

The Contribution of Sense of Purpose to Subjective Wellbeing: A Systematic Literature Review

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 2026-06-02

Revised 2026-08-18

Accepted 2026-08-18

Keywords:

Quality of Life

Sense of Purpose

Subjective Wellbeing

Systematic Literature Review

ABSTRACT

This systematic review synthesizes the contribution of sense of purpose to subjective wellbeing (SWB) and validates it through a bibliometric analysis of keyword co-occurrence. Using a Systematic-oriented Literature Review approach based on the PRISMA protocol, searches were conducted on the Scopus database and Google Scholar for publications in 2021–2025, resulting in 16 articles that met the inclusion criteria and were thematically analyzed, while the conceptual structure of the research field was validated through keyword co-occurrence analysis using VOSviewer against the initial recording of Scopus search results. The results of the thematic analysis identified six themes: health and aging; spirituality and existential wellbeing; sense of purpose as post-adversity psychological capital; socio-structural determinants; meaningful activities in work and social participation; and family and interpersonal relationships. In most themes, sense of purpose appears to act as a psychological mechanism linking external determinants to SWB. However, relationship patterns and directions vary across contexts and should be interpreted with caution given the dominance of cross-sectional design. Bibliometric analysis confirms the structural distinction between predictor and outcome keywords, but reveals minimal direct link strength between the two constructs—indicating terminological fragmentation, not weak substantive linkage. These findings confirm the need to consolidate terminology and adopt a longitudinal design in future studies, and provide an initial basis for interventions to strengthen the sense of purpose during life transitions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The scientific study of human wellbeing has developed through two major theoretical traditions that complement each other and compete conceptually. The first tradition, the hedonic approach, pioneered by Diener [1], defines subjective wellbeing (SWB) as an

individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life and consists of three main components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and low negative affect. This conceptualization was later emphasized by Diener et al. [2], who affirmed SWB as a multidimensional construct that measures happiness from the perspective of the subject itself, rather than an external criterion determined by an outsider. The second tradition, the eudaimonic approach, is rooted in the Aristotelian conception of flourishing and is empirically formalized by Ryff [3] through a six-dimensional model of psychological wellbeing—one of which is purpose in life—which emphasizes the actualization of one's potential and a meaningful life, not just a pleasurable affective experience.

Ryan [4] asserts that these two traditions, although philosophically and operationally different, are in fact complementary: the hedonic approach excels at capturing moment-to-moment subjective experiences, while the eudaimonic approach excels at capturing long-term psychological meaning and function. The development of contemporary SWB theory has therefore increasingly led to integrating the two traditions, where eudaimonic constructs such as purpose in life are seen not as competitors to SWB, but as determinants or components that contribute to it [5]. This paradigm shift underlies the relevance of specifically examining the contribution of sense of purpose—as a representation of eudaimonic constructs—to SWB as an outcome that is historically closer to the hedonic tradition.

Sense of purpose is defined as an individual's perception that his or her life has a direction and purpose that is in harmony with the meaning of life lived [6]. As a cognitive process that defines life purpose and provides personal meaning, sense of purpose is a system that explains a wide range of empirical findings that previously seemed separate in the social sciences—from life expectancy and satisfaction to mental and physical health [6]. Large-scale longitudinal evidence supports the centrality of this construct: Hill [7], through 14 years of Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) panel data, found that individuals with a higher sense of purpose had a consistently lower risk of mortality across adult age ranges, even after controlling for other indicators of psychological and affective wellbeing.

In addition to physical health benefits, sense of purpose is also consistently associated with better mental health indicators. Czekierda et al. [8], through a meta-analysis of dozens of studies on meaning in life and health, found a significant association between this construct and various physical health indicators, especially in subjective health indicators. The importance of this construct is even more prominent in the context of aging, where Pfund and Lewis [9] document that the sense of purpose functions as a catalyst for successful aging—in contrast to SWB which is more often seen as a marker or result of successful aging, a sense of purpose Instead, it is positioned as one of its active drivers. Thus, understanding how and under what conditions sense of purpose contributes to SWB becomes a research agenda that is not only theoretically relevant, but also has broad practical implications for health policy and psychological interventions across the life span.

Although the significance of sense of purpose to wellbeing has been empirically supported, the literature shows several unresolved inconsistencies. First, there are inconsistencies in the direction of causal relationships: some studies position the sense of purpose as a predictor of SWB [7], while others show that these relationships are reciprocal

and can even reverse direction in certain contexts, such as in interpersonal relationships where changes in the sense of purpose more strongly shape the quality of relationships compared to the other way around. Second, there are inconsistencies in age-related developmental patterns: sense of purpose is reported to follow a curvilinear trajectory that increases from young to mid-life but is prone to decline in old age, especially after life transitions such as retirement or declining health [9], a pattern that differs from the SWB trajectory itself, which in some studies tends to stabilize or increase in old age.

