



Self-Transcendence, Social Networks and Meaning in Life of the Retired Older Adults with Chronic Illness in Hong Kong

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Abstract. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of self-transcendence, the meaning of life, and social networks in successful ageing. However, there is a lack of studies exploring the relationship between self-transcendence, the meaning of life, and the social networks of retired older adults with chronic illnesses. One hundred fifty samples of older adults, comprising 63 males and 87 females, with a mean age of 69.69 years and a standard deviation of 3.18 years, were collected. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the Self-transcendence Scale and the Lubben Social Network Scale were used to measure the three variables. The PROCESS Macro for SPSS v4.2 Model 4 was used to examine the relationship between the three study variables. The results revealed that self-transcendence is positively related to the presence of meaning and social networks ($\beta=.51, p<.001$; $\beta=.64, p<.001$), while social networks is not related to the presence of meaning ($\beta=.11, p=.20$) in the first model. In the second model, self-transcendence is positively related to the search for meaning and social networks ($\beta=.72, p<.001$; $\beta=.61, p<.001$), while social networks is not related to the search for meaning ($\beta=.12, p=.08$). The results show that self-transcendence is significantly associated with a stronger sense of the presence of meaning and search for meaning among retired older adults with chronic illnesses in Hong Kong. This highlights the importance of self-transcendence as a key personal value in fostering a meaningful life for older adults. It implied that the services for increasing self-transcendence could be strengthened.

Keywords. Self-transcendence, Social networks, Meaning in life, Chronic illness

1 Introduction

Aging population and chronic illnesses are the main challenges in Hong Kong. The percentage of older adults aged 65 and above is foreseen to rise from 20.5% in 2021 to 36.0% in 2046 (The Census and Statistics Department, 2023). Among this population, over 70% suffer from one or more chronic illnesses, such as hypertension, diabetes, and high cholesterol (Department of Health, 2024). Older adults with chronic illnesses have become a large population in Hong Kong. Since chronic illnesses burden the healthcare system as well as the physical, mental, and social well-being of older adults. The well-being of these older adults should not be neglected in society.

Many studies have highlighted the significance of the meaning of life, self-transcendence, and social networks related to successful aging. In late life, meaning in life is vital to older adults, which is associated with better well-being (Hupkens et al.,

2018). Self-transcendence is also associated with improved quality of life and reduced levels of distress related to illness (Bean & Wagner, 2006). Having social connections is beneficial for older adults above the age of 65, both mentally and physically (Heslin et al., 2021). Studies have shown that self-transcendence, meaning of life, and social networks influence older adults' successful aging separately. However, there is a lack of studies exploring the relationship between these variables toward retired older adults with chronic illnesses in Hong Kong. This study focuses on examining the relationship between self-transcendence, social networks and the meaning of life of retired older adults with chronic illnesses. This research would provide a deeper understanding and offer evidence for social workers to help them realise the factors affecting the meaning of life for retired older adults with chronic illnesses. The results of the study may suggest more suitable interventions for retired older adults with chronic illnesses and contribute to successful aging simultaneously.

2 Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is vital to older adults as they are in the last stage of their lifespan. Meaning in life is about understanding, purpose, and significance, and the growth of age can revise a person's comprehension of meaning in life. When faced with a medical stressor, questions about life's meaning are particularly important (Dezutter et al., 2013). Older adults diagnosed with chronic illnesses face long-term diseases, which could be a stressor for them. To deal with this dilemma, looking for meaning in life as a way to assist older adults in living healthier (Greenblatt-Kimron et al., 2022). Several studies have reported that a person with higher meaning in life is related to a lower risk of chronic conditions and premature mortality (Kim et al., 2020). Having a greater sense of meaning in life is associated with better biological functioning, including lower allostasis, less inflammation, improved glucose control, reduced risk of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and Alzheimer's (Boyle et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2020). A higher sense of meaning in life is able to reduce the sense of suffering for older adults with chronic illnesses. Meanwhile, for older adults, reflecting on past experiences and accomplishments tends to bring meaning to their lives, which leads to positive outcomes (Feldman, 2021). Hence, factors affecting the development of the meaning in life for older adults with chronic illnesses are worth exploring.

