

Is There Hope in the Old Age of Korean Baby Boomers?

Youngmi MOON

Baekseok Arts University's Senior Business Major
Gyeonggi Province, South Korea
Email: Ymoon529 [AT] bau.ac.kr

ABSTRACT—*This study investigates the factors that influence the level of hope among South Korean baby boomers aged 62 to 70. Using data from 198 participants, the research analyzes how life quality, social participation, and economic satisfaction contribute to their hope level. Multiple regression analysis revealed that all three variables had significant positive effects, with life quality emerging as the strongest predictor. The study suggests that improving life quality and promoting social engagement are key strategies for enhancing hope in old age. Policy implications and limitations are also discussed*

Keywords— baby boomers, hope

1. INTRODUCTION

The South Korea is undergoing one of the fastest aging processes in the world, and the baby boomer generation, born between 1955 and 1963, is now entering old age. Although this generation has been central to Korea's industrialization and democratization, they are now facing challenges such as employment insecurity, family changes, and psychological isolation (Statistics Korea, 2024).

Hope in old age is more than a personal feeling; it is a vital indicator of quality of life and social integration (Snyder, 2002). This study investigates the key determinants of hope in the lives of Korean baby boomers by focusing on life quality, social participation, and economic satisfaction (Kim & Park, 2021).

2. RESEACH PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

All The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the level of hope among Korean baby boomers.
2. To analyze the effects of life quality, social participation, and economic satisfaction on hope.
3. To propose social and policy directions based on empirical findings.

Research Questions:

- RQ1: Does life quality significantly affect the level of hope?
- RQ2: Is social participation a contributing factor to hope?
- RQ3: How does economic satisfaction influence hope?

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Characteristics of the Korean Baby Boomer Generation

The baby boomer generation in Korea, born between 1955 and 1963, played a pivotal role in the nation's industrialization, democratization, and modernization. Having experienced both rapid economic development and significant social change, this generation now faces the unique challenges of old age—including job insecurity, weakened family structures, and social isolation (Yoon, 2023). While once bearing major responsibilities in families and communities, many baby boomers are now entering later life amid declining roles and shrinking support systems (Jung, 2021). These challenges call for a reevaluation of how this generation perceives and constructs “hope” in old age. Their situation is fundamentally different from both the preceding and succeeding generations, necessitating targeted academic attention.

3.2 The Concept of Hope

From a psychological perspective, Snyder (2002) defines hope as “goal-directed thinking,” composed of two elements: agency (the motivation to pursue goals) and pathways (the perceived ability to find strategies to reach them). Hope functions as a buffer against despair, fostering resilience and life satisfaction, especially among the elderly (Chew & Lim, 2013). Sociologically, hope is considered a future-oriented form of social capital that helps individuals remain integrated in society (Erikson, 1982). For older adults, especially those entering a new life stage after retirement, hope serves not merely as a feeling but as a meaningful compass for interpreting existence.

3.3 Life Quality in Old Age

Life quality, often referred to as quality of life (QoL), is a multidimensional construct that encompasses an individual's physical, psychological, and social well-being. According to the World Health Organization (1997), quality of life is defined as “an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.” This subjective appraisal is particularly important for older adults, whose functional abilities and social environments undergo significant transformation with aging.

In the context of gerontology, life quality has been widely studied as a central determinant of successful aging, life satisfaction, and resilience. It incorporates key domains such as physical health, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, autonomy, and environmental satisfaction. Each of these areas contributes uniquely to an older adult's sense of dignity, continuity, and purpose—factors intimately related to the experience of hope.

Psychologically, Erikson's psychosocial development theory identifies the final stage of human development as a tension between ego integrity and despair (Erikson, 1982). In this stage, individuals reflect on their life course and assess whether it has been meaningful and coherent. If this reflection leads to a sense of fulfillment, older adults attain ego integrity; if not, they may experience regret, bitterness, and hopelessness. Life quality serves as a psychological buffer in this process, reinforcing ego integrity and protecting against existential despair.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that older adults with high life quality are more likely to report greater levels of optimism, hope, and emotional resilience. For instance, studies have shown that physical health is a strong predictor of hope, not just because of reduced pain or disability, but due to the preservation of autonomy and independence it enables (Lawton, 1991). Likewise, emotional well-being—including the presence of positive affect and the absence of chronic anxiety or depression—correlates with a hopeful outlook on future possibilities (Chew & Lim, 2013).