Previous literature reviews on purpose in life and wellbeing generally have several relevant limitations to overcome. First, most previous reviews have tended to focus narrowly on a single population, particularly the elderly [9], so generalization of the pattern of the sense of purpose-SWB relationship across life stages—from adolescence, young adulthood, to the elderly—is still limited. Second, existing reviews generally rely on a single method of synthesis, either purely narrative-thematic or purely quantitative (meta-analytical), without integrating the two in a complementary manner; This singular approach risks missing one of two types of insights—the contextual depth of the narrative synthesis, or the objective validation of macro structures from the quantitative/bibliometric approach. Third, the fragmentation of terminology that has been described is rarely explicitly addressed as a separate substantive finding in previous reviews, but is only briefly referred to as a technical limitation of the literature search.

Based on the description above, several relevant research gaps can be identified. First, there has not been a recent systematic review (2021–2025) that specifically maps the contribution of sense of purpose to SWB across various domains of life simultaneously—health, spirituality, trauma, social policy, work, and interpersonal relationships—in a single synthesis framework. Second, in this study, there has been no systematic effort to integrate narrative thematic synthesis with bibliometric analysis (keyword co-occurrence using VOSviewer; van Eck and Waltman [10] in a complementary way to cross-validate thematic findings with the macro structure of the literature in a data-driven manner. Third, geographical representation in the existing literature is concentrated in a specific region (East Asia, Europe, the United States), while the gap in the representation of Southeast Asian contexts—including Indonesia—in the sense of purpose-SWB literature is still rarely explicitly highlighted as a review finding, even though this is relevant to the research agenda of welfare psychology in the region.

This article's novelty lies in three aspects. First, methodological integration between qualitative thematic synthesis and quantitative bibliometric analysis within a single SLR framework, which allows for the triangulation of findings and the explicit identification of terminological fragmentation as substantive contributions, rather than mere methodological limitations. Second, cross-domain coverage that deliberately does not limit searches to a single population or context, allowing simultaneous identification of common patterns (cross-domain psychological mechanisms) and exclusionary patterns (non-psychological independent pathways). Third, it contextualizes geographical gaps by explicitly identifying the absence of Southeast Asian representation in the existing literature, providing a concrete research direction for developing SWB studies in non-Western cultural contexts.

Based on the above descriptions of background, gaps, and novelties, this systematic review is formulated to answer the following research questions: How does the sense of purpose contribute to subjective wellbeing, and through what mechanisms or domains does it work consistently or conditionally, as reflected in the thematic synthesis of the empirical literature and the bibliometric structure of related keywords?

Specifically, this review aims to: (1) identify and synthesize the main themes that represent the determinants and mechanisms of the contribution of sense of purpose to SWB based on the empirical literature of 2021–2025; (2) validate the thematic pattern through bibliometric analysis of keyword co-occurrence using VOSviewer, in order to identify the conceptual structure of the literature in a data-driven manner; (3) identify areas of convergence and tension between thematic synthesis findings and bibliometric structures, including uncovering patterns of terminological fragmentation that affect the accumulation of evidence in this research field; and (4) formulate a research agenda and theoretical-practical implications for the development of the next sense of purpose and SWB studies, including for contexts that have not been represented in the existing literature.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a Systematic-oriented Literature Review (SLR) design integrated with bibliometric analysis to synthesize the contribution of sense of purpose to Subjective Wellbeing (SWB). The review protocol follows the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) reporting guideline [11]. The research procedure encompasses four main stages: (1) literature identification, (2) article selection, (3) data extraction and quality appraisal, and (4) thematic and bibliometric synthesis (see Figure 1).

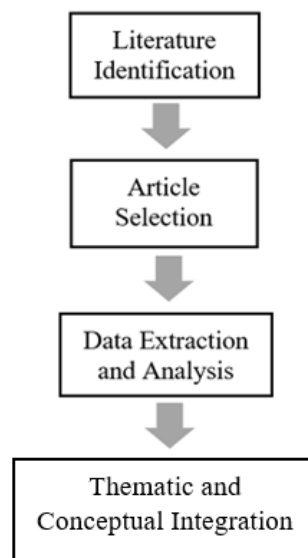


Figure 1. Research Procedure Flow

2.2. Eligibility Criteria

Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during title–abstract screening and full-text eligibility assessment.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	Published 2021–2025	Published before 2021 or year not determinable
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Book chapters, conference proceedings, theses, non-peer-reviewed reports
Language	English-language article	Non-English articles
Topical relevance	Explicitly examines sense of purpose (or purpose in life/meaning in life) in relation to subjective wellbeing or psychological wellbeing	Articles discussing purpose/meaning without any SWB reference, or SWB without any purpose-related construct
Full-text access	Full text accessible and retrievable	Full text inaccessible (paywall or unavailable)

2.2. Search Strategy

Literature searches are conducted systematically in two main databases: Scopus and Google Scholar. Scopus was selected for its broad scope and rigorous indexing as a highly reputable academic database. Google Scholar serves as a complementary resource to capture literature that may not be indexed in Scopus but is thematically relevant. It should be noted that the use of Google Scholar has the potential to produce less controlled and less reproducible results than Scopus; therefore, articles from Google Scholar undergo a more rigorous quality assessment process. The data search was conducted with the 2021–2025 time frame to capture the latest trends in the last five years.

The search strings used are as follows: “sense of purpose” AND (“subjective wellbeing” OR “subjective well being” OR “subjective wellbeing”). This keyword combination broadens the scope beyond the initial search by including terminology commonly used in the literature related to life and wellbeing goals.

