



The Sound of Solidarity: A Systematic Review of Communal Singing as a Therapeutic Measure

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Abstract

Communal singing is a universal practice that fosters silent solidarity, belongingness, and emotional expression. It provides a safe, structured environment for shared emotional support during both grief and celebration, strengthening social bonds. This is particularly meaningful for older adults experiencing isolation or distress, with research consistently linking group singing to improved physical and psychological well-being. This review aimed to evaluate the impact of communal singing on overall well-being in later life. A systematic review was conducted using PRISMA guidelines. 28 empirical studies published between 2015-2025 were included. Only English-language, freely accessible studies were considered. These studies involved participants aged 50 years and older and examined variables related to communal singing and well-being. Literature was sourced from Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, and SAGE Journals. Five key themes

emerged from the analysis, which were validated and organized using the PERMA well-being framework: Emotional Regulation, Purposeful Engagement, Enhanced Social Cohesion and Relations, Fostering Identity and a Sense of Purpose, Achievement, Growth, and Personal Competence. Together, these themes illustrate how communal singing nurtures psychological resilience, strengthens social bonds, and promotes meaningful engagement in later life.

Keywords: elderly well-being; communal singing; therapeutic measure

Introduction

As global demographics shift toward older age groups, ensuring the psychological and social well-being of older adults has become a central challenge in public health and gerontology. According to the World Health Organization (2025), by 2050, the proportion of people aged 60 years and older will nearly double, rising from 12% to 22% of the global population. This demographic shift demands not only medical support but also sustainable, non-pharmacological strategies that promote active ageing, autonomy, and social participation.

Ageing is often accompanied by losses in physical health, sensory capacity, social networks, and self-esteem, which collectively threaten holistic well-being (Correia et al., 2016). In this context, supportive physical and social environments help older adults preserve independence, sustain social engagement, and maintain overall well-being, thereby fostering healthy ageing (World Health Organization, 2020).

Communal Singing

Communal singing, broadly understood as the collective act of singing together, has long served as a universal mode of human expression and social connection. Compared to other forms of performing arts, it has been found to offer particularly strong benefits for fostering social connection (Pearce et al., 2015).

Group singing engages musical, cognitive, emotional and physiological systems simultaneously, functioning as a dynamic process of shared vocal expression, social engagement and embodied coordination (Bullack et al., 2018). Singing together has been shown to rapidly enhance social closeness, inclusion, and positive affect, even among

unfamiliar individuals, highlighting music's unique role in fostering large-scale social bonding (Pearce et al., 2015). Beyond recreation, it serves as a medium for cultural continuity and expression, helping older adults preserve their sense of identity and connection to heritage (Allison et al., 2020).

Elderly Well-Being

Elderly well-being is understood as a multidimensional construct that integrates physical health, emotional stability, social connectedness, and a sustained sense of purpose in later life. However, there are several ways in which older adults may struggle to maintain these dimensions, as ageing often brings physical decline along with psychological and social challenges. Psychologically, older adults may experience loneliness, grief, or reduced self-esteem due to the loss of roles or social connections, reflecting the deeply embodied and affective nature of loneliness in later life (Smith, 2012). Social isolation, compounded by retirement and changing family structures, further undermines quality of life among older adults (Moreno-Tamayo et al., 2020). These interrelated factors illustrate that well-being in older adulthood is influenced not only by health status but also by the broader social and emotional context of ageing.

Linking Communal Singing and Older-Adult Well-Being

Communal singing has emerged as a meaningful pathway to enhance well-being among older adults, offering emotional, social, and psychological benefits through shared musical experiences. Participating in group singing activates reward systems in the brain and stimulates endorphin release, producing feelings of pleasure and bonding (Pearce et al., 2015). Regular engagement promotes purpose and achievement while reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms (Coulton et al., 2015)

These psychosocial and biological mechanisms align closely with established models of well-being, such as Seligman's PERMA framework, highlighting Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, as the core elements that communal singing naturally supports (Seligman, 2011). Grounded in this framework, the paper identifies core elements of communal singing that contribute to various dimensions of well-being among older adults, with the aim of guiding future intervention design.

