



Analysis of Urban Senior Group Cohousing Willingness and Its Influencing Factors

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Abstract. Senior Group Cohousing represents an innovative approach to elderly care, marking a shift from traditional family-based systems to socially-oriented ones. This model addresses critical challenges such as population aging, diminishing intergenerational support, and the growing prevalence of "empty nest" households. Its primary objective is to enhance the emotional well-being, accessibility, and overall quality of life of older adults in active aging societies. This study examines two urban cases of this model, emphasizing that emotional and practical needs are key motivations for participation. Findings indicate that participants generally experience high levels of life satisfaction. However, persistent challenges, including sustainability, organizational inefficiencies, and resource constraints, limit its broader application. To ensure its long-term success, it is crucial to strengthen mutual aid values, expand support networks, and foster more inclusive relationships. Furthermore, integrating innovative, adaptive solutions will allow this model to address the evolving needs of aging populations effectively.

Keywords: elderly living alone, group eldercare, willingness to age in place

1 Introduction

As population aging intensifies, addressing the challenges of old age has become a critical priority for public policy and societal well-being. According to China's Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Elderly, the number of individuals aged 60 and above increased from 178 million in 2011 to 221 million in 2015, with an annual growth of 8.6 million. The proportion of the elderly population rose from 13.3% to 16%, reflecting an annual increase of 0.54 percentage points. This rapid demographic shift has amplified the urgency of elderly care challenges, particularly in urban centers like Beijing, posing significant implications for future economic and social development.

Senior Group Cohousing has garnered public attention as a potential solution. This model involves older adults with shared interests cohabiting, sharing living expenses, and addressing emotional and social needs collectively. The present study employs the concept of Senior Group Cohousing to evaluate its adaptability and feasibility within the unique sociocultural context of China. Traditionally, the elderly in China rely on

family-dependent social networks centered around spouses and children. However, industrialization, urbanization, and economic development have gradually weakened these familial support structures, shifting reliance toward geographically proximate relationships, such as neighbors and friends.

This transformation aligns with the evolving social network structure, wherein outer-circle relationships, such as friendships, are poised to play an increasingly significant role in elderly care. Current research predominantly examines China's "9073 pattern"—90% family care, 7% community care, and 3% institutional care. A critical question arises: can elderly individuals living alone achieve an active, healthy, and high-quality life through informal support networks composed of friends, relatives, and neighbors? Addressing this question forms the cornerstone of the present study.

2 Literature review

2.1 Study on “Senior Group Cohousing”

Recent theoretical studies increasingly recognize Senior Group Cohousing as a transitional or complementary model of elderly care, alongside family-based and socially-oriented systems. Wei Meng argues that Senior Group Cohousing compensates for the decline of traditional family caregiving, representing a modern adaptation to contemporary society ^[1]. Similarly, Yang Jinghui highlights the impracticality of an immediate shift from traditional family care to fully socialized care. Instead, Yang suggests a gradual approach tailored to contextual realities, positioning Senior Group Cohousing as a "third way" for elderly care systems ^[2].

Regarding practical strategies for advancing this model, several scholars have identified common challenges faced by Senior Group Cohousing in practice. Liu Yana and Chu Qi suggest strengthening social networks to enhance mental health ^[3]. Yu Jiaqi advocates institutional innovations to address the lack of standardized dispute resolution ^[4]. Lin Liwan highlights the need to increase elderly income to boost participation ^[5].

Additionally, other researchers bridge theoretical frameworks with policy recommendations to facilitate the development of Senior Group Cohousing. Drawing on New Institutionalism, Zheng Jun examines the social foundations of this model in China and Japan, proposing actionable insights such as establishing regulatory guidelines, creating information management systems, and promoting positive perceptions of Senior Group Cohousing ^[6].

