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# Social Support and Perceptions of Aging among Middle-Aged Adults: A Scoping Review

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### ABSTRACT

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Perceptions of aging formed in midlife significantly influence long-term health and well-being, with social support being a key determinant of these perceptions. Existing studies syntheses focus predominantly on older adults (65+), creating a gap in our understanding of how social support shapes aging perceptions specifically during middle adulthood (ages 40-60). This scoping review aims to map the existing literature on the relationship between social support and perceptions of aging among middle-aged adults. Following PRISMA-ScR guidelines, we systematically searched Scopus, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR in July 2025. Of 627 records, 13 quantitative studies met the inclusion criteria. The reviewed studies were primarily cross-sectional (n=11) and geographically concentrated in East Asia (n=7). Three key themes emerged: (1) a bidirectional relationship between social support and aging perceptions; (2) social support as a buffer against aging anxiety, especially emotional and spousal support; and (3) the influence of life stage and social structure. The findings highlight the potential influence of cultural context, with preliminary evidence suggesting differences between family-centred support models in East Asia and more diverse networks in Western contexts. Midlife is a critical period for shaping aging trajectories through social support. However, the evidence base is limited by methodological homogeneity and geographic concentration. The review maps existing evidence and identifies priorities for future research and intervention development.

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## 1. Introduction

Perceptions of aging significantly influence how individuals approach their later years, shaping health behaviors, life satisfaction, and overall well-being. These perceptions encompass individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about growing older and have been shown to affect engagement in preventive health practices, psychosocial participation, and planning for later life, including

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retirement and health maintenance. Importantly, perceptions of aging do not emerge abruptly in old age. Rather, they begin to solidify during midlife, a period when individuals increasingly reflect on aging-related changes and future trajectories. Accumulating evidence suggests that support received from one's social network plays a crucial role in shaping these perceptions, either reinforcing positive views of aging as a period of continued growth or amplifying negative expectations associated with decline and dependency.

Middle adulthood, typically defined as ages 40 to 60, represents a critical developmental transition period. During this stage, individuals often begin to experience visible signs of aging, assume increased caregiving responsibilities for both children and aging parents, and undergo shifts in social, occupational, and family roles (1). These age-salient experiences heighten awareness of the aging process and make perceptions of aging particularly susceptible to social influence. The presence of supportive social networks during this phase may normalize age-related changes, promote adaptive coping, and foster more positive aging perceptions, whereas limited or strained social support may contribute to anxiety, age-related stereotypes, and pessimistic views of aging as inevitable decline.

From a lifespan developmental perspective, social support is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, informational, and instrumental support derived from relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, and community networks. Theoretical frameworks such as the Convoy Model of Social Relations (2) and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (3) highlight that social networks evolve across adulthood in both structure and function. In midlife, social relationships are often renegotiated as individuals balance multiple and sometimes competing roles. Within this context, social support may serve as a key mechanism through which individuals interpret aging-related changes and construct meanings about growing older.

Despite growing scholarly interest in perceptions of aging and social support as independent constructs, their intersection remains underexplored, particularly within the middle-aged demographic. Existing studies on perceptions of aging have predominantly focused on older adults aged 65 years and above. While valuable, this age threshold may overlook important developmental processes occurring earlier in the life course, when aging perceptions are still forming and potentially more malleable. Notably, prior studies have acknowledged that restricting samples to adults over 65 excluded critical midlife transitions that may shape subsequent aging trajectories (4,5). The existing literature is further characterized by conceptual and methodological heterogeneity, including variation in how social support and perceptions of aging are defined, measured, and theoretically framed. Studies differ widely in their populations, social contexts, and analytical approaches, making it difficult to draw cohesive conclusions regarding patterns of evidence or gaps in knowledge. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how social support influences perceptions of aging during midlife, despite this stage being foundational for later-life attitudes, behaviors, and well-being.

