneurship is having no colleagues or friends, or in general people to talk to. I fear I might slip into depression."

Unlike irrelevant and benign positive appraisals, stressful primary appraisals trigger secondary coping appraisals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), discussed below. Not responding to a stressful primary appraisal with coping or ineffectually engaging in coping through secondary appraisals can make the threats noted above turn into actual harm. As such, stressful primary appraisals of loneliness are directly tied to outcomes, which we elaborate on next.

4.3 | Outcomes of loneliness

Feelings of loneliness left unchecked resulted in several negative outcomes for individuals in our data, including outcomes emphasized by prior literature, such as physical and mental health and productivity impacts (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), as well as outcomes unique to the entrepreneurial context, involving occupational exit and venture failure (see Table C3 in Appendix C for illustrative quotes).

4.3.1 | Declines in entrepreneurs' physical and mental health

Negative outcomes related to entrepreneur physical and mental health were most prevalent within our data, validating existing research on the consequences of loneliness for the general population (reviewed above). As the entrepreneurial occupation has been associated with greater "wear and tear" on one's physical and mental health

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(Cardon & Patel, 2015; Patel et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2021), it is not surprising that we find both physical and mental consequences of loneliness for entrepreneurs. Our Reddit data highlighted consequences such as exhaustion, burnout, trouble sleeping, anxiety, depression, a general deterioration of physical and psychological health, and even thoughts of suicide as reflected in the following quotes:

> "Don't take this lightly. Loneliness can make you sleep in depression."

> "Founders are 4× more likely for suicide, 8× more likely to suffer from debilitating ADD/ADHD, and 5× more likely to suffer from addiction."

> "My physical and mental health is trash and stress even gave me a stroke earlier this year (I'm 34)."

Further, entrepreneurs noted the links between the occupational determinants of loneliness discussed above (e.g., isolation, the need to grind, and high levels of responsibility) to worsened physical and mental health. Examples of these connections include the following:

> "The grind took a toll on my mental and physical wellbeing, and left me very jaded."

> "Know that the hard thing about entrepreneurship isn't the problems themselves most of the time. The hard thing are the emotional, social, and even physical side effects of walking the path. I know dozens, if not hundreds, of founders like you. I am one myself. There are times where the level of commitment required is, frankly, unhealthy."

4.3.2 | Decreases in entrepreneurs' productivity/performance

Loneliness has previously been linked to lower job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018) and impaired ability to think creatively or make decisions logically (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Murthy, 2017). We found that these performance effects also extend to entrepreneurs, with perhaps even greater effects due to the autonomous nature of the entrepreneurial occupation. Entrepreneurs noted that their isolation from others, ability to set their own hours, and lack of oversight from a supervisor meant that their loneliness sometimes caused a significant drop in their productivity. Whereas employed individuals may experience performance and productivity loss, they also have structures of accountability that force them to maintain some semblance of productivity to keep their jobs, which entrepreneurs lack, making performance consequences more extreme for this occupational group. Specifically, given that entrepreneurs have higher job control than employed individuals (Stephan & Roesler, 2010), the dangers of performance and productivity loss are more pronounced. The following quotes highlight these heightened productivity consequences of loneliness for entrepreneurs:

> "I lack the discipline as I have always thrived on performing well for the sake of the team. Now that I am by myself it feels quite depressing usually falling in two scenarios. I procrastinate because no one is there to hold me accountable, then feel guilty since all progress halts if I don't work."

> "So I have this self-employed bookkeeping business that I do at home at my computer. It's a very lonely job…pays well by the hour…though often times, I get distracted with video games or the internet. I just don't FEEL like working…which is common for self-employment. You pick your own hours, so you conveniently don't pick any hours. You don't have to get dressed or go anywhere…you just turn on a

computer and go at it. There are no bosses, and I can choose to not take calls when I'm feeling lazy or irritated. I can take any day off, when I'm feeling ill or have plans. It's great! But shit isn't getting done…"

These well-being and productivity outcomes are consistent with existing findings, albeit at a more extreme level given the autonomous nature of the entrepreneurial occupation. Yet, we also found loneliness outcomes in our Reddit data that appear to be unique to this occupation.

4.3.3 | Increases in occupational exit and venture failure

Entrepreneurship as an occupation is uniquely stressful and, given time and resource constraints, it is often difficult for entrepreneurs to avoid or recover from stressors (Williamson et al., 2021), which may lead to and exacerbate feelings of loneliness. The "psychological and physiological toll" (Williamson et al., 2021: 1308) entrepreneurship takes may be such that individuals feel they are not cut out to be entrepreneurs (leading to occupational exit), or cannot continue their ventures (resulting in venture failure). These outcomes are distinct from what traditional employees experience, as it is unlikely that a single employee's loneliness can cause a company to fail or that an individual would choose to change careers based upon it.

Prior research has not yet gone so far as to link the experience of loneliness with exit from one's occupation. However, in our data, the experience of loneliness was reported as so debilitating that some individuals felt they had to exit the entrepreneurial occupation and return to paid employment in order to attenuate their loneliness. The following quotes illustrate this:

"I just can't deal with the loneliness tbh. Sold it at the start of 2020 to a competitor who was just starting out and never looked back."

"The other perk to getting a job again is community. I've been flying solo for so long that Im getting lonely and I miss working with people. People to suffer with when shit gets hard. People to celebrate with when you pull it off - just another human in the office to be around."

This outcome is important because occupational exit of entrepreneurs has far-reaching workforce and market implications. Given that 16% of the US adult workforce (31 million individuals) is made up of entrepreneurs (Entrepreneur Statistics, 2022), and loneliness is on the rise (Murthy, 2017), these findings highlight the potential for massive shifts in the makeup of the labor market if entrepreneurial loneliness is not recognized, and strategies for coping with it engaged. Entrepreneurial loneliness may also more broadly influence market structures. Given that entrepreneurs are the primary catalysts driving the performance of their organizations, a direct outcome of entrepreneurial loneliness is the performance and viability of the organization itself. Loneliness may lead to venture demise and ultimate failure. Several entrepreneurs in our dataset commented on how their loneliness led them to lose their ventures:

"I honestly couldn't stomach my first business as I was too lonely"

"A lot of entrepreneurs and busy professionals tend to put all their time and energy into their work and end up burning themselves out or getting lonely and even depressed, which can kill your business."

This organizational outcome of loneliness has not been previously examined and is specific to the entrepreneurial process given the inherent bond between entrepreneur and venture. As 99.9% of businesses in the US are small busi-

	Problem-focused coping (focused on reducing feelings of loneliness)	Emotion-focused coping (focused on avoiding loneliness or re-appraising it to be irrelevant)
Making connections	Find like-minded/ entrepreneurial people at physical meetups	Find like-minded/ entrepreneurial people online
	Find a significant other	Rent love/buy friends
	Make non-work friends	Get a dog
Engaging in activities	Do things that help you connect with people in meaningful ways	Work harder on venture See a therapist Drugs/alcohol
	Pursue hobbies that are social	Pursue hobbies as a way to spend time/improve oneself
Changing one's mindset	Take time off of work so you can spend it with people	Ignore it; it will pass Focus on future social life Focus on future success

FIGURE 3 Distinctions between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms.

nesses (Entrepreneur Statistics, 2022), a rise in business failure due to occupational loneliness has serious market consequences, and may debilitate the pipeline of innovation entrepreneurs inject into the economy.

Our data revealed that loneliness was appraised by some entrepreneurs as a significant stressor that can harm both themselves and their firms if left unchecked. Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 35) noted, "when we are in jeopardy, whether it be a threat or a challenge, something must be done to manage the situation. In that case, a further form of appraisal becomes salient, that of evaluating what might and can be done, which we call secondary appraisal."

4.4 | Secondary appraisals for loneliness—coping

Secondary appraisals are complex evaluative processes where individuals consider what coping options are available to them and whether a particular option is both feasible and likely to help them accomplish their goals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping involves behavioral and cognitive exertions used to manage stressors (Ucbasaran et al., 2013), in this case loneliness. Problem-focused coping (or approach coping; Lazarus, 1991) occurs when entrepreneurs move toward the issue by addressing the root cause of the problem to minimize the loneliness they experience. Emotion-focused coping (or avoidance coping; Lazarus, 1991) occurs when entrepreneurs attempt to move away from the issue by focusing on alleviating or distracting themselves from the experience temporarily, without addressing the origin of the problem.

Whereas these approaches to coping align with prior literature on entrepreneurial coping (e.g., Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Uy et al., 2013), our study deepens understanding of specific approach and avoidance coping mechanisms with the explicit purpose of addressing entrepreneurial loneliness, rather than general negative affect or well-being of entrepreneurs (e.g., Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011). Interestingly, both patterns of secondary appraisals we uncovered involved coping through making connections, engaging in activities, and changing one's mindset, but in distinct ways and with distinct effects (see Figure 3). Whereas these categories of coping may apply generally, some of the specific

coping mechanisms employed by individuals in our dataset represent approaches to coping with loneliness that are unique to entrepreneurs.

4.4.1 | Problem-focused/approach coping

Table C4 in Appendix C depicts representative quotes from our data reflecting problem-focused coping approaches. Entrepreneurs focused on alleviating and resolving the problem of loneliness notably talked about the importance of making social connections. This is not surprising, as loneliness is a perception that one's personal relationships are somehow deficient, and addressing this problem directly should involve improving the depth, quantity, or quality of relationships the entrepreneur has. Coping with loneliness through making social connections most commonly involved connecting with other like-minded individuals or those who would better understand the entrepreneurial mindset and its challenges. Advice for dealing with loneliness through making connections involved comments such as:

> "Look for entrepreneur clubs, industry panels and boards, mentors, everything you need to stay grounded and connected."

> "It wasn't until I started participating in entrepreneurial communities and making connections did I really have a "Quality of life" uptick. It saved me from another spiral into depression."

Commenters also recommended developing relationships with mentors, co-founders, or employees to combat the occupational factors driving loneliness by sharing their feelings with someone who would understand (in the case of a mentor), increasing co-worker support (by mimicking relational systems found in traditional corporations), sharing the burden of responsibility (in the case of finding a co-founder), and potentially increasing one's time-related resources through delegating work to additional help. The following comments illustrate such advice for coping through work-related relationship development:

> "Having a mentor or advisor seems to be one of the best therapeutic remedies for this feeling of loneliness."