3 Self-Transcendence and Meaning in Life

There are several definitions of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is stated in Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the top stage of the needs of hierarchy. During this stage, people are motivated to become fully functioning individuals by assisting others in achieving self-actualisation, and through peak experiences of self-transcendence that foster personal growth (Llanos & Martínez Verduzco, 2022). In Maslow's perspective, self-transcendence is the highest achievement of any human being. Self-transcendence involves moving beyond oneself, paying attention to something greater or more important than oneself, such as others, and the world beyond oneself (Worth & Smith, 2021). The pursuit of self-transcendence contributes to feelings of satisfaction and

spirituality, fulfilling human beings' deepest desires (Worth & Smith, 2021). The above studies revealed that individuals with positive personal values in self-transcendence, implying that they have obtained a fruitful life, shape how older adults perceive themselves. Self-transcendence is associated with improved quality of life and reduced levels of illness-related distress (Bean & Wagner, 2006). In later life, having a sense of meaning is crucial for older adults, as it contributes to their overall well-being (Hupkens et al., 2018). Older adults with high levels of self-transcendence imply that they perceive their worth in terms of achieving a fulfilling life. Previous studies have shown that older adults with strong personal values find it easy to look for meaning in life, even older adults facing challenges from chronic illnesses; strong personal values in self-transcendence assist older adults in overcoming obstacles and further promote psychological health (Gruszczyńska et al., 2020). Self-transcendence as a process of health promotion assists older adults with chronic illnesses in finding meaning in life, satisfying their spiritual fulfilment and reducing the pain and pressure caused by their chronic conditions, resulting in having a better sense of meaning in life (Reed & Haugan, 2021).

4 Self-Transcendence and Social Networks

Older adults benefit from social networks mentally and physically (Heslin et al., 2021). Social networks refer to how individuals form relationships within society (Klärner et al., 2022). Online platforms, family ties, friendships, professional connections, and even virtual interactions can be considered social networks apart from character, as well as organisations, communities, and entire societies. Social networks are also linked to social support and social connections. (Hussain et al., 2023). Intangible support can be provided by social networks, for instance, social, informational, emotional, and appraisal. In addition, social networks provide tangible resources like financial assistance and transportation (O'Mara et al., 2012). One of life's purposes depends on social relationships (Vos et al., 2020). Independent living is possible for older adults living in their own homes, allowing them to maintain their original social network within the community, including with residents and neighbourhoods. Feeling connected with friends, family, and other social relationships, as well as feeling close and cared for, is an essential part of social connection, which is beneficial to human beings' mental and physical health, assists in preventing serious illnesses and diseases, and leads to healthier lives (U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). However, through the aging of the lifespan, older adults experience retirement, losing friends, and relatives. And the loss of social connection due to the death or departure of loved ones can reduce the meaning of life (Pachana & Baumeister, 2021). Retiring, relocating, and losing close friends and family members reduce the size and diversity of older adults' social networks (Vos et al., 2020).

Self-transcendence as a personal value has a positive impact on the social networks of older adults. After retirement, older adults often lose their roles in the workplace, which can reduce their social network. It is a challenge for older adults to overcome their developmental tasks for successful adaptation to their life phase. Self-transcendence enables older adults to transform life challenges or difficulties into positive outcomes through self-reflection and the expansion of their interpersonal

relationships, thereby broadening their boundaries and achieving a deeper understanding of life and their life goals (Reed & Haugan, 2021). Self-transcendence enhances individuals' ability to care for others, which fosters social connection and support, contributing to improved mental health. Better mental health, in turn, is more likely to result in a stable social network and greater satisfaction with social interactions (Liu et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals who value self-transcendence are willing to participate in social activities that foster and maintain stronger social networks, as these activities facilitate their pursuit of success and personal growth (Schwartz, 2012). Therefore, individuals with higher levels of self-transcendence are more likely to have stronger social networks.

