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Constructing well-being through music education: A qualitative inquiry into older women's emotional, social, and cognitive lives in China

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Abstract

This study explores how music education enhances happiness among Chinese elderly women. Focusing on their lived experiences, the research involved 120 women aged 60-70 from twelve senior universities in nine Chinese cities. Data was collected via in-depth interviews and analyzed using grounded theory methodology through open, axial, and selective coding. This process yielded nine core categories and a theoretical model centered on "happiness construction." The findings reveal three primary pathways through which music education boosts well-being: First, it improves physical and mental states via emotional regulation and health promotion. Second, it shapes the external environment through social belonging, family influence, and economic conditions. Third, it stimulates intrinsic motivation through self-identity, cognitive stimulation, learning drive, and teaching feedback, thereby rebuilding self-worth and fostering a sense of achievement. This study confirms the role of social activities in elderly well-being and highlights the unique capacity of music education to integrate emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural functions. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [4]: 115-130).*

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Older Adults Life, Health Care, Well-Being, Music Education

Résumé

Cette étude explore comment l'éducation musicale améliore le bonheur chez les femmes âgées chinoises. Centrée sur leurs expériences vécues, la recherche a impliqué 120 femmes de 60 à 70 ans issues de douze universités pour seniors dans neuf villes chinoises. Les données, recueillies via des entretiens approfondis, ont été analysées selon la méthodologie de la théorie ancrée, comprenant un codage ouvert, axial et sélectif. Ce processus a permis de dégager neuf catégories centrales et un modèle théorique axé sur la « construction du bonheur ». Les résultats révèlent trois voies principales par lesquelles l'éducation musicale améliore le bien-être : Premièrement, elle améliore l'état physique et mental via la régulation émotionnelle et la promotion de la santé. Deuxièmement, elle façonne l'environnement externe par l'appartenance sociale, l'influence familiale et les conditions économiques. Troisièmement, elle stimule la motivation intrinsèque grâce à l'identité personnelle, la stimulation cognitive, la motivation à apprendre et les retours d'enseignement, reconstruisant ainsi la valeur de soi et favorisant un sentiment d'accomplissement. Cette étude confirme le rôle des activités sociales dans le bien-être des personnes âgées et souligne la capacité unique de l'éducation musicale à intégrer des fonctions émotionnelles, cognitives, sociales et culturelles. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [4]: 115-130).*

Mots-clés: Développement durable, vie des personnes âgées, soins de santé, bien-être, éducation musicale.

Introduction

With the extension of global life expectancy and the decline in birth rate, aging has become an important social issue in many countries. In the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 3 (Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are all closely related to the quality of life of the elderly. China is one of the countries with the fastest aging rate in the world[1]. According to WHO data, the average life expectancy of Chinese women has significantly surpassed that of men, and their healthy life expectancy has improved[2]. However, this is paralleled by inevitable issues such as the loss of

health resources and decreased mobility. These trends make improving the sense of happiness, subjective quality of life, social participation, and other aspects of the elderly, especially female elderly, an important direction for public policy and educational intervention.

In China, the subjective well-being of elderly women is influenced by multiple factors: economic status, health status, social support, activity participation, and education level[3, 4]. There is a significant correlation between the leisure patterns of the elderly and their subjective well-being, with those who participate in social, cultural, and leisure activities experiencing higher life satisfaction[5-7]. Furthermore, the number of years of education for women has also been found to positively correlate with subjective well-being, although this relationship is influenced by mediating or moderating factors such as physical health, mental health, and economic status[8]. Gender differences have also been confirmed: among the elderly population, women often face more challenges to their subjective well-being due to their social roles, family obligations, economic dependence, and higher health risks[9, 10].

There have been numerous studies exploring the impact of musical participation on older adults. In a UK study, elderly participants engaged in active music making demonstrated significantly better well-being indicators in terms of emotional, social, and cognitive functions compared to those involved in non-musical activities[11]. In China, research has also delved into the mediating/moderating relationships between music use, the emotional adaptation function of music, and perceived stress. Tang and Deeprasert[12] found that among Chinese elderly aged 60 and above, music use positively correlates with subjective well-being; the emotional adaptation function of music can mediate this relationship, while perceived stress serves as a moderating variable, influencing the strength of the effect of music use on well-being. Furthermore, group activities incorporating music and dance elements, such as "public square dancing," have been proven to enhance life satisfaction, social connections, and mental health among middle-aged and elderly individuals, particularly for female participants[13-15]. Although research on how music participation enhances older adults' well-being has grown in recent years, systematic theoretical construction and empirical studies remain limited in the Chinese context—especially regarding the generative mechanisms of well-being for older women in music education. On the one hand, existing studies predominantly employ questionnaires or experimental designs, focusing on short-term effects of music on emotion or cognition from a psychometric perspective, while overlooking the mechanistic role of music education as a long-term, interactive, and agentic construction process[16, 17]. On the other hand, although a few qualitative studies have begun to explore the meanings of learning musical instruments among older adults, they largely center on individual emotional experiences, lack robust theoretical models and structured variable systems, and mostly fail to differentiate the heterogeneous effects of gender roles, family responsibilities, and cultural backgrounds on pathways to well-being[18]. In addition, research on organizational forms such as community choirs among older adults has mainly focused on teaching models or institutional arrangements, without delving into the processual mechanisms and cognitive pathways through which learners construct subjective well-being[19]. Therefore, current research still lacks a theoretical exploration that integrates the multidimensional perspectives of "education–gender–culture–identity," and there is a need to systematically reveal, through qualitative methods, the pathways by which older women generate well-being in the context of music education.

