

**PREDICTORS OF FLOURISHING AMONG
ELDERLY IN PENANG, MALAYSIA: THE ROLE
OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND PERMA
ELEMENTS**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2022

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ELDERLY IN PENANG, MALAYSIA: THE ROLE
OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND PERMA
ELEMENTS**

by

LIEW WEI PENG

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Social Sciences**

July 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my utmost appreciation and gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Dr. Intan Hashimah Binti Mohd. Hashim, for her unwavering support and courage throughout the research journey. She had relentlessly and persistently checked my paper and provided invaluable inputs and comments on this research. With her patience and efforts to guide me, I have learnt how to conduct rigorous research. Professor Dr. Intan not only guides me in academics, but she also illuminates me in life philosophies. She always exudes positive energy and spirits to all her students, especially during difficult times. She is always ready to offer her full support and assistance to those in need. This has always inspired me to strive to be a positive person. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Masarah Binti Mohd. Yusof, my co-supervisor, for her insightful suggestions and guidance on this research as well. In addition, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my parents and family who had provided me unending emotional support throughout this challenging journey. I am incredibly grateful to my husband, who is always have faith in me. Many thanks and appreciations to my friends, course mates, the social welfare and elderly home officers of Penang, and the religious organization leaders of Penang for their unlimited assistance in providing me with valuable information. Their support and cooperation in this study has made this paper possible. Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all the participants. This study would not have been happened without their support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF SYMBOLS	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
LIST OF APPENDICES	xiii
ABSTRAK	xiv
ABSTRACT	xvi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Overview	1
1.2 Problem Statement	3
1.3 Research Questions	10
1.4 Research Objectives	11
1.5 Significance of the Study	11
1.6 Scope of the Study.....	14
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	16
2.1 Overview	16
2.2 Flourishing	17
2.2.1 Flourishing of Elderly	22
2.2.2 Relationship Between Socio-Demographic Factors and Flourishing of Elderly.....	25
2.3 Theoretical Framework – PERMA (Model of Flourishing).....	30
2.3.1 Engagement.....	33
2.3.2 Positive Relations with Others	35

2.3.3	Meaning in Life.....	38
2.3.4	Accomplishment	41
2.4	The Impact of COVID-19 on Well-Being of Elderly in Malaysia.....	44
2.5	Conceptual Framework	45
2.6	Operational Definitions	47
2.6.1	Elderly	47
2.6.2	Flourishing	47
2.6.3	Engagement.....	47
2.6.4	Positive Relations with Others.....	48
2.6.5	Meaning in Life.....	48
2.6.6	Accomplishment	49
2.7	Research Hypotheses.....	49
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY		52
3.1	Introduction	52
3.2	Research Design	52
3.3	Study Location	52
3.4	Population.....	53
3.5	Sampling.....	54
3.6	Recruitment Procedures	55
3.6.1	Personal Network.....	56
3.6.2	Social Media Platform	56
3.6.3	Elderly Home and Religious Organization	58
3.7	Instruments	59
3.7.1	Socio-Demographic Information	60
3.7.2	Flourishing Scale (FS)	61
3.7.3	Engagement - Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being	62
3.7.4	Positive Relations with Others - Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS-PR).....	64

3.7.5	Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).....	65
3.7.6	Accomplishment - Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being.....	66
3.8	Pilot Test	67
3.8.1	Sample Size.....	67
3.8.2	Participant’s Demographic Information.....	67
3.8.3	Observations During Pilot Test.....	68
3.8.4	Pilot Test Result	69
3.9	Data Analysis	70
3.10	Ethical Consideration	72
CHAPTER 4 RESULTS		73
4.1	Overview	73
4.2	Description of Socio-demographic Information.....	73
4.2.1	Age	73
4.2.2	Gender	74
4.2.3	Ethnicity	74
4.2.4	Religion.....	74
4.2.5	Marital Status	75
4.2.6	Source of Income	75
4.2.7	Education Attainment	76
4.3	Reliability Test of Instrument and Posterior Analysis	76
4.3.1	Flourishing Scale (FS)	76
4.3.2	Engagement - Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being	76
4.3.3	Positive Relations with Others - Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS-PR).....	77
4.3.4	Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).....	78
4.3.5	Accomplishment - Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being.....	78
4.4	Research Question.....	79
4.4.1	Research Question 1.....	79

4.4.2	Research Question 2.....	80
4.4.3	Research Question 3.....	91
4.4.4	Research Question 4.....	93
4.4.5	Research Question 5.....	98
CHAPTER 5	DISSCUSSION.....	100
5.1	Overview	100
5.2	Summary of Findings	100
5.3	Discussion of Findings	101
5.3.1	Level of Flourishing of the Elderly in Penang.....	102
5.3.2	Relationship Between Socio-Demographic Factors and Level of Flourishing of the Elderly in Penang	105
5.3.3	Socio-Demographic Factors in Predicting Level of Flourishing of the Elderly in Penang	118
5.3.4	Relationship Between Engagement, Positive Relations with Others, Meaning in Life and Accomplishment and Level of Flourishing of the Elderly in Penang	121
5.3.5	Engagement, Positive Relations with Others, Meaning in Life, Accomplishment in Predicting Level of Flourishing of the Elderly in Penang.....	127
5.4	Implication of Findings	129
5.4.1	Theoretical Implications	130
5.4.2	Practical Implications.....	133
5.5	Limitations of the Current Study and Suggestions for Future Research.....	138
5.6	Conclusion.....	139
	REFERENCES.....	141
	APPENDICES	