> "After growing my team, the overall morale and company vibe feels a lot less lonely and it makes everything easier to grow."

We also found advice for changing the physical location of one's work as a way to connect with other like-minded individuals, as well as to reduce physical isolation associated with working alone. A frequent recommendation was to join a co-working space. Similarly, coffee shops or other socially oriented workspaces were also recommended as places individuals could work from in order to reduce physical and social isolation and find individuals with similar autonomous working arrangements. The following quotes illustrate this advice:

> "I think the biggest thing that helps me is working in a coworking space around other Entrepreneurs."

> "I run my business out of a cafe, which is also great for making connections and friends if you do it for long enough consistently enough."

Somewhat contrasting advice was to seek social support *unrelated* to one's business, such as through romantic or family relationships, or by socializing with individuals who share common interests or hobbies, but who are not like-minded entrepreneurs. Such strategies were designed to directly alleviate entrepreneurs' social isolation while also providing opportunities to disengage from their ventures, which may help to diminish the "have to grind" mentality and attenuate social maladaptation by learning to engage with others outside of entrepreneurship:

> "I think you need a girlfriend, to hold down your emotional bank account while you pursue your financial goals."

> "Have a social group completely outside of work that you can blow off steam with. You need to be able to completely unplug at times and just have fun (it's hard, I know)."

A second category of problem-focused coping strategies for addressing entrepreneurial loneliness involved engaging in specific activities, such as traveling, taking classes, or pursuing a hobby outside of one's work, with the express purpose of meeting other people and creating or deepening one's social connections with others. Below is a sample of the many activities recommended to make social connections through which to abate feelings of loneliness:

> "I do different activities that create opportunities for me to connect with people in a creative way: dancing (partner work), Agro yoga (which requires partner work and communication), volunteering my time with causes I believe in. It's my form of creating meaningful connections, whilst being able to "play" and be creative. At the same time, having that break away from the work I do."

Interestingly, some entrepreneurs recommended engaging in traditional forms of employment (in addition to entrepreneurship) in order to access the social support-related benefits that come with being an employee of a company and regularly interacting with others (employees, customers, etc.). They recommended using non-entrepreneurial employment to fill one's social needs outside of their own entrepreneurial venture, by taking on a part-time job:

> "Get a part time job somewhere preferably where people your age shop. They don't necessarily share your same entrepreneurial beliefs, but at least it fills the social aspect of your life. It's wrong to think we as entrepreneurs can do without social interaction. Humans are naturally social creatures and it's one of the levels of Maslow hierarchy of needs. That's what helped me out."

The final category of problem-focused coping mechanisms we found in our data was related to addressing the problem of entrepreneurial loneliness through changing one's mindset; including setting boundaries and assigning priorities such that entrepreneurs have more resources (primarily time) to devote to social connections and reduce feelings of loneliness. The following quotes depict advice on setting boundaries and prioritizing social and well-being needs:

> "Learn early to balance work and life so you can be both successful and fulfilled, rather than only being financially successful with no meaningful relationships in your life."

> "But we humans are not machines. We need some time to recharge. Some people handle it by having periods of grind and rest (e.g., 1 month grind, then 1 month rest & repeat). Most people balance it every day. So TL;DR,[3] work less, socialize more. We can't have the best of both worlds. Something needs to be sacrificed"

Similarly, individuals recommended changing one's mindset to accept responsibility for their own loneliness. This involved recognizing the cure to loneliness was within one's own control. By reframing one's mindset about loneliness in this way, individuals would be more inclined to pursue problem-focused coping mechanisms, rather than attempt to leverage emotion-focused methods. Such mindset reframing is depicted in the following advice:

> "When you have a business, it is what you create it to be. If it's lonely, you and only you can make it not lonely."

> "If it's making you unhappy though, be stubborn and find a way to change it. Being an entrepreneur is about having the freedom to get exactly what you want out of your work. If your work is damaging your life you may want to rethink how long you're willing to grind at it to get where you want to be."

The above examples of connections, activities, and mindsets represent approaches to coping are aimed at addressing the root cause of loneliness by directly engaging in social connections or by putting oneself in the right situations or frame of mind to create connections.

4.4.2 | Emotion-focused/avoidance coping

Emotion-focused or avoidance coping occurs when individuals appraise a situation as stressful, but instead of addressing the source of the problem, they either avoid addressing it or address it in temporary ways, such as by alleviating the emotions aroused by loneliness, but not loneliness itself (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). This occurred in our data when entrepreneurs believed loneliness was stressful, but either believed their loneliness was inevitable, or that they could only temporarily escape those feelings (see Table C5 in Appendix C for representative quotes). An interesting pattern in our data was that with such avoidance coping strategies, entrepreneurs still recognized the importance of making social connections, engaging in activities, or changing their mindsets, but did so in ways that addressed the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of loneliness (See Figure 3).

Avoidance coping strategies involving making social connections were focused on superficial connections such as buying friends or romantic partners, making connections with non-humans, such as getting a pet in order to satisfy one's emotional needs, or creating digital connections, such as through the Reddit community, primarily to reduce negative affect by venting to others (Sajjadiani et al., 2022). Whereas problem-focused approaches for addressing loneliness involved direct attempts at making meaningful social connections, these emotion-focused mechanisms allowed individuals to avoid making meaningful social connections by making connections based on superficial means or replacing in person human interaction with digital or animal substitutes. These approaches likely have varying efficacy as opposed to human social connections, as they do not directly address any of the factors associated with loneliness we outlined previously (e.g., they do not reduce one's burden of responsibility or cognitive isolation). The following quotes illustrate advice regarding emotion focused social connections:

> "Get a dog and you'll never be lonely (or fat) again!"

> "Rent some love on the weekends.. then get back to work."

> "When I used to get lonely I would go on Twitch. I could tune in to any live streams I liked and interact with people and feel part of something, and make friends. The brilliant part is I can work at the same time! (although it may end up distracting you)."

Activity based avoidance coping strategies involved distracting oneself from loneliness (e.g., working harder/staying busy), escaping through the use of alcohol or drugs, or taking care of one's physical and mental health in order to better understand and deal with loneliness despite not being able to change it. For example, the following quotes illustrate distraction activities, such as working harder or escaping feelings of loneliness with drugs and alcohol.

> "I have felt lonely before in the past, but as long as I am pouring my efforts into something competitive the lonely feeling starts to go away. The loneliest times I have had are idle times… If I just go back to working it gets a bit better."

> "I take on tasks until its more than I can handle. Work 12–14 hour days way too often. ignore friends and social life for weeks or months, and turn to drugs (study drugs to focus long term, THC/LSD to relax) and alcohol for downtime escape."

However, other entrepreneurs in our dataset noted that these avoidance techniques did not always help alleviate loneliness, but instead perpetuated it, which aligns with prior research proposing that emotion-focused coping mechanisms are typically not as effective as problem-focused ones (Stanton et al., 2002). For example, one entrepreneur said:

> "Honestly being lonely for so many years is killing me on the inside.… It's horrible. I try to keep myself busy by working and making connections but at the end of the day I feel horrible because I don't get to have amazing birthday parties, have a boyfriend, or go to social events without feeling like the elephant in the room."

Whereas many emotion-focused activities seemingly overlap with problem-focused activities (e.g., both recommend travel, sports and hobbies), it is the motivation for undertaking the activity and way in which it is engaged which determines whether it is a problem or emotion focused coping mechanism. For example, those who travel or go to the gym to meet others are using the activity to make social connections to help alleviate their loneliness (problem-focused coping), whereas those who travel or go to the gym to use the serotonin and dopamine boosts to temporarily reduce the negative emotions of loneliness are engaging in short-term emotional avoidance coping. The following quotes demonstrate using activities to cope with loneliness through solitary activity rather than using the activity to make connections:

> "My release has always been physical activity. Hitting the gym keeps you in shape, relieves stress, and also gives you time away from the office to think."

> "Take a vacation to somewhere outside your comfort zone. You'll have a new experience and probably be longing to come back to your old schedule."

> "try doing some kind of exercise routine on a regular basis and maybe even meditate or watch some kind of inspirational stuff on youtube…you'd be surprised that sometimes it's just something missing that's need to be filled-in more than actual loneliness."

Similarly, a general focus on mental and physical health may temporarily reduce the negative affect associated with loneliness, but fail to address the loneliness itself. The following advice for promoting mental and physical health through avenues such as therapy, meditation and journaling reflect this avoidance of making social connections by dealing only with the emotional consequences of loneliness:

"Take every mental support you can get! Positive affirmations, meditation, motivational speaks, affirmations in front of a mirror."

"Meditation. It's worked wonders on my mental state and dealing with the loneliness that is entrepreneurship."

"[a] Therapist should be a requirement for every founder/CEO."

Finally, avoidance coping strategies took the form of changing one's mindset about loneliness, such as by regulating or reframing emotions associated with loneliness. Entrepreneurs recommended reframing one's attitudes toward loneliness to view it as out of their control and something that has to be accepted as part of the entrepreneurial process. This advice came in the form of accepting loneliness, being one's own source of emotional support, and reframing one's attitudes in reference to a "worse" alternative, traditional employment:

"Give it time, it will pass. Slowly reduce your dependence on social stimulus for feeling happy and complete."

"In terms of emotional support… you have to learn how to provide that to yourself."

"It is isolating, I agree. Constant bookwork, trying to make phones ring, its a hassle, but its worth it and much better than being told how to live by a big corporation."

Additionally, some entrepreneurs recommended justifying current loneliness through delayed gratification and focusing on having future business and relational success:

"You can suffer being lonely for a few years so that you can sit on a beach or snowboard down a mountain or drive a Ferrari or whatever your goals are in the next decade."

"You can focus on your business and you don't waste your time on your friends issues, feelings, funny stories etc. But yeah at the end of the month you can feel lonely. But you have to make a choice you want to hang out and have fun now and work for the rest of your life later? Or you want to work now, building a business then hang out as much as you want, travel, buy nice cars, Nice homes later? Life is about choices."

