

Meaning, Self-Worth, and Psychological Growth following Adversity among Older Adults in India: A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review

Simran Arora, Dr. Roopali Sharma

Master's Student, Professor

Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences

Amity University, Noida, India

Abstract

This study is associated with the aim to discover the meaning, self-worth, and psychological development following the devastation amidst the elderly in India. The research considers on purposive qualitative research sample approach based on peer-reviewed journal articles, published qualitative research, and systematic reviews, which concentrate on older adults in India. This research is centered on secondary qualitative data that by using peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and qualitative research. The literature shows the use of Post-Traumatic Growth Theory and it presents that the positive psychological changes due to adversity struggle leads to post-traumatic growth, which entails increased individual strength, better relationships and greater appreciation of life. The primary tools have been the “PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items to Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)” checklist and the “flow diagram” that have applied to guide the systematic identification, screening, and eligibility assessment of the studies and their inclusion. It has been applied the systematic search to conduct a peer-reviewed secondary source search of the studies published from 2020 through 2025 with the target population being older adults in India. The results show that elderly people in India face complex adversity, which is determined by the economic, health, and social factors. The 28 PRISMA-selected studies synthesis adds weight to the evidence base since it indicates similar patterns of adversity in different contexts in India. It has been found that the interactions between cultural norms and societal structures are very instrumental in influencing the elderly experiences in India.

Keywords

Adversity in later life, Meaning in life, Self-worth, Psychological well-being, Post-traumatic growth, Resilience, Existential psychology, Ageing and mental health, PRISMA-guided systematic review

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The Indian population is aging faster than ever before, older adults (60 and above) are increasing in percentage of the population profile and this is both a challenge and an opportunity for health and well-being. According to the estimates of the “world health organization (WHO)”, in 2011, there were 104 million older adults (60+) in the country of India, or 8.6 percent of the total population of the country; this number continues to grow with age and social development (World Health Organization, 2020). Aging associated with physical decay, psychosocial stressfulness, economic insecurity, and alterations in the family support system have the potential to negatively

affect mental health. Adversity has been reported among older Indians to have high levels of psychological distress, lack of life satisfaction and unmet emotional needs. This puts into consideration the importance of testing the role of meaning, self-worth and psychological development in later life in improving resilience and quality of life.

1.2 Research Significance

As the ageing population is increasing rapidly in India, the psychological well-being in later life has become a research priority of critical interest. Old age usually comes with various misfortunes like poor health, loss, loss of social functions, and financial instability that may result in deteriorated mental health and dissatisfaction with life (Ranga and Panwar, 2023). Nonetheless, the Indian studies have not investigated much on positive psychological functioning like meaning in life, self-worth, and post adversity psychological growth. Most of the researches accessible fall under more pathological and less on resilience and strengths in ageing. These constructs are important in order to find protective factors that may result in adaptive coping, dignity, and emotional well-being in older adults. The research fills a large gap as it offers culturally-applicable ageing and adversity insights into ageing in India to enlighten age-sensitive mental health intervention, geriatric care, and policy practices to ensure healthy and meaningful ageing.

1.3 Research Aim

The study will discover the meaning, self-worth, and psychological development following the devastation amidst the elderly in India.

1.4 Research Objectives

- To investigate the adversity experience among the elderly in India.
- To address the levels of meaning in life and self-worth in older adults after adversity.
- To determine psychological development after adversity in older adults in India.

1.5 Research Sample

The research paper will use a purposive qualitative research sample approach based on peer-reviewed journal articles, published qualitative research, and systematic reviews, which concentrate on older adults in India (Obilor, 2023). Such sources contain stories, interviews, and thematic studies about the experiences of adversity, meaning of life, self-esteem, and psychological development. The studies included will be restricted only to those using participants aged 60 years and above, with a study that is carried out in Indian sociocultural context only. With a purposive approach, the study narrows down on research that is rich, relevant and in-depth in terms of the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of later life.

