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Living alone, feeling connected: television engagement, loneliness, and social isolation among elderly women

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ABSTRACT

Background: Rapidly changing family and migration contexts have made loneliness among older women in single-person households a key psychosocial issue. The literature has focused on loneliness as a lack of social interaction and isolation, with little attention to the emotional aspects of living alone and mediated forms of social contact.

Objectives: This study examined the lived experiences of older women living alone in Kerala, India, including living alone, television engagement, emotional coping, memory, and relational continuity.

Design: A qualitative reflexive thematic analysis with phenomenological sensitivity was used. Twenty-two older women aged 62–79 years who lived alone in districts of Kerala were interviewed through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted in Malayalam, and the data were analyzed using NVivo 14.

Results: Four themes were found: (1) emotional silence, solitary aging, and everyday loneliness; (2) TV as everyday companionship and emotional presence; (3) mediation of emotional coping and psychological escape; and (4) parasocial relationships, memory, and emotional identification. Loneliness was expressed as a relational phenomenon, while TV functioned as a 'mediated companion' that supported emotional regulation, continuity, autobiographical reflection, and psychological comfort.

Conclusions: Mediated emotional life is an underacknowledged aspect of well-being in solitude. These findings have implications for gerontological assessment, social work practice, and mental health care for older women experiencing solitary aging.

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Solitary aging; loneliness; television engagement; parasocial relationships; emotional well-being

Introduction

Population aging is a major demographic and social shift that is transforming family life, caring contexts, and later-life experiences in today's societies (Boobalakrishnan, 2023; Isaacson et al., 2019). One of the emerging consequences of this shift is the greater prevalence of older adults, especially older women, living alone for longer after the death of a spouse, retirement, or family separation due to migration (Forsyth et al., 2019; Ghahfarokhi, 2022). Although increased life expectancy is a positive indicator of improvements in healthcare and living conditions, it has also brought to the fore a concern about loneliness, emotional vulnerability, and relational disconnection in old age (Ratcliffe et al., 2021). Previous research has recognized that loneliness in later life encompasses both social and emotional dimensions, reflecting the absence of meaningful social connections as well as emotionally close relationships (Dahlberg et al., 2015; Morese & Palermo,

2022). While both dimensions are recognized in later-life research, the present study primarily concerns the lived experience of emotional loneliness among older women living alone. The risk is especially high for older women, who experience higher rates of widowhood, longer life expectancy, and declining opportunities for emotionally meaningful social relationships (Eggermont & Vandeboosch, 2001).

The experience of aging alone as a woman encompasses relational, emotional, and domestic dimensions that extend considerably beyond the absence of social contact. Later life often brings about a decrease in social interactions, companionship, disruption of home life, and changes in family dynamics (Fang et al., 2023; Urbaniak et al., 2023). Consequently, loneliness in old age is now understood to represent not merely a deficiency in social interaction, but a lack of emotionally meaningful relational presence in daily life. Loneliness has consistently been associated with depression, anxiety,

psychological distress, and decreased well-being in the gerontological literature (Gao et al., 2023; Gerino et al., 2017; Ratcliffe et al., 2021). However, psychosocial perspectives on aging often overlook its emotional aspects, which can encompass a sense of domestic silence, an interrupted sense of continuity, memory, vulnerability, and changing forms of belonging (Martin et al., 2023; Stones & Gullifer, 2014).

These experiences are especially relevant in the context of Kerala, India, where demographic aging is coupled with some of the highest rates of internal and international labor migration across South Asia (Ugargol & Bailey, 2021). Kerala has a high literacy rate, a rapidly aging population, and has been a significant migrant-sending state to the Gulf countries and metropolitan urban centers. Migration has allowed for economic mobility for many families but has also affected intergenerational care and everyday co-presence (Speck & Müller-Böker, 2020). Older parents, especially older women, often live alone because their children have migrated to other cities or countries (Ahlin, 2018; Y. Liu et al., 2021). In particular, ethnographic research by Ahlin (2018) in Kerala shows that although the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can support emotional relationships at a distance, there is no replacement for the physically based and emotionally saturating forms of domestic intimacy that once organized everyday life. Although phone and video calls allow ongoing connection, they do not replace the sensory, temporal, and relational textures of co-resident family life (Chen & Li, 2024; Erstad et al., 2024). Consequently, many older women occupy socially connected yet emotionally fragmented relational environments.

Within these altered domestic contexts, television is frequently integrated into everyday life in ways that extend well beyond entertainment. Previous research has primarily examined television use among older adults in relation to leisure behavior, health communication, cognitive functioning, and psychosocial wellbeing, demonstrating that television can provide routine, emotional comfort, and companionship, while also being associated with increased sedentary behavior and loneliness (Amaxilatis et al., 2017; Fingerman et al., 2022; Isaacowitz & Ossenfort, 2017). These studies indicate that television may provide routine and occupation but may also accompany reduced activity and heightened loneliness, making its psychosocial role potentially ambiguous. For older adults living alone, however, TV can serve as a mediated emotional presence, which helps reduce affective silence, structure everyday life, and offer experiences of familiarity and symbolic companionship (Jones et al., 2021; Latikka et al., 2021). Familiar voices, recurring characters, and serial narratives can create

a sense of inhabited domestic space in otherwise isolated settings (Krause & Fletcher, 2023; Lotun et al., 2024).

In this context, television serials are particularly relevant because their recurring narratives frequently center on caregiving, sacrifice, widowhood, family conflict, and emotional endurance, reflecting many of the emotional and relational experiences reported by older women in India (Das et al., 2024; Govil et al., 2024). Repeated exposure to recurring narratives and familiar characters can foster parasocial relationships—one-sided socio-emotional bonds that individuals develop with media personalities or fictional characters through sustained media exposure—which may provide emotional companionship and a sense of connection for older women (Bernhold et al., 2018; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Lotun et al., 2024). These are parasocial relationships rather than the immediate experience of parasocial interaction while viewing media. Unlike parasocial interactions, which occur while watching television, parasocial relationships develop over time through repeated media exposure and may become enduring sources of companionship and self-understanding (Bernhold, 2019). Serial narratives may also evoke autobiographical reflections, particularly when they resonate with the gendered experiences of motherhood, caregiving, loss, and changing family relationships. Television engagement may therefore support memory, emotional reflection, and continuity of self in later life (Lacalle & Simelio, 2017). However, existing research provides limited insight into how older women living alone experience these processes in their everyday domestic and relational lives.

