



EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING ACROSS GENERATIONS IN COLLECTIVIST CULTURES: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Emotional well-being is shaped by cultural values, social relationships, and generational experiences. In collectivist cultures, it is closely linked to family structures, social harmony, and interdependent identities. The present study explores how emotional well-being is understood across generations through a thematic analysis of 46 research articles drawn from cross-cultural psychology and well-being literature. The analysis identifies key generational patterns as well as broader cultural mechanisms influencing emotional experiences. Findings suggest that emotional well-being among older generations is strongly rooted in traditional collectivist values such as family obligation, social connectedness, and intergenerational reciprocity. Millennials occupy a transitional space, negotiating tensions between personal autonomy and collective expectations within rapidly changing social environments. Generation Z demonstrates emerging patterns of emotional regulation, identity negotiation, and cultural hybridity shaped by globalization and digital interconnectedness. Across generations, common themes include the role of family support, cultural identity, emotion regulation, and the influence of social change on psychological experiences. The findings highlight that emotional well-being in collectivist contexts is dynamic and continuously shaped by cultural norms, generational transitions, and evolving socio-cultural environments. This study contributes to cross-cultural psychology by providing a generational perspective on emotional well-being and emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive frameworks for understanding mental health across diverse societies.

Keywords - Emotional well-being, Qualitative Research, Collectivist cultures, Thematic analysis, Emotion regulation, Generational differences, Cultural identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Well-being is culturally constructed and shaped by broader social, relational, and historical contexts. Collectivist cultures emphasize relational harmony, interdependence, and social connectedness, whereas individualistic cultures prioritize autonomy and personal achievement. In collectivist societies, emotional experiences are deeply embedded within family systems, shared roles, and community structures.

In recent decades, rapid social change driven by globalization, urbanization, and technological advancement has significantly reshaped these cultural frameworks. As a result, emotional well-being is increasingly negotiated at the intersection of traditional collectivist values and emerging individualistic influences. These shifts are particularly evident across generations, as individuals differ in their exposure to and adaptation of changing social norms.

Despite extensive cross-cultural research on well-being, limited studies have examined how emotional well-being varies across generations within collectivist contexts. This study addresses this gap by adopting

a generational lens to explore how emotional experiences are shaped, maintained, and transformed within evolving socio-cultural environments.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cross-cultural research has consistently demonstrated that the experience and evaluation of emotional well-being are shaped by cultural context. Cultural value systems influence how individuals define happiness, emotional fulfillment, and psychological functioning. Collectivist cultures tend to emphasize relational harmony, social connectedness, and interdependence, whereas individualistic cultures prioritize autonomy, personal achievement, and self-expression. This distinction highlights the importance of examining well-being within its broader socio-cultural framework.

Studies examining emotional experiences across cultures suggest that while the basic structure of emotion may be universal, its expression and regulation are culturally shaped. Kuppens et al. (2006), in a large cross-national study, found that emotional experiences are organized around positive and negative affect across cultures. However, the frequency and desirability of specific emotions vary significantly, reflecting culturally embedded norms and expectations. These findings indicate that emotional experience is shaped through an interaction between universal affective structures and culturally specific regulatory processes (Matsumoto, 2007).

In addition to experienced emotions, cultural values also influence desired emotional states. Tamir et al. (2016) propose a value-based account of emotion, suggesting that individuals tend to prefer emotions that facilitate culturally valued goals. For instance, individuals who prioritize achievement-oriented values may prefer emotions that enhance assertiveness, whereas those who value social harmony are more likely to prefer emotions that promote empathy and relational connection. This perspective highlights the role of culture in shaping both emotional experience and emotional regulation.

Theoretical frameworks on individualism and collectivism further suggest that collectivist orientations are associated with interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), wherein individuals define themselves in relation to others, social roles, and group memberships. Such orientations emphasize relational awareness, social responsibility, and emotional sensitivity toward group dynamics, contributing to forms of well-being rooted in belongingness and social cohesion.