Therefore, this study aims to focus on the specific experiences of Chinese elderly women participating in music education through qualitative methods of observation and in-depth interviews. It explores how happiness can be enhanced from multiple dimensions such as emotion, social interaction, identity, self-worth, health, or cognition. Additionally, it seeks to investigate which factors promote or hinder this enhancement in the process (such as family support, economic resources, community education resources, gender roles/expectations, cultural traditions, etc.).

Literature review

Theoretical framework

An increasing number of studies have confirmed the positive effects of music intervention on emotional regulation and mental health in the elderly.

Carrasco[20] found that customized music and hypnosis interventions significantly reduce anxiety and pain, and enhance subjective well-being among elderly residents in nursing homes. Meanwhile, Li et al[21] conducted a systematic review, indicating that interventions involving slow-paced music twice daily for 30 minutes, lasting for 7 days, yield the most significant effects, particularly in reducing the risk of delirium in ICU patients and indirectly improving their well-being. Secondly, from the perspective of educational practice, He et al[22] conducted a retrospective analysis of music education courses in China, pointing out that current music courses still lag behind in terms of development for all age groups, especially in terms of the lack of systematic mechanisms for integrating cultural heritage and mental health intervention. Xu and Rodsakan[23] conducted a study on "elderly care courses" for music teacher education students in Sichuan Province, finding that integrating music and care knowledge can promote social participation and psychological recovery among the elderly in both theory and practice. However, there are still issues with imperfect curriculum design and evaluation systems.

From the perspective of elderly subjective motivation and barriers to participation, existing literature has shown that the core factors influencing elderly participation in music or other lifestyle interventions are "intrinsic motivation," self-efficacy, and sense of social support[24, 25]. However, this conclusion is mostly derived from general elderly populations, with little attention paid to the social gender role constraints faced by specific gender groups (women) in cultural activities. Additionally, domestic studies such as Chen et al[26] have explored the moderating effect of "community social capital" on depressive tendencies among relocated elderly individuals. The results showed that a lack of trust, emotional support, and participation opportunities significantly increased their depression levels, indirectly suggesting that "cultural participation" may serve as one of the intervention pathways. However, these study did not delve into the specific utility mechanism of music as a special cultural form in improving social connections and psychological states. Finally, although some current studies have begun to focus on the subjective cognition of female elderly during the aging process, such as the positive adaptation process of Black African women with HIV[27- 29], these studies are mostly limited to the perspectives of healthcare or marginalized populations, lacking in-depth qualitative interviews and narrative analysis from the perspective of art education (such as music).

In summary Most studies emphasize a static “activity–outcome” linkage and lack an in-depth understanding of educational processes; a gendered perspective is notably absent, particularly with respect to the specific mechanisms through which elderly women in China—situated within distinctive cultural contexts, familial responsibilities, and shifting identities—experience well-being; although the dimensional construction of well-being has expanded to some extent, integrative modeling that elucidates how underlying mechanisms interact remains underdeveloped; and longitudinal, pathway-oriented research grounded in “learning–reflection–identity reconstruction” is especially scarce. Accordingly, this study employs grounded theory to construct a processual mechanism model of how music education fosters well-being among elderly women, thereby addressing theoretical and empirical lacunae in the current literature

Methods

Data collection

This study adopts a qualitative research method, aiming to deeply understand the changes in subjective well-being and their influencing mechanisms among Chinese elderly women during their participation in music education. From April 2025 to May 2025, the research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 120 female students from 12 senior universities in China. The participants, aged between 60 and 70, were all active students enrolled in music courses (including vocal music, instrumental music, choral singing, dance, etc.).To ensure the geographical diversity and representativeness of the sample, this study selected senior universities in nine cities—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chengdu, Kunming, Suzhou, Changsha, and Xi'an—as survey sites. These cities were chosen based on multiple criteria: (1) regional coverage across eastern, central, and western China; (2) variation in urban development levels, including both tier-1 and emerging cities; (3) differing levels

of access to music education and aging-related cultural policies. This selection allows for a comparative understanding of how contextual factors shape well-being outcomes among older adults engaged in music learning.

Participants were recruited using a combination of snowball sampling and gatekeeper referral. At each senior university, the researchers first contacted music course instructors or class advisors, who served as gatekeepers to assist in recommending initial participants.

These initial participants then further recommended eligible peers of the same age. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, focusing on the following topics: motivations and original intentions for participating in music education, emotional experiences during the learning process, social interactions with others, impacts on self-identity, specific perceptions of changes in well-being, and possible hindering factors. To ensure compliance with research ethics, the research team clearly informed all participants of the research purpose, data usage scope, and confidentiality principles before the interviews. All participants signed informed consent forms. All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, and strict privacy protection and de-identification measures were adhered to during the interview process. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, supplemented by local dialects for interpretation based on the language preferences of the interviewees. The interview process was jointly participated in by two researchers trained in qualitative research, ensuring the openness, sensitivity, and accuracy of the interview process. All recordings were transcribed into written materials after obtaining authorization, and proceeded to the subsequent coding and thematic analysis process.

