



Life satisfaction of Korean older adults: The roles of chronological and subjective age and appearance management

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I addressed previous contradictory findings that people aged 65 and over (vs. younger age groups) have lower life satisfaction, in contrast to the well-being paradox in older age, whereby there is an increase in life satisfaction among people in this age group. Thus, I investigated the effects of age and appearance management on the life satisfaction of 364 Koreans aged 65 years and over, who completed a survey in which they gave their age (chronological and subjective), and responded to items on appearance management, life satisfaction, and demographic characteristics. Results of my preliminary analysis showed that economic status, age, and appearance management were related to life satisfaction. However, multiple regression analysis results showed that only subjective age and appearance management significantly explained overall satisfaction with life. A practical implication of the results is that perceptions of people aged 65 and over, including their subjective rather than chronological age, and behavior, such as appearance management, should be managed together by mental health services.

Keywords

life satisfaction; subjective age; chronological age; aging; appearance management; older adults

For people of various ages, including those aged 65 years and over, the concept of *life satisfaction* concerns their evaluation of their positive affect and overall life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Life satisfaction is, thus, used as a means to predict individual adaptation and mental health (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In addition, the degree of life satisfaction or quality of life can be used as an index to investigate successful aging in older adults (Mock & Eibach, 2011; Öztop, Şener, Güven, & Doğan, 2009). When people reach maturity in adulthood, the aging process begins. When adulthood has been reached, and particularly during old age, there are individual differences in all mental and physical aspects of the speed of aging, even among people of the same chronological age. Therefore, issues related to life satisfaction and age in older adults are of continued interest to researchers, who, however, have differing views. For example, in the modernization theory of aging (e.g., Cowgill & Holmes, 1972), it is proposed that among older adults there is a negative correlation between their age and their life satisfaction. In contrast, in the selection–optimization–compensation model (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990) a positive correlation is supported; for example, Gaymu and Springer (2010) reported that older age predicts an increase in life satisfaction, a situation known as the *well-being paradox* (Hansen & Slagsvold, 2012; Robnett, 2002).

Despite these conflicting results, researchers have suggested that people's perceived life satisfaction is stable and is influenced more by their subjective psychological factors than by the objective situation of being in old age (Chung, Lee, & Han, 2017; Fujita & Diener, 2005). The subjective psychological aspects regarding age are referred to as age identity (Logan, Ward, & Spitze, 1992). In other words, *subjective age* refers to the

age that people think of themselves as being, according to their living experience and the aging process. Thus, although *chronological age*, which serves as an objective standard of human development and which cannot be changed artificially, is important, the subjective perception older adults have of their age can be an important index for understanding them. Indeed, many scholars have shown that subjective age is more critical than chronological age for explaining life satisfaction (see, e.g., Chung et al., 2017; Logan et al., 1992; Montepare & Lachman, 1989).

Changes in appearance, such as hair loss, graying of the hair, and facial wrinkles, are the most noticeable visible changes in aging. In general, people evaluate other people's inner characteristics and traits by their appearance, which is a way for individuals to express themselves, and which, in addition to their age, contributes to the formation of their individual identity (Cash, 1990). Therefore, as *appearance management* is influenced by self-perception and others' perception, people strive to create their visual image and to gain others' understanding by managing their appearance. As personal hygiene and appearance management are the most basic activities of daily living, older adults feel self-satisfied and secure in their interpersonal relationships when they have a well-groomed appearance (Lee, 2007).

Previous researchers have indicated the importance of appearance management for life satisfaction. For example, Bruch, Berko, and Haase (1998) stated that people's positive perception of their appearance and physical attractiveness makes it easier to experience life satisfaction and desirable emotions. When H. R. Kim (2014) interviewed people in Korea aged 60 or over, their respondents answered that they manage their appearance for their self-satisfaction and quality of life. However, when older adults perceive changes in their appearance owing to aging as a physical loss, they are more likely to think that their lives are worthless, and to be unsociable (Blazer, 1998). Dubler and Gurel (1984) and S. H. Park (2006) also pointed out that appearance management can improve life satisfaction, relieve depression and stress, and improve quality of life among older adults.