3 Research design

3.1 Research theory and research framework

Social Support Theory (SST) posits that social relationships significantly influence individual health and well-being. This framework examines how support derived from social networks affects psychological and physiological states. Despite its importance,

the conceptualization of social support remains debated within the academic community. Cohen defines social support as a network providing psychological support or material resources to help individuals better cope with stressful events [7]. Cheng Hongjuan, among others, suggests a multidimensional perspective: from the lens of social interaction, support involves the presence of care, fostering feelings of acceptance and self-worth; from a behavioral perspective, it constitutes the provision of aid through personal social resources to sustain processes or actions; and from a resource-based view, it entails the reciprocal exchange of social resources between support providers and recipients [8]. For this study, social support refers to the unpaid assistance—material or emotional—offered to the elderly through their social networks.

Social support can be categorized into formal support, delivered by organizations or institutions, and informal support, provided by family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors [9]. This study employs the stress-buffering model, which posits that social support mitigates the adverse effects of stress by providing psychological companionship and material aid. This buffering effect enables individuals to manage stress more effectively and reduces its potential negative impact on well-being [10] (**Fig. 1**).

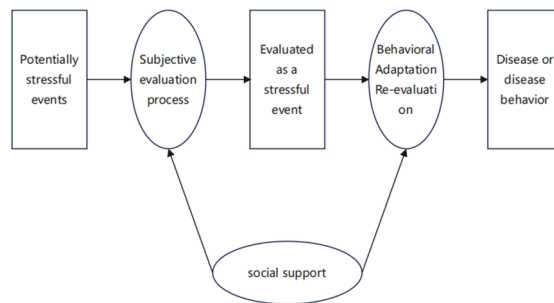


Fig. 1. Stress buffer model of social support

Building on the aforementioned theoretical foundations, this study develops a research framework to address the following key questions: How is the practice of Senior Group Cohousing constructed and organized? Which characteristics make certain urban elderly more inclined to choose Senior Group Cohousing? What forms of social support do urban elderly expect within the context of Senior Group Cohousing?

3.2 Research methodology

This study employs a semi-structured interview methodology, wherein the researcher uses a pre-designed interview outline and adapts the dialogue dynamically based on participant responses. A representative sample of 14 individuals engaged in Senior Group Cohousing was selected as the research cohort. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours, generating over 150,000 words of transcribed material.

The study was conducted with the informed consent and voluntary participation of all interviewees. A trust-based rapport was established to ensure open and candid

discussions. The interview process was guided by ethical principles, respecting participant preferences, and utilizing audio recordings or direct transcription as appropriate. To safeguard privacy, all identifying information has been anonymized in this report (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Basic information of respondents

No.	Age	Educational attainment	Occupation before retirement	Marital status	Children's status
ZH1	74	Undergraduate	Lawyers	Divorced	1 daughter
ZH2	66	High School	Sales	Married	2 sons 1 daughter
ZH3	70	College	Doctors	Married	1 son 1 daughter
ZH4	67	Undergraduate	Teachers	Widowed	2 sons.
ZH5	72	High School	Driver	Married	2 sons 1 daughter
ZH6	64	High School	Hairdresser	Divorced	1 son 1 daughter
ZH7	69	Undergraduate	Researcher	Married	1 daughter.
ZH8	71	Junior college	Administrator	Married	1 son 1 daughter
ZH9	65	High School	Laborer	Married	2 sons 1 daughter
ZH10	68	Undergraduate	Programmer	Divorced	1 daughter.
ZH11	73	High School	Farmer	Married	2 sons 2 daughters
ZH12	66	College	Nurse	Married	1 son 1 daughter
ZH13	70	High School	Cleaner	Widowed	2 sons 1 daughter
ZH14	67	Undergraduate	Electrician	Married	1 son

4 Empirical Research on Factors Influencing the Willingness of Urban Senior Group Cohousing

4.1 Specific Construction and Operation of Senior Group Cohousing

Senior Group Cohousing refers to a cohort of like-minded elderly individuals who choose to transition away from traditional family-based care. These individuals separate from their families and children, forming self-organized groups to live communally and share living expenses. Frequent and positive social interactions within these groups foster a neighborhood environment characterized by mutual trust and cooperation. This study focuses on Senior Group Cohousing in Community H of City Z, an early adopter of this practice with a track record of smooth implementation. As a representative case, this community provides valuable insights into the dynamics and feasibility of this innovative elderly care model.

