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Subjective Feeling of Happiness and Social Determinants of Quality of Life

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to develop an integrated conceptual synthesis of the relationships between individual experiences of well-being, assessments of living conditions, and social-environmental factors, while distinguishing their direct, mediated, and context-dependent associations. The study was conducted in September 2026 in the format of an integrative review of 25 English-language peer-reviewed scientific articles from 2022–2025, which covered data from European countries, Ukraine, China, Japan, the United States of America, South Africa, Guatemala, the Philippines and other national contexts. The reviewed scientific material was systematically organized into five analytical blocks. The findings indicated that material resources and economic status are associated with higher levels of well-being, although these relationships vary with initial income, perceived inequality, security, fairness, and perceived position in the social hierarchy. In one of the included meta-analyses, the average positive effect of cash transfers was d = 0.13, supporting the importance of material resources while also indicating that financial resources alone do not fully explain well-being. The synthesis found that support, trust, participation, and family and neighbourhood ties are positively associated with well-being, particularly when they provide meaningful inclusion, reciprocity, and access to assistance; loneliness, social exclusion, and unemployment are negatively associated with well-being. The spatial environment was also found to be relevant, although its associations with well-being depend on safety, housing status, and access to local resources. The integrated interpretation of the results produced a three-level conceptual structure in which structural-resource conditions interact with interpersonal relationships through individuals' subjective assessments of their social position. These findings support integrated approaches to improving well-being that combine material support with measures to strengthen community participation, improve access to assistance, and reduce inequality and social exclusion.

Keywords: population well-being, material security, interpersonal ties, community participation, inequality, trust

1. INTRODUCTION

The subjective feeling of happiness is increasingly understood not only as an outcome of individual psychological appraisals but also as an indicator of the extent to which the social environment provides people with resources, relationships, and opportunities to meet their basic needs. In this context, quality of life is shaped by the interaction of material conditions and social relationships, and its subjective assessment is associated with socioeconomic status, levels of trust and cohesion, and individuals' participation in social networks. In particular, Fors Connolly and Lindh [1] established a relationship between socioeconomic status and subjective well-being through need fulfilment, while Dwyer and Dunn [2] showed the significance of material resources for the experience of happiness. Nevertheless, this body of evidence also indicates that economic resources alone cannot fully explain observed differences in subjective quality of life.

Alongside material living conditions, the broader social context also has considerable explanatory significance. Bottoni and Addeo [3], analysing European countries, found a positive relationship between social cohesion and subjective quality of life. At the interpersonal level, general trust is associated with well-being through social inclusion and the quality of social connections [4]. However, the relationship between trust and well-being is more complex than a simple, unidirectional association: Glatz and Schwerdtfeger [5] showed the need to distinguish between social and institutional trust and to establish causal relationships cautiously. Thus, social capital, cohesion, and trust should be regarded not as merely secondary characteristics but as distinct dimensions of the social environment associated with subjective well-being [3, 4].

Despite the considerable body of evidence already available, the scientific understanding of this problem remains fragmented. Some studies focus primarily on material status and the redistribution of resources [1, 2], whereas other studies examine social cohesion, trust, and social connectedness [4, 5]. The question of how these different groups of determinants interact in shaping the subjective feeling of happiness and individual assessments of quality of life has not yet been sufficiently systematized. The lack of an integrated interpretation linking material conditions with social-relational factors therefore constitutes the central research gap addressed by the present review.

The aim of the present study is to synthesize and conceptually integrate evidence on the relationships between the subjective feeling of happiness, quality of life, and their principal social determinants, drawing on contemporary scientific research.

To achieve this research aim, the following specific objectives were established: 1) to systematize theoretical approaches to the relationship between subjective happiness and quality of life; 2) to identify the socioeconomic and social-relational determinants of their formation; 3) to determine the mechanisms of influence of social cohesion, trust and social connectedness on subjective well-being; 4) to conceptualize the relationship between material and non-material social factors in the structure of subjective quality of life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary research increasingly moves beyond interpreting subjective happiness as an exclusively individual psychological state. Rather, subjective happiness is understood in relation to interacting material resources, social status, the quality of interpersonal relationships, participation in community life, and characteristics of the surrounding living environment. At the same time, the concepts of subjective well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and quality of life are frequently treated as related, but not identical, constructs, which complicates the direct comparison of results. The research conducted by Prati [6] illustrates this issue, as numerous correlates of quality of life, happiness and life satisfaction among Europeans older than 50 years were simultaneously modelled using machine-learning methods. The strength of this approach lies in its multidimensional analysis; however, identifying statistical predictors does not, by itself, establish the causal mechanisms through which social conditions become reflected in subjective evaluations of life [6].

The relationship between objective material circumstances and their subjective interpretation remains particularly contested in the literature. McGuire et al. [7], after synthesizing research on cash transfers in low- and middle-income countries, found a small but statistically significant positive effect of such transfers on subjective well-being. This finding supports the importance of material resources but does not justify reducing the experience of happiness to income alone. Ren et al. [8] showed that the relationship between subjective socioeconomic status and life satisfaction is mediated by the perception of social fairness and social trust. Similarly, Sagioglou and Hommerich [9] established that subjective status and relative deprivation were more strongly associated with well-being than the independent direct associations of income and education, while perceived social exclusion partly accounted for these relationships. John et al. [10] also showed the significance not only of the objective scale of inequality but also of its perceived magnitude. Consequently, material circumstances appear to operate not in isolation but alongside social comparison, perceived fairness, and individuals' assessments of their position in society [8–10].