LIST OF TABLES

		Page
Table 1.1	Penang Population - 20 Years Projection by Age Category (2020-2040)	4
Table 3.1	Penang Population by Ethnic Group (2016 - 2020).....	53
Table 3.2	Penang 2019 Mid-year Population Estimates by Age and Ethnic Group	54
Table 3.3	Krejcie and Morgan Sampling Table	54
Table 3.4	Pilot Test’s Participant Socio-Demographic Information.....	68
Table 4.1	Descriptive Statistics for Participants’ Age	73
Table 4.2	Descriptive Statistics for Participants’ Ethnicity	74
Table 4.3	Descriptive Statistics for Participants’ Religion	74
Table 4.4	Descriptive Statistics for Participants’ Marital Status	75
Table 4.5	Descriptive Statistics for Participants’ Source of Income	75
Table 4.6	Descriptive Statistics for Participants’ Education Attainment.....	76
Table 4.7	The Mean, Standard Deviation, Cronbach’s Alpha for Instruments Used	79
Table 4.8	KMO & Barlett’s Test of Engagement and Accomplishment	79
Table 4.9	Descriptive Statistics for Flourishing.....	80
Table 4.10	Test of Homogeneity of Variances in Age and Level of Flourishing	80
Table 4.11	One-way ANOVA Between Age and Level of Flourishing	81
Table 4.12	Gender Differences in Level of Flourishing	81
Table 4.13	Test of Homogeneity of Variances in Ethnicity and Level of Flourishing	82
Table 4.14	One-way ANOVA Between Ethnicity and Level of Flourishing	82

Table 4.15	Descriptive Statistics for Ethnicity in Level of Flourishing	83
Table 4.16	Test of Homogeneity of Variances in Religion and Level of Flourishing	83
Table 4.17	One-way ANOVA Between Religion and Level of Flourishing	84
Table 4.18	Descriptive Statistics for Religion in Level of Flourishing	85
Table 4.19	Test of Homogeneity of Variances in Marital Status and Level of Flourishing	85
Table 4.20	One-way ANOVA Between Marital Status and Level of Flourishing	86
Table 4.21	Descriptive Statistics for Marital Status in Level of Flourishing.....	87
Table 4.22	Test of Homogeneity of Variances in Source of Income and Level of Flourishing	87
Table 4.23	One-way ANOVA Between Source of Income and Level of Flourishing	87
Table 4.24	Descriptive Statistics for Source of Income in Level of Flourishing	89
Table 4.25	Test of Homogeneity of Variances in Education Attainment	89
Table 4.26	One-way ANOVA Between Education Attainment and Level of Flourishing	90
Table 4.27	Descriptive Statistics for Education Attainment in Level of Flourishing	91
Table 4.28	Unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients for variables included in the model (Criterion variable: Level of Flourishing).....	92
Table 4.29	Descriptive Statistics.....	97
Table 4.30	Pearson's Correlations Coefficient for Level of Flourishing and Engagement, Positive Relations with Others, Meaning in Life and Accomplishment	98

Table 4.31	Unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients for variables included in the model (Criterion variable: Level of Flourishing).....	99
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LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1	Research Conceptual Framework46
Figure 4.1	Level of Flourishing Plotted against Engagement94
Figure 4.2	Level of Flourishing Plotted against Positive Relations with Others95
Figure 4.3	Level of Flourishing Plotted against Meaning in Life96
Figure 4.4	Level of Flourishing Plotted against Accomplishment.....97

LIST OF SYMBOLS

%	Percentage
α	Cronbach's alpha

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

et al.	(<i>et alia</i>): and others
etc.	(<i>et cetera</i>): and so forth
e.g.	Example
<i>df</i>	Degree of Freedom
FS	Flourishing Scale
KMO	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin
<i>M</i>	Mean
MLQ	Meaning in Life Questionnaire
N	Population Size
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
PERMA	Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment
QEWB	Questionnaire Eudaimonic Well-being
<i>r</i>	Pearson product-moment correlation
PWBS	Psychological Well-Being Scale
PWBS-PR	Positive Relations with Others - Psychological Well-Being Scale
S	Sample Size
SD	Standard Deviation
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
<i>t</i>	<i>t</i> -values
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
WHO	World Health Organization

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A1	Recruitment via email
Appendix A2	Recruitment via WhatsApp
Appendix B1	Recruitment via Facebook
Appendix B2	Online Questionnaire
Appendix C1	Email Communication Between Researcher and Elderly Home Officer
Appendix C2	Email Communication Between Researcher and Religious Leader
Appendix D	Instruments
Appendix E	Research Information
Appendix F	Subject Information and Consent Form
Appendix G	Participant's Material Publication Consent Form
Appendix H	Confirmation of Translation from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)
Appendix I	Permission to Access for the Research Instruments
Appendix J	Normal Q-Q Plot of the Variables
Appendix K	Normal Q-Q Plot of the Variables

**PERAMAL KEMAKMURAN DALAM KALANGAN WARGA EMAS DI
NEGERI PULAU PINANG, MALAYSIA: PERANAN PEMBOLEH UBAH
DEMOGRAFI DAN ELEMEN PERMA**

