

## Systematic Evaluation of the Factors Influencing Subjective Well-Being in the Elderly

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### Abstract

*This article employs a systematic literature review to examine a few factors influencing subjective well-being among the elderly. The findings indicate that 1) demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, educational level, and economic income; 2) social factors including social support, social comparison, and children-related factors; and 3) psychological factors such as personality traits, self-efficacy, and sense of control affect the subjective well-being of elderly individuals. Future research should focus on the following areas including 1) attention to special elderly groups, particularly those in rural areas and non-home-based care settings; 2) diversification of research methodologies, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches; and 3) enriching the content of research to explore the factors influencing elderly subjective well-being from multiple perspectives, especially understanding the psychological factors involved.*

**Keywords:** *Elderly, Influencing Factors, Subjective Well-Being, Systematic Review.*

### Introduction

Globally, nearly every country is experiencing an increase in both the number and proportion of elderly populations, posing challenges to nations that will persist over the coming decades [1]. According to a United Nations report, the world's elderly population is growing at an average annual rate of 2.5%, with China, the largest developing country and historically the most populous, exceeding this rate by 0.8%. Data from China's Seventh National Population Census indicates that individuals aged 60 and older account for 264 million, or 18.70% of the total population, with projections suggesting this will rise to 34.91% by around 2050 [2]. The Fourth National Survey on the Living Conditions of Urban and Rural Elderly in China reveals significant challenges in elderly care [3]. Issues such as "ageing before affluence" and "high

suicide rates among the elderly" remain pressing social concerns [4]. The 2024 Global Happiness Index ranks China 60th, indicating substantial room for improvement [5]. The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China highlighted that with the entry of Chinese socialism into a new era, the primary societal contradiction has shifted to one between the growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development. This definition of happiness has evolved from basic needs to more diverse and advanced needs, including spiritual needs and comprehensive personal development [6]. As ageing intensifies, it brings new demands on social, economic, medical, and psychological support systems, presenting significant challenges to the sustainable development of public services and social security systems [7]. The elderly face weakening physical health and mobility issues, impacting their subjective

well-being and quality of life when increasing their age. Yet, their desire for an improved quality of life and a safe, happy old age remains strong [8].

Subjective well-being is an individual's emotional and cognitive overall assessment of their life quality, reflecting a comprehensive psychological indicator of individual life quality. This includes positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction [9]. Some scholars consider life satisfaction a key measure of elderly subjective well-being, with studies showing a positive correlation between well-being and satisfaction. Research into individual satisfaction and assessment is crucial in measuring well-being and represents an important comprehensive indicator of people's quality of life and social development level [10]. The institutional framework for the national strategy of actively addressing population ageing has been essentially established, ensuring effective coordination and high-quality development of ageing-related industries and services, and a preliminary pattern of societal response to ageing has emerged, significantly enhancing the elderly's sense of gain, happiness, and security [11].

## **Literature Review**

The concept of elderly subjective well-being was first introduced by the renowned American psychologist Diener, who defined it as a subjective perception based on personal standards of life quality [12]. It comprises two components: a cognitive aspect known as life satisfaction, which is the individual's assessment of their life quality, and an emotional aspect that includes positive and negative emotional experiences [13]. Recognizing the importance of the elderly subjective well-being in building a healthy aging society is crucial [14]. Research on subjective well-being in China began in the 1980s, initially focusing on the mental health of the elderly [15]. Over the next decade, the scope of research expanded to include teachers, students, and laid-off workers [16]. Elderly