Social relationships also contribute significantly to perceived life quality. The ability to maintain close connections with family members, friends, or neighbors enhances a sense of belonging and social support, which fosters emotional stability. Socially isolated individuals, on the other hand, are more vulnerable to psychological distress, loneliness, and a diminished sense of future direction. As such, interpersonal satisfaction is not only a component of life quality but also a foundation for the development of hope.

In the Korean context, the baby boomer generation has witnessed vast structural transformations—including urbanization, educational expansion, and the erosion of extended family systems. While many have experienced upward social mobility, they are also subject to new pressures such as shrinking retirement benefits, increased cost of living, and the emotional burden of adult children's dependence. These contextual realities influence their overall life satisfaction and capacity to adapt positively to aging.

Moreover, older Koreans often encounter dual expectations: to remain self-reliant while still fulfilling intergenerational support roles. When these conflicting demands are unmet due to declining physical strength or insufficient resources, individuals may experience lowered self-efficacy and purpose. Thus, supporting life quality must include not only healthcare and income security but also emotional validation and social acknowledgment.

Lastly, environmental factors such as safe and accessible housing, transportation, and community infrastructure affect life quality in old age. When older adults live in inclusive environments that encourage mobility, participation, and security, their perception of life satisfaction and future hope is significantly enhanced (Walker, 2005).

3.4 Social Participation

Social participation has long been recognized as a vital component of successful and active aging. It refers to an individual's involvement in activities that foster social interaction, belonging, and engagement with the broader community. This can include volunteering, participation in religious organizations, membership in senior clubs or hobby groups, community service, and even informal social interactions such as meeting friends or neighbors. For older adults, such engagement plays a critical role in maintaining not only their physical and mental health but also their sense of identity and purpose in life.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Activity Theory of aging (Havighurst, 1961) posits that older adults who remain socially active and engaged are more likely to experience higher levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being. This theory suggests that aging should not be seen as a period of withdrawal from society, but rather as a time when individuals seek new forms of engagement that are personally meaningful and socially fulfilling. Similarly, the

Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1989) emphasizes that maintaining consistent patterns of activity and interpersonal relationships throughout life contributes to a more positive adjustment in later years.

Empirical studies have reinforced the critical link between social participation and mental health outcomes, including hope. Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra (2011) found that older adults with diverse and active social networks reported significantly higher levels of emotional support, subjective well-being, and resilience. These networks not only provide emotional validation and companionship but also serve as platforms for the exchange of information, resources, and encouragement—factors that are strongly associated with maintaining hope. In addition, Hong and Cho (2016) found that volunteering among Korean older adults enhanced their sense of usefulness and belonging, which are key psychological components of hope.

In the context of Korean society, where rapid modernization and individualism have weakened traditional family and neighborhood support systems, social participation becomes even more crucial. Many baby boomers are experiencing reduced roles within their families due to the declining influence of extended family structures. At the same time, formal retirement from work often leads to a loss of social identity and status. Without alternative avenues for meaningful engagement, older adults may experience social isolation, which is a well-documented risk factor for depression and hopelessness.

However, when older adults actively participate in society—through senior centers, lifelong learning programs, religious gatherings, or civic engagement—they are more likely to perceive their lives as meaningful and to maintain a hopeful outlook for the future. Such participation affirms their sense of competence and social relevance. It also enables them to contribute to the community in ways that reinforce their self-worth and dignity.

Importantly, the psychological benefit of social participation is not merely derived from quantity (i.e., how often they participate), but also from quality and reciprocity of interaction. Programs that are structured to empower older adults, rather than merely occupying their time, tend to yield stronger effects on emotional well-being. Therefore, not only should access to participation opportunities be ensured, but the content and design of such programs must also promote agency, respect, and mutual exchange.

