



## The psychological conditions and social engagement in the Vietnamese older people

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### ABSTRACT

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This study examines the psychological conditions and social engagement of older people in Vietnam. Population aging is occurring globally, including in Vietnam, necessitating an immediate supply of services to cater to the needs of the elderly. As individuals experience more significant advancements in their daily activities, the significance of mental health becomes a growing issue for the elderly population. We conducted a quantitative study on a sample of 100 senior individuals in Ben Tre province, Vietnam, to assess the psychological well-being of older adults. The findings suggest that older people frequently participate in sedentary activities such as reading newspapers, watching television programs, and listening to the radio. Additionally, older individuals expressed psychological conditions such as joy and happiness, a sense of respect, as well as feelings of helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness. In addition, older persons also expressed psychological conditions such as joy and happiness, being respectful, as well as feelings of helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness. This study emphasizes the significance of community policies and programs in consciously planning social activities to promote engagement among elderly individuals. To prevent dangerous situations, health professionals and clinicians should enhance the evaluation of psychiatric disorders in older people and direct those at risk to existing community resources.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study makes an important contribution to our understanding of mental health in Vietnam's aging population. It emphasizes the role of social and cultural activities in fostering psychological well-being in older people. The findings highlight the necessity for community policies and programs that promote social interaction among the elderly.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, society's progress in technology, medical advancements, and innovative treatment approaches has effectively increased people's overall life expectancy. The development of society in technology, medical advancements, and innovative treatment approaches has effectively elevated the overall life expectancy of people in general. Consequently, the issue of global aging has gained significant prominence in society and gained international attention to evaluate and comprehend the effects of the aging phenomenon on society and overall development. In recent decades, there has been a significant acceleration in the global aging process, and it is projected that older people will continue to grow shortly. Based on estimates from the World Health Organization, the percentage of individuals aged 60 and above is anticipated to increase by up to 34% between 2020 and 2030. Furthermore, by the year 2050, it is estimated that there will be approximately 434 million elderly individuals

worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021). Developed nations are confronted with an increasingly evident phenomenon of population aging, and they are swiftly transitioning towards societies with a substantial number of older people. Conversely, developing nations experience a comparatively slow transition into an aging population, yet the forces driving this change are intense (Wu, Huang, & Pan, 2021). While the longer lifespan is a positive development, it has also led to an increase in age-related illness and disabilities, resulting in significant societal and economic consequences. The aging of the population contributes to the societal responsibility of providing care for older people and presents a substantial obstacle to the social service system. Hence, research conducted globally has indicated that promoting healthy or successful aging has emerged as a matter of significant significance (Kalache, Barreto, & Keller, 2005).

### 1.1. The Psychological Conditions in Older People

The process of aging has been associated with a higher risk of mental health problems as older individuals face typical life pressures in their later years (Lyons et al., 2018). The prevailing focus on physical health problems often disregards psychological conditions in older people. Psychological health is a crucial measure of effective aging, assessing the mental well-being of older people in terms of their quality of life, sense of happiness, and feelings of loneliness (Do & Malhotra, 2012). The prevalence of mental problems is high among older people who have to stay in their homes (Li & Conwell, 2007). Studies conducted in the last twenty years have accumulated increasing evidence of unfavorable mental health effects among older people of Chinese and Korean descent living in both community and housing environments (Kang & Yoo, 2012). According to a study conducted by Lyons et al. (2018) a significant number of older people, ranging from 10% to 40%, have mental health disorders because of typical life pressures in their later years.

A significant marker of successful aging is happiness in countries with high incomes (Sumngern, Azeredo, Subgranon, Sungvorawongphana, & Matos, 2010), as older people are more inclined to demonstrate factors associated with a lower degree of happiness (Godoy-Izquierdo, Lara Moreno, Vázquez Pérez, Araque Serrano, & Godoy García, 2013). Tambyah, Tan, and Kau (2009) found that most Singaporeans are either moderately or extremely satisfied with their current situation; more specifically, the majority of older Singaporeans reported feeling moderately or extremely happy (Vestergaard et al., 2015). Siahpush, Spittal, and Singh (2008) found that individuals with higher happiness levels exhibited more significant objective and subjective health statuses. Factors such as cheerful family and societal support, strong self-esteem, and harmonious family relationships influence the happiness of older people (Nanthamongkolchai et al., 2009). Older people claim that engaging in hobbies, maintaining meaningful relationships, and interacting online provide them with happiness and comfort (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021).