This study is informed by Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST; Carstensen, 1992, 2021) and Parasocial Relationship Theory (Bernhold et al., 2018; Horton & Wohl, 1956), which provide the conceptual lens for understanding older women's emotional engagement with television and experiences of loneliness in later life. Although previous research has examined loneliness among older adults in a range of contexts, significant gaps remain in understanding how emotional loneliness is experienced and negotiated through everyday television engagement among older women living alone, particularly within migration-affected family settings. Studies on aging and loneliness have tended to focus on physical health outcomes, quantitative measures of social isolation, and systems of care, neglecting the emotional lived experience of solitary aging (Gunnes et al., 2024; Lotun et al., 2024; Morese & Palermo, 2022). Older adults' TV viewing research has been mostly behavioral or quantitative, with little consideration of the emotional dimension of television in their everyday lives (Fang et al., 2023; Rees et al., 2024). Furthermore, while bidirectional relationships

between loneliness and television viewing have been documented among older women—with loneliness predicting increased subsequent viewing over time (Liu & Li, 2025)—the experiential and relational meanings of this association remain underexplored. Studies of parasocial attachment have largely centered on younger audiences and celebrity media cultures, with few studies examining how older women interpret serial narratives, especially within the context of widowhood and family separation in the context of migration (Reul et al., 2023; Urbaniak et al., 2023). In the Indian context, qualitative research examining television as a form of mediated companionship among older women living alone remains particularly limited (Boobalakrishnan, 2023; Das et al., 2024).

Addressing these gaps, the present study explores the lived experiences of older women living alone in Kerala. It examines how television engagement intersects with loneliness, emotional coping, memory, and relational continuity in their later life. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do older women living alone experience loneliness and emotional vulnerability in their later life?
2. What role does television play in their everyday emotional lives and coping practices?
3. How do television narratives shape parasocial relationships, emotional attachment, and autobiographical memory among older women viewers?
4. How do widowhood, aging, migration, and changing family relationships influence television engagement and emotional well-being in older women living alone?

Methods

Research design

This study employed a qualitative design drawing on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it enables systematic yet flexible exploration of experiential meanings among a diverse group of participants while remaining attentive to the subjective, contextual, and emotionally textured accounts that characterize qualitative inquiry in gerontology. The approach treats themes as researcher-constructed interpretations that are both grounded in participants' accounts and shaped by the analyst's active interpretive engagement with the data. The study conceptualized television engagement not as a passive behavior but as part of participants' emotional, relational, and experiential worlds—foregrounding

meaning and lived experience throughout the analysis.

This study was conducted by an interviewer with insider familiarity with Kerala's cultural and linguistic contexts. As a Malayalam-speaking researcher familiar with the cultural landscape of intergenerational migration, domestic life, and television culture in Kerala, the first author occupied a position of relative insider familiarity with the study context. This familiarity facilitated rapport and linguistic accessibility during interviews. It was maintained as an explicit analytical lens throughout the analysis and reflexively examined to ensure that cultural assumptions did not foreclose participants' more unexpected or contradictory accounts. Assumptions about widowhood as the primary driver of loneliness, for instance, were actively held in check, given the sample's marital status diversity. Analytical memos documenting interpretive decisions and reflexive observations were kept throughout the study.

Theoretical orientation

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory theoretically informed this study (Carstensen, 1992, 2021), which suggests that as individuals grow older and perceive time as increasingly finite, emotionally meaningful relationships and experiences become increasingly important. Older adults prioritize familiarity, psychological comfort, and emotionally sustaining forms of engagement over broad social interactions (Carr & Fang, 2023; Fang et al., 2023). In this sense, familiar media environments can gain enhanced psychological significance by providing continuity, symbolization, and mediated relational presence in solitary aging contexts (Latikka et al., 2021; Simons et al., 2023; Tsang et al., 2022). The study also drew on Parasocial Relationship Theory, which explains the one-sided emotional relationships that individuals develop with media personalities or fictional characters, to understand how recurring television characters and emotionally engaging serial narratives become integrated into the everyday emotional lives of older women (Bernhold et al., 2018; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, television engagement may operate as a form of mediated affective companionship through which older women negotiate loneliness, memory, relational absence, and continuity of self within the emotional realities of later life (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001; Östlund, 2010). These theoretical perspectives functioned as sensitizing concepts rather than as a priori coding frameworks. They informed the development of the semi-structured interview guide and guided the interpretation of participants' narratives during reflexive thematic analysis,

while codes and themes were generated inductively from participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Study setting

This study was conducted in Kerala, India, where demographic aging is occurring in tandem with sociocultural transformation, particularly amid migration, urbanization, and evolving family dynamics. The increasing migration of adult children to metropolitan cities and foreign countries has contributed to the growing number of elderly parents, particularly widowed women, living alone for prolonged periods. These changes have impacted how intergenerational care, emotional closeness, and everyday companionship are experienced (Ahlin, 2018; Ugargol & Bailey, 2021).

In Kerala, there is also a culture of watching television, and devotional programs, films, and news broadcasts are integral to daily family life. In this context, television can play a key role in the lives of older adults living alone, and Kerala is a relevant setting for studying the emotional and relational aspects of their relationship with television.

Participants and recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to ensure the experiential relevance and depth of the narrative accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The inclusion criteria were women aged ≥ 60 years, living alone as a result of widowhood, separation, divorce, or long-term solitary living, and regular television watchers. Patients with severe cognitive impairment or major communication problems were excluded.

A total of 22 older women participated. The actual age range of the sample was 62–79 years (mean approximately 70 years). Participants came from diverse educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds, including retired teachers, lecturers, bank and government employees, homemakers, agricultural workers, tailoring and informal-sector workers, and nurses. Eighteen participants were widowed; two were separated, one was divorced, and one had never married. This diversity of marital status is important to recognize: although bereavement was the most frequent route to solitary living, the experiences of separated, divorced, and never married participants may differ in emotionally significant ways from bereavement experiences, and this was recognized in the analysis. The duration of living alone ranged from 3 to 22 years (mean approximately 11 years), and self-reported daily television viewing ranged from 3–4 h to 10–12 h (mean approximately 6.5–7 h per day). The participants' socio-demographic profiles are presented in Table 1.

Recruitment was conducted through neighborhood networks, local community contacts, elderly

associations, women's organizations, and informal contacts across districts in Kerala. Interviews were conducted until an adequate level of experience and thematic saturation was reached.

Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted between January and February 2026. This two-month window falls within Kerala's dry season, following the Christmas and New Year period. It is acknowledged that seasonal factors, including the emotional significance of festival periods and monsoon seasons noted by participants, were not captured and represent a temporal limitation of the study.

The interview guide (Table 2) was organized around six thematic domains: solitary living and everyday life; loneliness and relational absence; television engagement and domestic routine; television, coping, and emotional experience; parasocial attachment and narrative identification; and family relationships, memory, and aging. The interviews began with general questions about daily routines before moving to more reflective discussions on loneliness, widowhood, and television. This sequencing facilitated rapport and allowed participants to share sensitive experiences at their own pace.

Interviews were conducted in the respondents' local language, Malayalam, at their homes and took 60–100 min. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics, such as bereavement, family separation, and loneliness, care was taken during the interviews to ensure the emotional well-being of the participants, with the option to pause or withdraw whenever they were visibly distressed. Interviews were conducted with all participants, and all were audio-recorded with their permission and transcribed verbatim. Malayalam transcripts were translated into English by an interviewer fluent in both languages. Translated portions were checked for fidelity of meaning by a bilingual research colleague fluent in Malayalam and English, particularly to assess whether Malayalam emotional expressions and relational idioms had been captured in the translation, as they carry specific meanings in the Kerala context. Analytical notes were provided when there were choices for translation.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2019): familiarization, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis commenced with repeated, active reading of

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of participants ($N=22$).