Research tools

To capture the multi-dimensional experiences of older women participating in music education, a semi-structured interview guide was designed. The development of the guide was based on the theoretical framework introduced in Section 2, particularly drawing from the perspectives of active ageing, self-determination, and music as a psychosocial resource. The guide includes nine thematic sections, each focusing on one or more dimensions of well-being, such as emotional regulation, social connectedness, identity formation, and perceived value. Each theme contains 2–4 open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed personal narratives and reflective responses. This interview guide was validated by two qualitative research experts and refined through two pilot interviews before formal use. This tool ensured consistency across interviewers while preserving the flexibility to adapt to each participant's unique context and narrative. It served as both a roadmap for the interview process and an analytical anchor for subsequent thematic coding.

Data analysis

This study adopts Grounded Theory as the fundamental strategy for data analysis[30]. In the analysis process, the research team followed the following steps: First, open coding was conducted, where all interview texts were reviewed and labeled line by line to capture possible conceptual units. Second, axial coding was performed, where preliminary concepts were summarized into core categories, and their internal logic and relational structures were explored. Finally, selective coding was carried out, where a procedural narrative model was constructed around the core categories to reveal the formation and change mechanisms of elderly women's sense of happiness during their participation in music education. During the coding process, we adopted the constant comparison method, which involved comparing the responses of different interviewees to ensure that the concept formation had broad applicability and a solid empirical foundation.

To control research reliability and theoretical saturation, we continued to compare and sample after the 90 interviewees, and no substantial new categories were discovered after the 110 interviewees, leading to a preliminary judgment that the theory was tending towards saturation. Ultimately, after the 120 participant, the data analysis was basically completed, and a relatively stable category structure and relational network were established. In addition, to ensure the rigor and traceability of the analysis process, all coding was independently conducted by two researchers, and NVivo 14 software was used for data management and cross-validation. All disagreements were resolved through consultation to ensure the

systematicness and reliability of the analysis process.

Ethical considerations

The manuscript was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of Guangdong Ocean University, which confirmed that the work does not raise ethical concerns requiring formal ethical approval under relevant national or institutional regulations; therefore, ethical approval was deemed not applicable/exempt. Review documentation: Document No. ZJUST-EC-2025-0610, Date of approval: March 10, 2025.

Results

Data description

Table 1 presents the basic characteristics of the sample in this study. There was a total of 120 participants, hailing from nine cities in China, including Beijing (14), Shanghai (14), Xi'an (14), Guangzhou (13), Shenzhen (13), Chengdu (13), Kunming (13), Suzhou (13), and Changsha (13). The sample was primarily aged between 60 and 70, with an average age of 64.7 years. Specifically, 57% were aged 60–65, while 43% were aged 66–70. Regarding retirement income, 62% of the respondents received a monthly pension ranging from 3,001 to 5,000 yuan, 21% received 2,000 to 3,000 yuan, and 17% received more than 5,000 yuan. In terms of expenditure on music courses at senior universities, 74% of the respondents spent 200 to 500 yuan per month, 13% spent less than 200 yuan, and another 13% spent more than 500 yuan, primarily on private instrumental music training. Regarding marital status, 80% were married, 10% were widowed, 5% were divorced, and 5% were unmarried. Overall, the sample exhibited strong representativeness and heterogeneity in terms of urban distribution, economic conditions, marital status, and learning engagement, enabling further in-depth qualitative analysis on the mechanisms of happiness.

To ensure traceability of interview data during analysis and citation, the research team implemented numbered management for all participants using a combination of city abbreviations and numerical codes. For instance, 14 Beijing participants were labeled as BJ1 to BJ14, while Shanghai participants were designated SH1 to SH14. Other cities including Guangzhou (GZ), Shenzhen (SZ), Chengdu (CD), Kunming (KM), Suzhou (SZH), Changsha (CS), and Xi'an (XA) were also coded with corresponding identifiers like GZ1, SZ1, CD1, etc.

All citations strictly followed privacy protection protocols using anonymized numerical labels. Among the 120 participants in this study, each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes, yielding over 90 hours of raw audio recordings. These recordings were transcribed into approximately 187,000 Chinese characters. Through bilingual comparative analysis and partial translation citations, the text was converted into approximately 94,000 English words of corpus material, providing a robust semantic foundation for subsequent topic extraction and theoretical construction. This substantial corpus depth ensures rich, representative analytical results with theoretical saturation, enhancing both representativeness and theoretical depth of the findings.

Open coding results analysis

Through line-by-line analysis of interviews with 120 older women, the research team identified 82 representative open codes that reflected a wide range of experiences related to emotions, social interaction, self-identity, physical and cognitive perceptions, family and cultural factors, and structural conditions.

In the emotional and psychological dimension, participants frequently described experiences such as "inner peace, emotional release through music, alleviation of loneliness, and recalling childhood memories (e.g., BJ12, SH3, CD8). For example, BJ12 noted, "*Every time I finish singing that song, I feel especially calm, as if all my worries have stopped.*" SH3 shared, "*I feel much better emotionally every time I come to sing, like something has been released*." CD8 said, "*When I'm home alone, I feel lonely. Singing here gives me energy*."

