

## Libraries and loneliness: a hermeneutic review of grey literature

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### Abstract

Contemporary scholarly and public discourse has foregrounded a phenomenon construed as an epidemic of loneliness. Loneliness is fundamentally distinct from solitude: the former represents an unwanted condition marked by sadness and longing, whereas the latter denotes purposeful withdrawal of an introspective tenor. Within this context, libraries have evolved into dynamic community third places, functioning as mitigators of social isolation and loneliness. The research endeavours to explore grey literature concerned with the nexus between libraries and loneliness, adopting a hermeneutic literature search and review as its methodological approach. Analysis of fifteen grey literature sources demonstrated that libraries have promoted diverse programming spanning conventional and innovative approaches. Traditional programmes encompass digital literacy provision, collective film viewings, book clubs, story times, knitting circles, board game gatherings, collage workshops, and parent–infant or toddler groups. More inventive programmes include communal meal sharing, morning coffee gatherings, and picnic baskets containing books and themed objects. Libraries thereby afford spaces in which individuals may cultivate casual connections. Although such connections lack the intimacy and regularity that characterise relationships with family members or close friends, they nonetheless foster a sense of belonging requisite for alleviating feelings of loneliness.

**Keywords:** grey literature, hermeneutics, librarianship, library programme, literature review, loneliness.

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### Introduction

Libraries no longer function as mere quiet vaults of documented knowledge; rather, they have evolved into dynamic community third places whose “atmospheres of welcome and sociality can foster feelings of being-in-place and belonging in and beyond the library” (Peterson, 2023, p. 1). On this basis, one might assume that modern society exhibits heightened social connectedness; however, contemporary scholarly and public discourse has foregrounded a phenomenon construed as an epidemic of loneliness (Jeste et al., 2020; Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). This raises a fundamental question: what constitutes the essence of loneliness as a concept?

Loneliness borders on two cognate yet distinct concepts: aloneness and solitude. The former denotes the objective condition of physical and digital absence of others (Galanaki, 2004). By contrast, solitude bifurcates into private solitude – defined by physical removal from others – and public solitude, wherein others are in proximity yet abstain from social engagement (Weinstein et al., 2023). Loneliness itself, conceptualised within a theoretical framework of social needs, encompasses emotional and social dimensions. Emotional loneliness emerges from the absence of an intimate, close

attachment to another person, thereby rendering one’s social relations qualitatively deficient. Social loneliness, for its part, reflects the lack of an adequate social support system, leading to perceptions of quantitatively insufficient networks of social relationships (Malli et al., 2023). A fundamental distinction between loneliness and solitude resides in the fact that solitude denotes purposeful withdrawal of a serene, introspective tenor, whereas loneliness represents an unwanted condition marked by sadness and longing.

Within this contemporary epidemic of loneliness, evidence suggests that “libraries have been shown to cater to individuals contending with higher levels of social isolation and loneliness, as well as increased rates of mental illnesses and antisocial behaviours” (Dalmer et al., 2022, Abstract). This observation prompts further questions: through what mechanisms do libraries fulfil this function? In particular, which programmes are libraries developing and implementing to address social isolation and loneliness within the communities they serve?

Our research endeavours to address this line of inquiry by reviewing grey literature surrounding libraries and loneliness. Grey literature constitutes “the diverse and heterogeneous body of material available outside, and not subject to, traditional academic peer-review processes” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 433). A tripartite classification of grey literature (Figure 1) has been advanced, predicated upon two dimensions: outlet control – the extent to which content is subject to production, moderation, and editorial processes governed by explicit and transparent standards – and source expertise, which denotes the extent to which the authority of content producers can be ascertained (Adams et al., 2017). The tripartite structure represents a progression from known to unknown degrees along both dimensions. The first tier may comprise, for instance, governmental reports; the second tier encompasses materials such as news articles; and the third tier includes sources such as blogs.

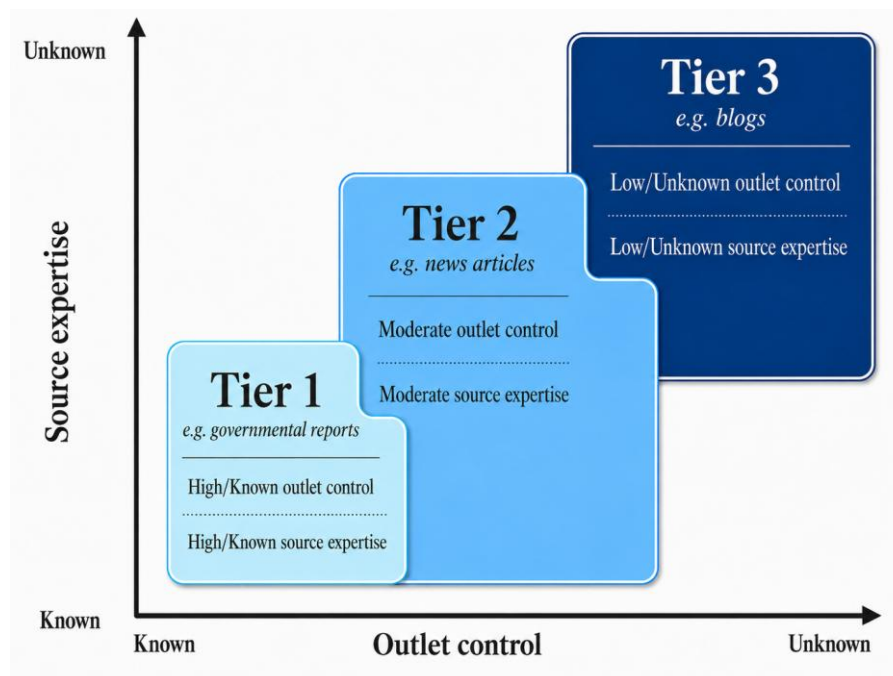


Figure 1. The tripartite classification of grey literature, based on Adams et al. (2017).

