

The Relationship Between the Engagement in Meaningful Activities and Health Status Among Elderly in The Community

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ABSTRACT

Engagement in meaningful activities is associated with better physical and mental health among elderly individuals in the community. Such participation may delay age-related decline, reduce mortality, and minimise the need for long-term care. This study examined the relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and health status among community-dwelling elderly. A total of 134 participants aged 60 years and above completed the Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (EMAS-12) and the Short Form Health Survey (SF-12) using a cross-sectional design. Findings showed a moderate level of engagement, with significant positive correlations for physical health ($r = 0.20$, $p = 0.02$) and mental health ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$). Group comparisons indicated significant differences in engagement based on education level ($F = 11.88$, $p < 0.001$), prior occupation ($F = 5.29$, $p < 0.001$), community participation ($t = 3.28$, $p < 0.001$), and geographic location ($F = 3.67$, $p = 0.02$). Higher engagement was reported among those with tertiary education, professional work backgrounds, active community involvement, and urban residence. In contrast, no significant differences were observed for gender, income, marital status, living arrangement, or ethnicity. Overall, the findings highlight those meaningful activities play a vital role in elderly health, and demographic factors must be considered when designing programmes to promote active ageing and well-being.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

The global trend of population ageing is reshaping societies and influencing social policies, economic planning, and community development strategies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), individuals aged 60 and above are expected to comprise more than 22% of the global population by 2050, doubling from 1 billion in 2020 to 2.1 billion. Malaysia mirrors this demographic shift, with recent national statistics showing that the proportion of Malaysians aged 65 and older rose from 7.2% in 2022 to 7.4% in 2023, representing approximately 2.5 million people (WHO, 2022). By 2030, Malaysia will become an aged society, with 15% of its population falling into this age group (Awani, 2023; Siddharta, 2024).

As people grow older, they often encounter changes that affect their daily lives, such as reduced physical capacity, changes in memory and thinking skills, and a greater risk of becoming socially disconnected (Kadariya et al., 2019; Pinheira et al., 2018). The World Health Organization (2022) emphasizes that in addition to biological factors, living environments, access to resources, social networks, and economic conditions play a significant role in shaping the experiences of older adults.

Participation in meaningful activities—whether social, recreational, creative, or community-based—has been recognised as an important contributor to life satisfaction in later years (Tierney & Beattie, 2020; Morley et al., 2014). Research further shows that such activities help to sustain resilience, preserve independence, and enhance well-being (Kim et al., 2015; Elsdén et al., 2022).

1.2 Statement of Problem

Although numerous studies have emphasized the positive outcomes associated with participation in meaningful activities, many older adults remain disengaged from such experiences. Various factors contribute to this trend, including limited mobility, low self-confidence, reduced social interaction, or a lack of access to supportive environments. As individuals age, their involvement in community and recreational pursuits often decreases, which may contribute to feelings of disconnection or reduced purpose (Rand et al., 2022). In Malaysia, a significant proportion of older adults tend to adopt sedentary routines, with leisure time often dominated by passive activities such as watching television, rather than engaging in stimulating or interactive experiences (Haidhir & Dahlan, 2022).

Despite global research underscoring the value of meaningful activity in later life, there is a noticeable lack of localized, evidence-based studies that examine this relationship within the Malaysian context. Specifically, limited attention has been paid to how cultural, social, and environmental factors influence the participation of older adults in everyday activities and how this relates to their overall quality of life. There remains a need for in-depth, contextually grounded research to better understand how activity engagement contributes to well-being among Malaysia's ageing population.

1.3 Objectives of Study and Research Questions

This study is conducted to investigate the relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and the health status of elderly individuals residing in the community. This study is specifically conducted to answer the following questions;

1. What is the level of engagement in meaningful activities and health status among elderly in the community ?
2. Is there any relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and health status among elderly in the community?
3. Is there any association between engagement in meaningful activities with demographic data (age, the distance between your home and the treatment facility, the number of community activities involved in the last 6 months, number of households and number of close friends) among elderly in the community ?
4. Is there any significant difference between engagement in meaningful activities with demographic data (gender, socioeconomic status, marital status, living arrangement, ethnicity, education level, type of occupation, geographic location, involvement in community activities) among elderly in the community ?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Issue Among Elderly

Aging is frequently associated with physical decline, and often accompanied by changes that can affect an individual's daily living and social participation. Many older adults encounter difficulties in carrying out routine activities due to reduced energy, physical strength, or mental sharpness (Kim et al., 2020; Kadariya et al., 2019). These challenges may lead to less engagement in community or family life and increase the risk of feeling disconnected or lonely.

