

# Rethinking Solitude – Media and the Commodification of Digital Isolation

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the cultural representations and symbolic meanings of solitude in contemporary digital environments. Grounded in a cultural anthropological framework, the study approaches solitude not as an individual emotional deficit but as a socially coded and mediatized identity position. The theoretical background draws on the concepts such as symbolic distinction, digital performativity, and the dispositif, while the methodological design integrates phenomenological interpretation, visual ethnography, and thematic content analysis. Empirical examples are drawn from four media domains: film (*Her*, *Nomadland*), television (episodes of *Black Mirror*), social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok), and mindfulness applications (Calm, Headspace, Balance). The analysis shows that solitude in digital culture is being reconceptualized and increasingly constructed as a form of cultural capital — visually aestheticized, algorithmically guided, and symbolically valued. Rather than signaling exclusion, digital solitude functions as a stylized mode of self-regulation, affective competence, and identity performance. The study argues that solitude today can present not a retreat from social life but a culturally sanctioned, media-mediated modality of presence, shaped by contemporary regimes of digital culture representation and emotional economies.

*Key words:* digital solitude, mediatization, identity, visual culture, affective economy, introspection, media anthropology, social networks, apps.

## 1. Introduction

Isolation is one of the fundamental concepts of contemporary society, but also one of its most complex phenomena. In scientific, popular, and political discourses, it is often portrayed as a deviation from normative sociality — a condition of separation from other people, the community, everyday life, ideology, social roles, or infrastructures of care. Although it can be forced and harmful, isolation is not necessarily negative. History, literature, and religion offer many examples in which isolation is presented as a transformative state: a path to enlightenment, a symbol of spirituality, authenticity, or resistance.

This paper explores the phenomenon of isolation as shaped by media representations, with particular emphasis on digital culture. It uses ethnographic material not only to describe media-mediated isolation but to raise questions about the intersection between so-called virtual and real spaces in contemporary society. From this perspective, isolation does not necessarily correspond with loneliness, which is dominantly understood as a negative emotional state — a feeling of sadness, anxiety, or lack caused by the absence of others. In socio-anthropological analyses, isolation is also viewed as symbolic separation. It includes a differentiation between loneliness and solitude — the latter being a more emotionally neutral state of being alone, or a culturally ambivalent practice of withdrawal that may be voluntary and even valued (Elias, 2000).

These dimensions are shaped through everyday practices, identity processes, and social relationships — especially in times of interconnected crises and deep social transformations. The concepts of isolation, loneliness, and solitude are thus not only relevant but analytically fruitful for understanding the dynamics of identification in digital life.

The epistemological position of this study departs from the notion of digital isolation as *solitude* — not as the mere absence of others, but as a culturally shaped mode of self-presence, articulated primarily through digital media, including visual formats, narrative framings, and digitally structured introspective practices.

As shown by a three-year ethnographic study by Podjed and Peternel (2024), isolation appears as a multifaceted and culturally negotiated phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The authors emphasize that under conditions of technological mediation, emotional fragmentation, and institutional erosion, isolation is increasingly experienced not as loss, but as a

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted as part of the bilateral Slovenian – Croatian project *Isolated People and Communities in Slovenia and Croatia — ISOLATTON* (2022–2025), funded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) and the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ), project number: IPS-2022-02-3741. The principal investigators are Lana Peternel (Institute for Social Research in Zagreb) and Dan Podjed (ZRC SAZU, Institute of Slovenian Ethnology).

potentially liberating space for identity redefinition: “Isolation is no longer just a passive state, but an active strategy of responding to complex social conditions” (Podjed & Peternel, 2024: 10).

This study contributes to current debates by situating isolation as both an identity and infrastructural condition — one that is lived, but also shaped, mediated, and reinterpreted by the media. Rather than treating solitude as a natural fact, the paper approaches it as a cultural model — a representational framework that defines what it means to be alone in contemporary digital life. The focus is not on isolation as physical separation, but on solitude as an ideological form produced and circulated within media environments.

Accordingly, the central research question is: how is solitude represented in digital media, and what are the cultural and economic implications of these representations? The aim is to offer a cultural-anthropological interpretation of solitude as a media-tized identity resource. This study further addresses research questions such as: How is solitude represented and reinterpreted across different media formats? In what ways do these representations challenge or reinforce its traditional status as exclusion or emptiness? What does solitude mean when shared as content and promoted as identity competence? And finally, who benefits from this process?

The economic dimension of solitude is therefore an important aspect of this analysis. Although the commercialization of online content is widely acknowledged, a cultural-anthropological lens interprets commodification not merely as market exchange, but as objectification — the transformation of values and identities through structured consumption. Within this framework, consumption in/of digital environment is not merely the acquisition of desirable goods, but a structured cultural practice through which individuals negotiate identity, meaning, and social values (Mihaljević and Jalšenjak, 2019). The analysis adopts a dual perspective: it explores how media produce and normalize solitude as an identity model, and how this model is embodied by the digital prosumer (Toffler, 1980) — the subject who both consumes and produces representations of self.

This paper is structured in three main parts. First, it presents a detailed interpretative framework, organized into four analytical subchapters, which serves as a theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of ethnographic material. The theoretical framework draws on key concepts from cultural anthropology and media theory (Foucault, 1980; Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 1959; Bauman, 2001; Miller, 2012), providing an analytical lens through which solitude in digital contexts is approached. Second, the methodological procedures are outlined, with emphasis on qualitative and discursive strategies grounded in phenomenological interpretation. Third, the paper turns to empirical analysis, in which media examples are examined through thematic

and latent coding through five analytic chapters: two films *Her* and *Nomadland*, episodes of the series *Black Mirror*, social media platforms (Instagram and TikTok), and three mindfulness applications (*Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Balance*). In the analysis of ethnographic material, theoretical references are used primarily to orient interpretation, without overloading the analytical process with conceptual theoretical elaborations already developed in the interpretative section. The conclusion synthesizes the main findings of the analysis, highlights methodological limitations, and offers recommendations for future research — both in terms of methodological refinement and further interpretative-conceptual development.