ID	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation	Housing	Duration Alone	Family Contact	TV hrs/day	Preferred Content	Health
P1	68	Widow	Primary	Homemaker	Own house	11 yrs	Weekly calls	6-7	Serials, devotional	Average
P2	74	Separated	High school	Tailoring worker	Rented house	18 yrs	Monthly video calls	8-9	Old films, reality	Poor
P3	66	Widow	Bachelor's	Retired teacher	Own house	6 yrs	Daily calls	5-6	Serials, news	Good
P4	69	Widow	Master's	Retired employee	Apartment	9 yrs	Frequent calls	4-5	Serials, talk shows	Fair
P5	79	Never married	No formal	Coir worker	Ancestral house	22 yrs	Occasional visits	9-10	Serials, devotional	Poor
P6	62	Divorced	Higher secondary	Staff nurse	Rented flat	14 yrs	Frequent calls	4-5	Crime serials, reality	Moderate
P7	71	Widow	Secondary	Private employee	Village house	13 yrs	Holiday visits	7-8	Serials, cookery	Fair
P8	64	Unmarried	Diploma	Librarian	Apartment	17 yrs	Weekly calls	3-4	Documentaries, dramas	Good
P9	73	Widow	Informal	Fish vendor	Coastal house	12 yrs	Occasional calls	8	Serials, comedy	Weak
P10	76	Widow	Bachelor's	Retired employee	Own house	10 yrs	Daily calls	10-12	Mega serials, devotional	Moderate
P11	72	Widow	SSLC	Anganwadi worker	Village house	8 yrs	Weekly calls	6-7	Serials, devotional	Moderate
P12	78	Widow	Middle school	Agricultural worker	Rural house	16 yrs	Frequent calls	9	Serials, mythological	Weak
P13	70	Widow	Master's	Retired lecturer	Apartment	7 yrs	Daily calls	4-5	News, documentaries	Good
P14	75	Widow	B.Ed.	Retired headmistress	Independent house	14 yrs	Daily calls	7-8	Serials, news debates	Fair
P15	74	Widow	Undergraduate	Retired bank employee	Flat	5 yrs	Frequent calls	5-6	Serials, reality shows	Good
P16	77	Widow	TTC	Retired teacher	Ancestral house	18 yrs	Frequent calls	8-9	Serials, spiritual talks	Moderate
P17	63	Separated	Diploma	Beauty parlor owner	Apartment	9 yrs	Daily contact	3-4	Reality shows, music	Good
P18	67	Widow	Pre-degree	Tailoring worker	Town house	4 yrs	Frequent calls	6	Serials, comedy	Fair
P19	71	Widow	Primary	Homemaker	Village house	9 yrs	Calls every few days	7	Serials, devotional	Average
P20	69	Widow	High school	Catering helper	Small house	3 yrs	Frequent visits	5-6	Serials, cooking shows	Fair
P21	68	Widow	Bachelor's	Retired teacher	Govt quarters	6 yrs	Daily calls	6-7	Serials, classic films	Good
P22	66	Widow	SSLC	Textile saleswoman	Rented house	7 yrs	Frequent calls	7-8	Serials, talk shows	Moderate

Note. TV=television. Age range: 62-79 years old. Duration of living alone: 3-22 years. Daily TV viewing: 3-12 h per day.

Table 2. Interview protocol: Thematic domains and sample interview questions.

Thematic Domain	Sample Interview Questions
Solitary living, aging, and everyday life	Can you describe a typical day in your life? What has living alone been like for you at this stage? How have your daily routines and experiences changed over the years?
Loneliness, relational absence, and psychological wellbeing	Are there moments when you particularly miss the presence of others? How do you usually feel during the evenings or during quiet moments? What situations make you feel the most alone or disconnected?
Television engagement and everyday companionship	What role does television play in your daily life? What kind of programs do you usually enjoy watching? How important is television to your daily routine?
Television, coping, and emotional experience	Does television affect your feelings during the day? Are there times when watching television helps you feel calmer, occupied, or comforted? What makes certain programs personally meaningful to you?
Television narratives, parasocial relationships, and personal identification	Have you ever felt connected to certain television characters or stories? Do television programs remind you of experiences from your own life? Are there any programs or scenes that linger in your mind even after you watch them?
Family relationships, memory, and aging experiences	How often do you stay in contact with your family members? How have your family relationships changed as you have grown older? Do television programs ever remind you of earlier periods of family life? What do older women living alone need for comfort and support?

Note. The interview guide was semi-structured and conversational. Questions were designed to facilitate experiential depth while allowing participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words. Follow-up prompts were used sensitively depending on participants' narratives, comfort level, and the direction of the discussion.

transcripts to achieve deep familiarity with participants' accounts, with particular attention to emotional language, symbolic expressions, relational meanings, and descriptions of everyday domestic practices.

Initial codes were generated inductively across the data corpus, capturing both semantic content and latent meanings. NVivo 14 was used to organize, manage, and systematically interrogate the coded data, although all interpretive decisions remained researcher-driven. Codes were iteratively clustered into candidate themes through sustained engagement with the data and ongoing analytical memo-writing. Themes were reviewed against the data corpus to ensure they were coherent, distinctive, and well grounded in participants' accounts. The final four themes with their sub-theme structure are presented in Table 3.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive attention was paid to how the researcher's own cultural positioning and interpretive assumptions shaped the emerging interpretations. Potential overgeneralization from the widowed participants' accounts to the full sample was monitored. Member checking was not undertaken, consistent with the epistemological commitments of reflexive thematic analysis, which situates themes as researcher constructions rather than findings to be validated by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, analytical decisions were documented transparently to support dependability.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with transcripts, repeated listening to audio recordings, and sustained immersion in participants' accounts. Dependability was maintained through careful documentation of analytical decisions and thematic development across the research process. Confirmability was enhanced by integrating

verbatim participant quotations to maintain coherence between the data and interpretive claims. Transferability is intentionally limited to the specific sociocultural context of Kerala; the findings are offered as contextually grounded descriptions of subjective experience rather than generalizable patterns.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) of Marian College Kuttikkanam Autonomous (approval no. MCKA/IERB/2601-02). All participants provided written informed consent after being briefed on the study's aims, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without consequence. The transcripts were anonymized using participant codes (P1 to P22). The research materials were securely stored and accessed only by the research team. The ethical principles of dignity, privacy, emotional well-being, and respectful representation of older women's lived experiences were maintained throughout the study.