The quality of interpersonal relationships constitutes another important thematic dimension. Ruppel et al. [11] distinguished the characteristics of personal social networks and showed that positive ties and perceived support are

associated with higher subjective well-being, while difficult or burdensome contacts have the opposite association. This finding challenges the oversimplified assumption that merely having a larger number of social contacts automatically improves quality of life. The function and perceived quality of these relationships also matter substantially. This is consistent with the results of Li et al. [12], where social support acts as a mediator between depression and subjective well-being among older people with chronic diseases. Nevertheless, the age-related and clinical specificity of these samples limits the direct generalizability of the observed patterns to the wider population [11, 12].

Social participation likewise cannot be treated as a universally straightforward source of happiness. The meta-analytic structural equation modelling conducted by Lv et al. [13] confirmed the relationship between social participation and life satisfaction among older people, but part of this relationship is statistically mediated by depressive symptoms and cognitive functioning. This finding has important methodological implications: social determinants may be related to quality of life through intermediate psychological and functional mechanisms, rather than solely through direct associations [13]. A comparable multilevel pattern can be observed in Hu et al. [14], who used panel data to identify an association between marriage and higher subjective well-being in Chinese society. However, the cultural specificity of such a result means that marital status should not be interpreted as a universal predictor without considering normative expectations, the structure of family relations and the sociocultural environment [14].

Another important strand of research shifts analytical attention from interpersonal relationships towards the spatial characteristics of everyday living conditions. He et al. [15] found a positive relationship between residential greenspace and the subjective well-being of older people and showed the mediating role of well-being in the relationship between green areas and mortality. Nevertheless, the findings of Holy-Hasted and Burchell [16] challenge the assumption that particular types of public space are universally beneficial: in Greater London, the relationships of different types of public space with well-being depended, in particular, on neighbourhood safety and the housing context. Thus, the physical environment should not be regarded solely as an independent ecological factor, but also as a socially structured setting, the accessibility, safety and quality of which are differentiated between population groups [15, 16].

The importance of social context becomes particularly evident during crises and major disruptions in individuals' life circumstances. Lawes et al. [17], using longitudinal panel data, documented considerable differences between individuals in changes in subjective well-being after unemployment, with expectations of re-employment being more important for the nature of these changes than most of the stable psychological resources studied. These findings challenge explanations that attribute adaptation to socioeconomic losses primarily to stable individual characteristics [17]. In the Ukrainian context, Pavlova et al. [18] established that the well-being of young adults during wartime was associated with both individual resources and contextual experiences, including occupation, environmental insecurity, and displacement. Rogowska et al. [19], comparing Polish and Ukrainian students during the COVID-19 pandemic, also found a complex system of direct and indirect relationships between stress, mental and physical health and life satisfaction. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the contextual dependence of subjective well-being, although crisis and specific student samples limit the extent to which their results can be generalized to the overall population [18, 19].

In summary, the contemporary research literature establishes a broad range of social determinants associated with subjective happiness, although the evidence remains conceptually fragmented. Material status, perceived inequality, social exclusion, support, participation, family ties, employment and the spatial environment are mostly analysed in separate models, on different age and cultural samples and with different ways of operationalizing and measuring well-being [6, 9]. Even methodologically strong panel, cohort and meta-analytic studies do not completely resolve problems of comparability across these analytical levels [7, 13, 15]. The central scientific gap is the lack of an integrated explanation of how material, social-relational and contextual-spatial determinants relate to one another in forming the subjective feeling of happiness and the assessment of quality of life, as well as which of the established relationships are direct, mediated or dependent on the social context. This continuing fragmentation therefore justifies a comprehensive conceptual synthesis of evidence concerning the social determinants of quality of life.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Ukraine in September 2026 as a non-experimental, literature-based investigation employing an integrative review design to examine previously published scientific research. This study design was appropriate for the stated aim, which focused on synthesizing and conceptually integrating the relationships between the subjective feeling of happiness, quality of life and their social determinants, without recruiting an original sample of respondents or collecting new primary empirical data. The unit of analysis was an individual peer-reviewed scientific publication in which at least one of the target constructs–subjective well-being, happiness, life satisfaction or subjective quality of life–was studied in connection with social, socioeconomic, relational or contextual factors.

The body of material examined comprised a purposively selected, non-random documentary sample of 25 English-language peer-reviewed scientific articles published in 2022–2025. Before inclusion in the analytical corpus, each publication was checked against the publisher's official bibliographic records for its title, authorship, year of publication, journal

title, volume, issue number, page range or article number, and digital object identifier (DOI). The inclusion criteria were direct relevance to the issue of subjective well-being or quality of life, analysis of at least one relevant social determinant, and reporting of findings from an empirical, cohort, panel, comparative, experimental, meta-analytic, or other methodologically relevant scientific investigation. The corpus included works that assessed income and socioeconomic status, perceived inequality, social trust, social capital, support, participation, family relations, employment, social exclusion, characteristics of the spatial environment and crisis social conditions. Non-peer-reviewed materials, publications without a direct relationship to the target constructs, non-scholarly web resources, regulatory documents, and sources originating from Russia or Belarus were excluded from the analytical corpus.