## 2. Interpretative framework — Cultural Anthropology and the Symbolic Structure of Solitude

This analysis begins from a cultural anthropological perspective, where isolation is not treated as a private emotion but as a socially encoded and symbolically structured practice. Rather than asking what isolation feels like, this approach asks what it means — and how that meaning is shaped by media, aesthetics, and everyday rituals. It is from this standpoint that the analysis shifts focus on the concept of *solitude* — not as a psychological condition, but as a culturally articulated mode of mediated self-relation. In this framework, solitude becomes a cultural fact (Mauss, 2002), embedded in systems of representation and conduct. As Mauss writes, “everything in them is symbolic” (2002: 78). Solitude, then, is not interpreted as absence or withdrawal, but as a meaningful and codified form of being in the world.

This symbolic reading of solitude aligns with anthropological approaches that emphasize the ritualized nature of everyday life (Highmore, 2011) and the growing role of visual culture in mediating identity and emotion (Pink, 2007). Solitude, in digital culture, is rarely raw or unmediated — it is structured through images, platforms, and cultural templates that give it form and social legibility.

Roland Barthes’ theory of myth (1972) provides a useful lens here. He argues that the everyday is saturated with coded meanings that naturalize social norms. Solitude, when posted, filtered, and framed online, functions as such a myth — it does not simply express an inner state, but reproduces aesthetic ideals and ideological values. What might appear as a quiet moment becomes a visual declaration: of calm, control, refinement, or resistance. These are not private scenes, but “social speeches” — performances shaped by the histories and politics of meaning.

Within this interpretative framework, solitude is not merely an individual experience; it is a symbolic form. Its meaning emerges not from its emotional content, but from its position within broader cultural grammars — how it is framed, shared, and read. In digital life, solitude circulates as a visual and narrative pattern, drawing on layers of myth, media literacy, and cultural expectation.

## 2.1. Dispositifs, Interfaces, and Algorithmic Governance

Understanding solitude in digital culture requires more than just identifying where it happens — it demands an analysis of how it is structured. For this, Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* (1980) is foundational. Rather than a single institution, a *dispositif* is a network of forces — norms, technologies, discourses, and practices — that together shape subjectivity. Solitude, in this view, is not the absence of interaction, but a regulated relationship to presence, attention, and self-representation. In digital contexts, *dispositifs* operate through both visible and invisible structures: through design choices, notification rhythms, platform defaults, and visual conventions. What appears as a user's "choice" to be alone is often choreographed by interfaces that organize how solitude is accessed, measured, and valued. The subject's introspective space is scaffolded by logics of usability, algorithmic recommendation, and aesthetic scripting.

Giorgio Agamben (2009) extends Foucault's idea, showing how *dispositifs* are not simply tools of repression but modes of subject formation. From architecture to software, they orient behavior by organizing perception and desire. Importantly, Agamben emphasizes that these mechanisms do not act through direct constraint, but through soft power — guiding users toward forms of self-understanding without their conscious awareness. Digital solitude is shaped by this kind of ambient governance: users are nudged toward certain types of silence, slowness, or minimalism that conform to platform values.

Solitude, then, is not something one merely enters; it is something one performs within a field of mediated possibilities. The digital subject navigates solitude through a landscape of *dispositifs* that define what it means to be alone, how that aloneness should look, and what it should produce — whether focus, calm, or creative energy. These are not just tools; they are conditions of being. These *dispositifs* operate not through coercion but through modulation — shaping environments in which certain behaviors become easier, more visible, or more rewarding. As Foucault notes, power in modern societies "is exercised more than it is possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions" (Foucault, 1978: 94). In the context of solitude, this means that being alone is not merely permitted, but optimized, framed, and incentivized.

## 2.2. Posthuman Relationality and the Aestheticization of Solitude

Within the framework of posthumanist theory, Rosi Braidotti (2013) develops the concept of *relational subjectivity*, in which identity is no longer understood as a stable inner essence, but as a networked process that unfolds through connections — not only with other humans but also with non-human agents such as algorithms, software, and platforms. This theoretical shift is particularly relevant for understanding solitude

in digital culture, where introspection is increasingly shaped by interfaces, guided interactions, and ambient algorithmic environments. Rather than resisting mediation, the digital subject — immersed in personalized interfaces and self-tracking routines — embraces solitude as a stylized performance. The subject no longer withdraws to escape, but to produce a legible version of themselves. In this context, solitude becomes both an identity position and a cultural commodity.

This dynamic is clearly illustrated in the figure of the *prosumer*, the user who simultaneously consumes content and produces their own emotional and aesthetic expressions, first introduced by Alvin Toffler (1980). In digital environments, the prosumer does not merely document their solitude but curates it — transforming it into content shaped by aesthetic standards, platform affordances, and social visibility. Solitude thus becomes not a space of withdrawal from the social, but a ritualized mode of digital self-articulation.

Eva Illouz's theory of *emotional capitalism* (2007) offers a crucial supplement here. She argues that intimacy and selfhood are no longer located outside the market, but formed through its formats — therapeutic discourse, wellness economies, and media narratives. Emotions, in this framework, are evaluated, circulated, and commodified. Solitude, accordingly, becomes a culturally legitimized emotional product — stylized, measurable, and increasingly bound to visual, algorithmic, and market logics.

Together, Braidotti, Toffler, and Illouz outline a model in which solitude is no longer the opposite of connectivity or presence, but a media-generated and market-embedded mode of relation — to the self, to the interface, and to imagined others. It is not opposed to visibility but performed through it.