Empirical research also demonstrates that cultural orientation is associated with differences in psychological functioning. Bhullar et al. (2013) found that collectivistic orientations are linked to greater emphasis on emotional understanding and relational harmony, which may contribute positively to well-being in collectivist contexts. However, these relationships are not uniform, as both individual-level differences and cultural influences interact in shaping emotional outcomes.

Despite these advances, several limitations persist in the existing literature. Much of the research relies on Western theoretical frameworks, which may not fully capture culturally specific conceptualizations of well-being. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons often focus on Western and East Asian contexts, with relatively limited attention to South Asian collectivist societies. Furthermore, existing studies tend to examine emotional experience and life satisfaction in isolation, rather than integrating relational, cultural, and social dimensions of well-being.

Given the rapid socio-cultural transformations driven by globalization, urbanization, and technological change, there is a need to examine how emotional well-being is experienced across generations within collectivist contexts. Addressing this gap can contribute to the development of more culturally sensitive and contextually grounded frameworks for understanding well-being.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic literature review and thematic analysis of 46 peer-reviewed articles sourced from Google Scholar. The review focused on studies published between 1997 and 2025.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Focus on emotional well-being, cultural identity, or family dynamics
- Situated in collectivist contexts
- Address generational cohorts (Gen Z, Millennials, Pre-Millennials)

Exclusion Criteria:

- Exclusive focus on individualistic cultures
- Non-peer-reviewed sources
- Clinical-only studies without cultural context

Data were categorized and organized based on cultural context, generational focus, theoretical framework, and key findings. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, involving systematic coding, theme development, and iterative refinement to identify recurring patterns across the literature.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Generational Patterns in Emotional Well-Being

Table 4.1

Generational Themes in Emotional Well-Being in Collectivist Cultures

Generation	Major Theme	Key Psychological Factors
Generation Z	Emotional regulation and cultural identity	Identity negotiation, resilience
Millennials	Autonomy vs interdependence	Cultural fit, shifting family roles
Pre-Millennials	Intergenerational support	Family bonds, social connectedness

This table highlights a developmental progression from strong relational interdependence to identity negotiation, reflecting increasing exposure to global and individualistic influences across generations.

The analysis reveals distinct generational differences in emotional well-being. Pre-Millennials demonstrate a strong reliance on interdependence, family roles, and social connectedness. Millennials occupy a transitional space, negotiating between personal autonomy and collective expectations. In contrast, Generation Z reflects increasingly hybrid identities shaped by globalization and digital exposure.

These findings align with theories of interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and culturally moderated emotion regulation (Matsumoto, 2007). They also indicate a broader shift from predominantly interdependent to more hybrid forms of self-construal across generations.

4.1.1 Generation Z: Identity and Emotional Regulation

Generation Z navigates multiple cultural influences, balancing collectivist expectations with global norms. Emotional regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal enhance well-being (Gross & John, 2003), while cultural identity serves as a protective factor (Phinney et al., 2001). Digital exposure further contributes to hybrid identity formation, increasing both emotional awareness and psychological complexity.

4.1.2 Millennials: Autonomy vs. Interdependence

Millennials occupy a transitional space, balancing personal aspirations with family expectations. The concept of cultural fit (Fulmer et al., 2010) explains how well-being is optimized when individuals align personal goals with cultural norms.

This cohort reflects an ongoing negotiation between stability and change within collectivist systems.

4.1.3 Pre-Millennials: Intergenerational Support

Older generations demonstrate strong adherence to traditional collectivist values. Emotional well-being is rooted in family cohesion, reciprocity, and social roles (Diener & Diener, 1995).

However, social changes such as migration and the nuclearization of families may increase the risk of isolation and reduced social support.

4.2 Cross-Cutting Themes in Emotional Well-Being

Table 4.2

Cross-Cutting Themes in Emotional Well-Being in Collectivist Cultures

Theme	Description
Family Support	Emotional stability through family networks
Cultural Identity	Belonging and shared traditions
Emotion Regulation	Managing emotions to maintain harmony
Social Change	Impact of modernization and globalization

These cross-cutting themes indicate that while generational experiences differ, core cultural mechanisms underlying emotional well-being remain relatively stable.