Previous studies indicated that individuals commonly experience a heightened sense of loneliness with advancing age. Loneliness is a psychological condition that older people encounter when they feel overwhelmed by life's difficulties (Bergland, Tveit, & Gonzalez, 2016). Loneliness is a prevalent phenomenon, and 40% of those aged 65 and above reported experiencing feeling alone at least occasionally (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). A study conducted by Adams, Sanders, and Auth (2004) showed that 37.9% of older individuals reported experiencing a moderate level of loneliness, while 26.3% reported experiencing high levels of loneliness. In a study conducted by Cohen-Mansfield, Marx, Thein, and Dakheel-Ali (2010), it was discovered that 38% of older people in Israel expressed feelings of loneliness, and after 3.5 years, the rate expanded to 46%. Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, and Pitkälä (2005) found that 39% of individuals aged 75 and above in Finland reported experiencing loneliness. Victor and Bowling (2012) further discovered that 41% of older people in the United Kingdom felt lonely. Tomstad, Dale, Sundsli, Sævareid, and Söderhamn (2017) revealed that 11.6% of older people frequently experienced feelings of loneliness related to various factors such as living alone, dissatisfaction with life, problems with mental health, an inadequate feeling of belonging, and a lack of community connections.

### *1.2. Social and Recreational Engagement in Older People*

Furthermore, older people regard societal activities and entertainment as significant aspects of their mental experiences. Leisure activities include pastime activities such as painting and gardening (Kuykendall, Tay, & Ng, 2015). This category frequently includes sedentary or inert activities such as watching television (Chang, Chien, Pui-Man Wai, Chiang, & Yu, 2021). Social engagement among older people is critical in facilitating a healthy aging process and is one of the most significant determinants of geriatric health. Social engagement activities include volunteering and watching television. Participating in leisure activities can help individuals regain material and social resources during stress recovery, as studies have demonstrated their impact on various well-being and happiness-related factors (Gautam, Saito, & Kai, 2007). Michèle et al. (2019) implied that as individuals age, they transition from engaging in physical activity to more inert activities, such as watching television or engaging in sedentary entertainment. The research findings of Huxhold, Miche, and Schüz (2014), social interaction with family and acquaintances positively influences the mental well-being of older people. According to research by Ryu and Heo (2018), supporting positive social interaction through entertainment and encouraging engagement with volunteer activities are significant contributors to successful aging. As a result, social activities (including both indoor and outdoor, physical, and volunteer interests) and family-centered connectedness are associated with the health of older people. Overall health and life satisfaction positively correlate with volunteering, participating in cultural activities, maintaining an optimistic outlook, and engaging in physical activity (Ryu & Heo, 2018). There are numerous differing accounts regarding the status of social and recreational activities among older people worldwide. Paillard-Borg, Wang, Winblad, and Fratiglioni (2009) delineated five recreational pursuits among the elderly: mental, social, physical, and productive, such as writing and reading. Furthermore, a study by Silverstein and Parker (2002) revealed that engagement in friendship-oriented social activities, such as visiting friends, was associated with the highest quality of life among older Swedes. On the contrary, Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon (2011) concluded that clubbing and other informal social activities offer older people the most substantial health advantages. According to the findings of Sardina, Mahlobo, Gamaldo, Allaire, and Whitfield (2022), the typical amount of leisure activities engaged in by participants was three per day, with activities such as walking, reading literature and visiting others, participating in church activities, and watching television being the most frequently undertaken activities. The two most common forms of social interaction among older Chinese people were reading and watching television, with only 10% reporting radio listening (Strain, Grabusic, Searle, & Dunn, 2002).

Contemporary advancements in social work research attempt to examine several dimensions of the lives of older people using intersectional frameworks. Studies conducted in Vietnam have systematically investigated several aspects of the physical and mental health of older people in specific areas. Dao, Nguyen, Nguyen, and Nguyen (2018) reported a depression prevalence of 66.9% among older people, and there is a correlation between age, physical activity, pharmacological therapy, and psychological, physical, and environmental health. Nguyen et al. (2019) discovered a notable psychological discomfort in older people following a fall. In addition, the research of Nguyen, Le, Vu, and Le (2019) indicated that older people generally have an average quality of life. Furthermore, a study conducted by Van Minh, Byass, Thi Kim Chuc, and Wall (2010) found that women tend to report greater levels of suffering health and lower quality of life compared to men. Nevertheless, there are still limitations in collecting evidence of older people's engagement in recreational and social activities. This study is the first investigation in Vietnam that examines the present situation of mental health, including psychological conditions and the level of social and recreational engagements among older people in Ben Tre province.