Regarding social interaction and belonging, codes such as "expanded social circle, making new friends, and sense of group belonging" were frequently mentioned.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the interview sample

Variable	Categories
Age Distribution	60-65 years (57%), 66-70 years (43%), Mean: 64.7
Retirement Pension	2000-3000 RMB (21%), 3001-5000 RMB (62%), >5000 RMB (17%)
Music Course Spending/week	<200 RMB (13%), 200-500 RMB (74%), >500 RMB (13%)
Marital Status	Married (80%), Widowed (14%), Divorced (5%), Single (1%)
City Distribution	Beijing (14), Shanghai (14), Guangzhou (13), Shenzhen (13), Chengdu (13), Kunming (13), Suzhou (13), Changsha (13), Xi'an (14)

Figure 1: Word cloud of open-coding keywords in elderly women's music education

Many participants described music classes as a social anchor that significantly enhanced their later-life sociability and sense of community (e.g., SZ2, GZ9, BJ6). For instance, SZ2 said, "*I met many friends in the choir class. We meet weekly, chat, and sing. It doesn't feel lonely anymore*." GZ9 remarked, "*Usually I don't have anyone to talk to at home, but here I can talk to people every day. It feels like regaining social life.*" BJ6 reflected, "*Every rehearsal and performance feels like being part of a big family. It's so warm.*"

On the dimension of identity and self-worth, codes such as "reaffirmation of self, increased confidence, and challenging stereotypes emerged. For example, CS6 stated, "*People say I'm too old to learn, but I feel I can still do well.*" GZ3 said, "*I had never spoken so confidently before, but now I'm not afraid to perform on stage.*" BJ10 shared, "*After retirement, I felt useless. Music helped me find my place again.*"

In terms of cognitive and learning experience, participants described codes like "sense of achievement in continuous learning, memory improvement, and mental stimulation." CD2 said, "*I memorize lyrics for every new song. It really trains my memory*." CS12 added, "*Practicing rhythm makes my brain more agile.*"Family and cultural factors also shaped participation, with codes such as "family support, conflict with caregiving obligations, and traditional constraints on learning freedom." CD7 said, "*My husband supports me and even bought a speaker for me to practice*." SH4 explained, "*I have to take care of my grandchild. Sometimes I really don't have time for class.*" BJ11 commented, "*My mother-in-law often says I'm too old to mess around with music*.

"In addition, codes like "perceived health improvement, pursuing lifelong dreams, teacher encouragement, and rich curriculum content" reveal that music education operates not only on emotional and social levels but is also embedded in physical, economic, and institutional conditions. KM9 shared, "*Singing requires deep breathing. I feel my lung capacity has improved.*" XA2 said, "*I dreamed of becoming a singer when I was young. Now I feel like I can fulfill part of that dream.*" SH10 emphasized, "*The teacher really encouraged me and said my voice was touching. That's why I had the courage to keep going.*" These open codes reveal the layered and complex subjective experiences of older women in music education and provide a solid foundation for the subsequent axial coding phase.

Figure 1 integrates the open-coding keywords referenced in interviews with 120 respondents, illustrating the emotional, cognitive, social, and motivational dimensions most frequently articulated in the context of music education. Larger font size indicates higher frequency of occurrence, highlighting the salience of themes such as "emotional release," "self-identity," and "social belonging."

Axis coding results analysis

Through synthesizing and comparing over 82 open coding analyses, the research team identified nine core categories to elucidate the mechanisms underlying enhanced well-being in elderly women through music education (Table 2). First, under the Emotional Regulation dimension, codes such as "inner peace, emotional release, alleviation of loneliness, and emotional resilience demonstrate that music education provides effective channels for emotional guidance and psychological support. Second, the Social Belonging dimension encompasses experiences like "expanded social circles, group identity, and intergenerational connection", indicating that music classes serve as vital platforms for elderly women's social engagement. In the Self-Identity dimension, codes such as "boosted self-confidence, breaking stereotypes, and self-affirmation" reveal how music learning offers opportunities to reconstruct self-worth. The Cognitive Stimulation dimension includes aspects like "improved memory, flexible thinking, and achievement from continuous learning, highlighting music education's crucial role in maintaining cognitive vitality. Meanwhile, the Family Influence dimension reveals dual effects of family support and care conflict, which present both facilitation and obstacles.

Economic factors encompass tuition costs, transportation expenses, and urban-rural disparities, directly impacting the sustainability and depth of participation. Health perceptions in improved physical coordination, enhanced respiratory capacity, and chronic disease management demonstrate music education's positive significance for physical and mental well-being. Motivational aspects such as passion for music, pursuit of dreams, and escaping loneliness reveal diverse driving forces behind elderly women's participation in music education. Finally, the teaching feedback dimension encompasses elements such as teacher encouragement, rich curriculum content, and performance opportunities, highlighting the pivotal role of educational resources and teaching methodologies in shaping well-being.

Collectively, these nine core categories not only reveal the multi-layered mechanisms through which music education enhances happiness, but also provide a framework for subsequent selective coding. This foundation solidifies the theoretical model exploring the relationship between music education and elderly well-being. Table 3 presents the definitions of all axis codes.