Results of studies in which demographic variables have been assessed in relation to life satisfaction are contradictory. For example, regarding gender differences, some researchers have reported that men have greater life satisfaction (K.-N. Park, 2005; Smith & Baltes, 1998), others have concluded that women have greater life satisfaction (Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991), and still others that there are no gender differences (Bourque, Pushkar, Bonneville, & Béland, 2005). In addition, although most researchers agree that religion does not exert a consistent influence on life satisfaction, some researchers have identified its instrumental benefits. For example, religion can be helpful for people in their old age, who are often exposed to bereavement, such as the loss of their spouse (Siegal & Kuykendall, 1990).

I reviewed previous studies and investigated if age, appearance management, and demographic characteristics are related to life satisfaction among Koreans aged 65 years and over. The proportion of Korea's population in this age group is increasing at a fast rate. Korea became an aged society in 2017, when more than 14% of the population was aged 65 and over (S. Kim, 2017), after just 17 years as an aging society (i.e., more than 7% in this age group). In contrast, France took 115 years to change from an aging to an aged society, the United States took 73 years, Germany took 40 years, and Japan took 24 years (S. Kim, 2017). Therefore, in Korea, there was insufficient preparation for this rapid structural population change because, along with administrative and financial problems, there was not enough time and experience for conservative traditional attitudes about older adults in Korean society to change, for example, the stereotypes that older adults are inflexible, do not dress well, and should sacrifice themselves to their children. In contrast to these traditional age norms, people in Korea aged 65 and over are striving to form a new culture for this age group, in which they are well-groomed, maintain a youthful appearance, and enjoy various social activities and hobbies (Yea, 2010).

Korean household characteristics have also changed owing to a prolonged average life span. For example, in 2017 the households consisting of only people aged 65 years or over accounted for 12.2% of general

households, and people aged 70 years or more made up the largest share (18.0%) of one-person households (Statistics Korea, 2018). Thus, my findings will contribute to understanding of people aged 65 and over and to the promotion of their mental health in the aged society of Korea.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were people aged 65 years or over who attended a senior welfare center in Daejeon, South Korea. None of the participants had ever been neurologically diagnosed with a geriatric cognitive impairment, and those with a visual or auditory impairment all had the impairment corrected with either glasses or hearing aids. Accordingly, they could lead independent daily lives. In accordance with the standard operating guidelines common to all research institutes in Korea, participants provided written informed consent prior to completing a self-report survey during free time between individual programs at the center and then were supported to take one chosen program. The final sample comprised 364 people (215 women, 149 men) aged from 65 to 90 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 75.19$, $SD = 4.82$). Other demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Chronological and subjective age. For chronological age, participants entered their age according to their date of birth. For subjective age, I used a four-item scale previously developed for use with Korean older adults (Chung et al., 2017). Participants rate each item on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *younger than my actual age* to 3 = *older than my actual age*. The items were feel-age (i.e., the age the person thinks they are), look-age (i.e., how old the person thinks they look), do-age (i.e., the age group the person considers that their activities belong to), and how old the participant thought that others perceived them to be. Higher total scores indicate that participants perceive themselves as older than their actual age. Cronbach's alpha was .84 for the scale in the original study by Chung et al. (2017) and .84 in this study.

Appearance management. I used the 12-item Appearance Management Scale to measure the participants' perception of their management of their outer appearance (Jang, 2010). The scale was revised with the help of a psychometric expert, and questions that were more appropriate for women only, such as "I put effort into wearing makeup," were excluded. The scale consists of two subscales: interest in appearance and appearance management behavior. A sample item is "I care a lot about changes from aging, including wrinkles and age spots." Participants rate the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating greater appearance management. Cronbach's alpha was above .80 in Jang's (2010) study. In this study Cronbach's alpha was .94 for the entire scale, and .90 and .87 for the interest in appearance and appearance management behavior subscales, respectively.

Life satisfaction. The five-item Korean version (Lim, 2012) of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) was used to measure life satisfaction. A sample item is "In most ways, my life is close to ideal." Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction. In Lim's study in 2012, Cronbach's alpha was .86 for adolescents and .84 for undergraduates, Chung et al. (2017) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .90 for people aged 65 and over, and in this study Cronbach's alpha was .87.