## **2. METHODS**

### *2.1. Participants*

A random sample of 100 older people from two urban and rural regions of Ben Tre, Vietnam, participated in

the investigation.

### 2.2. Measurements and Procedures

The researchers formulated the research questionnaires to evaluate the psychological conditions of older people in Vietnam. They structured the research questions into two fundamental components: The first comprises questions about older people's involvement in recreational activities, entertainment, and social engagements. The next part contains material concerning the psychological well-being of older people. Furthermore, the survey included demographic variables such as age, gender, place of residence, religion, and level of education.

The survey participants volunteered for the current study. Participants were informed of the research's objectives, benefits, security, and confidentiality before conducting the survey; they may withdraw at any time if it causes discomfort. The researcher will address any questions volunteers may have about the ongoing research. In cases where individuals are illiterate or too elderly to read, the researchers will read the questions aloud for the volunteers to answer. The survey can be completed in approximately 10 minutes.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews constitute the primary research methodologies utilized. We applied version 25 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in the investigation. Specifically, descriptive statistical methods are used to explore sociodemographic characteristics and analyze the mental health status of older people.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristic.

Gender	Percentage
Male	64%
Female	36%
Age	Percentage
60-70 years old	48%
70-80 years old	40%
Above 80 years old	12%
Religion	Percentage
Ancestor worship	85%
Buddhism	7%
Christian	6%
None	2%
Education level	Percentage
Primary	44%
Secondary	32%
High school	13%
College/University	10%
Illiterate	1%
Marital status	Percentage
Married	78%
Single	1%
Divorced	3%
Separated	2%
Widowed	16%
Living status	Percentage
Living with their spouse	70%
Living with children	20%
Living with relatives	1%
Living with offspring	1%
Living alone	8%

## 3. RESULTS

According to the results presented in [Table 1](#), an evaluation of 100 older people in the Mo Cay Bac district included 36% females and 64 males, ranging in age from 60 to 80 years. Those aged 70 to 80 comprised 48% of the

sample, while those aged 70 to 80 were 40%, and those aged 80 and above were 12%. The findings of this research indicated that the religious affiliation among the elderly participants was ancestor worship (85%), with Buddhism (7%), Christianity (6%), and no religion (2%). For older people, 44% have completed primary school; secondary and high school were 32% and 13%, respectively. College and university degrees and illiteracy have the lowest rates at 10% and 1%. The report on marital status indicated that most married people are 78%, widows are 16%, and the proportions of divorced, separated, and unmarried individuals are 3%, 2%, and 1%, respectively. The findings indicate that older people (70%) live with their spouse, 20% with their children, 8% living alone, 1%, respectively with relatives, and 1% with offspring.

Table 2. Social and recreational activities of the older people.

STT	Social and recreational activities	Mean	SD
1	Taking a rest	2.83	0.60
2	Going outside and communicate with others	2.36	0.63
3	Engaging in entertainment activities such as listening to the radio, reading newspapers, and watching TV	3.11	0.65
4	Engaging in physical activities for health benefits	1.8	0.93
5	Joining religious rituals in ceremonies, temples, and churches	1.85	0.94
6	Engaging in community and charitable activities	1.89	0.97
7	Engaging in cultural activities	2.24	0.78
8	Ornamental plant care	2.26	0.92
9	Playing chess	1.54	0.83
Total		2.21	0.51

Table 2 presents the evaluation of older people’s engagement in social and recreational activities. Firstly, "engaging in entertainment activities such as reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching TV" is a routine activity among older people, with a mean score of 3.11 (SD = 0.65). Following that, "going outside and communicating with others" and "taking a rest" received considerable attention, with an average of 2.83 (SD = 0.60) and 2.36 (SD = 0.63), respectively. Certain older people dedicate time to "ornamental plant care," with a mean score of 2.26 (SD = 0.92), and "engaging in cultural activities," with a mean score of 2.24 (SD = 0.78). The elderly also exhibit interest in social and leisure activities such as "engaging in charitable and community activities" with a mean of 1.89 (SD = 0.97); and "joining religious ceremonies, temples, and churches" with a mean of 1.85 (SD = 0.94). Conversely, there are specific activities that older people engage in to lesser degrees. For instance, "playing chess" gets a mean score of 1.54 (SD = 0.83), while "engaging in physical activities for health benefits" receives a mean score of 1.8 (SD = 0.93).

Table 3. The older people’s psychological conditions.