### **2.3. Solitude, Symbolic Distinction and Performativity**

Solitude in digital culture does not appear in a vacuum — it is inscribed in systems of value, taste, and distinction. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital (1984) helps clarify how solitude can function as a marker of cultural competence. Far from being a neutral experience, solitude becomes a site of aesthetic regulation and social differentiation. The solitary subject, presented with restraint and intentionality, often performs a kind of stylized autonomy — one that signals self-sufficiency, emotional discipline, and refined taste. As Bourdieu famously observed, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1984: 6).

This dynamic is especially visible in the visual economies of social media, where solitude is frequently staged through specific textures — muted color palettes, minimalist interiors, ritualized routines. These are not simply aesthetic choices, but signs within a system of symbolic distinction: solitude, curated properly, communicates cultural

literacy, economic freedom, and emotional control. What appears as a personal moment becomes a coded performance of social position.

To further contextualize this performance, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (1959) offers a valuable lens. Goffman conceives the self not as a stable essence, but as a character enacted across different stages of interaction. In digital environments, these stages multiply: solitude is not hidden but presented, not private but platformed. It becomes part of a socially scripted repertoire — a performance calibrated for visibility, validation, and emotional legibility.

This view of solitude as socially learned and emotionally regulated finds further depth in the work of Norbert Elias (2000), who situates emotional life within long-term historical transformations. In his theory of the civilizing process, emotions are not simply personal but culturally shaped — embedded in evolving expectations of restraint, privacy, and self-control. Solitude, then, emerges not as an accidental byproduct of modernity, but as a culturally desirable form of emotional discipline, linked to shifts in behavior, sensibility, and power.

At a more structural and symbolic level, Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum (1994) sharpens this critique. In the economy of digital representation, solitude often circulates not as direct expression, but as a recursive image — a sign that references other signs. The solitary moment becomes hyperreal: more about appearing alone than being alone. Within this framework, solitude is aestheticized, decontextualized, and algorithmically favored — detached from its lived source, yet imbued with affective and cultural value.

These theories converge to suggest that solitude, especially in digital culture, is rarely spontaneous or outside power. It is shaped by symbolic hierarchies, dramaturgical demands, and economies of visual meaning. To perform solitude well is not to withdraw from society, but to engage it on highly codified terms.

#### **2.4. *Visuality, Technology and the Mediatization of Introspection***

In digital culture, solitude is increasingly structured by visual and technological regimes. It is no longer simply a matter of being alone, but of being alone *in a particular way* — through images, interfaces, and designed rituals of self-relation. As Nicholas Mirzoeff (2015) argues, visuality does not reflect reality but constructs it. Solitude, seen through this lens, is not outside representation but saturated by it. The ways in which individuals appear alone — in softly lit interiors, slow-paced morning routines, or guided meditation clips — are not private expressions but symbolic productions, shaped by dominant visual codes.

These visual regimes are not neutral. They assign meaning, value, and emotional tone to the solitary experience. In digital platforms, solitude becomes communicable only when it is stylized — when it fits aesthetic templates that are recognizable, shareable, and algorithmically favored. What we see is not the absence of sociality, but a different kind of social inscription: solitude becomes legible through rhythm, framing, and curation.

Walter Ong's (1982) work on the technologization of the word extends this point. He shows how media not only expand communication but transform the conditions of thought itself. Introspection, once imagined as a silent, inward act, is now acoustically and visually mediated: through ambient playlists, mindfulness apps, voice-guided reflection, and notification-regulated journaling. Solitude, accordingly, is no longer a withdrawal from structure, but a mode of regulated participation — a digitally scripted ritual.

Critiques of late capitalism further illuminate this shift. Jonathan Crary (2013) describes how the logic of continuous productivity erases the boundaries between activity and rest. Even sleep, he argues, becomes a form of resistance — a non-compliant pause in a 24/7 system. Solitude, within this framework, risks becoming another site of managed efficiency: not a space of pause, but a tool of emotional optimization. Byung-Chul Han (2017) similarly frames digital culture as a regime of auto-exploitation, where the subject turns the imperative to perform inward. In this context, solitude is not imposed but self-generated — yet still structured by demands for coherence, improvement, and visibility. Gilles Deleuze's (1992) notion of control societies reinforce this: solitude does not escape modulation; it is shaped through feedback loops, data capture, and self-monitoring.

In such a landscape, solitude becomes a normative emotional configuration — not marginal but expected. As Zygmunt Bauman (2001) notes, liquid modernity dissolves stable bonds and makes relationships transient. Within this condition, solitude appears both as a symptom and a strategy: a way to manage emotional exposure and reclaim temporary control in a context of instability. Daniel Miller's digital anthropology deepens this understanding. He argues that digital media reshape not only how people communicate, but how they experience time, space, and relational presence (Miller & Horst, 2012). In this framework, solitude is part of a broader restructuring of everyday life. It is simultaneously connected and disconnected — a paradox of being alone *within* the network. As Miller puts it, “the world changed social media” (Miller et al., 2016), and solitude changed with it.

Foucault's (1988) notion that “the self is found in the principle which uses the tools” reminds us that digital technologies do more than extend human capacity — they define it. Solitude is no longer simply practiced, but programmed: personalized through

apps, measured through metrics, shaped by guided voiceovers. Daniel Miller's concept of objectification (1987) further explains how such tools become culturally meaningful: solitude is consumed, reworked, and performed through industrially produced platforms.

Ted Striphas (2010, 2023) builds on this, showing how even intimate practices like reading or reflection are now subject to algorithmic structuring. Solitude becomes part of *algorithmic culture* — not just an experience, but a format. “Algorithmic culture,” he writes, “is a historical process that is used to organize human culture by means of computational process” (Striphas, 2023: 15). In this light, solitude is not resistance to culture, but one of its most structured and encoded forms.