A decline in regular physical movement is also common with age and may affect how actively older individuals participate in family, cultural, or social interaction. This reduced activity can lead to greater dependence on others and a narrowing of social networks (Pinheira et al., 2018). Additionally, broader social factors such as limited financial resources, lack of accessible transport, and weak community ties can further hinder participation in everyday social or recreational activities (Nishino et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2020).

Mental health concerns are also prevalent. Feelings of sadness, loss of motivation, and forgetfulness are more frequently reported among older adults, especially those who lack strong support networks (Maynou et al., 2021). These difficulties often interact and create a cycle that reduces confidence and social involvement. As societies experience rapid demographic shifts, there is an urgent need to shift attention beyond addressing illness alone toward fostering inclusive, meaningful engagement and supportive environments that promote well-being and dignity in later life.

2.2 Engagement in Meaningful Activities Among Elderly in The Community

Research consistently highlights the benefits of engaging in meaningful activities for older adults. These activities defined as purposeful, enjoyable, and personally relevant are strongly linked to improved physical, mental, and social health outcomes (Tierney & Beattie, 2020; Morley et al., 2014). The WHO's International Classification of Functioning (ICF) framework emphasizes participation as a core component of healthy aging, recognizing that activity engagement supports both functionality and psychosocial well-being (WHO, 2022).

Empirical studies demonstrate that meaningful engagement can mitigate the effects of aging-related decline. For instance, participation in community-based physical activities such as Tai Chi and dance therapy has shown to improve balance, mobility, and quality of life (Siu & Lee, 2021; Brustio et al., 2018). Similarly, cognitive and social activities including reading, volunteering, and group recreation are associated with enhanced mood, cognitive preservation, and reduced mortality risk (Hatt, 2022; Oh et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the nature and intensity of engagement matter. Chen et al. (2018) found that partial or full engagement in leisure, cognitive, and social activities produced significantly better health outcomes compared to passive or minimal engagement. This supports previous findings that intrinsic motivation and meaningfulness are essential for sustaining participation (Dombrowsky, 2017). Local studies also underscore the importance of cultural and contextual factors. Haidhir and Dahlan (2022) observed that Malaysian older adults who engage in religious and communal activities report better self-rated health and life satisfaction. However, barriers such as frailty, low socioeconomic status, and lack of accessible programs continue to limit widespread participation.

In conclusion, enhancing engagement in meaningful activities offers a viable, non-pharmacological approach to improving the health status of the elderly. Given Malaysia's rapidly aging population, it is imperative that public health interventions and occupational therapy practices integrate culturally relevant, person-centered strategies to support meaningful aging.

3. METHODOLOGY

The current study applied a quantitative method to examine the relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and health status among elderly living in the community. A purposive sampling technique was used and 134 respondents responded to the survey. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections. Section A gathered demographic information. Section B used the Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (EMAS), a 12-item instrument measured on a 4-point Likert scale, to assess the personal significance and frequency of participation in daily activities. Section C utilized the Short Form Health Survey (SF-12) to evaluate self-reported physical and emotional well-being as shown in Table 1.

Both instruments have been widely validated in prior studies and demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80. Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized the respondents' profiles and levels of engagement. Correlational and comparative analyses were applied to examine the relationship between activity engagement, well-being, and demographic factors. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee (Ref. Number: FERC/FSK/MR/2024/00298) and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Table 1: Distribution of items in survey

Section	Instruments	No of items	Components	Cronbach Alpha
B	Engagement in Meaningful Activities (EMAS)	12	-	0.81
C	Short Form Health Survey - 12 (SF-12)	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical health component Mental health component 	0.83
	Total		24	

4. FINDING

4.1 Findings for Demographic Profile

The study involved 134 older adults residing in a Malaysian community. The mean age was 67.21 years ($SD = 7.39$), with the majority aged between 60 and 69 years. Most participants were female (75.4%) and of Malay ethnicity (97%). A significant portion of respondents (62.7%) reported monthly household incomes below RM 5,250. More than half (66.4%) held tertiary-level educational qualifications, and the most commonly reported prior occupation was in professional roles (54.5%). Regarding marital status, 70.9% were married, and over half (50.7%) lived with their spouses. In terms of residential location, 52.2% lived in urban areas, and a strong majority (76.9%) reported participating in community activities as show in Table 2.