As can be seen in the examples above, individuals who recommended engaging in emotion-focused or avoidance coping suggested a different set of connections, activities, and mindsets than those espousing problem-focused or approach coping mechanisms. These contrasts are depicted in Figure 3. Rather than using connections, activities and mindsets to put one in a position to accumulate greater quality and quantity of social connections (as with problem-focused coping), these mechanisms focused on avoiding or temporarily reducing feelings of loneliness through focusing on distractions. Whereas some of these recommendations are good for general well-being, such as engaging in exercise or therapy, they do not directly combat the source of loneliness or change one's level of perceived social isolation. Additionally, other emotion focused coping mechanisms may directly negatively influence well-being, such as avoiding loneliness through alcohol or drugs. We therefore follow prior literature (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004) in suggesting these emotion-focused coping mechanisms are likely to be less effective in reducing loneliness over time.

4.4.3 | Pathways and feedback loops of entrepreneurial loneliness

As the last part of the model, our data points to the existence of feedback loops through which coping mechanisms can alter different aspects of the experience of loneliness. Specifically, we found that engaging in problem-focused coping may alter the factors initially driving feelings of loneliness. For example, by finding a co-founder or hiring employees, entrepreneurs may simultaneously reduce their isolation, generate more resources by sharing the workload, and gain co-worker support, which could lead the entrepreneur to experience entrepreneurship as less lonely. The following quote depicts how problem-focused coping through making connections led to such improvements for one entrepreneur:

> "It wasn't until I started participating in entrepreneurial communities and making connections did I really have a "Quality of life" uptick. It saved my from another spiral into depression."

We also found that emotion-focused coping involving avoiding loneliness may lead individuals to attempt to re-appraise their loneliness as positive or irrelevant rather than stressful. For example, interacting with other entrepreneurs online may lead to attempts to re-appraise their situation as not lonely, or to re-appraise loneliness as positive given that other entrepreneurs face the same challenge and discuss it in the online environment. Such re-appraisals do not alter factors driving feelings of loneliness, but instead alters how one appraises their loneliness. For example, the following quote recognizes that while the drivers of loneliness don't disappear, one can learn to re-appraise loneliness to manage it:

> "I've been an entrepreneur for over thirty five years, and I can tell you that the loneliness never disappears… But you will learn to handle [it] better over time."

These responses point out the iterative nature of the process through which entrepreneurs experience loneliness, and how coping responses may alter the extent to which entrepreneurs experience loneliness, as well as their primary and secondary (re)appraisals of it.

5 | DISCUSSION

> "Entrepreneurship has been a complex journey for me. Although a profound sense of togetherness, support, and connectedness have been part of my journey, there is also a unique, solitary, and undeniable burden that comes with being an entrepreneur; a certain "loneliness." Psychologically you will experience pressures that very few others fully grasp, while practically speaking you will have less time for you to spend with your closest friends. That is the choice you make when embarking on such a journey" – Jamie Skella, founder (Monce, 2020)

Findings from our qualitative analysis of over 9000 Reddit comments discussing entrepreneurial loneliness and related advice among an online community of entrepreneurs revealed several unique occupational factors associated with loneliness. These include an extremely high burden of responsibility, lack of co-worker support, social maladaptation, a lack of resources (particularly time), the need to grind, and isolation (social, cognitive, and physical). We also uncovered novel outcomes of loneliness for entrepreneurs, including occupational exit and venture failure, in addition to validating existing physical, mental, and productivity problems stemming from loneliness. Contrary to existing literature that depicts loneliness as wholly negative (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2014; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Murthy, 2017), our findings reveal that primary appraisals concerning how problematic loneliness is to entrepreneurs varies widely, from irrelevant to benign positive to quite stressful. We found that stressful primary appraisals led to a vari-

ety of coping strategies which we categorized as problem-focused/approach strategies or emotion-focused/avoidance strategies, each with different specific types of coping through connections, activities, and mindsets. As noted in our findings, some of these strategies were specifically targeted to address factors associated with entrepreneurial loneliness (such as the use of co-working spaces to address physical isolation), whereas others were strategies designed to target the overall experience of loneliness as stressful (such as seeking therapy). These coping mechanisms reinforce existing literature while also recognizing unique mechanisms entrepreneurs utilize to cope with loneliness. Below we discuss how our findings and conceptual model contribute to, and elaborate upon extant knowledge and theory about loneliness and entrepreneurial well-being.

5.1 | Theoretical implications/contributions

5.1.1 | Loneliness

In contributing to ongoing conversations about loneliness, we add to the growing body of research (e.g., Wright, 2012, 2015) that is shifting the focus from personal characteristics (Barreto et al., 2021) as the primary determinant of loneliness to contextual elements, such as the workplace (e.g., Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), and build on existing research on occupational determinants that recognizes the antecedents and boundaries of loneliness likely depend on the specific work context (Wright & Silard, 2021). We first add to this research by investigating the cognitive and emotional processes through which individuals differentially interpret and respond to work-related factors that may be linked to loneliness, and explore this process in an extreme occupational context.

Through analysis of our data, we discovered that applying appraisal theory helped us uncover the processes through which entrepreneurs experience and react to their loneliness, as well as the outcomes that result from it. By finding a fit between appraisal theory and the emerging evidence in our data, we were able to identify the processes through which specific occupational factors of entrepreneurship drive feelings of loneliness, which undergoes a primary appraisal as irrelevant, positive, or challenging, the latter of which leads to secondary appraisals and subsequent choices of coping mechanisms. This allowed us to address previously paradoxical findings and claims in the literature concerning whether loneliness is (e.g., Akande, 1994; Fernet et al., 2016; Gumpert & Boyd, 1984; Williamson et al., 2021), or is not (e.g., Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Stephan & Roesler, 2010), a major problem for entrepreneurs. The answer is that it depends; while there are clearly occupational factors that do enhance feelings of loneliness among entrepreneurs, some entrepreneurs did not experience loneliness at all, and others viewed loneliness as something to embrace rather than a stressor to address.

Second, by exploring the experience of loneliness in the extreme occupation of entrepreneurship, we contribute to the literature by providing evidence contrary to the general consensus that loneliness is always experienced as "unpleasant" (Weiss, 1975), and "negative" (Perlman & Peplau, 1982), or that loneliness is "without redeeming features" (Cacioppo et al., 2006, p. 140). Although defined as "a complex set of feelings" (Cacioppo et al., 2006: 1055), loneliness is typically viewed through a singularly negative perspective. Our findings showcase the boundary conditions of these prior views of loneliness, as we found that loneliness was sometimes seen as a positive, rather than painful experience for entrepreneurs. Some entrepreneurs in our study noted that loneliness helped them focus on and give everything to their venture, and even viewed loneliness as a signal that they were on the right path. These findings open the door to exploring other contexts or situations in which loneliness may not be debilitating or even negative, but instead may have positive implications for productivity, similar to research highlighting the consequences and opportunities associated with stress (Cardon & Patel, 2015) or ADHD (Wiklund, Yu, Tucker, & Marino, 2017) for entrepreneurs.

We speculate that our findings may also apply to other occupational contexts where individuals may experience a subset of the features that define entrepreneurship, such as extremely high responsibility, autonomy, work intensity, deep personal connection to the work, lack of boundaries between work and non-work, personal and financial risk,

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isolation that is physical, cognitive, and social, and/or extreme levels of uncertainty. For example, commercial pilots, executive chefs, movie producers, or medical doctors may represent occupations that share acute levels of responsibility and agency, as well as long and intense working hours, for which our findings may readily apply. Other occupations may share different elements, such as software developers or engineers who often experience the same "need to grind" and social isolation, but typically have the shelter of an organization or high demand for their services that reduces the extreme uncertainty entrepreneurs face when attempting to create market share for unknown products and services. As another example, individuals in technical science field may experience physical, cognitive, and social isolation and uncertainty related to their work in developing scientific advancements, but likely do not experience personal or financial risk as acutely as entrepreneurs if they are employed by research institutions or labs. For occupations such as these that share one or more of the occupational factors of entrepreneurship we found associated with loneliness, our findings suggest that unbridled loneliness may be viewed by some as functional because it affords the individual the ability to focus exclusively on the demands of their occupational pursuit. For others in these occupations, loneliness may be experienced as a substantial problem with unique causes or consequences and for which specific coping mechanisms are needed.

Though the factors that make entrepreneurship an extreme occupation may be individually shard with other occupations, it is their combination within the occupation of entrepreneurship (the simultaneous presence of risk, uncertainty, autonomy, etc.), that makes entrepreneurship an "extreme" (Eisenhardt, 1989) or "revelatory" case (Siggelkow, 2007), which offers potential for generating novel insight regarding an understudied phenomenon (Yin, 2009). There is a long and rich history of research that argues that entrepreneurship is fundamentally different from other occupations (Gartner, 1985; McGrath et al., 1992), whether due to the unique set of activities associated with organizational creation (Gartner, 1985) or certain cognitive biases and patterns of cognition (Baron, 1998). The occupational context is the distinguishing factor upon which a body of research has proposed that entrepreneurship is a distinctive and unique occupation (Larson & Pearson, 2012) that can be considered as distinctly extreme (Chen, 2015; Seawright, 2016).

Given this, in order to recommend occupation-specific coping mechanisms for other similar occupations such as those mentioned above, we encourage future research to test our model in different extreme and general populations, as well as explore the potential heterogeneity within the entrepreneurial occupation (e.g., novice vs. portfolio vs. serial founders; Westhead & Wright, 1998) in order to advance and extend our initial findings and identify possible boundary conditions to the application of our model.

5.1.2 | Entrepreneurial well-being and ill-being

Within the entrepreneurship literature, loneliness is typically mentioned but not empirically investigated (e.g., Wright, 2012), and is often bundled as one aspect of other negative emotions (e.g., grief, Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011), or as a single component of overall well-being (Williamson et al., 2021). By providing a theoretical process model of entrepreneurial loneliness we contribute to the growing research on entrepreneurial well-being (Lerman et al., 2021) and ill-being (Stephan, 2018; Williamson et al., 2021). Loneliness has been recognized as one potential aspect of entrepreneurial ill-being, which involves states of distress and impaired daily functioning (Stephan, 2018). The costs of ill-being are substantial (Stephan et al., 2022), with estimates that poor mental health will cost the global economy US $6 trillion by 2030 (Trautmann et al., 2016). Given that prior research is clear that loneliness has extensive psychological, physical, and economic costs (Burke, 2009; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Fernet et al., 2016; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), it is likely a significant contributor to entrepreneurial ill-being. Further, the strain of launching a business makes it likely that entrepreneurs will prioritize the needs of the business at the expense of their own well-being (Van Gelderen, 2016), for example, by grinding or hustling rather than spending time with friends and family. These factors help explain why the majority of the entrepreneurs in our dataset struggled with loneliness and

its detrimental outcomes, and why much of the conversation on Reddit about entrepreneurial loneliness was focused on methods of coping and mitigating its negative effects.