The selected publications were assessed consistently using a common analytical framework. For each article, the research design, country and social context, sample characteristics, approach used to operationalize and measure subjective well-being, social determinant studied, direction of each reported statistical relationship, presence of mediating or contextual mechanisms and limitations indicated by the authors were recorded. Following data extraction, the findings were organized into five predefined analytical blocks: material-status factors; social ties, trust and social capital; social participation, family relations and employment; spatial-environmental conditions; crisis and contextual factors. The type of research design was taken into account when interpreting the results: the findings of cross-sectional associative studies were interpreted as evidence of statistical relationships, whereas causal interpretations were reserved for findings supported by appropriately designed investigations.

In the final stage, recurring, inconsistent, and context-dependent findings were compared, with particular attention to distinguishing direct and statistically mediated relationships between social determinants and subjective well-being. The primary numerical datasets underlying the selected publications were not subjected to any new statistical reanalysis, and therefore Student's t-test, the Mann–Whitney U test, correlation tests and other procedures of inferential statistics were not applied within this study. A quantitative meta-analysis was not conducted because of the heterogeneity of samples, designs, indicators and methods of operationalizing subjective well-being. No specialized laboratory apparatus or technical equipment was required for the review. Ethical approval was not required for the present review because it exclusively analyzed previously published scientific literature and did not involve new participation by human subjects or animals, or the collection and processing of personal participant-level data.

4. RESULTS

The systematic coding of all 25 selected publications revealed substantial methodological and contextual heterogeneity across the reviewed body of research. The analysed works covered the individual, family, local and macrosocial levels of social determinants, while the principal subjective outcomes were measured as subjective well-being (hereafter SWB), happiness, life satisfaction, or subjective quality of life. This distinction was important because the same social characteristics did not consistently show equivalent explanatory value across the different components of well-being. In particular, in the study by Prati [6], machine-learning models explained 53% of the variation in quality of life, 33% of life satisfaction and only 18% of happiness, with physical health and subjective life circumstances being the most significant for the first two results, while psychological and sociodemographic characteristics played a greater role for happiness. Accordingly, findings across the complete analytical corpus indicated that happiness, life satisfaction, and quality of life cannot be treated as fully interchangeable outcomes.

To ensure transparency and reproducibility in the subsequent thematic synthesis, the design, social context, group studied, central social determinant and direction of each reported statistical relationship in each of the 25 publications were first compared. The detailed findings from this initial comparative stage are presented in Table 1.

4.1. MATERIAL-STATUS DETERMINANTS

The first analytical block indicated that material resources are consistently associated with subjective well-being, although absolute income alone is not sufficient to explain variation in this outcome. Some of the strongest causal evidence in the reviewed corpus was provided by Dwyer and Dunn [2]: among 300 participants from seven countries, randomly assigned transfers of USD 10,000 produced improvements in the three measured components of subjective well-being. Compared with the control group, the transfer recipients showed larger increases in life satisfaction, greater positive affect, and lower negative affect across the follow-up period. At the same time, the magnitude of the resulting improvement in well-being varied across groups: participants with lower incomes and participants living in lower-income countries experienced larger well-being gains from the same amount of transferred money [2].

These experimental findings are consistent with the broader evidence synthesized in the systematic review by McGuire et al. [7]. A meta-analysis of 45 studies with a total sample of 116,999 participants showed a small but statistically significant positive effect of cash transfers on SWB, measured after an average follow-up period of approximately two years, Cohen's $d = 0.13$. Thus, material resources are linked to well-being by more than cross-sectional associations alone.