The decision to analyse grey literature rather than white literature – such as peer-reviewed scholarly journals – stems from the scarcity of the latter addressing the topic under investigation (Dodd &

Bawden, 2024; Huysentruyt et al., 2022). Furthermore, dissemination of community engagement activities and social programmes undertaken by libraries occurs predominantly through blogs and library webpages, further warranting the focus on grey literature sources.

## Method

To explore grey literature on libraries and loneliness, a hermeneutic approach to literature search and review was adopted (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, 2014). The hermeneutic approach eschews adherence to rigid protocols, conceptualising the literature search and review processes through the lens of the hermeneutic circle, in which dynamic, iterative rounds of dialogue with the literature unfold. The comprehension of an individual text is never isolated; rather, it is interpreted within the context of other texts constituting the broader literature. In turn, understanding of the literature as a whole is shaped by each newly read and interpreted text. This reciprocal movement between the parts and the whole in the process of understanding constitutes the hermeneutic circle.

Entry into the hermeneutic circle may occur through the reading of a text recommended by a supervisor to a PhD student, or through term searches drawing on terminology familiar to the researcher within the topic under study. Another key aspect of the hermeneutic approach concerns the question of when to exit the hermeneutic circle, which transpires upon reaching a point of saturation – that is, when additional readings cease to contribute substantially to an enhanced comprehension of the phenomenon under study (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

In accordance with the hermeneutic approach to literature search and review, a search was conducted on 18 October 2025 via Google Search, employing the search string (*library OR libraries*) AND *loneliness*, in both Portuguese and English. The literature review encompassed a total of fifteen sources, seven in Portuguese and eight in English.

## Results and discussion

In endeavouring to address social isolation and to function as mitigators of loneliness, libraries have developed and promoted a diverse array of social programmes, ranging from traditional to more inventive approaches. Traditional programming encompasses the provision of technological access and the promotion of digital literacy for individuals lacking such resources or competencies at home, which may contribute to alleviating feelings of loneliness (Marquez & Woods, 2024; Bozeman Library Friends and Foundation, 2023); collective film viewings targeted at older men living alone, followed by informal discussions over tea (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland [CILIPS], n.d.); the formation of peer groups centred on particular topics or shared experiences, including book clubs, story times, knitting circles, board game gatherings, and collage workshops (Marquez & Woods, 2024; Sjostedt, 2024); parent-and-infant or toddler groups, which may prove particularly vital for parents with young children who are at risk of loneliness, not least single parents (CILIPS, n.d.); and the extension of library services beyond their physical premises, encompassing not only book lending but also tablet lending to facilitate digital socialisation (Arts Council England, 2019). By contrast, more inventive approaches include communal meal sharing, morning coffee gatherings, and picnic baskets containing books and objects themed around pursuits such as cooking and gardening (Arts Council England, 2019; Khan, 2018; Rich, 2024). In addition, libraries serve as safe spaces for marginalised communities at risk of social exclusion, social isolation, and loneliness, such as refugees, immigrants, and LGBTI youth (Breevoort, 2020).

## **The Portuguese context**

In the Portuguese context, libraries have also developed and promoted programmes that aim to combat social isolation and loneliness among the communities they serve. A storytelling service by phone not only tackled social isolation among the elderly but also exposed them to literary culture (Lusa & P3, 2021). However, one of the most common services promoted by Portuguese libraries targeted at the mitigation of loneliness is the mobile library. Several examples were found in grey literature, underscoring the role of mobile libraries in facilitating access to books and reading for isolated communities. In addition, these mobile units extend beyond traditional library services, encompassing city council and health services (Cerca, 2024; Município de Penacova, n.d.; O Mirante, 2021). The programmes developed by Portuguese libraries also include storytelling sessions for children on the topic of loneliness and a programme named ‘Dialogues for loneliness’, which promotes the reading of theatre and drama books and a follow-up discussion with the author of the book (Amarelo Silvestre, n.d.; Notícias de Lamego, n.d.). In Southern Portugal, libraries serve as hubs for socialisation that combat loneliness among the elderly and promote social inclusion among foreign communities, acting as catalysts for social cohesion (Teixeira, 2025).

## **Conclusions**

The main sources of grey literature included in this study belong to the second and third tiers of grey literature, where the levels of outlet control and source expertise are lower; this reinforces the need for scholarly research on the role of libraries in the mitigation of loneliness.

It is worth noting that several programmes reported, such as mobile libraries, phone storytelling, and picnic baskets, extend well beyond the library’s walls, which poses a challenge to the ‘third place’ conceptualisation.

A critical analysis of the programmes documented in grey literature points to the role of libraries in mitigating social loneliness in particular, through the promotion of ‘weak ties’ – those loose social relationships with, e.g., neighbours, the local coffee shop staff, or near-strangers (Rich, 2024). However, how can libraries, as low-intensive meeting places that promote a sense of community (Audunson, 2005), contribute to mitigating emotional loneliness? Perhaps the more inventive programmes, such as communal meal sharing and morning coffee gatherings, could foster stronger ties, thereby combating emotional loneliness within the community. Scholarly research on libraries and loneliness is almost non-existent, which opens extensive avenues for future investigation. Interviews with librarians could illuminate the challenges inherent in developing programmes targeted at combating social isolation and loneliness and in identifying communities at risk of loneliness. A follow-up study could develop recommendations for public library policy and management to better serve users and communities who may experience loneliness. An empirical study is also needed to gauge the degree to which the programmes developed by libraries reduce levels of loneliness among participants.

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