Figure 2 depicted the multidimensional pathways through which well-being is constructed among elderly women in music education. The x-axis represents the frequency of open codes, the y-axis lists specific code items, and color encodes their corresponding axial-coding themes.

This visualization elucidates distributional differences in respondents' focal concerns across thematic dimensions, thereby aiding the identification of core drivers and characteristic manifestations within the theoretical model.

Selective encoding

In the selective coding phase, this study further centered around the research objective, which is to explore the pathways for enhancing the sense of well-being among Chinese elderly women during their participation in music education.

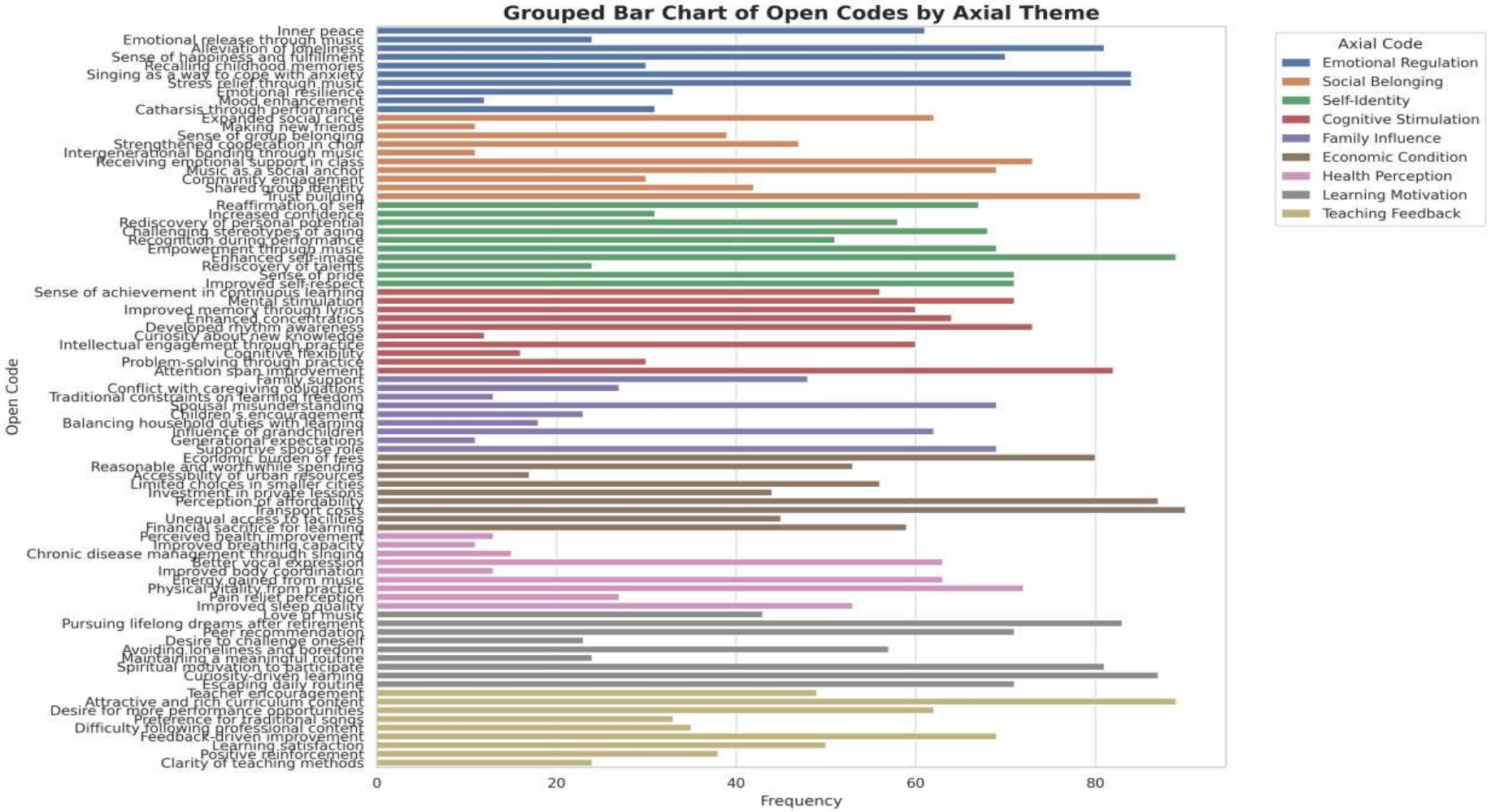

Figure 2: Grouped bar chart of open-code frequencies by axial theme in elderly women's music education