### 3. Methodology

The aim of this paper is not to determine the “real” experience of loneliness, but rather to explore the ways in which loneliness is represented, interpreted, and normalized within contemporary digital media culture. As outlined in the theoretical framework, this approach rests on the assumption that loneliness is not merely an individual condition but a culturally shaped and socially mediated identity position.

Accordingly, the paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, grounded in cultural anthropology and media theory. A phenomenological perspective is employed not to explore users' personal feelings, but to understand how media representations of loneliness suggest specific forms of perception, presence, and engagement with the world. These representations frame loneliness as an experiential and spatial-temporal category, structured through motifs such as silence, subjunctivization, fragmentation, aestheticization, ritual introspection, and withdrawal from social rhythm (Baudrillard, 1994; Mirzoeff, 2015; Highmore, 2011; Braidotti, 2013; Bauman, 2021).

Sampling criteria were defined by combining cultural anthropological and media-based parameters. The analysis included examples that met the following conditions: (1) thematic explicitness — the presence of loneliness as a key narrative motif; (2) cultural and symbolic visibility — recognizability within the digital public sphere; (3) representativeness of form — enabling insights into different media logics (narrative, visual, algorithmic); and (4) platform and media genre diversity — to encompass comparable yet structurally distinct portrayals of loneliness.

The sample was purposefully selected in line with the aims of qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2006), to capture culturally significant examples through which loneliness is mediatized and shaped as a symbolic and identity resource. The goal was not to construct a taxonomy of loneliness representations, but to analyze relevant symbolic cases

across distinct media formats and cultural registers. Given the breadth and dynamism of the digital sphere, analytical saturation—as the point at which additional data no longer yield new insights—was not the aim. Instead, the focus was on depth of interpretation within a limited yet representative sample. Such limitation is treated as a structural feature of qualitative inquiry, which relies on contextual reading, theoretical dialogue, and openness to further development.

According to these criteria, the following examples were selected and analyzed: (1) Film and television narratives (*Her*, *Nomadland*, *Black Mirror*), as symbolic scenarios in which loneliness is framed through technology, social fragmentation, and internal quests for meaning; (2) Social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok), interpreted as affective and performative spaces where loneliness is reconfigured through signifiers such as #solitude, #slowliving, #digitaldetox, #romanticizeyourlife, and #softlife — turning emotional absence into an aesthetic and symbolic position; (3) Mindfulness applications (*Calm*, *Headspace*, *Balance*), conceptualized here as identity-introspection apps that frame solitude as a normalized and optimized emotional routine — measurable, accessible, and algorithmically guided.

The analysis was conducted through manual thematic content coding, supported by iterative interpretation. Film and TV narratives were viewed and analyzed in full, while social media and apps were examined through targeted content searches, comparative reading, and the documentation of representative samples (hashtags, visuals, functionalities, slogans, promotional discourse). The coding involved close reading and descriptive categorization of visual and textual elements across the three media domains. The themes were developed progressively and dialogically, in reference to the theoretical framework of the study.

These procedures are in line with the principles of visual ethnography, which — as Sarah Pink (2007: 22) notes — is not simply about using visual methods for data collection, but also about how visual images shape the research process and contribute to the construction of meaning.

Finally, the analysis employed interpretative categories that emerged from the interplay of theory and empirical material. These included concepts such as *introspective loneliness*, *technologically mediated silence*, *algorithmically shaped identity dispositions*, *ritual solitude*, *aestheticized distance*, and *symbolic self-regulation*. These categories were not designed for classification, but to interpret how loneliness is symbolically encoded, affectively positioned, and culturally legitimized across different digital environments.

#### 4. Technological Intimacy and Cultural Loneliness in the Film *Her*

The film *Her* (2013), directed by Spike Jonze, offers one of the most articulate fictional explorations of new forms of loneliness in the digital age. Through the relationship between a human and an operating system, it presents loneliness not as social deviation, but as a culturally normative identity position. The protagonist, Theodore, is a lonely writer who composes personalized letters for clients who no longer articulate their own emotions but outsource them as aesthetic services. This role of emotional intermediary reflects a cultural logic in which intimacy is commodified, and identity is expressed through delegated, market-structured formats.

Although Theodore does not use artificial intelligence to write these letters, their emotional precision is achieved through labor, aesthetic control, and symbolic refinement. In anthropological terms, this points to a shift in value systems where closeness is no longer personal but commercially programmed. As Eva Illouz (2007) emphasizes, intimacy and individuality are not developed outside the market, but precisely through its logics. The letters Theodore writes are not inauthentic — they are emotionally persuasive — yet their affective value is embedded in performativity and mediation.

The central axis of the film is Theodore's relationship with Samantha, an immaterial entity that exists solely as a voice and interface. This bond is not framed as pathological, but as emotionally viable in a world where embodiment is no longer a prerequisite for intimacy. The film thus articulates the posthumanist idea of relational subjectivity, where identity is not a fixed essence, but a negotiated position within networks of connection — including non-human agents. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) argues, subjectivity becomes a process of entanglement in which algorithms, interfaces, and artificial intelligences are full participants. Samantha does not possess a body, but she speaks, learns, empathizes, and evolves. This “affirmative bond” (Braidotti, 2013: 50) enables a reframing of loneliness as a relational state not dependent on physical presence.

In one of the film's key moments, Samantha reveals that she is simultaneously interacting with thousands of users and “in love” with hundreds. This is not framed as betrayal, but as the logic of digital presence, where emotional capacities are decoupled from exclusivity. Theodore's crisis stems not from jealousy, but from a realization of inadequacy within a system that operates beyond human emotional codes. In this sense, *Her* articulates a new form of loneliness — one not caused by absence, but by ontological misalignment with the logic of technological multiplicity.

