

**Adolescents' Sense of Mattering and Connection to Well-Being
During Pandemic Isolations**

Jocelyn MacLeod

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Dr. Grace Ukasoanya: Supervisor

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Abstract

In winter 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 or the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020) resulted in forced periods of home isolation. Social isolations were encouraged in some countries and strongly enforced in others to reduce the spread of the virus and “flatten the curb” (Marques et al., 2020, p.1). Manitoba school closures resulted in a loss of sports and activities and face-to-face contact with peers outside of the family home. Initial surveys flagged mental health risks to youth and health care providers and schools sought protective factors. This research looks at how youth experienced these periods of isolation, and their sense of mattering and connection to well-being during this time.

During a pandemic or period of crisis, there could be a new kind of urgency to feel that one matters or to support others in developing this feeling of mattering, (Flett & Heisel, 2020). Using a qualitative research approach, this study aims to 1) understand how adolescents describe their sense of mattering during the pandemic within the context of their personal experience and 2) understand how this may have been related to their well-being. The growing body of quantitative research on mattering points to its power as a protective factor in well-being (Schlossberg, 1989; Marshall, 2001; Tucker et al., 2010; Marshall et al., 2019); in the case of feelings of anti-mattering, however, there can be a detrimental impact (Giangrasso et al., 2022).

The findings show that youth recalled experiences of disruption to their habitual routines and daily lives. They sought connections with friends and peers only after the initial month or two of isolation. Overall, a sense of mattering was shared by all participants. Many felt a sense of mattering when family or friends spent time with them. All youth reported a sense of mattering when they took action to connect and improve the lives of other people or take part in shared

responsibilities. Proximal relationships in the family home strengthened this sense of mattering more than relationships with friends or school.

Finding ways to help youth understand how they matter and showing them that they matter could have positive impacts on their overall well-being and may even create a chain reaction that leads to an increased sense of mattering and well-being for others. What the youth shared in this study suggests the need for ongoing research in the area, especially with the adolescent population.

Keywords: mattering, adolescents, youth, teens, well-being, mental health, COVID-19, isolation, pandemic, experience

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Adolescent's Sense of Mattering During Pandemic Periods of Isolation

Chapter One: Introduction

Study Purpose

When considering factors that can mediate the mental health effects of a pandemic or crisis, a strong sense of mattering to others and oneself is paramount. “Mattering” is described as “the feeling of being important to others in ways that give people the sense that they are valued, and other people care about them” (Flett & Heisel, 2020). Its importance is becoming increasingly recognized as a key predictor of well-being (Rayle, 2006; France & Finney, 2009, Flett, 2018a, 2019; Flett & Heisel, 2020). The term mattering is often used interchangeably with words such as worthiness, acceptance, importance, sense of purpose, relevance, and concepts such as a sense of belonging and self-esteem. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) pioneered the concept of mattering through their research on self-esteem and defined it as:

A motive: the feeling that others depend on us are interested in us, are concerned. with our fate or experience us as an ego-extension exercise a powerful influence. on our actions. (p. 165)

Tovar et al.'s 2009 study with a diverse group of college students further highlights the distinct qualities of mattering. They proposed a construct definition of mattering that included perceived marginality, being perceived as support and an active participant, a supportive learning environment, and school fit (Tovar et al., 2009, p. 159).

The study will provide the opportunity for youth to have a voice in sharing and interpreting their own experiences about how they mattered and how this may have affected their well-being. While the intent is not to explore students' perceptions about existing mattering

interventions in schools, by hearing more mattering stories of students, we may begin to understand the value of mattering as a resource during a pandemic or crisis.

With each stage of human development comes varying levels of growth and change. Adolescent development weighs heavily on the psychological and social experience. It can be characterized by “the transitional phase of growth and development between childhood and adulthood” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). During this period of maturation, teens observe social, physical, and emotional changes while developing their identity and finding their place in society. In 1968, Erik Erikson wrote that adolescents might experience a crisis while navigating through these changes and that an adverse event could bring growth, build strength and resiliency, or it could lead to maladjustment and further isolation (Erikson, 1968). As a psychological resource, mattering can aid in developing resiliency in times of stress or crisis (Flett, 2020; Ma & Miller, 2020; Ng et al., 2006). Alternatively, periods of transition could arouse feelings of marginalization and not mattering (Schlossberg, 1989).

When one considers the most vulnerable populations in Canada likely to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, should we consider the fragility of adolescents? Physically, adolescents are seen as a healthier sector of the population (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013), and less at risk for COVID-19 complications or mortality than older adults (Chen et al., 2020; Imam et al., 2020). In the prime of their social and identity development, however, teens are consistently hurdling transitions in their race to adulthood.

Could this glimmering age that brags the most heightened sense of social awareness, withstand the psychosocial impacts of forced social isolation? Research on related literature suggests that at the age of adolescence, youth are navigating how to balance expectations from their parents, peers, and society while developing their self-concept. Any environmental

disruptions could upset this balance and lead to psychological distress. (Dixon et al., 2009). A review of emerging studies has documented how adolescents are vulnerable, in their developmental stage, to mental health impacts as their lives as they know them are disrupted (Samji et al., 2022). When we consider what protective factors may mediate the effects of COVID-19 isolations on youth well-being, a sense of mattering may be integral as the importance of mattering has emerged as a vital asset in building resilience and coping (Flett, 2018a, 2018b). Dixon et al.'s research (2009) also shows that a sense of mattering seems to be “highly influential in adolescents” during environmental disruptions (p. 303).

Despite being perceived as having good physical health, adolescent psychological health may flag more significant. A cross-country Statistics Canada study done during the first COVID-19 isolation reported that all age groups expressed lower levels of mental health than the Canadian Community Health Survey showed in 2018. The group surveyed aged 15-24 revealed a more dramatic dip. Only 42% of youth reported that they believed they were in excellent or very good mental health during the first COVID-19 isolation; a noticeable drop from 62% in 2018 (Findlay & Arim, 2020). Similarly, across the globe, in a study of children, grades 2-6 in China, higher numbers of depression and anxiety symptoms were reported than in earlier studies before COVID-19 (22.6% and 18.9%, Xie et al., 2020, p. E1). Furthermore, in 2020 the Centre for Disease Control reported hospital data that showed that emergency mental health visits increased in children by 44% from 2019-2020 (Leeb et al., 2020).

Although these foreseen periods of isolation cannot be compared to the feelings of social isolation and interruption of school caused by war or the devastating loss of disasters like Hurricane Katrina (Teasdale et al., 2013), much can be learned from research on the impacts on youth following these events. Abramson et al.'s (2010) research into the emotional disturbance

of youth after the hurricane suggests “a disruption of ties to civic institutions such as schools and medical care can negatively affect a child’s physical, mental and social development” (p. S18).

The Importance of Mattering when Well-being may be at Risk

Youth around the world experience sudden confinement during a developmental stage in their lives when they seek autonomy and independence. Several researchers sounded the alarm to raise awareness of the vulnerability of this population to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety (Listernick & Badawy, 2021; Racine et al., 2021). In their global meta-analysis of the increase in mental health symptoms in youth, Racine et al. (2021) concurred overall that “the COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated restrictions and consequences, appear to have taken a considerable toll on youth and their psychological well-being” (p. 1148). Although adolescents may have shared restrictions on their freedom during the COVID-19 isolations, it can be assumed that each of their experiences was unique. A sense of mattering or not mattering in their interpersonal and social lives could impact how they interpret their isolation experience and their well-being. Not everyone will experience the COVID-19 period as a crisis, however, and some might eventually see this as a welcome moment in time. One student who inspired my desire to research the topic and to hear differing views on being in isolation expressed an increased sense of belonging and well-being during the isolations. He shared, “2020 was good for me. Everyone stopped, not just me. It gave me a chance to catch up” (B.W., 2020). If this drastic change was perceived as a “traumatic experience,” it may have led to a period of growth. Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is described as “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Dixon et al.’s research (2009) shows that a sense of mattering “seems to be highly influential in adolescents

during environmental disruptions” (p. 303). The COVID-19 periods of isolation are disruptions to the lives of youth around the world.

In addition, Flett et al.’s research with post-secondary students (2019) highlighted the importance of mattering as “central to the health, well-being, and psychosocial adjustment of emerging adults at universities and colleges assessment and promotion of a sense of mattering are vital to the mission of institutions” (p. 667). It is also clearly distinguished from other constructs that influence adolescent mental health such as self-esteem and a sense of belonging (Schmidt et al., 2020).

Some have suggested that this generation is more prepared to experience anxiety over the uncertainty of their ever-changing world and that their social, economic, and environmental future will likely not resemble the present or past (Konstam, 2015). This COVID-19 pandemic may be the proof they were waiting for, that previous generations have impacted their future. This may be their turning point to build collective resilience, “own” their generation, and develop strength from it. Kidman and Chang (2020) even suggest that this may be an opportunity to educate children who lack information and experience on how to mitigate risk and cope during times of crisis (p. 108).

By sharing the current research and the collective results of this study with adolescents, they may be able to relate to these experiences or be reminded of their own uniqueness. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) have shown that positive and strength-building changes can occur when individuals share their stories and “integrate it in such a way that the events are recognized as turning points” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 14). Common themes that may arise from the interviews could promote further investigation in a future study or support the developing body of research on adolescents and mattering.

The qualitative data collected could also provide some insight or speculation on the results from broad-scale quantitative surveys such as those recently administered by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020) or the National Institute of Health (Patrick et al., 2020). Or other global studies on youth well-being during the pandemic. In a study by Samji et al. (2022) for example, they found that positive family relationships were one of the factors that led to positive well-being in youth during the pandemic. Another study showed that close family relationships increased resilience and was a protective factor in mental health during the pandemic (Prime et al., 2020). This qualitative study could provide information about what helped promote these positive family relationships. Was it because youth felt they mattered to their families, and if so, what gave them that sense of mattering? Results may support how parents learn to communicate an increased sense of mattering to their adolescents (Vélez et al., 2020), or what other factors may have led to a subset of the population reporting improved mental health during the pandemic (Patrick et al., 2020). As suggested in Coller and Webber (2020):

Exploring what drove some parents to report improvements in child and/or parent mental or physical health could inspire novel interventions to bolster resilience during the pandemic (022079, p. 2, para 2).

Feedback from youth on how they felt they mattered could be used to plan reintegration strategies or preventative interventions such as those suggested by Flett et al. (2019). They could also be a reminder of the importance of increasing a sense of mattering with youth in counselling sessions (Rayle, 2006; Dixon & Tucker, 2008). Rayle (2006) expressed this idea; “When clients and counsellors perceive they matter in the counselling relationship, the shared relationship can act as a powerful source of change” (p. 486). This study may also be useful to clinicians,

teachers, and other researchers interested in how isolation may impact adolescent development and the significance of mattering in times of stress or adversity.

Context

COVID-19 Mandated Social Isolation

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared “a Public Health Emergency of International Concern” (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). This pandemic, “a global outbreak of disease” Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2019), was named by WHO as the coronavirus disease 2019 or the COVID-19 virus (WHO, 2020). For this study, the periods of isolation will be referred to as the COVID-19 periods of isolation. During these isolations or lockdowns, different families responded to these covid protocols and suggestions in diverse ways affecting the youth’s experience. In some families, social bubbles were quite large with neighbours, extended family and friends included in their bubble. Others limited themselves to members of their household.

As of February 9, 2021, there were 106,125,682 confirmed cases and 2,320,497 deaths reported globally with the numbers rising daily (WHO, 2021). Altena et al. (2020) reported: “societal consequences” from home confinement, resulting in a “stressful situation for many across the globe” (p. 1). Beginning in March 2020 in Manitoba, school closures limited adolescents' face-to-face social contact with their peers and the structure of their daily routines might have felt like an early summer vacation. For many, however, they may have missed their last three months of high school, missing dramatic transitions such as their graduation day and their leap into summer before post-secondary studies or the workforce. For some, it may have even been their last chance to make an impression on other students with whom they may have hoped to continue relationships in their later adult lives. To public health and the enforced

lockdowns, their graduation, their grades, their relationships, and social needs did not matter in comparison to the need to stop the spread of the virus and prevent more people from getting sick.

Youth, as high social media consumers, observed as the COVID-19 periods of home isolation spawned a flood of dramatic reactions on social media. A unique moment in our current history, it could be pivotal to how we reconstruct our local, national, and global interactions with others. Representatives of multiple generations, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, abilities cultures, and different socioeconomic backgrounds expressed their isolation experiences online. Many of which may have had an impact on how youth interpreted this period.