subjective well-being is influenced by a complex interplay of health, psychological resources, social support, and life experiences. These factors determine how the elderly perceive their life quality and cope with aging-related challenges [17, 18]. Health is a key determinant of elderly subjective well-being. Physical health issues and functional status directly affect subjective health, thereby impacting overall health [19]. However, despite physical decline, subjective well-being can remain stable as subjective assessments and psychological resources play a more significant role than objective health status [20]. Psychological factors such as coherence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem are crucial for maintaining subjective well-being. Coherence reflects an individual's ability to see life as understandable, manageable, and meaningful, mediating the relationship between resources and well-being [21]. Personality traits, such as control trajectories, have a significant influence, often exceeding that of social resources [22]. Social support is another critical component, positively associated with life satisfaction and reduced depression among the elderly [23]. The quality and supportiveness of social networks are essential as they provide emotional and practical assistance, enhancing elderly well-being [24]. Active engagement in life, part of successful aging models, also contributes to higher subjective well-being [25]. Coping strategies, particularly those involving direct problem-solving and positive reevaluation, are associated with higher life satisfaction and positive affect. Conversely, avoidant coping is linked to increased negative emotions [26]. Life experiences, including past achievements and education, have a profound impact, shaping current well-being by providing a foundation for adaptation [27]. Traditionally, research on subjective well-being has considered demographic variables such as age, gender, and income. However, recent studies suggest that the direct effects of these factors may not be as strong as previously thought, although the paradox of happiness persists despite increased

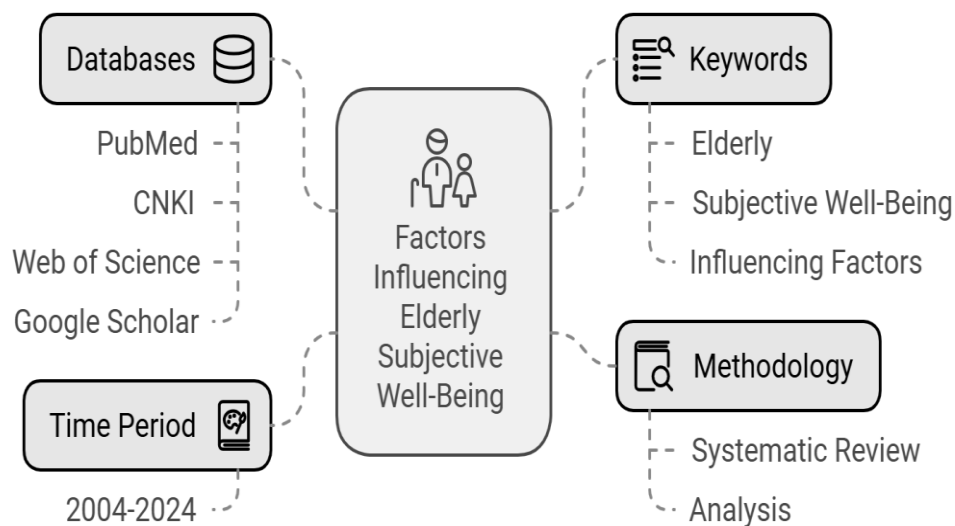
risks and losses [28]. While these factors collectively influence elderly subjective well-being, it is important to recognize individual differences in how these elements interact. The integration of psychological and social resources, along with personal life experiences, creates a unique sense of well-being for each elderly individual [29].

At present, research on elderly subjective well-being in China focuses on the factors influencing it and the impact of negative factors [30]. Often, studies use convenience sampling and are limited to specific regions, resulting in unrepresentative samples, and primarily employ cross-sectional research methods, lacking longitudinal studies that examine the interactive effects of multiple variables on subjective well-being. Additionally, there is a lack of research on positive psychological interventions for special groups of elderly, such as the widowed, terminally ill, and those in nursing homes, and even less research on technologies that could enhance elderly subjective well-being [31]. Thus, this paper reviews domestic and

international research on factors affecting elderly subjective well-being, aiming to deepen understanding of these factors, address the social and psychological issues brought on by an aging population, and improve elderly life quality and well-being by providing references for positive influencing factors and new perspectives for future research on this topic, ultimately enhancing the happiness level of the elderly in their later years.

## Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to explore and analyze factors influencing elderly subjective well-being. Literature searches were conducted across databases such as PubMed, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using the keywords "elderly," "subjective well-being," and "influencing factors." The research covered the period from 2004 to 2024 to ensure the timeliness and relevance of the literature [32]. Study the key diagram shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Study Key Infodiagram

Inclusion criteria were limited to peer-reviewed empirical studies, excluding review articles, case reports, and non-English publications. Data extraction included, but was not limited to, author, publication year, research method, sample size, and main findings [33].