Yet, our findings suggest that this might not always be the case for entrepreneurs. Instead, we need to better understand the varied experiences of entrepreneurial loneliness and its implications for entrepreneurs' mental health and well-being. In particular, if some entrepreneurs thrive on loneliness, efforts to reduce feelings of loneliness may be counterproductive. On the other hand, such "lonely at the top" and "lone-wolf" narratives and rhetoric may be detrimental to other entrepreneurs, potentially stigmatizing discussions about mental health and attempts to address loneliness for those who experience it as stressful. Individuals in our data who espoused irrelevant and positive appraisals for loneliness often accused those who did experience loneliness as doing something wrong. Online platforms can further amplify this narrative, evidenced by community membership of 2.7 million individuals (just in the two subreddit communities from which we pulled our data). As such, this rhetoric has the potential to be quite stigmatizing and damaging to entrepreneurs who are suffering from loneliness. By drawing attention to the variety of experiences of loneliness, individuals may come to see loneliness as neither black or white, good nor bad, but as a complex set of feelings that can be experienced and dealt with in a variety of ways.

Further, through our integration of prior research streams on loneliness and appraisal theory, our findings have implications for research on coping processes of entrepreneurs. While there have been important advancements in understanding how entrepreneurs use problem and emotion-focused coping in general (e.g., Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Ucbasaran et al., 2013; Uy et al., 2013), and how appraisals are correlated with specific aspects of entrepreneurship such as firm survival (De Cock et al., 2020), we add to this work by exploring coping mechanisms that are specifically valuable for entrepreneurs (Lerman et al., 2022), especially those experiencing loneliness. We thus answer calls to study how entrepreneurs appraise specific stressors, engage various coping mechanisms, and how such coping strategies impact individual well-being, occupational exit, and venture performance (Lerman et al., 2021; Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Stephan, 2018; Uy et al., 2013).

5.2 | Practical implications

Our work has several practical implications. First, the prevalence of loneliness on Reddit and the negative experiences and outcomes we discovered suggest the need to incorporate these insights into our entrepreneurial education programs, by (1) building awareness of the prevalence and susceptibility to loneliness faced by those in entrepreneurship or other extreme occupations; (2) proposing and helping individuals develop coping mechanisms that may help; and (3) reducing stigma surrounding mental health. Existing entrepreneurship education largely focuses on strategic, financial, and operational issues associated with starting and running businesses, rather than the cognitive and emotional demands the occupation requires. Yet, these cognitive and emotional demands have real consequences not only for the mental and physical health of individuals but also for the viability of their ventures and entrepreneurial careers. As such, we need to properly prepare and equip entrepreneurship students for these demands. Second, given the prevalence of entrepreneurs already operating businesses, our findings suggest the need to help entrepreneurs in our communities connect in meaningful ways to one another and to services that can help, such as mentors, therapists, and coworking spaces specifically designed for entrepreneurs (so they can find like-minded people). An immediate practical implication of our work is that entrepreneurs need more safe spaces that provide a sense of community and understanding, like Reddit does online, in order for people to voice their concerns and get help.

Third, there is a real need to decrease the stigma around mental health, for entrepreneurs specifically, as well as for the population more generally. Recent suicides of prominent entrepreneurs such as Kate Spade (designer and founder), Tony Hsieh (Zappos founder), Anthony Bourdain (celebrity chef), and Aaron Swartz (Reddit partner), among others, have made mental health struggles of entrepreneurs prominent in the popular press. Our findings suggest that we need collaboration between research and practice to diagnose and design interventions to address mental health concerns before such tragic events are seen as the only recourse. This requires academic investigations that both explore

and test the efficacy of coping mechanisms (e.g., experiments) to understand what works and for whom. Such interventions should both be inspired by and contribute back to practice dealing with entrepreneurial support and mental health. Psychologists focused on entrepreneurial mental health have commented that "highly competent founders and entrepreneurs don't talk about what they're wrestling with. Once entrepreneurs understand some of the factors contributing to this deadly silence, they can better recognize them in their own lives" (Walling, 2022). Taken together, our findings suggest the need for better attention to addressing the specific challenges of loneliness for entrepreneurs through education, public policy, and social support services within our entrepreneurial ecosystems (e.g., similar to the work of https://endingloneliness.com.au/).

5.3 │ Limitations and opportunities for future research

The findings and limitations of this study provide several opportunities for future research. First, our data cannot determine causality nor can we speculate how our findings may vary based on individual demographics, such as age, gender, or race, or organizational factors, such as stage of development, venture size, industry, or performance, due to the anonymous nature of our dataset. For example, there could be many reasons why the "heroic lone wolf" narrative evident in our data is related to positive or irrelevant primary appraisals, which future studies should investigate. When we investigated factors associated with irrelevant and benign positive appraisals in our data, it appeared that this perspective sometimes reflected a retrospective view, where successful entrepreneurs remembered their loneliness as not as bad as it actually was earlier in their startup process, and some even explicitly said they had re-appraised their experience at some point in their entrepreneurial journey, as suggested by the feedback loops in our model. A second possibility is that entrepreneurs with irrelevant or benign positive primary appraisals for loneliness have not yet been successful, but view the "health and wealth" tradeoffs as inherent in entrepreneurship (Cardon & Patel, 2015; Lerman et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2019) and ultimately worth it. Our findings may also reflect arguments regarding person-environment fit (Markman & Baron, 2003), where those who self-select into entrepreneurship may be better equipped to handle loneliness because they enter the occupation aware of and prepared for the unique stressors and autonomous work involved (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011), being people who appreciate "effortful, self-determined activities" (Stephan, 2018: 7) such that they are able to leverage the unique occupational aspects of entrepreneurship to manage them. While we found such patterns in our data, we encourage future quantitative work that examines the prominence and causal relationships of these different factors and loneliness appraisals. Additional research is needed to examine who, when, how, and why some entrepreneurs appraise loneliness as irrelevant or positive rather than stressful, as well as the individual well-being and firm-level consequences of such appraisals.

As a second limitation, we do not know whether entrepreneurs who post about loneliness on Reddit and seek support there are fundamentally different than entrepreneurs who do not do so. For example, a limitation of the anonymous nature of Reddit is that we were not able to discern the age or gender of the posters in our dataset. Based on gender and age norms for entrepreneurs and Reddit posters, Reddit data "potentially represents the experiences of individuals who more closely align with dominant norms of who is an entrepreneur" (Williamson et al., 2022: 1524). However, we do not know whether the subset of entrepreneurs who talk about their loneliness on Reddit and how they talk about it might differ from how loneliness is experienced or discussed by entrepreneurs outside of this anonymous environment. Our Reddit posters were aware of their loneliness and seeking help and advice to cope with it, which may not be the case for all entrepreneurs. Further empirical work is needed to test our theoretical model among a larger population of entrepreneurs to determine the extent to which the model overall, or its various components are generalizable to all entrepreneurs. Additionally, our data did not provide any insight into entrepreneurs' venture characteristics, such as age of the venture, size, profitability, or industry. It may be that entrepreneurs are likely to experience more or less loneliness at certain stages of the startup process (e.g., pre-launch, growth, raising funding), when they are experiencing performance lows rather than highs, or in certain industries where solo founding and social isolation is more common (e.g., drop-shipping businesses that can be run solely by one person online vs. manufactur-

ing ventures that require multiple workers). Future research could leverage secondary data or use surveys in which individual and organizational demographic data can be collected.

Third, we theorized that the feedback loops in our model can impact the factors driving loneliness as well as entrepreneurs' primary appraisals for loneliness. Yet, our data include single-point-in-time reflections and comments of entrepreneurs. As such, we are not able to track how loneliness varies over time or how it changes based on the use or effectiveness of different coping mechanisms. Future work could also focus on the potential for entrepreneurs to utilize multiple coping mechanisms to address their loneliness, either simultaneously (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Uy et al., 2013) or over time through re-appraisal processes (e.g., Thompson, et al., 2020). Future research could also look at changes in appraisals for the same stressor (in this case, loneliness) from stressful to benign over time (or vice versa), which would further contribute to the evolutionary, process-based view of loneliness recently emerging in the literature (Wright & Silard, 2021).

More practically, given our findings and extensive popular press evidence concerning the crisis of poor mental health of entrepreneurs (as noted above), it is clear that we need much more research to understand not only the experience of loneliness and ill-being of entrepreneurs (Stephan, 2018; Williamson et al., 2021), but also interventions that may help them discuss challenges they face and find the support and help they seek. As Williamson et al. (2021) note, we need to move from documenting health and well-being challenges of entrepreneurs to identifying and implementing solutions to support them. Our finding that one way entrepreneurs cope with their loneliness is by seeking advice and support through online communities such as the Reddit platform (from which we collected our data), are echoed by other recent work showing that such platforms can be a source of both information and social support (Sajjadiani et al., 2022). Yet, there are volumes of entrepreneurs not engaging in social media platforms who may also need better social or other support to help them cope with and/or address the root of their loneliness and other mental health challenges. Loneliness is still largely "perceived as a shameful topic and is stigmatized, trivialized, or ignored" (Wright & Silard, 2021: 1061). We need future research to investigate ways to destigmatize this conversation and improve the outcomes for entrepreneurs, as well as others working in extreme occupations.

6 | CONCLUSION

> "It's really hard. It's a journey that will most take you to the very bottom of your emotions, and to the very top hopefully. In-between those emotions is extreme loneliness. Basically life on steroids. Higher highs, lower lows, and lonelier loneleys." – Reddit data

Building on prior research on loneliness, well-being, and entrepreneurship, we analyzed over 9000 posts about loneliness in online entrepreneurship communities. While we found several factors consistent with prior literature on loneliness in the general population, we also found several occupational factors, outcomes, and coping responses that were unique to the extreme occupation of entrepreneurship. By integrating and applying appraisal theory to our data, we discovered novel processes through which loneliness is experienced by entrepreneurs. We encourage additional research to dig deeper into loneliness in extreme occupations and its potential positive, negative, or neutral implications.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Reddit.