Addressing this gap is increasingly important in the context of global population aging, including Malaysia's projected transition to an aged society by 2030. In such settings, preventive and promotive strategies for healthy aging must begin well before old age. Understanding how social support shapes perceptions of aging among adults aged 40 to 60 can inform timely, culturally relevant interventions, guide public health planning, and support policies aimed at fostering positive aging trajectories and psychosocial resilience.

Given the emerging and conceptually diverse nature of research examining social support and perceptions of aging during middle adulthood, a scoping review approach is most appropriate. A scoping review was selected to comprehensively map the extent, characteristics, and thematic patterns of existing research examining the relationship between social support and perceptions of

aging among middle-aged adults. This approach is particularly suitable for clarifying how the relationship between social support and perceptions of aging has been studied during midlife. Therefore, this scoping review aims to identify the types and sources of social support and how they relate to individuals' perceptions of aging.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Scoping Review Framework

This scoping review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines (6), following the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley and subsequently refined by the Joanna Briggs Institute (7). A scoping review approach was selected to comprehensively map the extent, characteristics, and thematic patterns of existing research examining the relationship between social support and perceptions of aging among middle-aged adults. The review process comprises five key stages: **Stage 1:** Identify review questions; **Stage 2:** Identify the relevant studies; **Stage 3:** Study selection; **Stage 4:** Data extraction and analysis; **Stage 5:** Discussion of the results. Consistent with the purpose of a scoping review, this study did not aim to assess intervention effectiveness, estimate pooled effect sizes, or formally appraise study quality, but rather to map the scope, characteristics, and thematic findings of existing research.

### 2.2 Stage 1: Identify Review Questions

We used our review questions to refine the scope and structure of this scoping review. The review question incorporates the population of middle-aged adults, typically aged 40-60, conceptually the role of social support in perceptions of aging, and the context of perceptions of aging, including attitudes, beliefs, and expectations toward the aging process. The review questions guiding this scoping review are:

- 1) What types of social support (emotional, informational, instrumental) are associated with perceptions of aging among middle-aged adults?
- 2) Who are the primary sources of social support (family members, peers, workplace colleagues, community networks) influencing perceptions of aging in middle adulthood?
- 3) How does social support influence positive or negative perceptions towards aging during middle adulthood?
- 4) What theoretical frameworks or models are commonly used to examine the relationship between social support and perceptions of aging in middle-aged populations?
- 5) What methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) have been employed in the existing studies on this topic?
- 6) What are the key findings and thematic patterns across the literature impact of social support on perceptions of aging in middle-adulthood?

This review included studies published in English from 2005 to the present that examine the relationship between social support and perceptions of aging in adult participants aged 40 to 60 years. Studies with broader age ranges are eligible if they report findings specifically relevant to this age group. Eligible studies must report original empirical data and be accessible either via full text or via an English abstract. Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused solely on social support or perceptions of aging without examining their relationship.
2. Published in a language other than English without an available English abstract.

3. Review papers or dissertations that lack accessible data.

### 2.2 Stage 2: Identify the Relevant Studies

Scoping searches of Scopus, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR were conducted in July 2025. The search string used generally related keywords was designed utilizing a combination of search functions, including Boolean Operators, Truncations, Wildcards, Field Codes, and phrase searching, as shown in Table 1. The search terms targeted three core concepts: social support, perceptions of aging, and the midlife population. The search strategy was adapted for use in each database, based on its specific indexing and search functionalities.