Thematic analysis was applied to synthesize the collected data, aiming to identify and summarize the key factors influencing elderly subjective well-being and their interactions [34]. Based on these criteria, the samples used are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Data Characteristics

Key Insights	References
Community services enhance SWB among the elderly.	Robinson & Nelson, 2021
Cultural backgrounds influence SWB perceptions.	Kim & Park, 2019
Digital literacy affects SWB in the elderly.	Martin & Clark, 2017
Engaging in physical activities improves SWB.	Stathi, Fox & McKenna, 2002
Financial security is key to improving SWB.	White & Black, 2023
Gender differences are evident in SWB.	Anderson & Thompson, 2020
Housing conditions affect the elderly.	Kaučič, Filej & Ovsenik, 2016
Larger social networks enhance SWB.	WangQing, 2016
Loneliness significantly decreases SWB.	Martinez & Gomez, 2011
Marital status is a crucial factor in SWB.	Johnson & Roberts, 2018

## Results

Using the systematic literature review methodology, this study comprehensively organizes the existing research literature on factors affecting the subjective well-being of the elderly, identifying critical elements that can help enhance the quality of life for the elderly in their later years, thus holding substantial social practical value and real-world applicability.

### Demographic Factors

Demographic factors include age, gender, marital status, educational level, and economic income, which are basic characteristics and situations of individuals. In examining these demographic factors, scholars both domestically and internationally often recognize their significant impact on the happiness of the elderly. However, some studies have found no significant effects, such as gender having no substantial impact on the well-being of the elderly. In experiments involving multiple differential tests on age, scholars divided age into three groups: 60-65 years old, 66-75 years old, and over 75 years old. Using one-way ANOVA, they found no significant differences in overall happiness across these groups [34], and no significant differences between early elderly stages (50-60 years) and other age stages, while there were significant differences in later stages (71-80 years and 81-99 years) [35]. The variability in results may be due to differences in research populations or age categorization

standards. Besides gender, the relationship between age and subjective well-being among the elderly appears to follow a U-shaped curve, indicating an "inflexion point" for personal happiness with age [36], although some studies have noted that the impact of age on subjective well-being is not significant [37].

The physical health status of the elderly and their level of participation in social life also influence their subjective well-being. Older adults who are relatively healthy and more active in social activities tend to be happier than those who are less healthy and less socially involved [38]. This is because participating in physical exercise or cultural and recreational activities of interest can help maintain good social relationships and foster positive emotional experiences [39]. Additionally, elderly individuals in good health are better able to engage in rich social activities. Marriage, as one of the significant events in human life, fulfils a psychological need, providing a sense of satisfaction and belonging [40], and different marital statuses have varying impacts on the subjective well-being of the elderly [41]. Comparisons indicate that elderly individuals in happier marriages tend to be more content than those who are single, divorced, or widowed [42].

Moreover, in real-life experiences, elderly individuals with higher educational levels often secure better job opportunities and higher economic incomes over their lifetimes. When analyzing the impact of demographic variables, it

is found that there is a negative correlation between educational level and loneliness, and loneliness negatively affects the subjective well-being of the elderly. Thus, a higher education level will increase subjective well-being, as financial security and health concerns are less pressing, leading to greater overall happiness. This group generally exhibits higher satisfaction with their living conditions and, consequently, higher measures of subjective well-being. Studies have shown that financially well-off elderly individuals have significantly higher subjective well-being than those who are economically strained. Other research has found that income has a limited impact on the subjective well-being of the elderly.

### **Social Factors**

Social factors refer to external resources available to the elderly community, such as government support and friendships. Elderly individuals with strong social support can enhance their subjective well-being, as good social support can provide substantial material and emotional support, significantly aiding the elderly in self-acceptance and boosting their self-efficacy. When stressful events occur in an elderly person's life, good social support can play a preventive and mitigating role. Pensions, as an important form of social support, show that elderly individuals with pensions are 6.60% more likely to report being "very happy," where public spending on healthcare, basic education, and social security has a positive impact on individual subjective well-being [43]. The level of social support and other factors have good predictive power for the subjective well-being of the elderly, consistent with findings from international studies. Different modes of elderly care result in varying degrees of subjective well-being [44]. Multi-generational cohabitation and home-based elderly care models can effectively alleviate depression tendencies among the elderly, increasing their life satisfaction and consequently, their subjective well-being.