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ENDNOTES

[1] While the specific keywords used for the search were "lonely" and "isolate," these terms are automatically expanded by Reddit's default search stemming. This means that our search for these terms also included the words lone, loneliness, isolated, isolation, and isolating.

[2] Due to the timing of this study, it is important to note that the physical isolation discussed by our informants was not related to lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

[3] TL;DR is internet shorthand for "too long; didn't read" to signify a summary statement of an online post.

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APPENDIX A: REDDIT AS A DATA SOURCE

In a systematic review of over 700 manuscripts that used Reddit data that were published between 2010 and 2020, Proferes et al. (2021) found that Reddit data was prevalent in both business and psychology journals. Online forums such as Reddit have become a place where individuals increasingly share work concerns, seek and offer advice, offload their negative emotions, and engage in shared coping, making them forums for "emotional social sharing" and "social coping" (Sajjadiani et al., 2022). As such, online forums have been increasingly leveraged as a data source where sensitive emotions can be captured unsolicited, creating greater ecological validity (Lawson & Matz, 2022), and authenticity, due to posters' anonymity (Amaya et al., 2021; Kafetsios et al., 2017). An additional benefit of using Reddit data is the ability to avoid social desirability or social behavior biases introduced by the presence of researchers in the field (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Prior studies have leveraged Reddit to study sensitive topics such as eating disorders (Sowles et al., 2018), gender roles (Ammari et al., 2018), and mental health (De Choudhury & De, 2014).

APPENDIX B: ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS

In order to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of our findings, we leveraged five validity procedures: member checking, disconfirming evidence or negative cases, thick description, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity. The use of member checks involves giving those experiencing the phenomenon of study a chance to react to the data and findings of a study, verify whether the findings are accurate and realistic, and in so doing add credibility to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe this procedure as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Due to the anonymous nature of Reddit, we could not engage in member checks directly with Reddit posters, so instead we discussed our findings with other entrepreneurs at several stages of our analysis process. This participant feedback regarding our emerging theorizing helped us to refine our model and validate that the loneliness phenomenon uncovered within our Reddit data extended outside of the Reddit environment.

Second, we remained open to and searched for negative cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994), or accounts that run contrary to the themes that were emerging early in our analysis (Hymer & Smith, 2022; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). For instance, our findings that entrepreneurs were not lonely or saw loneliness as a positive experience ran counter to the literature on loneliness, the bulk of the Reddit data, and our emerging theoretical model, as well as our personal expectations regarding the experience of loneliness as primarily negative. However, in order to stay true

to the data, set aside our own expectations, and remain open to the entrepreneurial loneliness phenomenon, we coded these negative cases. Through constant iteration between our data and theory, we found that our negative cases represented benign and irrelevant appraisals that are included, but not often discussed, within appraisal theory.

Third, we used thick, rich quotes throughout our findings below to provide detailed accounts of the entrepreneurial loneliness experience. These thick descriptions provide credibility by capturing and relating the experience of respondents by using their own words to describe the setting (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Further, this "groundedness" in the data increases methodological integrity (Levitt et al., 2018). Fourth, we used peer debriefing throughout our data analysis process by engaging researchers (at multiple prominent universities in addition to that of the authors) familiar with qualitative methods and psychological phenomenon in order to challenge our assumptions and methodological choices.

Finally, we employed several procedures to manage and account for our own researcher reflexivity and our personal assumptions, biases and beliefs (Creswell & Miller, 2000). First, we fostered reflexivity through acknowledgment of the paradigm through which we as researchers approached the study and its underlying assumptions. In this study we take an interpretive approach. Interpretivists believe in highly contextualized, pluralistic perspectives of socially constructed realities (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which shaped our approach to data analysis. Second, we fostered reflexivity by including multiple investigators in the analysis, enabling us to develop both complementary and divergent understandings of the entrepreneurial loneliness phenomenon emerging from our data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Overall, we believe that our approach is transparent and rigorous, and enables us to establish credibility and trustworthiness in our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and manage any potential researcher biases (Creswell, 1998).

APPENDIX C: SUPPLEMENTARY TABLES

TABLE C1 Factors Associated with Entrepreneurial Loneliness

Factors	Representative Quotes
Unique Occupational Factors	
Burden of Responsibility	"You're just facing a lot of struggles that most employees never will and can't understand. The other reason is ultimately the sole responsibility for the business is on you and often your employees etc… will critique you because they don't have the same context and you'll rarely get any thanks for the things you do to help your staff, customers etc.. as it's expected rather than appreciated." "Being a solo entrepreneur means that no one has the same burdens as you do. It is lonely." "Sure, the day to day work involves interactions with talented and dedicated people and customers that you sometimes get to know like family, but who else is there to make the tough decisions? Who else has to decide which staff to fire during a pandemic, knowing you could massive affect their lives and their families? Who else phones the bank to beg for more finance because of a bad quarter? Who else has to use their children's savings to make payroll one very bad month? Awards are great, and I share ours with the team, but they don't hear about any of the other stuff." "Heavy the head that wears the crown" "It seems like the highs and lows are more extreme. Entrepreneurship is making life more challenging at times. I doubt myself. The pressure sets in. I feel lonely"

(Continues)

TABLE C1 (Continued)

Factors	Representative Quotes
Lack of Co-worker Support	"Being an entrepreneur is like sailing out into a big blue sea without a compass. It's much different than working in a corporate environment where the infrastructure, systems and team are in place to assist in getting things done. The boss who held you accountable in your previous job is now you, and those team status meetings may feel lonely for a while." "I've made the leap last year into starting my own online business, but something I was surprised by was how much I miss having teammates and colleagues. It can get lonely - and sometimes, frankly, kinda boring - working on my own goals." "I get very lonely as a solo entrepreneur. Starting a business is stressful alone, and can be even more stressful without a team to share the experience with." "You're no longer part of "normal" social circles. You don't have company outings or lunches that large corporates organise frequently. Being a remote team means that applies doubly so. You can't even hang out with your own team members." "I mentioned something like this to my wife yesterday. I was lamenting how hard it was to stay motivated because there is practically no encouragement from anywhere. If it doesn't come from me, I'm flat on my face getting nothing done. People who work in regular jobs get that all the time (I don't know if this is true it might just be a fantasy I've built up in my mind)." "You're right - stress can be found everywhere. entrepreneurs definitely have a unique set of stressor though, without much, if any, support from colleagues." "Your friends may think you are living your dream, but the reality is that starting a business can be a highly lonely and isolating experience. Days are long, nights can be longer, and even weekends can disappear into laptop screens, spreadsheets, meetings and more.A lot of entrepreneurs miss the lively environments and jovial banter they previously thrived in"
Social Maladaptation	"I'm starting to find that when I meet up with friends I'm not interested in their discussions because I want to talk SEO, backlinking, marketing, strategies, social media etc.. I didn't go out over Christmas and new year, I worked on my business instead." "It wasn't that I hate people or wanted to be a loner. It wasn't even that I was that focused on work. I just didn't want to waste my time with people who were not taking the same steps I was to better themselves simply because I have a hard time relating to others that are just out there existing." "At the end and you finally made it? now you're a workaholic… Now you aren't comfortable at home. There's nothing happening at home. Life seems dull unless you're out there talking to people, being out there in your chosen field." "Because of my workaholic mindset, I think I've begun to automatically dismiss everyone who doesn't have the same mindset. This is a dangerous state to be in, and I want to change it." "It just came down to what I enjoyed more, time with friends or building a business. I spent less time with my friends over the years… It got to a point where I had nothing in common with most of my friends… Some people are social and can't handle this." "I made a lot of mistakes over the years and in the cold dark hell of ownership, you learn that you are the only one you can depend on. So I don't turn to anybody else… its a great way to get burned." "Ironically, entrepreneurs are often people persons and yet quite lonely because they're so consumed by their work."

(Continues)

TABLE C1   (Continued)

Factors	Representative Quotes
Lack of Resources	
Lack of Time	"Although I also know what the most important thing is in social relationships, time, but I always fall short on that"
	"honestly starting up my own thing has been kind of a lonely experience. My free hours are not weekends or night time, I'm constantly turning down going out with people to get more work done or to get ahead of work so I can have free time the next week but I often end up getting more projects that delete all plans for a social life. Turning down invites leads to people not inviting you out as much bc theres a big chance I won't be able to go."
	"It is 10 pm and I am only boarding my 1.5 hr train home, I'll be up again to be on the 7 am back. No one is up to chat casually because it is Monday. My weekends, I work also. While I get to communicate with friends and family, I don't actually have time to spend with them. I live in a work or sleep world; if I'm not working, I'm sleeping. Don't know the point of this post really, but I wanted to express that I feel this journey we take as entrepreneurs isolates us. Loneliness is one of the demons we face."
	"I've grown to realize, there is a loneliness to entrepreneurship. It's a funny paradox: they're very sociable, that's why they're in the people business, and yet they're too busy to have much of a social life."
	"Incredibly lonely. Incredibly hard at times. The January when things really started taking off in year 4 I worked 12-14 hour days for the whole month straight. No break. Just up at 6, work until the evening, fall asleep, and do it all again the next day."
Need to Grind or Hustle	"In my experience if you hustle 24/7, you lose interest in almost everything relatable to others and relationships start falling apart. The mutual interests that initially formed those connections fall to the side as you obsess over making your endeavor successful. Entrepreneurship is all consuming. Relationships are part of the fuel for that fire."
	"I had to hustle like mad, because I had to pay the bills and sometimes some contract work ends, and I've to find another. And this repeats consistently. I couldn't hang out with my peers because I was broke, tired, fearful and guilty at times, that I "needed" to keep working to ensure that we took care of clients who were in pain."
	"right now I'm completely obsessed. I'm tired myself but i just have to grind. If i don't grind everyday. I feel the day just went away wasted. My whole life has warped around my goals."
	"The ambition has a sense of loneliness to it, but the hunger keeps them going."
	"The hustle mentality. Internal pressure. And more. I think it comes down to the fact that you are your own best friend and worst enemy. You can spend so much time alone in your head when getting started with a business. If you are your own worst enemy, this isolation is a a recipe for disaster."
Isolation	
Social Isolation	"I can count all my friends on a single hand now, with a finger spare."
	"100% true especially if you start becoming super successful, jealousy, envy from existing friends. Then meeting new people can be a challenge also.""I've reached a point where I'll have a few hours of free time and I have nothing to do *but* work because I don't have anyone to hang out with."
	"Social circles and sometimes even relationships seems to be sacrificed for the greater good."
	"The entrepreneurial journey is lonesome. It also takes a massive toll on personal relationships. It is great to have peers, but in the end, plan on taking this trip alone."
	"People make freinds when there is repeated interaction in a constant environment. An entrepreneur's lifestyle is the antithesis of that."