In May 2017, a 79-year-old man, Z, and his 74-year-old partner, W, initiated a pioneering effort in Senior Group Cohousing. Using a microblogging platform in Y District, H City, Province Z, they publicly invited elderly individuals with shared aspirations for aging to join them in establishing a mutual support living arrangement

at their home. The announcement garnered significant interest, with over 100 applicants. Ultimately, four additional couples were selected, forming a group of six healthy elderly couples who began living together, sharing both expenses and daily life responsibilities. This initiative, spearheaded by an elderly couple, marked a notable milestone in public awareness and practice of Senior Group Cohousing as an alternative elderly care model.

4.2 Common Characteristics of Urban Elderly People Who Choose Senior Group Cohousing

The findings indicate that the decision to engage in Senior Group Cohousing is not made impulsively by the elderly. Instead, it is the result of a thorough self-assessment process. Participants carefully evaluate their personal circumstances, considering the potential advantages and disadvantages of this living arrangement. This deliberate decision-making process leads them to conclude that Senior Group Cohousing offers the most suitable solution for their retirement needs and aspirations.

"Now, this is pretty much my ideal life. We go out in the morning, rest in the afternoon, and in the evening we drink tea or watch TV. It's just really comfortable. I don't think retirement means staying at home. After retiring, you can still make friends, go out, eat, drink, and have fun like when you were younger. Staying home and being bored all day is pointless." [Interviewee ZH8]

Regarding personal characteristics, the study found that the majority of urban elderly individuals who opted for Senior Group Cohousing exhibited outgoing personalities, a strong willingness to communicate with others, and an active openness to embracing societal changes. These individuals demonstrated a keen interest in exploring and experimenting with new ways of life. Despite its growing recognition, Senior Group Cohousing remains a relatively novel concept, with no standardized model established across regions. As such, the practical implementation of this model requires ongoing exploration and adaptation by the elderly themselves. The research further revealed that participants in Senior Group Cohousing are particularly proactive in planning their retirement lives and are eager to embrace innovative solutions to aging.

4.3 Social Support Expected by Urban Senior Group Cohousing

Within the same geographical area, when confronted with the challenge of aging independently, many elderly individuals express a desire for assistance from others to meet their needs—ranging from daily care and convenience services to psychological guidance and emotional support. This expectation of mutual assistance serves as a key motivator for their voluntary participation in Senior Group Cohousing.

Emotional Support Expectations.

Beyond material and daily care needs, it is essential to address the mental health of the elderly. In terms of emotional expectations, elderly individuals derive a sense of

self-worth and existence through helping others. This process not only strengthens their own social bonds and friendships but also satisfies their broader social needs.

"Senior Group Cohousing is really about 'all for one, and one for all.' For example, we have a few cars here, and I'm one of the drivers. Some of the others don't drive, so I help by taking them out when needed. Back when I was younger, everyone drove or used public transport, so I never thought this skill would be so useful. It feels good to contribute, and I'm proud of it." [Interviewee ZH5]

According to the findings, elderly participants in Senior Group Cohousing frequently cite several motivations for choosing this lifestyle. Many express a desire to avoid burdening their children and emphasize that living in a community with peers alleviates loneliness. They find joy in forming connections with like-minded individuals who share their hobbies and engage in leisure activities together. Additionally, by contributing within their capabilities—such as offering assistance to others—they experience a renewed sense of purpose and social value, even in old age. These aspirations align closely with the principles of positive and healthy aging.

Material Support Expectations.

