



Systematic Review of Social Media’s Role in Enhancing Subjective Well-being among Elderly Users

Sicong Shen^{1*}, Nur Haniz Mohd Nor¹, and Peng Kee Chang^{1,2}

¹*School of Media and Communication, Taylor’s University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia*

²*Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

The world is experiencing a significant demographic transformation, with social media now appealing to a broader age range beyond just the youth. In China, the population is aging quickly, and by 2023, over 296.97 million individuals will be 60 years old or older. Data from Age Club indicates that many middle-aged and older online influencers are active on social media, attracting a substantial following among younger audiences. However, research on social media users has primarily focused on young and female demographics, leaving a gap in the study of elderly users. This paper employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to investigate the connection between social media usage and subjective well-being in older adults, highlighting key research trends in this area. The findings underscore the significant impact of social media engagement on enhancing the subjective well-being of the elderly. Additionally, this study discusses the potential of social media as a means to improve public relations, bridge the digital divide, and promote overall societal health.

Keywords: Ageing population, social media use, subjective well-being, elderly influencers, systematic literature review (SLR)

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most populous countries, China is facing significant challenges related to aging. According to the seventh national census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2021, there are 264.02 million individuals aged 60 and above, which accounts for 18.7%

of the total population. Additionally, the population aged 65 and older stands at 216.76 million, making up 15.4% of the total. The 50th “China Internet Development Statistical Report,” released by the China Internet Network Information Center (2022), reveals that the total number of Internet users in China has exceeded 1.05 billion, with a

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 30 September 2025

Published: 28 November 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pp.1.6.025>

E-mail addresses:

Sicong.Shen@sd.taylors.edu.my (Sicong Shen)

NurHaniz.MohdNor@taylors.edu.my (Nur Haniz Mohd Nor)

PengKee.Chang@taylors.edu.my (Peng Kee Chang)

* Corresponding author

penetration rate exceeding 74.4%. Notably, users aged 60 and above represent more than 11.3% of this total, and 99.6% of Internet users access the Internet through mobile phones (1). The increasing popularity of the Internet and smartphones has positively impacted older adults, alleviating feelings of loneliness and depression while enhancing their social participation and sense of value. This paper emphasizes the relationship between social media use and the subjective well-being of elderly users. Factors such as the physical, intellectual, economic, and technological development levels of older adults contribute to individual differences in their use of social media, which in turn affects their subjective well-being. (2). This highlights the necessity of paying more attention to and studying the sense of fulfilment experienced by elderly users of social media. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the relationship between social media use and subjective well-being, as well as the feasibility of utilizing social media as a means to proactively address aging, improve public relations, bridge the digital divide, and promote overall social health.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a systematic literature review as its primary research method. The keywords used for retrieving relevant articles include: “Elderly and SWB” or “SMU and SWB”, or “Elderly SMU and SWB”, searched through the Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect databases. After conducting title searches and screening the abstracts of full-text research papers published after 2023, an initial selection of 63 articles was identified. Ultimately, through detailed search queries, 12 articles were chosen for review. These articles were analysed according to the following topics: (a) the impact of social media use on the elderly; (b) the effect of social media use on subjective well-being; and (c) the influence of elderly users of social media on their subjective well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SMU Enhances the Elderly’s SWB

The findings from this systematic literature review underscore the significant role that social media plays in enhancing the subjective well-being of elderly individuals. Notably, this area of research has gained substantial international attention, as evidenced by studies that span multiple countries, including China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and the Netherlands. This suggests a shared global interest in understanding how social media can be leveraged to support the well-being of older adults.

Review of Theoretical Framework

A comprehensive review of literature published after 2023 reveals various theoretical frameworks utilized by researchers investigating the intersection of ageing, social

media use, and subjective well-being. In Table 1, the theories used in the literature are detailed listed. For example, the application of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Social-Emotional Selectivity Theory, and Activity Theory has provided a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics at play (El-Keshky et al., 2023). Specifically, Activity Theory and the Information Systems (IS) Success Model have emerged as particularly influential frameworks. These theories aid in exploring how social media functions can fulfil the needs of elderly individuals, leading to improved emotional health and life satisfaction.

Table 1
Studies of elderly social media users for enhancing subjective well-being

	Methodology	Authors	Theory	Country	Mediator	Moderator
1	Mix method	Gao & Wu, 2024	Maslow's theory of needs	China		Expectation
2	Experimental	El-Keshky et al., 2023	The social emotional selectivity theory	Saudi Arabia	Social Support and Enjoyment of Life	
3	Experimental	Yue et al., 2024	Self-esteem	China	Social Support and Enjoyment of Life	
4	Experimental	Zhang et al., 2024	Social media usage and well-being	China		
5	Experimental	Chen et al., 2023	Activity theory; IS success model	Taiwan		
6	Survey	Zhang,et al., 2024	Activity theory	China	Subjective social Fairness	
7	Experimental	Yue et al., 2024		China	Perceived Social support (PSS) and self-esteem	Gender
8	Experimental	Zolkepli et al., 2024	Stressor-strain-outcome (SSO) model	Malaysia	Privacy Invasion	Boredom
9	Survey	Duan, 2024		China	Social Capital	
10	Survey	Shi et al., 2023		China	Perceived Usefulness	
11	Mix method	Hou et al., 2024		China	Perceived Social Support	
12	Experimental	Egberts, 2023	Activity theory	Netherlands		

Review of Research Method

Among the 12 studies reviewed, methodological approaches varied widely. It can be learned from Figure 1, two studies employed mixed research methods, three utilized survey methodologies, and seven were centred on empirical quantitative analyses. The survey reports often relied on official statistical panel data, ensuring robust data sources. Notably, most

empirical studies utilized questionnaire surveys to collect data, focusing on how the functionalities and social attributes of social media contribute to subjective well-being. The independent variables assessed in these studies typically centred on the emotional engagement facilitated by social media, while dependent variables consistently measured subjective well-being. Mediating variables identified across the literature included social support, enjoyment of life, perceived social support (PSS), and self-esteem.