**Table 1**

Search String

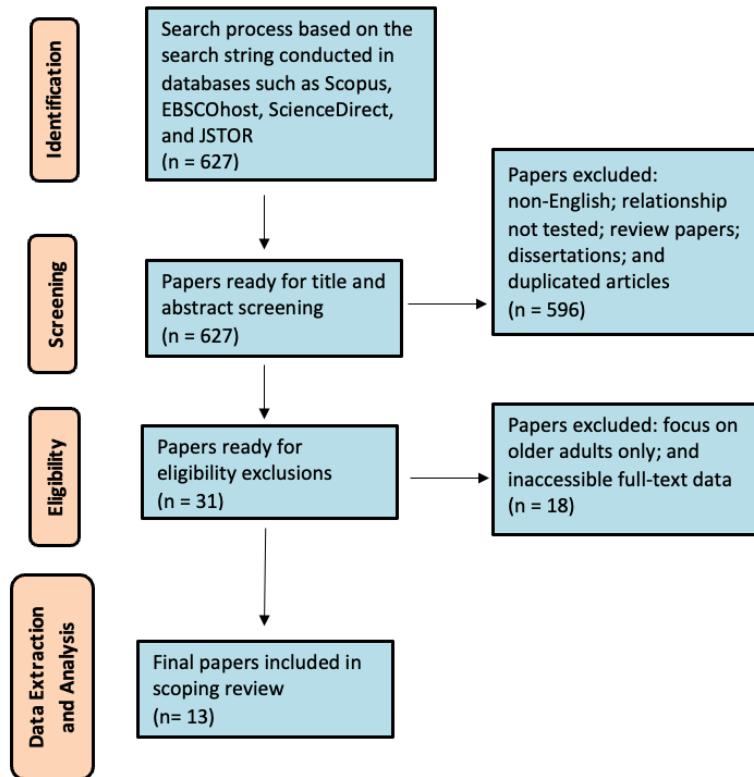
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TITLE-ABS-KEY (( "social support" OR "support system\*" OR "support network\*" OR "emotional support" OR "practical support" OR "instrumental support" OR "informational support" OR "peer support" OR "mutual aid" OR "social integration" OR "social capital" OR "safety net" OR "connectedness" OR "belonging" OR fellowship OR "familial support" OR "community support" OR "friendship support" OR "perceived support" OR "received support" OR "interpersonal support" OR "appraisal support" OR "companionship support") AND ( "perceptions of ag\*ing" OR "views on ag\*ing" OR "attitudes toward ag\*ing" OR "ag\*ing beliefs" OR "self-perception of ag\*ing" OR "subjective ag\*ing" OR "ag\*ing attitudes" OR "ag\*ing anxiety" OR "age identity" OR "age-identity" OR "perceived age" OR "subjective age" OR "felt age" OR "age stereotypes" OR "internalized ageism" OR "age expectations" OR "ag\*ing perceptions" OR "age perceptions" OR "ag\*ing stereotypes" OR ageism OR "successful ag\*ing" OR "positive ag\*ing" OR "age anxiety") AND ( "middle-aged adult\*" OR "midlife adult\*" OR "mid-adulthood" OR "middle-adulthood" OR "midlife population" OR "generation x" OR "gen x" OR "sandwich generation" OR "empty nester\*" OR "45-64" OR "40s to 60s" OR "pre-retirement adult\*" OR "prime-of-life adult\*" OR "mid-life" OR "middle age" OR "adults aged 40 to 60" OR "middle-aged population"))

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### 2.3 Stage 3: Study selection

A total of 627 papers were identified, as in Figure 1. All citations were imported into Mendeley reference management software. Duplicates were removed using the Mendeley automatic duplicate finder. A title and abstract screening were conducted on all citations. Full texts were obtained for papers that appeared to meet the inclusion criteria, and a relevant abstract if the full text was not accessible. A final 13 papers were included in the scoping review.