5 Social Networks and Meaning in Life

Older adults with a satisfied social network have a more positive outlook on life. Adequate social network reduces feelings of isolation and enhances the sense of meaning in life in older adults, even when facing the challenges of suffering from chronic illnesses. (Lutzman & Sommerfeld, 2023). Especially for older adults diagnosed with chronic diseases, developing a strong social network relieves their loneliness and gives them a sense of belonging with positive emotional support from friends, family members, and children, which rebuilds their sense of meaning in life (Van Wilder et al., 2021). On the other hand, older adults participate in community activities or help others, which makes them feel needed, enhances their sense of meaning in life, and face challenges from illness (Zhou & Wong, 2024).

Based on the results of previous studies, this study hypothesises that:

H1: Retired older adults with chronic illness in Hong Kong with higher levels of self-transcendence values are more likely to have higher levels of presence meaning and search for meaning in life.

H2: Retired older adults with chronic illness in Hong Kong with higher levels of self-transcendence have stronger social networks.

H3: Retired older adults with chronic illnesses in Hong Kong who have stronger social networks are more likely to have higher levels of presence meaning and a greater search for meaning in life.

6 Methods

A quantitative method is used to investigate the relationship between self-transcendence, social networks and the meaning of life of retired older adults with chronic illness in Hong Kong. Data collection was conducted via an online survey and face-to-face survey. In-person street interviews were conducted in person, and online surveys were conducted using Google Forms sent to organizations whose target users are older adults. Participants who are mentally incapacitated persons were excluded, such as older adults with dementia, Alzheimer's disease, mental handicap, mental illness, and significant intellectual impairment, as well as severe physical illness. A total of 150 samples of older adults, including 63 males and 86 females, with a mean of

69.69 and a standard deviation of 3.18, were collected from February 2025 to March 2025. Most respondents are in primary school or below levels ($N=82$; 54.7%), then 37 respondents are in junior high school (24.7%), 23 respondents are in high school (15.3%), 5 respondents are in university (3.3%), 2 respondents are uneducated (1.3%) and the fewest that 1 respondent is in master's or PhD levels (0.7%).

7 Self-Transcendence

Self-transcendence was measured by the Self-Transcendence Scale (STS). The scale is a 15-item self-report questionnaire that measures the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of people. The scale has a 4-point range of 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). The total score is between 15 to 60. Scores between 15 and 30 are considered low, scores between 31 and 45 indicate a moderate level, and scores between 46 and 60 are classified as high. Higher scores mean greater self-transcendence (Haugan et al., 2011). The Cronbach's alpha of STS in this study is .90, which is excellent reliability.

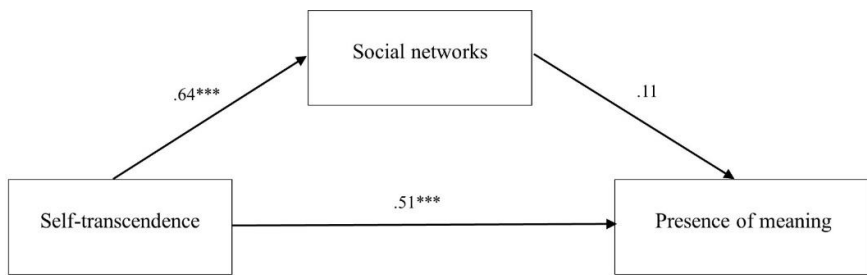
8 Social Networks

The Lubben Social Network Scale-6 (LSNS-6) was applied to measure social networks. LSNS-6 is a self-reported scale with six items for assessing social networks in older adults. LSNS-6 is divided into two subscales: family and friendship. The questionnaire was set up with 5-point ranges, from 0 (none) to 5 (nine or more). (Lubben et al., 2006). The Lubben Social Network Scale, LSNS-6 has a minimum score of 0 and a maximum score of 30, with a mean score of 15. Higher scores indicate greater social participation and a stronger social support network. A score below 12 indicates a high risk of social isolation, with a very limited social support network. The Cronbach's alpha of the total LSNS-6 is 0.81, indicating good reliability.