3.5 Economic Satisfaction and Hope

Economic satisfaction in later life plays a foundational role in shaping an individual's overall well-being, psychological stability, and perception of the future. While not the sole determinant of hope, financial security is often considered a prerequisite for older adults to maintain dignity, independence, and engagement in meaningful activities. In the context of hope theory, economic satisfaction can influence both the agency and pathways components described by Snyder (2002)—by giving individuals the confidence to pursue goals and the perceived means to achieve them.

In psychological research, economic satisfaction is closely associated with reduced levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, particularly among retirees and those living on fixed incomes (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). When older adults perceive their financial situation as adequate—not necessarily affluent, but sufficient to meet their basic needs and sustain autonomy—they are more likely to report higher life satisfaction and future orientation. Economic satisfaction, therefore, does not merely reflect the objective level of income or wealth, but rather the subjective judgment that one's resources are manageable and predictable, which in turn sustains hope.

Sociologically, financial well-being functions as a form of structural resource that enables or restricts social participation, healthcare access, residential stability, and opportunities for leisure or personal development (Walker, 2005). Insecure economic conditions can lead to social withdrawal, self-stigmatization, and feelings of helplessness—all of which erode hope. By contrast, a sense of financial stability reinforces one's ability to plan, imagine, and act upon future goals—key ingredients of sustained hope in old age.

In the Korean context, this issue is particularly salient for the baby boomer generation. Many of these individuals contributed to national economic development during their working years but now find themselves inadequately prepared for retirement. Unlike subsequent generations who may benefit from more structured retirement planning and pension schemes, many baby boomers relied on real estate assets, private savings, or familial support, which have become increasingly unstable or insufficient in today's socio-economic climate (Yoon, 2023). Furthermore, the weakening of the traditional family support system—where children were expected to care for aging parents—has left many older Koreans feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their economic future.

Research by Kim and Park (2021) confirms that perceived economic stability is a significant predictor of subjective well-being in older adults. However, their findings also show that economic satisfaction interacts with other psychosocial variables: for instance, those with strong social networks report higher well-being even when their objective income level is low, suggesting a buffering effect. This means that while financial resources are essential, their positive effect on hope is enhanced when combined with social engagement and emotional support.

Another important consideration is the symbolic meaning of economic satisfaction. For many older adults, especially men in patriarchal societies like Korea, financial capability is closely tied to self-worth, competence, and identity. Loss of income or dependence on children or government aid can thus trigger feelings of shame or irrelevance, undermining the psychological foundations of hope. Policies that emphasize empowerment—such as flexible part-time employment, lifelong learning stipends, or community-based economic activities—can help restore a sense of contribution and control.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior studies have investigated the determinants of hope and well-being in older adults, emphasizing life quality, social networks, and economic factors. Kim and Park (2021) found that subjective well-being among elderly Koreans is strongly influenced by quality of life and engagement in social activities. Their findings suggest that older adults with limited social ties are more likely to experience diminished hope.

Chew and Lim (2013) reported that hope is closely linked to lower levels of depression and greater psychological resilience. Moreover, Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra (2011) demonstrated that different types of social networks (family-centered vs. friend-centered) significantly influence subjective well-being and emotional support.

However, most of the existing literature does not distinguish the baby boomer generation as a separate cohort with unique characteristics. As such, this study seeks to fill that gap by focusing specifically on Korean baby boomers and investigating how their life quality, social participation, and economic satisfaction affect their level of hope.

5. METHODOLOGY

Participants: 198 baby boomers aged 62–70 residing in metropolitan areas participated in the study.

Measurement Tools:

- Hope level: Based on Snyder's Hope Scale (1–10)
- Life quality: WHOQOL-BREF subscales (1–10)
- Social participation: Number of days per week (0–7)
- Economic satisfaction: 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very dissatisfied to 5 = Very satisfied)

A multiple regression analysis was conducted using Python's statsmodels module with a significance level set at $p < .05$.