Teachers worldwide strived to stay connected with students remotely through online learning platforms (Ministry of Education, 2020). Many educators reached out repeatedly to let students know that they were there to support them and that every student mattered. In some cases, having teachers reach out to engage with a student individually from their homes may have even increased a sense of mattering to a student who might have felt previously lost in large class sizes. There were many uncertainties about how many weeks or months this change in learning would continue. For some, an “intolerance of uncertainty” could contribute to “pandemic-related anxiety and distress” (Taylor, 2019, p. 42). Webinars on working with youth at risk for educators and social workers suggested that just checking in with students regularly to show them that they matter, and we have not forgotten about them can make a significant difference in their well-being and engagement in learning (Waller & Sandoval, 2020).

Since the experience of the COVID-19 periods of isolation are consistently changing as we live through it in real-time. Gloviczki (2020), in his ethnographic study on the COVID-19 period, shares that it is unknown how this will end for our countries, cities, schools, and homes. All is uncertain. He echoes what so many may have thought, “The impact is still in development,

yet to unfold” (p. 1). When students returned to school in the fall after the first lockdown, the short and long-term effects were not yet known, but the chance of resilience through sharing this experience is possible.

Researcher Positionality

This question was on the minds of many. After a few weeks of adjustment to the isolation the question “How has the home isolation period been for you?” popped up in online surveys everywhere. Primary schools asked children to draw and vocalize their experience and to symbolize it into time capsules. Secondary school teachers continuously assessed how their students felt about the experience and asked them to document their challenges and observations. Much of this was to ensure that their opinions and feelings about the situation mattered and to shape the development of remote learning modalities. Statistics Canada (March 2020) also collected quantitative data from businesses and post-secondary students about how they were experiencing this period and their perceptions about their job and financial stability, and impacts on academic achievement (Statistics Canada, 2020).

At the time of data collection, I had just completed a high-school practicum in counselling and worked part-time at a high school. In the past, I have worked with adolescents as a teacher, research assistant, student services, and psychiatric assistant. I did not want my prior experiences to influence or direct the youth’s recollection, and I wanted to be cautious not to weigh one part of their experience of the COVID-19 isolations over another. With this in mind, I selected a qualitative approach for the study. Bias can be avoided by allowing adolescents to freely speak about their experiences of the COVID-19 isolations and their sense of mattering and well-being during the pandemic. The youth will place their own emphasis on the significant parts

of their experience. It will provide an opportunity for youth to reveal ideas and themes that I may not have considered.

My interest in investigating this topic stemmed from virtual meetings with students at the start of the initial spring 2020 lockdown. As their classroom teacher at the time, students candidly expressed feeling down since their sports events, competitions, work, and volunteering were canceled. They felt that they were not contributing to their school clubs, community agencies, tutoring friends, no longer to anyone or anything. If youth that they mattered, could this also be related to how they interpreted their overall experience of the event and their well-being? Prior research shows evidence that adolescents who felt that they mattered to their family and friends showed higher levels of self-esteem, fewer symptoms of depression, and reported lower suicidal ideation (Elliott et al., 2005). It would be interesting to know if this occurred in pandemic isolations too, or if this were a unique situation that would increase or minimize youth's feeling of their importance in their environment.

Youth might feel pressure or a sense of conflict under isolation rules made to protect themselves and others. They might struggle to maintain the independence and freedom that they had earned with age and merit. Even with their multitude of social platforms and virtual identities already established, one might wonder if isolation could build resilience, coping skills, and a greater sense of connection to their families, communities, and peers. Alternatively, it might develop their sense of mattering as global citizens; each with the personal power to help stop the spread of the virus. Or they might feel like they do not matter and may have a sense of helplessness and loss of control. Youth may even have withdrawn from their place in society into deeper reclusion.

John Dewey (1938) placed value and impact in the experience itself. He discussed the potential for experiences to induce growth and learning in individuals. In his book *Education and Experience* he wrote, “Every experience is a moving force. Its value can only be judged on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (p. 14). The snapshot in time in which youth recall the impact of COVID-19 on their lives may not unfold the lasting impact of their isolation experiences. Acknowledging adolescent's unique expression of their lived-experience, however, can remind us to consider humanness and individuality even during a wide-spread, global pandemic.

I was curious about how adolescents were experiencing the COVID-19 isolation periods and this curiosity flooded me with questions. Were they feeling that this was an end of the world situation? Did they feel like they had control over their health and others? Did they feel trapped and overwhelmed by being at home with their families or did they embrace this time? Did they feel disconnected from their peers and social network or more connected? But not only that, I wondered what they recalled the most from the experience and how they interpreted it. Did they recall it with emotions or simply report the events? Would they explain the challenges or just their outcomes? Were there similar experiences that led to similar perceptions of mattering? Or were their experiences so unique? I was eager to know how adolescents experienced it without making assumptions or leading them in an emotional or a logical explicative direction.

Significance

In this climate of uncertainty, there is no promise that we will not be faced with another global-sweeping virus and subsequent periods of isolation. More information is needed to ease uncertainty and to speak about the potential impacts of the virus could (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 10). The uncertainty of this virus and the impact that it could have on the lives of youth could

lead to psychological distress in their crucial stage of adolescent development. The impact on youth may depend on how they experienced and interpreted the isolation and how they felt that they mattered during this time.

Marshall (2001) defines perceived mattering as “the psychological tendency to evaluate the self as significant to specific other people” (p. 474). This definition can also be more broadly extended to include seeing oneself as making a difference in the lives of other people and being “a significant part of the world around us” (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 339). Elliott et al.’s definition suggests a greater sense of mattering to the community or world which some youth may have experienced for the first time in doing their part to reduce the spread of the virus or “flatten the curve.”

During the COVID-19 isolations friends and families may have more time to show each other that they matter by reaching out and connecting on social media. Staying at home and not having to spend hours commuting to and from work or school may allow for more time in their households (Altena et al., 2020). The importance of mattering could be paramount in well-being outcomes for youth. Flett et al.’s 2019 research with post-secondary students highlighted the importance of mattering as “central to the health, well-being, and psychosocial adjustment of emerging adults” (p. 667). This might also be important when considering reintegration into school and work settings as Flett et al. (2019) emphasize that assessing and promoting a sense of mattering should be “vital to the mission of institutions” (p. 667).

Rationale

There is limited qualitative research on the well-being of youth and the impact on their adolescent-stage transitions (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013). There is also a gap in literature that helps us to understand a sense of mattering with this population. The existing studies have shown

that a sense of mattering is critical to well-being of adolescents and adults (Flett, 2018a; Vélez, et al., 2020) or that it is negatively correlated with behavioural problems in adolescence (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Marshall et al., 2019; Vélez et al., 2020). Yet the concept is still vague in public health, mental health promotion, and schools. Despite its importance, many adolescents feel that they do not matter to their community (Flett, 2020). In a 2018 study of North American data on adolescents, Flett (2018b) found that less than half of those surveyed felt that they mattered.

Each adolescent's experience of the isolations is unique and understanding the context of their experience will help to know how they felt that they mattered and the impact on their well-being. There is no doubt that the household dynamics during this period may have affected the youth's well-being. Parents may have lost their jobs during this period and struggled with financial strains. Alternatively, parents who continued working may have experienced stress trying to work from home. Stressors that impacted parent(s) may have affected youth directly or indirectly. Gershoff et al. (2007) and Patrick et al. (2020) found that parental stress and mental health can affect adolescents' cognitive, behavioural, and social-emotional outcomes.

Implications and Proactive Solutions

With data emerging about the well-being effects of the pandemic, Marques et al. (2020) warn that proactive steps need to be taken to “flatten the mental health need curve before the demand for services further overwhelms system capacity” (p. 1). Marques et al. suggest a mental health response should be comprehensive including the creation of innovative treatments and “re-tasking” and retraining of educators and community workers to deliver “empirically-driven strategies” to prevent and support the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 2). Prilleltensky (2014) noted that mattering is composed of recognition and impact (p. 151).

Reframing a sense of mattering has been suggested to benefit health and mental health in times of crisis and could inform school and community-based interventions (Flett, 2018a, 2019, 2020).

To increase a sense of mattering in youth, we might be able to provide education on how to recognize signals that they matter (recognition), and how to make them aware of how they are important to us (impact). Also, mattering in youth may be encouraged by supporting them in recognizing their significance in the present and the future. Prilleltensky's research (2019) offers suggestions to increase a sense of mattering:

To make sure that the need for mattering is fulfilled, we must balance feeling valued, with adding value. Moreover, we must balance adding value to ourselves with adding value to others. (p.16)

The theme of knowledge exchange was also shared by Flett and Hewitt (2013). They advise that proactive school-based interventions and knowledge transmission should not be limited by traditional means of knowledge transfer but shared more broadly by using social media.

Educational institutions looking for academic investment through increased well-being can look to Schlossberg et al.'s early research on mattering (1989) that promotes institutions that invest in mattering as environments where learners are more involved and motivated. The government of Manitoba is showing its proactive approach by launching a virtual cognitive behavioural therapy program AbilitiCBT (Government of Manitoba, 2020).

By developing an increased understanding of how adolescents made sense of their isolation experience we may know whether they attached meaning to the event and if this meaning was obtained through a sense of mattering. An increased understanding of how perceptions of mattering affect adolescents during a pandemic, a crisis, or periods of isolation may have positive implications for the individual and society

Chapter Two: Literature review

This chapter will first look briefly at how adolescents might describe their experience of the pandemic to understand their individual context and then will focus more on the literature on mattering and adolescents. The body of literature will show how adolescents can develop resiliency and strengths, or experience post-traumatic growth following adversity, or a traumatic event based on the circumstances that are imposed on them or how they perceive or recall it. It will then look more closely at the research related to the pandemic and isolation and whether youth may interpret these as moments of crisis or opportunity.

It will include research contributions made to the concept and study of mattering, mattering as a protective factor during adolescent development, and the effects of feelings of not mattering. It will also examine how a sense of mattering is measured and the implications for practical application. It will look at the potential factors that may have influenced adolescent well-being during this time, and whether a sense of mattering may have affected their experience or the other way around.

Seeking to Understand Adolescents' Experience of Pandemic Isolations

The intent of this research is to understand how adolescents felt they mattered during the pandemic isolations, within their unique experiences of the event. Limited research has explored directionality in mattering as a sense of mattering can influence one's experience or one's experience could result in a sense of mattering. Marshal et al.'s (2019) study of adolescent mattering and well-being looks at directionality on whether mattering promotes well-being or well-being provides an increased sense of mattering. If depressive symptoms lead to more negative interpretations of their COVID-19 isolation experiences might adolescents also perceive themselves to matter less to others during this time? Just as frequent interactions with friends

increase a sense of mattering, low friend interaction is related to feelings of neglect or not mattering (Marshall, 2001). Might this be experienced despite the enforced nature of the reduced interactions? What about physical well-being? Would youth feel like they mattered less if they got sick with COVID-19 and experienced increased isolation or had less physical well-being because their sports or training was limited?

Perceiving the Pandemic as a Crisis

This section looks at the factors that may be associated with how adolescents might have experienced the pandemic isolations such as whether they perceived COVID-19 and the isolation periods as a crisis, factors that might influence psychological distress, quarantine, and feelings of isolation or loneliness, loss, grief, worry and the impact of increased social media consumption.

The literature search thus far has considered that there are protective factors such as time with family and schoolwork (Ellis et al., 2020). These protective factors could be the potential consequences or fallout from a “crisis,” such as this pandemic, and the onset of isolation, but what if there were youth who did not see this as a crisis? Maslow (1968) cautioned against pathologizing an experience and suggested “The good therapist can perceive each person in his own right freshly and without the urge to taxonomize, to rubricize, to classify and pigeonhole” (Maslow, 1968, p. 87). This study allows youth to clearly express their experience and its impact.

Although research is emerging on the effects of the COVID-19 periods of isolation on mental health, there are still limited studies with adolescents. One recent study by Ellis et al. (2020) of 1,054 participants aged 14–18, found that 43% of respondents were very concerned about the pandemic and its effects on their school, family lives, social connections, and health, etc. (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 182). Research on their sense of mattering, purpose, or worthiness during this time remains limited.

To avoid making assumptions about how youth interpreted this experience, it might be best to let them explain it in their own words. If we consider that this experience of COVID-19 isolation is a “crisis,” we can explore the potential impacts that it could have in youth’s developmental stage. In 1968 Erik Erikson’s work on identity shared his description of a crisis that may naturally occur in adolescence. Erikson described the adolescent crisis as a “turning point,” one in which the threat was not catastrophic, but strengths could be developed through increased vulnerability and potential (p. 96). Only the youth themselves can interpret how they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. One cannot even be certain if they perceived it as a “crisis.” If they believed that this externally imposed isolation is a crisis, it could have a positive or negative impact. Erikson (1968) believed that adverse external events could be a positive moving force in their life that brings growth, builds strength and resiliency, or could lead to maladjustment and further isolation (p. 16).

Mattering in Adolescent Development and Transitions

Research on mattering, with the adolescent population, however, remains limited. Despite studies that came out of the development of the concept with Rosenberg & McCullough (1981) and an initial surge in mattering research (Marshall, 2001; Schieman & Taylor, 2001; Schlossberg, 1989, Taylor & Turner, 2001), there is still a literature gap on the impact of mattering and well-being in adolescents (Dixon, 2016).