**Fig. 1.** Article selection process according to PRISMA 2020 guidelines

#### 2.4 Stage 3: Data Extraction and Analysis

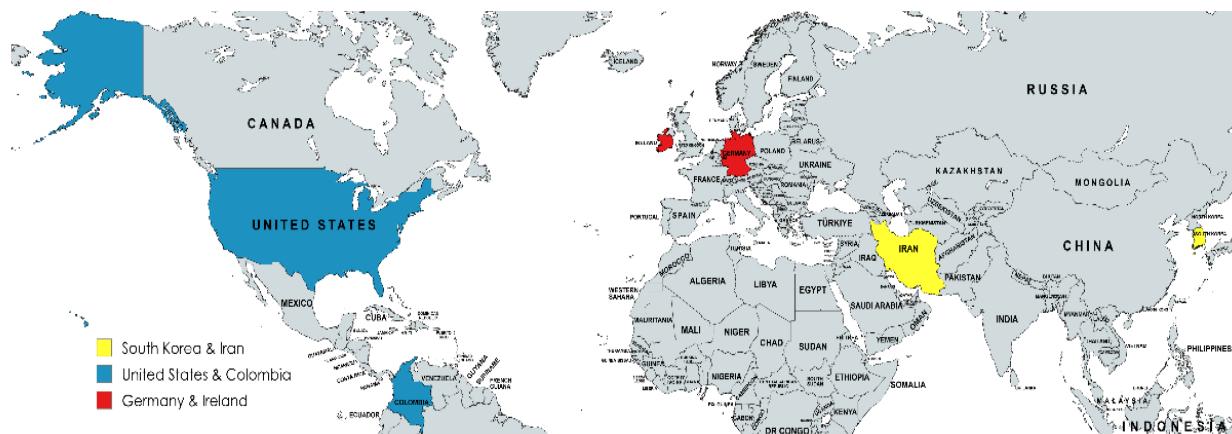
Data on the sample characteristics, types and sources of social support, key findings, theoretical frameworks, and research gaps were extracted and organized into an Excel database for further analysis. Consistent with the purpose of a scoping review, this study maps the extent and nature of existing evidence rather than appraising the methodological quality of included studies. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an overview of the existing evidence rather than an assessment of evidentiary strength.

Descriptive statistics, including country of study, participant age, and gender distribution, were reported for included studies. Studies were systematically compared, categorized, and organized according to the thematic focus. A thematic analysis was then conducted to explore the relationship between social support and perceptions of aging among middle-aged adults.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Descriptive Summary

Geographically, the studies were predominantly concentrated in Asia, with the majority conducted in South Korea (n=7) and Iran (n=1). This was followed by studies from North America, specifically the United States (n=1) and Colombia (n=1). Additional studies were identified from Europe, including Germany (n=2) and Ireland (n=1), as shown in Figure 2.



**Fig. 2.** Participant location of included studies

Methodologically, cross-sectional designs dominated the literature ( $n=11$ ), with only ( $n=2$ ) studies employing longitudinal approaches. Sample size varied considerably, with most studies ( $n=10$ ) comprising fewer than 500 participants, while ( $n=3$ ) studies featured large samples exceeding 5,000 participants, with most samples drawn from community-based urban populations. Regarding participant demographics, ( $n=8$ ) focused specifically on middle-aged adults aged 40 to 60 years, whereas ( $n=5$ ) included broader age ranges extending up to 93 years. In terms of gender representation, ( $n=3$ ) studies exclusively examined only women, while the remaining ( $n=10$ ) adopted mixed-gender sample. Terminology for middle-aged adults: Most studies ( $n=5$ ) used the phrase “middle-aged” to describe participants; instead, they referred to a broader adult population based on age range criteria without applying an age-related label. A summary of the final studies included in the reviews is in Table 2.