Across generations, four major themes emerge. Family support remains the primary source of emotional stability (Triandis, 1995), while emotion regulation is guided by cultural norms emphasizing social harmony (Matsumoto, 2007). Cultural identity enhances belonging and psychological resilience (Phinney et al., 2001), whereas ongoing social change introduces both opportunities for autonomy and sources of psychological tension (Arnett, 2015).

4.3 Interpretation of Findings

The present study examines how emotional well-being is experienced across generations within collectivist cultural contexts by synthesizing findings from existing literature through thematic analysis. The results indicate that emotional well-being in collectivist societies is deeply embedded in relational networks, cultural identity, and shared social responsibilities. At the same time, generational differences reveal how these cultural foundations are continuously reshaped by broader social and economic transformations. This highlights the need to understand emotional well-being not as a fixed construct, but as a contextually evolving process shaped by generational and socio-cultural dynamics.

One of the key insights emerging from the analysis is that collectivist values continue to provide an important framework for emotional support and psychological resilience. Family relationships, community belonging, and shared social roles function as stabilizing structures that help individuals manage emotional challenges. However, these structures are not static. Rather, their influence is mediated by generational experiences shaped by changing family structures, urbanization, globalization, and evolving social expectations.

For older generations, emotional well-being remains closely tied to traditional collectivist frameworks characterized by strong interdependence, clearly defined family roles, and reciprocal caregiving relationships. These relational systems have historically provided emotional security and continuity, allowing individuals to cope with adversity through shared responsibility and social cohesion. Nevertheless, rapid social changes such as migration, urban mobility, and the weakening of extended family systems have introduced new vulnerabilities for this cohort. The erosion of traditional support

networks may increase the risk of social isolation and emotional distress, highlighting the importance of intergenerational connectedness in sustaining well-being.

In contrast, Millennials navigate a more complex cultural landscape in which traditional expectations coexist with an increasing emphasis on personal autonomy and individual achievement. This cohort often experiences well-being through the process of negotiating these potentially competing demands. While family relationships remain central, greater educational mobility, career aspirations, and geographic movement have reshaped how these connections are maintained. The concept of cultural fit becomes particularly relevant in this context, as well-being is strengthened when individuals align personal goals with culturally embedded expectations while maintaining meaningful social ties.

For Generation Z, emotional experiences are influenced by an even broader range of cultural and technological forces. Young individuals encounter diverse cultural narratives through digital media, global communication networks, and increasing access to mental health discourse. These influences contribute to the development of hybrid identities that integrate collectivist traditions with contemporary perspectives on emotional expression and psychological health. As a result, well-being within this group often involves balancing cultural belonging with emerging forms of individual self-expression. Strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, emotional awareness, and cultural identity reinforcement appear to support resilience as individuals navigate these complex environments.

Taken together, these generational patterns suggest that emotional well-being in collectivist contexts evolves through an ongoing interaction between cultural continuity and social change. While collectivist values remain influential across generations, their expression adapts in response to shifting economic conditions, technological developments, and changing family structures.

4.4 Comparison with Previous Research

These patterns of the present study are consistent with existing cross-cultural research highlighting the importance of cultural context in shaping emotional experience and well-being. Earlier work suggests that while the basic structure of emotional experience may be universal, the ways in which emotions are valued, expressed, and regulated are strongly influenced by cultural norms.

Research examining emotional experiences across cultures demonstrates that cultural systems shape both the frequency and expression of different emotions. These patterns align with the present analysis, which indicates that emotional regulation strategies in collectivist contexts are often guided by the cultural priority placed on maintaining relational harmony and social stability.

Similarly, value-based theories of emotion propose that individuals tend to desire emotional states that support culturally meaningful goals. In collectivist societies, emotions that promote empathy, cooperation, and social connection are frequently encouraged because they contribute to group cohesion. The themes identified in this study—particularly those related to family support, cultural identity, and relational well-being—reflect this broader cultural emphasis on interpersonal harmony.