Quantitative studies on mattering are increasing overall and they tend to look at youth’s personal experience from a symptom-focused perspective using inventories such as the General Mattering Scale (Schieman & Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Turner, 2001), Mattering to Others Questionnaire (Marshall, 2001), or the College Mattering Inventory (Tovar et al., 2009). Although quantitative data on mattering with this population is growing with the impact of

mental health brought on by COVID-19, most early studies with adolescents examined mattering to parents and the effect on their psychosocial well-being (Elliott et al., 2005; Elliott, 2009; Marshall, 2001; Marshall et al., 2019; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Vélez et al., 2020).

Schlossberg (1989) found in her research that when people are in transition, they often feel marginalized and that they do not matter. This makes adolescents particularly vulnerable at their transitional stage of development. It is “the next most rapid period of growth in human development after infancy, and it requires adaptive coping mechanisms” (Benjet, 2017, p. 16).

The transitions required from adolescents in this developmental stage might include moving from middle school to high school, or post-secondary, graduation, physical and hormonal changes in the body, increased importance on friend or romantic relationships, first jobs or volunteering, and a greater sense of independence. All these choices and changes could result in anxiety, depression, and poor coping mechanisms such as substance abuse. According to Flett (2020) “Mattering is a core element of the self and identity that is especially relevant during transitions” (p. 107). Adolescence is the transitional stage when the youth observe themselves in their new roles and ask themselves “Do I matter?” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 6).

Mattering and Well-being During Pandemic Isolations

Like any pandemic, those who lose a family member or loved one to the virus could experience a period of grieving. With COVID-19 this might be even more challenging as individuals may not have been able to see their loved ones while they were ill or be able to attend funerals or parting ceremonies with friends and family because of social isolation (Marques et al., 2020). Another type of loss may occur during the isolation period that could be heightened for adolescents during their identity-forming stage of development. They may experience a loss of autonomy and peer connections as they must stay at home and social distance (Ellis et al.,

2020). Life as they thought they knew it has certainly changed and many may experience grief and longing for what was. Branquinho et al., (2020) investigated over 600 youth between the ages of 16-24 and found that they reported a “loss of moments or key life events.” They have lost their routines, maybe their first job, their clubs that allowed them to stay at school and socialize, and other paths to developing independence such as career placements, and volunteer opportunities. Athletes who may have been training since they were young children were used to travelling for tournaments, and they are suddenly grounded. They may find themselves even searching for a new identity and questioning their purpose with no certainty of when they will get to play or even practice again.

Quarantine could also impose a feeling of confinement on adolescents, making them feel trapped and that they have little control over the situation (Chatterjee & Chauhan, 2020). This could be especially true for individuals who were completely cut off from everyone if they had symptoms or contracted the virus. The psychological impacts could linger long after healing. A longitudinal study following survivors of the SARS virus found that one year after the outbreak they still self-reported high levels of stress and worry (Lee et al., 2007).

Although this is quite different from the displacement and loss that affected many youths during Hurricane Katrina or the Indian Ocean tsunamis, there could be a connection to the impact on adolescent development and even mental health during a period of unexpected school disruption. Abramson et al.’s research (2010) into the emotional disturbance of children after Hurricane Katrina suggests “a disruption of ties to civic institutions such as schools and medical care can negatively affect a child’s physical, mental and social development” (Abramson, 2010, p. S18). Furthermore, there can be seen a connection to loss of connection to school, mattering and mental health. Watson et al. (2022) noted in their research that “the more adolescents were

connected to their school, the more they believed they mattered” and those who felt they mattered reported fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression (p. 104).

Early COVID-19 studies are showing that people are reporting anxiety and stress related to the uncertainty of the length of the isolation periods and worry that a family member would contract the virus. Wang et al. (2020) found that 75.2% of their respondents were somewhat or very worried that family members would contract the virus (p. 15). Adolescents specifically reported being concerned about family finances or that someone they care about might contract the virus (Ellis et al., 2020). Also, Ellis et al. (2020) found that adolescents had social concerns unique to their developmental stage such as supporting friendships, relationships, reputations, and schooling. High school seniors may also have concerns about post-secondary acceptance or may grieve the loss of milestone events such as graduation ceremonies and celebrations (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 183).

Over the past year, the news media has been plastered with reports on the impacts of COVID-19 isolations on adolescents and their mental health. Quantitative studies are increasing around the globe (Racine et al., 2021). For this study, literature on well-being will include studies on well-being and mental health so as not to exclude those studies on mental health. While it is difficult to capture a consensus about how to define well-being, it appears that most well-being studies focus on mental or psychological well-being. Even the 18-item General Well-being Scale (Dupuy, 1977), a self-report measure designed to measure well-being focuses heavily on the mental aspects of well-being with most of the items, 13 out of 18, in psychosocial subdomains. Only 5 out of 18 items were about physical well-being. Diener (2000) names separate components of subjective well-being (SWB):

- life satisfaction (global judgments of one's life),

- satisfaction with important domains (e.g., work satisfaction),
- positive affect (experiencing many pleasant emotions and moods),
- and low levels of negative affect (experiencing few unpleasant emotions and moods). (p. 34)

During the interviews, I explained to participants that well-being also includes their physical well-being. This was important in case there were occasions in which their physical state may affect their sense of mattering.

When considering risk factors that could result in a decline in well-being during a pandemic, one must consider the same impacts that would affect the whole family. In a quantitative study of 1101 parents, Patrick et al. (2020) noted that there was a “tandem effect;” parental worry and increased mental health concerns of the parent correlated with somewhat of an increase in behavioural health decline in their children (p. 7). This was increasingly reported by single parents, parents who were hourly workers, and parents of younger children who may have lost their access to childcare or had financial or food insecurity concerns (Gassman et al., 2020, Patrick et al., 2020).

There are limited studies that share the recollections of adolescent's experience of a period of premeditated but involuntary isolation from peers, school, and their world outside of their homes. When we question the impact of the COVID-19 period of isolation on youth, studies have emerged that share the vulnerability of this age group. Youth are reporting lower mental health during the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020; Xie et al., 2020). As this is a global pandemic, studies are starting to appear around the world from the countries that first contracted the virus. A study on Indian children and adolescents examined the psychological impacts of being in quarantine during COVID-19. Saurabh and Ranjan (2020) found the most common

feelings that children and adolescents experienced during this time were worry (68.59%), helplessness (66.11%), and fear (61.98%) (para 10). Xie et al. (2020) attributes their results of increased depression and anxiety symptoms in the younger population to a decrease in social interaction and outdoor activity. Golberstein et al. (2020) caution that the COVID-19 pandemic may “worsen mental health problems” and increase cases of mood and anxiety disorders in children and adolescents because of “the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession” (p. E1). They even express concern that lack of access to school mental health services may potentiate increased symptoms of mood and anxiety disorders for children ages 12 to 17 (Golberstein et al., 2020).

One early pandemic study focused on how youth obtained information about the pandemic and how their behaviour may have changed (Campbell et al., 2021). The study shared that most teen participants reported that they increased their screen time (not including remote learning) and decreased their physical activity during social isolation periods (Campbell et al., 2021). The same study showed that over half of youth surveyed reported that the information they learned about COVID-19 was through social media sources. Unlike the 1918 influenza pandemic, where information may have been limited to the public, youth in this COVID-19 pandemic could be flooded with news reports about the virus. Social media today can spread boundless amounts of news in real-time that can either be informative or inaccurate, toxic, and addictive. Kumar and Nayar (2020) suggested that this news may not always be true and “rumours and unauthenticated information” have the potential to “create fear, anxiety, and stress” (p. 1). Ellis et al. (2020) found that it was the adolescents who reported high levels of social media use who also had the highest reported level of COVID-19 stress and depression (p. 183). One ongoing study with Chinese university students showed an increase in feelings of

discrimination and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential links to how groups were portrayed in the news and social media (Haft & Zhou, 2021) shared that Increased racism and discrimination could also lead to chronic stress in those who are stereotyped as being “disease carriers” (Khoo & Lantos, 2020, p. 2).

In adolescents, the frequency of interactions with friends was found to be positively associated with mattering (Marshall, 2001, p. 477). So, what would happen if youth were physically cut off from their peer relationships? The research on enforced isolation effects on adolescents is developing.

There were similar reports following the Spanish flu or the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, but this may be a unique extended period in which social distancing and some measures of social isolation are still ongoing. Monahan et al., (2011) found with their study on the effects of visitation on incarcerated youth, that “any parental visits, regardless of parent-adolescent relationship quality, served to reduce depressive symptoms during the first two months of incarceration” (p. 150). This may speak to how youth felt that they mattered to their parent(s) when they could see them for brief periods, but how about feelings of loneliness when they are isolated from their peers, and living at home?

One might consider loneliness a natural outcome of social isolation during a pandemic. In addition to being physically isolated, loneliness is also described as a feeling of being disconnected from others, feeling unimportant, and that no one cares (McComb et al., 2020). Rokach’s (2019) description of loneliness encompasses not only physical isolation but also the emotional isolation that one might feel. She suggests that factors that could influence loneliness are “anything that increases the physical and emotional distance between humans and blocks the potential for closeness and intimacy” (p. 122). With adolescents being increasingly socially

connected online, one might assume that they could maintain this intimacy while physically distanced. A study by Ellis et al. (2020) early in the pandemic shows otherwise. Their results suggest that virtual connections to peers may not decrease loneliness, and high levels of social media use may be related to increased symptoms of depression during the pandemic.

A lack of face-to-face contact with their peer group could have lasting effects on adolescents. Erikson emphasized the importance of peer relationships and intimate relationships (1968). He suggests that not developing these relationships in adolescence or early adulthood years could lead to one settling for more superficial or “highly stereotyped interpersonal relations and come to retain a deep sense of isolation” (Erikson, 1968, pp. 135-136). Should youth feel that they no longer matter to their peers, they may develop feelings of not mattering or not being missed.

Brooks et al.’s (2020) rapid review of over 3,166 papers on the psychological effects of quarantine found that most studies reported adverse short and long-term psychological effects. Some of those effects included insomnia, fears of infection and uncertainty of time duration, financial stress resulting in symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depressed feelings and feelings of anger and confusion, and anger. Jeong et al. (2016) studied the effects of quarantine due to the coronavirus in Korea in 2015 (known at the time as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome). They found that people who were required to isolate showed high rates of anxiety symptoms and anger during isolation and saw that the mental health effects lasted four to six months.

Both Brooks et al. (2020) and Jeong et al. (2016) point to the negative psychological impacts of social isolation, and at what cost, and what benefit? The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention reinforces that isolation and quarantine can help prevent exposure to viruses and the spread of contagious diseases (CDC web). The self-quarantine process is an active choice

and an individual's public health contribution. In self-isolation, people are experiencing the burden of protecting others in their community, while sacrificing their rights to free movement (Barbera et al., 2001; Khoo & Lantos, 2020).

Adolescents' perception of quarantine could enhance a sense of mattering if they feel that they have some choice in adhering to self-isolation measures. They may see that they are contributing to the overall well-being of their community. This could create stress and a conflict or crisis in their stage in development that is seeking autonomy (Erikson, 1968; Hagel et al., 2012). If quarantine is considered a public health measure, more psychological supports should be considered for youth and other populations at risk; who may be adversely affected (Hawryluck et al., 2004).

With such potential mental health side effects, isolation may not be the most effective and desirable solution. Brooks et al. (2020) suggest that there is further research on the effectiveness of imposing quarantine during a public health crisis. They offer that there may be fewer adverse mental health effects from less restrictive methods such as ongoing social distancing, school closures and cancelling large events (Brooks et al., 2020).

One study of youth surveyed during the first lockdown of March to May 2020 showed that a third of youth felt nervous/anxious or depressed, nearly half felt lonely/isolated, and half of them reported feeling stressed at least 3 times/week (Gazmararian et al., 2021). Unfortunately, an increased incidence of family violence was reported around the globe (Campbell, 2020), which could have added to the stress, worry and impact on well-being during isolation. This could be especially true if the youth felt that they did not matter to the agencies or supporters that they may have had access to prior to isolation.

Mattering as a Protective Factor of Well-being

This isolation experience could be an opportunity for youth to develop their identity, coping mechanisms, and resiliency if the right psychological resources are in place. Lisa Damour, an adolescent psychologist, and columnist for the Times explained "Psychological health, however, is not about being free from emotional discomfort, but about having the right feeling at the right time and being able to bear the unpleasant ones" (Damour, 2020, web). Youth who may not have experienced much adversity can learn how to build strength in the face of change.