ABSTRAK

Kemakmuran adalah satu keadaan kesejahteraan mental yang optimum. Ia merujuk kepada pengalaman melakukan sesuatu dan menjalani kehidupan dengan baik dalam semua aspek kehidupan seseorang, termasuk kesejahteraan psikologi dan sosial. Kemakmuran memainkan peranan penting dalam semua peringkat jangka hayat, dan setiap orang berpotensi untuk menjadi makmur. Warga emas sebagai kumpulan umur yang semakin meningkat jumlahnya di Malaysia boleh mendapat manfaat sekiranya menjadi makmur. Namun begitu, pendekatan terkini yang mengkaji tentang kemakmuran adalah terlalu umum dan kajian yang berfokus kepada kemakmuran, khususnya dalam kalangan warga emas di Malaysia yang terdiri daripada masyarakat berbilang kaum, budaya and later belakang sosio-demografi, masih terhad. Malaysia merupakan sebuah negara berbilang bangsa, setiap etnik mempunyai definisi sendiri tentang apa yang dimaksudkan untuk berkembang. Hasilnya, dengan memahami definisi setiap etnik, program atau ukuran yang sesuai bagi mereka yang berkembang dan yang tidak berkembang boleh diambil dengan sewajarnya. Oleh yang demikian, kajian ini melihat secara khusus kepada peranan pemboleh ubah demografi (iaitu umur, jantina, etnik, agama, status perkahwinan, sumber pendapatan dan pencapaian pendidikan) dan elemen psikologi dari PERMA (penglibatan, hubungan positif dengan orang lain, makna kehidupan dan pencapaian) dalam menyumbang kepada kemakmuran warga emas berbilang bangsa. Peserta terdiri daripada 123 warga emas, berumur 60 tahun ke atas dari negeri Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. Kajian ini menggunakan

pendekatan kuantitatif dan kaedah soal selidik. Soal selidik ini diedarkan secara atas talian dan versi bercetak dan terdiri daripada bahagian demografi, elemen psikologi positif (penglibatan, hubungan positif dengan orang lain, makna dalam kehidupan dan pencapaian) dan kemakmuran. SPSS telah digunakan untuk analisis data. Peserta dalam kajian ini melaporkan tahap kemakmuran yang sederhana. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa faktor sosio-demografi seperti etnik, agama, status perkahwinan, sumber pendapatan dan pencapaian pendidikan semuanya mempunyai perbezaan yang signifikan dalam tahap kemakmuran warga emas di Pulau Pinang. Di samping itu, korelasi positif yang signifikan juga dilihat antara elemen psikologi positif (penglibatan, hubungan positif dengan orang lain, makna dalam kehidupan dan pencapaian) dan kemakmuran. Di samping itu, peramal demografi terkuat kepada kemakmuran adalah pencapaian pendidikan sementara peramal psikologi positif terkuat adalah keterlibatan. Implikasi teori dan praktikal kajian telah dibincangkan. Kajian ini tidak hanya menyumbang kepada lebih banyak kajian mengenai kemakmuran, khususnya dalam konteks masyarakat Timur yang berbilang budaya, tetapi juga meningkatkan perkembangan teori dan aplikasi praktikal hasil penyelidikan yang dapat digunakan untuk meningkatkan kualiti kehidupan warga emas di Malaysia.

**PREDICTORS OF FLOURISHING AMONG ELDERLY IN PENANG,
MALAYSIA: THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND PERMA
ELEMENTS**

ABSTRACT

Flourishing is a state of optimal mental well-being. It is the experience of doing and living well in all aspects of one's life, including psychological and social well-being. Flourishing plays a significant role in all life span, and every person has the potential to flourish. Elderly as the growing age group in Malaysia can benefit from being flourished. Nevertheless, current approach to studying flourishing is too general and limited studies have focused on flourishing, particularly among Malaysian elderly from a heterogeneous society with diverse cultural backgrounds. Each ethnicity has its own definition of what it means to flourish. By understanding the definitions of each ethnicity, interventions, programs, or measurements of those who flourish and those who do not can be taken appropriately. As a result, this study focuses on the role of demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, religion, marital status, source of income and education attainment) and elements in PERMA (e.g., engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment) in contributing to flourishing among Malaysian elderly from various races. Participants were 123 elderlies, aged 60 years old and above from the state of Penang, Malaysia. This study used a quantitative approach and employed a questionnaires method. The questionnaire was presented in both online survey and printed version and comprised of sections on socio-demographic, positive psychological elements (engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment) and flourishing. SPSS was used for data analysis. Participants in

this study reported a moderate level of flourishing. The findings revealed that socio-demographic factors such as ethnicity, religion, marital status, source of income and education attainment have significant differences in level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang. However, age and gender did not have impact in level of flourishing among elderly in Penang. In addition, significant positive relationship was also observed between the positive psychological elements (engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment) and flourishing. In addition, the strongest socio-demographic predictor of flourishing was education attainment while the strongest positive psychological predictor was engagement. Theoretical and practical implications of the study were discussed. The current study not only contribute to more studies on flourishing especially in the context of multi-cultural Eastern societies, but also enhances theoretical development and practical applications of the research findings that can be used to improve the quality of lives of elderly in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2018), people are living longer than ever before. As a result, the number of people aged 60 and above is on the rise. By 2030, elderly (age 60 and above) in worldwide will increase to 1.4 billion, and 2.1 billion by 2050. While the shift in a country's population distribution towards older ages began in high-income countries, it is now low- and middle-income countries that are seeing the most transition, particularly in developing countries. By 2050, 80% of the world's elderly will be living in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, 2018). Hence, population ageing is no longer an issue for developed countries but also posing a threat to the developing countries like Malaysia.

Over the past two decades, Malaysia is witnessing a dramatic increase in the elderly population. The percentage of Malaysians aged 60 and above has been steadily growing, rising from 6.2 percent in 2000 to 10.7% in 2020 (Department Statistics of Malaysia, 2020). The increase at 72.6% was astonishingly large. Malaysia will be one of the “super-aged” countries by 2030 (Tey, 2017). This phenomenon highlights a need to identify important determinants that can contribute to a flourishing life among the elderly in the context of Eastern culture.