Rationale

The global rise in the older adult population necessitates effective, non-pharmacological interventions to combat issues like social isolation and declining well-being. While communal singing is internationally recognized for its multifaceted benefits, a significant research gap exists regarding its efficacy and application within the Indian context, limiting the generalizability of existing Western findings. The systematic review seeks to bridge this gap by examining and synthesizing global research findings.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the key dimensions that demonstrate the effects of communal singing on well-being among older adults.
2. To identify and analyze key themes emerging from the systematic review, validated through the PERMA framework

Method

Study Design

This review followed the PRISMA model to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize research on the benefits of communal singing in older adults, with the selection process detailed in a PRISMA flow diagram.

Search Methods and Data Retrieval

Relevant literature was retrieved from multiple academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. The primary platforms utilized were Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, and SAGE Journals. The following keywords and phrases were used in various combinations across the platforms: "communal singing," "group singing," "elderly well-being," "older adults," and "benefits of singing."

Study Selection and Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

1. Empirical Studies published from 2015-2025.
2. Studies published in the English language.
3. Studies that are freely accessible.
4. Studies focusing on relevant variables.
5. Studies including elderly population above the age of 50.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Inaccessible Studies.
2. Studies not in the English language.
3. Studies outside the established time-frame.
4. Studies not focused on the established population.
5. Non-Empirical Studies

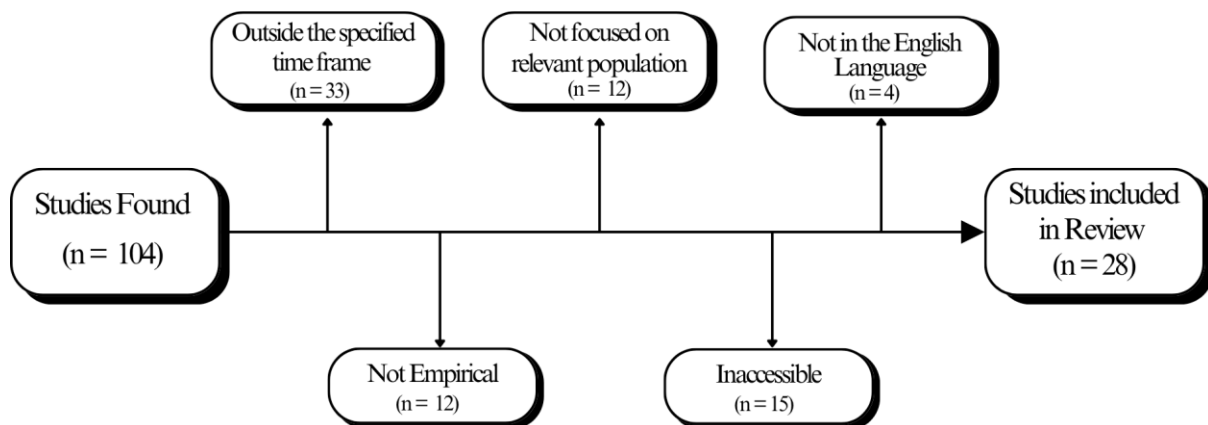
The initial selection involved screening papers by reviewing their titles and abstracts. Subsequently, the remaining papers underwent full-text review to confirm eligibility against the inclusion criteria.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

From the final set of included studies, the following key characteristics were extracted: Study Design, Population Characteristics, and the Specific Outcomes Measured. The findings of the included studies were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on the results sections of the papers. The reported specific benefits of communal singing were organized into overarching themes structured according to the PERMA Model of Well-being.

Figure 1

PRISMA Model



Results

The synthesis of research robustly validates communal singing as a potent, non-pharmacological intervention for enhancing older adults' well-being. The findings reveal a powerful, multidimensional mechanism that acts as a direct countermeasure to loneliness and social isolation while bolstering emotional, cognitive, and psychological health.

Psychological Well-Being

Group singing is an effective tool for mood regulation, confirmed by strong quantitative evidence showing a statistically significant increase in happiness scores and a reduction in depressive symptoms and loneliness (Gulliver et al., 2021; Mathew et al., 2017). This effect is supported by neurobiological mechanisms and social benefits from the singing practice that create a safe space for emotional expression. The core motivator is the intrinsic pleasure of "Something for us to do that we love" and engaging in "Joyful time together" (Petrovsky et al., 2020).

Cognitive Well-Being

The benefits of communal singing extend to measurable improvements in cognitive function. Active engagement in structured programs specifically improves verbal memory (Galinha et al., 2021), verbal flexibility (Pentikäinen et al., 2023; Pentikäinen et al., 2021), and global cognitive function (Man et al., 2022). The studies confirm that communal singing serves as a powerful cognitive stimulant, enhancing cognitive functions and mental acuity.