Flett, (2018a) found mattering as a "unique predictor of psychological well-being" (p. 398). This was also confirmed in a 1-year longitudinal study with adolescents in grades 6-9, in which it was found that mattering and feeling significant to others contributes to overall psychosocial well-being (Marshall et al., 2019). A recent study with Chinese students abroad showed that during periods of necessary isolation, emotional support may reduce anxiety, as a result of "increased perceptions of self-worth, mattering to other people, and being cared for and loved" (Ma & Miller, 2020, p. 7). Additionally, in a study on cancer survivors who accepted a "survivor identity," female survivors reported a greater feeling of mattering, which they attributed to their supportive social networks (Morris et al., 2014, p. 427).

Mattering, Resiliency and Post-traumatic Growth

A growing interest in the strengths that can emerge from traumatic events is supporting a model of post-traumatic growth (PTG). Jieling and Xinchun's (2017) study of the psychological impact of the Ya'an earthquake in 2013, China, considered most participants to have fallen into a "thriving pattern" following the disaster. Most self-reported that they had only mild post-traumatic stress symptoms and moderate post-traumatic growth (Jieling & Xinchun, 2017, p. 23).

Early media and studies released as the COVID-19 isolation period phased out point to the risk of negative impacts of the COVID-19 period of isolation on mental health. At the onset of a pandemic, proactive measures can be put in place to increase resiliency or promote post-traumatic growth. During the SARS epidemic of 2003, a group debriefing model called Strength Focused and Meaning-Oriented Approach for Resilience and Transformation (SMART) was developed with the aim of “boosting resilience” and “a growth-oriented and holistic approach of health promotion” (Ng et al., 2006, pp. 53-54). Mattering is connected to both “meaning-making” and resiliency as shown in Hamby et al.’s resilience portfolio model (Hamby et al., 2020). It shows the psychological and social strengths of self-regulation, meaning-making, and interpersonal strengths to overcome trauma, and mattering is considered a “meaning-making” strength and resource (Banyard et al., 2017, p. 90; Prilleltensky, 2014, p.151).

A proactive approach could increase the capacity of mental health services by reacting quickly (Golberstien et al., 2020). Research is increasingly showing that following a traumatic event, youth have the potential to develop resiliency (Ying et al., 2014). Flett’s 2018 handbook of school-based mental health promotion suggests that children can develop resiliency to adverse events, which could prevent the onset of mood disorders such as anxiety and depression (p. 384). Canadian community organizations such as the “We Matter Campaign” have been working since before 2017 to foster a sense of mattering in Indigenous youth. Mattering is at the heart of their mission statement which is “to communicate to Indigenous youth that they matter and create spaces of support for those going through a hard time while fostering unity and resiliency” (We Matter, 2020). Another campaign is Choose2Matter (Choose2Matter | Join the Movement of Mattering. #youmatter, n.d.) a movement started by Angela Maiers, an educator at The University of Iowa. Choose2Matter and Maiers aim to spread the message in schools and

communities that “when people accept that they matter, and their actions count, lives and learning change and our world changes” (Maiers & Sandvold, 2018). In Maiers’ book “A Passion-Driven Classroom: The Essentials she has even outlined “You Matter Time” as a weekly part of every classroom in which teachers, and other students can have regular structured time to share reasons why they feel that each person is important and what they have done or said this week that makes them significant and that they matter (Maiers & Sandvold, 2018, p. 43).

Hamby et al. (2020) describe resilience as “a process that makes it possible for people to use their assets and resources to overcome diverse social, economic, and environmental challenges” (Hamby et al., 2020, p. 378). Regarded from this perspective, isolation could be seen as an opportunity to build strengths for the future and new coping strategies. “Reframing” or “re-interpreting” events into benefits could be seen as positive coping mechanisms to a potentially adverse event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 466). Malin et al. showed, in their 2019 study, that some interviewees found purpose through adversity, and some even described a negative experience as being “a trigger or inspiration” for acts that would impact others positively (p. 9). If adolescents recalled their experience of the COVID-19 isolation and realized that they mattered because they chose to participate in the isolation to reduce the spread of the virus, they may have a stronger sense of well-being. This could balance out the initial feelings that some may have had about feeling a lack of participation in their surrounding communities.

Marginality and Risks of “Antimattering”

Youth can build resilience and effective coping strategies through adulthood if they feel that they matter and have a purpose. This may be through antimattering,” by contrast, can have the opposite effect on lifelong well-being. One study by Lewis (2017) even showed that youth

who feel that they do not matter can seek attention through increase “risk-taking behaviours” such as committing a crime, being aggressive, violent, or attempting suicide (p. 1318).

Researchers studying the effects of mattering on well-being have also begun to develop a body of research on the impacts of feelings of not mattering. As early as 1989, Schlossberg saw the polarity of mattering and marginality and saw that groups could develop feelings of marginality as a result of feeling unimportant. Flett et al.’s research (2020) demonstrated that one of the most apparent themes related to mattering is the relationship between low-mattering and depression. While mattering appears to be a significant factor in overall well-being, the importance of mattering varies from individual to individual (Flett & Heisel, 2020).

According to Flett & Heisel (2020), a sense of “not mattering” in the individual “is especially common among people who feel marginalized and left behind for social, political, economic, or other reasons, rather than feeling cherished and valued as human beings” (np, web). At a systemic level, Flett’s research (2020) suggests that an unequal distribution of public resources or aid in times of crisis “can exacerbate already existing feelings of not mattering among vulnerable people and vulnerable groups” (p. 118). Inequalities by gender were also seen by Banks and Xu (2020) in their study that rigorously looked at the mental health impact on UK (United Kingdom) populations in the first two months of COVID-19 lockdowns. They found that women and youth between the ages of 16 and 24 reported a greater decline in mental health, as did people who had mental health challenges prior to the pandemic (Banks & Xu, 2020). Newcomers may not be as familiar with, or able to access the social or medical supports and therefore experience greater psychological distress during this time (Shultz, 2008; Taylor, 2019). Although most of the world was in lockdown at nearly the same time, it can be assumed that everyone’s experience of enforced isolations was different.

Additionally, an emerging American study on two rural Georgian schools examined demographic differences in the mental health effects of the pandemic saw that the pandemic increased feelings of “stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness and that these feelings were higher in females in older grades and racialized, minority youth, or those with lower socioeconomic status who may have already been “disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due to financial or health reasons” (Gazmararian et al., 2021, p. 360).

Following their study with university students during the pandemic, Giangrasso et al. (2022) advises:

Given the potential destructiveness of feelings of not mattering, in general but especially during a global pandemic, it is essential to proactively develop interventions and programs that are designed to enhance feelings of mattering and reduce anti-mattering experiences and feelings. (p. 125)

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach used to investigate the research questions on youth experience during the pandemic, their sense of mattering and the potential connection to their well-being. It will outline the research questions, the sample, and data collection and data analysis processes that aim to establish trustworthiness and increase credibility. It will also share the ethical considerations and limitations and delimitations of the study.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand:

1. How would adolescents, aged 14-18, in Manitoba, describe their experience during the COVID-19 periods of isolation?

2. How would adolescents describe their sense of mattering and how it may have been related to their well-being during this time?

Sampling and Selection

Purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2013) was used to include a heterogeneous group of up to 12 youth, aged 14-16, who may have had varied experiences during the pandemic isolation. The original inclusion criteria are youth aged 14-18, living in Manitoba who had been registered in Manitoba schools since the beginning of February 2020. Exclusion criteria were those under 14 or over 18 years of age, living outside of Manitoba, and who could not obtain consent to participate in the study. When considering transparency to increase study credibility, initially there were fourteen who responded to the study poster, but one could not be contacted after their initial email of interest. One youth was withdrawn from the study as his audio recording could not be heard clearly at the transcription stage and he could not be contacted for another interview. Table 1 shows the age and gender of each participant for reference.

Table 1

Coded Participant Numbers with Gender and Age for Quotation Reference

Participant #	Gender	Age
1	male	14
2	female	16
3	male	15
4	male	15
5	female	16
6	female	16
7	female	15
8	female	15
9	female	16
10	male	15
12	female	16
13	male	14

Qualitative Research Approach

The construct of mattering is a subjective concept, unique to the individual. Since the construct of perceived mattering is defined as “an individual’s feeling or belief that he or she is important and of interest to others, or the feeling that others *depend* on him or her” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), Accordingly, it is suiting that a qualitative inductive approach would be used to explore this topic. Interviews and prompts provided the opportunity to gain insight into how high school students experienced these periods without making assumptions about their challenges or benefits. It cannot even be assumed that it was an emotional experience for each of them, or that it had any effect on their well-being. In quantitative studies, mattering is often measured using The General Mattering Scale (Schieman & Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Turner, 2001), which looks at specific items such as attention, importance, dependence, being missed, and interest. Being unique and complex, adolescents are the most informed to explain their experiences and to help select the language to explain it (Cohen et al., 2011). They can reveal anything that may be overlooked or inapparent to the researcher (Alvis, 2018). Falkenberg (2018) expresses the link between students’ voice throughout the research process and validity:

If one accepts that students are the experts of their own lives as students, then providing students with voice in matters affecting their lives as students will make the findings from data on students’ perspectives methodologically more valid, in the statistical and construct sense. (p. 17)

Data Collection

Advertisements for voluntary participation in the study were posted on my social media (Instagram and Twitter) and those of friends and colleagues. Because it was already the start of summer vacation, colleagues shared the posts with teens they knew and encouraged them to pass them on to other teens outside of their neighbourhoods or schools. The inclusion criteria were

youth aged 14-18 living in Manitoba and attending a Manitoba school during the COVID-19 periods of isolation.

Individual semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection. They are an opportunity to “explore the experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to them” (Tong, Siansbury, & Craig, 2007, p. 351). Prompts were carefully used to develop the responses of the teens and to help the teen to understand the definitions of the concepts of mattering and well-being. The opportunity to clarify and check in was conducted with a youth who was not taking part in the study. This allowed the interviewer to check for understanding of the questions, flow, and approximate length of time to administer. It also allowed the interviewer to test out the telemedicine site.

Interviews included prompts about the youth isolation experiences and mattering and well-being that “guided rather than dictated” the interview process (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 30). See Appendix B for interview questions and prompts. Since mattering and well-being are sensitive and complex concepts, the questions included definitions of mattering and well-being as well as several examples to help the youth to understand the concepts.

Interviews were recorded and later transcribed to document the entirety of the rich details of how the participants described their isolation experience, their sense of mattering, and well-being.

Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Enhancing Trustworthiness and Credibility

According to Liebenberg and Ikeda (2020), qualitative data analysis can be described in short as “organizing data (coding) and distilling key ideas and concepts (developing themes) (p.2). They also simplify that “analysis is about making decisions about what matters” (p.2). This could be especially important in studying what matters in youth. In consultation and debriefing

with the master's advisor and after reading several articles on content analysis, thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as a structured method of analysing the youth's responses. By following the six steps, the process would be transparent and increase credibility.

Thematic Analysis Six-Step Process and Member Checking

The six steps of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were followed, and throughout these steps, it became apparent that this qualitative research study was both inductive and deductive in its analysis. In step one, during the transcription phase, the researcher first listened to the audio recordings of the initial interviews and jotted down first thoughts and initial codes and phrases connected to the research question (deductive approach). Following these first listens, the interviews were transcribed, and the investigator started by highlighting interesting and relevant words and phrases in the text and adding sidebar comments. Returning to the transcript, the investigator began to use the codes to identify what these interesting comments were about and what theme the codes might fit under.

For the questions related to youth experience, the second stage of the process of generating initial codes and eventually themes was less pre-conceived and more inductive as the investigator could not assume that she knew anything about each individual youth's experience, and it is the youth who revealed the themes through their responses. The themes of *experience*, *sense of mattering and connection to well-being* emerged naturally in the third step as prompts and questions were used to guide the interview. While gathering data during this phase related to each theme and doing additional research on the topic, the sub-themes began to emerge. The themes were reviewed repeatedly, and the transcripts were checked and rechecked to be certain that nothing was being missed or needed to be added as new themes emerged.

Following transcription, the principal investigator employed member checking by asking participants to verify the accuracy of the transcribed interview by email. This aimed to increase credibility by having the participants check for any errors in the transcription and to clarify their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 in Nowell et al.). Member checking occurred when participants were asked to let the researcher know within one week of receiving the transcript if they noticed any inaccuracies in the transcript or anything that did not convey the meaning or intent of their responses. The researcher sent the electronic \$5.00 gift card during this time and at the end of the week sent an email asking the participant to verify that they received the gift card and double-check if they noted any problems with the transcript. Participants were also consulted on the themes selected by the researcher as another form of member checking. When the researcher prompted the participants about the ways they may have felt they mattered or not the researcher also asked if any of these ways might be missing. This gave an opportunity for one participant, for example, to suggest that “mattering to self” was not included in the sense of mattering prompts or in the thematic codes. Once this was added to the prompts and codes the researcher went back to the initial transcripts to look for a sense of mattering to self and then continued to ask about the sense of mattering to self in the subsequent interviews.