According to Seligman (2011) the "founding father of flourishing", being in a state of mental health is not merely being disorder free; rather it is the presence of flourishing. Flourishing is a psychology concept that refers to a state of good mental health and living within the full range of human capabilities (Agenor, Conner, & Aroian, 2017). This is the area where positive psychology is practised. Positive psychology is the scientific study which focuses on the strengths development that

enable individuals and communities not only to survive but to flourish (Seligman, 2011). In other words, positive psychology is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences throughout their life.

In this context, PERMA, model of flourishing advocated by Seligman (2011), proposed that human flourishing is derived from one or a combination of the five positive psychological elements. These five elements are: Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M) and Accomplishment (A). This is the acronym of PERMA. Different people will derive well-being from each of these five building blocks to varying levels. A good life for one person is not necessarily a good life for another. There are many different routes to a flourishing life.

As a result, the concept of flourishing has emerged as one of the most important and promising topics studied in positive psychology (Style, 2011). Having said that, most of the studies on flourishing come from the Western regions. Even less is known about the concept of flourishing in developing countries, particularly in nations like Malaysia, which have a diverse cultural heritage. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is only one study that focuses on the concept of flourishing among older adults in Malaysia (e.g., Momtaz, Hamid, Haron & Bagat, 2016). Previous study on flourishing had alerted that while a startling high percentage (50.1%) of Malaysian older adults were flourishing, the fact that 49.9% of them were not flourish should not be neglected. However, there have been limited flourishing studies conducted in Malaysia to look extensively into factors such as what are the positive psychological elements that might be associated to and predict a flourishing existence among Malaysian elderly. Because flourishing studies are scarce in Malaysia, therefore only

limited efforts can be undertaken to implement flourishing strategies among elderly in a multi-racial society.

Furthermore, as mentioned by Rasmussen (2012), human flourishing is determined by both who and what one is, and it is thus not universal but individual. As a result, we can learn that the previous flourishing study in Malaysia (e.g., Momtaz, Hamid, Haron & Bagat, 2016) was lacking ethnic and cultural variety. In the current study, flourishing become one of the main concepts to be explored. The purpose of this study was to assess the level of flourishing of Malaysian elderly from different ethnicities group. Besides, this study aims to examine the relationship between level of flourishing and socio-demographic factors from a diverse ethnicity background. By using a positive psychology approach, this study also sets to examine the relationship between level of flourishing and the positive psychological elements that can help to foster a flourishing life of the Malaysian elderly. Furthermore, best predictor of socio-demographic factors and the positive psychological elements in level of flourishing will be identified in the current study as well.

In conclusion, because the elderly people are expected to become a rapidly rising segment of the Malaysian population soon, the current study focuses on the elderly in an attempt to investigate their life experiences in a diverse cultural setting in Malaysia.

1.2 Problem Statement

The following section discusses problems and research gaps leading to the current study. To begin with, Malaysia's elderly population is on the rise. By 2030, 15% of Malaysia's population would be 60 years old or older, making the country an ageing nation (Department Statistics of Malaysia, 2020). Malaysians aged 60 years old

and above are expected to reach 6.3 million by 2040, accounting for roughly 20% of the total population (Lee, 2018). By 2050, this percentage would have increased to 24% (Tey, 2017).

In this regard, according to the Department Statistics of Malaysian (2020), by 2040 Penang would have the highest proportion of elderly (26.2%) among all states in Malaysia. This is followed by Kuala Lumpur (24.5%) and Selangor (22.4%). The percentage of Penang's elderly aged 60 and above has risen to 14.9% (MURAD, 2020), it is more than double the average set by Malaysia's Department of Statistics at 7 percent (*Utusan Malaysia Online*, 2018). From 2020 to 2040, Penang elderly who aged 60 years old and above is expected to increase by 106.6% from 268,700 in 2020 to 555,000 in 2040. The increase is approximately at 17% to 20% in every five years (Department Statistics of Malaysia, 2018) (refer Table 1.1 below).

Table 1.1 Penang Population - 20 Years Projection by Age Category (2020-2040)

Age	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040
0 – 14	350,500	357,000	358,200	355,500	345,600
15 – 59	1,187,300	1,211,400	1,225,800	1,226,300	1,212,800
60 – 80 +	268,700	331,800	399,800	472,500	555,000
Total	1,806,500	1,900,200	1,983,800	2,054,300	2,113,400

As one of the most developed states in Malaysia (Khoo, Samat, Badarulzaman, & Dawood, 2015), this demographic shift in Penang would undoubtedly have a huge effect on all facets of the elderly's life. As a result, Penang will certainly face an ageing population crisis soon, and it is vital that we should not overlook any of the related viable solutions. Illness, loss, futility, and even death are frequently associated with old age (Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Ponzo, 1992), therefore, longer life expectancy does not guarantee that elderly people can live a flourishing life. As such,

it is important to understand the life experiences of the elderly in order to help them live their full potential and best lives.

Second, elderly is likely to experience various types of mental health problems. This includes depression, anxiety, and fatigue (Kwag, Martin, Russell, Franke, & Kohut, 2011). Mental health issues among elderly are the result of a complex interaction of social, psychological, and biological factors (Manaf, Mustafa, Abdul Rahman, Khairul, & Noor Azah, 2016). Although mental health disorders are common, especially among the elderly, but they are typically undiagnosed and untreated. Mental health issues among elderly place a heavy burden not only to the elderly but also to the society, community and country (Guo et al., 2016).