Results

The analysis demonstrated how television engagement was embedded within the broader emotional and relational realities of solitary aging among older women in the state of Gujarat. Four themes were identified through iterative coding and interpretative engagement with the data (Table 3), as follows. Across accounts, loneliness was rarely described as mere physical aloneness; rather, it was expressed as a relational and emotional condition shaped by the gradual erosion of shared domestic practices, familiar presence, and meaningful everyday interactions. Television emerged as more than an entertainment medium—it functioned as a material emotional resource that attenuated silence, structured daily time, and provided forms of psychological and

Table 3. Thematic Framework: Older women's television engagement and lived experiences.

Final Theme	Sub-themes	Representative Participant Narratives
Theme 1. Emotional Silence, Solitary Aging, and Everyday Loneliness	Emotional quietness within the home	<i>'The house feels very quiet.' 'Living alone feels emotionally heavy.'</i>
	Evening and nighttime loneliness	<i>'After sunset the loneliness becomes stronger.' 'Evenings feel emotionally long.'</i>
	Retirement, widowhood, and shrinking social worlds	<i>'Life became emotionally smaller after retirement.' 'The house became silent after my husband passed away.'</i>
	Emotional invisibility and relational absence in aging	<i>'Sometimes I feel emotionally invisible.' 'Phone calls cannot replace emotional presence.'</i>
Theme 2. Television as Everyday Companionship and Emotional Presence	Television as surrogate companionship	<i>'Television became my companion.' 'The voices make the house feel alive.'</i>
	Television-centered domestic routines and temporal structure	<i>'My day revolves around serial timings.' 'I keep the television on almost the whole day.'</i>
	Sound, familiarity, and emotional occupation	<i>'I feel uncomfortable with complete silence.' 'Television reduces the silence in the house.'</i>
Theme 3. Mediated Emotional Coping and Psychological Escape	Television as distraction from loneliness and overthinking	<i>'Watching television helps me forget sadness.' 'Television distracts me from loneliness.'</i>
	Coping with illness, fear, and emotional vulnerability	<i>'When I feel emotionally upset, television helps me stay occupied.' 'I watch more during lonely periods.'</i>
	Emotional regulation, mood management, and ambivalence	<i>'Comedy programs improve my mood.' 'Sometimes serials increase my sadness.'</i>
Theme 4. Parasocial Relationships, Memory, and Emotional Identification	Emotional attachment to serial characters and gendered recognition	<i>'I feel emotionally attached to elderly mother characters.' 'Serial characters feel real to me.'</i>
	Identification with aging female experiences and sacrifice	<i>'Mother characters remind me of myself.' 'Women's struggles in serials feel relatable.'</i>
	Television-triggered nostalgia and family memory	<i>'Family scenes remind me of my husband and children.' 'Old films bring back earlier memories.'</i>
	Narrative immersion, emotional reflection, and ambivalence	<i>'Serial scenes remain in my thoughts for a long time.' 'Certain emotional scenes make me cry.'</i>

Note. Themes were developed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) of narratives collected from older women living alone in Kerala. The framework reflects the participants' lived experiences of loneliness, television engagement, emotional coping, widowhood, aging, and changing family relationships.

symbolic companionship in the context of widowhood, migration-affected family separation, and solitary aging.

Theme 1: emotional silence, solitary aging, and everyday loneliness

Across narratives, loneliness was not primarily described as social isolation but as an emotionally charged experience of relational absence, characterized by domestic silence, the loss of shared routines, and a diminished sense of companionship in daily life. Participants always remembered changes in the emotional climate of their homes over the years. Spaces that were once used for family activities, talking, and caring had turned quiet and emotionally still. One participant expressed this change after the loss of their spouse:

Earlier in the morning was more alive, as my husband and I would sit together and have conversations. Now the house is very quiet; most of the day goes empty. (P1)

Another participant similarly described the household silence that followed her husband's death and her children's migration:

Previously, there was always some noise in the house, children talking, people coming and going,

family talking. However, after my husband's death and my children moving out, the quietness became too much. (P19)

Loneliness was not defined as simply being alone but rather as a sense of deprivation of emotionally satisfying interactions, that is, ordinary moments shared by eating together, talking about life at night, and normal household routines during the day. One participant expressed that although she received regular video calls from her daughter overseas, she still missed *'simple things like having tea with somebody or discussing daily life'* (P2), which aligns with the overall finding that mediated communication cannot replace co-present companionship (Ahlin, 2018; Chen & Li, 2024). Another participant described loneliness as most acute in its quality as *'the absence of everyday companionship'* rather than formal social isolation (P3).

The evening/night time was often recognized as a time of increased emotional vulnerability:

Loneliness intensifies after sunset and becomes even heavier at night when the TV is turned off. (P7)

During the night, worries about health and aging become stronger,

Nights are emotionally difficult because silence becomes stronger then. (P9)

Retirement and widowhood were identified as cumulative transitions. Emotionally empty days resulted from the loss of work and caring roles that had previously provided structure, social interaction, and a sense of purpose. One retired teacher looked back at the working years, commenting that there was 'constant interaction and responsibility' but in retirement, since her husband's death, *'life became emotionally still'* (P3). Of particular importance, those who came from high-status, economically stable backgrounds experienced emotional loneliness similar to those who had fewer material resources—pointing to the conclusion that emotional loneliness in later life is not necessarily a result of low socioeconomic status, but rather of continuity in relationships and the presence of emotionally significant contacts in everyday life.

The participants also described a feeling of emotional *'forgetting'* as time went on and the surrounding society became more youthful and active (P8). Emotional difficulties were noticed in festivals and seasonal occasions as they became reminders of the past occasions of festivities when the house was full of relatives and activities:

Festivals like Onam and Vishu were now emotionally difficult as they brought back memories of previous festivities when the house was full of relatives and activity (P5).

Some participants spoke about the loneliness and quiet of Kerala's rainy evenings as a particularly emotional reminder of the state (P3).

Those who had been alone for shorter periods of time (e.g. 3–5 years) were likely to articulate loneliness in more acute and grief-like ways, often in relation to concrete loss experiences and ruptures. Those who had been alone for more than ten years talked about loneliness in more routinized and accustomed ways, with television and prayer now providing steady compensatory anchors to everyday life. This temporal dimension of adjustment did not eliminate loneliness but altered its emotional texture.

Theme 2: television as everyday companionship and emotional presence

Television emerged as an emotionally meaningful domestic presence, particularly within the contexts of widowhood, retirement, and prolonged solitary aging. Participants overwhelmingly reported leaving the television on all day, not necessarily to watch a particular program, but because the sounds, voices, and movement it produced made the house feel less empty. Participants reported watching television for an average of 6.5–7 h per day, with some reporting up to 10–12 h daily, illustrating the extent to which

television was integrated into everyday emotional life within solitary households.

Television became my daily companion. Honestly, without the television, the house is too quiet. The sound itself is comforting. Even when I am cooking or just lying there, I listen to television because I cannot stand the silence. (P9)

Television became almost like a family member in my house. It remained on from morning until night. The voices and sounds made me feel less isolated. Without television, the silence became emotionally unbearable for me. (P12)

Television was characterized as *'another presence inside the house'* (P2), reflecting its role not merely as a media device but as a symbolic relational presence within homes where everyday companionship had diminished due to the pandemic. This is consistent with Östlund's (2010) observation that television functions as a quasi-inhabitant of older adults' homes rather than merely a leisure tool.