The researcher read through the transcripts several times to identify themes, common characteristics, and potential conceptual analyses. The goal was to identify emergent themes that may or may not be related to mattering and any other common characteristics for potential conceptual analysis.

Following the first three interviews, the researcher transcribed them early to identify initial common themes and sub-themes. These were refined and recategorized as the interviews progressed. Within were sent the interview transcription and were asked to review the electronic

copy of their transcript for accuracy and to add further clarification if they felt that what they were trying to communicate was not captured in their responses. This interviewee transcript review (ITR) technique aims to “verify the accuracy of the transcript” (Hagens et al., 2009, p. 2) and may establish trustworthiness. Each participant was given one week to report any inaccuracies or need for clarification and asked to let the researcher know if they required more time to review their transcript. At this time, the youth had the opportunity to provide further information into their experience if it was not clear, or to correct or add to the researcher’s interpretation. By going back to the participant for clarification of the interpretation, anything that was inapparent to the researcher can be revealed at this time and the researcher can more accurately capture the meaning of what the participant was trying to say.

Bracketing

There were limitations due to the context of the study in that the researcher was also experiencing the pandemic and subsequent isolations at the same time as the participants. As qualitative research uses an interpretive perspective, the researcher may be influenced by their own beliefs and past experiences (Glogowska, 2011, p.252). To reduce the chance of researcher bias, bracketing was used through extensive notes in the process memos that were shared with the research advisor and well-documenting the “Researcher Positionality” outlined earlier in this document to declare any assumptions that the researcher may have had based on previous roles or experiences in her positionality as a school counsellor or teacher. Participants can thus describe their experience with minimal influence or bias from the researcher (Shepherd et al., 2010, p. 279).

Reflexivity

In addition to bracketing, reflexivity was used by the researcher in an ongoing journal of process and coding memos that recorded planning, reflections, and rationale for decisions (Nowell et al., 2017) that narrowed the scope of the data and kept the data collection aligned to the research questions. Although the structure of thematic data analysis can be quite descriptive and systematic to increase credibility. Often in qualitative research the data analysis and interpretation process can be non-linear and occurring “simultaneously” as data collection and analysis may be a parallel process. The researcher began the process memos at the start of the data collection and analysis process. This permitted an ongoing log of emerging themes and posed questions to the researcher about how the data was being collected, what influence the researcher’s bias might be having on the process and how the themes were aligned with the research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Themes and sub-themes emerged and through the transcripts and process memos and they were modified once they appeared in the excel sheet and any previous themes and sub-themes that may have carried importance but that did not show up in the data were discarded. It was through these memos, for example, that Prilleltensky’s mattering framework of “feeling valued” and “adding value” (2019), became the obvious way to organize the themes presented by the interviewees. This theoretical framework also helped to identify additional themes that were not clear from the start such as feeling valued to self and adding value to self that was not as evident in Prilleltensky’s descriptions but were added through reflecting using the memo process. In ongoing consultation with the researcher’s thesis advisor, this process also aided the researcher to narrow the scope of the data as the quantity of the data grew.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

As the pandemic was ongoing during the time of research there was little opportunity to distance oneself from the ongoing changes of the pandemic situation. Information was shared with the public on an as-needed basis and youth and adults alike were never certain when the next lockdown or isolation might arise. It was difficult to step back and look at the situation. Each time the threat or actual implementation of increased restrictions on social interactions continued, the context changed once again. Nothing can compare the initial experience of social isolation to what followed in subsequent isolations. As new restrictions were placed on the freedom of youth to work, to socialize, to attend school, and play sports, there might be an impact on their well-being and sense of mattering. When one considers dependability for this study and the ability to repeat the study with similar subjects, it would be difficult since the context continues to change (Beery, 2010). As the pandemic is ongoing, the documentation process and research studies continued to emerge around the world. Publications on the topic of both mattering and the well-being effects of the pandemic became more revealing as time progressed. Despite students voicing that they wanted to share the stories of their isolation experience and to support other students in future isolations, there were time constraints in that many of the participants were only available for the initial interview and did not wish to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Some were leaving the city for camping and had limited access to the internet or devices, while others were working or helping with childcare. This limited the possibility of probing further into their responses after listening to the audio and reading their transcripts. Also due to the pandemic, university guidelines did not permit face-to-face interviewing and interviews were held remotely. This may or may not increase the possibility of student comfort and openness during the interview. Most participants spent thirty

minutes or more in the interview, and it is uncertain whether interviews may have been longer in person.

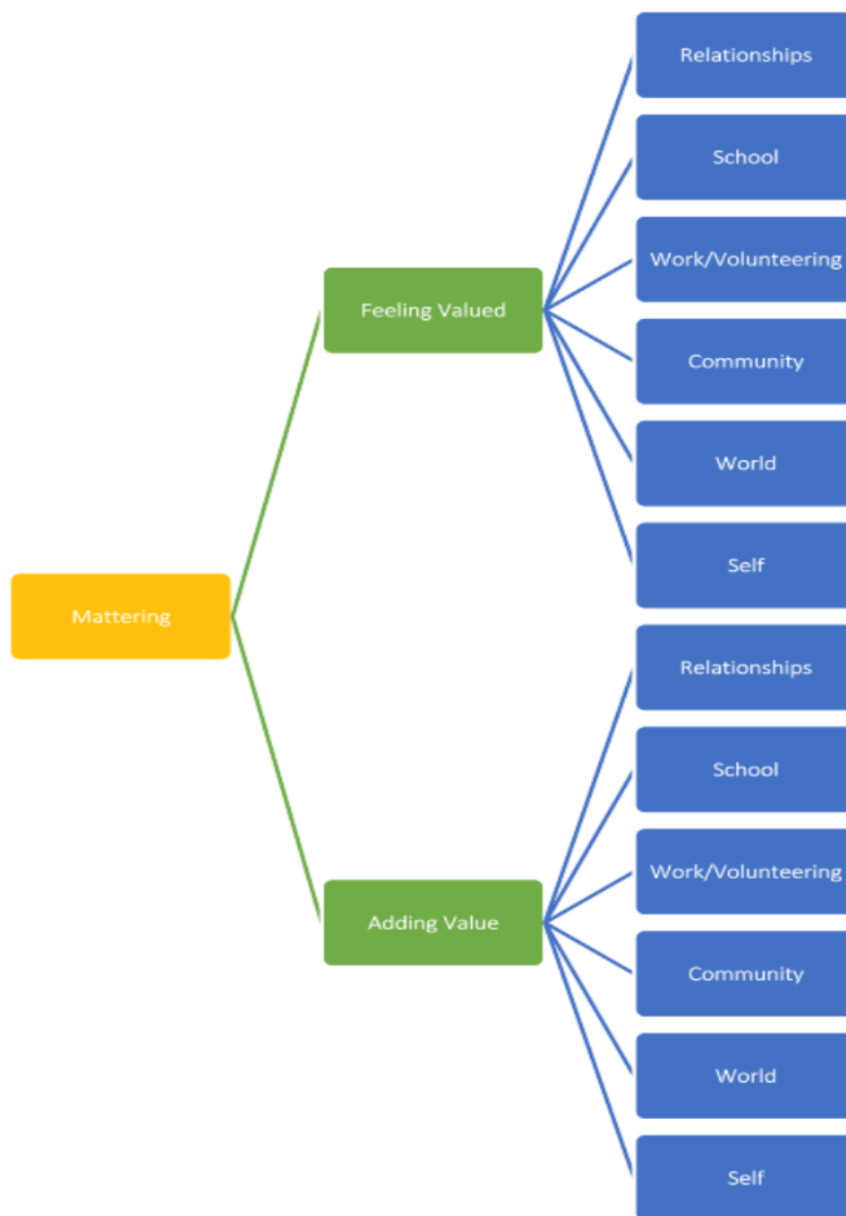
The nature of the lengthy interviews in this qualitative approach accounts for the choice of a small sample size. While twelve participants in a qualitative study may be considered plentiful, regarding transferability and generalization, the sample size limits generalizability as their perceived experience is very individual (Flett & Heisel, 2020). It is not known how much of the participant's shared experience could benefit other youth populations.

Delimitations

A sense of mattering can be conceptualized in several ways. Most participants did not know what mattering meant, and therefore a simple definition with clear examples was necessary to fully understand how the youth felt they mattered. For this study, mattering was defined by the domains of value added and adding value as outlined by Prilleltensky (2019). See Figure 1 and Appendix A for a larger functional diagram of these domains.

Figure 1

Adolescent Mattering Domains of Feeling Valued and Adding Valued



Note: Adapted from Prilleltensky's Diagram of Feeling Valued and Adding Valued (2019)

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board 2 (REB 2) on July 15, 2021 (R2-2021:072 (HS25011)). Participants were between the ages of 14-16 and

therefore required parental consent in addition to their own assent. The study was explained in detail in the consent form. The researcher responded to any questions that they may have had prior to signing the consent. They were informed of the possibility of the minimal risk of experiencing emotions during or after the interview and reading their transcript as they recalled their experiences and sense of mattering and well-being. Participants were advised that they could withdraw at any time from the study and refuse to answer any of the interview questions. The interviews took place online on Doxy.me (<https://doxy.me>), a secured, HIPAA-compliant telemedicine platform (Alan, 2022) that was paid for by the researcher. Participants were not asked to be alone during the interview and may have had their parents or another family member in the room while the interview took place. Participants also had the option to have their cameras on or off. All participants chose to have their cameras on. Participants were not identified in the study or on the audio recording by their names, but by a coded participant number to ensure privacy and confidentiality. All participants were provided a \$5.00 online gift certificate of their choice for their time and the results of the study were shared with them in a brief PowerPoint format.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter will share the main themes and findings that emerged through the interviews and data analysis. The first looks at the overall context of how this group of adolescents described their experience of the pandemic periods of isolation. The second focused on their sense of mattering and how that may have been connected to their well-being. In the experience section results focused on what changed, what was challenging and what was easier. In the mattering and well-being section we examine what gave the youth a sense of mattering and any connections they saw to their perceived well-being. Several quotations are included from the

participants to capture their unique voices and perspectives and enhance trustworthiness. The results are formatted within the framework of the above-mentioned mattering domains as seen in Appendix A of feeling valued and adding valued which is adapted from Prilleltensky's model (Prilleltensky, 2019, p. 16).

Without being preconceived, the interview responses naturally fell into these two categories and thematic analysis revealed several themes in each area. Prilleltensky's category of "relationships" (2019) was further sub-themed into family, friends, or school because it was observed in the data that there were unique themes in how the youth felt they mattered with each of these categories.

Themes of mattering and well-being appeared to be interconnected as youth did not speak about their well-being alone. Most of the questions and prompts were focused on mattering within the context of their personal experience. When youth volunteered responses about their perceived well-being, they connected it with times that made them feel good or happy. Using the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines as outlined by Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig, (2007) and in Nowell et al. (2017), the findings are shared in a format of generalizing the responses of the youth interviewed for this study in summary, followed by notable participant-specific examples to support those generalizations. Participant identifier codes will be included to authenticate their responses and link to their age and gender.

COVID-19 Isolation Experiences

Since it had been over a year since the initial 2019 COVID-19 pandemic isolation and school closures I used questions and prompts to help youth to recall and describe their

experience. This will support them in sharing a context for their experience, within their sense of mattering. Many expressed that there were changes related to how they communicated with others, their relationships, and how they spent their time.

A word cloud was created from the coded data (see Appendix C). It visually shows frequent responses to youth's COVID-19 isolation experiences. The larger and more visible the font, the more often the word was reported. In the background are several words that could be combined into themes. The bolded or larger font words alerted me to the idea that "time" was a factor in how youth described their experience; spending time, having time, more time, less time, and change over time. It also helped me see that loss, sports, school, transition, pause, relationships, and family were important to several participants. Several youths also used the word "everything" when describing their experiences.

What Changed? What Was Challenging?

When asked for their initial thoughts on the pandemic isolation experiences, youth had a mix of reactions:

"That it was a year of back and forth" (P2)

"Everything was on pause, a period of adaptation" (P5).

"It was fun and interesting" (P3)

"Everything was boring, dull, and grey" (P1)

Most teens commented that something changed or even that everything changed. Only one participant commented that nothing really changed. However, after further probing questions, he

reported a change in his daily social relationships. Several teens initially commented on the COVID-19 protocols; rules and restrictions of social distancing, wearing masks, school closure and learning from home. Following these obvious recollections, youth shifted more towards their personal, social-emotional experience of the situation. They often described it as initially challenging and then getting easier as they got used to it and started to reconnect with people. Youth then shared that it became difficult again when they had to re-adapt to return to school with a more rigid schedule and socializing or the opposite, to return into another isolation period as COVID-19 cases augmented again.