Within the category of mental health issues, depression is one of the most prevalent mental illness and a common cause of disability and reduced well-being in old age (Skoog, 2011). Globally, older adults (70 years and above) have a higher risk of depression relative to other age groups (Ritchie & Max, 2019). In Malaysia, according to Dr. Richard Ng (2016), a consultant physician-geriatrician from Malaysia's Jesselton Medical Centre (JMC), depression affects about 10% of Malaysian elderly. However, for those who live in old folk homes, the prevalence is even higher at 20%. Despite of the number of elderly people suffering from depression is rising, but many go undiagnosed or unreported as the elderly is unlikely to tell people they are depressed. Furthermore, diagnosing depression in the elderly is more difficult because they do not exhibit the typical low mood symptoms. Fear of mortality, the loss of a partner or companion, a lack of attention or activity that reduces mental stimulation, and loneliness are just a few of the reasons that can lead to depression among elderly (Olivia, 2016).

Findings from several studies in different setting (e.g., community-based, primary health care, old folk homes, hospital levels, and rural communities) revealed that the prevalence of mental illness (depression, anxiety, and emotional stress) among elderly in Malaysia ranging from as low as 2% to as high as 35% (e.g., Sherina et al., 2000; Sherina 2002; Sherina et. at., 2004; Al-Jawad, Rashid, & Narayan, 2007; Norsiah 1998; Rashid et al., 2011; Manaf et al., 2016). Besides, Sherina et. al. (2004) has compared the levels of geriatric depressive disorders among the urban and rural elderly in Malaysia, findings revealed that the rural elderly (7.6%) tend to be more depressed than the urban elderly (6.3%). This finding was supported by Manaf et al. (2016) where result in this study indicated that, depression and anxiety especially among the Malays elderly in the rural community of Perak, Malaysia were very worrying, therefore, depressive symptoms should be treated to prevent them from progressing to more severe mental health issues among elderly.

Besides, according to Chan, Leung, and Tsoh (2011), depression is the most common psychiatric disease among elderly suicides, especially when other severe conditions are present. In this context, the suicide rate among Malaysian older people suffering from depression is on the rise (Olivia, 2016). According to Rahimi et al. (2015) study on the suicide among elderly in Malaysia, suicide in victims 65 years and older totalled 23 cases and accounted for 7.1 percent of all suicides. The ages of these suicide victims ranged from 65 to 94 years old. The most common elderly suicide victim is a man (70%), who is 73 years old on average.

In sum, although depression is not part of a normal ageing process among elderly (Roberts, Kaplan, Shema, & Strawbridge, 1997), but it is the most common mental health problem and found to have the most negative adverse effects among

elderly (Pendleton, 2008). Therefore, if depression is not addressed properly, it can have a major negative effect on the well-being of the elderly.

Third, as world's population ages, loneliness has been identified as a global public health issue and one of the major risk factors for morbidity and mortality among elderly (Basu, 2012; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Seeman, 2000). Loneliness is described as a lack of willingness to share social and emotional experiences or a perceived deprivation of social interaction or engagement and it has a negative impact on the elderly's quality of life and overall well-being (Kumari, 2015).

Past research shown that increasing age is associated with a higher prevalence of loneliness among elderly (e.g., Simon, Chang, Zhang, Ruan, & Dong, 2014; Crewdson, 2016). Park & Chang (2004) urge that loneliness occur due to life changes and losses in old age. Furthermore, as we enter the twenty-first century, changes in social, economic, and demographic factors have contributed to a rise in the neglect of the elderly, resulting in a growing proportion of elderly people living alone; the pace at which this shift is occurring is especially evident in Asia (Chan, Raman, Ma, & Malhotra, 2015).

In Malaysia, study revealed that, 21% of the Malaysian elderly aged 60 years old and above always feeling lonely and 32.5% sometimes feeling lonely. Loneliness was more common among elder Malays than among Chinese and Indians. Loneliness was also found to be associated with age, marital status, education level, sources of income, health status, and physical limitations (e.g., Teh, Tey, & Ng, 2014). Momtaz et al.'s study (2012) reported the results of nearly 29.3% of 1,880 community-dwelling older Malaysians have high level of loneliness. On the other hand, Ibrahim, Momtaz, and Hamid (2013) reported almost 50% of senior Malaysians are at danger of social

isolation. This phenomenon has reached a critical point and attention is needed to address the issue (Ibrahim, Momtaz, & Hamid, 2013).

On the other hand, although loneliness can have positive side effects (e.g., assisting people in providing a sense of perspective that aids people in making important decisions), but there is widespread consensus that loneliness is a negative feeling. Past study had highlighted that elderly themselves observed loneliness as a significant issue for their generation (Schoenmakers, Van Tilburg, & Fokkema, 2012). In Hansson et al.'s study (1987), results revealed that loneliness was linked to poor psychological adjustment, disappointment with family, and social relationships. Additionally, Cacioppo et al. (2002, 2003) summarize succinctly the pathways through which loneliness may impact mortality. Lonelier adults were more likely to experience higher levels of perceived stress than their non-lonely peers. In comparison to their non-lonely peers, lonely people were also less likely to gain satisfaction from social interactions and to find social interactions supportive. In sum, loneliness has had a significant and detrimental effect on the elderly and is often regarded as a negative concept. Elderly who are frequently lonely may suffer physical and mental health consequences.

Forth, aside from the functional disabilities as mentioned above, the most common problems that elderly people face around the world are the non-functionality disorder issues. For example, adjusting to retirement life, new social positions, reviewing one's life, hunger, lack of proper shelter, non-productivity, and financial incapacity are just some of the issues (Lee, 2018). Some elderly even experiences a sense of loss, known as the "empty nest" syndrome. The "empty nest" phenomenon depicts how elderlies feel a sense of loss. As the traditional extended family has become less of a reality than in the past, the empty nest phenomena has become more

widespread in our modern society; and now, many older people are left living alone while their offspring work far away from home, pursuing their own goals and desires (Silverstone & Hyman, 2008). While depression, loneliness and non-functionality disorder issues are not the major concern of this study, an understanding about flourishing among elderly in Malaysia can help address the issues.