2.3. Search Protocol

The article selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 protocol [11], as illustrated in Figure 2. Initial identification yielded 80 records: 57 from Scopus and 23 from Google Scholar. After removing 2 duplicate records, 78 articles underwent screening based on title and abstract. Of these, 43 articles were excluded for thematic irrelevance or ineligible document type. A total of 35 articles then underwent full-text eligibility assessment, of which 16 could not be retrieved due to restricted access, leaving 19 reports for full eligibility review. Of these 19, 3 were further excluded (2 were not peer-reviewed articles, 1 was not in English). This left 16 articles that met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

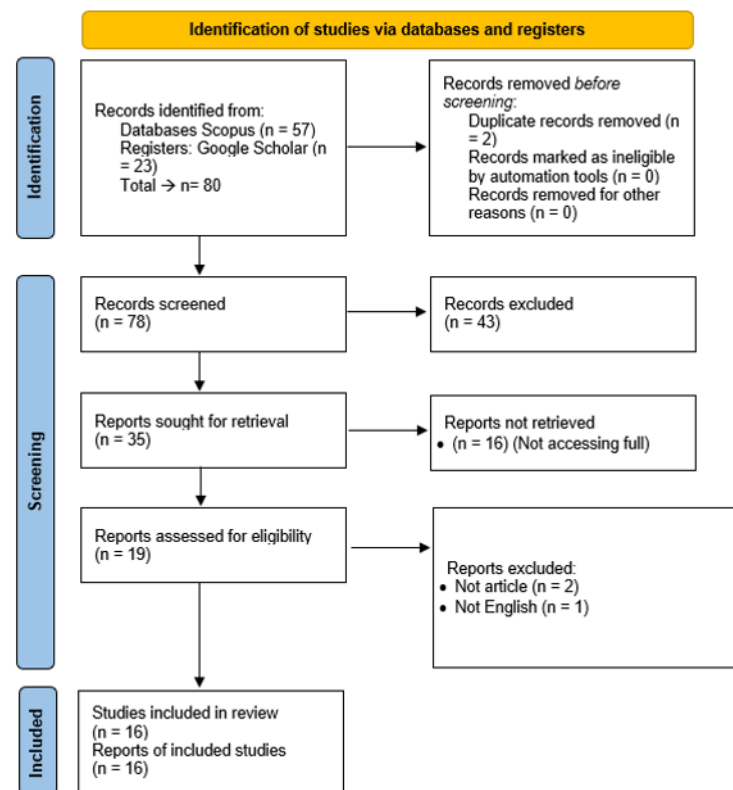


Figure 1. PRISMA workflow diagram

2.4. Data Synthesis

Data from articles that met the criteria were extracted using a systematic analysis table that included: authors, article titles, methods, key findings, and source data. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring meanings, group dominant issues, and compile six main themes that formed the basis for creating a conceptual framework. As a complement, keyword co-occurrence analysis was performed using the VOSviewer software to visualize the relationship between the keywords “sense of purpose” and “Subjective Well Being”. In contrast to the thematic synthesis applied to the 16 articles of the final selection results, this co-occurrence analysis was applied to all 57 initial records of the results of the Scopus database search results (before the title-abstract screening stage and feasibility assessment), with the aim of mapping the conceptual structure of the research field more broadly and not limited to a subset of articles that passed the full selection. Keyword co-occurrence analysis was carried out based on field author keywords and index keywords (KeyWords Plus) as recorded in the Scopus database, not on full-text abstracts or titles. The network was constructed using a full-counting method with a minimum occurrence threshold of 2, and a file thesaurus was applied to combine spelling variants and term synonyms. This visual map confirms that sense of purpose has a bibliometric relationship in the academic literature. In addition, these thematic and visual results are analyzed reflectively and synthesized with relevant psychological theories.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

A total of 16 articles were systematically reviewed in this study. The characteristics of the articles analyzed in this study are presented in Table 1 as follows.

Table 2. Article Findings Extraction

No	Author	Article Title	Method	Key Findings	Source
1	[12]	Does aging alter the contribution of health to subjective wellbeing?	Quantitative	Poor health increasingly erodes eudaimonic and experienced wellbeing with age, while life satisfaction adapts hedonically only before age 80, challenging assumptions of uniform SWB adaptation.	Scopus
2	[13]	Health benefits of physical activity for people with mental disorders: From the perspective of multidimensional subjective wellbeing	Quantitative	Physical activity reduces depression's negative impact via multidimensional subjective wellbeing, with effects varying by age, education, health, location, and socioeconomic status.	Scopus
3	[14]	Polyvictimization, Polystrengths, and Their Contribution to Subjective Wellbeing and Posttraumatic Growth	Quantitative	The experience of polyvictimization does not directly affect subjective wellbeing (SWB) or posttraumatic growth (PTG), while the psychological and social strength of the individual plays a significant role. In particular, psychological endurance and sense of purpose have been shown to improve wellbeing and posttraumatic growth. These results emphasize the importance of building a portfolio of strengths (<i>polystrengths</i>) to support SWB and PTG after victimization.	Scopus
4	[15]	Impact of spirituality on older adults's quality of life and life satisfaction after acute myocardial infarction: Iranian hospital-based study	Quantitative	Spiritual connection with God significantly improves the quality of life of elderly patients after myocardial infarction, while life satisfaction is more influenced by medical factors such as hospital history and CPR experience.	Scopus
5	[16]	Exploring the Interplay between Religion, Health, and Subjective Wellbeing in Turkey	Quantitative	Religion contributes to SWB indirectly through increased happiness and life satisfaction. Religious practices such as prayer are associated with better health outcomes, but religion's direct influence on SWB is weaker than its mediated effect through happiness. Socio-demographic variables such as age, income, and marital status also affect SWB.	Scopus
6	[17]	Reciprocal associations between sense of purpose and subjective wellbeing in old age	Quantitative	The sense of purpose in the elderly plays an important role in improving subjective wellbeing, especially life satisfaction and positive affect. This relationship is reciprocal, but the sense of purpose influences SWB more	Scopus