Table 1. *Analytical characteristics of the research corpus*

Source	Design and context	Sample / data	Main determinant	Key result
Adedeji et al. [4]	Structural modelling, Germany	ESS Wave 10, n = 8,725	General trust, social participation, social resources	General trust was positively associated with SWB; social participation retained a significant relationship with well-being in the mediation model
Bottoni & Addeo [3]	Multilevel model, 29 European countries	ESS Round 6, over 54 thousand persons	Social cohesion, income, subjective social status	Social cohesion was positively associated with subjective quality of life and reduced the relative role of income and social status
Dwyer & Dunn [2]	Preregistered randomized experiment, 7 countries	n = 300, of whom 200 received USD 10,000	Material resources	The cash transfer causally increased life satisfaction and positive affect and reduced negative affect; the effect was greater at lower incomes
Fors Connolly & Lindh [1]	Time-lagged SEM, Sweden	ESS/CRONOS-2, analytical sample n = 930	Income, occupational status, education, need fulfilment	Income was the strongest component of SES; autonomy and security acted as the main intermediate mechanisms
Glatz & Schwerdtfeger [5]	Multilevel cross-lagged model	217 observations, 30 countries, 9 ESS time points	Social and institutional trust	Support was found for the direction SWB → social trust, but there was little evidence for the reverse causal direction
He et al. [15]	Prospective cohort study, China	n = 13,133, age 65+	Residential greenspace	Greater provision of green areas was positively associated with SWB; SWB partially mediated the relationship between greenspace and mortality
Holy-Hasted & Burchell [16]	Multifactor spatial model, Greater London	n = 3 684	Green and hard public spaces, safety	Green spaces were positively associated with well-being; the effect of hard public spaces depended on neighbourhood safety and housing status
Hu et al. [14]	Five-wave panel, fixed effects and SEM, China	n = 15,507; SEM n = 13,196	Marital status	The transition to marriage was associated with higher SWB; the relationship depended on gender, income and cultural context and was partially realized through human and social capital
John et al. [10]	Three studies: international, representative and experimental	41 countries; n = 836; n = 302	Perceived inequality	A greater subjectively perceived scale of inequality was associated with lower SWB regardless of objective inequality and the assessment of its fairness
Lawes et al. [17]	Monthly panel, Germany	two samples of job seekers, n = 552 and n = 988	Unemployment, re-employment expectations	Unemployment reduced life satisfaction; the negative change was greater with low re-employment expectations
Li et al. [12]	Cross-sectional survey and SEM, rural Western China	n = 2,156, older persons with chronic diseases	Social support	Social support was positively associated with SWB and mediated 10.23% of the relationship between depression and SWB
Lv et al. [13]	Meta-analytic structural equation modelling	50 articles, 66 effects, N = 161,854	Social participation	A direct relationship between participation and life satisfaction and indirect paths through depression and cognitive functioning were found
McGuire et al. [7]	Systematic review and meta-analysis	45 studies, N = 116,999	Cash transfers	After an average two-year follow-up, transfers had a small but positive effect on SWB, d = 0.13
Pavlova et al. [18]	Survey under wartime conditions, Ukraine	n = 593 students	Wartime context, emotional support, personal resources	34.7% were dissatisfied with life; emotional support together with optimism, hope, resilience and other factors predicted life satisfaction
Prati [6]	Machine-learning modelling, Europe	n = 62,500, age 50+	Broad set of living conditions	The structure of correlates differed for quality of life, life satisfaction and happiness
Ren et al. [8]	Survey and mediation modelling, China	n = 17,217	Subjective SES	Subjective SES was positively associated with life satisfaction through the perception of social fairness and social trust
Rogowska et al. [19]	Cross-sectional comparative study, Poland and Ukraine	n = 3,230 students	Pandemic stress and health	Lower stress was directly associated with higher life satisfaction; a system of indirect relationships through physical and mental characteristics was found
Ruppel et al. [11]	Three-wave panel study, United States	n = 1,159	Social networks, support, loneliness	Positive ties were associated with higher SWB, difficult contacts and loneliness with lower SWB; most relationships reflected interindividual differences
Sagioglou & Hommerich [9]	Cross-cultural comparison	N = 2 155, Japan, Germany, United States	Subjective status, relative deprivation	Subjective status and relative deprivation were stronger predictors of SWB than income and education; part of the effect was explained by social exclusion
Varghese et al. [20]	Analysis of three prospective cohorts	Guatemala n = 1,258; Philippines n = 1,323; South Africa n = 1,393	Subjective social status	A higher assessment of economic position and social respect was consistently associated with greater happiness regardless of objective SES
Wilding et al. [21]	Instrumental heterogeneous treatment effects model, United Kingdom	n = 50,006	Social participation	Participation was associated with greater life satisfaction and happiness; the effect was stronger among socially more vulnerable groups
Xin et al. [22]	2 × 2 experiment	n = 206 students	Providing social support	Voluntary and subjectively effective provision of support increased positive affect and life satisfaction
Xu et al. [23]	CGSS micro-empirical study, China	n = 10,014 rural residents	Trust and social capital	Trust and social capital were positively associated with happiness; social capital performed a partial mediation function
Zangger [24]	Longitudinal Swiss Household Panel data	up to n = 4,530 for SWB models	Neighbourhood relations	Improvement in neighbourhood relations mitigated the decline in SWB during COVID-19; the effect was specific to the crisis period
Zhang [25]	Regression analysis of CHIPs, rural China	9,200 observations	Income and social capital	Higher income, social participation and reciprocity were positively correlated with happiness

Note: the table summarizes the findings of the included publications in the form in which they were interpreted by the authors of the respective publications; repeated statistical assessment of the effects was not conducted in this study. Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of the systematization and comparative analysis of 25 scientific publications included in the analytical corpus of the study [1–25].

At the same time, the modest average effect size indicates that increased financial resources address only part of the broader set of mechanisms underlying subjective quality of life.

Findings from other included studies offer further clarification of this overall pattern. In the temporally ordered Swedish survey analysis conducted by Fors Connolly and Lindh [1], income had a stronger association with basic need fulfilment and SWB than educational attainment, while occupational status provided an additional positive contribution. The findings suggest that the importance of material resources lies not only in their possession but also in the needs they enable people to satisfy: after the simultaneous consideration of five needs, autonomy and, particularly, perceived security remained statistically significant predictors and mediating mechanisms. Thus, the relationship between material status and well-being appears to be partly explained by perceived security and a sense of control over one's own life.

The greater explanatory role of perceived social standing, compared with formal status indicators, was particularly evident in the cross-cultural studies. Sagioglou and Hommerich [9] established that subjective socioeconomic status (SES) and personal relative deprivation independently and more strongly predicted SWB in Japan, Germany and the United States, while the independent direct associations of income and education were negligible after all of these measures were entered simultaneously. Similarly, Varghese et al. [20] found small but consistent positive relationships between happiness and assessments of one's own economic position and social respect in three cohorts from low- and middle-income countries even after accounting for objective socioeconomic position.

Accordingly, material inequality is relevant not only as an objective pattern of resource distribution. John et al. [10] showed that a greater perceived scale of inequality was associated with lower SWB regardless of the objective level of inequality and beliefs concerning its fairness. The experimental part of their work provided partial support for the causal influence of perceived inequality on the affective components of well-being. Ren et al. [8] provided complementary evidence for this interpretation: the relationship between subjective socioeconomic status and life satisfaction included both a direct association and sequential statistical mediation through perceived social equity and social trust.