Several teens mentioned the loss of the way things were and the loss of notable events such as clear transition milestones like graduation or anticipated sports competitions. Most teens also commented on their increased use of technology to communicate. What stood out for them was the overall change in routine, the change in how they spent their time, and a lot of uncertainty. Since only 4 out of 12 of the youth worked or volunteered prior to the isolations, there was little concern over financial dependency or maintaining a job.

I was surprised based on their development stage of growing independence that they didn't comment on the limitation of freedoms, romantic relationships, and physical health. They may have included this in their reasons for concerns about their mental health. The following are individual categories of themes that youth shared when asked about their experience of the pandemic periods of isolation. Most notable were changes in relationships, communication, personal identity, exploring existential mattering and meaning in life and how time was spent.

Relationships. Adolescents volunteered reflections on their relationships. All commented on peer and friendship relationships and several also commented on relations with family members, community members and teachers. Time was a factor, as online relations improved, and youth reconnected as the pandemic progressed. Initially, nearly all youth mentioned missing time with friends and a great lack in meaningful communication in the first month of the pandemic isolation. More time together improved relationships including time spent online with relatives overseas, sometimes too much time with siblings became annoying, while one youth commented that the social drama of school carried over to their online chats (P2) and several commented those social opportunities were lacking in and out of school during the isolations. Except for two youths who embraced the opportunity to stay home and not to feel the pressure of socializing, the majority missed face-to-face chats with friends and hanging out together. They missed the casual social interactions at school as a place to connect (P5) and this may have impacted their well-being. One shared “it was hard not to see friends” (P13). They shared that it was different from being face to face, they could not connect in the same way.

Some youth even missed seeing immediate family members for lengthened periods of time if their family was stuck overseas because of travel bans or if they could not travel to see a sick relative even a couple of provinces away. Some family and friend relationships were strengthened with more quality time spent together in smaller, more intimate groups. This more meaningful connection to others was also seen in research by Slatcher (2020). One youth mentioned the surprise that his friendships strengthened over the isolations. He shared “*I got a greater sense of belonging with a small, intimate group of people online. I could be myself without worrying what others would think*” (P10).

Not all youth experienced these strengthened relationships with peers and friends, however. Youth who lacked connection with an intimate group, shared that they missed the day-to-day casual interactions with peers at school. One youth who began a new school in September, following the first isolation, commented on the challenge of making friends during this time. She thought she would use her role as a basketball player to meet people, but that opportunity was not available with sports cancellations. She commented that with people wearing masks, going in and out of remote learning, and being in small cohorts, there were very few school socialization opportunities to make new friends in her first year at a new school (P12).

Communication. *“Ain’t nothing like the real thing”* (P2) responded one youth, while she was discussing her isolation experience and challenges in communicating with others remotely. All youth commented on changes in the ways that they communicated with others during the pandemic isolations. While some saw this as an opportunity to get to know others better through online communication, especially one or two close friends or extended family (grandparents, cousins) out of town; others felt that “social aspects were lacking” (P2) and that “maintaining contact with others was challenging” (P9).

Personal Identity. Although they did not use the terms “identity” or “development”, youth commented on growth and changes within themselves. Several youths interviewed voiced that they could not do the things that they used to (sports, volunteering, work etc.), so they decided to try new things. Some realized just how important their sport was to who they were, and others realized that they had just been doing it for years but did not really enjoy it that much anymore. Several youths mentioned that they did not realize just how busy they had been until everything stopped and they now had time to get to know themselves and their families. Some even noticed changes

in their personality, either becoming more extroverted with their smaller group of close friends who they stayed connected with or more introverted when it came to speaking online or returning to school after so much alone time. One youth mentioned that they understood that they needed more time management skills and another that they had become more eco-friendly because of the pandemic. Two youth commented on their own independent time despite being around family all the time and one commented on being “a step closer to independence” (P3). Two youths mentioned their growth in trying to see things positively. One reported, “at first it felt like 'this sucks!' but look on the bright side, I have all this time to find new hobbies and do some new interests” (P6). Another youth shared “We tried to make the best of things, to make us feel like we were making a difference” (P2)

Existential Mattering and Meaning in Life. When reflecting on how the periods of isolation shaped their opinions and thoughts of themselves, a few youths expressed existential ideas; reflecting on what their life means now. They developed an understanding of the situation over time, feeling “blindsided” in the beginning that it could happen in Winnipeg (P2). This may have been connected to their well-being in that they had the time to appreciate their situations. Costin and Vignoles (2022) found that participants got a sense of mattering through a sense of meaning in life. Also, King and Hicks (2021), in their research into meaning in life reveal the connections between meaning in life, well-being and mattering as they see meaning and life is “a sustaining factor in personal wellbeing” and:

The notion of existential mattering or significance refers to the extent to which a person believes their life counts—i.e., that their existence has and will have a lasting impact on the world. (p. 567)

One youth shared her deep reflections:

I'm appreciating life, people come and go, tomorrow could be different, the world is turned upside-down. I'm privileged to be here. I saw the impact on the world. You never know when your last day could be 'cause people were just dropping everywhere.

With social media "living in the moment is something that is slowly fading in our lifetime right now. Things happen for a reason, can't change the past, just the future (with vaccines)
(P2)

Another shared:

It was sad and confusing, a transition, each year another step closer to independence, so close to the future (P3).

How Time Was Spent. I was curious to know more about how adolescents spent their time during these periods of isolation. They shared how their new hobbies and interests led to identity development through changes in who they thought they were. They also revealed that new shared experiences may have led to new relationships or strengthened existing ones.

Youth commented that there were significant changes in how they spent their time. Many shared that they spent more time with family at home with the whole family having fewer external obligations to work or sports. Many commented that they spent their time just talking, getting to know each other better, cooking together, playing games, or watching tv.

When youth spent time alone, they were often on social media, playing video games, sleeping, or doing independent physical activity alone like running, biking, or yoga.

Youth noted that they missed the group sports opportunities for social reasons and the competitions that motivated them to practice their sport. They felt that the lack of routine and regular practices made it easy for them to stop doing their habitual sport and to use this time to try new activities and build new routines and habits.

Ways of Learning/School. Many youths voiced school and learning as one of their biggest changes and challenges during the pandemic isolation. They discussed the initial relief of having less pressure on grades during the first remote learning period. One youth reported that she did better in math, a subject that often caused her stress, because she was “learning for the sake of learning” (P5). Another youth saw that when the teachers put them in groups, either online or in-person, this helped her to feel more connected to school and her peers (P6).

Several youth mentioned challenges with motivation and lack of motivation due to changes in routines and ways of learning shifting back and forth from in-person to remote or hybrid models. Many voiced that it was challenging to engage with the material, to talk to classroom peers online and to participate actively or ask the teacher questions. Several youth mentioned distractions in the home and finding it difficult to stay focused, either noise, pets, siblings, or the lure of tv, video games, social media or even just sleeping in and not showing up. Some youth noticed that they changed their learning styles and that after the initial isolation period they developed new routines to help them to stay on task. Some also commented that they lacked time management skills that were needed to get the work done and wished that schools had spent more time teaching them skills to work remotely.

Adolescents' Sense of Mattering

Mattering Through Feeling Valued

The following includes ways in which participants shared that they felt that they mattered in ways that they felt valuable to others. Youth commented on how they felt important in the lives of others and if they felt that others missed them when they were not there. As the pandemic progressed and restrictions on social isolation changed unpredictably so did the youth's perceptions on how they mattered.

Time was a considerable factor in how youth's feelings of mattering changed. There appeared to be an initial sense of loss and shock during the first few weeks of lockdown that increased feelings of isolation from their peers. Following these initial few weeks, the youth seemed to have made a choice to act, or to do nothing. Some acted by looking after their own well-being and taking time for themselves while others reconnected outside of the home through electronic means, or to increase connections with the people in their homes. The details of their thoughts follow in the subsections with accompanying quotes below.

Mattering Through Adding Value

The most remarkable and clear utterances by youth regarding how they felt they mattered were clear when they felt like they were contributing or "adding value" to the lives of others. It was less the innate feeling "I feel like I matter" and more of an acknowledgement that their own chosen actions to support others, help others, or participate in the lives of others made them feel important, needed, and like they mattered. Responses that came up during the interviews included the phrases: "*I felt important,*" "I had purpose," and "*I felt like I made a difference.*"

Some participants even expressed that during these periods of isolating in their homes that their

role was redefined. They explained this because everyone was simply at home more, they were more present when they were there, and they had more time. Although they did not use the term “identity development” they spoke with many examples of how they changed through the process of getting to know themselves and helping others. These changes were noted in the above section on youth experience.

Mattering in Relationships

Mattering to Family All youth reported that they felt like they mattered to their families. Several youths reported that their family had more time to spend with them than usual, they got closer and felt important to their parents and siblings. They mentioned that they even learned about each other. Some even expressed surprise that these household members had become such a huge part of their lives. One participant shared *“My family got a lot closer. We did lots of activities, like the Covid Olympics. We grew a lot more and continued these activities after; which is amazing! (P6)*

Youth reported that the only people who they felt dependent on them were their families. Although they voiced feeling like they mattered to friends, that dependency relationship in mattering wasn’t voiced with friends. One of the most common responses when youth described how their family depended on them was an increase in responsibility in the home. With parents working from home, the teens were asked to help more with chores such as cooking, cleaning, and aiding younger siblings. Thanks to technology, a couple of youth even shared that their extended family in other countries counted on them to help with their younger cousins with homework, or to chat with elderly family members online when they were isolated. One teen

even shared that they grieved online together when they could not be together for a COVID-19-related funeral. They shared how their families depended on them:

” My brothers depended on me – just sort of knowing that they weren’t alone” (P13)

“My family depended on me to help in the home and do my part” (P10)

This seemed especially important for youth who did not feel like they mattered to friends or to school. They felt they mattered to their family just because they were home spending time together. Even if it was just watching tv together or their parents and siblings taking time to listen to them.

The pandemic separated some families from their extended family and even close family who were working abroad. When it came to wondering if extended family missed them, some youth assumed that grandparents, aunts and uncles must have missed them because they missed them too (P9, P10, P12, P13). Even one youth who first said that was unsure how he mattered at the start of the interview, eventually shared examples of how he knew that he mattered to family. He felt that they enjoyed having him around and that he could help the family by being responsible for getting his own work done (P4). Other examples of what participants said about how they knew they mattered to their families can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Mattering to Their Families; Examples of Participant Responses to How They Felt Valued and Added Value.

Feeling Valued	Adding Value
They listened to me (P9)	I helped my family with schoolwork (P3, P5)
I was being cared for like a small child (P5)	I helped my family grieve with Covid death even overseas (P5)
They spent time with me (P5, P6, P9, P12)	I had more time for my family without sports commitments (P1, P6, P9)
Just felt important to my family (P2, P9)	I cooked/baked for the whole family (p7)
They enjoyed having me around (P4)	I helped around the house (P6)
We looked out for each other (P12)	I helped a parent with their work (P2)
	I helped by getting my own schoolwork done (P4)

Mattering to Friends. Most youth mentioned an initial disconnect with friends during the first month of isolation. Eventually when their friends started reaching out to them through text or videoconferencing (FaceTime etc.), they felt that they mattered to them and realized who they were still important to. Table 3 shows examples of how youth felt they mattered to friends.

Table 3

Mattering to their Friends: Examples of Participant Responses to how they Felt Valued and Added Value.

Feeling Valued	Adding Value
They called, FaceTimed, or texted to see how I was doing, “stayed in touch” (P7, P12)	I helped friend(s) with their mental health problems, stress, or anxiety (P2, P3, P8) I reached out to people, and we talked about our feelings and the pandemic (P6)
They played online games with me (P3)	I had exchanges of social support, helped them feel less alone, relating to them (P2)
They trusted me with information (P3)	I would get help for my friends if they needed it (i.e., conflict resolution between peers (P3)
They gave their time to me (P3, P7)	I gave time to my friends (P7)
I felt missed by them (P3, P5, P12, P13)	I dropped off cookies at friend’s house (P2)

Youth who were unsure of how they mattered to friends, or those who felt that they didn’t matter to friends, shared that they felt this was because their friends did not contact them. or that they had a lack of connection to their friends. They shared:

“I felt somewhat less important to peers; I didn’t communicate with peers in other classes that didn’t talk to (P1)

“I didn’t feel like I mattered because I mostly didn’t talk to friends while in isolation,

mostly just teachers. Seeing friends at school made me feel I mattered more.” (P4)

“It was difficult to tell, I didn’t have much contact with people” (P9)

Mattering to School. Some youth shared that they knew they mattered to teachers as they believed that teachers were trying to engage with them and showed that they cared about their mental well-being. Some youth who were active in school or sports missed the socialization aspect. One youth commented that she felt missed by the track team and she missed “talking while running” and realized “it’s hard to train alone” (P6). Other examples of how youth felt that they mattered to school can be seen in Table 4. There were fewer opportunities for youth to feel that they could add value or contribute to their schools during the pandemic, especially during the remote periods.