Social Well-Being

The group singing intervention fosters a structured, joyful, and purposeful social space. Global evidence confirms that group singing acts as a crucial socio-cultural support system and a direct countermeasure to isolation (Deng, 2024) by fostering a vital sense of belonging, trust, empathy, and mutual support (Gomes et al., 2025).

Table 1

Studies included in the Review

Reference (Year)	Method	Key Findings
Chen et al. (2025)	Mixed Method Single group Pre&Post test	The study reported decreased loneliness and a reduction in depression and anxiety among participants.

Gomes et al. (2025)	Mixed Method	The study indicated that communal singing fostered a sense of belongingness, promoted autonomy and active participation, and supported social integration and inclusion.
Netshivhambe (2025)	Qualitative	The study showed that communal singing enhanced emotional well-being, provided cognitive stimulation, and demonstrated strong cultural relevance.
Viet (2025)	Mixed Method	The study reported reduced loneliness and an enhanced sense of community among participants.
Chauhan et al. (2024)	Qualitative	The study found that communal singing facilitated emotional expression and regulation, supported social negotiation and solidarity, and reinforced cultural and performative identity.
Deng (2024)	Qualitative	The study found that communal singing strengthened social support, enhanced quality of life, and enriched participants' personal narratives.
Pentikäinen et al. (2023)	Quantitative Longitudinal	The study found that communal singing supported cognitive and executive functioning while enhancing social engagement.
Galinha et al. (2022)	RCT Quasi-experimental follow-up	The study found that communal singing promoted cognitive enhancement, improved social well-being, and supported better respiratory functions.
Man et al. (2022)	Pre&Post-Test Quasi-experimental RCT	The study showed improved global cognitive function, better physical health, and greater functional independence.
Moss et al. (2022)	Qualitative	The study highlighted the use of person-centered, flexible musical content and

		emphasized the value of structured social interaction.
Galinha et al. (2021)	Mixed Method RCT	The study indicated that communal singing increased positive affect, reduced loneliness, and strengthened social identification.
Gulliver et al. (2021)	Mixed Method	The study showed a reduction in depression and improved emotional regulation among participants.
Pentikäinen et al. (2021)	Quantitative Cross-Sectional	The study found that communal singing enhanced cognitive flexibility and promoted better social integration.
Bashetti et al. (2020)	Quantitative Cross-Sectional	The study found that communal singing enhanced emotional well-being, strengthened social connection, and was enriched by culturally rooted music.
Batt-Rawden et al. (2020)	Qualitative Longitudinal Explorative	The study revealed that communal singing enhanced emotional well-being and fostered a strong sense of belonging and community.
Chen et al. (2020)	Quasi-expermental	The study found that communal singing improved cognitive function and was enriched through the use of culturally meaningful music.
Corvo et al. (2020)	Experimental- Pre&Post test	The study demonstrated that communal singing improved mental well-being and quality of life, showed cross-cultural transferability, and functioned as a structured, scalable intervention.
Gao et al. (2020)	Multi modal MRI	The study reported that communal singing improved emotional regulation, enhanced social connectedness, and activated neurobiological processes linked to emotional and cognitive engagement.

Na et al. (2020)	Quantitative	The study highlighted holistic benefits of communal singing and its cross-cultural transferability.
Petrovsky et al. (2020)	Qualitative	The study revealed that communal singing fostered a sense of belongingness and purpose, along with joyful engagement and a sense of achievement.
Entezari et al. (2019)	Quasi-experimental	The study reported increased happiness scores among participants engaged in communal singing.
Johnson et al. (2018)	RCT	The study found that communal singing reduced loneliness and enhanced interest in life.
Lamont et al. (2018)	Longitudinal Case Study	The study reported an enhanced sense of community and higher engagement levels among participants.
Ververis et al. (2018)	Mixed Method	The study revealed holistic emotional and physical benefits of communal singing, fostering a sense of accomplishment within a non-judgmental environment.
Mathew et al. (2017)	Quantitative RCT	The study showed that communal singing reduced depression and loneliness while effectively combating social isolation.
Lee et al. (2016)	Qualitative	The study showed that communal singing fostered positive emotion, strengthened social cohesion, and promoted a sense of meaning and accomplishment.
Coulton et al. (2015)	Experimental- RCT	The study highlighted that communal singing enhanced emotional well-being, demonstrated cost-effectiveness, and showed strong relevance for public health initiatives.
Fu (2015)	Quasi-experimental Pre & Post test	The study demonstrated that communal singing produced physiological benefits and

		enhanced executive functions.
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Table 2