1.6 Data Sources

The secondary qualitative data that will be used in the study will be gathered in peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and qualitative research reports found in indexed databases, such as “PubMed”, “Web of Science”, “WHO” and “Google Scholar”. Other sources can be policy reports and academic theses devoted to ageing and mental health in India.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by post-traumatic growth theory and existential psychology. The existence of older adults as they create meaning and self-esteem despite adversity is explained by existential psychology, whereas positive

psychological changes that occur after difficult life events are accounted for by post-traumatic growth theory. All these structures can give a full picture of resilience and psychological development in later life.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Review

2.1.1. Experiences of Adversity among Older Adults in India

Thampi & Mathew (2024) and Banerjee and Rao (2021) found that structural aspects and intersectional vulnerabilities contribute to an older adult adversity in India. According to a study by Thampi and Mathew (2024) of 15 community-dwelling seniors in Kerala, family support, autonomy, and age-related interventions such as the ASHA worker programs stand out as the main problems that the participants face; deterioration of health and migration of children (2/3 of respondents of the study) are the most prominent issues. Conversely, the study by Banerjee & Rao (2021) on 10 older adults, who are transgender, demonstrates compounded misfortunes due to age, being part of the minority gender, and social impoverishment, which are aggravated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1.2 Meaning in Life and Self-Worth in Later Life

As AshaRani et al. (2022) observe, purpose in life (PIL) in people of older age encompasses six domains, such as “health and well-being”, “meaningful goals”, “inner strength”, “social relationships”, and “spirituality/religiousness”. Their systematic review included 44 studies and they established that female gender, higher education and income, marital status, health, social integration as well as spirituality were determinants. PIL was also associated with life satisfaction, successful aging and healthy behaviors and implication is that community-based intervention can be used to help improve meaning and self-worth. Similarly, the study by Upasen et al. (2025) explored the mechanism of sustaining mental health in later adulthood through four active stages of openness to change, relaxation techniques, establishing inner peace, and self-esteem, relying on the interview of 19 community dwellers.

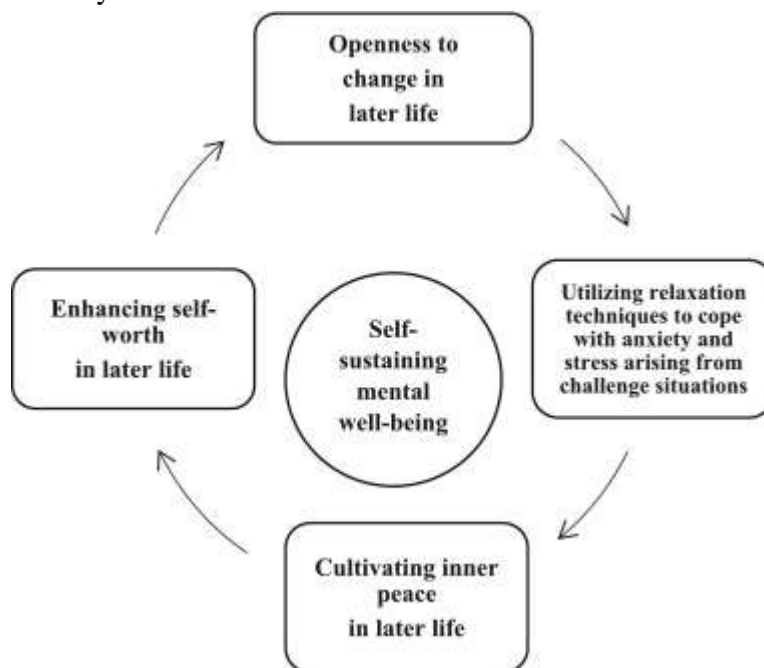


Figure 01: “The way Older Adults sustain Mental well-being when facing challenges in Later Life”

(Source:Upasen et al. 2025)

2.1. 3. “Post-Traumatic Growth and Resilience Among Older Adults Facing Adversity”

In the systematic review by Kadri et al. (2025), 23 studies involving a total of 5,447 revealed that post-traumatic growth (PTG) in older adults is accompanied by positive growth in relationships, personal resilience, life and spiritual growth following adversity regardless of variation in the effects of the severity of the trauma, age, gender and PTSD symptoms. Similarly, Moye (2025) points out that the elderly experience trauma due to late-life events, including illness, loss, or lifetime exposure and accumulation, yet the majority of them are resilient because of adaptive coping and post-traumatic growth (PTG). More to the point, both articles accentuate the fact that the promotion of PTG should incorporate not only social, but also psychological and meaning-making resources, but the gaps in the prospective designs and intervention-based research studies persist that is why the application of trauma-sensitive and strengths-based geriatric care is necessary.