TABLE C1   (Continued)

Factors	Representative Quotes
Cognitive Isolation	"I think it comes down to the fact that you are your own best friend and worst enemy. You can spend so much time alone in your head when getting started with a business. If you are your own worst enemy, this isolation is a a recipe for disaster." "There's not that many people who have the same experiences as you so it's sometimes hard to find others to talk about these issues with." "One thing that non-entrepreneurs won't understand is what drives you and what stresses you. So maybe they can't relate to you when - on Monday afternoon - you're wondering how exactly you can shake down accounts receivable to get the 20 grand you need to meet Friday's payroll, or what it feels like to land your first $9/month customer on an MVP, or why at 2am you want to talk about how your FB ad campaign finally hit a ROAS over 1.0. Maybe they can't understand giving up your 6 figure corporate job for the hope and dream of a 5 figure job with high stress and longer hours (for NOW only, of course). And they definitely can't understand that first moment where you realize you just conjured something out of nothing and POOF you no longer need a boss EVER AGAIN." "It's not that I am surrounded by the wrong people, it's just that there is no one that will ever care about your baby as much as you do. I spent all morning having anxiety attacks, from 6 am to 10:30 am, and I tried to talk to 2 friends just to get relief, but no one really understood what it meant for me." "Bigger the stakes more lonely are you with your fears, purpose and such. No social circle will ever understand your battles, even if they are fellow businessmen." "To me, Lonely and Alone are very different. As an entrepreneur for 4 years, I enjoy to be alone much of the time so I can work on the business without distractions. However being lonely as someone who your circle can't relate to is different and difficult. Even thought I have had emotional support from friends and family, the journey will still lead you to places others may find hard to understand" "I talk to a lot of people especially the costumers and I usually enjoy it despite being shy by nature. I just found myself feeling isolated despite all the interaction."
Physical Isolation	"I am now 100% digital. I can wake up when I want, and I can go wherever I want… I worked extremely hard to gain those things and it's awesome… but you have to remember most people don't have that kind of flexibility. So often times it's just me and my computer screen allllll day." "The isolation of working from home solo wasn't something I was expecting." "When I started out as a solo entrepreneur I thought working from home was ideal. I had a great social life at night and enjoyed the freedom I had during the day to run errands if needed, work out, take my pup out, etc. What I didn't see coming was how lonely I felt after a year and how I slowly, slowly had started choosing more and more to isolate myself. Very unhealthy." "Sometimes it is lonely, just me and my numbers…" "I feel alone most of the time. I work solo but have a few online collaborators. So chatting on skype can help, but there are days where I don't see anyone unless I go out to grab groceries." "I kinda like the work but i really don't know if i could pursue this. I love to interact and joke around with people and be part of a community. This is exactly the opposite of sitting in my room alone behind a laptop and working on a website or analyzing /making ads."

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TABLE C2 Primary Appraisals of Loneliness

Primary Appraisal	Representative Quotes
Irrelevant	"Business is all about relationships. I've been an entrepreneur for 12 years, never been lonely. Now I hide from my clients!" "Don't have this problem. Work best by myself, can't really stand working with people. There are times I go weeks without speaking to another human being." "Wonder how could any entrepreneur ever find the time to be "lonely"...? There is so much to do. 10 Years in, no regrets." "I've learned to enjoy my own company and become my own best friend, so loneliness is not a problem." "If you're losing everything while becoming an entrepreneur **you're doing something wrong**. There's no way around it. The business is wrong, or you are wrong for the business." "Loneliness? If you're lonely in business, clearly you're doing something wrong." "Growing a business is hard work and you have to put in the time, but you have 168 hours in a week if you can't find time to cuddle with your girlfriend AND build a business you're doing something wrong." "Right now I've been alone for the past 6 months as I'm working on a new business idea, and have decided to come live in a small village where I can just concentrate for this time. Not lonely in the slightest." "actually i don't really feel lonely cus i always have something to do."
Benign Positive	"As a entrepreneur and introvert… it is heaven. With a splash of socializing with vendors and clients every so often." "At some point, you need to embrace the solitude. There is value in it, in getting to know yourself better." "As an entrepreneur in the beginning the most beautiful thing is being alone because you can find out more about yourself and what your capable of." "If your lonely they you have pulled away from the non starters, the wannabes, and you are on your path." "Once you reach that point where people don't understand you and your alone is when you know you've made it. When you know that your in that 1% grinding and trying to build your business and build a better life. Learning to be alone and do things by yourself is one of the best things you can do for yourself. I'm not saying to be alone forever but learn to be okay by yourself" "As an entrepreneur for 4 years, I enjoy to be alone much of the time so I can work on the business without distractions" "The ability to enjoy solitude is a requirement to be a successful entrepreneur it is lonely at times."
Stressful	"That's a good way to burn yourself quickly or end up rich with no friends or family." "Long-term isolation is not something to celebrate. Us entrepreneurs need to get better educated on mental health, b/c the misinformation being spread is just awful… Loneliness is never a solution, it is a wound." "I've read a lot of posts where people feel lonely while building their businesses. Working hard on your business to make your entrepreneurial dreams come true. Some days you are very motivated and some days you feel dreadful and loneliness hits you in the face. Especially when things aren't going the way you want them to go. Mental health is very important and I think everyone should take care of themselves." "If you are operating on burnout, it's just a matter of time that you run out of fuel and in the end, you may even lose what you have built because of this sacrifice!" "My intuition is that too much isolation is bad. So many companies shut down due to founder burnout, sacrificing speed for wellbeing might be worth it for longevity? Hard to say" "The hardest part of getting an early stage business off the ground might not be the actual work involved. You will battle yourself, you might battle your friends and family, and you will be lonely, especially if like me you're a one-person team working from home." "I've had a few moments where I have found myself on my own with a tear or two running down my face…partly from loneliness, pressure and frustration….even when things are going right."

TABLE C3 Outcomes of Loneliness

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Outcomes Consistent with Loneliness Literature	
Declines in Entrepreneurs' Physical and Mental Health	"This past summer I completely burned myself out. For the first time in my life I experienced depression. Frankly, I think it was negligent decision making that led to that. Working till 2am thanks to stimulants, no exercise, poor eating habits, isolation/loneliness, and the fact that I didn't have a clear sense of where I or my business was headed." "I hate being so alone….. I fucking hate it. It's especially depressing because most people have friends, people to talk too and such…. I don't have anything like that and I always feel really sad when I see other people socializing and having fun." "When I first started on this journey to entrepreneurship, it was because I wanted to solve a problem that was bringing me a lot of pain. Then when you couple that with the inherent anxiety and stress associated with building a company, the isolation from friends and family (who often times cant relate or can be outright disrespectful) it is a recipe for all different kinds of mental health issues." "just…. I just can't take it anymore….. It hurts so much….. I don't even know what to do now.. the fact I don't have any friends and my self loathing is getting worse….. My mind is starting to fall apart. I've been trying so hard to improve my life… So hard…. I feel like such a failure….." "solo founder is the most depressing thing I've experienced. 11 months of waking up, working, eating, sleeping." "There's no doubt starting a new startup can feel lonely, depressive, and frustrating." "You can't be "on" all the time - you will become chronically exhausted" "I spent all morning having anxiety attacks" "There's a reason suicide rates are high among entrepreneurs." "For about half of my entrepreneurial career, I haven't had a good friend group, and it really took a toll on my health and happiness."
Decreases in Entrepreneurs' Productivity/ Performance	"Sometimes sole founders do get a bit isolated and start letting their pedal off the gas" "This inner psychological conflict mixed with setting your own hours can lead to serious procrastination" "I find it very difficult to keep productive in an unstructured solitary environment. It's easy to feel lonely and demotivated." "I've worked a lot over these 1.5 years. Probably too much. And recently I've just felt very little motivation to even open my laptop, let alone work. I've done practically nothing for the last 2 weeks, and yet, I'm still tired, still no motivation, and lowkey feel kinda depressed." "It makes me so sad that i don't always have the force to work on my business, i feel like there's no purpose in realizing my dreams if if there's no women next me." "Currently I'm in that state, I'm not on my A game emotionally and I couldn't get any work done today" "Also one of the most important things is that you have social contacts, if you are completely alone, sitting in your room, your mind will fall into some kind of darkness where it's difficult to get anthing done." "The Entrepreneur as a martyr is a good way to burn yourself out and get poorer performance because "it has to be me" means you can't rely on your team to augment your skills with what they are best at." "Sure, you could grind your ass off for 18 hours a day alone, sleep, then rinse and repeat, but if you're miserable I highly doubt you're using those 18 hours effectively."

(Continues)

TABLE C3 (Continued)

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Increases in Occupational Exit and Venture Failure	
Occupational Exit	"We all have been depressed in our own businesses. I wanted to quit my own business at least once a month." "Your wellbeing must be a priority before business because with out it, there's no business." "This lack of love make me not wants to continue my business, it's really hard to focus on my company when i lack love" "Ive tried to quit my business to have a more "balanced" life" "And the prophetic Steve Jobs advice – 'You have to really love what you do. If you don't, you'll quit.'" "And people that quit aren't bad - they're sane." "I just need some people around me and I'm not in a place yet where i can hire people. Should i continue or quit?" "You can definitely quit – and you know, that would be okay. Not all businesses work, and I'm sure you've developed enormous experience just in this whole process. There's a silver lining in there as badly as you're feeling right now."
Venture Failure	"I wasn't depressed because I was failing at things, I was failing at things because I was depressed." "Burying all that inside will either kill you or kill the company, and then you. That very unhealthy and terrible business." "I have lost everyone from my past due to my mental health struggles and also lost my business." "I have been through all of these feelings over the last 10 years of running my business. You have to do what's best for you, even if that means sacrificing things like employees… **or even** the business altogether and trying something new." "Happened and still happinig right now once my childhood friend used to work with me it wasn't so lonely back then i m trying to convince him to partner with me maybe it will remedy to the loneliness but if can't i will sell the business and concentrate on something else" "Having gone through multiple sole entrepreneurial journeys and losing 2 girlfriends for that reason, the very hard and painful lesson I learn is that social health is also a very key factor for the success of any venture. Poor social health = losing everything." "In the end, you are the most important asset of your business and that means that taking care of yourself both physically and mentally is crucial for your business to survive!" "At times it can _feel_ that you are alone… but as has been said in other comments, if you act as some kind of lone martyr….your business is doomed. And so are you."