For instance, Duan (2024) emphasizes the role of digital village construction in enhancing social interactions, which subsequently boosts the subjective well-being of older adults. Furthermore, moderating variables such as expectations, gender, and feelings of boredom were also examined, revealing a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the experiences of elderly social media users. The consensus emerging from 10 out of the 12 selected studies indicates that social media use has a predominantly positive effect on the subjective well-being of elderly individuals. Yue et al. (2024) demonstrated that social media forwarding enhances emotional connectivity, subsequently leading to greater life satisfaction among Chinese older adults. These findings are supported by Shi et al. (2023), who found that increased internet usage among older adults correlates with improved well-being, highlighting the need for facilitating digital literacy to optimize these benefits.

However, it is essential to address the counterpoints presented in two studies that suggest potential downsides of social media engagement. One study noted that excessive information overload and privacy breaches could diminish elderly users' subjective well-being, echoing the concerns raised by Zolkepli et al. (2024) regarding the negative connotations of social media. Additionally, the digital divide stemming from generational differences in technology usage has been identified as a substantial barrier leading to decreased well-being among certain segments of the elderly population (Zhang et al., 2024).

Review of Outcomes

Overall, the literature affirms the positive impact of social media on enhancing the subjective well-being of older adults while also pointing to the complexities and challenges that accompany its use. This underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions that maximize the benefits of digital engagement while addressing the disparate experiences based on individual circumstances and backgrounds.

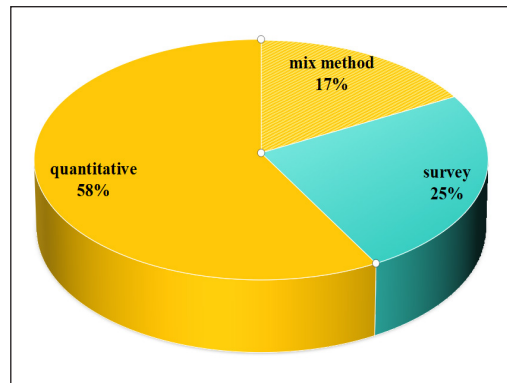


Figure 1. Research methods statistics

CONCLUSION

Both actively coping with aging and promoting active aging are crucial topics that warrant attention in the current social development of China and the world. This study reviews existing research on how older adults can enhance their subjective well-being through social media use. It underscores the significant role of social media in fostering the subjective well-being of older individuals and confirms the moderating effects of user expectations, boredom, and age on the digital divide and overall well-being. These findings highlight the necessity for targeted interventions that focus on managing user expectations. This guidance will direct future research to examine the impact of the digital divide on social equity and access to technology, particularly in less developed regions and among underrepresented groups within the elderly population. Ultimately, these efforts aim to inform practice with more robust theories, enhancing the quality of life for older adults in an increasingly digital world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to everyone who supported us during the research process.

REFERENCES

- Chen, M. H., Agrawal, S., Lin, S. M., & Liang, W. L. (2023). Learning communities, social media, and learning performance: Transactive memory system perspective. *Computers & Education*, 203, Article 104845. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2023.104845>
- China Internet Network Information Center (2022). *The 50th China Internet development statistics report*. CNNIC. <https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202212/P020221209344717199824.pdf>
- Duan, K. (2024). Digital villages construction and subjective well-being of the elderly: Evidence from China longitudinal aging social survey. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-024-10362-5>
- Egberts, J. (2023). *From isolation to connection: Testing the relationship between internet use and subjective well-being in Europe's elderly population*. [Unpublished bachelor's thesis]. University of Twente.
- El-Keshky, M. E. S., Khusaifan, S. J., & Kong, F. (2023). Gratitude and life satisfaction among older adults in Saudi Arabia: Social support and enjoyment of life as mediators. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(7), Article 527. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13070527>
- Gao, Y., & Wu, J. (2024). Aging in place in rural Northeast China: a mixed methods examination of the influence of social capital on mental well-being in middle and late adulthood. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, Article 1261132. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1261132>
- Shi, J., Liu, M., Fu, G., & Dai, X. (2023). Internet use among older adults: Determinants of usage and impacts on individuals' well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 139, Article 107538. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107538>

- Yue, Z., Zhang, R., & Xiao, J. (2024). Social media use, perceived social support, and well-being: Evidence from two waves of surveys peri-and post-COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 41(5), 1279-1297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075231188>
- Zhang, C., Zhang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2024). A study on Internet use and subjective well-being among Chinese older adults: Based on CGSS (2012-2018) five-wave mixed interface survey data. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, Article 1277789. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1277789>
- Zolkepli, I. A., Tariq, R., Isawasan, P., Shamugam, L., & Mustafa, H. (2024). The effects of negative social media connotations on subjective well-being of an ageing population: A stressor-strain-outcome perspective. *PlosOne*, 19(1), Article e0296973. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296973>