**Table 2**

A summary of the studies included in the review

Author(s)	Sample	Design/Analyses	Types and sources of social support	Theories	Findings	Themes
<b>Cross-sectional</b>						
Lee, J.H. (2009) (8)	Total: 424 153 males; 271 females Age range: 40-50 South Korea Community-dwelling middle-aged adults residing in the Gwangju and Jeonnam regions	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics, cross tables, t-test, correlations, and regression.	Social relationships and social activities with family (spouse and children), friends, and community engagement (neighbors and community members).	Not specified	Social support and social relationships strengthen positive perceptions of aging, with family and friends being perceived as strong in later life social preparedness; health-related anxiety can reflect more negative perceptions of aging, moderated by gender (women) and resource access (financial).	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging; social support reduces aging anxiety;
Jung, Y.O., & Oh, H.S. (2016) (9)	Total: 210 210 females Age range: 40-60 South Korea Community-dwelling middle-aged women residing in Gwangju metropolitan city	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics t-test, one way ANOVA, and multiple regression.	Emotional support, evaluative support, informational support, and material support from family, friends, and others.	Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory	Social support influences perceptions of aging, both directly and indirectly, especially through enhancing self-efficacy and perceived health, and reducing aging anxiety about getting older.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging; social support reduces aging anxiety;
Ramírez, L., & Palacios-Espinosa, X. (2016) (10)	Total: 230 105 males; 123 females Age range: 44-89 Colombia Community-dwelling adults from a community in Bogota city	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics correlation, and multiple regression analysis.	Perceived (emotional and instrumental) and expected social support from family, friends, and community organizations (church members).	Stereotype Embodiment Theory	Perceived social support helps reduce aging anxiety; aging stereotypes and mental health perceptions shape social support expectations.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging; social support reduces aging anxiety;
Park, J.H. (2018) (11)	Total: 210 210 females Age range: 40-60 South Korea	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/	Types of support are not explicitly specified, while sources include family, friends, and community.	Not specified	More social support is linked to less aging anxiety; social support helps reduce aging anxiety, especially when	Bidirectional relationship between social support and

**Table 2**

A summary of the studies included in the review

Author(s)	Sample	Design/Analyses	Types and sources of social support	Theories	Findings	Themes
	Community-dwelling middle-aged women residing in Busan metropolitan city	descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson correlation coefficient, and multiple regression analysis.			combined with self-efficacy and marital satisfaction; self-efficacy, marital satisfaction, and social support are the key factors affecting aging anxiety,	perceptions of aging; social support reduces aging anxiety;
Kim, Y., Lee, J., & Lee, Y. J. (2018) (12)	Total: 131 22 males; 109 females Age range: 55-64 South Korea Community-dwelling late middle-aged adults	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics, two-sample t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Scheffe's post-hoc, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis.	Types of support are not explicitly specified, while typical sources include family, friends, and community networks.	Rowe and Kahn's Successful Aging Theory	More social support is linked to better aging outcomes; social support is as important as health and self-esteem in explaining successful aging; both good health and strong social support are key to aging well.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging.
Santini, Z. I., Koyanagi, A. I., Tyrovolas, S., Haro, J. M., & Koushede, V. (2019) (13)	Total: 6,912 3,318 males (48%); 3,601 females (52%) Age range: 50 years and older Ireland First wave of the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)	Cross-sectional design using online survey data/ descriptive statistics, hierarchical multivariable linear regression analysis.	Both structural (social networks and social participants) and functional (quality of social relationships perceived support, and social strain) relationships with spouse, children, other family members, and friends.	Theoretical framework that emphasizes the relationship between social support, social networks, perceptions of aging, and health outcomes.	Being socially connected leads to more positive views on aging, while isolation and loneliness lead to more negative ones; supportive relationships improve perceptions of aging, but strained relationships make them worse; low support and loneliness predict negative views on aging even when depression is taken into account; online networks and community activities could help improve aging perceptions.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging.