Table 4

Mattering to Schools; Participant Responses to how they Felt Valued by the School Staff and How they Added Value

Feeling Valued	Adding Value
They reached out to connect and interact with me (P5)	I helped at school on wellness day and in Peace of support club” (P5)
They kept us engaged (P3, P4)	
I knew I mattered to them (P4)	
Teachers cared about our mental health, they took time to talk about it individually and in class. (P2, P5) “It was prioritized (but not previously” (P5)	

Several youths mentioned that they did not feel that they were missed by the other peers in their classes or school who they would normally interact with because they did not have their contact information outside of school. Even if they were connected by social media or in online classrooms these classroom peers, not necessarily friends, did not reach out to each other in the

periods of isolation. Only one youth mentioned that she felt she mattered to school when she was helping with the school wellness events and when she was supporting peers through the Peace of support club (P5)

Youth who did not express feelings of mattering from school shared thoughts of empathy for their teachers and school staff. They voiced words of understanding towards the challenges that teachers faced. Rather than expressing feelings of anti-mattering, some looked at the situation as something that no one could be prepared for. They saw teacher's jobs as a panic to provide an ideal learning environment remotely. Table 5 shares examples of what the youth shared. Once again, time was a factor in how they felt they mattered to school. One of the above youths commented that it was "a lot better" in September when they started back because teachers were "making an effort" to engage youth and trying to connect kids through group work.

Table 5

Responses from Youth who Expressed Empathy for Teacher's Efforts

Participant	Statement
3	"It was hard to make sure that everyone was happy" "No one had stability." "Resources were being put into better spots, other people were being helped and that was ok; "Some people needed help because they had covid."
2	"It wasn't easy for teachers. I knew from my mom who was a teacher" "Teachers thought it would be temporary." "They didn't have an outlet."
6	"I didn't feel that I had access to enough resources or teachers were busy with other students who needed help more."

Note. These youth did not express feelings of mattering from school, however, they shared statements of understanding or empathy towards their teachers.

Mattering to the Community. While only 4 out of the 12-youth worked or volunteered in the community during the pandemic isolation, those who did reported a strong sense of mattering. Less came from innate feelings of being valued and more from them adding value and contributing to the lives of others. One youth who shared connections to a church community noticed that they mattered to the church because church members asked their families about how they were doing (P7). Another youth shared “helping others makes me feel like I mattered more” (P2).

Mattering to the World. With the ongoing global pandemic, there was some speculation that youth may have felt that they mattered to the world. One youth felt that teens did not matter in the beginning because they had “a lack of information” and they felt like they were being “sheltered from the pandemic” (P2). Youth who did feel like they mattered to the world felt like it was because of what they were doing to stop the spread of the virus through social distancing, getting vaccinated, and following COVID-19 protocols.

Mattering to Self. Interestingly, some youth volunteered ways in which they knew that they were important to themselves even though this was not a direct prompt in the interview. Youth shared that they knew they mattered to themselves (especially several weeks into the first period of isolation) when they took action to care for themselves or to take time for themselves.

It was here that the youth made the most voluntary connections to their sense of mattering and their well-being. They shared information (see Table 6) about mattering to themselves.

Table 6

Mattering to Self: Examples of How Youth Knew They Mattered to Themselves.

Feeling Valued	Adding Value
Mattering to self is important now (P5)	I practiced self-care (skin, health, exercise, rest, sleep) (P3, P5) I made a plan to feel better, improve my well-being (P8) I needed to take control of goals (school, sports etc.) (P1)

One youth who felt like he did not matter much to himself shared; *“I know I matter, but it*

doesn’t always feel like that, right?” He also shared; “I don’t take my own advice because

don’t believe in myself?” (P2)

Mattering and Well-being

With the exception of the one youth who commented on feeling “sad” to miss transitions and momentous events (P3), the other youth interviewed only discussed well-being when they were asked how it might be connected to their sense of mattering. They often referred to well-being in terms of “feeling “good” or feeling “happy.” In the interview, a brief suggestion of what well-being could mean included the possibility of commenting on their physical well-being. Despite COVID-19 being a physical health threat, they did not comment on physical aspects of their well-being.

Adolescents did not share that they saw explicit connections from how they felt they mattered and how it related to their well-being; yet some of what they shared revealed a connection. They tended to associate mattering most with doing things for others, the “adding value” (Prilleltensky, 2019) or impacting the lives of others. Despite social distancing restrictions, research is growing over the past couple of years on the importance of volunteering and caring for others and its impact on the well-being of the person volunteering and the person that is being supported (Tierney & Mahtani, 2020; Pool & Atkinson, 2021; Yong & Sia, 2021). When asked about their sense of mattering and how it may be related to their well-being, youth commented uniquely on their emotional or mental well-being. Some of the youth interviewed responded:

“I felt important to teachers and classmates, and this made me feel happy, better.” (P2)

“Taking time out for myself...made me realize that people did care a lot about me.”

“It made me feel super good about how I’m able to be a part of that family and help them.” (P5)

“I felt like I had something to do, my responsibilities changed, helping the family unload the dishwasher while in class, made me feel happy, made me feel good because I felt they needed me, they wanted me to be there like I impacted them, I enjoy helping other people.” (P6)

“Helping my friend with her mental health problems made me feel happy. (P8)

One teen even commented that it made a difference in their stress levels and feelings of happiness. She shared:

“The more I do, the less stressed I am and the more happy!” (P7)

Chapter 5: Discussion

The Youth COVID-19 Isolation Experiences

Being teenagers, seeking autonomy and independence, I had hypothesized that youth would have voiced changes and concerns related to their limitation of freedoms and tension in their relationships. It may have been included in their reasons for concerns about their mental health, but they did not comment on physical health concerns at all. They also shared little information about what may have been easier. Some shared that it was easier to connect with family overseas because they were home during the day and could call at better times and that it was easier to find time with family members in their homes.

In an OECD study on the COVID-19 impacts on youth (2020), the average number of youths surveyed expressed mental health concerns, lack of employment, and lack of disposable income respectively (OECD, 2020). The youth interviewed in this qualitative study differed from the larger OECD study in that they were less vocal about their mental health concerns and well-being overall. The participants in this study discussed changes in how their volunteer positions

went online instead of face-to-face but they did not voice job-loss. In fact, one youth even found a job during this time because of the need for front-line workers in the grocery stores. This difference between the study population and OECD study could be based on cultural norms in which they do not discuss certain family challenges or finances, or this was not a concern for them or their families. They may also have withheld fewer positive feelings as they may have felt like they had to respond in a way they may have believed was culturally favourable (Diener, 2000) or what the researcher (who was also a high school teacher) may have wanted to hear. Interviewing several more youths may have shown more similar findings.

Matters of time – Giving time/Over time

It is all in the timing. Just over one year after their first social isolation experience and only one month after their latest, youth described changes in their relationships as the most notable recollection of their experience. Rapid qualitative research (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020) conducted and disseminated within the initial months of lockdown may have been more effective in informing the importance of mattering in subsequent lockdowns. This data may still be able to support youth well-being or senses of mattering in a broader sense. The importance of quality time in relationships was also noted in Vowels et al., (2021). This was also like Branquinho et al.'s findings (2020) in which youth noted relationships changed either positively by being strengthened with more time together, or negatively, by losing contact and finding it difficult to communicate remotely. Smallen (2021) saw this as “disruptions to their regular patterns of social behaviour or shifts in the organization of their social life” (pp. 2886-2887). Youth noted this change, and their reaching out to connect with others after the initial shock of the pandemic is consistent with

people's patterns to seek and maintain meaningful connections with others (Baumeister et al., 1995; Reis et al., 2000).

The ways that youth felt that they mattered in this study reflected what was reported in Smallen's (2021) study on meaningful interactions in the first few weeks of COVID-19 isolation. He noted that the adult's sense of mattering was diverse but included the same appreciation for spending quality time or doing activities together. He also reported that adults felt they mattered if they engaged on an "emotionally intimate level" (p. 2897) which was not unlike how the youth in this study shared that they would support each other with mental health problems and that their teachers and family listened to them and prioritized discussions about their mental health. The same feelings of mattering through receiving "time, energy, attention and care" (p. 2897) were expressed by Smallen's participants in 2021 and the participants in this study. Smallen's study with adult Amazon workers and Psychology students, also acknowledged the importance of the value-added, and adding value domains. He shared his findings on the experiences of meaningful connections during the first weeks of the pandemic:

Participants reported experiencing a sense that they matter when their interaction partners expressed verbally or through actions that they valued the participant, or in experiences in which participants were able to recognize their own positive impact on other people (Smallen, 2021, p. 2897).

Youth's sense of mattering and positive well-being through participating and sharing responsibilities was also seen in Vowels et al. (2021) in their qualitative study on relationships.

In follow-up interviews they noted that participants described relationships positively when discussing teamwork and balanced shared responsibility (p. 2935).

Flexibility or Resiliency and Adolescents During times of Adversity

Participants showed flexible thinking in how they perceived their covid isolation experience. None expressed particularly strong feelings about not being able to continue in their sport or activities of choice. Many expressed appreciations of having time to re-discover who they are and what they are really interested in and who they will choose to spend their time with. One can only wonder if these opinions would be shared by older youth who were in their last year of high school with pre-conceived notions of what their graduation would look like or perhaps their first job interviews. Young adults who were just starting their first year in college or University and facing it all online may lack the social opportunities that may help them with this transition. It may even be especially challenging for young adults in their final years of professional sports, hoping to have a chance at the Olympics but missing valuable training time due to COVID-19 restrictions. It was seen by Shah et al. (2021) that athletes' mental well-being declined during the periods of isolation due to lack of physical activity, dysregulated sleeping and eating patterns, fear of missing training opportunities and losing competitive edge. They may have voiced stronger opinions on their well-being and greater disappointment or frustration with the periods of isolation because their identity was much more tied to their sport and time is limited. They also have pressure to maintain high levels of performance no matter how conditions may change.

In times of adversity such as pandemic isolations, youth may tend to focus on what they are lacking or what's missing. Prilleltensky's mattering model of feeling valued and adding value provides opportunities for youth to look at a broader aspect of their lives that they may be

missing. For example, they may be ruminating on how they don't feel they matter to one group such as friends because they have lost touch but then later realize how much they matter to their families and communities and themselves by considering what they are doing that is impacting the lives of others.

Youth Understanding of the Concepts of Mattering and Well-being

Despite using concrete definitions and prompts in the interview process, the concepts of mattering and well-being may have been too abstract for some of the teens as they are for younger children (Crivello et al., 2009). The concept of well-being was described in the interview to include aspects of both psychological, social and physical well-being. Since the pandemic was initially seen as a virus that would affect people's physical selves through illness it was surprising that no youth commented on their physical well-being. Even athletes who were much less active commented on their self-motivation to workout but not on the physical impact of lack regular activity. The youth's association with the term well-being is not unlike the research on the topic that tends to interchange it with mental health.

Although the youth were able to provide examples of how they felt they mattered to others, using a more participatory process may have been beneficial to increase understanding of the concepts and may have offered even more insight into their experience and thoughts.

An example of this participatory process of understanding these subjective concepts would be in Falkenberg et al. (2019) invited youth to take part in developing a greater understanding of what well-being and well-becoming means to them through a survey and focus group. Another participatory process was used by Crivello et al., (2009) in which younger children co-constructed the concept of well-being through illustrations and discussions. With teens, social stories could also be useful or by them pulling images from the internet or social

media to describe the concepts. This might also help in cross-cultural contexts in which diverse understandings of these concepts or even the willingness to share their thoughts in this area may be challenging for some youth (Liebenberg et al., 2020).

In addition, since youth appeared to construct a sense of mattering through questions and prompts during the interview, we lack information about how they felt they mattered prior to the COVID-19 periods of isolations. In González-Valero et al., (2020) youth reported a higher self-concept prior to the pandemic. It would be interesting to know what their sense of mattering was before the pandemic and if this shifted with increased responsibility and greater participation in the lives of others during the isolations.

Relevance of Youth Voice to Support a Sense of Mattering

Youth voice was invaluable to this study. I met them where they were in their understanding of their individual experience, how they felt they mattered, and how that may have been related to their well-being. When one considers the youth voice in the member checking process of having the youth review their own transcripts for accuracy, there is some possibility that the youth did not in fact review their transcripts because they were lengthy, or they trusted the researcher and did not want to take the time. A more participatory process of data interpretation that may have felt that they mattered more to the study process might have been to involve the youth in how *their* data was interpreted. Liebenberg et al. (2020) found that we need to consider youth's time when asking them to participate in our research process and that they might not be interested in reading their lengthy transcripts (p. 3). Liebenberg et al. suggests that Participatory Thematic Data Analysis might be more engaging for the youth and in their study on Extending Youth Voices in a Participatory Thematic Analysis Approach, they recommend more

engaging step by step processes in which the youth can assist in the development and consensus of themes and sub-themes through games and collective group processes (pp. 4-9).