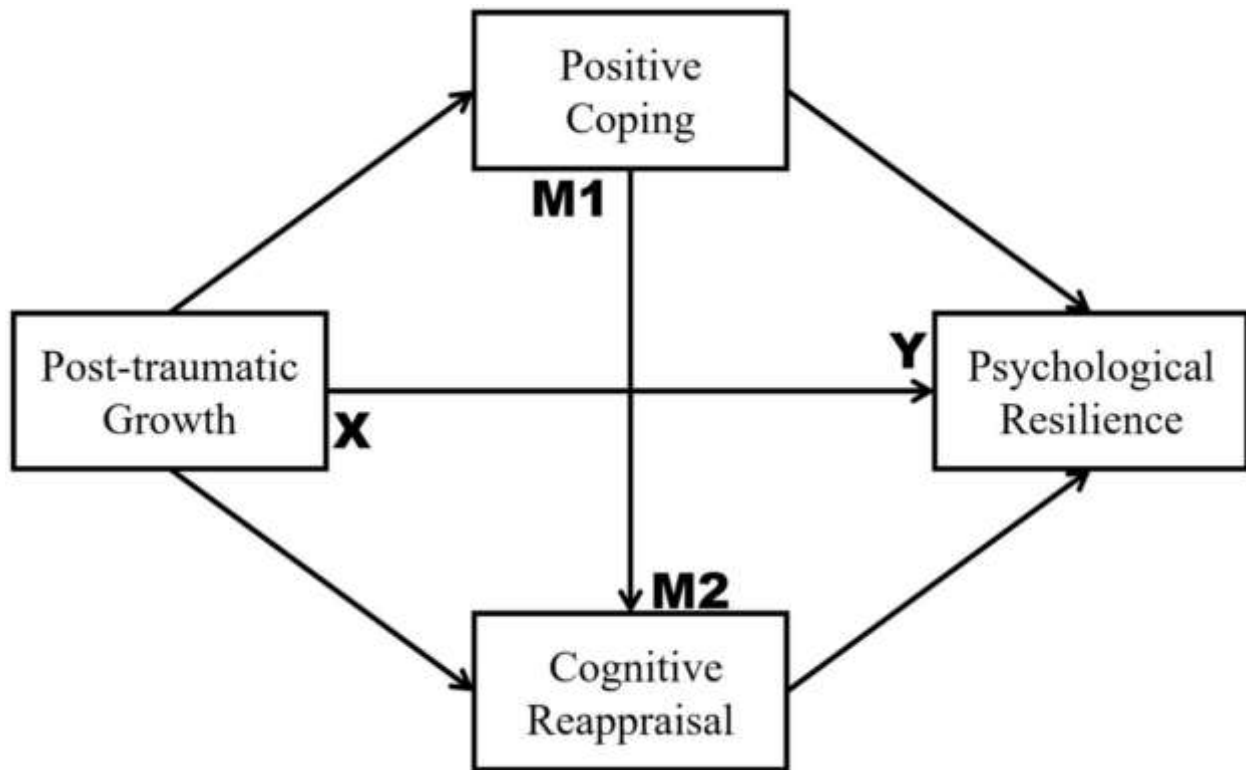


Figure 02: Post-traumatic Growth and Psychological Resilience
 (Source: Li & Hu, 2022)

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Existential Psychology

Existential psychology lays focus on the human quest to find meaning, purpose, and self-worth especially amidst the suffering, loss and transitional periods in life (Marschall, 2023). In terms of old age in India, this model describes how people redefine meaning and maintain self esteem after misfortune in terms of illness, bereavement or changes in social role. It correlates with the research in terms of emphasizing culturally rooted meaning-making, spirituality, and dignity facilitating psychological well-being later in life.