Television also structures the temporal organization of daily life. Serial timings, devotional programs, and recurring viewing schedules provided continuity and predictability in days that had grown increasingly unstructured following retirement and widowhood.

I have turned on the TV from the morning—first devotional programs, then the serial repeats, afternoon serials, evening serials and reality programs—seriously, the serial watching is now a part of my survival. (P10)

After lunch, the house is very quiet. That is when I usually turn on the TV. Television has been my emotional companion since retirement and since my husband passed away; it fills those empty hours. (P3)

This temporal structuring function was particularly evident for those who watched more hours of TV daily and those who lived alone for longer periods. The relatively high viewing duration observed in this sample is consistent with previous research showing that loneliness may be associated with increased television viewing over time (Liu & Li, 2025) and may compensate for reduced social interaction (Fingerman et al., 2022).

Television was described as a *'softener of silence'* and an *'occupier of long evening hours.'* Participants valued television because it alleviated emotional solitude without replacing family relationships or meaningful social interactions.

Theme 3: mediated emotional coping and psychological escape

Television functioned as a significant emotional coping resource, providing temporary relief from

loneliness, overthinking, sadness, and psychological vulnerability, particularly during evenings, periods of illness, and other times of heightened emotional exposure. Participants described how viewing redirected attention from distressing thoughts and helped them manage the psychological burden of living alone:

Watching television prevents me from sitting alone with negative thoughts all the time. Some serial characters feel emotionally familiar after being watched regularly for years. Sometimes, while watching emotional family scenes, I feel like I am temporarily part of another family environment. (P2)

When I feel anxious or emotionally disturbed, television distracts my thoughts and calms my mind. (P9)

Television also plays an important emotional role during physical illness and vulnerability. Participants for whom health difficulties were more pronounced (including several participants with poor self-rated health who reported the highest viewing hours) described television as providing occupation, reassurance, and a sense of inhabited space when fear and isolation were most severe.

Television distracts me from loneliness and physical pain. Sometimes, I even speak to characters while watching because after many years, they feel familiar. (P5)

Genre mattered to participants' coping experiences. Comedy programs, devotional content, and emotionally uplifting serial scenes were associated with mood regulation and temporary relief from sadness: 'Funny scenes make me happy and relaxed, and emotional programs make me mentally less burdened when I am alone' (P19). The familiarity of recurring serial narratives also appeared to provide a form of psychological escape—a temporary sense of being emotionally involved in another household (P7) that displaced awareness of one's own solitary domestic space.

However, coping through television was not uniformly positive. Several participants described an ambivalent quality to emotionally charged viewing: serial storylines that closely resembled their own experiences of family conflict, neglect of elderly parents, or widowhood sometimes heightened rather than reduced feelings of sadness and grief. One participant became 'too emotionally involved' in serial scenes, resulting in disturbed sleep (P10); another found that excessive exposure to emotionally distressing narratives 'occasionally increased sadness and anxiety rather than reducing them' (P14). This ambivalence complicates straightforward accounts of TV as a compensatory coping resource and suggests that the emotional effects of television for older women living alone are bidirectional and context-dependent (Fingerman et al., 2022; Liu & Li, 2025)

Theme 4: parasocial relationships, memory, and emotional identification

Participants' relationships with television frequently extended beyond viewing to the formation of enduring parasocial relationships—long-term socio-emotional bonds with recurring serial characters developed through sustained exposure (Bernhold et al., 2018; Horton & Wohl, 1956). These were not momentary in-viewing experiences of parasocial interaction; they were stable, emotionally significant attachments that persisted beyond broadcast hours and influenced participants' daily inner lives. Several women described knowing characters 'like people in real life' (P10) and experiencing their emotional distress or joy as genuinely meaningful:

I feel emotionally attached to elderly mother characters in Malayalam serials. Some of their experiences are very similar to mine. When they feel ignored or emotionally hurt, I can deeply understand those feelings. (P11)

I feel emotionally attached to older female characters who experience loneliness, sacrifice, or neglect. Their emotions seem real to me. Some serial mothers remind me of my struggles as a woman and mother. (P2)

A distinctive feature of these parasocial relationships was their gendered, autobiographical character. Unlike parasocial attachments to celebrities or admired figures documented in the literature, participants' attachments were grounded in experiential recognition rather than admiration or fantasy. Characters who embodied sacrifice, caregiving, widowhood, family neglect, and emotional endurance were felt to mirror participants' own generational experiences. As one participant noted, 'mother characters who sacrifice for family members' felt emotionally realistic because 'many women of my generation lived similarly' (P7). This form of parasocial relationship served an identity-sustaining function—affirming participants' own emotional histories in a social context where, as some described, older women feel increasingly 'invisible' (P8). Bernhold et al. (2018) found that older adults' parasocial relationships with favorite TV characters predicted depressive symptom change as a function of attachment anxiety and relationship quality with children; the current findings suggest that in the context of migration-fractured family relationships, the psychological function of such bonds may be particularly salient.

Television also functioned as a powerful trigger of autobiographical memory and nostalgia. Old Malayalam films, devotional songs, and family-centered serial scenes frequently evoked memories of lost husbands, children's childhoods, past festivities, and earlier periods of emotionally active family life.

Family scenes remind me of earlier life with my husband and children; some serials brought back memories I had forgotten over time. (P1)

These memory experiences were not passive nostalgic retreats but emotionally alive encounters between the participants' solitary present and their relationally rich past. Television therefore functions as a symbolic bridge, connecting the quiet, repetitive textures of later life with the more densely inhabited emotional landscapes of earlier decades. Migration-related family separation added a particular quality to this nostalgic function: serial depictions of children living away from their elderly parents or of intergenerational misunderstandings resonated powerfully with participants' own lived experiences (P14, P17).

At the same time, television-triggered memory was not always comforting. Scenes of family conflict, parental neglect, or separation sometimes elicited grief, upsetting memories, or heightened emotional vulnerability. One participant recalled that some programmes elicited 'old emotional memories' that she had not revisited for years (P10). This ambivalence reinforces the complexity of television's role in later life: it simultaneously offered emotional affirmation and emotional disruption, functioning as both a companion and a mirror that could as readily deepen loneliness as attenuate it.

Discussion

This study explores how older women living alone in Kerala experience loneliness and television engagement, using reflexive thematic analysis to examine the emotional, relational, and memory functions of television in solitary aging. Four themes emerged, together forming an account of television as mediated companionship within migration-fractured domestic worlds. The following discussion situates these findings within four analytical arguments that extend existing theoretical frameworks.