**Table 2**

A summary of the studies included in the review

Author(s)	Sample	Design/Analyses	Types and sources of social support	Theories	Findings	Themes
Seo, J. H., & Noh, Y. G. (2019) (14)	Total: 160 160 females Age range: 40-60 South Korea Community-dwelling middle-aged women residing in C city	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis.	Types of support are not explicitly specified, while typical sources include family (parents and children), friends, and spouse (husband).	Not specified	More social support means less aging anxiety; support from a spouse is especially effective in reducing aging anxiety; healthy lifestyle behaviors and strong support together help lower aging anxiety; different types of support have different effects, with spousal support standing out.	Social support reduces aging anxiety.
Yeom, H. E., & Ju, K. O. (2020) (15)	Total: 244 127 males; 117 females Age range: 40-64 South Korea Community-dwelling middle-aged adults	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis.	Types of support are not explicitly specified, while the source is predominantly family members.	Not specified	Negative views of aging symptoms increase stress; family support mediates and moderates this link between aging perceptions and stress; strong family function can buffer the stress caused by negative aging perceptions; aging perceptions shape how family support affects stress.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging.
Yeom, H. E., Jung, M., & Park, E. (2020) (16)	Total: 245 Mean age: 51.5 years South Korea	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics and PROCESS macro.	Social relation with family, friends, and community networks.	Not specified	More social support is linked to better aging expectations and healthier habits; this link is stronger in younger middle-aged adults; positive aging expectations help explain how social support leads to healthier behaviors; supportive relationships encourage healthy lifestyles by shaping positive views of aging.	The role of life stage and social structure in shaping support.

**Table 2**

A summary of the studies included in the review

Author(s)	Sample	Design/Analyses	Types and sources of social support	Theories	Findings	Themes
O'Brien, E. L., & Sharifian, N. (2020) (17)	Total: 137 60 males (43.8%); 77 females (56.2%) Age range: 21-76 United States Online community from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing platform/ descriptive statistics and hierarchical multiple regression analysis.	Cross-sectional design using online data collection through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing platform/ descriptive statistics and hierarchical multiple regression analysis.	Both perceived social support (emotional and instrumental) and received social support (emotional) from various social ties such as family, friends, or caregivers.	Theoretical framework that emphasizes the relationship between stress, social support, aging attitudes, and awareness of age-related changes.	Perceived support relates to both positive and negative views of aging; received emotional support is primarily tied to noticing aging losses. The effects of stress on aging perceptions depend on attitudes toward aging and the type of support. The impact of support varies with people's expectations about aging.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging.
Mohamadzadeh, M., Zanjari, N., Arani, Z. A., Shoraka, H., & Pirouzeh, R. (2024) (18)	Total: 330 129 males; 201 females Age range: 40-59 Iran Urban middle-aged population	Cross-sectional survey design using a structured questionnaire/ descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and linear regression.	Social support from three domains, family, friends, and significant others.	Theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of social support, socio-economic factors, and perceptions of aging in shaping attitudes toward aging.	Support from family, friends, and significant other is linked to more positive attitudes toward aging; family support is the strongest predictor; feeling financially secure predicts more positive aging attitudes; older age and higher education are linked to better perceptions of aging.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging.
<b>Longitudinal</b>						
Schwartz, E., Ayalon, L., & Huxhold, O. (2021) (19)	Total: 6,089 3,106 males (51%); 2,983 females (49%) Age range: 40 years and older Germany Community-dwelling adults	Longitudinal design from the German Ageing Survey (DEAS) 2008 and 2014 waves/ descriptive statistics, structural equation modelling (SEM), model testing and comparison.	Informal and formal support from family, friends, community members or organizations.	Stereotype Embodiment Theory	Positive views of aging are linked to more social activity, both informal and formal; helping and supporting others informally improves aging perceptions; positive perceptions encourage social activity, and social activity improves perceptions.	Bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging.

**Table 2**

A summary of the studies included in the review

Author(s)	Sample	Design/Analyses	Types and sources of social support	Theories	Findings	Themes
Choi, E. Y., Zelinski, E. M., & Ailshire, J. (2023) (20)	Total: 11,145 5,126 males (46%); 6,019 females (54%) Age range: 50 years and older United States Community-dwelling adults	Longitudinal design from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) 2014 and 2016 waves/ descriptive statistics and multilevel linear regression.	Neighbourhood social environment, including community engagement and perceived neighbourhood characteristics.	Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST)	People in neighborhoods with strong social connections view aging more positively; living in disordered neighborhoods is linked to more negative views of aging; the positive effect of neighborhood cohesion is stronger for middle-aged adults; strengthening community bonds may especially benefit middle-aged residents.	The role of life stage and social structure in shaping support.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Discussion of the Results

This scoping review addressed a critical gap in the literature by focusing on middle-aged adults aged 40 to 60, a life stage where perception of aging solidifies and becomes integrated into individuals' beliefs and behaviors. Synthesizing findings to answer the guiding review questions confirms midlife as a crucial developmental phase during which interventions can proactively alter aging pathways.