Post-Traumatic Growth Theory

The theory of positive psychological changes due to adversity struggle leads to post-traumatic growth, which entails increased individual strength, better relationships and greater appreciation of life (Dell’Osso et al.

2022). When applied to the elderly in India, this framework describes psychological development after age-related cumulative adversities. It also conforms to the research by focusing on resilience, adaptive coping, and growing out of distress, which describes how the elderly reuse adversity to psychological growth and self-esteem.



Figure 03: Post-Traumatic Growth Theory

(Source: Fu et al. 2022)

2.3 Literature Gap

The available literature emphasizes adversity, meaning, self-worth, and post-traumatic growth in older adults in India; nevertheless, the studies are still disjointed in populations and constructs. There is little research that holistically incorporates these dimensions in one framework, especially in diverse sociocultural and marginalized populations. Besides, there is limited longitudinal and intervention-oriented evidence. The present study is even more limited and limited by the fact that some subscription-based articles are inaccessible.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is a collection of beliefs with regard to the nature of reality, and how knowledge can be generated and conceptualized. The philosophy of interpretivism concerns itself with gaining knowledge of the “social phenomena” based on the “subjective definition” and “experiences of individuals” (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). This method is applicable in the study because it examines how the older adults in India perceive adversity, meaning, self-worth and psychological development in their sociocultural backgrounds.

3.2 Research Approach

“A research approach” can be defined as a systematic approach to the linkage of research philosophy and the collection and analysis of data. This research uses an inductive approach because it is aimed at discovering patterns and themes based on the qualitative literature instead of proving the previously established hypotheses (Kumar & Ujire, 2024). This is the suitable method of investigating the experiences of adversity, meaning, self-worth, and psychological development among Indian older adults.

3.3 Research Design

“Research design” is a systematic method, which describes how research will be organized in order to answer the research questions and objectives. “The research design” applied in the current study is a “descriptive research design” since such a study involves an organized review and synthesis of previous qualitative studies to present a comprehensive explanation (Shinija, 2024). It focuses on how the older adults in India experience adversity,

meaning, self-worth, and psychological growth. The method will enable a detailed explanation and interpretation of the patterns and themes based on the past research in the Indian sociocultural setting.

3.4 Research Strategy

Research strategy denotes the approach to be applied to address the research questions in the design of choice. The current study follows a “systematic review strategy”, which is a “structured approach” to identify, evaluate, and synthesize qualitative studies of interest (PRISMA principles). The study will use a systematic review strategy to determine, evaluate, and synthesize available qualitative studies on the topic of adversity, meaning, self-worth, and psychological growth in older adults in India.

3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Relevance and rigor were ensured through inclusion and exclusion criterion. Research articles were selected based on the inclusion criteria that the study was carried out in the Indian setting, investigated the topic of adversity, meaning in life, self-worth, psychological development, or resilience, and only secondary data was used. Peer-reviewed articles that were in English were only taken into account. Younger studies, published prior to 2020, with exclusively quantitative methods, and irrelevant to the main constructs were not included, as well as non-peer-reviewed sources and editorials and opinion pieces.