Relational loneliness in migration-affected Kerala: beyond Western models

The dominant gerontological literature treats loneliness primarily as a function of objective social contact deficit (Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2016; Dahlberg et al., 2015). The present findings complicate this framing. The present findings complicate this framing. Participants routinely maintained frequent social contact, including regular telephone calls, video calls, and occasional face-to-face family interactions, yet experienced profound loneliness—a pattern that resonates with qualitative work in Western contexts (Charpentier et al., 2021; Morlett Paredes et al., 2021)

but is amplified by Kerala's specific migration context. The distinction participants consistently drew between communication and companionship directly extends Ahlin's (2018) Kerala-based finding that ICT-mediated care is practiced and emotionally valued, yet cannot reproduce the everyday textures of co-resident domestic life. The current study adds that for older women left behind, the emotional residue of migration is not merely practical care absence but the loss of what might be termed relational co-presence—the quiet, unremarkable shared moments of daily life that constitute felt connection.

This relational quality of loneliness was cross-cutting: participants from highly educated and economically secure backgrounds reported emotional emptiness indistinguishable from that of participants with fewer material resources. This finding challenges the assumption that financial security or professional status buffers against later-life loneliness and aligns with SST's (Carstensen, 1992, 2021) proposition that the primary currency of well-being in later life is emotional meaningfulness in relationships, not social status. This also resonates with Manchana's (2024) finding among Indian older adults that the absence of meaningful family relationships—irrespective of contact frequency—was the primary driver of loneliness.

The variation in the duration of living alone (3–22 years) in the current sample suggests that temporal adjustment shapes the emotional character of loneliness without eliminating it. Participants living alone for shorter durations described more acute, grief-proximate experiences; those living alone for longer durations described habituated loneliness woven into daily routine, with television and devotional practice as stabilizing anchors. This temporal dimension of later-life solitary living is relatively underexamined in the qualitative literature. The present findings extend existing qualitative research by demonstrating that loneliness is not a static experience but evolves over time, with participants developing everyday strategies, including television engagement and devotional practices, to adapt to prolonged solitary living. Future studies should further examine these temporal processes using longitudinal qualitative designs.

Television as mediated presence: extending uses and gratifications and SST

The uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1974) proposes that media audiences actively select media to satisfy their psychological and social needs. The current findings are consistent with this framework but extend it in ways that the original theory did not anticipate. Television engagement in this sample was less about selecting content to satisfy discrete needs

and more about maintaining a continuous acoustic and narrative environment that made the domestic space feel inhabited than in other samples. The extraordinarily high average viewing of 6.5–7 h per day—with a significant cluster of participants reporting 8–12 h—suggests a form of ambient media use that is qualitatively distinct from purposive content selection. This ambient function—television as a permanent domestic background—is under-theorized in the uses-and-gratifications literature, which tends to conceptualize viewing as goal-directed.

The Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) framework helps explain the heightened salience of familiar, emotionally resonant content (serials, devotional programmes, classic films) relative to informational or cognitively demanding programming. Consistent with SST's prediction that older adults prioritize emotional meaning over novelty, participants oriented towards familiar characters and narratives that provided continuity, comfort, and symbolic recognition rather than stimulation or information. Television engagement thus functioned as a continuity-maintaining practice—one of the adaptive strategies through which older adults preserve emotional stability amid the relational losses of later life (Simons et al., 2023; Stones & Gullifer, 2014).

However, the present findings also complicate the uncritically positive framing of TV as a compensatory well-being resource. The ambivalence documented in Themes 3 and 4, where emotionally charged viewing could intensify sadness, grief, or sleeplessness, aligns with Liu and Li (2025) longitudinal finding that loneliness predicts increased TV viewing over time in older women, suggesting a potentially self-reinforcing cycle. Fingerman et al. (2022) similarly found that TV viewing was associated with higher momentary loneliness ratings in older adults living alone, raising the possibility that very high viewing reflects loneliness severity rather than successful resolution. The present study cannot determine the causal direction, but the co-occurrence of the highest viewing levels with poor self-rated health and longer duration of living alone in the sample is consistent with a compensatory yet insufficient dynamic. This bidirectionality should be acknowledged in practice and policy discussions, rather than treating television straightforwardly as a protective resource.

Taken together, these findings suggest that television should not be understood as inherently beneficial or detrimental. Rather, it functions as a context-dependent socioemotional resource that provides companionship, emotional regulation, and continuity in everyday life while remaining an incomplete substitute for reciprocal human relationships. For most participants, television complemented rather than replaced valued interpersonal relationships, helping to ease the emotional silence of solitary

living without eliminating the need for meaningful social connections.

Parasocial relationships as gendered recognition: a feminist gerontological reading

The parasocial attachments described by the participants differed from those documented in the predominantly youth-focused parasocial literature, which typically involves celebrity admiration, identification with aspirational figures, or fan-community belonging (Schramm et al., 2024). Participants' parasocial relationships were structured around experiential recognition: the characters they felt closest to were those whose lives most closely mirrored their own histories of caregiving, sacrifice, widowhood, and emotional endurance. This distinction—parasocial attachment as a mirror of biography rather than a projection of aspiration—has significant theoretical implications.

Bernhold et al. (2018) found that older adults' parasocial relationships with favorite TV characters predicted depressive symptom trajectories moderated by attachment anxiety and parent–child relationship quality. The current findings suggest that for older women in migration-affected households—whose parent–child relationships are emotionally maintained but physically distant—parasocial bonds with television characters who embody shared female experiences may serve identity-sustaining and validation functions that partially compensate for the reduced relational centrality that many participants described. This is consistent with feminist gerontological arguments that the emotional labour, relational identities, and lived experience of aging women are systematically undervalued in later life (Bauldry & Stainback, 2022; Urbaniak et al., 2023), and that narrative identification with characters who are 'seen' in their sacrifices and struggles may function as a form of social recognition. The present findings extend previous research by demonstrating that parasocial relationships may function not only as media attachments but also as sources of identity affirmation and emotional recognition for older women living alone in migration-affected family contexts.

The memory and nostalgia functions of television (Theme 4) further reflect a continuity of identity: participants' autobiographical recollections, activated by serial scenes and Malayalam classic films, constituted an ongoing project of self-narration in conditions of social diminishment. This is consistent with narrative psychology accounts of meaning-making in later life (Lacalle & Simelio, 2017) and the observation that television viewing in old age can serve as a vehicle for reviewing and integrating life experiences rather than merely consuming content (Lacalle & Simelio, 2017).

The present findings further suggest that nostalgia is not simply a reflection on the past but an active emotional resource through which older women maintain continuity of self while adapting to prolonged solitude.

Implications for practice: a Mediated Companionship Framework for Psychosocial care in Solitary aging

The findings of this study have meaningful implications that extend beyond the Kerala context. This study was based on the sociocultural reality of migration affecting family life in India, and the emotional role of television as filling domestic silence, as a continuity of the relationship, as a way of maintaining identity through para-sociality, and as a means of psychological escape was not specific to this context. Broadly speaking, across many societies, there are common emotional experiences among older women who live alone after widowhood, family separation, or long-term solitary living. The implications discussed here are therefore relevant to gerontological practice, social work, and mental health care wherever older women experience the relational erosion that accompanies solitary aging.