No	Author	Article Title	Method	Key Findings	Source
				strongly than the other way around. The effect on the negative aspects of SWB, such as depression and negative affect, is limited, so additional interventions are needed to reduce distress.	
7	[18]	Fairness, Trust, and Wellbeing Among Young Adults: Evidence from 2021 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS)	Quantitative	The wellbeing of China's youth is multidimensional, influenced by physical and mental health, positive outlook, sense of purpose in life, and personal growth. A positive outlook and higher education increase trust and perceptions of social justice, while economic challenges and the pandemic reduce employment opportunities and wellbeing. Family support and interventions in the health, education, and economic sectors are important for strengthening social wellbeing and trust.	Scopus
8	[19]	Exploring determinants of flourishing: a comprehensive network analysis of retirees in Taiwan	Quantitative	Personal factors, health, social involvement, and the community environment influence retirees' wellbeing. "Happiness" and "promoting good" are the main indicators of flourishing, while social participation and community cohesion improve wellbeing. Postretirement work can improve mental health but decrease life satisfaction, suggesting a complex relationship between indicators that requires a balanced policy approach.	Scopus
9	[20]	The influence of social investment on subjective capacity throughout the life course	Quantitative	Social investment welfare provision, especially through in-kind spending on family and elderly services, moderates the negative impact of parenthood, unemployment, and aging on <i>subjective capacity</i> . The most significant positive impact was seen in parenthood and aging, increasing optimism, sense of purpose, agency, and resilience, while the effect on unemployment was more limited. These results suggest that social services that emphasize the ability to act can improve subjective wellbeing more effectively than traditional indicators such as income or happiness.	Scopus
10	[21]	Exploring the relationship between meaningful work and subjective wellbeing among language teachers: a mixed-method study	Mixed Methods	A significant positive relationship between the perception of meaning in work (<i>meaningful work</i>) and the subjective wellbeing of EFL teachers, where the more teachers feel meaning in their work, the higher the level of wellbeing. The qualitative findings highlight that personal fulfillment, professional growth, <i>a sense of purpose</i> , and social connections are the main factors supporting teacher wellbeing. These results affirm the importance of a work environment that supports meaning and	Scopus

No	Author	Article Title	Method	Key Findings	Source
				professional development to improve teacher wellbeing.	
11	[22]	The impact of internet use on the subjective wellbeing of older adults: The mediating role of mental health	Quantitative	Internet use in the elderly improves subjective wellbeing indirectly through reduced anxiety and increased sense of purpose, while social loneliness is not a significant mediator.	Scopus
12	[23]	The Downstream Wellbeing Effect of Encounters with the U.S. Criminal Justice System	Quantitative	First arrests by police significantly lower subjective wellbeing and a sense of meaning in life, while other criminal justice experiences had no significant impact.	Scopus
13	[24]	Air pollution and subjective wellbeing: exploring the link between PM10 and a composite measure of wellbeing	Quantitative	The impact of air pollution (PM10) on individuals' subjective wellbeing in Europe depends on location: increased pollution decreases wellbeing in rural areas. However, it tends to have little impact, or even improve wellbeing, in large cities, suggesting that residential context influences pollution effects.	Scopus
14	[25]	Family communication patterns, self-efficacy, and adolescent online prosocial behavior: a moderated mediation model	Quantitative	Self-efficacy plays a key role as a mechanism that bridges the influence of family communication patterns on adolescents' online prosocial behavior, and suggests that emotion regulation strategies function differently: cognitive reappraisal amplifies these positive influences, while expressive suppression weakens them.	Google Scholar
15	[26]	The Swedish version of the multidimensional inventory for religious/spiritual wellbeing – Part II: Development of a four-field typology	Quantitative	The combination of religiosity and spirituality forms a different typology of Religious/Spiritual Wellbeing, which is differentially related to psychological and personality wellbeing, so that the typological approach is more representative than looking at religiosity and spirituality separately.	Google Scholar
16	[27]	Keeping the Romance Alive (and Well): Sense of Purpose as a Predictor of Relationship Quality and Dissolution	Quantitative	<i>A sense of purpose</i> not only increases the likelihood of individuals being in a romantic relationship but also develops simultaneously with the quality of the relationship through the mechanisms of positive affect, partner responsiveness, and <i>purpose invalidation</i> , with the quality of the relationship more strongly shaping the change <i>in the sense of purpose</i> than the other way around.	Google Scholar

Based on the thematic analysis of the main findings of the 16 studies, six themes were identified that represent the determinants and mechanisms of SWB, as presented in Table 2 and described in the following subsection.