TABLE C4   Problem-Focused Secondary Appraisals

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Making Connections	
Make/deepen like-minded connections	"Find a group of other business owners that you can meet with semi regularly. I find that even though we may be in completely different industries, we all deal with the same issues." "One way I've been able to overcome this tendency of isolation is to proactively network with other people who are in my same shoes. This gets me out of my own head." "You're an entrepreneur, you should also start making friends with your tribe - entrepreneurs. Keep other friends, but only your entrepreneur friends will ever understand the issues you're facing." "find a charity club or young professionals organization. Rotary, Toastmasters, Active 20-30, Young professionals network, etc. One thing these places have in common are people that are go-getters and always looking to make things happen." "I eventually found a peer group of ∼10-12 other entrepreneurs running similar companies as myself." "would encourage you to seek other entrepreneurs like yourself no matter where they are and put some structure around connecting." "I'd recommend looking into YEO (Young Entrepreneurs Organization) and YPO (Young Presidents Organization). I joined YPO in my last startup. Find an surround yourself with people that are going through he same experiences. I've made some of my best friends through YPO."
Find a mentor, co-founder, or employees	"I'm a solopreneur and my best advice is to get a mentor." "You can also hire a professional mentor in your industry for advice and helps with loneliness" "Highly suggest getting a coach if you can afford it. Even if for a short period of time… You just need someone to talk to sometimes (i.e., get out of your own head)." "That's why you get a business coach who you can confide in. A professional who will at the very least listen to your problems to provide you an outlet and at best, give you useful insights." "I have been so lonely in the start, but now I have a partner join with me and I feel no longer lonely" "Having a co-founder you like (i.e. a friend) makes it less lonely and more fun." "Find a partner who compliments your skillsets. They will keep you on track and you guys can enjoy each others company and success together." "Invest in level-upping yourself and hire the people you need."
Working in co-working /shared spaces	"Thank God I joined a coworking space, best decision I ever took for my social life and mental health." "I would suggest looking for a coworking space in your location. I think it might be helpful for you to be around other like-minded people. You'll meet some new friends who have the entrepreneurial mindset and you can bounce ideas of them. It fills your networking/relationships need you mentioned." "I joined a coworking office like WeWork, where you're surrounded by other people running businesses and you can make new friends there. Tour a few and feel out the vibe. A majority of my close friends are now people I met in that office space!" "If you're still starting up, you don't have an office and employees, you should look up the nearest co-working space and set-up base there. It's a great way to stay connected and find others with similar interests. And also might help you form a healthy work routine by getting you out of the house, while saving money by not renting a private office." "You could try to find a co-working space" "See if you have a coworking office nearby where you can spend a few times a week and socialize." "Maybe find a coworking space so you can interact with new people on a regular basis." "Sometimes it helps to just change things up a bit and get out of the house when you're working alone" "There's ways around the solitary environment, you can find others to work with even if they're on different things. I think that's why coworking spaces have been so popular. Its that comfort of being close to people but not interrupted."

(Continues)

TABLE C4 (Continued)

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Make/deepen non-work connections (e.g., friends/ family outside of work)	"While I go along this route, I'm realizing how important it is to have someone you can talk to everyday and about anything. Not an industry advisor, a coach or a mentor who gives you practical business advice. Just someone who knows your story and who listens to you. A person you can be 100% yourself, with no facade. A person you can show your vulnerability to and share your moments of depression and enthusiasm. Not just about your business, but also about your personal life" "I dont recommend searching for people who are just like you or entrepreneurs/wantrepreneurs. You'll be miserable and go crazy if you talk business 24/7. Find folks who are different than you and spend time with them to compliment who they are." "The cure for loneliness is not companionship but intimacy. Let me say that again: the cure for loneliness is not companionship but intimacy. You need a person or group of people that you can be really close to. That's why the gym and coffee shops don't cut it. Now that you have clarity on what you need, it's up to you to find where to get it. I like churches - there are certain expectations of privacy in a church and I'm a private person. Things you can say and do and pray for each other about. Those are very intimate actions." "Do I seek out people with the same ambition, drive, or interests? Nope! I don't need a support group. Instead, I spend time with people that enjoy the same activities I do." "its lonely at the top, that's why you should bring a friend. A spouse/life partner is one of the greatest friendships you can have because they'll always be in your corner." "So in terms of actual advice. 'Hey old friend, I miss hanging out with you. Sorry I haven't been around or found time to connect lately, I got a bit busy and obsessed, I still am, but would love to reconnect again a bit more frequently.'"
Engaging in Activities	
Travel/Sports/ Hobbies/ Classes to meet people	"Finding new friends as an adult sucks in general. However, the one angle that really seems to consistently work for finding new friends as an adult is to pursue a hobby or activity that can be done socially. Pick up an instrument and join a band." "social hobbies where you are forced to see the same people regularly. Crossfit, jiujitsu, golf or disc golf, any team sport, car groups, etc. Something competitive is even better." "Take the time to develop hobbies and interests outside of work, ideally something active and outdoors. Naturally, you will interact with others who share similar interests and develop relationships as a result." "Try traveling solo to places with big expat communities. Also try simply joining clubs or leagues or associations that meet near where you're from to make new friends." "My social fix comes from martial arts (BJJ to be exact). I work from Home, and need this as my outlet. It's much different than going to a gym and exercising, as you need to partner and collaborate with others. The camaraderie is great." "Becoming a gym rat is what I did, I go to my climbing gym 4-5 days a week and I know all the other regulars" "Find a hobby which will find you a community. If you like hiking, then find people that hike, etc. Meetups are really great." "Take up a new sport, join clubs, meet people, etc" "The best friends are like-minded people. So if you enjoy comic books, ComicCon is a great place to meet like-minded people. Mingle and some will become friends. If you like wines, wine tastings. If you like Art, go to Museums and Art galleries."

(Continues)

TABLE C4 (Continued)

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Get a side-hustle or job	*"I got a part time job at a tea cafe by my house that I would frequently go to work on my business at, and it's changed everything. I have made some very solid friendships and honestly, the customer interactions are so much more valuable that they seem, it's nice to break up my week with something else easy and fun. It's a very chill job, I work there two days a week and that does it for me."* *"I was able to automate a couple of things and hire a part time assistant to free me up quite a bit. With my extra time I became a realtor which is quite a social job and really expands your network of other business owners. If you're able to free up some time and start another, more social business it could help a lot."* *"if you feel lonely, maybe it's worth to doing some contracting work so that you can interact with other colleagues until you find your own"* *"I eventually got a part time job for this very reason. I hustle in my spare time now. I'm still mostly alone during my hustle hours but at least I'm getting some socialization at work."* *"Good step may be to keep a day job, so your sanity frays a little less."* *"Bartend on the weekends or something."* *"Start something new as a "Side business". write a blog… start a youtube channel..."* *"As for your fear of money and loneliness - maybe get a couple shifts at some part-time job"*
Changing Mindset	
Set boundaries	*"I'll recommend setting up a specific time every day at which you stop working. It has been proven many times over that we can not be productive for lengthy period of time - there is no point in working a 100 hours a week."* *"It sounds like you need to rebalance a bit and trade 10 of those 80 working hours for something else, mix it up. Spend an hour a day resting or doing some hobby. And an hour a day just corresponding with people in some way."* *"Make time on your calendar to socialize, the same way you would put time on your calendar for important tasks or meetings."* *"I used to think balance wasn't necessary, and that I would get better results if I just focused on one thing and grinded it out. But I ended up letting all the other areas of my life fall apart. Now that I've found work-life balance the new connections I'm making and experiences I'm having are teaching me so much that I couldn't learn at home in isolation, and helping my business grow."* *"Try getting out at least once a week and make a conscious effort to socialize with others. We as entrepreneurs sometimes have difficulty stepping away from work because we are focused on the next project or goal instead of enjoying the journey there…get out and meet some people."* *"Don't work yourself into oblivion. Prioritize your physical and mental health."*
Accept responsibility for loneliness	*"You need to have an On-Off switch. You have to learn how to turn it off. 99.99% of people will not relate to someone building a business. It's a fact. The on-switch is when the hustle is going full throttle. You're working with a Domination Frame of Mind. The off-switch is where you are just your normal self. You go out and talk to pretty girls. You make them laugh by being charming and never taking yourself too seriously. Totally comfortable in your own skin with nothing to prove to anyone. You focus on other people instead of yourself. You talk to other cool dudes and find what things you have in common."* *"Some people can handle a lot more isolation than others, you need to find out how much socializing you need and then hit that mark and not over or under do it if your focus is your business."* *"Your wellbeing must be a priority before business because with out it, there's no business."* *"Step down from the Hard Working Mentality."* *"When you have a business, it is what you create it to be. If it's lonely, you and only you can make it not lonely."* *"Life is lonely. Only you can make it otherwise."* *"After many years of asking myself that question, I was choosing to 'feel' lonely and be 'lonely'"* *"Thing is, we only have so much time in a day to do things. You decided to spend that time on your dream which is perfectly fine. But that came at the cost of not keeping up your social life. Similarly, if you focus on being social, you'll have less time to work on your dream. Nothing can be done about it, it's all about the trade offs. You just have to choose which one is more important to you."* *"Right now you are your own worst enemy."*