Table 2: Axial codes for improve well-being of older women by music education

Axial Code	Open Code
Emotional Regulation	Inner peace
	Emotional release through music
	Alleviation of loneliness
	Sense of happiness and fulfillment
	Recalling childhood memories
	Singing as a way to cope with anxiety
	Stress relief through music
	Emotional resilience
	Mood enhancement
	Catharsis through performance
Social Belonging	Expanded social circle
	Making new friends
	Sense of group belonging
	Strengthened cooperation in choir
	Intergenerational bonding through music
	Receiving emotional support in class
	Music as a social anchor
	Community engagement
	Shared group identity
	Trust building
Self-Identity	Reaffirmation of self
	Increased confidence
	Rediscovery of personal potential
	Challenging stereotypes of aging
	Recognition during performance
	Empowerment through music
	Enhanced self-image
	Rediscovery of talents
	Sense of pride
	Improved self-respect
Cognitive Stimulation	Sense of achievement in continuous learning
	Mental stimulation
	Improved memory through lyrics
	Enhanced concentration
	Developed rhythm awareness
	Curiosity about new knowledge
	Intellectual engagement through practice
	Cognitive flexibility
	Problem-solving through practice
	Attention span improvement
Family Influence	Family support
	Conflict with caregiving obligations
	Traditional constraints on learning freedom
	Spousal misunderstanding
	Children's encouragement
	Balancing household duties with learning
	Influence of grandchildren
	Generational expectations
	Supportive spouse role
Economic Condition	Economic burden of fees
	Reasonable and worthwhile spending

	Accessibility of urban resources
	Limited choices in smaller cities
	Investment in private lessons
	Perception of affordability
	Transport costs
	Unequal access to facilities
	Financial sacrifice for learning
Health Perception	Perceived health improvement
	Improved breathing capacity
	Chronic disease management through singing
	Better vocal expression
	Improved body coordination
	Energy gained from music
	Physical vitality from practice
	Pain relief perception
	Improved sleep quality
Learning Motivation	Love of music
	Pursuing lifelong dreams after retirement
	Peer recommendation
	Desire to challenge oneself
	Avoiding loneliness and boredom
	Maintaining a meaningful routine
	Spiritual motivation to participate
	Curiosity-driven learning
	Escaping daily routine
Teaching Feedback	Teacher encouragement
	Attractive and rich curriculum content
	Desire for more performance opportunities
	Preference for traditional songs
	Difficulty following professional content
	Feedback-driven improvement
	Learning satisfaction
	Positive reinforcement
	Clarity of teaching methods

Table 3: The definition of the axis codes

Axial Code (Dimension)	**Theoretical Definition**
Emotional Regulation	Music education provides emotional release, inner peace, and mechanisms to alleviate loneliness and anxiety, functioning as a tool for psychological regulation.
Social Belonging	Music participation fosters friendships, group identity, and intergenerational bonding, thereby reducing social isolation and strengthening community belonging.
Self-Identity	Through learning and performance, older women reaffirm self-worth, enhance confidence, and challenge aging stereotypes, reconstructing their social identity.
Cognitive Stimulation	Structured learning stimulates memory, concentration, and cognitive flexibility, keeping the mind active and counteracting age-related decline.

Health Promotion	Musical engagement contributes to physical well-being by improving breathing, body coordination, and vitality, and can alleviate chronic conditions.
Family and Cultural Influence	Family expectations and cultural norms both support and hinder participation; music also acts as a medium for cultural memory and intergenerational transmission.
Economic Condition	Economic resources, tuition costs, and accessibility of facilities shape the continuity and depth of participation, highlighting structural inequalities.
Teaching Feedback	Teacher encouragement, curriculum design, and performance opportunities.
Learning Motivation	

A theoretical model centered on well-being construction was constructed. By integrating nine axial categories, the research indicates that the enhancement of elderly women's well-being primarily stems from three interacting main threads: Firstly, music education improves individual physical and mental states through emotional regulation and health perception, helping them achieve positive emotions and physical vitality; secondly, music education shapes the external support and constraint environment through social belonging, family influence, and economic conditions, enabling them to find a balance in social connection, intergenerational interaction, and resource accessibility; Thirdly, music education stimulates individual intrinsic motivation through self-identity, cognitive stimulation, learning motivation, and teaching feedback, rebuilding self-worth and learning achievements. These three main threads, in interaction, collectively point towards the research objective: music education is not only an artistic

practice but also a comprehensive psychosocial intervention pathway, which helps elderly women achieve a transformation from passive adaptation to active construction within the unique socio-cultural context of China.

In other words, the enhancement of well-being is not caused by a single factor, but rather by the interactive effects of personal psychological state, social support network, cultural identity reconstruction, and educational resource supply. The theoretical model presented in this study echoes the established goal, which is to reveal the multidimensional well-being experience of elderly women in music education through observation and in-depth interviews, and to identify the key factors that promote and hinder this process.

Based on this, Figure 3 depicts a theoretical framework.

Pathway 1: Emotional regulation and health perception

Music education improves both emotional and physical states by fostering inner peace, releasing negative feelings, alleviating loneliness, and promoting better breathing, body coordination, and overall vitality. Through these processes, participants gain positive emotions and physical energy.

Pathway 2: Social belonging, family influence, and economic condition

Music education shapes the external support and constraint environment by strengthening social connections, fostering intergenerational interaction, and providing a sense of community. At the same time, family encouragement, caregiving obligations, financial resources, and access to educational facilities jointly determine the continuity and depth of participation, creating both enabling and limiting conditions.

Pathway 3: Self-Identity, cognitive stimulation, learning motivation, and teaching feedback

Music education stimulates intrinsic motivation by challenging aging stereotypes, reaffirming self-worth, and enabling recognition through performance. It also contributes to cognitive vitality through memorization, rhythm practice, and problem-solving, while teacher encouragement and curriculum design further sustain satisfaction and long-term engagement. Together, these processes facilitate the reconstruction of self-identity and the achievement of personal growth.