Table 3. Mapping Synthesis Theme Results

Theme	Key Focus	Supporting Studies
Health, Physical Activities, and Aging	Health conditions and the aging process sebagai determinan SWB	[28]; [13]; [22]
Spirituality, Religiosity, and Existential Wellbeing	The role of spiritual/religious beliefs in SWB	[15]; [16]; [29]
Sense of Purpose and Psychological Strength	Life goals and psychological capital as predictors of resilience and SWB	[14]; [17]
Socio-Structural Determinants and Public Policy	The influence of social systems, policies, and macro environments on SWB	[18]; [20]; [23]; [24]
Meaningful Activities: Work and Social Participation	Involvement in work and social activities as a source of SWB	[19]; [30]
Family Relations and Interpersonal Dynamics	Family and romantic relationships in shaping psychosocial wellbeing	[25]; [27]

3.1.1. Theme 1: Health, Physical Activity, and Aging as Determinants of SWB

The relationship between health and SWB is dynamic and nonlinear across the age range. Bussière et al. [12] found that the contribution of health to older adults' SWB differed by SWB type: life satisfaction showed hedonic adaptation only before age 80, while eudaimonic and experienced wellbeing were increasingly eroded by poor health as age advanced. Li et al. [13] showed that physical activity reduced the negative impact of depression on multidimensional SWB, with effects moderated by age, education, health status, and socioeconomic factors. Hu and Tan [22] added that internet use was associated with higher SWB in older adults indirectly through reduced anxiety and increased sense of purpose, while social loneliness was not a significant mediator. These three studies consistently indicate that the health–SWB relationship is moderated by psychological mechanisms—including sense of purpose and affective regulation—rather than being direct, suggesting health interventions targeting SWB should incorporate psychological mediation pathways alongside biomedical approaches.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Spirituality, Religiosity, and Existential Wellbeing

Spiritual dimensions contribute to SWB through pathways distinct from, and partially independent of, sense of purpose as conventionally defined. Marznaki et al. [15] found that spiritual connection with God significantly improved quality of life among elderly patients post-myocardial infarction, while life satisfaction was more influenced by medical factors such as hospital history and cardiopulmonary resuscitation experience. Yilmaz [16] showed that religion contributed to SWB indirectly through increased happiness and life satisfaction, with the direct effect of religion on SWB weaker than the mediated pathway. Podolin-Danner et al. [29] demonstrated that religiosity and spirituality combine into distinct typologies of Religious/Spiritual Wellbeing, each differentially related to psychological and personality wellbeing. The synthesis across these three studies indicates that spirituality and religiosity are not direct, uniform predictors of SWB, but operate through affective mediators and multidimensional typological configurations.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Sense of Purpose and Psychological Strength as Resilience Capital

Sense of purpose and psychological strength appear to function as capital that protects and promotes SWB, particularly in post-adversity contexts. Brooks et al. [14] found that polyvictimization did not directly affect SWB or posttraumatic growth, while individual psychological and social strengths—especially psychological resilience and sense of purpose—were associated with improved posttraumatic wellbeing and growth. This underlines the importance of building a portfolio of strengths after victimization. Among older adults, Gudmundsdottir et al. [17] demonstrated a reciprocal but asymmetric association: sense of purpose was more strongly associated with subsequent SWB, particularly life satisfaction and positive affect, than the reverse, while effects on negative SWB indicators such as depression and negative affect remained limited. Both studies suggest that sense of purpose functions as a relatively stable psychological anchor—a predictor of SWB more than merely its consequence—in contexts of adversity and aging.

3.1.4. Theme 4: Socio-Structural Determinants and Public Policy on SWB

SWB is shaped not only by individual psychological factors but also by macro-level systems and policies, often through pathways that do not directly involve a sense of purpose. Wu and Wang [18] found that youth wellbeing in China is multidimensional, shaped by health, positive outlook, sense of purpose, and personal growth, while economic challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic reduced employment opportunities and overall wellbeing. Lehmus-Sun [20] found that social investment welfare provision moderated the negative impacts of parenthood, unemployment, and aging on subjective capacity—with the most significant effects on parenthood and aging contexts, and weaker effects on unemployment. Sanders and King [23] showed that a first police arrest was associated with significantly lower SWB and sense of meaning in life, while other criminal justice experiences showed no significant impact. Montanari et al. [24] found that the impact of air pollution (PM10) on SWB depended on residential context, decreasing wellbeing in rural areas but showing limited or neutral impact in large cities. Collectively, these findings underscore that SWB reflects interactions between social structures, state policies, and geographic contexts, so improving SWB requires system-level interventions in addition to individual-level approaches.