On a material level, Senior Group Cohousing provides foundational elderly care services. The intrinsic motivation to meet personal needs drives individuals to engage in mutual assistance and fosters reciprocal interactions. For many elderly individuals, prolonged absences of their children and financial limitations preclude the option of full-time professional care services. Consequently, they seek help from others to address daily inconveniences, creating a support system that bridges the gaps in their care needs. This dynamic highlights the dual role of Senior Group Cohousing: not only does it satisfy immediate material needs, but it also strengthens interpersonal bonds through cooperative living.

"A while ago, I slipped and hurt my foot, which made walking really hard. But I didn't need to bother my kids—other residents stepped in to help. They took over my duties and even brought meals to my room for two or three months. I'm so touched by their kindness and feel I made the right choice to retire here. Everyone's so nice, and I'll definitely pay it back once my foot heals." [Interviewee ZH4]

According to the author's survey, the reason why some of the elderly choose Senior Group Cohousing is that Senior Group Cohousing can reduce the living expenses and cut down the cost of living. At the same time, most of the elderly do not have enough financial basis to support full-time elderly caregivers to provide home services, and Senior Group Cohousing between the elderly can effectively solve this problem. Therefore, Senior Group Cohousing is characterized by low cost and convenience, and in the process of self-help and mutual assistance, it meets the expectations of the elderly in terms of material life.

5 Research, analysis and recommendations for countermeasures

5.1 Conclusions of the study

Senior Group Cohousing represents a dynamic interaction among elderly individuals and between the elderly and broader social groups. Rooted in shared values and mutual support needs, this model leverages the relative resources of its participants while operating within internal and external social norms. It aims to fulfill the fundamental care needs of elderly individuals through cooperative support behaviors, making it a practice of profound significance.

The implementation of Senior Group Cohousing helps bridge the substantial gap between the development of elderly care services and the growing demand for such services. Current societal nursing services are insufficient to meet the scale of demand, and their high costs exacerbate the challenge. Under these circumstances, Senior Group Cohousing emerges as a practical alternative, with members relying on mutual aid to fulfill some of their care requirements.

By facilitating mutual daily care, Senior Group Cohousing partially replaces formal socialized care services and meets material support needs. As urbanization accelerates and young adults face increasing work pressures, their capacity to provide care for aging parents diminishes. With its low cost and high efficiency, Senior Group Cohousing complements family and institutional care, alleviating the burden on professional services and optimizing resource allocation for elderly care.

Beyond material benefits, Senior Group Cohousing provides mutual emotional comfort and addresses the psychological needs of participants. Through collaborative activities and mutual aid, elderly individuals can rediscover their abilities and strengths, fostering pride, achievement, and a renewed sense of purpose. The shared age group among participants creates a strong sense of camaraderie, enabling deeper emotional understanding and mutual empathy. This shared experience not only promotes emotional well-being but also fulfills the goal of mutual care and support.

5.2 Problems of Senior Group Cohousing

The evolution of Senior Group Cohousing involves two key entities—service providers and recipients—operating within a framework supported by intrinsic values and external forces. However, several critical obstacles persist in its current implementation.

Participation in Senior Group Cohousing is constrained by several factors. Successful cases often require individual initiators to possess large residences capable of accommodating multiple elderly individuals. In contrast, others may resort to shared rental arrangements or repurposed unused housing, which may lead to higher costs and safety risks. Furthermore, shared living requires participants to pool resources for living expenses, necessitating a stable income and financial foundation. Crucially, participants must also maintain a level of self-sufficiency, a requirement not universally applicable among the elderly population.

The reach and scope of Senior Group Cohousing remain limited. As a spontaneously formed mutual aid model, these initiatives typically operate within small, specific groups and lack mechanisms for broad inclusion or comprehensive service provision. The services offered primarily address basic needs, such as daily life assistance and emotional support, with limited offerings in specialized areas like healthcare and rehabilitation. This narrow scope reduces both the expectations of potential participants and the overall appeal of the model.

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