The comparison between individual-level and broader societal-level relationships was particularly informative. In the study conducted by Bottoni and Addeo [3], almost one-quarter of the variance in subjective quality of life was located at the between-country level. A person's own position on the social ladder had a greater positive relationship with quality of life than income, while after the inclusion of social cohesion, gross domestic product (GDP) and the Gini coefficient were no longer significant predictors of subjective quality of life in the relevant model. Furthermore, in countries with greater social cohesion, the relationships of income and social position with quality of life were weaker. This pattern suggests that social cohesion can operate as a contextual moderator that partly weakens the dependence of well-being on an individual's material resources and perceived social position.

4.2. SOCIAL TIES, TRUST AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The second analytical block identified consistently positive associations between supportive social relationships and well-being, while also showing that the causal direction of these associations cannot always be established unambiguously. According to Adedeji et al. [4], general trust was positively associated with SWB in a representative German sample, and social participation remained significant in the full structural model. In contrast, the path from social resources to SWB became insignificant after the simultaneous consideration of other components. Thus, what was important for well-being was found to be not the simple availability of social resources alone, but meaningful participation in social interaction.

At the same time, Glatz and Schwerdtfeger [5] provide important grounds for caution against interpreting trust as a unidirectional cause of happiness. Using longitudinal aggregate data from 30 European countries, the authors obtained support for the temporal sequence from SWB to a subsequent level of social trust, while there was little evidence for the reverse direction. This finding represents one of the most important qualifications to the apparently consistent associations identified in the reviewed corpus. A positive cross-sectional correlation between trust and well-being does not automatically mean that it is trust that produces well-being. Part of the observed relationship may operate in the reverse direction, when a higher level of well-being contributes to greater trust in others.

Research conducted in rural China offers another perspective on this relationship. Xu et al. [23] established positive relationships of social trust and social capital with happiness, with social capital partially mediating the relationship between trust and subjective well-being. The effects were heterogeneous by age and degree of market competition. Zhang [25], using 9,200 observations of rural households, also found that, along with income, greater engagement in social activities and reciprocal interpersonal relationships were positively correlated with happiness. Thus, in environments where access to resources is largely realized through networks of relations, economic and social capital may function as complementary rather than competing resources.

Nevertheless, the number of interpersonal connections alone is not a sufficient indicator of their potential significance for well-being. Ruppel et al. [11] showed that positive and supportive contacts are associated with higher SWB, while difficult or demanding interpersonal contacts and feelings of loneliness are associated with lower SWB. The particularly strong indicator was the individual's subjective perception of social isolation. However, the panel models showed that a

significant part of the relationships between network characteristics and SWB were attributable to stable differences between individuals rather than to changes experienced within the same person over time. This limits any causal interpretation of the simplistic assertion "more social contacts–more happiness."

The role of social support also depended substantially on its perceived functional quality. In Li et al. [12], social support was positively associated with the SWB of older people with chronic diseases and partially mediated the negative relationship between depression and well-being. At the same time, subjectively perceived support had a stronger association with the measured outcomes than the objective availability or utilization of support. The controlled experimental investigation conducted by Xin et al. [22] provided additional causal evidence from the perspective of individuals providing support: the voluntariness and perceived effectiveness of assistance increased positive affect and life satisfaction and reduced negative emotions. Thus, support is associated with well-being not only through receiving resources but also through autonomous and meaningful prosocial inclusion.

4.3. SOCIAL PARTICIPATION, FAMILY RELATIONS AND EMPLOYMENT

The third analytical block indicated that individuals' engagement in socially meaningful roles is associated with their subjective evaluations of life, although the magnitude of these associations varies substantially across population groups. Wilding et al. [21], using data from 50,006 adults in the United Kingdom and an instrumental model, associated social participation with reduced loneliness, better health, higher life satisfaction and greater happiness. The effects were stronger among persons with lower incomes, a lower educational level, as well as those who lived alone or without children. Thus, the apparent benefits of social participation were greatest among groups with fewer pre-existing alternative social resources.

The meta-analytic structural equation modelling conducted by Lv et al. [13] confirmed not only a direct relationship between social participation and the life satisfaction of older people but also two mediated mechanisms. The estimated indirect association mediated through depression was $\beta = 0.085$, the corresponding indirect association through cognitive functioning was $\beta = 0.015$, and the sequential indirect association involving both variables was $\beta = 0.005$. This pattern suggests that social participation is associated with life satisfaction both through participation itself and through relationships involving depressive symptoms and cognitive functioning.

Associations involving marital and family status were likewise not universal or independent of cultural context. Across five waves of data from the China Family Panel Studies, Hu et al. [14] found an increase in SWB after the transition to marriage, but the effect changed depending on gender, cultural context, income and educational differences between partners. The mediation model associated part of this effect with human and social capital. These findings suggest that marital status alone offers an incomplete explanation: the set of resources and social positions that arise together with it matters.

A contrasting change in social and economic roles was observed in research on unemployment. Lawes et al. [17] established a consistent decline in reported life satisfaction during episodes of unemployment in both German samples. In the mass-dismissal group, the average decline in life satisfaction indicators was approximately 4.24–4.51 percentage points, and the decline was more pronounced among individuals who had lower expectations of re-employment. At the same time, most previously formed psychological characteristics did not provide stable protection against the negative effect of job loss. Thus, the relationship between employment and subjective quality of life also depended on individuals' expectations about their prospects of returning to employment and regaining their socioeconomic role.

