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### Subjective Well-Being and Cultural Engagement Patterns Amongst Older People: Examining Gender Differences

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### Introduction

The growing number of older people worldwide have led to an increased focus on enhancing life satisfaction during older adulthood. While economic well-being alone does not fully capture the multidimensional nature of individual well-being, researchers in the social sciences have turned their attention to related concepts such as life satisfaction and happiness. A growing body of research has highlighted the importance of psychological, social, and cultural factors in determining individual happiness and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999; Frey, 2010).

Social participation is a crucial aspect of successful older. Engagement in cultural activities provides opportunities to interact with others, fostering social connections and a sense of belonging (Toepoel, 2011). By participating in cultural activities, older adults can engage with their peers, expand their social networks, and combat feelings of loneliness and marginalization (Burnett-Wolle & Godbey, 2007; Pettigrew, 2007). However, the issue has received little scholarly attention; researchers in the field have tended to focus on a single cultural activity (or treat them in additive terms) and neglect the potential effects of different levels of participation on subjective well-being (SWB) amongst older individuals.

The present study aimed to complement the literature by exploring how different cultural consumption patterns, in terms of individual combinations of variety and frequency, related to different domains of SWB amongst an older population. Moreover, we examine the role played by gender in cultural participation. To the best of our knowledge, an assessment of the combined contribution of these factors to differences in the relationship between SWB and cultural consumption is lacking, especially in an Italian context and amongst older populations.

### Theoretical Background and Research Questions

The present study brings together two strands of the literature: SWB as it relates to social activities and the more general topic of cultural consumption amongst older people. The former—which draws on social psychology and sociology—has included the investigation of contextual factors affecting SWB, but with a tendency to neglect the role played by participation in cultural activities. The latter has largely comprised quantitative and qualitative economic and sociological studies that have focused on specific patterns of engagement in art and cultural forms amongst older people. The study also pays close attention to gender differences in SWB and cultural participation.

#### *Understanding SWB in Relation to Cultural Activities*

The definition of well-being and related terms has been widely debated over the past couple of decades (Brown et al., 2015; Galloway, 2006). A starting point for a definition of well-being is the fundamental distinction between objective and subjective components (Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development, 2013). Other studies have suggested that a comprehensive definition of SWB must consider cognitive aspects (e.g., satisfaction with life), short-term emotional components (e.g., perceptions of happiness; Fleche et al., 2012), and affective components (e.g., a sense of belonging). Our work adopts a multidimensional definition of SWB that includes the individual's evaluation of their overall life satisfaction and relevant subdomains (i.e., leisure and friendship satisfaction; Diener, 2009; Diener et al., 1993).

A growing body of research focused on the role of non-pecuniary factors, underscoring the influence of factors beyond financial considerations in shaping individuals' overall life satisfaction (Ngoo et al., 2015). These non-monetary components encompass social relationships, personal values, a sense of purpose, and subjective experiences (Arpino & de Valk, 2018). Strong social ties and leisure activities, for example, engagement in social and cultural gatherings, appear to have the capacity to positively impact life satisfaction and other relevant subdomains of SWB (Becchetti et al., 2008), though there is little substantive supporting evidence for this. The majority of these studies, however, focused on general populations and did not consider broader phenomena, such as the intricate relationships between increased participation in cultural activities and specific life satisfaction domains (Brown et al., 2015; Graham & Pozuelo, 2017). They evaluated the influence of single cultural activities or treated them as additive factors, overlooking the potential combined impact of variety and frequency. Ateca-Amestoy et al. (2008) argued that SWB is more likely to be associated with an individual's leisure experience, which is manifested as a lifestyle pattern and influenced by diverse consumption choices across various cultural activities.

We lack a comprehensive understanding of how SWB is impacted by the simultaneous combination of variety and frequency in cultural participation. To address this gap in the research, we consulted the sociological literature on the concept of cultural consumer profiles (Bourdieu, 1984; Katz-Gerro, 2004). These profiles enabled us to identify prevalent cultural patterns emerging from specific consumption habits across a range of cultural activities. Cultural consumption encompasses a wide range of activities and experiences, so defining and measuring its breadth can pose a challenge.

#### *Gender Differences in SWB and Cultural Engagement*

There is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding gender disparities in reported life satisfaction. While some studies have shown that women generally tend to report lower levels of satisfaction than men (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998), others found that they are happier (Easterlin, 2003; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004). This gender/overall satisfaction paradox might help explain some of the contrasting findings in the literature (Kessler et al., 1993; Weissman et al., 1996). Gender-related preferences have been acknowledged to be a crucial factor in cultural participation (Christin, 2012). Some studies found that women tend to participate more in highbrow cultural activities such as visiting museums, attending classical music concerts, and engaging with others (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000). These gendered tastes are a combination of socialization during childhood, societal standards, and personal experience (Bourdieu, 1984), and interact in complex ways to produce distinct patterns of cultural consumption. However, the existing literature in this area is limited and mainly focused on gendered cultural preferences rather than their effects on SWB.