Some literature also addresses Festinger's theory of social comparison [45]. Festinger's social comparison theory has strong predictive power in various fields for satisfaction judgments, suggesting that in rural elderly populations, those whose living conditions have improved compared to five years ago have higher subjective well-being at the 1% level than other rural elderly individuals. Similar results were found for those with positive expectations for the next five years [46]. From a horizontal comparison perspective, rural elderly individuals who compare their living standards with friends and relatives and find themselves worse off have significantly lower subjective well-being at the 1% level. Moreover, the characteristics of a familiar society in rural areas tend to simplify the way happiness is measured among the elderly living there, which also impacts their subjective well-being [47].

Additionally, children's factors also significantly impact the subjective well-being of the elderly. Influenced by traditional views, the presence of children, the proportion and number of children, and their filial piety are significantly correlated with the subjective well-being of the elderly, a trend that is more pronounced among the rural elderly. Numerous studies indicate that elderly individuals with children have significantly higher subjective well-being than those without children, and those with more than two children generally have higher overall happiness than the other groups; elderly individuals with one or two children score higher in anxiety [48]. The respect and care shown by children to the elderly also affect their subjective well-being. Thus, when children are filial and frequently show care and support, the happiness of the elderly increases.

### **Psychological Factors**

Psychological factors refer to a series of factors related to the personality traits of elderly individuals. Research has found that demographic and social factors have certain impacts on individual subjective well-being, but

these effects are mainly exerted through personal characteristics to varying degrees [49]. The subjective well-being of the elderly is highly correlated with personal personality traits, which affect individuals' positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction, thereby influencing their subjective well-being. Studies have shown that extroversion has a positive effect on happiness, positive affect, life quality, and perceived health, while neuroticism has the opposite effect, negatively affecting happiness levels [50]. Self-efficacy can have a direct impact on subjective well-being, while other variables, such as social support and health status, mainly influence subjective well-being indirectly through self-efficacy [51]. Generally, elderly individuals with high self-esteem have higher subjective well-being, while those with low self-esteem have lower subjective well-being. The sense of control over the physical environment also affects the positive emotions in subjective well-being, with predictive effects on the positive emotions within subjective well-being. In summary, two key points in the factors influencing the subjective well-being of the elderly are found to be the difference between self-control sense and the level of control desire; higher interpersonal control desire means more negative emotions, while higher interpersonal control sense suggests more positive emotions [52]. Elderly individuals who are more harmonious and have fewer internal conflicts tend to have higher subjective well-being.

## Discussion

This study, based on an extensive literature review, investigates the influence of demographic, social, child-related, and psychological factors on the subjective well-being (SWB) of elderly individuals. The findings reveal that these factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in complex and dynamic ways. This interdependence necessitates further investigation into the specific relationships among these factors and their potential to enhance elderly SWB.

Understanding these relationships is of both theoretical and practical importance, as it could inform interventions aimed at improving the quality of life for elderly populations.

Future research should build upon these insights through empirical studies that explore the long-term effects and interactive dynamics of these factors. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how demographic, social, and psychological factors converge to influence elderly well-being. This approach would not only advance theoretical frameworks but also offer evidence-based strategies for improving elderly care, particularly in regions like rural China, where access to formal care systems is limited.

## Conclusion

This study examines the multifaceted determinants of subjective well-being (SWB) among elderly individuals in rural China, focusing on demographic, social, psychological, and familial influences. The results emphasize that these factors are interrelated and contribute dynamically to elderly well-being. Unlike traditional models that primarily focus on physical or economic aspects, this study highlights the importance of social support networks, intergenerational relationships, and psychological resilience as critical factors in shaping the well-being of elderly individuals.

These findings are particularly relevant in rural China, where limited access to formal care systems makes family and community-based support essential. The implications for policymakers and practitioners are significant: interventions that integrate social, psychological, and physical health support could substantially improve elderly SWB. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to examine the long-term evolution of these factors and explore technological interventions that could enhance elderly connectivity and engagement.

In summary, this study expands the understanding of elderly SWB and provides a foundation for developing practical interventions

aimed at improving the quality of life for ageing populations in diverse settings. Addressing the complex interplay of demographic, social, and psychological factors, contributes to a more holistic approach to elderly well-being, particularly in resource-limited contexts.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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