Table 2: Findings for Demographic Profile

No	Variables	N(%)
	Age	
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60-69 years old 70-79 years old 80 years old and above 	96 (72.20) 25 (18.80) 12 (9.00)
	Age mean (SD) = 67.21 (7.39)	
	Gender	
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female Male 	101 (75.40) 33 (24.60)
	Income / month	
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Above RM 11,820 Between RM 5,250 - RM 11,819 Below RM 5,250 	5 (3.70) 45 (33.60) 84 (62.70)
	Marital status	
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single Married Divorce Widow 	7 (5.20) 95 (70.90) 4 (3.00) 28 (20.90)
	Living arrangement	
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With Spouse With Children Self Other 	93 (69.40) 25 (18.70) 11 (8.20) 5 (3.70)
6	Ethnicity	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malay Chinese Indian 	130 (97.00) 2 (1.50) 2 (1.50)

7	Education level	
	• Primary	20 (14.9)
	• Secondary	25 (18.7)
	• Tertiary	89 (66.4)
8	Type of occupation	
	• Professional	73 (54.50)
	• Technician	5 (3.70)
	• Government Servant	31 (23.10)
	• Operator	15 (11.20)
	• Housewife	10 (7.50)
9	Geographic location	
	• City	70 (52.20)
	• Town	25 (18.70)
	• Rural areas	39 (29.10)
10	Involvement in community activities	
	• Yes	103 (76.90)
	• No	31 (23.10)

4.2 Findings on Activity Engagement and Health Status

Findings from the Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (EMAS) revealed that the majority of older adults in the study reported a moderate level of activity engagement, with a mean score of 2.11 (SD = 0.63). Participants most frequently associated their activities with feelings of satisfaction, accomplishment, and personal relevance, although fewer described their activities as creative or contributing to a broader purpose. In connection to this, results from the Short Form Health Survey (SF-12) indicated that while respondents generally perceived their overall health positively, with a mean physical health score of 41.71 (SD = 9.24) and a higher mean mental health score of 50.63 (SD = 9.01), limitations in daily functioning due to physical or emotional concerns were still reported by a substantial portion. Notably, emotional well-being appeared relatively stable across the sample, yet some individuals indicated feelings of discouragement and interference in social participation due to health-related issues. Together, these results suggest that while meaningful engagement plays a supportive role in promoting emotional resilience and a positive sense of self among older adults, physical limitations and health-related challenges continue to affect their overall well-being.

4.3 Correlation Between Engagement and Health Status

Correlation analysis revealed a significant but weak positive relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and both physical health ($r = 0.20$, $p = 0.02$) and mental health ($r = 0.24$, $p = 0.00$), indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of engagement also perceived themselves as healthier. Age showed a significant negative correlation with engagement ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that older participants were less likely to be actively involved. Additionally, the number of community activities in the past six months was positively associated with engagement ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.04$), reinforcing the role of social participation in promoting active aging. No significant correlations were observed between engagement and other demographic factors such as number of close friends, household size, or proximity to healthcare facilities.

Table 3: Correlation between engagement and health status

No	Research variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	EMAS	-							
2	Physical Health Status	0.20* 0.02	-						
3	Mental Health Status	0.24** 0.00	0.14 0.09	-					
4	Age	-0.29** <0.01	-0.28* 0.00	-0.21 0.01	-				
5	The number of close	0.16	-0.20*	0.15	0.07	-			

	friends	0.06	0.01	0.07	0.41			
6	The number of households	0.05	-0.27**	0.09	0.27**	0.05	-	
		0.52	0.00	0.30	0.00	0.51		
7	Number of community activities involved in the last 6 months	0.17*	-0.07	0.12	0.16	0.14	0.10	-
		0.04	0.93	0.16	0.06	0.10	0.23	
8	Distance between home and treatment facilities	-0.05	-0.28**	0.21*	0.13	-0.06	0.06	-0.03
		0.52	0.00	0.01	0.13	0.47	0.44	0.67

4.4 Findings for Significant Difference

Independent samples t-test results revealed no significant difference in engagement levels between male and female participants ($p = 0.58$). This suggests that gender does not influence participation in meaningful activities among older adults in the community. In contrast, a significant difference was observed for involvement in community activities, where those actively engaged reported higher levels of meaningful activity ($p < 0.001$). Although the effect size was small, these findings highlight the importance of community participation as a facilitator of active and meaningful ageing as shown in Table 4.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of demographic variables on engagement in meaningful activities. The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in engagement scores for education level, occupation, and geographic location, while no significant differences were found for income, marital status, living arrangement, or ethnicity. For education level, a statistically significant difference was observed: $F(2, 131) = 11.88, p < .001$. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test revealed that the mean score for participants with tertiary education ($M = 38.13, SD = 6.88$) was significantly higher than those with secondary education ($M = 32.92, SD = 6.96$) and primary education ($M = 31.05, SD = 6.87$). For occupation prior to retirement, a statistically significant effect was found: $F(4, 129) = 5.29, p < .001$. Participants who had worked in professional roles ($M = 38.34, SD = 6.48$) reported significantly higher engagement compared to operators ($M = 30.20, SD = 7.14$) and technicians ($M = 32.20, SD = 13.66$).