4.4. SPATIAL-ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

The fourth analytical block indicated that physical living environments are associated with subjective well-being through mechanisms that vary according to social circumstances. In the prospective cohort of He et al. [15], greater availability of green space in the residential environment was positively associated with the SWB of older people. Well-being, in turn, partially mediated the relationship between greenspace and mortality. At the same time, the effects were more pronounced among persons with lower income, residents of rural areas and towns and people with cognitive impairment. This pattern suggests that the potential value of an equivalent spatial resource differs across social groups.

The findings reported by Holy-Hasted and Burchell [16] also showed that the significance of public space cannot be reduced to the fact of its availability. Green spaces in Greater London were positively correlated with well-being, but no general direct association was identified for hard-surfaced public spaces. In safe neighbourhoods, such space was positively associated with well-being, while in neighbourhoods with low perceived safety the direction of the observed association was reversed. This interaction was especially pronounced among residents of social housing. Thus, a spatial resource acquires positive or negative significance depending on neighbourhood safety and the housing circumstances of the people who use it.

This pattern is consistent with the findings reported by Zangger [24] concerning localized social capital. During the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, persons whose relations with neighbours improved showed a significantly less

pronounced decline in subjective well-being. By comparison, friendship networks and online social networks did not provide a similarly pronounced additional buffering association. However, respondents who had greater resources before the pandemic were also more likely to report improved neighbourhood relationships. The local environment can therefore be understood as both a spatial and a social resource, although access to its potential protective benefits is itself socially unequal.

4.5. CRISIS AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

The fifth analytical block indicated that relationships between social determinants and subjective well-being may change under conditions of substantial external stress. In the Ukrainian sample of Pavlova et al. [18], 34.7% of young participants were dissatisfied with their own lives during the period of full-scale war. The authors identified the following statistically significant predictors of life satisfaction: optimism, hope, resilience, post-traumatic growth, the use of emotional support and the experience of living under occupation. Thus, even under extremely adverse societal conditions, social support remained associated with subjective life satisfaction, although this association coexisted with individual psychological factors and direct experiences of wartime conditions.

Evidence from the pandemic similarly illustrated the multidimensional nature of subjective well-being. In the study by Rogowska et al. [19], Ukrainian students had a higher mean life satisfaction score than Polish students, 22.86 compared with 20.55 points on the life satisfaction scale used in the study, although the interpretation of such a between-country difference is limited by the cross-sectional design. In the structural model, lower perceived stress had a direct positive relationship with life satisfaction and was also included in a system of indirect paths through indicators of physical and mental health. Considered alongside the findings reported by Zangger [24], these results suggest that a crisis context may not only reduce average well-being but also change the relative importance of individual social resources.

Integrating the findings from all five thematic blocks made it possible to compare recurring mechanisms linking social determinants with subjective well-being, rather than considering each explanatory variable separately. Before developing the integrated interpretation, the results of this comparative synthesis were organized systematically in Table 2.

Table 2. *Generalized patterns according to five analytical blocks*

Analytical block	Recurring result	Main intermediate mechanisms	Contextual dependence	Limits of causal interpretation
Material-status factors	Higher resources and status are mostly associated with higher SWB, but subjective position is often more important than formal indicators	Security, autonomy, social fairness, trust, social exclusion	Stronger effects of resources among economically less secure groups; social cohesion weakens dependence on income	The strongest causal support was obtained for cash transfers; a significant part of status models remains associative
Social ties, trust and social capital	Supportive ties, participation and capital are mostly positive, loneliness and difficult ties are negative	Social participation, quality of support, inclusion, subjective loneliness	Age, rural context, market environment, crisis	The causal direction trust → SWB is not confirmed unambiguously; a reverse relationship is possible
Participation, family and employment	Participation and stable social roles are mostly associated with higher well-being; unemployment with lower well-being	Depression, cognitive functioning, human and social capital, employment expectations	Income, education, living alone, cultural norms, gender	Stronger quasi-causal models are available for participation and family status, but the effects are heterogeneous
Spatial-environmental conditions	Green and safe local environments are associated with better SWB	Social interaction, local support, safety	Income, housing status, type of settlement, cognitive condition	Associations have been established for most spatial indicators; the direction depends on neighbourhood characteristics
Crisis and contextual factors	Crises reduce well-being, but social resources may perform a buffering function	Emotional support, local ties, stress, expectations of the future	War, pandemic, occupation, unemployment, socioeconomic vulnerability	Context-specific results predominate, and therefore their generalization to stable conditions requires caution

Source: compiled by the authors from the results of the integrative analysis and thematic generalization of 25 scientific publications included in the analytical corpus of the study.

A central finding of the integrative synthesis was that social determinants should not be interpreted as a collection of independent, parallel explanatory factors. In most works where mediating or moderating mechanisms were tested, the relationship with well-being involved intermediate subjective appraisals of social position or assessments concerning the availability and usefulness of social resources. For socioeconomic status, these mechanisms included perceived security and autonomy [1], social fairness and trust [8] and social exclusion [9]. For interpersonal relationships, meaningful social participation [4], the quality of perceived support [12], loneliness [11] and local neighbourhood interaction [24] were

important. For social participation in later life, depressive symptoms and cognitive functioning appeared as intermediate statistical pathways [13].