Positive psychology as the study of strengths have shown how we can address mental health issues by trying to understand not only the factors leading to poor mental health, but also by examining factors that can protect elderly from the condition and instead lead them to flourish. By understanding the factors of flourishing such as those proposed in PERMA, it is possible to equip and educate elderly people to be more mentally prepared and resilient in the face of diversity. In other words, the awareness of PERMA can help an individual to increase their well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2011). PERMA model identifies several key features that can lead to flourishing. Therefore, it is critical to investigate not only flourishing among elderly, but also factors that can be associated with the condition.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that Eastern and Western philosophies are based on very different historical events and traditions (Lopez, Jennifer & Synder, 2015). However, positive psychology's grounds are rooted in Western values and experiences (Leong & Wong, 2003). More studies have also been conducted in the context of Western cultures, employing Western samples. It is important for the field of positive psychology and the study of flourishing to focus more on Eastern context and samples.

While there are some studies, albeit limited, that focus on flourishing and well-being in Malaysia, but the sample population mainly from university undergraduates (e.g., Izazol, Ahmad Zamri, & Hasni., 2019), school teachers (e.g., Panatik, Badri,

Rajab, Abdul, & Shaha, 2011), government officers (e.g., Jasmani & Abdul Jumaat, 2011) and young adults (e.g., Teoh & Hashim, 2020). Flourishing research in Malaysia particularly focusing on the elderly is still limited.

To date, there has only been one previous study on flourishing of the elderly conducted in Malaysia by Momtaz, Hamid, Haron, & Bagat, 2016. However, it is primarily based on a single ethnic group, the Malays. While it has contributed to some understanding about flourishing in elderly Malaysians, it does not offer a comprehensive picture. There is a scarcity of study on the differences in socio-demographic factors among ethnic groups and how they contribute to the notion of flourishing. It is critical to comprehend the elderly's life experiences, which are shaped by their interactions with people of all races.

The above discussion illustrates research gaps on looking at flourishing among elderly, particularly in Malaysian context and among more diverse ethnic groups.

1.3 Research Questions

The above discussion highlights the prominent issues that lead to the following research questions:

1. What is the level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang?
2. What is the relationship between socio-demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, marital status, source of income and education attainment) and level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang?
3. Which socio-demographic factors can best predict level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang?
4. What is the relationship between elements of engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment and level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang?

5. Which elements of engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment can best predict level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang?

1.4 Research Objectives

The research questions emphasise the need to delve deeper into the idea of flourishing. As a result, the following three main research objectives emerge:

1. To assess the level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang.
2. To examine the relationship between socio-demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, marital status, source of income and education attainment) and level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang.
3. To identify which socio-demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, marital status, source of income and education attainment) can best predict level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang.
4. To examine the relationship between engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life, accomplishment, and level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang.
5. To identify which elements of engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment can best predict level of flourishing of the elderly in Penang.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important in few aspects. First, as mentioned in the problem statement, the significant increase of the elderly population has become one of the major challenges in Malaysia. By delving deeper into the concept of flourishing, this study can provide more useful and valuable knowledge to policymakers, practitioners, and caregivers to design a variety of new strategies and intervention programmes based on the flourishing approach aimed at addressing the needs of the rapidly growing elderly population. This is extremely beneficial because, rather than focusing solely on maintaining psychological well-being, the flourishing perspective encourages

elderly to set new goals, become more capable and adaptable, and take charge of their lives even at their advanced age for continuous self-development.

Second, the present study can help to address the mental health issues, loneliness, and some of the non-functionality disorder issues that the elderly face indirectly. Many previous studies have been indicated that flourishing is linked to a wide variety of positive life outcomes. Elderly who is actively engage in social events or volunteering can help to widen their social network. Besides nurturing good rapport, social participation can help to enhance the positive relationships within the social network groups. Furthermore, a sense of accomplishment might be achieved by completing a task, assisting in a social engagement, or volunteering work, all of which contribute to a feeling of being appreciated by the society and a sense of meaningful life can be observed by the elderly as well. All these positive functioning can indirectly contribute to a flourishing in later life as well as contributing ideas on interventions to stakeholders in preserving and prospering the lives of elderly in line with the third target of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which is ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being at all ages (United Nations, 2021).

Thirdly, this study is significant because it can bridge the research gaps in few ways. The current study explores a new concept in the well-being studies. In an Eastern setting especially Malaysia, little is understood about the concept of flourishing as it is still in its infancy stage, hence flourishing research is scarce. Results deliver in the current study will be a step in the right direction for other researchers in terms of extending and enriching their knowledge of flourishing in an Eastern context. Studies of flourishing, such as the current one, can provide a pathway for researchers to further explore and investigate factors and elements which is associated with and can predict one's level of flourishing in Malaysia. Besides, the current study's ethnic

and cultural diversity may provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the differences of socio-demographic factors in level of flourishing among elderly from diverse backgrounds. The differences in life experience among ethnic groups will provide more details about the strengths found in each culture and the methods used to seek and achieve positive life outcomes.

Fourthly, flourishing studies especially among elderly sample is still lacking in Malaysia context. Therefore, it is worthwhile to undertake research based on the positive approach to explore opportunities for growth and ultimately lead to the conditions that allow elderly to live a flourishing life in old age. Despite their advanced age, longer lives provide opportunities for the elderly, families, and whole communities. For example, elderly people may use the extra years to pursue new interests such as a new career, or a long-neglected passion. Indirectly, elderly can still make a major contribution to their families and societies in their later years. The extent of these opportunities is highly dependent on a functioning well condition that helps elderly act and perform good in all aspects of their lives. Therefore, the results of the current study may serve as a guideline for future researchers, and they may even proliferate to other flourishing studies involving other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups (such as people with disabilities) with the same desired outcome.