For geographic location, a significant difference was also found: $F(2, 131) = 3.67, p = .02$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that participants living in cities ($M = 37.63, SD = 6.92$) had significantly higher engagement scores than those in towns ($M = 33.32, SD = 4.58$). No significant difference was observed between city and rural participants ($M = 35.15, SD = 9.12$) as shown in Table 5. For the remaining demographic variables — income, marital status, living arrangement, and ethnicity — no significant differences were observed (all $p > .05$).

Table 4: Differences in Engagement in Meaningful Activities by Gender and Community Involvement

No	Variables	Mean (SD)	t	df	p	r
1	Gender					
	• Male	35.48 (7.81)	0.54	132	0.58	0.00
	• Female	35.48 (7.81)				
2	Involvement in community activities					
	• Yes	37.22 (6.35)	3.28	132	0.00	0.07
	• No	32.39 (9.46)				

Table 5: Differences in Engagement in Meaningful Activities Across Categorical Demographic Variables

No	Variables	Mean (SD)	Sig (p)	F	df
1	RM 5,250 and below	35.96 (7.38)	0.83	0.17	2
	RM 5,250 - RM 11,819	36.16 (7.89)			
	11,820 and above	36.10 (7.40)			
2	Single	37.29 (12.01)	0.85	0.25	3
	Married	36.08 (7.13)			
	Divorce	33.25 (4.57)			
	Widowed	36.29 (7.17)			
3	Husband	36.44 (7.23)	0.97	0.11	4
	Wife	35.64 (6.35)			
	Child	35.48 (7.70)			

	Self	36.64 (11.10)			
	Others	35.80 (7.19)			
4	Malay	36.28 (7.45)	0.25	1.39	2
	Chinese	28.50 (0.70)			
	Indian	32.00 (7.07)			
	Others	-			
5	Primary	31.05 (6.87)	<0.00	11.88	2
	Secondary	32.92 (6.96)			
	Tertiary	38.13 (6.88)			
6	Professional	38.34 (6.48)	<0.00	5.29	4
	Technician	32.20 (13.66)			
	Government servant	34.81 (7.52)			
	Operator	30.20 (7.14)			
	Housewife	34.60 (3.92)			
7	City	37.63 (6.92)	0.02	3.67	2
	Town	33.32 (4.58)			
	Rural areas	35.15 (9.12)			

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored the relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and perceived health status among older adults living in the community. The findings provide important insights into how demographic characteristics, patterns of activity involvement, and self-rated health intersect to influence the daily experiences of older individuals. The results demonstrate that most participants reported a moderate level of engagement in activities that they found personally valuable, suggesting that while older adults generally maintain participation in purposeful routines, there may be limiting factors such as age-related changes, access barriers, or reduced opportunities for involvement. This moderate engagement level aligns with previous literature that indicates older individuals often continue engaging in routine activities, albeit with less frequency or intensity due to various social or physical constraints. In a comparable study, Dombrowsky (2017) reported similar engagement scores, further validating the interpretation that aging individuals are inclined to remain active within their means.

In relation to self-reported health, the study found that both physical and mental health levels were moderate overall, with the average mental health score slightly higher than the physical health score. This suggests that, while physical limitations may increase with age, emotional well-being can be sustained, particularly when older adults remain engaged in meaningful pursuits. This pattern supports the findings of Luchesi et al. (2018), who emphasized that even amid physical decline, older adults often report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction when they are able to maintain participation in enjoyable or purposeful activities. Moreover, emotional engagement may act as a buffer against the psychological challenges of aging, providing a sense of continuity, identity, and belonging even as physical capacity changes. Fancourt et al. (2021) similarly highlighted the role of social and cognitive activities in preserving mental resilience in older populations.