3.6 Tools and Instruments

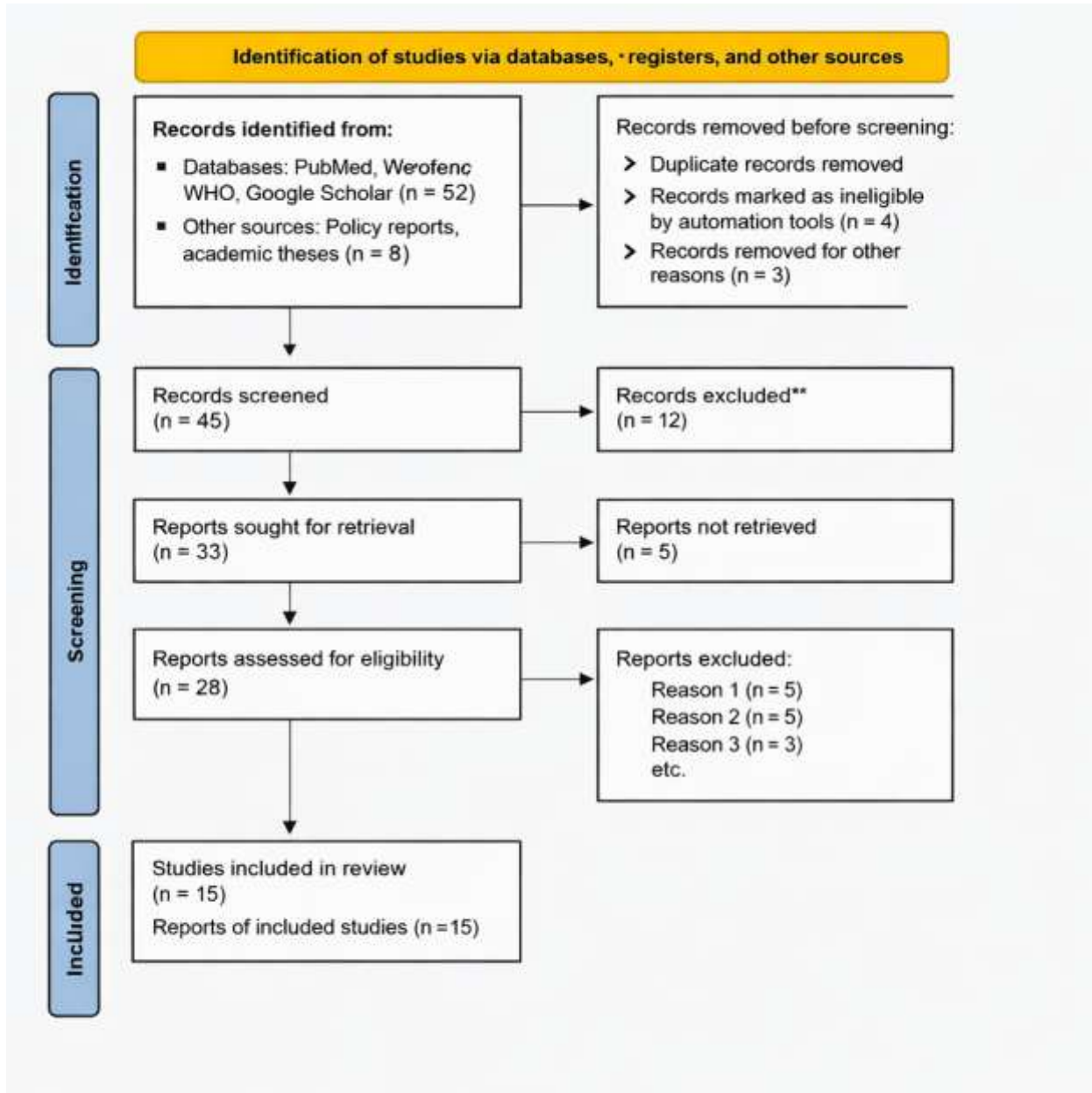


Figure 04: PRISMA Diagram

(Source: Self-Created based on Jasminebmacdonald, 2025)

The primary tools were the “PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items to Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)” checklist and the “flow diagram” that were applied to guide the systematic identification, screening, and eligibility assessment of the studies and their inclusion. PRISMA was a way to have transparency, methodological rigor and replicability in the process of conducting a review because it captures the search strategy used, selection criteria and reasons why studies were not included.

3.7 Data Collection and Analysis

The systematic search has been used to conduct a peer-reviewed secondary source search of the studies published from 2020 through 2025 with the target population being older adults in India. Screening, eligibility assessment

and ultimate inclusion depended on the PRISMA. Thematic analysis is a technique that determines, analyzes, and presents trends or themes in qualitative data (Lochmiller, 2021). Data obtained were thematically analyzed with the highlighting of trends and lessons in the areas of adversity, meaning in life, self-worth, and psychological development that enabled a holistic synthesis of available evidence.