The ongoing debate on the cultural engagement of older adults and SWB, gender disparities in reported life satisfaction, and the limited research on gendered cultural consumption underscore the need for further research. The present study has contributed to this debate by addressing the following questions:

*RQ1:* What is the association between the frequency of engagement in a variety of cultural activities and SWB (including life, leisure, and friendship satisfaction) amongst older adults?

*RQ2:* Does the relationship between SWB and cultural consumption differ according to gender?

#### **Data and Methodology**

The present study used data from the 2018 Italian Multipurpose Survey on Households (*Aspects of Daily Life*), conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). After selecting individuals aged 55 and above, our sample comprised 16,515 participants.

We gathered information about the variety and frequency of participants' engagement in outdoor cultural and leisure activities—which encompassed sports events, dance venues, music concerts, cinemas, theaters, museums, and monuments—for the past 12 months. To understand how the combined influence of the variety and frequency of cultural engagement affected life satisfaction and related subdomains, we employed the latent class analysis (LCA) approach, from which we derived four distinct cultural consumer profiles: *culturally inactive*, *culturally omnivorous*, *highbrow lovers*, and *culturally voracious*. The profiles reflected the outcomes of various combinations of individual-level engagement in cultural activities. The first profile was the *culturally inactive* group, which comprised individuals displaying a very high conditional probability of

abstaining from participation in almost all cultural activities. Next was the *cultural omnivore* group, who were characterized by a moderate probability of engagement. Members exhibited diverse cultural interests and took part in highbrow and lowbrow activities. The *highbrow lovers* category comprised individuals who exhibited a distinctive preference for cultural heritage-related activities, such as visiting museums and monuments. Finally, the *culturally voracious* group actively participated in all activities and did so with a high frequency, more than seven times

Our main variable of interest was individual satisfaction with life and other relevant subdomains, for example, leisure and friendship satisfaction. Life satisfaction was evaluated using an 11-point Likert scale, from 0 (indicating *no satisfaction at all*) to 10 (indicating *complete satisfaction*) in the past 12 months. We posed the following question: When you consider all aspects of your life, how satisfied are you with it? A binary dummy variable was assigned values of 1 for responses falling within the top four categories (7–10) and 0 for all other scores. Friendship and leisure satisfaction were each assessed using a 4-point Likert scale, with responses varying from 1 (*very happy*) to 4 (*unhappy*).<sup>1</sup> Binary dummy variables were assigned a value of 1 if the individual fell into the categories of *very happy* or *quite happy* (Scores 1–2 on the Likert scale) and 0 otherwise. Due to the subjective nature of the scores and the characteristics of both cultural consumption patterns and individual well-being, the Probit regression model using a binary choice approach was better suited for examining the cultural question because it facilitated the interpretation of the simultaneous combination of variety and frequency of cultural goods consumption. We also control for individual socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, employment status, marital status, educational attainment, presence of physical limitations, self-rated health satisfaction, and economic well-being. The per capita number of cultural venues was included to account for regional disparities in the local cultural supply. Finally, we included dummies for the macro area of residence (i.e., northeast, northwest, central, south, and islands).

## **Selected Results**

### *SWB and Heterogeneity in Cultural Consumption Profiles*

In line with previous literature (Brown et al., 2015), our results show a positive association between life satisfaction and the simultaneous combination of variety and frequency of individual cultural engagement. They indicate that participation in various cultural activities enhances life satisfaction. Even sporadic engagement in different cultural activities is positively associated with a higher probability of life satisfaction, spanning from those who are culturally inactive to the culturally omnivorous. This is in line with research that has identified a link between social health and the quality of leisure time as significant indicators of life satisfaction and physical health (Cornwell et al., 2008). As with our findings regarding life satisfaction, the coefficients for friendship and leisure satisfaction exhibited higher values. While life satisfaction can be influenced by various socio-demographic factors, especially for older individuals, larger coefficients associated with satisfaction subdomains were directly linked with free time and recreational activities, such as friendship and leisure satisfaction, indicating a more pronounced and robust association between cultural good consumption and SWB. Cultural engagement also had a significant positive effect on all three aspects of SWB among the highbrow lover group. This reveals that individuals who identified as highbrow cultural consumers tended to have a higher probability of being satisfied with life, friendships, and leisure. This finding is in line with recent European research that has stressed the positive association between involvement in the arts and heritage and participation in civic life, a sense of place, and a sense of belonging (Ateca-Amestoy et al., 2021). This tends to be particularly true for aging populations, for which social cohesion is also related to many other social outcomes, such as the enhancement of personal capabilities and a sense of meaning (Grossi et al., 2012). Finally, our results reveal that dedicating more time to diverse cultural experiences was linked to elevated levels of life satisfaction. This finding corroborates earlier research focused on preventing satiation effects (Galak et al., 2011), and highlights the potential benefits of promoting and facilitating cultural participation as

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<sup>1</sup> The questions were: First, how satisfied are you with your relationships with your friends? Secondly, how satisfied are you with your free time?

a means to enhance the well-being of the older population, thereby offering valuable insights that might be used to inform the development of culture-led welfare policies. Figure 1 summarizes our findings.