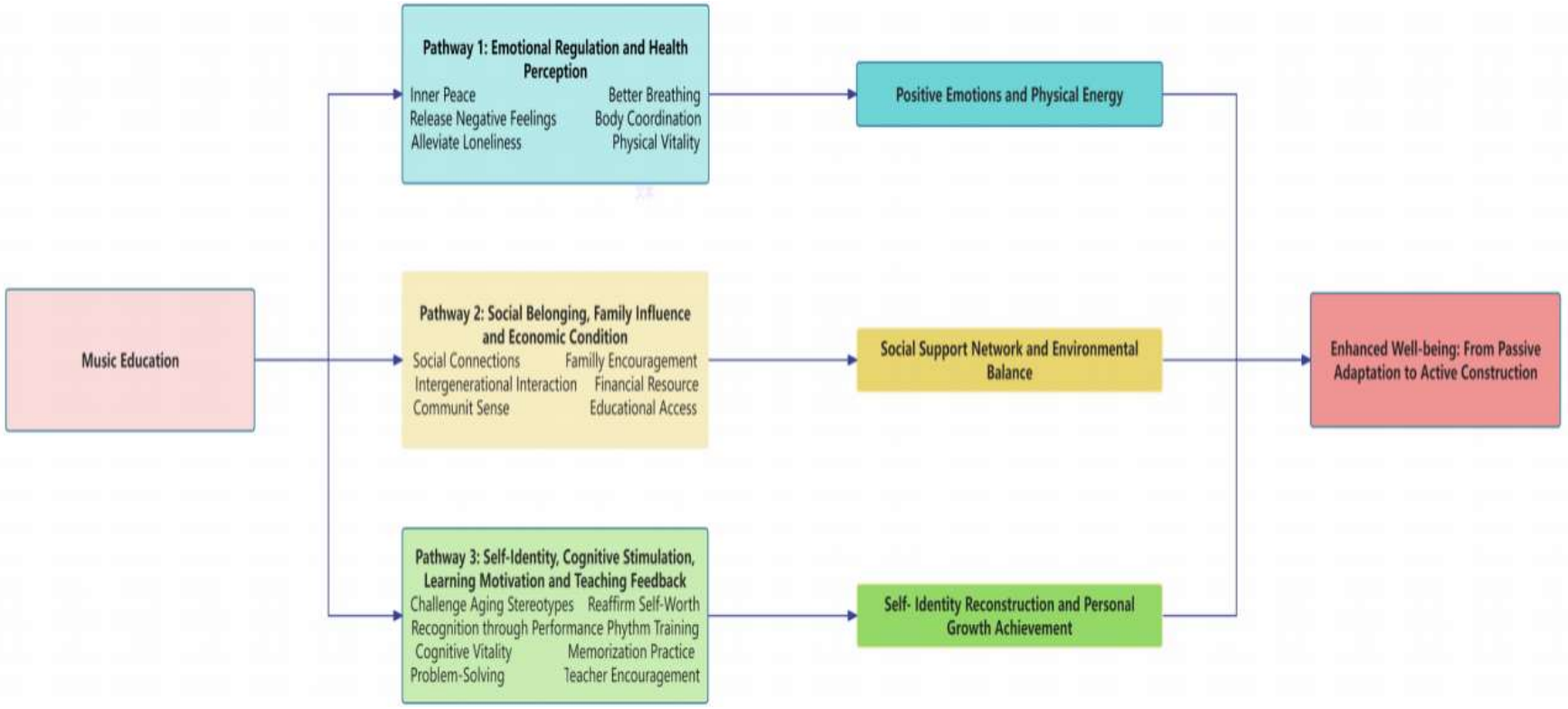

Figure 3: Theoretical model of well-being construction through music education among older women in China

Discussion

This study explored how music education contributes to the construction of well-being among older women in China. Based on grounded theory analysis, we identified nine axial categories integrated into three overarching pathways: emotional regulation and health promotion, social belonging, family influence, and economic condition, and self-identity, cognitive stimulation, learning motivation, and teaching feedback. Together, these dimensions illustrate how music education operates not merely as an artistic practice but as a holistic psychosocial intervention that empowers older women to achieve psychological balance, strengthen social integration, and reconstruct self-worth in the context of aging.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study align with, but also extend, previous scholarship on music, social participation, and aging. Similar to Liu et al[31], who emphasized that social activities enhance well-being by reducing depression and supporting cognitive function, our results confirm the significance of social engagement in later life. Yet we move beyond this perspective by showing that music education is not merely a form of social participation but a multidimensional intervention that combines emotional regulation and identity reconstruction, thereby offering a more comprehensive pathway to well-being. In line with Xiong et al[32], who highlighted the role of social capital in shaping cognitive trajectories, our findings further reveal that music classes generate not only structural networks but also emotional and cultural forms of social capital, enriching the theoretical dimensions of social capital theory. Our results also resonate with English et al[33], who described community music-making as a transformative experience; however, by employing grounded theory with older Chinese women, we constructed a pathway model of well-being construction, thereby contributing greater theoretical innovation and cultural specificity.