5.1 Correlation Analysis

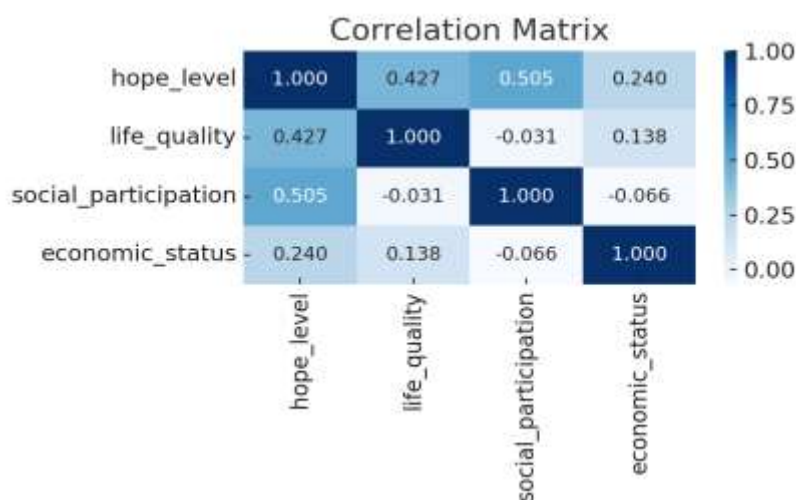


Figure 1. Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

6. RESULTS

Before conducting the multiple regression analysis, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between the key variables: hope level, life quality, social participation, and economic satisfaction. The following table summarizes the correlation coefficients among these variables.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variable	β (Beta Coefficient)	p-value	Interpretation
Life Quality	0.439	$p < .001$	Significant positive effect
Social Participation	0.312	$p < .001$	Significant positive effect
Economic Satisfaction	0.221	$p < .01$	Significant positive effect
Constant	0.421	$p = .442$	Not statistically significant

$F = 31.77, p < .001$

$R^2 = 0.498$ (The model explains 49.8% of the variance in hope)

Model Summary and Interpretation

The results of the multiple regression analysis demonstrated that the overall model was statistically significant, with an F-value of 31.77 and a p-value less than .001. This indicates that the combination of the three predictor variables—life quality, social participation, and economic satisfaction—collectively contributed to explaining the variance in hope levels among Korean baby boomers, to a degree far beyond what would be expected by chance.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) was 0.498, meaning that approximately 49.8% of the variability in hope levels can be accounted for by the three independent variables in this model. In the context of social science research, where human behavior is influenced by a multitude of complex factors, an R^2 value approaching 0.5 is considered moderately strong and meaningful. This finding suggests that while other variables beyond the scope of this model may also affect hope, life quality, social engagement, and economic stability are substantial and significant contributors.

Implications for Research Questions

This statistical evidence directly supports all three research questions proposed in this study:

- **RQ1 (Life Quality):** The strong beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.439, p < .001$) confirms that perceived life quality is the most powerful predictor of hope. Respondents with higher satisfaction in areas such as physical health, psychological well-being, and autonomy reported significantly higher hope levels.
- **RQ2 (Social Participation):** The second strongest predictor was social participation ($\beta = 0.312, p < .001$), reaffirming that frequent involvement in social activities—such as volunteering, religious engagement, or leisure clubs—fosters a stronger sense of purpose and connection, which elevates hope.
- **RQ3 (Economic Satisfaction):** Although comparatively weaker, economic satisfaction ($\beta = 0.221, p < .01$) was still statistically significant. This suggests that even subjective perceptions of financial stability can positively influence how optimistic older adults feel about their future.

Conclusion on Model Robustness

Together, these findings imply that interventions aimed at enhancing older adults' life quality and encouraging regular social engagement may yield meaningful improvements in their psychological well-being, specifically in fostering hope. While economic satisfaction plays a role, the analysis indicates that psychosocial variables have a more prominent impact. The high level of statistical significance across all predictors, along with a strong R^2 value, underscores the robustness of this model and its utility for future policy-making and targeted support programs.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Life quality emerged as the most influential factor, underscoring the importance of physical and psychological well-being. Social participation also contributed positively, supporting prior findings that social engagement reduces isolation and enhances purpose in life (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011). Economic satisfaction, while statistically significant, was less impactful.

Policy implications include the need for holistic welfare policies, expanding social participation programs, and reinforcing economic safety nets for older adults. Limitations include the cross-sectional nature of the study and the exclusion of other potential variables such as family relations and health status.

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