9 Results

The results of the correlation analyses indicate that all three variables are positively correlated. Older adults with higher levels of self-transcendence exhibit higher levels of presence of meaning and a greater search for meaning ($\beta = .51, p < .001$; $\beta = .64, p < .001$). Those with a higher level of self-transcendence have stronger social networks ($\beta = .64, p < .001$). Older adults with stronger social networks exhibit higher levels of presence of meaning and a greater search for meaning ($\beta = .51, p < .001$; $\beta = .64, p < .001$).

The PROCESS Macro for SPSS v4.2 Model 4 was used to examine the relationship between the three study variables. Self-transcendence and social networks were considered independent variables, while social networks was considered a mediator. The two dimensions of meaning in life, the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, are regarded as the dependent variable, which was tested in two separate models alongside self-transcendence and meaning in life. The results of PROCESS revealed that self-transcendence is positively related to the presence of meaning and social networks ($\beta = .51, p < .001$; $\beta = .64, p < .001$), while social networks is not related to the presence of meaning ($\beta = .11, p = .20$) in the first model.



Note: *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: Results of the Mediating Relationships between Self-Transcendence, Social Networks and Presence of Meaning

10 Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicate that self-transcendence is significantly associated with a stronger sense of meaning presence and a greater search for meaning among retired older adults with chronic illnesses in Hong Kong. This highlights the importance of self-transcendence as a key personal value in fostering a meaningful life for older adults. Self-transcendence is closely related to spiritual well-being, and self-transcendence improves the well-being of older adults who feel isolated and lonely (Haugan & Innstrand, 2012). In spiritual care, especially for elderly people, self-transcendence is becoming increasingly important (Wong, 2016). For retired older adults with chronic illnesses, self-transcendence programs could be promoted to support their exploration of existential and spiritual well-being, including religious practices, engaging in activities to help others, confronting end-of-life issues, and seeking a more profound sense of purpose (Kim & Ahn, 2021). These activities inspire people to see beyond themselves and connect with a larger purpose, which helps them look for meaning in life and successful ageing.

Self-transcendence has been found to have moderate and positive relationships with social networks. This suggests that self-transcendent individuals are more likely to engage in and sustain social relationships actively. In contrast to the expectation, the relationship between social networks and the meaning of life was insignificant. The strong effect of self-transcendence on social networks and meaning in life generates a spurious relationship between social networks and meaning in life. Therefore, the bivariate relationship between social networks and meaning in life disappears after adding self-transcendence in the analysis. Chronic diseases are the leading cause of disability and activity limitations among older adults, directly affecting their social participation. The decline in physical condition hinders older adults from fully engaging in social

activities, even with a moderate social network. This limitation could reduce the perceived significance of social connections in contributing to a sense of meaning.

This study has a few limitations. The sample size is small, with only 150 older elders with chronic illnesses. The respondents who participated in this study may not accurately represent all older adults in Hong Kong, and the findings may not accurately reflect the situation, views, or outcomes of retired older adults with chronic illnesses in Hong Kong. Additionally, the research includes online surveys and street interviews, which may exclude older adults who are unfamiliar with using mobile phones and are therefore unable to participate in street interviews. Moreover, the results are self-reported; participants may be prone to social desirability bias, and respondents may provide answers they believe are more socially acceptable rather than their true feelings or experiences, which can lead to inaccurate findings. Future studies can collect more samples from older adults with diverse backgrounds to enhance the representativeness of the results. Despite the limitations, the study demonstrates the importance of self-transcendence for older adults in developing their meaning in life. Particularly when retired and coping with chronic illness, they are essential parts that help older adults feel a sense of purpose and well-being. Moreover, self-transcendence facilitates connection with others, which may enhance the overall well-being of older adults.

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