STT	Psychological conditions	Mean	SD
1	Joyful and happiness	4.66	0.54
2	Be respectful	4.67	0.53
3	Feelings of helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness	4.50	0.64
4	Recalling past events	4.48	0.66
5	Refusing to engage in interaction or relationship	4.41	0.77
6	Willing to engage in cultural, artistic, athletic, and sporting activities	4.58	0.50
7	Scared of mortality	4.45	0.56
Total		4.54	0.41

Table 3 details the psychological health status of older people during the survey. The findings indicated that "be respectful" was evaluated with the highest scores from older people, with an average score of 4.67 (SD = 0.53), followed by "joyful and happiness" with an average score of 4.66 (SD = 0.54). Additionally, older people consider the activity "willing to engage in cultural, artistic, athletic, and sporting activities" in high regard, as evidenced by

its average score of 4.58 (SD = 0.50). The average scores for "Feelings of helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness" and "recalling past events" were 4.50 (SD = 0.64) and 4.48 (SD = 0.64), respectively. On the other hand, the psychological conditions "refusing to engage in interaction or relationship" have an average score of 4.41 (SD = 0.77), and "scared of mortality" have an average score of 4.45 (SD = 0.56), respectively.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The study aims to evaluate the level of engagement in social and recreational activities and analyze the psychological well-being of older people in Vietnam. The survey findings revealed that older people often engaged in passive leisure activities such as reading newspapers, watching television, and listening to the radio. They were also involved in outdoor activities and social interactions, as well as cultural and community events. Furthermore, older individuals further reported psychological conditions such as joy and happiness, as well as sentiments of helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness, as the common emotional experiences among them.

The results indicated that older people assessed their psychological conditions as joyful and happy, and they felt respected by others. Older people are regarded as the most susceptible demographic to a decrease in functional ability, as well as numerous changes in physical conditions, including cognitive, social, and psychological functioning. Older people are susceptible to experiencing a low mood because of several elements associated with aging, such as neurobiological alterations, stressful circumstances, social isolation, poverty, hunger, and sleeplessness (Fiske, Wetherell, & Gatz, 2009). Enkvist, Ekström, and Elmståhl (2012) discovered a negative correlation between increasing age and life satisfaction when compared to a younger age. As individuals get older, life satisfaction or subjective well-being tends to rise or remain relatively consistent throughout adulthood (Urry & Gross, 2010). There are contradictions in the correlation between happiness and age, since studies have shown that happiness levels tend to decline as age increases, and older people often report lower happiness levels (Tornstam, 2011). People with lower happiness and higher stress levels typically exhibit ordinary or worse bodily and mental well-being. In contrast, a study by Tornstam (2011) revealed that advancing age does not necessarily result in loneliness or sadness among older people. However, they derive pleasure from the aging process and experience a sense of contentment, and older people also indicate comparatively elevated happiness levels (Vestergaard et al., 2015). According to specific experts, the joy can be attributed to the improved regulation of emotions that older persons experience in later life. They become more discerning in choosing the social settings and individuals they associate with Bengtson and Settersten Jr (2016). The study found that older people experienced a feeling of respect from other people around them. This can be attributed to the influence of Asian traditions, where the importance of respecting older people is strongly stressed. Asian civilizations tend to exhibit a more reverential attitude toward older people than Western societies (Sung, 2000). Traditionally, filial piety encompasses a range of actions and attitudes that demonstrate affection, respect, and regard for one's parents, including adherence to older generations and providing care for one's parents.

Recent research findings indicate that older people also experience emotions such as helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness. In alignment with the findings of this study, prior research has shown that loneliness poses a significant issue for older individuals as they age due to its impact on their cognitive and physical condition (Dahlberg, Andersson, McKee, & Lennartsson, 2015), as well as their emotional and psychological health. According to the study conducted by Dahlberg et al. (2015), there is a correlation between experiencing frequent feelings of loneliness and older age. Social loneliness in older people refers to lower social connection and engagement (Victor, Scambler, Marston, Bond, & Bowling, 2006). Several risk factors, including living alone, financial disadvantages, poor educational achievement, unsatisfactory social connections, compromised health and functioning, bereavement, as well as feelings of shame and anxiety, can influence loneliness (Cohen-Mansfield, Hazan, Lerman, & Shalom, 2016). Nevertheless, as individuals get older, the level of social engagement and willingness to serve tends to rise, partially attributed to the extra free time that comes with retirement (Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm, 2008). Older

people are more likely to experience the loss of a loved one and to encounter health issues that intensify their requirement for assistance from society and interaction. Older individuals are more vulnerable to the danger of loneliness (Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, & Thisted, 2006). Social loneliness can impact an individual's health, affecting both their health behaviors and biological processes (Cacioppo et al., 2002).