The reviewed literature indicates that emotional and instrumental support, primarily from spouses and family members, is most consistently associated with perceptions of aging. Geographic patterns emerged, though the concentration of studies in East Asia (notably South Korea) limits broad cross-cultural comparisons. Within this available literature, East Asian studies frequently emphasized familial support, including spousal and intergenerational care. In contrast, few studies from Western contexts highlighted more diversified support networks encompassing friends and community ties. These preliminary distinctions suggest cultural context may shape support mechanisms, but the limited number and geographic spread of studies preclude definitive conclusions.

Robust evidence reveals a clear relationship between social support and perceptions of aging. Emotional and instrumental support fosters positive perceptions and reduces aging anxiety. Conversely, positive perceptions of aging appear to enhance an individual's social engagement, whereas negative perceptions correlate with isolation and stress, potentially creating self-perpetuating cycles of decline over time. This dynamic extends beyond immediate networks such as neighborhood cohesion, measured through trust and collective efficacy, which correlated strongly with positive perceptions, while weak social ties in disorganized environments worsened aging anxiety. This underscores the role of broader sociological systems in shaping aging trajectories.

The use of explicit theoretical frameworks was inconsistent throughout the literature. Most studies ( $n=8$ ) did not specify a guiding theoretical model. Among ( $n=5$ ), the most referred to were Stereotype Embodiment Theory (10,19). And Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (9). Other frameworks identified include Rowe and Kahn's Successful Aging Theory (12), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (20). This scarcity of theoretical grounding represents a significant gap, limiting the understanding of underlying mechanisms and the development of a cohesive explanatory model for how support influences perceptions of aging.

The heavy reliance on cross-sectional quantitative designs substantially limits interpretive depth. Such designs cannot establish temporal directionality, leaving unresolved whether social support shapes perceptions of aging or whether aging perceptions influence social engagement. This limitation is particularly consequential in midlife, a period marked by dynamic transitions in health, work, and caregiving roles. Without longitudinal or mixed methods approaches, the developmental processes and reciprocal mechanisms underlying these associations remain poorly understood, as purely measures overlook the subjective and culturally embedded meanings of both "support" and "aging".

Overall, the key findings reveal three main themes: (1) a bidirectional relationship between social support and perceptions of aging, where support fosters positive views and, in turn, positive views enhance social engagement; (2) social support as a mitigator of aging anxiety, with emotional and spousal support being particularly effective; and (3) the role of life stage and social structure, where younger midlife adults and those in cohesive neighbourhoods report more positive aging perceptions.

#### **4.2 Gaps and Future Research**

Substantial gaps constrain the current understanding of how social support shapes aging perceptions in midlife. Geographically, the evidence is unevenly distributed, with a pronounced concentration in East Asia (notably South Korea) and neglecting other Asian countries and global regions. This limits the generalizability of findings across diverse cultural and socioeconomic landscapes.

Demographically, the reviewed studies underrepresent several marginalized populations, including individuals with low socioeconomic status, rural residents, unmarried or divorced adults, informal caregivers, and individuals with chronic illnesses or disabilities. This omission is particularly problematic in midlife aging research, as these groups often face compounded stressors such as financial insecurity, caregiving burden, stigma, and limited access to support networks, which may intensify aging anxiety and shape aging perceptions in distinct ways. Excluding these populations limits the equity and applicability of current evidence.