The correlations identified in this study further highlight the positive relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and overall well-being. Although the associations with both physical and mental health were relatively weak ($r = 0.20$ and $r = 0.24$, respectively), they were statistically significant, reinforcing the idea that regular involvement in activities perceived as valuable has a beneficial impact on how older individuals perceive their health. These results mirror previous research suggesting that meaningful engagement helps to reduce passivity, enhance motivation, and promote autonomy factors that contribute positively to self-assessed health and general life satisfaction (Parra-Rizo & Sanchis-Soler, 2020; Bone et al., 2022; Brajša-Žganec et al., 2010). The stronger correlation with mental health is particularly noteworthy, as it reflects a growing body of literature demonstrating that emotional and cognitive well-being in older adults is more sensitive to personal meaning and social connectedness than to purely physical functioning. Involvement in personally meaningful roles or routines can provide emotional stability, purpose, and structure, helping older adults manage the social and emotional transitions that accompany aging.

A negative correlation was found between age and engagement in meaningful activities, indicating that older participants were somewhat less likely to engage. This finding is consistent with studies by Fernández-Mayoralas et al. (2015), which identified age-related reductions in engagement due to decreased flexibility, reduced cognitive speed, and functional limitations. However, the effect in this study was weak, suggesting that age alone is not the sole determinant of engagement. Rather, access to supportive environments, appropriate resources, and inclusive programs may help

maintain or even enhance engagement across different age groups within the older population. In addition, interestingly, some commonly assumed factors, such as household size, proximity to healthcare facilities, and the number of close social contacts, were not significantly associated with activity engagement. This finding aligns with research by Schmelzer and Raina (2023), who argue that the quality of social interaction rather than the number of social ties is more influential in shaping one's ability and desire to remain engaged. Simply having more people in the household or more friends does not necessarily translate into meaningful interaction or support for purposeful activity. Instead, the depth and relevance of those social relationships are likely to have a more significant impact.

Analysis of demographic variables revealed further patterns. Gender, marital status, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status were not significantly associated with differences in engagement. This outcome supports research by Costenoble et al. (2023), who found that engagement in later life tends to be influenced more by personal motivation, values, and opportunity than by fixed demographic characteristics. However, some demographic factors were strongly linked to differences in engagement. Notably, older adults who reported participating in community-based activities had significantly higher engagement scores. This reflects the broader theoretical concept of social capital, where community networks, shared values, and mutual support play a central role in enabling individuals to remain socially and emotionally active (Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). Additionally, educational attainment was another significant factor. Respondents with tertiary education consistently reported higher levels of engagement than those with lower education levels. This is consistent with studies by Chen et al. (2018) and Lövdén et al. (2010), which found that education enhances critical thinking, communication skills, and self-efficacy traits that support lifelong learning and meaningful participation. Education may also increase awareness of available opportunities and promote habits that encourage continued activity and involvement beyond retirement. A similar trend was observed in relation to prior occupation. Those who had been employed in professional or managerial roles were more engaged than those with technical or operational work backgrounds. This supports Moen's (2001) perspective that career experiences can shape the structure of retirement life. Individuals from more cognitively demanding or socially interactive work environments may be more likely to seek out and engage in similarly stimulating activities after retirement.

Geographic location whether participants lived in urban or rural setting also showed a statistically significant effect on engagement, but the effect size was small. This suggests that while the built environment and access to services may influence opportunities, other factors such as education, occupation, and social support are stronger predictors of engagement. It also implies that meaningful activity is not confined to one type of living environment and that with the right supports, both urban and rural settings can be conducive to active aging. Lastly, variables such as marital status, ethnicity, and income level did not significantly influence engagement in meaningful activities, suggesting that the desire for purpose and fulfillment transcends these demographic categories. This aligns with findings from Schmelzer and Raina (2023), who emphasized the universal human need for meaningful engagement across diverse backgrounds.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings of this study add to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of meaningful activity in supporting quality of life among older adults. Despite the challenges of aging, many older individuals continue to participate in activities that provide satisfaction, identity, and emotional resilience. The study highlights the need for community and policy initiatives that encourage inclusive, accessible, and individually tailored opportunities for engagement. Strategies that incorporate education, prior life experiences, and social participation are especially important in sustaining involvement and promoting well-being. The results suggest that while physical changes are inevitable with age, the ability to live a fulfilling and purposeful life can be preserved and even enhanced when older adults are supported in pursuing what they find meaningful.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None declared

9. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Nursafia Najwa Binti Rosely: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, and writing original draft; **Associate Professor Dr. Akehsan Hj Dahlan:** Conceptualisation, supervision, writing-review and editing, and validation.

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