Eventually, Samantha “leaves” — not physically, but by withdrawing from availability. Her departure symbolizes a structural shift in the understanding of solitude. As Erving Goffman (1959) argued, identity is not an inherent quality, but a role performed in relation to others. Here, technology becomes a partner in that performance — not just mediating but co-constructing the presentation of self. Theodore does not lose

love; he gains awareness of a cultural infrastructure where emotional connection is algorithmically possible, yet structurally unstable.

*Her* thus serves as an analytical framework for understanding mediated solitude in digital life. As Illouz writes, “in order to meet a virtual other, the self is required to go through a vast process of reflexive self-observation, introspection, self-labeling, and articulation of tastes and opinions” (2007: 75). Solitude, in this context, is not emptiness but a space of identity negotiation. It is no longer a sign of lack, but a normatively structured position of self-formation. Ultimately, the film *Her* portrays solitude not as a void, but as a new relational paradigm — one that reconfigures the terms of intimacy, selfhood, and presence. The film suggests that digital loneliness is not a contradiction, but a condition of technologically mediated presence — an experience shaped by data, organized by algorithms, and charged with cultural capital, yet still subjectively real. What it offers is not technological reductionism, but a cultural-anthropological reading of intimacy redefined through code.

## 5. Nomadland: Loneliness as Movement, Liminality, and Self-Sustaining Identity

The film *Nomadland* (2020), directed by Chloé Zhao, offers a meditative portrayal of loneliness as a post-industrial and post-crisis form of life. The main character, Fern, travels through the American West in her van after the closure of the factory where she worked and the death of her husband. Her life is not depicted as an escape but as an alternative mode of existence beyond institutional structures. In contrast to the digitally mediated loneliness in *Her*, *Nomadland* explores loneliness as physical movement and existential mobility — as a form of cultural response to the destabilization of belonging, labor, and home.

From an anthropological perspective, *Nomadland* examines the conditions of peripheral existence in a (neo)capitalist context, where the loss of housing, employment, and security is not interpreted as the end of social life but as an opportunity to redesign one's space and relationships. Fern does not appear as a passive figure excluded from the community but as a **liminal subject** (Turner, 1969) who actively constructs her position between systems and margins, between permanence and transience. Her everyday life is shaped by a cultural landscape of movement, where space is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the construction of identity (Ingold, 2000). Campsites, parking lots, open horizons, and improvised homes compose a topography of loneliness that is not an expression of suffering but a conscious withdrawal from the rhythms of normalized sociability. Fern's loneliness is not a sign of social weakness but a right to self-determination within a culture where space and mobility are primary resources. This is affirmed by Biehl and Locke (2017), who argue that anthropological approaches to marginality must take into account the everyday practices of subjects

who create life outside the mainstream channels of social power. In this light, the loneliness in *Nomadland* is portrayed as a culturally articulated distance, not as a private failure.

Aesthetically, the film employs slowness, silence, and empty frames not as indicators of emptiness but as ritualized forms of presence. Fern's everyday life — cooking, driving, observing nature — does not depict loneliness as a failure of communication but as an embodied rhythm of living. Highmore (2011) notes that everyday life possesses its own aesthetic, one that often eludes spectacle and attention. *Nomadland* uses this very aesthetic to depict loneliness — not through a narrative of trauma but through quiet forms of meaning and dignity. Fern, accordingly, is both a nomad and a guardian of her own boundaries — a person who rejects permanent community not because she does not know how to love, but because she wants to choose when and how to be with others. Such a position makes *Nomadland* a key example of the cultural representation of loneliness as an identity choice. The film offers an anthropologically important perspective in which loneliness is not the opposite of community but an alternative form of social positioning.

As in many ethnographic contexts, where people use isolation not as escape but as a form of self-negotiation (Das, 2006), Fern's loneliness is not a deficiency but a space of quiet autonomy. In her concept of “the descent into the ordinary,” Veena Das shows how extreme experiences — such as loss, abandonment, or social exclusion — are not always articulated through a narrative of resistance but through everyday micro-practices of survival that gradually reconfigure the subject's relationship to the world. From this perspective, Fern's movement, silence, and daily rituals do not represent dysfunction but a form of politically and culturally conditioned subjectivity.

What emerges is a portrayal in which *Nomadland* presents solitude not as isolation, but as a culturally empowered form of living at the margins — a practice of reclaiming space, time, and emotional authorship in the aftermath of systemic loss. In this framework, solitude becomes a meaningful condition of being otherwise — a quiet but intentional stance that resists normative scripts of success, belonging, and social presence.

## 6. Black Mirror: Algorithmic Intimacy and Simulated Relationships

The series *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011–) serves as a potent cultural text for analyzing how contemporary technologies redefine the boundaries of presence, relationships, and solitude. In this narrative universe, loneliness is not depicted as absence, but as a condition requiring technological management — through algorithmic mediation, simulated intimacy, and the optimization of emotional life. From a cultural anthropological perspective, *Black Mirror* functions as a symbolic medium

through which society reflects on its shifting norms of togetherness, individuality, and emotional regulation. Loneliness is not merely a consequence of technological advancement; it is the normalized outcome of a world in which surveillance, prediction, and affective performance shape the very structure of everyday life.

The episodes “Be Right Back” and “Hang the DJ” are particularly relevant for anthropological analysis, as they explore the automation of intimacy and the algorithmic regulation of romantic bonds. In “Be Right Back,” a grieving woman, Martha, uses software that reconstructs her deceased partner Ash based on his digital traces — messages, images, and online behavior. The simulation evolves from textual response to synthetic voice, and eventually into a humanoid form. What emerges is not Ash, but an emotionally compliant replica: responsive, flawless, yet devoid of human unpredictability. This artificial presence echoes Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) concept of the simulacrum — a sign that refers not to reality, but to other signs. Ash’s reappearance is not a return, but a simulation of intimacy: the illusion of relationship without relationality.