Methodologically, the field is dominated by cross-sectional designs (n=11 of 13 studies), which presents a fundamental constraint. These studies cannot establish causal directionality or clarify whether social support shapes aging perceptions, or whether one's outlook on aging influences the support they seek and receive. This limitation is especially significant given the bidirectional relationship indicated by our thematic synthesis. Without longitudinal or experimental data, the mechanisms and temporal dynamics of this relationship remain speculative. Furthermore, the lack of qualitative and mixed-methods research restricts deeper insight into the subjective and contextual meanings of both "support" and "aging".

Theoretically, while mediators such as self-efficacy and financial security have been examined, their causal pathways lack experimental validation. Inconsistent use of explicit theoretical frameworks further limits the development of a cohesive explanatory model for how support influences perceptions of aging.

To address these gaps, further research must first expand geographical representation beyond East Asia to include underrepresented regions, enabling investigation into how factors like urbanization, shifting family structures, and cultural context moderate the relationship between support and aging perceptions. Additionally, future research should demographically prioritize inclusive sampling to capture the experiences of marginalized populations, such as individuals with low economic status, rural residents, unmarried or divorced adults, informal caregivers, and individuals with chronic illnesses or disabilities. Their inclusion is essential for developing structurally aware interventions that address disparities in aging well. To deepen our understanding of this phenomenon, further research is warranted to employ longitudinal and mixed methods designs to establish causality, capture lived experience, and disentangle the reciprocal dynamics of support and perception over time. There is a need to pursue experimental and comparative studies to validate causal pathways and examine the efficacy of emerging digital support tools versus traditional networks.

#### **4.3 Limitations and Strengths**

As with any scoping review, it is challenging to capture all relevant studies by meeting the inclusion criteria. Our decision to include studies based on informative English abstracts, particularly when full texts were unavailable or in other languages. This may have limited access to supplementary methodological and contextual details. The predominance of cross-sectional designs across the included literature restricts causal interpretation of the relationship between social

support and perception of aging. Furthermore, the geographic concentration of studies in East Asia constrains the generalizability of findings related to cultural contexts. Finally, consistent with scoping review methodology, this review did not include a formal appraisal of methodological quality or risk of bias. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an overview of existing evidence rather than an assessment of evidentiary strength.

This review offers several contributions to the literature. First, it systematically addresses a critical gap by focusing on adults aged 40-60, a pivotal and understudied developmental period during which perceptions of aging solidify. Second, it synthesizes cross-cultural evidence to establish a bidirectional relationship between social support and aging perceptions, demonstrating that emotional and instrumental aid, particularly from spouses and family. It not only fosters positive aging attitudes but is also reciprocally reinforced by them. Third, it highlights the role of socioecological factors, such as neighborhood cohesion and life-stage transitions, as important structural determinants of aging trajectories. Collectively, these strengths provide a foundational evidence base to inform life-course interventions and policies targeting midlife.

## 5. Conclusion

Understanding how perceptions of aging form during midlife, and how social support shapes these perceptions is vital for fostering individual well-being and resilient communities. This review establishes midlife as a critical window during which social support profoundly shapes long-term aging perceptions and trajectories, while also revealing significant knowledge gaps, including geographical imbalances, methodological constraints, and the exclusion of marginalized voices. The findings of this scoping review have several implications. For researchers, future studies should prioritize longitudinal and mixed methods designs to clarify causal pathways and capture the lived experiences of aging in midlife, particularly among underrepresented populations. For practitioners, incorporating assessments of social support and aging perceptions into midlife health and counselling services may help identify individuals at risk of aging anxiety. For policymakers, investment in community-based and workplace initiatives that strengthen social connections during midlife, such as caregiver support programmes and age-inclusive employment policies that may promote more positive aging trajectories. As a scoping review, this synthesis maps patterns and gaps rather than establishing definitive evidence, and thus, the recommendations offered should be viewed as strategic directions for future research and intervention development. Collectively, these actions can bridge research, practice, and policy to transform midlife from a period of potential anxiety into one of agency, leveraging social support as a foundational resource for resilient aging across diverse populations.

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