Data Analysis

The independent variables were significant in the tests for the mean difference and correlation analysis (coding continuous variables with their numerical values and coding categorical variables as dummy variables). Life satisfaction was the dependent variable in the multivariate stepwise regression analysis. As all tolerance values were above .10 and all variance inflation factors were below 10 (range = 1–30), multicollinearity was not an issue (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

I employed an independent samples *t* test and one-way analysis of variance to compare life satisfaction between different groups divided according to self-reported demographic characteristics (see Table 1). The results show that only economic status led to significant group differences in life satisfaction, $F(4, 359) = 3.79, p < .01$.

Table 1. Comparison of Life Satisfaction Between Participant Groups According to Demographic Characteristics

Variable		<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		<i>df</i>	<i>t/F</i>
Gender	Female	215	59.1	18.57 (3.92)		362	0.96
	Male	149	40.9	18.15 (4.22)			
Religion	Protestant Christianity	79	21.7	18.52 (4.31)		5	1.71
	Buddhism	127	34.9	17.78 (3.71)	Between groups		
	Catholic Christianity	86	23.6	18.83 (4.26)	Within groups	358	
	Confucianism	5	1.4	16.20 (3.56)			
	No religion	62	17.0	18.89 (4.07)			
	Other	5	1.4	21.00 (2.00)			
Economic status	Very poor	8	2.2	15.75 (4.43)		4	3.79**
	Poor	92	26.6	18.12 (4.84)	Between groups		
	Average	217	59.6	18.23 (3.70)	Within groups	359	
	Wealthy	39	10.7	20.46 (2.95)			
	Very wealthy	3	0.8	19.67 (4.04)			
Marital status	Living with spouse	175	48.1	18.84 (3.62)		4	1.28
	Bereaved	162	44.5	17.88 (4.49)	Between groups		
	Divorced	12	3.3	18.50 (3.56)	Within groups	359	
	Separated	10	2.7	18.50 (3.66)			
	Unmarried	5	1.4	19.40 (4.34)			

Note. $N = 364$. ** $p < .01$.

Results of the correlation analysis of the major variables are presented in Table 2. There was no significant correlation between chronological and subjective age. Chronological age and subjective age were each significantly and negatively correlated with interest in appearance, appearance management behavior, and life satisfaction. Interest in appearance and appearance management behavior were each significantly positively correlated with life satisfaction.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Between Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Chronological age	–	.05	-.15**	-.15**	-.16**	75.19	4.82
2. Subjective age		–	-.40**	-.34**	-.62**	7.91	2.37
3. Interest in appearance			–	.85**	.60**	20.88	4.58
4. Appearance management behavior				–	.59**	21.43	4.23
5. Life satisfaction					–	18.40	4.04

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Regression Analysis

I investigated the influence of the following variables on life satisfaction: economic status, which showed significant differences in the one-way analysis of variance results, and age and appearance management, which showed significant relationships with life satisfaction in the correlation analysis. To determine significant predictors, I used stepwise regression (see Table 3). Economic status, dummy 1, $t(359) = 0.09$, *ns*; dummy 2, $t(359) = -1.35$, *ns*; dummy 3, $t(359) = 1.68$, *ns*; dummy 4, $t(359) = -1.90$, *ns*, and chronological age, $t(359) = -1.89$, *ns*, were excluded from regression models because they were not significant, whereas the other three variables were included in the model, $F(3, 360) = 153.54$, $p < .01$. In addition, when all the demographic variables were used, these three variables only were included in the model explaining life satisfaction. Subjective age, interest in appearance, and appearance management behavior explained 56.1% of the total variance of life satisfaction ($R^2 = .56$).

When contribution to life satisfaction and statistical significance of the individual independent variables were investigated, subjective age had the most influence on life satisfaction, followed by appearance management behavior and interest in appearance (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis of Life Satisfaction

Independent variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>F</i>	R^2
Subjective age	-0.77	0.07	-.45	-11.90**		
Appearance management behavior	0.27	0.06	.29	4.36**	153.54**	.56
Interest in appearance	0.16	0.06	.18	2.73**		

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

In contrast to previous results showing that people aged 65 and over have lower life satisfaction than younger generations do, recent researchers have proposed a well-being paradox in old age, whereby there is an increase in life satisfaction in older age (e.g., Hansen & Slagsvold, 2012; Robnett, 2002). To expand on these findings, I investigated the crucial roles of age and appearance management in the life satisfaction of a group of Korean participants aged 65 years and over.