Finally, the current study can contribute and add knowledge to the understanding of PERMA. While PERMA serves as a good indicator of the flourishing studies in Western setting (e.g., Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015; Goodman et al., 2018; Khaw & Kern, 2015), empirical data on how Eastern cultures interpret the PERMA model and its application in other cultures is lacking in the literature. This is because people from various cultures is important to better understand themselves and to develop their own flourishing within their cultural context. This is supported by

Khaw & Kern (2015) who urge that, even though the PERMA offers a tool for measuring well-being cross-culturally, nevertheless culture-based modifications may be necessary.

In a nutshell, the concept of flourishing is an important topic to emphasise, particularly at a time when the number of elderly people is growing rapidly and becoming a global problem. Flourishing is advantageous to individuals, society, and society. All will be able to benefit from this positive mental state and life situation in a world full of flourishing people.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the concept of flourishing. The population of interest is Malaysian aged 60 years old and above. According to The National Policy on Senior Citizens in Malaysia, anyone who aged 60 years old and above is defined as elderly (Bahagian Pasca Perkhidmatan, 2015).

Participants of various ethnicities and religions were recruited in the current study to avoid bias and over-generalization. This is because Malaysia is a country with its unique history, each ethnic and religious group has its own culture, habits, and way of life, which can influence an individual's conceptions of flourishing.

Besides assessing the level of flourishing of the elderly, the current study aims to examine the relationship between socio-demographic factors and level of flourishing of the elderly. Although the broad flourishing factor is related to lower risk, but additional value can be gained by simultaneously investigating multiple elements. As a result, the current study also set to examine the correlation between level of flourishing and elements in PERMA (e.g., engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment). In addition, socio-demographic factors, and the

elements of PERMA (e.g., engagement, positive relations with others, meaning in life and accomplishment) that can best predict level of flourishing of the elderly will be identified in the current study as well.

Lastly, the current study used a quantitative approach for data collection, with a closed-ended questionnaire.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

The aim of this chapter is to provide a discussion on all the relevant concepts, variables that are related to flourishing and a review of the past research that are related to the current study. This chapter is divided into five main sections which consist of (i) discussion of the flourishing; (ii) PERMA as the key theoretical framework; (iii) conceptual framework; (iv) operational definitions and (v) research hypotheses of the current study.

In the discussion of flourishing, the focus is on general discussion and flourishing of the elderly. There is also a general review on how socio-demographic factors can be correlated and influence an individual's level of flourishing based on previous studies.

In addition, this study is guided by PERMA model as its main theoretical framework. Hence, a discussion on how the elements in PERMA are associated to flourishing is also presented.

The data collection of the current study was conducted during COVID-19 pandemic. This is a major event that is likely to have an impact on the data collection process. As a result, a section on how COVID-19 affects flourishing of the elderly has been added to put context to the current study.

In the final section, conceptual framework, operational definitions of the current study and hypothesis formation is explained after reviewing all the related past studies.

2.2 Flourishing

In the wake of the positive psychology movement, scholars' efforts to define the ultimate level of well-being have mainly pivoted around two prominent understandings which is hedonic (etc: happiness, life satisfaction) and eudaimonic (etc: flourishing) approach of well-being. The relationship between hedonism and eudaimonism is positive as it represents efforts in answering questions regarding the nature of a good life or a life well-lived, therefore in terms of the conceptualization, they are overlap as well. Hence, very often, these concepts were frequently used interchangeably in the past literatures. Researcher defined their research terminology based on their own measurements and context where they were in. For the purpose of this review, the term flourishing and well-being are being used interchangeably because they are two highly related concept (e.g., VanderWeele, 2017).

Flourishing comes from the Latin word *flor* (Hefferon, 2013), it is a central idea and the ultimate goal in positive psychology (M. Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). In Aristotle's ethical writings, he claimed that everyone has an inbuilt responsibility to strive for, develop, and become their best selves. Human flourishing or eudaimonia is the term for this concept (Treddenick, 2004). We can conclude that human flourishing is an essential notion worth exploring as Aristotle spent most of his life devoting the concept.

According to Rasmussen (1999), human beings can reach their full potential (i.e., to flourish). Every individual has the freedom to choose whether or not to try to flourish, but they do not have the freedom to change the fact that they have that potential because of the type of living being they are. Meaning, a person's potential for flourishing exists.

Despite the fact that there have been many distinct operational definitions of flourishing circulated in the past literatures, flourishing in general has always been referred to an optimal state of mental well-being (Huppert, 2009a, 2009b; Keyes, 2002; Ryff & Singer, 1998). However, long-standing traditions suggest that flourishing or human well-being is more than one's mental state and how one feels about various parts of life. Flourishing includes happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and positive social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017). Hence, in layperson's term, flourishing is the experience of doing and living well in all aspects of one's life and thus it is not simply the present of pleasant sensation (Satici, Uysal, & Akin, 2013).

According to Seligman (2011), the goal of a well-lived life is to flourish, and this is the purest of all human endeavours. Flourishing occurs when an individual experiences positive emotion (P), engages in interesting activities (E), has positive relationships (R), has meaning in life (M), and makes important personal accomplishments (A). These five building blocks are abbreviated as PERMA, a model of flourishing. Each of these five pillars of well-being has three characteristics. It must, first and foremost, contribute to one's general well-being. Second, many people are interested in it for its own sake, rather than for any of the other benefits. Third, it is defined and measured independently of the other elements (exclusivity). Thus, Seligman (2011) suggest that, if we want to flourish, we must reduce our misery and at the same time build these five pillars.