3.1.5. Theme 5: Meaningful Activities—Work and Social Participation

Work and social involvement are significant sources of SWB, particularly during retirement transitions and in certain professions. Hsu et al. [19] found that personal, health, social engagement, and community environment factors were associated with flourishing among retirees in Taiwan. Importantly, postretirement work showed a complex pattern: it was associated with improved mental health but decreased life satisfaction, highlighting that flourishing indicators do not always align directionally and that a balanced policy approach is needed. Gaskaree et al. [21] found a significant positive association between perceived meaningfulness in work and SWB among foreign language teachers; qualitative data identified personal fulfillment, professional growth, sense of purpose, and social connection as key supporting factors. This theme indicates that meaningfulness in activity—

occupational or social—is closely associated with SWB, and that sense of purpose operates as one of several contributing factors rather than the sole driver.

3.1.6. Theme 6: Family Relations and Interpersonal Dynamics

The quality of interpersonal relationships—in both family and romantic contexts—is associated with psychosocial wellbeing, and sense of purpose co-develops within these relational contexts. Zhan and You [25] found that self-efficacy played a key mediating role in the link between family communication patterns and adolescents' online prosocial behavior, with cognitive reappraisal amplifying this positive influence and expressive suppression weakening it. In the context of adult romantic relationships, Pfund [27] showed that sense of purpose was associated with a higher likelihood of entering a romantic relationship and co-developed with relationship quality over time—notably, relationship quality more strongly predicted subsequent change in sense of purpose than the reverse, suggesting a relational contribution to purpose rather than only the other way around. This theme reinforces the finding from Theme 3 that sense of purpose is not a static, fixed trait but is shaped and sustained through ongoing social interaction and relationship quality.

3.1.7. Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis: Bibliometric Mapping of *Sense of Purpose* and *Subjective Wellbeing*

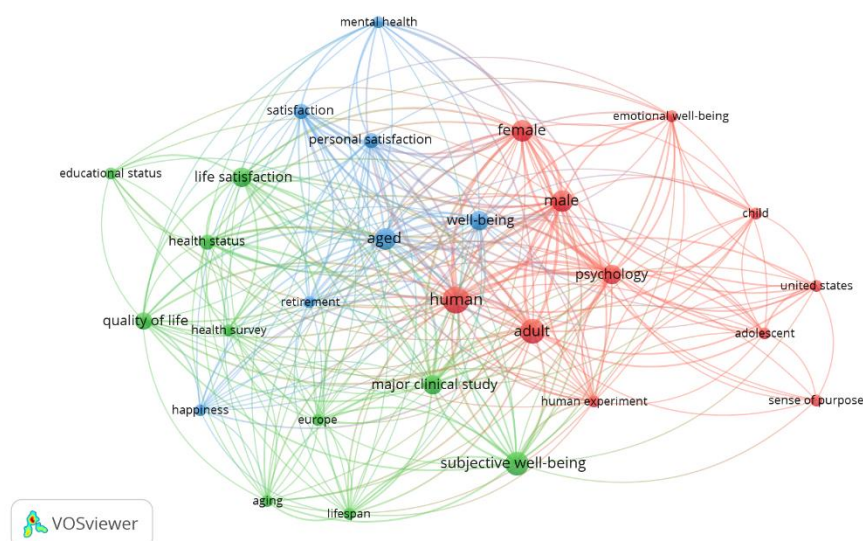


Figure 3. Visualization map of the keywords of the VOSviewer analysis results

To complement and cross-validate the thematic synthesis, we performed a keyword co-occurrence analysis on the 57 initial Scopus records using VOSviewer [31]. This process yielded a final network of 28 keywords connected through 287 links, grouped by the smart local moving algorithm [32], [12] into three thematic clusters (Table 4, Figure 3).

Table 4. Characteristics of Clusters Results of Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

Cluster	Number of Items	Total Occurrence	Average Publication Year	Label Theme	Key Keywords
Red	11	46	2023,4	Demographic and psychological characteristics of individuals	human; adult; female; male; psychology; sense of purpose; adolescent; child; emotional well-being; human experiment; united states
Green	10	34	2023,0	Welfare and quality of life outcomes	subjective well-being; life satisfaction; quality of life; major clinical study; health status; aging; educational status; europe; health survey; lifespan
Blue	7	23	2023,6	Satisfaction and mental health in the elderly population	aged; well-being; personal satisfaction; satisfaction; happiness; mental health; retirement

Cluster 1 (Red) is dominated by keywords representing individual demographic characteristics and study design features, and specifically contains “sense of purpose” as one of its members. Cluster 2 (Green) represents SWB outcome constructs, with “subjective wellbeing” as the item with the highest occurrence and total link strength (occurrence = 7; total link strength = 43; links = 25), making it a central hub of the network. Cluster 3 (Blue) represents life satisfaction and mental health themes predominantly associated with elderly populations and retirement transitions.

Although “sense of purpose” and “subjective wellbeing” belong to different clusters, co-occurrence matrix analysis confirms a direct link between the two keywords with a link strength of 1 (Table 5). This establishes bibliometric support for the central premise of this review—that the two constructs do co-appear within the same academic documents—while also revealing the terminological fragmentation that limits the strength of this link.