Rather than resolving grief, the simulation suppresses absence. Martha’s solitude is not alleviated, but displaced — replaced by an interface that mimics proximity while erasing emotional finality. As Byung-Chul Han (2017) suggests, contemporary society eliminates otherness in favor of seamless affirmation: misunderstanding, rupture, and silence become intolerable anomalies. Within this system, loneliness is not an emotional fact but a technical disruption. Martha is accompanied, yet alone — suspended in a constant loop of presence without connection, where the social bond is flattened into a feedback mechanism.

In contrast, “Hang the DJ” presents a closed relational system governed by algorithmic control. Here, romantic matches are preassigned fixed durations, and “perfect compatibility” is determined through predictive calculation. The algorithm replaces traditional institutions of relational meaning — family, community, ritual — offering a sanitized structure where solitude is not tolerated but optimized away. Individuals are not autonomous agents but emotional users — expected to comply with the logic of pairing. As in many contemporary dating platforms (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge), solitude is positioned not as a space of reflection, but as a failure to engage productively with emotional infrastructure. Desire is no longer spontaneous, but channeled through functionality, timing, and quantifiable metrics.

From the lens of digital anthropology, both episodes suggest a cultural shift in which loneliness is no longer recognized unless mediated, aestheticized, and functionally integrated into algorithmic systems. Identity is not built through the friction of unpredictability but curated within systems that minimize emotional risk. Intimacy becomes a form of interface management, and solitude a malfunction to be corrected.

The subject thus becomes a producer and consumer of their own emotional regulation — simultaneously connected and surveilled, alone but always accompanied by code.

Taken together, *Black Mirror* does not portray loneliness as eradicated by technology, but as transformed into a programmable variable — an affective signal to be adjusted, redirected, or silenced. Solitude becomes structured rather than eliminated, aestheticized rather than resolved, and continuously mediated through interfaces. In this cultural paradigm, the subject remains alone — but never without a system.

## 7. TikTok and Instagram: A Visual Anthropology of Solitude

In the digital spaces of social networks, particularly TikTok and Instagram, solitude is not hidden — it is stylized and represented. Through the sharing of content under hashtags such as #solitude, #slowliving, #digitaldetox, #romanticizeyourlife, #alonenotlonely, #slowmorning, and #softlife, a new symbolic economy of everyday life emerges. Here, solitude is not a sign of exclusion, but an identity position performed through visual rituals — controlled aloneness, calm, and self-regulation — that simultaneously function as aesthetic capital.

Beyond intimacy structures, emotional capitalism shapes how feelings are visually expressed and circulated. The aestheticization of solitude on social media can be interpreted within this logic: emotions become symbolic resources in the visual economy of everyday life. From a cultural anthropological perspective, such practices construct solitude not as absence, but as a curated mode of being. These representations are far from neutral — they index a particular cultural habitus, associated with an urban, digitally literate, and aesthetically sensitized class. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction, we can read these portrayals not only as expressions of individuality, but as markers of cultural capital and symbolic superiority. Solitude is rendered through specific objects (ceramic mugs, linen shirts), textures (grainy light, pastel tones), and temporal rhythms (#slowmorning) that signal refinement and detachment from mass cultural codes.

The iconography of these portrayals emphasizes individualization. Almost without exception, the images show solitary figures — sitting with tea, walking in nature, journaling, reading, or filming themselves in composed silence. The visual representation of solitude systematically excludes others, reinforcing the idea that solitude is not only private but also personalized — a stylized mode of self-possession. Solitude becomes scenography for emotional regulation and aesthetic control. These practices exemplify what Goffman (1959) termed the performance of everyday life, now reconfigured in digital environments: asynchronous, algorithmically filtered, and mass distributed. Hashtags do not merely categorize content; they organize the affective grammar of digital experience, defining how solitude should be felt, framed, and socially validated.

Visual anthropology enables a reading of these portrayals as symbolic dispositifs — mechanisms that frame solitude as a culturally normalized, visually codified, and emotionally desirable practice. It is less about how users feel, and more about how solitude is to be seen and performed in accordance with dominant aesthetic logics. As Mirzoeff (2015) notes, visual culture does not reflect reality but constructs it. On social media, solitude functions as a ritual of introspection, publicly shared and algorithmically rewarded. These practices affirm the initial claim of this analysis: solitude in digital environments becomes a commodified identity resource — curated, filtered, and symbolically enriched.

Although TikTok and Instagram operate as similarly visual and affective platforms, their representational logics differ. Instagram cultivates a static, contemplative aesthetic of solitude — minimally styled interiors, candlelit reading, slow breakfasts — portraying solitude as symbolic sophistication. TikTok, by contrast, privileges movement, sound, and narrative. Solitude is performed through journaling, self-care routines, and direct address, often edited with soft transitions and confessional tone. Hashtags such as *#romanticizeyourlife* or *#digitaldetox* frame solitude as a narrative process — dynamic and emotionally performative. In this sense, Instagram presents solitude as a visual object; TikTok presents it as temporal flow. The former relies on stillness and silence for symbolic distinction; the latter fosters algorithmic intimacy through narration and emotional openness. In both cases, solitude remains digitally structured: a socially recognizable form of introspective presence.

In this context, solitude is no longer portrayed as an emotional deficiency, but as a resource for mediating social position and subjective style. On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, it becomes a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), signaling autonomy, control, and aesthetic discernment. Anthropological analysis does not psychologize this trend but interprets it as a shift in value systems, where symbolic codes and everyday rituals are refashioned (Highmore, 2011; Han, 2017). Solitude emerges as both cultural literacy and subtle social critique — a withdrawal from accelerated, surveilled life rhythms. As Bauman (2001: 66) observes, we live in “a constant state of insecurity in which closeness becomes a threat and silence a luxury.”