Based on these four themes, we envision a Mediated Companionship Framework for Psychosocial Care in Solitary Aging, in which the three pillars of relational assessment, mediated emotional life, and community continuity practices are inter-connected. This framework is based on the empirical results of the study and is designed to be a practice-oriented contribution that can be used in various cultural and care contexts (Figure 1).

Pillar 1—rethinking loneliness assessment: a gerontological perspective

A consistent finding throughout this study was that the frequency of social contact—including telephone calls, video calls, and face-to-face family visits—was not a good indicator of loneliness in older women living alone. Among the participants, those who spoke daily with family members described this as profound emotional emptiness—not a lack of communication, but a lack of co-presence, of the everyday unremarkable sharing of family life, which cannot be reproduced by a phone call or video contact. This distinction has direct implications for how gerontologists and health professionals conceptualize and assess loneliness in later life.

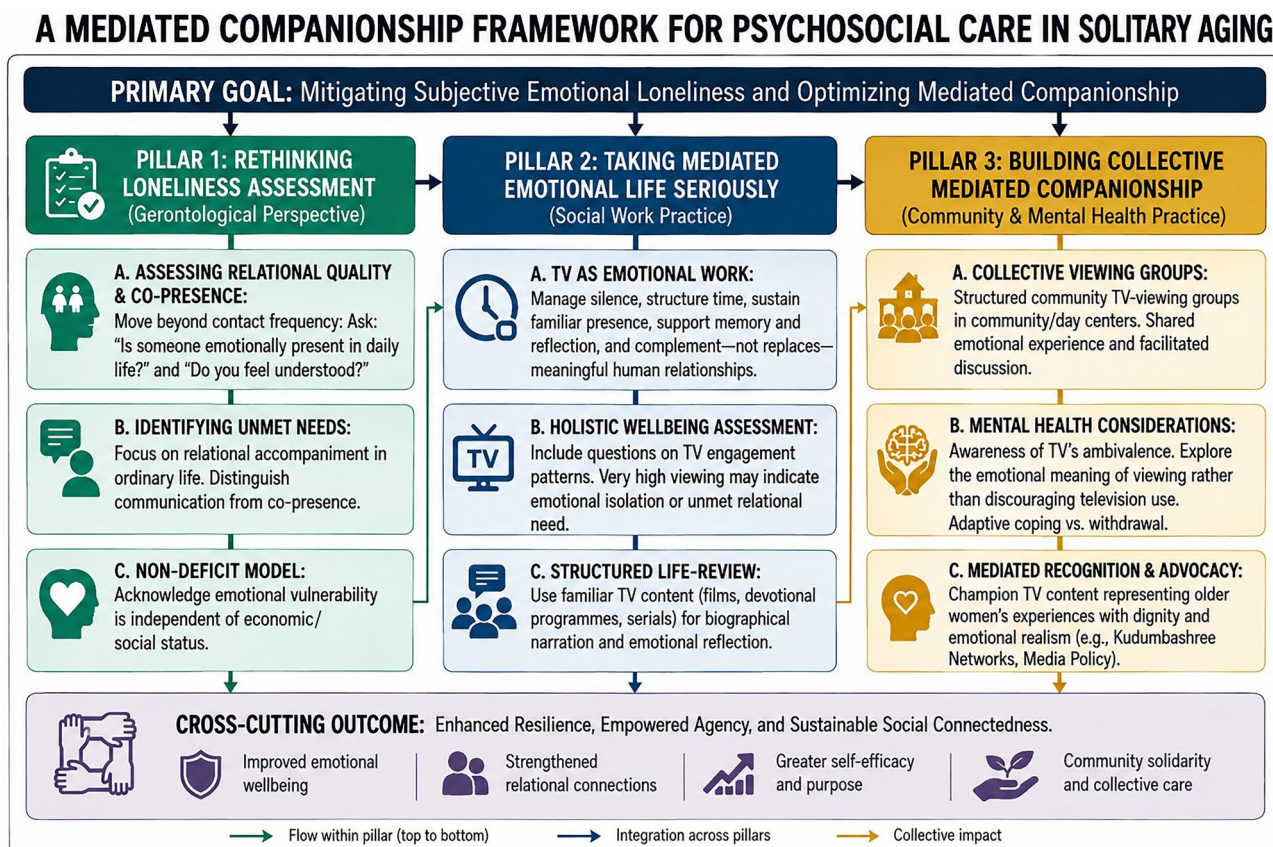


Figure 1. A. Mediated companionship Framework for psychosocial care in solitary aging.

Note. Framework derived from qualitative thematic analysis of 22 older women living alone in Kerala, India. Three practice pillars—gerontological assessment, social work practice, and community mental health care—are directed towards mitigating emotional loneliness and optimizing mediated companionship in solitary aging. Applicable across diverse contexts of solitary aging globally. TV=television.

Standard loneliness screening tools in gerontological practice tend to focus primarily on social network size, contact frequency, and perceived social support (Akhter-Khan et al., 2023; Courts et al., 2024) and may not fully capture the emotional and relational dimensions of loneliness documented in this study (Charpentier et al., 2021; Manchana, 2024). While these are valuable, the present findings suggest that they may systematically underestimate emotional loneliness in older women whose families are present but distant. Gerontological practice requires more sophisticated assessment strategies than the frequency with which older women talk to others; it asks whether they are listened to, whether they are emotionally recognized, and whether they are relationally accompanied as they live out their everyday lives. However, questions that focus on more than just the frequency of contact, such as ‘Is there someone who is just present with you during the day?’ or ‘Do you feel that people around you understand what your daily life is really like?’ may be more indicative of meaningful contact (Akhter-Khan et al., 2023; Courts et al., 2024).

The finding that loneliness was equally pronounced among economically secure and professionally accomplished participants also challenges deficit-based models that associate emotional vulnerability in old age primarily with poverty or low social status. The quality of relationships and emotional continuity should not be overlooked as distinct aspects of well-being in later life and cannot be replaced by financial security (Manchana, 2024). This has specific implications for social workers and community health workers who may underestimate emotional loneliness in women who appear materially comfortable.

Pillar 2—taking mediated emotional life seriously: implications for social work practice

A second important implication concerns how social workers and community practitioners understand and respond to television use by older adults. In professional assessments, television watching is often treated as a neutral background activity—sometimes even seen as a sign of passivity or disengagement. The findings of this study suggest a fundamentally different reading. For older women living alone, television is a form of emotional work—it manages silence, structures time, sustains familiar presence, and provides a space for memory, reflection, and self-recognition. It is not passive; it is emotionally purposive.

Social workers, community health nurses, and home visitors should consider including questions about television engagement patterns as part of holistic well-being assessment. Very high daily

viewing (8–12 h), as reported by several participants, may be a meaningful indicator of emotional isolation or unmet relational needs, particularly when combined with poor self-rated health and a long duration of living alone. Conversely, disruption of established viewing routines (through hospitalization, bereavement, or physical decline) may signal a loss of one of the few remaining sources of emotional regularity in an older person’s daily life, prompting proactive outreach (Courts et al., 2024; Simons et al., 2023).