The results also correspond with research exploring the psychological implications of individualism and collectivism. Prior studies indicate that collectivist orientations are associated with stronger relational awareness and emotional sensitivity toward others. The present analysis builds on these insights by illustrating how such relational values operate differently across generational cohorts experiencing varying degrees of social change.

Furthermore, the generational differences observed in this study echo broader research on globalization and cultural transformation. Social changes such as urbanization, technological connectivity, and economic mobility have reshaped traditional social structures in many collectivist societies. These transformations create new opportunities for autonomy while simultaneously introducing tensions between individual aspirations and collective responsibilities.

The present study extends this body of research by demonstrating that these cultural processes are not uniform, but vary systematically across generational cohorts.

4.5 Psychological Explanation of Findings

From a psychological perspective, the patterns identified in this study can be understood through theories of self-construal, cultural identity, and socialization. Collectivist societies generally promote an interdependent form of self-construal, in which individuals define themselves primarily through their relationships with others. However, the present findings suggest a gradual shift from purely interdependent to more hybrid self-construals across generations, as individuals increasingly integrate relational identities with elements of autonomy and personal expression. Within this evolving framework, emotional experiences remain closely connected to family roles, social obligations, and group membership, but are increasingly interpreted through more individualized and flexible lenses.

Within such contexts, emotional regulation strategies are often oriented toward preserving social harmony and minimizing interpersonal conflict. Behaviors such as emotional restraint or suppression may therefore serve adaptive functions, helping maintain stable social relationships and collective well-being. While these strategies are sometimes interpreted negatively within Western psychological frameworks, they may represent culturally appropriate responses within collectivist settings.

At the same time, changing social environments influence how individuals internalize these cultural norms. Younger generations are increasingly exposed to diverse cultural perspectives that emphasize personal autonomy, emotional expression, and individual identity. This exposure encourages the development of more flexible or hybrid forms of self-construal, where individuals integrate traditional collectivist values with emerging individualistic orientations.

Cultural identity also appears to function as an important psychological resource. Strong identification with cultural traditions, community practices, and shared social values provides individuals with a sense of belonging and meaning. Such cultural anchoring can enhance resilience, particularly in contexts where rapid social change may otherwise create uncertainty or identity conflict.

Overall, the findings suggest that emotional well-being in collectivist cultures is shaped by the dynamic interaction of cultural values, generational experiences, and evolving social environments. Rather than representing fixed cultural patterns, emotional well-being reflects an adaptive process through which individuals continuously negotiate the relationship between tradition, social change, and personal identity.

V. CONCLUSION

Emotional well-being in collectivist cultures emerges as a dynamic and contextually embedded process shaped by cultural values, generational shifts, and ongoing social transformation. The findings demonstrate that while core collectivist principles such as relational interdependence and social connectedness remain influential, their expression varies across generations in response to changing socio-cultural environments.

By integrating cultural and generational perspectives, this study highlights the need to understand emotional well-being as an adaptive process rather than a fixed construct. These insights have important implications for developing culturally sensitive and generationally adaptive approaches to mental health, particularly in rapidly changing collectivist societies.

VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is subject to certain limitations. First, it is based on secondary data derived from existing literature, which may limit the depth of contextual and experiential insights. Second, the geographic representation of the selected studies is relatively limited, with a stronger focus on certain regions within collectivist contexts, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, variations in research design, sample characteristics, and theoretical approaches across the reviewed studies may influence the consistency of the themes identified through the analysis.

Future research can address these limitations by incorporating primary data through qualitative or mixed-method approaches to capture more nuanced, lived experiences of emotional well-being across generations. Expanding research to include a wider range of collectivist societies, particularly underrepresented regions, would further enhance cross-cultural understanding. Longitudinal studies may also provide deeper insight into how emotional well-being evolves over time within changing socio-cultural environments.

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