TABLE C5 Emotion-Focused Secondary Appraisals

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Making Connections	
Get a pet	"When I ran my business, my dog was 2IC, head of security and director of keeping things positive. It helped a hell of a lot to deal with the loneliness. I actually miss those days now, we were a team." "I also have a dog which keeps me company and gets me to go out on walks and away from the computer." "Get dog or cat and hustle." "I would start by adopting a pet. Every time you come home your pet will be super happy to see you." "If you just want a source of unconditional love get a dog." "I think the suggestion of a dog is a great start. It's basic needs of exercise, companionship and food are all dependent on you. It forces you not to work or it will literally die. Hell even a cat is a good start (I'd suggest a kitten, but not a puppy – a trained younger dog is ideal)." "Bought a cat and a dog. Changed my life also. Get a companion."
Find status peers/ buy friends or partners	"let the cry babies cry - find new friends in your new income bracket" "I've come to the conclusion that folks with money, tend to hang around with other folks who have money. As there's no jealousy there." "It's time to upgrade. No one will like you more for rolling around in the mud." "Now you're moving up in the world. It's time to upgrade your social circle." "If you'd like to talk business, try just going to a nicer, upscale bar, cigar bar, etc. Places where successful people would hang out. You can't be at the local Chili's grill expecting Warren Buffett to walk in." "Join a nice country club. Boom. Instant successful circle of people." "Escorts until you get to the billion dollar payout. Then friends come with the money later in life."
Engage in digital connections	"I outsource my friends on Upwork." "Find your community either on reddit, Twitter, or any other place and you'll feel less lonely." "Online groups are also great - Facebook, reddit, slack" "Go where people like you hang out**. For me it was internet forums and subreddits. But there's facebook, discord, telegram etc. The logic is simple. To make friends and share ideas you gotta be where others are. Generally speaking smaller communities are better than big ones. This is because there's fewer posts, which means your posts (and others) won't be missed. You'll all know each other by username, which gives a familiar feel - which is a natural bridge to easy friendships." "Twitter and Discord. I've been lucky to find a ton of great twitter spaces that are related to tech that I love. There are probably some decent spaces on entrepreneurship that you could join." "You can also start a facebook group for entrepreneurs/marketers/professionals in your town, odds are there are more people just like you than you" "Most of the time, Entrepreneur youtubers has their youtube discord/ telegram channel where their community can hang out, you can join their group and find some friends there, works for me, and that's what I did."

(Continues)

TABLE C5 (Continued)

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Engaging in Activities	
Travel/Sports/Hobbies/ Classes to feel better	"try a vacation somewhere farther south to get out of your winter funk" "Change your environment. Almost all depression is caused by your environment, ask every thing physician out there. Sometimes you must hit the reset button, or just get out of where you currently are. Live in Michigan? Go to Scottsdale.(MJ Demarco reference)This is my life example: Depressed/Sick in Boston? Go to San Francisco. Depressed/Sick in San Francisco? Go to Los Angeles. Depressed/Sick in Los Angeles? Go to Portland. Your environment is the #1 reason for depression and for life success. Get a drastic scenery change." "Recently have just forced myself into a different routine, haven't been developing as much, try to go enjoy running daily since the weather has been nice (usually helps with mood and productivity)." "Force yourself to take the time off and fill that free time with new hobbies and experiences." "People say exercise, but it's not about exercise and more about finding a hobby that relieves stress and takes you out of the real world briefly." "grow some plants" "reading in general increases self-esteem quite a lot - you just know more stuff and can talk various different subjects." "What I personally did was keep learning." "Listening to podcasts helps."
Stay busy/ work harder	"Maybe it's not that you need love, maybe it's because you feel that you need love when you really just need to sit down and work and make things happen for yourself." "I keep busy so I don't ever really even feel lonely." "I just put in my hours and try to be better at my job every week. Some weeks I feel like a champion, some weeks I feel like a failure. No matter what I take forward steps. Hours every week, just like a job." "Divert your emotions to something else. You'll find you don't have time to be down." "No free time - if you want to get depressed, take a vacation. You can only reflect if you have time." "I keep busy so I don't ever really even feel lonely"
Use alcohol/ drugs to escape	"I'd like to add that the time I was the loneliest was when I wasn't completely living true to my own nature. It might take a time to discover your true nature - it took some LSD and a lot of smoking weed and walking on the beach promenade while listening to some audiobooks to really click for me." "Alcohol, then nicotine." "I smoke weed and drink wine to relax. I have to, because the stress is just so high." "Take a good hit of lsd or some other introspective drug and sort your mind out." "Just wait until you're 21 and go to a bar and get shit faced every time your are celebrating. That will solve your loneliness even though I really hope you are successful enough soon."
Take care of physical health	"Work out and build a healthy body, sort out your mental issues (we all have them), and have a solid life." "I would add to make physical fitness a priority. Exercise will help with coping with stress and also with the release of serotonin you might find your mood changing." "One thing I would consider is optimizing your health through nutrition, health and fitness. Hormones and neurotransmitters play such a big impact on how we feel, our moods, and our attitudes." "Get plenty of sleep, exercise frequently, eat well." "Some advice from someone who's been there, get exercise, get vitamin d, try to sleep on a routine as best as possible." "take care of your body.** shave, walk, eat home made food, learn to cook, use creams, and dress nice. your appearance is your selling point more than the product it self" "Exercise. Sunlight. Sleep. Omega-3's"

TABLE C5   (Continued)

Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Take care of mental health	"I talked with someone today that thought about his mental health as a sort of "training." He was an athlete before becoming an entrepreneur. He said that if he didn't train his body, how could he expect to perform at a high level? Now, he thinks about his mental health in the same way. If he doesn't put in the work with meditation, counseling, self-exploration, etc, then how can he expect to improve his mental health?" "Ultimately, what helped me was a ton of talk therapy and simply prioritizing my own well-being." "Next time you feel a powerful sense of loneliness, sit quietly and meditate on the feeling" "For me it's about priorities - no doubt I have a mission to continue building my company. But, at the same time, I'm building my mental strength through therapy, meditation, cold exposure, etc." "hypnosis, meditation recordings help a lot at bed time, that's when your mind is programmable as well. great for relaxation and getting mind off things" "I've always known that I feel best when I spend time on myself (meditation and a workout in the morning)" "There's just sooo many things out there that can help (meditation, exercise, cold showers/plunges, deep breathing, journaling, therapy/counseling, CBD, etc)" "For me, for the moment, journaling and therapy (no drugs), are how I am deal in with the day to day." "# 1. Journaling your thoughts and feelings.This has helped me so much throughout these times. Instead of keeping the thoughts in your head, you simply write down how you feel can be such a huge relief. You basically dissect where the loneliness comes from and write everything down can make things a lot clearer."
Changing Mindset	
Change attitude/reframe negative emotions	"Just give yourself time. The point is that number of people with whom you can talk will decrease as your mindset will grow faster than the one of your peers. I went into mode where I got used to be lonely that spending time with people after required some effort." "I've been at this for over 15 years. It is a lonely occupation most times. Nobody can really identify with what you do or understand the struggles and stresses you live with each day. But it is part of the deal. Get used to it, because it doesn't change." "Its a lonely road my friend. You must embrace it." "As a entrepreneur yes you are lonely in 90 percent of time and i got used to it" "Never show weakness to those you work with, never tell your spouse your problems, always say less than necessary. Eagles fly alone." "Accept the loneliness or stop being an entrepreneur." "if you were getting constant social stimulation a while ago, then the mind is kind of going through a withdrawl. Like an addiction withdrawl, give yourself some time with people every now and then, but know that it's going to pass and you will be so engrossed in your work that you won't miss it." "The art of being alone is real and it's something you must master." "Slowly reduce your dependence on social stimulus for feeling happy and complete."

(Continues)

TABLE C5 (Continued)

| Coping Approach	Representative Quotes
Regulate emotions by focusing on the future and delaying gratification	"It's about doing the internal work first, then achieving success second" "Investing in yourself and your future is the best thing you can do and always worth the effort." "I tell myself that I'll be happier *when I'm further along and meet better people* but holding out for fulfillment doesn't seem healthy." "you gotta do shit now that your future self will thank you for" "You can make it a bit easier if you only focus on making money. Forget everything fun, friends, happiness, etc just focus on making that $ (don't forget your family) This works great for me, because I start young (20s)… I chose to give up those so that I can retire and spend time with my family at my 40s and secure a good future for the next generation" "All the hard work can get lonely, but I know I love my work. And I know later I will be so proud of the work I did and that is what I believe matters." "keep grinding. It will payoff." "The loneliness comes with creativity. Social circles and sometimes even relationships seems to be sacrificed for the greater good. Then one day you look up and your entire social circle contains every type of person that you need to bring your ideas into fruition (networking). It'll be just fine in the end. Keep pushing!!" "For me it feels lonely and I am in fact the most alone I've ever been. My only trick is to remember why I am doing this and to visualize the good moments that will come."

APPENDIX D: SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURE
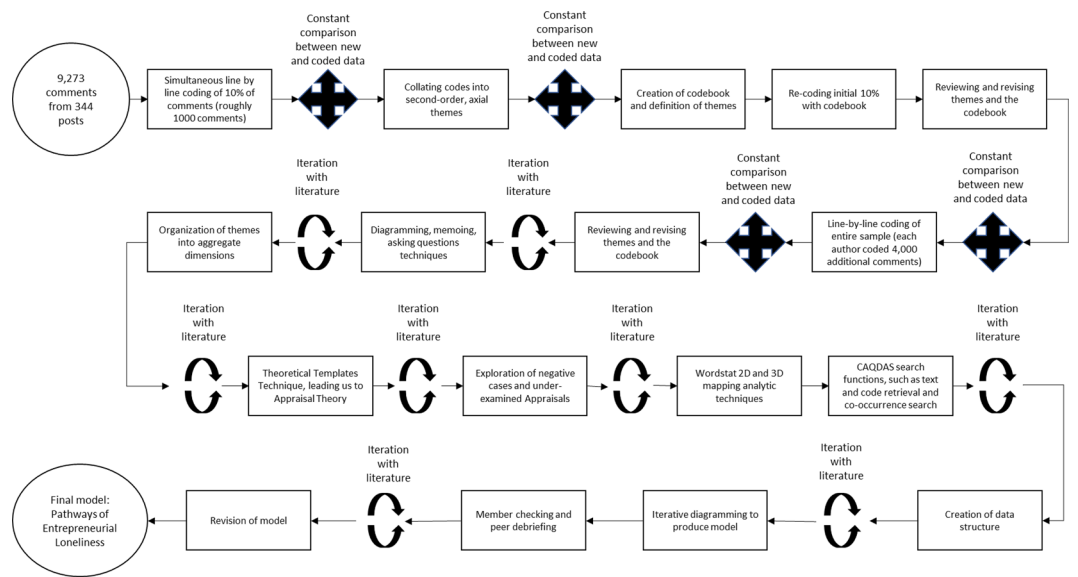
FIGURE 4 Data coding and analysis process.