Table 5. Keyword Link Profile “sense of purpose” (Total Link Strength = 8)

Connected keywords	Link Strength
adolescent	1
adult	1
female	1
human	1
male	1
psychology	1
subjective wellbeing	1
united states	1

“Subjective wellbeing” was the item with the second-highest degree of connectivity in the network (25 links), with the highest individual link strengths (strength = 3 each) to adult, aged, human, and major clinical study. Its link to “sense of purpose” remained identifiable at the minimum threshold value (strength = 1)—a baseline value common to co-

occurrence in moderate-sized bibliometric corpora, not an indication of inter-construct disconnection.

3.2. DISCUSSION

Overall, the review found four cross-study patterns that went beyond each article's findings. First, sense of purpose has consistently emerged as a psychological mechanism that bridges external determinants with SWB in four of the six themes (Themes 1, 3, 5, and 6)—in the context of health-aging, trauma-resilience, work-retirement, and interpersonal relationships—although “subjective wellbeing” itself is a construct that appears far more often as an explicit keyword than “sense of purpose.” Second, for the other two themes (Theme 2—spirituality, and Theme 4—structural determinants), contributions to SWB appear to operate through pathways independent of the sense-of-purpose mechanism—spirituality works through affective mediation (happiness). At the same time, structural-macro factors (social policy, legal systems, air quality) influence SWB without explicitly involving individual psychological pathways.

Third, the direction of influence between the sense of purpose and SWB is inconsistent in one direction: in the context of aging, the direction of the sense of purpose → SWB is stronger [17], but in the context of a stronger romantic relationship, the opposite direction [27] indicates that the causal direction is contextual, not fixed. Fourth, bibliometric analysis independently reproduces the same conceptual divisions (predictor clusters vs. outcome clusters), but the strength of the direct link between the two core keywords is minimal—a finding that, instead of weakening the main argument, reveals terminological fragmentation as a significant finding in itself.

This pattern is best understood not as evidence that sense of purpose is a universal determinant of SWB, but as evidence that its contribution is conditional on context and stage of development. In the context of disturbances/threats to wellbeing—victimization [14], aging with declining health [12], or life transitions such as retirement [20] the sense of purpose appears as a psychological resource invested to mitigate the impact of loss, exactly as predicted by the Conservation of Resources model [33]. In contrast, in the growth/formation of new relationships, including newly formed romantic relationships [27], sense of purpose appears to be more a result of the quality of the relational experience than its cause. Given the limitations of this corpus size, the bibliometric analysis in this review serves as an illustrative cross-validation of the thematic narrative patterns at the core of the analysis, rather than a method for independently mapping the structure of the research field.

This interpretation also explains why the strength of the bibliometric link between these two keywords is relatively minimal even though the search strategy explicitly requires the appearance of a “sense of purpose” in each filtered document (see Methods). Since the search was conducted on the title-abstract-keyword field (TITLE-ABS-KEY) while the VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis only counted author-listed official keywords/index keywords, it is highly likely that “sense of purpose” was discussed substantively in the abstract of most of the initial 57 records analyzed. However, only two authors listed it as a formal keyword, while others used adjacent labels such as “purpose in life” [18] or “meaning in life” [23]. This pattern suggests that authors' chosen official keywords tend to reflect the

variables central to their studies. In contrast, in many studies, sense of purpose serves as only one of several mechanisms/components discussed, rather than the main focus variable—a substantive finding in itself about how the literature positions these constructs hierarchically, rather than simply a keyword-search artifact.

The finding that the strength of the bibliometric link between sense of purpose and subjective wellbeing is relatively weak (strength = 1) is consistent, not contradictory, with larger-scale meta-analytic evidence beyond this corpus of 16 articles. A meta-analysis of dozens of studies on meaning in life and physical health reported that the association between meaning in life and health indicators was significant but weak—an effect pattern consistent with what the minimum link strength on our VOSviewer map captures indirectly [8]. These findings are an important reminder: thematic synthesis of narratives risks suggesting a stronger and more uniform relationship than aggregate quantitative evidence in the broader field supports.

The pattern of development of sense of purpose across the age range in this corpus—where it plays a protective role in the elderly (Theme 1, Theme 3) but is susceptible to decline postretirement (Theme 5; [19]) is also in line with a comprehensive review [9] that documents that sense of purpose follows a curvilinear trajectory throughout life: increasing from young to middle-age, but prone to decline in old age, particularly after life transitions such as retirement or declining health. This convergence reinforces the belief that the patterns found in the 16 articles are not coincidental, but rather reflect well-established developmental phenomena in the literature on elderly psychology.

In contrast, the separation of bibliometric clusters between “sense of purpose” (the eudaimonic component) and the “subjective wellbeing” (which has historically been closer to the hedonic tradition) [2] is in line with the classical psychometric finding [3] that the dimension of purpose in life and other eudaimonic dimensions were empirically not well captured by the hedonic SWB instruments that were commonly used in his time. In other words, the cluster separations in our map are not a weakness of the method, but a contemporary replication of structural distinctions long known in the welfare literature.