Social work practice can also develop structured life-review interventions using familiar television content—old films, devotional programmes, and serial characters—as starting points for guided biographical narration and emotional reflection. Life-review approaches have a well-established evidence base in gerontological social work (Saarelainen et al., 2022; Tripathi & Samanta, 2023), and the present findings suggest that culturally familiar television content can serve as a particularly accessible and emotionally meaningful medium for this work—especially for older women who may feel more comfortable with familiar media than with formal therapeutic settings. Such interventions do not require specialist resources; they can be incorporated into routine home visits, day-center programmes, or community elderly group meetings.

Pillar 3—building collective mediated companionship: community and mental health practice

The third pillar moves from individual assessment to community-level intervention and mental health care. The findings suggest that the emotional functions of television in solitary aging—companionship, familiarity, shared narrative, and memory activation—can be deliberately cultivated and enriched through collective and professionally supported practice.

One potential intervention informed by the present findings is the development of structured community television-viewing groups for older women living alone. Such initiatives should be co-designed with older women and, where possible, build on existing community activities and resources to ensure that they are meaningful, feasible, and responsive to participants’ preferences and local contexts. Rather than watching alone in silent homes, women could come together in community centers, day centers, or neighborhood spaces to watch familiar serial content collectively, followed by facilitated discussion of the emotional and personal themes that arise. The value of these initiatives lies not in television itself but in the shared social experience it creates by fostering conversation, emotional connection, and a sense of

belonging. Group-based community programs have been shown to be effective in reducing loneliness and improving well-being among older adults in other contexts (Ascanio et al., 2022; Morlett Paredes et al., 2021), and the present findings indicate that such activities may be especially effective *via* television-based content among older adults in different settings who present a greater barrier.

The ambivalence reported in Themes 3 and 4, in which the highly emotional nature of viewing, at times, exacerbated grief, disrupted sleep, or left individuals more emotionally vulnerable, has clinical relevance. Mental health practitioners working with older women living alone should be aware that television is not a uniformly protective resource. Some women, especially recently bereaved women, women in poor health, and younger women in the first few years of living alone, may be distressed by a series of conservative contents that resonate with their experiences and, therefore, activate rather than calm distress. Psychosocial care planning for this population may involve non-judgemental discussion of television viewing—not to discourage viewing, but rather to determine its emotional valence in each person's life; to distinguish between adaptive coping and reinforcing withdrawal (Fingerman et al., 2022; Liu & Li, 2025).

Finally, the parasocial recognition functions described in Theme 4—where older women found emotional validation in serial characters who shared their experiences of sacrifice, widowhood, and aging—point to broader cultural and public health implications. Media producers, public health communicators, and community practitioners should consider the psychosocial value of television content that represents older women's experiences with dignity, emotional realism, and narrative depth. In a social environment where many older women feel increasingly invisible, mediated recognition through culturally resonant storytelling is not a trivial matter; it is part of how emotional and social belonging is sustained in later life.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. This study was conducted in a specific sociocultural context (Kerala, India) during a two-month window in the dry season; seasonal variation in loneliness and television engagement—particularly the significance of monsoon evenings and festival periods described by participants—was not captured. The temporal and seasonal dimensions of mediated emotional life in solitary aging represent a direction for future research.

The sample was intentionally gender- and Kerala-specific. In addition, participants were purposively recruited as regular television viewers,

reflecting the study's specific focus. Consequently, the findings reflect the experiences of older women who regularly engage with television and should not be interpreted as evidence that television serves as a coping mechanism for loneliness among older adults more broadly. Although the sample included women who were widowed, separated, divorced, and never married, the predominance of widowed participants limited meaningful exploration of differences across marital status groups. Future qualitative research with more balanced samples is needed to examine how different pathways into solitary living may shape experiences of loneliness, mediated companionship, and emotional adaptation. While this focus enabled depth and cultural specificity, the findings are not generalizable to older men, intergenerational household contexts, or older women living alone in different cultural or national settings. Cross-cultural comparative studies, including comparisons with older women in non-migration-affected Indian states or in analogous transnational migration contexts in Southeast Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, would enrich the understanding of the contextual conditions under which television functions as mediated companionship.

The present study examined television as the primary focus of the media. Other digital platforms, including social media, video calling applications, and streaming services, were not analyzed in depth. In addition, although the interview guide explored participants' everyday lives and family relationships, it was not designed to systematically examine broader forms of social participation, such as friendships, neighborhood networks, community organizations, and religious groups. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted primarily within the context of participants' domestic and family lives and their engagement with television rather than as a comprehensive account of their wider social worlds. Future research might examine how older women in migration-affected communities navigate multiple mediated environments simultaneously and how these different forms of mediated presence interact with loneliness and relational continuity. Future research could also explore how non-familial social relationships, including friendships, neighborhood networks, community organizations, and religious groups, contribute to emotional well-being and shape the experiences of loneliness among older women living alone.

Longitudinal qualitative studies could explore how television's emotional functions change over the trajectory of solitary aging—including major transitions such as bereavement, health decline, and children's migration—and whether television engagement patterns serve as early indicators of social withdrawal that could guide targeted interventions. Future

qualitative research should also explore how older women themselves understand and interpret loneliness, including whether it is perceived as a normative aspect of later life, associated with stigma or shame, and how television and other everyday practices are consciously incorporated into coping with solitary living.

Conclusion

This study investigated the lived experiences of older women living alone in Kerala and how their experience of being in relation to the TV can relate to loneliness, emotional coping, parasocial relationships, memory, and relational continuity in older age. The results demonstrate that loneliness in this population is more intrinsically related to co-presence than to isolation per se, and thus to the loss of companionship, shared household activities, and meaningful daily interaction. Television emerged as a mediated companion that buffered domestic silence, structured daily time, sustained autobiographical identity, and provided emotionally recognized mirrors of gendered life experiences through parasocial relationships with serial characters. These functions were well-grounded in the particular social/cultural power-laden contexts of families affected by migration in Kerala, where family life has become geographically distant yet emotionally close. Therefore, this study contributes to qualitative gerontology and media psychology. In the field of psychosocial aging, it reveals that mediated emotional life is a worthwhile and under-researched aspect of older people's well-being that helps to overcome and partly compensate for the relational deprivations of later life. Future research should examine the transferability of these findings across diverse cultural and social contexts, including different family structures, living arrangements and media environments. Further qualitative and longitudinal studies could refine the concepts of mediated companionship and temporal loneliness and explore how the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study apply across different populations and settings.

Declaration of AI usage

AI-assisted tools (Grammarly and Paper Pal) were used solely for language editing to improve the clarity and the readability of the manuscript. All conceptualization, research design, data analysis, and interpretation were conducted entirely by the authors, who took full responsibility for the work's content. The authors acknowledge the use of FigureLabs AI for the figure design support and visual refinement.

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed in the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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