Different from Park and Kim[34], who focused on middle-aged learners in Korea, our study adds qualitative evidence on older women, filling a notable gap in the intersection of gender and age in music education research. Likewise, consistent with Chen et al[35], who found that music improves quality of life, we demonstrate that such effects are mediated by family support, economic resources, and cultural expectations, which are especially salient in the Chinese context.Placed within the theoretical foundations, these findings also advance existing frameworks. Active aging theory is enriched by demonstrating that cultural participation—specifically music education—should be considered central, not peripheral, to maintaining well-being in later life. Social capital theory is expanded by showing that music education produces bonding, bridging, and linking ties that are infused with cultural identity and affective meaning, aspects rarely emphasized in earlier accounts. Self-determination theory is extended to older adulthood, as our findings show that teacher encouragement, group learning, and curriculum design sustain autonomy, competence, and relatedness even under gendered cultural constraints.

Taken together, the study contributes a novel theoretical model that integrates emotional, cognitive, social, cultural, and structural dimensions of music education. By both confirming and extending prior empirical findings and by advancing the scope of active aging, social capital, and self-determination theories, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how older women in China construct well-being through lifelong learning and cultural participation.

Practical implications

The findings of this study generate several practical implications that are highly relevant for policy makers, educational institutions, families, and practitioners.At the policy level, music education should be recognized as a cost-effective and culturally resonant intervention for promoting active aging. Given its demonstrated benefits for emotional regulation, cognitive stimulation, and social inclusion, governments and local authorities should consider integrating music education into broader public health and eldercare strategies. Subsidized programs and community-level initiatives could reduce financial barriers and ensure that older women, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, have equitable access to cultural education opportunities.

At the institutional level, universities for older adults and community learning centers should

expand the availability and diversity of music programs. Courses should be designed to accommodate varying skill levels, provide opportunities for both group singing and instrumental learning, and integrate culturally relevant repertoires that resonate with participants' life histories. Importantly, institutions should also reduce tuition fees or provide scholarships to ensure inclusivity across socioeconomic strata.

At the family level, awareness campaigns and intergenerational activities could encourage families to view older women's participation in music education as meaningful and valuable rather than as optional leisure. Promoting supportive family attitudes is critical, given that caregiving obligations and traditional gender expectations often hinder participation. Encouraging children and spouses to actively support and even join in music activities could enhance intergenerational bonding and reduce resistance to late-life learning.At the pedagogical level, music educators working with older populations should prioritize encouragement, flexibility, and inclusivity in their teaching. Teachers should be trained to provide positive reinforcement, adapt lessons to different learning speeds, and create performance opportunities that build confidence. By doing so, educators not only sustain motivation but also fulfill autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, as suggested by self-determination theory.

Research limitations and future research directions

Despite this study's in-depth exploration of the pathways to enhancing the well-being of Chinese elderly women participating in music education through the grounded theory method, and the construction of a relatively systematic theoretical model, there are still several limitations. Firstly, in terms of sample scope, this study only selected 120 elderly women from nine cities, covering first-tier and some second-tier cities, but failing to fully reflect the group experiences in rural areas, ethnic minority areas, or economically underdeveloped regions. Secondly, at the methodological level, this study mainly relies on qualitative interviews and observational data, which can capture rich subjective experiences, but lacks statistical verification of the degree of well-being enhancement at the quantitative level. Thirdly, in terms of cultural and social structure, although the study reveals the importance of family support, economic resources, and cultural traditions, it has not deeply analyzed the differential mechanisms across different generations or levels of cultural capital. Finally, the theoretical model proposed in this study, centered on "well-being construction," still needs further testing and comparison in different cultural contexts and educational projects. Future research can be deepened in terms of sample expansion, method integration, and cross-cultural research, to more comprehensively reveal the unique role of music education in enhancing the well-being of the elderly.

Conclusion

This study advances the existing research on music education and well-being among older adults across multiple dimensions. First, in terms of subject focus, it centers on elderly women in China—a population seldom examined as an independent group—addressing the paucity of scholarship on the complex intersections among gender roles, cultural expectations, and later-life education. Second, in analytical perspective, it moves beyond the prevailing emphasis on static associations between "musical participation" and "well-being outcomes," foregrounding music education as a continuous, reflexive, and socialized process through which well-being is constructed and reconfigured. Third, at the level of theoretical development, drawing on grounded theory, it inductively delineates four mechanism dimensions—emotion regulation, social belonging, self-identity, and cognitive activation—and underscores their interwoven, dynamically evolving characteristics, thereby proposing an integrative process model. Fourth, in practical terms, the study uncovers relationships among regional economic disparities, the distribution of family responsibilities, and educational accessibility, offering conceptual guidance and empirical grounding for inclusive cultural-education policies in aging societies. Finally, methodologically, the research is based on in-depth interviews with 120 participants across nine cities, combined with systematic coding analysis, thereby balancing the theoretical depth of qualitative inquiry with the breadth of regional variation and enriching the empirical pathways for studying well-being in later life. In summary, this study not only validates

the core viewpoints of existing research but also provides new theoretical and practical insights, highlighting the unique value of music education in promoting positive, healthy, and dignified aging among Chinese elderly women.

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