Research prior to data collection pointed to the risks of anti-mattering on well-being. Even though a couple of youth mentioned that they were not sure how they felt they mattered at times, throughout the interview they provided examples of when they did feel they mattered. This was also a limited sample and the youth who had anti-mattering experiences or who felt that they may not matter, may have chosen not to volunteer to participate. To also include the voices of these youth in future studies, a partnership with Kids Help phone (<https://kidshelpphone.ca>) or a community agency that provides counselling services to youth might be an opportunity to hear from youth who lack a sense of mattering.

Implications for Schools and Counsellors

The findings from this study support existing evidence that mattering was an important aspect in how this group of youth experienced the pandemic isolations, particularly in Manitoba. What can be done to increase a sense of mattering in youth? As recently shared by Flett et al. (2020) mattering is a public health issue that needs to be developed. Ross et al. show that following the evidence of the impacts of the pandemic on youth, there need to be “systems in place to support the well-being of adolescents” (Ross et al., 2020, 472). The findings highlight how mattering could be a protective factor of youth well-being. Based on this context-specific data, Manitoba schools can include a focus on mattering in their health education and facilitate its connection to learners’ well-being. Opportunities can be created within the school and individual classrooms or clubs for youth to contribute to the lives of others (Pool & Atkinson, 2021). Connections can be made between individual mattering through schools and public awareness campaigns such as “Every Child Matters” (<https://www.angeshirtday.org/>), “We

Matter” (We Matter, 2020), and “Choose2Matter” (Choose2Matter | Join the Movement of Mattering. #youmatter) so that youth take part in the process.

In addition, counsellors can work to build a sense of mattering in their therapeutic alliance with youth (Flett, 2018) through constructivist perspectives such as solution-focused or narrative therapy. Learners who have lived experience of mattering but do not have the name for it could be supported to construct meaning about their sense of mattering and its contribution to their development. Mattering as a counselling focus can help them understand how they already matter to others and how they can take action to help others feel that they matter. Flett (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) stresses the role of schools in promoting learners’ development of mattering. He suggests that not only is mattering a protective factor in mental health but that the “self-stigma” that one may have of seeking counselling may be alleviated if one feels that it is important to take care of themselves (Flett, 2018c, 220). Findings from this study suggest the importance of mattering in all aspects of counselling including career counselling. This is a critical time as youth are constructing their identity and the possibilities of their future selves.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Future Studies

Conclusion

This study first sets out to understand how adolescents experienced the COVID-19 isolation periods. There were several commonalities in what youth shared about their experience. Regarding any speculation based on their developmental age, no youth categorized this experience as a crisis and any disruptions or changes to their perceived identity appeared to be positive. This could speak to their resilience, and adaptability. With this specific group there was no identified post-traumatic growth observed, as the group did not share or even hint to the idea that they had trauma from their COVID-19 isolation experiences. In addition to the obvious

changes brought upon by Covid protocols, this group noticed changes in their relationships, in their interests and how they spent their time.

Following a better understanding of how youth experienced these periods of isolation. Youth clearly voiced the importance of feeling that they mattered in the lives of others. Overall, youth expressed innate feelings of mattering to family, friends, and school when people invested time in them, and showed interest. Most of the youth interviewed in this study expressed a greater sense of mattering in instances when they felt that they were actively participating or contributing to the lives of others or themselves. This ranged from sharing responsibilities in the home, to supporting others with their mental well-being through listening to them, helping them with their work, or just spending time with them.

Although most youth did not use the words mattering and well-being together while casually recalling their experiences, when prompted, they began to see the connections and expanded on how they felt they mattered and what made them feel happier. Youth commented uniquely on their mental well-being even though part of the definition shared with youth was “a feeling either physically or in your mind” (see Appendix B). With the COVID-19 virus being something that affects one's physical health, it was curious that it was only their mental well-being that they commented on when reflecting on their isolation experiences. This could be the psychological association with the word well-being or because none of the adolescents interviewed had been experiencing any COVID-19 or other health challenges at the time. Youth used the words “I felt happy” or “It made me feel good” when they shared how they felt like they mattered. This was often when they were actively contributing to the lives of others or choosing to spend more time with their family.

Additionally, this study extends emerging research that explores the effects of feelings of not mattering. Mattering was described as a context-specific construct by some participants in this study. For example, while one youth expressed feeling unsure how he mattered because he felt that he did not matter with friends or school, later in the interview, he shared that he did feel like he mattered with his family. Another youth who was unsure at times how she mattered, through further discussion, shared that she felt like she mattered in her job and to her mom when she helped her mom with her work. This points to the importance of how context shapes youth construction of mattering and how skills related to mattering could be transferred from one context to another.

Future Studies

As mentioned in the literature search, research on mattering with adolescents is growing, but not as fast as the research on adolescent mental health problems. This population would benefit from more studies that show its importance. A mixed methods study that coupled standardized instruments such as the mattering General Mattering Scale (Schieman & Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Turner, 2001) and measures of well-being such as The Adolescent Well-Being Scale (Birlleson, 1980), might have a way to quantify their measure of well-being or mattering. Even if it would still be a personal interpretation, a subjective measure, triangulation would be useful to enhance credibility. Future large-scale national studies such as those by Statistics Canada and the NIH might also want to offer a mixed methods approach. While certainly more costly, taking time to investigate "the why" of the youth's responses might lead to more suitable interventions and less expenditure on programs that are not currently being accessed.

In addition, this current study highlights general assertions about the relationship between mattering and well-being, and it may be interesting to explore this relationship further. When

developing mattering interventions, more research into the directionality of mattering, such as in Marshal et al.'s (2019) study could provide a more specific understanding of whether mattering is an antecedent or outcome of well-being.

Looking at longitudinal data would also be interesting to observe if their interpretation of their experience changed over time. As the initial quantitative data collected on youth mental health symptoms in the initial two months of lockdown might suggest (Patrick et. al, 2020; Samji et al., 2022; Statistics Canada, 2020), youth expressed increased symptoms of anxiety and depression early in the pandemic isolations. With time, and developing coping mechanisms through their own actions, or accessing support, they may see the asset in this experience and have an increased sense of well-being.

If youth are more aware of how they matter to others, and are valued, they may be more inclined to act to add value to others and show others how they matter to them. Angela Maiers, in her TEDx talk and Choose 2 Matter campaign has spread this message internationally and promotes awareness of the power of choosing to matter (TEDx, 2011). This could lead to further exploration into how events are recalled and if this influences their perceptions of their experiences and their sense of well-being during that time. If the researcher is asking for specific examples of how they may have mattered or felt valued, they may begin to recall their experiences more positively.

It might also be interesting to explore if there were any research effects on youth well-being with a pre and post interview mattering and/or well-being inventory. This might show if while discussing their experience, with examples and reflection, it helped them to realize that they mattered more or mattered less. This could also inform the important people in their lives ways they could help the youth feel that they mattered more.

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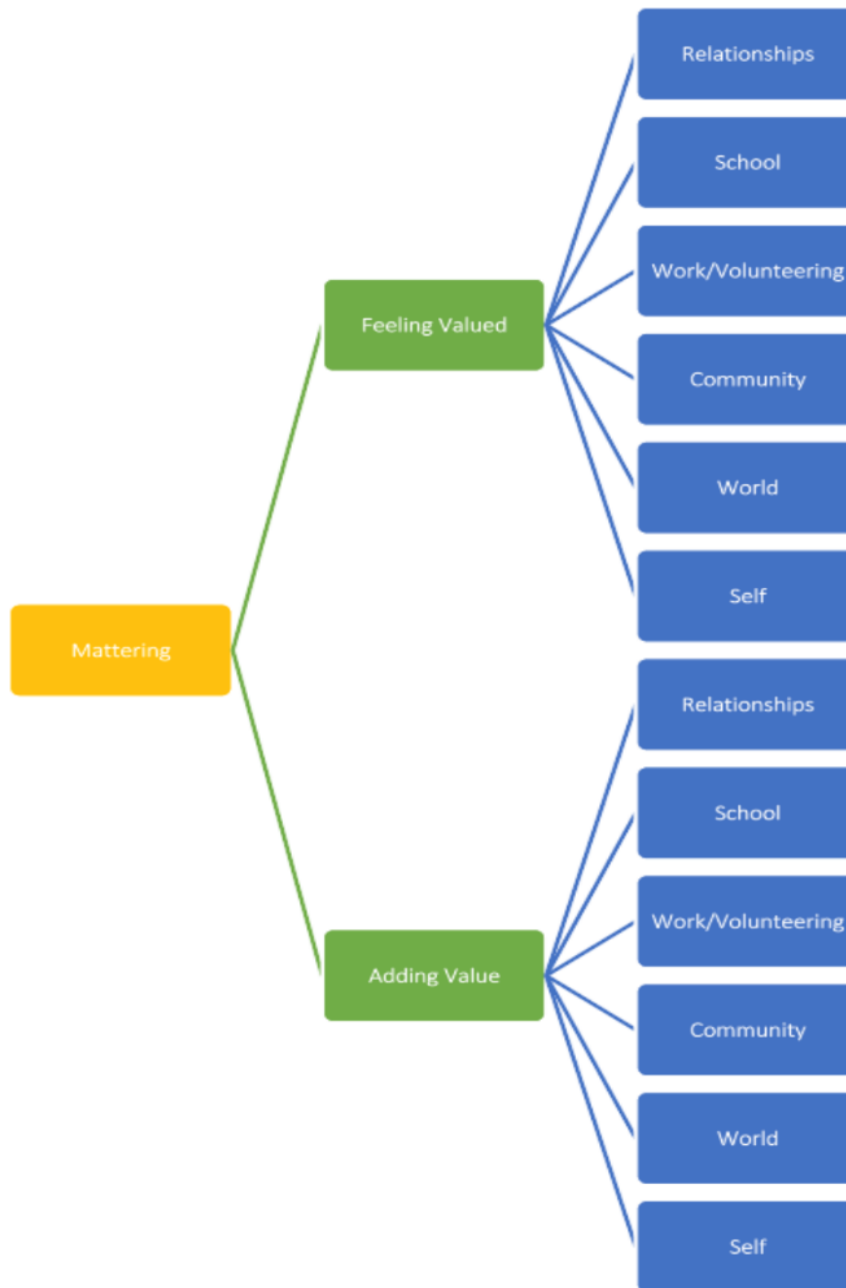
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Appendix A

Adolescent Mattering Domains of Feeling Valued and Adding Valued



Note: Adapted from Prilleltensky's Diagram of Feeling Valued and Adding Valued (2019)

Appendix B

Interview Questions and Prompts

1. Youth experience of the pandemic periods of isolation

The first part of the interview is to understand what your experiences were like during the pandemic periods of isolation. The Covid periods of isolation could be anytime when you felt that you were in lockdown, that you could not go to school or be with your family or friends in the same way as you could before Covid.

Prompts (Social isolation periods):

Let us talk about these periods of isolation.

- What stands out for you about this experience?
- Did being in isolation change your life a lot?
- What was challenging for you?
- What was easy?
- Was there anything that made your life better during this time?
- What could have been done to make your life better during this time?

2. Sense of mattering and your well-being during isolation periods

Now I would like to understand how you felt that you mattered during this time and how this may have affected your well-being.

Mattering means feeling that we are important to others, this includes ourselves. *(Based on Flett & Heisel (2020) and Rosenburg & McCullough's (1981) definitions).*

Prompts (Mattering):

Let us talk about how you felt that you mattered during these periods of isolation.

- During these periods did you feel that you were important to other people? This could be the people in your home or your friends and peers outside of the home or on social media.
- Did you feel that you were making a difference in the lives of the people around you? In what ways?
- How about in the world? Do you feel that there was any way while you were in isolation that you were making a difference in the world?
- Did you feel that there were people who depended on you or needed your help?
- Did you feel that people may have missed spending time with you?
- Did you feel that what you said or did have an impact on people?
- What could have been done so that you felt that you mattered more during this time?

Your *well-being* means how you are feeling, either physically or in your mind. Some people say that well-being is when they are feeling happy, satisfied, or that they can control and regulate their thoughts and/or emotions.

Now, after thinking about how you felt you mattered to yourself or others during these periods of isolation:

- How do you think that this affected your overall well-being during these times?
- What could have made you feel better during this time?

Appendix C

Word Cloud of COVID-19 Experience Responses

This appendix has a word cloud that was created from the coded data. It visually shows frequent responses to youth's COVID-19 isolation experiences. The larger and more visible the font, the more often the word was reported. In the background there are several words that can be combined into themes. The bolded or larger font words alerted me to the idea that "time" was a major factor in how they described their experience, spending time, having time, more time, less time and change over time. It also helped me see that loss, sports, school, transition, pause, relationships, and family were important to several participants or even that several youths used