To distinguish direct, mediated, and contextually modified associations, the integrated analytical matrix in Table 3 was developed from recurring findings across the corpus. It is a conceptual synthesis rather than a statistical metamodel, and no new effect sizes were calculated.

Table 3. *Integrated Structure of the Relationships Between Social Determinants and Subjective Well-Being*

Initial social condition	Intermediate mechanism / modifier	Subjective result	Nature of support in the corpus
Material resource	Level of previous income	SWB, life satisfaction, affect	Causal experimental and meta-analytic support
Objective SES	Autonomy and security	SWB	Mediated temporally ordered relationship
Subjective SES	Social fairness → trust	Life satisfaction	Chain mediation
Subjective status / deprivation	Perceived social exclusion	SWB	Partial mediation, cultural modification
Social trust	Social participation / social capital	SWB / happiness	Positive indirect relationship, but the causal direction remains disputed
Social support	Subjective quality of support	SWB	Positive relationship and partial mediation
Social participation	Depression and cognitive functioning	Life satisfaction	Direct and multiple indirect relationship
Marital status	Human and social capital	SWB	Panel relationship with cultural and social heterogeneity
Unemployment	Re-employment expectations	Life satisfaction	Negative within-person change with moderation
Spatial resources	Safety, housing status, social interaction	SWB	Positive or conditional associative relationship
Crisis	Social support, neighbourhood relations, stress	SWB / life satisfaction	Context-dependent buffering action

Source: developed by the authors from the results of the integrative analysis and conceptual generalization of 25 scientific publications included in the analytical corpus of the study.

The matrix is intended to make the relationships across the five thematic blocks easier to compare. Each row reflects an association, an intermediate mechanism, or a contextual modifier reported in one or more of the reviewed publications. The matrix therefore represents an interpretive organizing framework and must not be mistaken for the results of a newly fitted statistical model.

Taken together, the reviewed results supported a conceptual framework that organizes social determinants of subjective quality of life into three interrelated levels. The first level, designated the structural-resource level, encompasses income, socioeconomic status, employment, inequality, and access to spatial resources. These dimensions define the material and institutional opportunities available to individuals, although their relationships with well-being are not necessarily linear. In particular, an equivalent increase in financial resources generates greater subjective gains among individuals with lower initial incomes [2], while high social cohesion reduces the dependence of quality of life on individual income [3].

The second level, designated the social-relational level, includes trust, social participation, social capital, support, family ties and neighbourhood relations. The analysis did not support the oversimplified assumption that a greater number of social contacts necessarily corresponds to greater subjective well-being. The relevant factors included the functional quality of interpersonal relationships, the possibility of participation, voluntariness of interaction, absence of loneliness and the ability of networks to provide resources or a feeling of inclusion [11, 22]. Thus, social networks appear particularly beneficial when they perform meaningful supportive or integrative functions rather than merely existing in numerical terms.

The third level, designated the subjective-evaluative level, was identified as a key link between objective social conditions and individuals' experience of their quality of life. It includes the perception of one's own social status, relative deprivation, inequality, fairness, security, autonomy, social exclusion and loneliness. This level helps explain why individuals experiencing comparable objective living conditions may nevertheless report different levels of happiness. Thus, subjective status was found to be a stronger predictor of well-being than income or education [9], while perceived inequality had an independent negative relationship with SWB even after accounting for objective inequality [10].

Importantly, the relationships operating across all three conceptual levels were sensitive to social and cultural context. Age changed the significance of social capital and networks [11, 23], income and education changed the return from social participation [21], neighbourhood safety and housing type changed the effect of public space [16], the cultural environment changed the relationship of marriage and status with SWB [9, 14], while war, the pandemic and unemployment changed the relative significance of support, local ties and expectations of the future [17, 18, 24].

Overall, the integrative review did not identify any single social determinant that could be treated as a universally dominant predictor of subjective happiness. The most consistent finding is the multilevel nature of subjective quality of life, under which structural resources set opportunities, social relations provide or limit access to support and participation, while the subjective assessment of one's own position and inclusion transforms these conditions into the experience of happiness and life satisfaction. At the same time, the causal status of individual relationships remains uneven. Experimental data directly support the influence of material resources and characteristics of providing social support [2, 22], while for

trust, social capital, family status and spatial characteristics a significant part of the evidence remains associative or context-dependent. Especially indicative is the result of Glatz and Schwerdtfeger [5], which shows the possibility of the reverse direction from well-being to social trust.

Thus, the set tasks were implemented through: distinguishing subjective happiness, life satisfaction and subjective quality of life as related but not identical results; identifying material-status, social-relational, role, spatial and crisis-contextual determinants; establishing recurring mediating and moderating mechanisms; as well as constructing an integrated three-level structure of "structural resources–social relations–subjective assessment," the functioning of which depends on the social context.

5. DISCUSSION

The principal finding of the present integrative analysis is that the subjective feeling of happiness and the assessment of quality of life are formed not through the isolated action of a separate social determinant but through the interaction of three levels: structural-resource, social-relational and subjective-evaluative. The resulting conceptual structure extends conventional resource-based explanations, under which income or formal socioeconomic status is considered as a direct predictor of well-being. The synthesis suggests that objective resources acquire subjective significance partly through the perception of one's own social position, the possibility of participation, the quality of relations and the availability of support. This is consistent with Varghese et al. [20], who in three cohorts from Guatemala, the Philippines and South Africa established a stable positive relationship between assessments of one's own economic position and social respect and happiness even after accounting for objective socioeconomic position. Therefore, an adequate explanation of happiness should consider not only the amount of resources available to an individual but also how that individual perceives their relative position within the social hierarchy.