3.8 Sampling Technique

Sampling technique is the methodology of selecting useful data or respondents to a research. “Purposive sampling” is a “non-random method” in which participants or studies will be chosen with the intention to pick certain features of individuals or studies that are related to the purpose of the research (Obilor, 2023). The sampling method in this study was the purposive sampling where the researcher selected studies that addressed the problem of the Indian older adults aged 60 and more. Qualitative or mixed-methods studies that found adversity, meaning in life, self-worth, psychological development, or resilience were selected only and ensure that rich and context-specific information is included in the systematic review.

3.9 Research Ethics

“Research ethics” can be defined as the basis of responsible and respectful behavior in research. In this research, ethical standards were followed because the publicly available and peer-reviewed articles were used, there was proper citation, and the findings were accurately reported (Baldwin et al. 2022). Primarily, no primary data were gathered, and therefore, consent or confidentiality were not a concern, so the issues of transparency, integrity, and academic honesty were upheld in the process of the review.

4. “Results and Discussion”

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Adversity Experiences Among Older Adults in India

The synthesis of the outcomes of 28 studies incorporated in the PRISMA-based systematic review underpins results that consistently point to the prevalence of adversity in later life which is structurally determined. The multifaceted adversity of older adults in India is determined by economic, health, and social issues. According to a recent report, approximately 70 % of the Indians aged 60 and above are still dependent financially, and many still work after retirement and in addition, face insecurities about food; an example is that 6.4 percent of the elderly decreased the amount they eat under the pretext of resource scarcity and 5.6 percent went hungry at least once in the past year (The Indian Express, 2025). Rising health burdens, such as cardiovascular disease (35.6 %), hypertension (32 %), diabetes (13.2 %), and signs of depression in approximately 30-percent of older adults are also facing this population. Loneliness and social isolation are also worsened by structural changes, including the erosion of joint family systems and the migration of the youth. National statistics also indicate that the population of Indian older adults has almost doubled in 2022, where 149 millennium people (about 10.5 percent of the population) were compared to 76 millennium people in 2001 (Chinnakkannu et al. 2025). These misfortunes highlight the differences in experiences of elders in India.

4.1.2 Meaning in Life and Self-Worth in Indian Older Adults

Significance in life and self-esteem are essential parts of emotional well-being in later adulthood, especially in old people who are going through hardships. Recent longitudinal data indicate that 25.4% of Indian older adults are low life satisfaction, and 45.5 percent are high life satisfaction, which suggests that there is great variation in subjective well-being between older adults aged 60+ in India (Kandapan et al. 2023). Studies show that self-

reported life satisfaction, which is a major predictor of meaning and self-worth, is affected by living arrangements, physical health, social support and family incorporation, the co-residence with spouse and children is associated with better life satisfaction. The studies conducted by other people have revealed that bad interpersonal relations and the “lack of social support” are associated with the decrease in the level of happiness and satisfaction (Manchana, 2023).

4.1.3 Post-Traumatic Growth and Resilience in Older Adults

“Post-traumatic growth (PTG)” is the “positive change” that occurs due to adversity and resilience is the capacity to transform and recover after stress. According to the evidence provided by MDPI, stressed individuals older than 65 years may develop PTG, especially when their social support, optimism, and coping mechanisms are robust (Grigoraş et al. 2021). According to reports by WHO, older adults have resilience that is dependent on their physical health, social activities, and support provided by their communities, which mitigate the effects on adults in late life (World Health Organization, 2024). These results indicate that as many older adults do not develop PTG, there are positive changes and improved resilience in significant subgroups, which are measurable.

4.2 Discussion

The results demonstrate that elderly people in India face complex adversity, which is determined by the economic, health, and social factors. The 28 PRISMA-selected studies synthesis adds weight to the evidence base since it indicates similar patterns of adversity in different contexts in India. The fact that almost 70 % of the aged are financially dependent, the prevalence of cardiovascular disease (35.6 %), hypertension (32 %) and diabetes (13.2 %) is in line with the findings of Thampi & Mathew (2024) that community-residing seniors experience health deterioration and structural issues. Banerjee & Rao (2021) also emphasize that heterogeneous and context-dependent experiences have a compounding effect on marginalized populations because of the intersectionality of their vulnerabilities (age, gender minorities, social impoverishment, etc.). The joint family system and youth migration worsen the situation of isolation, and the interventions that should help the situation are such as the ASHA programs and community engagement (Thampi & Mathew, 2024).