Identified themes aligning with the PERMA components

Identified Theme	Thematic Description	PERMA Component
Emotional Regulation	<p>Positive emotion emphasizes the experience of joy, gratitude, and contentment. Sustained positive emotions enhance resilience, mental health, and overall life satisfaction.</p> <p>(Entezari et al., 2019; Mathew et al., 2017; Gao et al., 2020; Chauhan & Mishra, 2024; Coulton et al., 2015; Corvo et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2025; Moss et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2021; Bashetti & Kumar, 2020)</p>	Positive Emotion
Purposeful Engagement	<p>Engagement refers to deep involvement in activities that draw on one’s strengths. It fosters focus, fulfillment, and personal growth through a state of complete absorption or “flow.”</p> <p>(Lee et al., 2016; Viet, 2025; Ververis & Marshall, 2018)</p>	Engagement
Enhanced Social Cohesion and Relations	<p>Meaningful and supportive social connections are vital to well-being. They provide emotional security, belonging, and shared positive experiences.</p> <p>Deng, 2024; Johnson et al., 2018; Petrovsky et al., 2020; Galinha et al., 2022; Na et al., 2020 Gomes et al., 2025; Moss et al., 2022; Lamont et al., 2018; Bashetti & Kumar, 2020; Pentikäinen et al., 2023)</p>	Relationships

Fostering Identity and a Sense of Purpose	Meaning entails having purpose and connection to something greater than oneself. It brings direction, coherence, and a sense of significance to life. (Lee et al., 2016; Batt-Rawden & Stedje, 2020; Netshivhambe, 2025)	Meaning
Achievement, Growth, and Personal Competence	Accomplishment involves striving for and achieving personal growth. It builds confidence, motivation, and a sense of competence. (Petrovsky et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Ververis & Marshal, 2018; Galinha et al., 2021; Pentikäinen et al., 2021; Man et al., 2022; Fu, 2015; Lamont et al., 2018; Pentikäinen et al., 2023)	Accomplishment

Discussion

Corresponding to the primary objective, the study seeks to identify and critically analyze the key themes emerging from the systematic review. These themes are corroborated by the PERMA framework to elucidate the dimensions through which communal singing influences well-being among older adults. The evidence synthesized from the review indicates that communal singing represents a multidimensional, non-pharmacological intervention that effectively enhances various facets of older adults' well-being.

Emotional Regulation

The review establishes that communal singing functions as a measurable mechanism for emotional regulation. Evidence indicates significant increases in happiness (Entezari et al., 2019) and reductions in depressive symptoms, enhancing overall emotional well-being (Mathew et al., 2017). Neuroimaging findings further support this effect: fMRI studies on repetitive chanting reveal activation in the left amygdala and prefrontal cortex, which help counter negative emotions through positive emotional schemas (Gao et al., 2020). Psychologically, communal singing acts as a “safety valve,” enabling shared emotional expression and fostering solidarity among participants (Chauhan & Mishra, 2024), making emotional co-regulation central to its therapeutic impact.

Achievement, Growth, and Personal Competence

Research shows that the benefits of communal singing extend beyond mood enhancement to measurable improvements in cognitive function and a renewed sense of purpose among older adults (Petrovsky et al., 2020). Musical engagement enhances cognition (Chen et al., 2020) through the sustained attention required to master lyrics, rhythm, and pitch, fostering accomplishment and competence (Ververis & Marshal, 2018). Findings from RCTs demonstrate that structured singing programs improve verbal memory (Galinha et al., 2021) and verbal flexibility, a key executive function, through regular choir participation (Pentikäinen et al., 2021). Similarly, participation in culturally relevant singing practices, such as Cantonese opera, contributes to significant gains in overall cognitive performance (Man et al., 2022).