Of the demographic variables, only economic status led to differences in life satisfaction, with participants with higher economic status reporting greater life satisfaction. Although it is difficult to definitively

conclude that economic status directly influences life satisfaction, perceived high income and economic stability may contribute to increasing life satisfaction in older adults. A perception of being younger in terms of one's chronological age and subjective age were both correlated with high life satisfaction despite the absence of a relationship between both types of age (see Table 2). Many researchers have found that, after their twenties, adults perceive themselves as younger than their actual age (Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Rubin & Berntsen, 2006). Thus, youthful bias is not only seen in the population aged 65 years and older, and I assumed that chronological and subjective age were not linear relationships as applied to this older age group. Nonetheless, a perception of being younger than one's actual age and younger subjective age are related to greater life satisfaction. In addition, I found a positive correlation between appearance management and life satisfaction, which supports the suggestion that changes experienced by older adults can be transformed by helping to improve personal satisfaction and confidence in social scenes (relationships) through appearance management into positive aspects, such as life satisfaction and happiness (Lee, 2007).

Subjective age had the greatest explanatory power for life satisfaction: Participants who perceived their subjective age as younger than their actual age reported greater life satisfaction. This finding corresponds with previous findings showing that subjective, rather than chronological, age plays a crucial role in life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Chung et al., 2017; Logan et al., 1992; Mock & Eibach, 2011; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). As subjective age can entail thinking that one is younger, rather than aspiring to be young (Guiot, 2001; Montepare & Lachman, 1989), there is not an absolute threshold. People's healthy perceptions of subjective age appear to improve their psychological adaptation and life satisfaction by encouraging them to maintain a positive self-image. Although in this study life satisfaction changed significantly according to economic status and chronological age was negatively correlated with life satisfaction, these variables did not significantly directly influence participants' life satisfaction. It may be more appropriate to consider that they influenced activities, such as hobbies and lifelong education (mediating variables), that bring about life satisfaction (Markides & Martin, 1979).

Appearance management behavior and interest in appearance also had a strong influence on life satisfaction in this study. This finding supports the results H. R. Kim (2014), who interviewed people aged over 60 years and found that 80% of participants believed that appearance management should continue until death, and that they managed their appearance for quality of life (37.3%) and self-satisfaction (32.8%). According to activity theory (e.g., Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1968), in their old age people may have fewer social relationships compared to when they were in more productive and active stages of life. In contrast, according to the well-being paradox, people who are retired from paid employment may have more time and economic capacity to develop social relationships. Despite these contradictory stances, appearance management can effectively affect both the expansion of fewer social relationships and the enjoyment of leisure time. Management of one's appearance contributes to self-esteem and helps the individual to maintain a positive impression in front of others (Aune & Aune, 1994). Therefore, appearance management can improve life satisfaction among older adults by giving them more confidence to find new friends and form new social relationships (Jang, 2010), and by positively influencing their perceptions of their physical and psychological health and of the environment (Choi, Jeong, & Chu, 2014).

There are some limitations in this study. First, because many researchers have suggested that the gap between chronological and subjective age grows as people get older (Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Rubin & Berntsen, 2006), the correlation between both types of age can be predicted. However, I did not find such a correlation. This may be because my sample did not include the whole adult population with a youthful bias, nor did I examine the nonlinear relationship between both types of age (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005). My sample comprised only people aged 65 and over who led independent daily lives, and I did not collect their perceived health status as background information. According to a longitudinal study conducted over a period of 6 years (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, & Smith, 2008), the number of illnesses the individual experiences affects the felt-age discrepancy. Future researchers should investigate subjective age

patterns by including health and economic status, and look comprehensively at how they affect one another. Second, causal relationships between the variables cannot be determined using the cross-sectional data I collected. Future researchers who employ longitudinal or cross-cultural designs can obtain more evidence of causality.

Nevertheless, my results fill a gap in the literature. I examined the life satisfaction of people aged 65 and over in Korea from multiple perspectives, including demographic variables, to determine the most important influential factors. A key implication of my results is that, because human thoughts and behavior have bidirectional influences, the perceptions of people in this age group (including their subjective age) and behavior (e.g., appearance management) should be considered together by researchers and by mental health services.

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