“A sense of purpose” in existence and self-esteem prove to be the important countermeasures to the negativity. Big data show that a quarter of the elderly is dissatisfied with life, and half are satisfied (Kandapan et al., 2023), which is similar to the results of AshaRani et al. (2022), who found that all these variables increase purpose in life. Upasen et al. (2025) also indicate that experiential interventions, which include openness to a change, relaxation, the development of inner peace, and self-worth, are helpful in promoting psychological wellness. Such tendencies support the topicality of existential psychology, where meaning-making and dignity are considered the most important aspects of maintaining self-worth in the face of adversity.

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) and “resilience” refers to the ability of older adults to convert the negative consequences to positive effects. The findings provided by MDPI and WHO suggest that social support, optimism, and community interaction increase PTG and resilience, which supports the work of Kadri, Gracey, and Leddy (2025) on the adaptive coping systematic review and Moye (2025). The context of post-traumatic growth theory explains why older adults grow and improve their relationships, personal strength and appreciation of life despite the challenges in their late life. In combination, these frameworks and findings enable us to underline that the combination of “social”, “psychological”, and “meaning-making resources” is important in promoting adaptive coping and psychological growth in older adults in India.

Besides, the interactions between cultural norms and societal structures are very instrumental in influencing the elderly experiences in India. Weakened traditional support systems especially the loss of joint families through migration to cities and nuclearization worsen loneliness and financial dependency among the older people. Gender differences also make women more vulnerable, whereby women of all ages are disproportionately impacted because of diminished lifetime income, and reduced access to healthcare, and social isolation. The ASHA programs are one of the community-based interventions that are gaining recognition as essential in alleviating the challenges with the help of encouraging engagement, health awareness, and inclusion (Thampi & Mathew, 2024). As well, digital literacy programs and peer-support connections present new opportunities to improve social connection and self-efficacy. More significantly, the merge between the existential and resilience models highlights the view that psychological well-being is not just a lack of misfortune but the intentional pursuit of meaning and cause, as well as hopefulness.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study finds that elderly people in India are faced with several and overlapping challenges, including financial dependency, illness, social isolation, and deprivation of traditional support systems. Also, in combination with stressors, it is important that the marginalized groups, such as older transgender adults, are revealed, and the heterogeneity of experiences and the significance of the sociocultural context are essential. The feeling of life and self-esteem are regarded as the key resources of the psychological field that guard against the negative influence of a crisis and make life more satisfying. The second one is that social support, optimism, and adaptive coping strategies can assist older adults to convert challenging circumstances into personal growth and resilience, depicted by post-traumatic growth and resilience. The findings justify the relevance of both existential psychology and the post-traumatic growth theory and add to the importance of meaning-making, dignity, and growth-related intervention.

It is under these circumstances that the policymakers, practitioners, and caregivers are encouraged to adopt age-sensitive interventions depending on their cultures. The mental health and social engagement programs, community programs are expected to increase social networks, purposeful activity, and adaptive coping. The longitudinal studies and intervention will similarly be suggested to further understand the mechanisms of resilience and psychological development that will assist in making the decisions on healthy, meaningful, and inclusive ageing in India. The study demonstrates that structural determinants and experiential strategies are required in holding on to the meaning and self-worth in the later life. It has been found that the trends highlight the role that sociocultural and relational influences play in maintaining the significance and good self-images in older adults in India. It has been discussed that naturalistic approach highlights why it is necessary to utilize multi-dimensional interventions that involve the social or economic and psychological support in order to achieve healthy aging in India.

Finally, customized interventions ought to be more inclusive; especially to the marginalized sub groups and they ought to include culturally aware techniques that strengthen community ties, intergenerational relationship and meaningful interactions. Program effectiveness can be improved by training the caregivers and health practitioners in psychological first aid, effective communication, and techniques used in building resilience. In general, a combination of social, psychological, and purpose-focused resources should be encouraged as it exposes older adults to holistic well-being, so they can overcome the adversity and even attain personal development, dignity, and life fulfillment in India.

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