A second important finding concerns the functional quality of social relationships rather than their merely formal presence. The integrative analysis did not confirm the assumption that the mere presence of a social network or participation automatically increases well-being. Positive associations are particularly apparent when interpersonal interaction provides inclusion, reciprocity, support or a feeling of social significance. Such an interpretation coincides with the results of Wilding et al. [21], who showed a positive return from social participation for life satisfaction and happiness, with socially more vulnerable groups receiving the greatest benefit. Thus, participation in social life may partly offset limitations in other resources, although the magnitude of its association with well-being varies among population groups.

The context-dependent nature of social support is demonstrated particularly clearly in Xin et al. [22]. Their experiment showed that providing support was associated with higher subjective well-being primarily when the provision of assistance was voluntary and the assistance was perceived as effective. This finding is consistent with the distinction developed in the present conceptual synthesis between the fact of social interaction itself and its subjective quality. Social resources therefore cannot be assessed meaningfully on the basis of contact frequency or number of relationships alone. Autonomy, reciprocity and whether the interaction is perceived as useful matter.

Nevertheless, research findings concerning social capital require careful interpretation in relation to their specific social and cultural contexts. Xu et al. [23] found a positive relationship between trust and social capital and the happiness of rural residents in China, with social capital partially mediating the relationship between trust and well-being. Zhang [25] also showed that in the rural Chinese environment, higher income, more active social participation and reciprocity were positively correlated with happiness. These findings support the proposed conceptual model of complementarity between material and relational resources, while also illustrating important limits to generalization: the structure of social capital and its significance depend on the cultural and institutional environment.

A further important finding concerns the contextual variability of the relationships involving different social determinants. Zangger [24] showed that improvement in neighbourhood relations during the pandemic mitigated negative changes in subjective well-being and trust, while geographically dispersed networks did not show a similar additional role. This pattern is consistent with the present review's conclusion that, under crisis conditions, the significance of a social resource is determined by its availability precisely in a specific local context. At the same time, the fact that persons with greater initial resources more often improved neighbourhood ties indicates potential inequality in the ability to convert social capital into well-being.

In summary, the synthesis is broadly consistent with the included international evidence and contributes an integrated conceptual structure connecting determinants that previous studies have often examined separately. At the same time, the conclusions are limited by the heterogeneity of the operationalization of happiness, life satisfaction and subjective well-being, the cultural heterogeneity of the samples and the predominance of associative designs in part of the corpus. Future research should focus on empirically testing the proposed three-level conceptual structure using longitudinal and cross-country designs, which will make it possible to establish the direction of relationships and compare the relative weight of structural, relational and subjective-evaluative mechanisms. Taken together, the reviewed findings provide the basis for the final conclusions concerning how social conditions are associated with subjective happiness and individual

assessments of quality of life.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present integrative review provides a conceptual basis for understanding how the subjective feeling of happiness and the assessment of quality of life are related to multiple interacting social determinants that should be considered at three levels: structural-resource, social-relational and subjective-evaluative. The analysis of 25 English-language peer-reviewed publications from 2022–2025 showed that income, socioeconomic status, employment and access to spatial resources create the basic conditions of well-being, but their influence depends to a large extent on social cohesion, support, trust, participation and the subjective perception of one's own social position.

The synthesis showed that material resources are positively associated with subjective well-being, although the magnitude and consistency of this relationship depend on individual and contextual circumstances. The statistical pathways most consistently identified across the reviewed studies involved autonomy, security, social fairness, trust, social exclusion and relative deprivation. Likewise, social relationships cannot be assessed adequately on the basis of their availability or number alone. The functional quality of support, voluntariness of interaction, social inclusion, absence of loneliness and the possibility of real participation in the community were of particular significance in the reviewed evidence.

Another important conclusion concerns the contextual dependence of associations involving social determinants. Age, income, education, family and employment status, type of settlement, housing conditions, cultural norms, war, the pandemic and other crisis circumstances may alter both the strength and the direction of relationships with subjective well-being. Therefore, a universal model of happiness built around a single dominant determinant is not supported by the evidence considered in this review.

From a practical and policy perspective, these findings suggest that strategies intended to improve quality of life should combine economic support with measures directed towards strengthening social participation, local ties, the availability of support, environmental safety and the reduction of social exclusion.

The principal limitations of this integrative review arise from the heterogeneity of samples, methods and ways of operationalizing happiness, life satisfaction and subjective well-being, and the predominance of associative designs in some of the sources. Future research should focus on empirically testing the proposed three-level conceptual structure in longitudinal and cross-country studies with unified indicators of subjective well-being and comparison of the relative weight of structural, relational and subjective-evaluative mechanisms.

Author Contributions

Tetiana Ulianova: Conceptualization, investigation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualization, and project administration. Oksana Kuznietsova: Methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, and writing – review and editing. Iryna Vasylenko: Investigation, formal analysis, validation, writing – original draft, and writing – review and editing. Alona Ohneva: Investigation, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, and writing – review and editing. Olga Tkachenko: Methodology, validation, supervision, writing – review and editing. All authors contributed to the development of the study, critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the present review.

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Data availability

The reviewed publications are identified in the reference list and are accessible through their respective publishers. The review's extracted analytical data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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