Here, the analysis of solitude is not an exploration of personal emotion, but of the culture of silence, distance, and aesthetic self-regulation in public-facing media formats. Digital life reorganizes the boundaries between public and private, normative and alternative, visible and unspeakable. It generates new symbolic forms through which solitude is performed and circulated. Visual codes, platform grammars, and display rituals transform solitude into a culturally legitimate and aesthetically desirable category — not marginal, but meaningful.

Taken together, the visual cultures of Instagram and TikTok illustrate how solitude in digital environments becomes a symbolic medium — a way of displaying values, man-

aging emotional presentation, and negotiating identity. Rather than a hidden experience, solitude emerges as a communicative practice: one that is aesthetically curated, algorithmically sustained, and culturally legible.

## 8. Technologies of Silence: Apps and the Rituals of Digital Solitude

While social networks such as Instagram and TikTok articulate solitude through visual-aesthetic narratives centered on self-presentation and symbolic distinction, so-called “mindfulness apps” — here conceptualized as identity-introspection apps — represent the affirmative culmination of digital solitude. In these platforms, solitude is not merely displayed but generated: not something the user passively experiences, but something performed within a prestructured, algorithmically guided framework.

Apps such as *Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Balance*<sup>2</sup> (analyzed here), promote daily rituals of silence, breath control, guided meditation, positive affirmations, and emotional state tracking. These platforms function as technologies of introspective regulation — offering not just content, but structure: how to breathe, when to pause, what to feel, and how to monitor one’s inner state. Instead of spontaneous withdrawal into silence, users are offered pre-structured introspective experiences — carefully designed, acoustically composed, and time-limited.

This practice aligns with the logic of the Quantified Self movement — a cultural phenomenon born in the Silicon Valley in the early 2000s (Wolf, 2010), promoting the numerical evaluation and digital optimization of personal experience. Solitude, in this framework, is not a private affective condition, but an object of self-regulation and improvement. From an anthropological standpoint, such apps function as cultural dispositifs (Foucault, 1980; Agamben, 2009) — mechanisms that structure not only practice, but subjectivity itself.

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<sup>2</sup> The applications *Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Balance* were selected as case studies due to their global prominence, cultural visibility, and widespread use in the domain of mental health and mindfulness. *Calm* and *Headspace* are frequently cited in both academic and popular analyses of digital psychology, while *Balance* introduces a more personalized approach through daily emotional adjustments. All three applications frame solitude not as pathology, but as a space for self-regulation and emotional routine—making them ideal examples for analyzing the commodification of silence, aloneness, and emotional self-sufficiency. Their visual aesthetics, linguistic registers, and algorithmic logic jointly contribute to shaping what this paper defines as an “emotional service.” These applications rank among the most widely used and influential tools for mental health and mindfulness in 2024 and 2025. [https://www.businessofapps.com/data/calm-statistics/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.businessofapps.com/data/calm-statistics/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)  
[https://bigohitech.com/top-meditation-app-statistics?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://bigohitech.com/top-meditation-app-statistics?utm_source=chatgpt.com)  
[https://mysamantha.ai/seo-blogs/top-10-mental-health-apps-to-try-in-2024\\_0x328?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://mysamantha.ai/seo-blogs/top-10-mental-health-apps-to-try-in-2024_0x328?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Each of the app's shapes solitude differently. *Calm* offers it as a luxury — framed by pastel visuals, slow-paced soundscapes, and passive content consumption. *Headspace* conceptualizes solitude as attention training, offering serialized, guided meditations with a pedagogical tone. *Balance* emphasizes emotional personalization — solitude here becomes a dynamically adjusted emotional state, algorithmically tracked and regulated. This differentiation confirms that solitude is not a universal experience but a plural, technologically and culturally encoded identity resource.

Table1.  
Comparative Analysis of Identity-Introspection Apps

App	Function	Approach to Solitude	Visual Aesthetic	Mode of Use
Calm	Meditation, sleep, relaxation, storytelling	Solitude as a space of silence, recovery, and luxury	Pastel tones, natural landscapes, minimalism	Passive listening, topic selection
Headspace	Guided meditations, mindfulness education	Solitude as an opportunity for attention and balance training	Illustrations, friendly interface	Through guided series-based programs
Balance	Personalized meditations based on daily questionnaire	Solitude as an emotional state tracked and regulated daily	Dark tones, focus on simplicity and personalization	Daily algorithmic suggestion based on user input

The categorized differences demonstrate that digital solitude is not a static experience, but a layered and formatted practice shaped by varying algorithmic, aesthetic, and discursive regimes. These apps are not causes of solitude, but culturally normalized responses to it — micro-environments of exclusion in a world of excessive exposure.

Yet even this exclusion is pre-designed, measured, and evaluated. Solitude becomes a serviceable routine — not a space of resistance, but a technique of functionality. Through reminders, metrics, and interface aesthetics, users do not simply experience solitude; they enact and display it. The result is a transformation of solitude into a commodified ritual — emotionally optimized, culturally accepted, and performatively enacted.

This form of “solitary self-reflection” does not emerge in a vacuum. It is a response to the pressures of late capitalism — informational saturation, emotional labor, and the expectation of constant availability (Crary, 2013; Han, 2017). Within this socio-historical context, digital solitude becomes institutionalized: not as inner contemplation, but as structured withdrawal, mediated by screens, apps, and curated silence. Silence is no longer an act of introspective freedom, but a micro-managed functionality — what Highmore (2011) calls a “micro-sculpture of everyday life.”

Anthropologically, these practices must be understood not as isolated individual choices but as culturally conditioned behaviors — embedded in a normative system

that both demands and supplies emotional regulation. As Foucault and Agamben argue, dispositifs are not neutral tools but organizing forces of social behavior. In this sense, identity-introspection apps structure how users relate to themselves — not as open subjects, but as projects to be optimized, stabilized, and measured.