Enhanced Social Cohesion and Relations

The literature consistently validates the role of group singing as a key socio-cultural support structure, actively combating isolation among participants (Deng, 2024). Communal singing functions as a direct countermeasure to loneliness and social isolation, increasing participants' overall interest in life (Johnson et al., 2018). The shared musical experience fosters deep social cohesion, described as a time of collective joy (Petrovsky et al., 2020). Crucially, experimental data shows that the long-term emotional and social benefits are achieved primarily through the development of social identification with the singing group, which subsequently reduces loneliness (Galinha et al., 2022).

Fostering Identity and a Sense of Purpose

Communal singing fulfills deeper psychological needs by offering meaning, accomplishment, and a sense of validation (Lee et al., 2016). Its impact stems not merely from the musical act itself but from the strong sense of belonging and “good community feeling” it cultivates among participants and facilitators (Batt-Rawden & Stedje, 2020). The use of culturally relevant music further strengthens this effect by evoking nostalgia, reinforcing identity, and promoting purpose and meaning-making (Netshivhambe, 2025; Bashetti & Kumar, 2020). By fostering shared purpose and emotional resonance, communal singing emerges as a powerful medium for strengthening both individual well-being and collective connectedness in later life.

Purposeful Engagement

Communal singing is an intrinsically meaningful activity that promotes self-discovery and deep engagement among older adults (Lee et al., 2016). Such engagement is sustained by meeting core psychological needs through tailored programs and adequate support (Viet, 2025). Pursuing a structured, collective goal enables participants to experience focused immersion, promoting emotional regulation. Within this shared context, individuals gain self-awareness through supportive group interactions. The non-judgmental environment of communal singing further helps participants navigate emotional challenges while fostering social cohesion and a sense of personal competence (Ververis & Marshall, 2018).

Conclusion

The review highlights that communal singing is a multidimensional, non-pharmacological approach that meaningfully strengthens emotional, cognitive, and social well-being in later life. Evidence shows reductions in depressive symptoms, improved mood, increased cognitive stimulation, and a heightened sense of personal competence that arises through active musical engagement. These benefits are amplified when singing evokes shared identity, cultural familiarity, nostalgic connection, and a sense of belonging that deepens emotional resonance and fosters social cohesion.

The study also outlines some core elements necessary for effective implementation of the singing intervention. These include: structured, goal-oriented delivery, use of familiar cultural repertoire, opportunities for narrative and reflective participation, supportive and inclusive facilitation, and accessible program design suited to varied abilities.

Overall, the evidence positions communal singing as a meaningful and adaptable public health approach that enhances emotional well-being, cognitive engagement, and social connectedness in later life. Its low cost and accessibility make it suitable for community centres, residential homes, and ageing-well initiatives, enabling consistent participation while supporting emotional stability. By strengthening supportive relationships and shared joy, it evolves into more than a therapeutic tool, offering an enriching pathway towards aging with dignity, energy, and purposeful involvement.

Limitations

While the evidence base on communal singing and its psychosocial benefits continues to expand, several limitations constrain the current understanding. Most existing studies have been conducted within Western cultural frameworks. This restricts the transferability of findings to diverse populations, particularly within the Indian context, where communal

practices, cultural meanings of music, and group dynamics may vary considerably. This cultural mismatch raises questions about whether the same benefits would emerge in settings with different social structures or musical traditions.

There is also heterogeneity in research methodologies, such as inconsistent participant demographics, intervention duration, frequency of sessions, and the variety of psychological or physiological outcome measures used. This makes it difficult to compare studies or synthesize them meaningfully. These methodological variations reduce the overall coherence of the evidence base and limit the development of clear, generalizable conclusions about the effects of communal singing.

Future Implications

Future research should prioritize developing culturally responsive models that reflect regional traditions, community practices, and local understandings of music. This is especially important for India and other non-Western settings, where communal singing often carries different social meanings and forms of participation. Tailoring intervention models to these contexts would make them more relevant, acceptable, and effective for diverse groups.

Using longitudinal and mixed-method research designs would also strengthen the evidence base. Long-term studies can capture whether improvements in mood, social connection, and well-being are sustained over time. Mixed-method approaches can blend quantitative data with qualitative insights, helping to offer a more complete picture of how and why communal singing works.

In addition, integrating evidence-based singing programs into community health, welfare, and elder-care initiatives could make the benefits more accessible to large populations. Such programs are low-cost, easy to implement, and can be adapted for different age groups. For aging populations in particular, communal singing could support mental health, enhance social engagement, and improve overall quality of life by fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

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