The research's findings suggested that older people commonly engage in entertainment activities, hang out and communicate with others, engage in cultural activities, and contribute to community and charitable activities and religious activities... Previous research and health organizations support the belief that ongoing engagement in various activities can enhance the psychological health of older people and encourage effective aging. Van Willigen (2000) confirmed the findings of this study by demonstrating that active involvement in pleasant social interactions during leisure activities and encouraging engagement in volunteer work are crucial factors for achieving effective aging. Older people engage in fewer activities than younger people, especially those that require physical and mental exertion (Menec, 2003). In contrast, those who are older and who have attained higher levels of education exhibit a greater propensity to go out and engage in cultural events (Strain et al., 2002). Menec (2003) showed that older people who engaged in sports or games had elevated levels of enjoyment and life satisfaction, whereas those who participated in solitary activities such as craft work, music, reading, social groups, light housework, and gardening. Furthermore, research indicated that engaging in leisure and social activities that prioritize the family unit is associated with individuals' perceptions of their health and overall happiness (Ryu & Heo, 2018). According to Lampinen, Heikkinen, Kauppinen, and Heikkinen (2006), older people who engaged in leisure activities such as reading, doing crafts, and engaging in religious groups or activities regularly were more likely to have better mental health. Cohen-Mansfield et al. (2018) proposed providing participants with resources to enhance social networks, cultivate social connections, and contemplate the interactions of older persons with friends, families, and groups.

#### *4.1. Implication and Limitation*

Based on the research results, this study has made substantial contributions to both practice and theory. The study has produced empirical evidence regarding older people's psychological conditions, contributing to the overall database and specifically to the context of Vietnam. The research findings indicate a correlation between the level of participation in social and entertainment activities and psychological conditions such as loneliness, joy, and feelings of respect among older people. We recommend encouraging older adults to engage in personal activities such as arts and crafts, pet care, reading, restorative, and community activities to promote positive psychological condition. Developing relationships with friends and family is crucial for alleviating loneliness and enhancing overall satisfaction and happiness. These findings have implications for developing therapies aimed at enhancing psychological well-being and providing community resources for older individuals that specifically target teaching technological and societal skills. Engaging in social and volunteer activities is crucial for older people to recognize the significance of their lives, hence promoting good aging. This study offers valuable data for clinical practitioners and psychological consultants to swiftly construct psychological support programs and recreational activities for older people with prevalent mental health issues.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that require consideration. Initially, the study's findings do not represent the total Vietnamese population due to the small number of samples. Subsequent research might be carried out on a broader, more diverse sample population, encompassing urban and rural regions. However, it is also essential to note that this study depends on self-reported data, indicating that the research findings reflect older people's subjective perspectives regarding their state. To obtain more significant results, it is also essential to include the evaluations provided by their family members. In addition, existing research has not investigated the impact of variables such as financial status, social support, accessibility to healthcare facilities, and other psychological circumstances on individuals' engagement in social activities. Hence, further research can examine the

correlation between the aforementioned components using various approaches, including quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, and in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the present study did not assess the influence of physical health on mental health or engagement in social interactions among older people. Future research should examine the multifaceted relationships between relevant factors. Researchers might conduct more studies to find out whether the encouragement of social interaction can serve as an intervention against mental health issues in older people. Given the swift advancement of contemporary technology and its influence on people's social lives, it is essential to consider the role of technology in facilitating and maintaining social engagement among older people.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Nations worldwide have noticed an increase in the proportion of the population that is 60 years old or older. Considering the current issue of the aging population, there is a growing focus on improving the quality of life for older people by both the community and medical organizations. By providing comprehensive support to older people, encompassing both material and spiritual aspects, people can enhance their general health, promote their longevity, and enable them to contribute more significantly to society. Hence, maintaining a lively spiritual existence among older people is regarded as a crucial approach adopted by all nations worldwide. The present study aimed to evaluate the contemporary condition of the spiritual well-being of older people in Vietnam. Research findings indicate that elderly individuals frequently engage in sedentary activities, communicate with others, and engage in social and cultural activities. Concurrently, the results also revealed that older people commonly experience feelings of joy and happiness, respect, helplessness, self-pity, and loneliness. The study highlights the necessity of health programs focusing on the significance of mental health evaluation for older people, enabling timely implementation of treatments. Furthermore, the study recommends that social workers and communities propose and implement a multitude of social programs and community activities specifically designed for older people to encourage their active engagement in social interactions and establish meaningful relationships.

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**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Authors' Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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