Three theoretical implications can be formulated. First, these results support the treatment of the sense of purpose as a cross-domain eudaimonic mechanism (in line with Self-Determination Theory [5] and the six-dimensional model [3]) rather than as a domain-specific variable—but with the important qualification that this cross-domain nature is not universal, since the spiritual and structural pathways in Themes 2 and 4 show partial independence. Second, different causal directions demand a wellbeing developmental model that treats the direction of influence as a contextual variable rather than a fixed parameter—a nuance the classical SWB model has not widely accommodated, as it generally assumes a single dominant direction of influence. Third, fragmented terminology provides a theoretical impetus for construct-consolidation projects (following the spirit of [8], which also faces similar challenges in defining “meaning” consistently across studies)—SWB-purpose research fields require a common definition framework before they can efficiently accumulate evidence.

Although these findings are drawn largely from cross-sectional data and thus require further experimental testing as intervention hypotheses, several practical implications can be

synthesized across domains, first, posttraumatic recovery programs for victimization survivors should explicitly target a sense of purpose rather than just symptom regulation [14]. Second, “bridge employment” policies for postretirement workers must balance multi-indicator outcomes, such as mental health and life satisfaction, instead of focusing solely on work participation [19]. Third, occupational wellbeing programs for high-burnout professions like education should integrate efforts to foster a sense of work meaning [34]. Fourth, digital literacy initiatives for the elderly must go beyond increasing access to reduce anxiety and strengthen their sense of purpose actively [22]. Finally, domestic life-cycle-based social investment policies should consider the logic of using public services during key life transitions to moderate negative impacts on subjective capacity [20].

This review has several limitations that must be acknowledged, starting with the restricted search string, which focused exclusively on “sense of purpose” and “subjective wellbeing” without incorporating related concepts such as “meaning in life,” “meaningful work,” or “subjective capacity,” thereby potentially leaving relevant literature uncaptured. Furthermore, the corpus size for VOSviewer (57 initial records and 16 final articles) is relatively moderate, meaning small clusters remain susceptible to the idiosyncratic characteristics of a handful of studies. The review also exhibits potential accessibility and language biases due to the dominance of open-access mega-journals and the exclusion of non-English literature. Geographically, the complete absence of research from Southeast Asia—including Indonesia—reveals a significant regional gap despite the universality of the constructs. Finally, the synthesis is restricted to association-level insights due to the predominance of cross-sectional designs (13 out of 16 studies), and methodological transparency is constrained by the lack of explicit reporting on inter-rater reliability procedures during the manual thematic coding process.

To address the identified limitations and tensions, five distinct research agendas are proposed. First, future studies should replicate multi-wave panel designs across domains such as trauma-resilience and work-retirement transitions to clarify causal directions, building on the cross-lagged framework of [17] and exploring the domain-specific variations noted by Pfund [27]. Second, a construct consolidation project must systematically map terminological overlaps among concepts like “sense of purpose” and “subjective capacity” to prevent label diversity from weakening future quantitative and bibliometric syntheses. Third, multi-level designs will allow researchers to evaluate how macro-level policy and structural regimes interact with, and potentially moderate, individual psychological pathways. Fourth, moving beyond correlational data requires randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that actively manipulate the sense of purpose to experimentally confirm its causal impact on subjective wellbeing (SWB). Finally, geographical and cultural expansion—particularly into underrepresented regions like Indonesia and Southeast Asia—is crucial to determine how collectivist cultural orientations, family structures, and distinct modes of self-construction alter the established relationships between purpose and SWB.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic review and bibliometric analysis synthesized and cross-validated the contribution of sense of purpose to subjective wellbeing across multiple life domains and

research contexts. The central conclusion that emerges from both lines of evidence is that sense of purpose does not function as a single, universal determinant of SWB but rather as a context-dependent psychological mechanism whose contribution, and the direction of its causal influence, shifts according to the life stage and domain in which it operates — being most clearly protective in contexts of aging and post-adversity recovery, and most clearly reciprocally constituted in contexts of interpersonal relationship formation and quality.

Theoretically, integrating narrative thematic synthesis with bibliometric keyword mapping has allowed this review to show that the modest co-occurrence link strength between the two core constructs is more accurately attributed to terminological fragmentation across the research field than to a weak substantive association between them. This finding supports positioning sense of purpose as a cross-domain eudaimonic mechanism that can operate across health, relational, occupational, and social-structural contexts, while also calling for theoretical models that accommodate contextual variability in causal direction rather than assuming a fixed, unidirectional relationship between purpose and wellbeing.

The conclusions of this review are constrained by methodological limitations that future work should address. The predominance of cross-sectional study designs among the included literature restricts interpretations to association, the exclusion of psychology-specific databases limits the comprehensiveness of the evidence base, and the geographic concentration of available studies outside Southeast Asia limits the cultural generalizability of the patterns identified. These constraints do not invalidate the synthesis but define the boundaries within which its conclusions should be read.

Despite these limitations, the findings carry meaningful practical relevance. The synthesis provides an initial evidence base for purpose-strengthening intervention programs designed around key life transitions—retirement, illness onset, posttraumatic recovery, and occupational burnout. Future research should therefore give priority to longitudinal and experimental designs, systematic terminological consolidation across related construct labels (incorporating concepts such as “meaning in life,” “meaningful work,” and “subjective capacity”), and deliberate geographic and cultural expansion into underrepresented regions, particularly Indonesia and Southeast Asia, to determine the extent to which the patterns identified in this review hold across the full diversity of human populations and cultural contexts within which sense of purpose and subjective wellbeing are lived and studied.

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