

Loneliness and Life Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Mothers: A Comparison of Empty Nesters and Non-Empty Nesters

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ABSTRACT

This study compares loneliness and life satisfaction among empty and non-empty nester mothers. The sample comprised 120 middle-aged, unemployed mothers from various districts of Kerala, equally divided into empty and non-empty nesters using purposive sampling. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) and Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) were used. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and independent samples t-test via Jamovi. Results showed a significant negative correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction in both groups. Empty nesters reported higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction than non-empty nesters.

Keywords: *Loneliness, Life Satisfaction, Middle-Aged Mothers, Empty Nesters, Non-Empty Nesters*

In India's collectivist culture, mothers deeply involved in caregiving often struggle with loneliness and purposelessness when children leave home. In middle age (40–65), Erikson's concept of generativity promotes fulfillment, while its absence can lead to stagnation and emotional distress. Staying engaged in meaningful roles supports well-being (Cherry, K., 2024). Singh et al. (2023) found that empty nest unemployed mothers experienced more loneliness than employed mothers, while employed mothers had higher life satisfaction. Srivastava (2015) reported significant differences in loneliness and health-related quality of life (HRQOL) between empty nest and non-empty nest elderly, along with significant associations between socio-demographic characteristics and both loneliness and HRQOL.

Need and Significance

With rising empty nesting in Kerala due to children's education and migration, middle-aged mothers may face increased loneliness and reduced life satisfaction. Identifying a negative correlation between these factors highlights the need for interventions like social participation, peer support, and emotional expression to foster resilience and improve well-being during this life transition.

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Received: June 08, 2025; Revision Received: October 25, 2025; Accepted: October 28, 2025

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Statement of the Problem

While existing studies focus on elderly populations or other cultural contexts, the effects of empty nesting on loneliness and life satisfaction in middle-aged mothers in this region remain underexplored.

METHOD

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction among mothers.
2. To determine the correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among non-empty nesters.
3. To determine the correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among empty nesters.
4. To compare the levels of loneliness between non-empty nesters and empty nesters.
5. To compare the levels of life satisfaction between non-empty nesters and empty nesters.

Hypotheses

- H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction among mothers.
- H₀₂: There is no significant correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among non-empty nesters.
- H₀₃: There is no significant correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among empty nesters.
- H₀₄: There is no significant difference in loneliness between non-empty nesters and empty nesters.
- H₀₅: There is no significant difference in life satisfaction between non-empty nesters and empty nesters.

Research Design

This is a quantitative, descriptive study comparing loneliness and life satisfaction between empty nesters and non-empty nesters using a survey method. It focuses on collecting and analyzing numerical data to identify patterns and test relationships, providing objective, generalizable results through statistical analysis.

Operational Definitions

Russell et al. (1980) define loneliness through common themes, which characterize the phenomenon of feeling lonely as a specific experience of an unpleasant nature, the cause of which lies in quantitative or qualitative impoverishment of individuals' social relations; they also understand the feeling of loneliness as a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships. Diener et al. (1985) defined global life satisfaction as a cognitive judgment of the quality of one's own life. Cognitive judgments of satisfaction are dependent upon a comparison of one's circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard. Mitchell (2016) defined an Empty nest as a family life course transition and post-parental phase that occurs when children have moved out and left the parental home.

Sample

The study included 120 non-working middle-aged mothers (40–65 years) from Kerala, 60 empty nesters and 60 non-empty nesters. Empty nesters lived with their spouse and had all

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children away from home for over a month; non-empty nesters lived with their spouse and at least one child. Mothers who were single, widowed, separated, divorced, working, had serious medical/psychological conditions, or had children frequently visiting home were excluded. Purposive sampling was used to select participants meeting these criteria.

Research Tools

The study used a brief demographic questionnaire to gather information on participants' age, living arrangements, work status, number of children, whether all children live away, the reason and duration of their absence, and any serious health issues. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) by Russell (1996), a 20-item self-report tool, measured subjective feelings of loneliness using a 4-point Likert scale (Never to Always), with nine items reverse scored and total scores ranging from 20 to 80. It has high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.89-0.94$), test-retest reliability of 0.73, and strong validity across populations. The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener et al. (1985) measured global life satisfaction through five items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree), with total scores from 5 to 35. The SWLS demonstrates high reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$), test-retest stability (0.82), and good convergent and discriminant validity.

Procedure

Mothers aged 40–65 from various districts of Kerala, both empty and non-empty nesters living with their spouses, were individually approached. After explaining the study and obtaining informed consent in the regional language, participants completed a demographic form, the UCLA Loneliness Scale, and the SWLS. Doubts were clarified during one-on-one administration to ensure clarity. Data was then analyzed to explore the link between loneliness, life satisfaction, and empty nest status.

Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using quantitative methods. Pearson correlation was computed to assess the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction for the entire sample, and separately for empty nesters and non-empty nesters. Additionally, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare empty nesters and non-empty nesters on levels of loneliness and life satisfaction. All analyses were performed using Jamovi software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Pearson correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction for whole sample

Variables	1	2
1. Loneliness	-	
2. Life Satisfaction	-0.776***	-

***. Correlation is significant at 0.001 level (2 tailed).

Table 1 shows a significant negative correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction ($r = -0.776, p < 0.001$) in the total sample, indicating that greater loneliness is linked to lower life satisfaction. This supports previous studies on loneliness, particularly in older adults (Sanjeed, 2024), while filling a gap in research on middle-aged mothers. Additionally, non-working, empty-nest mothers experience more loneliness than their employed counterparts due to reduced social engagement (Singh et al., 2023).

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Table 2 Pearson correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among non-empty nesters

Variables	1	2
1. Loneliness	-	
2. Life Satisfaction	-0.687***	-

***. Correlation is significant at 0.001 level (2 tailed).

Table 2 shows a significant negative correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among non-empty nesters ($r = -0.687, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher loneliness is linked to lower life satisfaction. This rejects the null hypothesis of no relationship. Research by Nayak et al. (2024) suggests that living with children does not necessarily protect mothers from loneliness, as emotional distance and limited interactions may still lead to isolation. Royena (2024) found that social support reduces loneliness, highlighting that changes in family dynamics, such as children becoming more independent, can contribute to feelings of emotional detachment. For Hartanto et al. (2024), mothers in Indian households may feel redundant when their caregiving role diminishes.

Table 3 Pearson correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among empty nesters

Variables	1	2
1. Loneliness	-	
2. Life Satisfaction	-0.646	-

***. Correlation is significant at 0.001 level (2 tailed).

Table 3 shows a significant negative correlation between loneliness and life satisfaction among empty nesters ($r = -0.646, p < 0.001$), indicating that increased loneliness is linked to lower life satisfaction. These findings align with Arora and Khanam (2023), who found that empty nest syndrome negatively affects life satisfaction. However, some studies, such as Varudu (2021), suggest the empty nest phase can also bring positive changes, like stronger marital bonds.

Table 4 Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Non-Empty Nesters and Empty Nesters on Loneliness and Life Satisfaction

Variables	Non-Empty Nesters ^a		Empty Nesters ^b		t(118)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Loneliness	39.5	5.86	46.1	4.58	-6.85	<.001	-1.25
Life Satisfaction	25.9	2.84	20.7	2.99	9.73	<.001	1.78

Note. N=120, M=mean; SD=standard deviation

^an=60. ^bn=60

***p < .001

Table 4 shows significant differences between non-empty nesters and empty nesters. Empty nesters reported higher loneliness ($M = 46.1, SD = 4.58$) and lower life satisfaction ($M = 20.7, SD = 2.99$) compared to non-empty nesters (loneliness: $M = 39.5, SD = 5.86$; life satisfaction: $M = 25.9, SD = 2.84$), with large effect sizes (loneliness: $t(118) = -6.85, p < .001, d = -1.25$; life satisfaction: $t(118) = 9.73, p < .001, d = 1.78$). These findings align with previous studies (Srivastava, 2015; HariPriya & Sharmili, 2024), emphasizing the emotional challenges of the empty nest phase. The null hypotheses were rejected.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Findings of the Study

There is a significant negative relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction among the total sample of mothers, as well as among both non-empty nest and empty nest mothers. Specifically, empty nest mothers reported significantly higher loneliness scores than non-empty nest mothers. Additionally, non-empty nest mothers reported significantly higher life satisfaction scores compared to empty nest mothers.

Implications

The findings highlight the emotional challenges of the empty nest phase, with empty nest mothers reporting higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction. This suggests a need for targeted interventions to address isolation and promote social connections. Support systems that enhance emotional well-being can help improve life satisfaction.

Limitations and Scope for Further Study

The sample was limited to mothers within a specific age group, reducing generalizability. Key factors such as coping mechanisms, personality traits, and social support were not considered. Cultural and regional variations, which may influence empty nest experiences, were also overlooked. Future research should include longitudinal designs, diverse family structures including fathers, and explore cultural, socioeconomic, and regional factors. Qualitative methods like interviews could offer deeper, more personal insights.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Hameed, N. & Bishmi, P.D. (2025). Loneliness and Life Satisfaction in Middle-Aged Mothers: A Comparison of Empty Nesters and Non-Empty Nesters. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(4), 423-428. DIP:18.01.039.20251304, DOI:10.25215/1304.039