### Gender Differences

Our results offer several insights into gendered cultural consumption. As with several previous studies (Kessler et al., 1993; Weissman et al., 1996), we noted the persistence of the gender/overall satisfaction paradox; that is, although increased cultural consumption enabled women to experience higher levels of satisfaction with their friends and leisure time, they tended to report lower levels of overall life satisfaction. Moreover, we recognized the crucial role of gender-related tastes in shaping cultural participation, which, in turn, had distinct effects on SWB amongst both men and women. The stronger positive influence of highbrow lovers on women’s friendship and leisure satisfaction can be attributed to the role of early socialization (Katz-Gerro, 2004). Following this reasoning, early socialization becomes pivotal in the development of an individual’s identity. It influences how one perceives oneself, which can have long-term consequences for self-esteem and well-being.

Finally, a distinct gendered pattern was apparent in our findings (Figure 2). While our principal hypothesis was confirmed in both genders, the marginal effect of increased cultural consumption was more pronounced among the females. In marginal terms, it appeared to exhibit a stronger effect on their overall well-being, as they transitioned from one cultural consumption profile to another (i.e., from culturally inactive to voracious).

Fig. 1. Predictive Margins with 95% CI on the probability of being satisfied with life, friends, and leisure for cultural consumer profiles

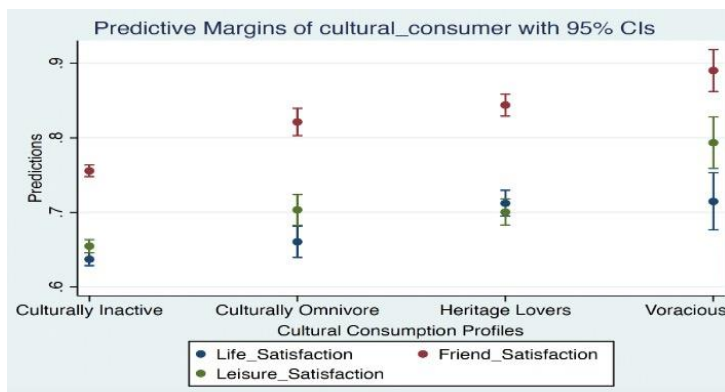
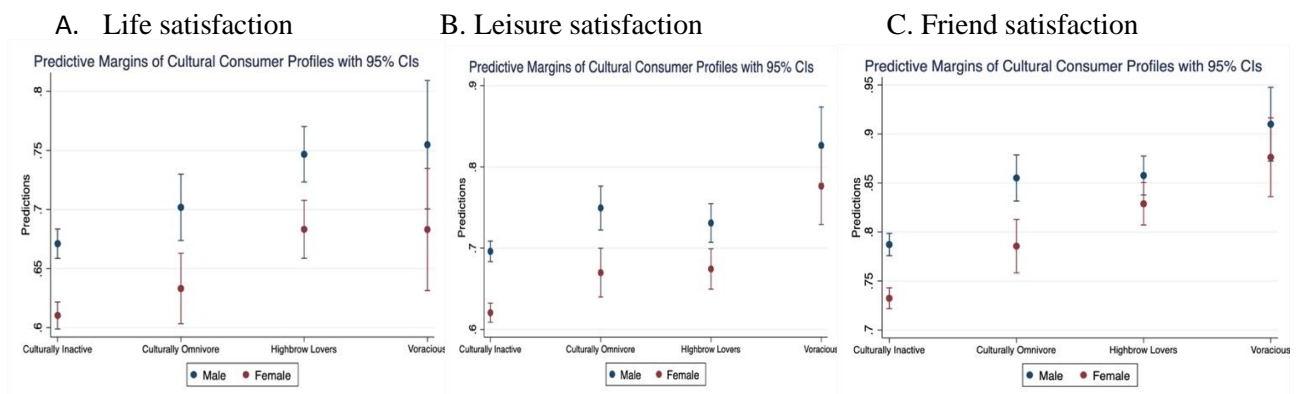


Fig. 2 Predictive Margins with 95% CI on the probability of being satisfied with life, friends, and leisure for cultural consumer profiles, differentiated by gender



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