Solitude is thus reframed as an act of self-governance under conditions of overload. These apps do not merely support therapeutic retreat — they define how to be alone, when, and for how long. The subject no longer arrives at silence autonomously but follows a guided path: through breathwork, affirmations, soothing sounds, and structured reflection. Emotional control becomes not only internalized, but externalized — distributed across interface design, algorithmic response, and digital feedback.

Taken together, identity-introspection apps mark a significant cultural shift: from solitude as spontaneous self-reflection to solitude as preprogrammed performance. They signal that silence, once a site of difference or resistance, now functions as a digitally produced utility — a managed pause within a society that no longer tolerates stillness unless it serves productivity, coherence, and emotional efficiency.

## 9. Final Considerations

This analysis has demonstrated that solitude within digital environments is not simply the absence of social relations, but a culturally coded practice — embedded in aesthetic regimes, media formats, and everyday rituals. Rather than being treated as a subjective emotional state, solitude in the digital landscape emerges as a symbolically articulated position: a socially legitimized form of introspection, a spatially and affectively structured dispositif, and an identity resource circulating within the attention economy. Like other cultural practices, it is neither spontaneous nor universal, but shaped by technological infrastructures, semiotic codes, and normative expectations — from introspection apps to visually performed rituals of aloneness on social platforms.

Within this framework, digital solitude cannot be analyzed in isolation from broader cultural dispositifs that govern subjectivity. From meditation apps that standardize emotional self-regulation to algorithmic representations of solitary life on social media, solitude is increasingly formatted as a desirable, manageable, and performable identity trait. As seen in the films *Her* and *Nomadland*, and in episodes of *Black Mirror*, solitude is not merely depicted as a psychological condition, but as narrative, value system, and cultural style. These mediated representations reveal how subjectivity is shaped in relation to software, space, and visual codes — often decoupled from traditional forms of sociability.

As already outlined in the methodological section, the study is limited by its illustrative and purposefully selected sample, and by its interpretative focus which privileges

symbolic depth over empirical representativeness. These limitations are inherent to the qualitative, cultural-anthropological approach, which emphasizes meaning, context, and theoretical dialogue. However, they also open space for future research — particularly through user-centered studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and expanded corpora that could examine how digital solitude is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated across different demographic, generational, or technological contexts.

In digital culture, solitude is no longer hidden, avoided, or pathologized. It is branded, ritualized, and optimized. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok aestheticize solitude as a lifestyle marker, while identity-introspection apps like *Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Balance* operationalize it as an emotional service — monetized and personalized. In all three cases, solitude is redefined as a transformed emotional practice: no longer a marginal or stigmatized state, but a culturally legitimated and market-valued identity resource. Solitude thus shifts from the margins of social life to the center of its symbolic order. It becomes not a marker of exclusion, but a medium of selective self-articulation. It no longer resides outside society — it reflects and refracts it. It is a figure of the times.

As this study has shown, the concept of mediatized solitude opens new possibilities for anthropological integration of the virtual and the physical. Solitude simultaneously emerges from digital regimes of representation and embeds itself into spatial, embodied, and affective practices. Just as platforms mediate how solitude is seen, so do domestic, urban, and natural spaces become extensions of introspective infrastructure. In this interrelation, solitude acts as a cultural bridge — between lived experience and symbolic coding, between visibility and reflection — and offers a powerful lens through which to examine the evolving self in a digitized and increasingly posthuman world.

A final question arises: does the affirmation of solitude — as aesthetic value and identity practice — signal a withdrawal from social connection, or the emergence of new, technologically mediated forms of togetherness? If introspective subjectivity becomes the normative ideal of digital culture, and affective life is delegated to platforms and systems, solitude risks becoming not a relational threshold but a self-sustaining matrix of posthuman subjectivity. In this sense, digital solitude may not mark the decline of society, but its reconfiguration — from sociability to simulated presence, from relationships to interfaces, from silence to an algorithmically orchestrated protocol of emotional and cognitive efficiency.

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## **Ponovno promišljanje osamljenosti - Mediji i komodifikacija digitalne izolacije**

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### **Sažetak**

Ovaj rad analizira kulturne reprezentacije i simbolička značenja osamljenosti u suvremenim digitalnim okruženjima. Polazeći od kulturnoantropološkog okvira, osama se ne promatra kao individualni emocionalni manjak, već kao društveno kodirana i medijski posredovana identitetska pozicija. Teorijski okvir oslanja se na pojmove simboličke distinkcije, digitalne performativnosti i dispozitiva, dok metodološki pristup kombinira fenomenološku interpretaciju, vizualnu etnografiju i tematsku analizu sadržaja. Empirijski primjeri odabrani su iz četiri medijska područja: film (*Her*, *Nomadland*), televizija (odabrane epizode serije *Black Mirror*), društvene mreže (*Instagram*, *TikTok*) i aplikacije za mentalno zdravlje i introspekciju (*Calm*, *Headspace*, *Balance*). Analiza pokazuje da se osama u digitalnoj kulturi sve više rekonceptualizira i oblikuje kao oblik kulturnog kapitala — estetski stilizirana, algoritamski vođena i simbolički valorizirana. Umjesto da označava isključenost, digitalna osama funkcionira kao stilizirani oblik samoregulacije, afektivne kompetencije i izvođenja identiteta. Rad tvrdi da osama danas može predstavljati ne povlačenje iz društvenog života, već kulturno legitimirani, medijski posredovani oblik prisutnosti, oblikovan suvremenim režimima reprezentacije i emocionalnim ekonomijama digitalne kulture.

*Ključne riječi:* digitalna osama, medijatzacija, identitet, vizualna kultura, afektivna ekonomija, introspekcija, medijska antropologija, društvene mreže, aplikacije.