Keyes (2002) urge that, flourishing necessitates a combination of “symptoms” resulting from high emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The absence of mental illness does not imply that the presence of flourishing mental health (Keyes, 2005). Keyes (2005, 2009) concludes from his studies that flourishing people operate

significantly better than those who are otherwise free from mental illness but have moderate or low levels of well-being. Although distinctions along the mental health continuum are clearly important for people who are free from mental illness, they also distinguish degrees of functioning among adults and youth with mental illnesses - with flourishing individuals who have a mental illness functioning better than those with moderate mental health, who in turn function better than individuals who are experiencing low level of flourishing, they may enter the domain of languishing and have a mental illness. Clearly, flourishing is an essential condition for optimal functioning.

Keyes' works demonstrate that mental illness and flourishing are not two opposite ends of the same continuum, but rather interdependent aspects of ourselves. In essence, a person may have a chemical imbalance, implying that he or she has a mental disorder, but he or she can still work on personal strength to ensure high level of flourishing. A person with a high degree of resilience can deal with life's ups and downs and rebound from them. The ability to be resilient is considered as personal strength which allows a person to deal with a wide range of life's uncertainties and challenges and subsequently lead to a flourishing life. Although resilient is not the focus in the current study, other positive psychological elements in relation to the concept of flourishing should be investigated.

We can conclude from the insights contribute by both Keyes (2005) and Seligman (2011) that, the absence of mental illness or simply reducing suffering do not guarantee a flourishing life. Instead, an individual must cultivate positive psychological aspect for personal growth and self-development. Long-term sustainability can only promise a flourishing and fulfilling life.

On the other hand, by using a deductive approach, Huppert and So (2013) hypothesised that flourishing is the opposite of depression and anxiety disorders. Although these scholars define flourishing as the combination of feeling good and being able to operate well but the emphasis is more on the mental rather than the physical condition. This paradigm allows for a flourishing diagnostic, in which an individual is labelled as flourishing if he or she achieves high scores on the 10 identified positive elements plus one item that measures life satisfaction. The ten identified positive elements are categorized into three factors which are “positive characteristics” (emotional stability, resilience, self-esteem, vitality, and optimism), “positive functioning” (engagement, competence, meaning, and positive relationships), “positive appraisal” (positive emotion and life satisfaction).

We observed there are similarities in both Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing and Huppert & So's (2013) conceptualization of flourishing where the positive elements of flourishing were derived. Positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and competence or accomplishment are the positive psychological elements which appear in both definitions of flourishing. According to these scholars, a state of flourishing can be achieved by fostering and optimising these positive elements which focuses more on an individual's positive functioning aspects. These are the elements and positive interactions that the current study would delve further into.

Following the observation that flourishing is one of the most essential topics to be focused on, a growing body of research has found that high levels of flourishing or living a fulfilling life are associated with favourable life outcomes. This include both psychological and social functioning such as effective learning, healthy

relationships, longevity, physical well-being, life satisfaction, self-esteem, vitality, academic success, and psychosocial functioning (e.g., Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009b; Huta, Ryan, 2010; Keyes, 2007; Keyes et al., 2012; Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Keyes, 2011; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2009).

According to Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), the many aspects of flourishing produce more concrete effects than just mental or physiological ones. Self-efficacy, likability, and prosocial behaviour, for example, promote active involvement in target pursuits and in the community. This encourages people to seek out and solve new and unusual circumstances. As a result, flourishing adults are more motivated to work actively to achieve new goals and have more previous knowledge and resources. This enables individuals to achieve personal and social objectives such as creating opportunities, performing well at workplace, and delivering high-value products, work, and careers.

Additionally, Seligman (2002) urge that widening focus, broadening behavioural repertoires, which means broadening one's skills or regularly practised acts, increasing intuition, and increasing imagination are also benefits of flourishing. Besides, engagement and social interactions have been cited as elements that flourishing affects directly in the group. Those that flourish, for example, have been discovered to volunteer at higher levels across cultures. Studies have also found a connection between flourishing and actual number of friends, overall social support, and perceived companionship in terms of social support and relationships (Lyubomirsky, King, et al., 2005).

We can conclude from the past literatures that, the favourable and positive outcomes of living a flourishing life are indeed multi-dimensional. As urge by

Dunn & Dougherty (2008), as a society, we need to know how people can flourish (Dunn & Dougherty, 2008, p. 314).

In sum, flourishing indeed plays a significant role in all life span, and it is a phase that continues throughout our lives. Depending on the type of living being that he or she is, each person experiences a state of flourishing in a unique way. The promotion of a flourishing life is especially important in developing countries such as Malaysia and among vulnerable groups like the elderly, who will be the fastest growing population soon. Therefore, rigorous research in this area is necessary to better understand the lives experiences of the elderly in order promote this further. The following sections present an overview of previous studies on flourishing of the elderly people.

2.2.1 Flourishing of Elderly

We live in an era where increased life expectancy is a fact of life. As a result, there is genuine concern that the elderly has the right to flourish in old age. Due to the ageing process, elderly frequently faces challenges which affects and threatens families and elderly individuals.

According to past research, flourishing older adults able to demonstrate a sense of personal growth in which they are still evolving and changing. By achieving optimal performance in all aspects of life, the elderly will not only be able to overcome many obstacles in their daily lives but will also be able to contribute and live an enriching and more independent life in their old age. Moreover, past literatures also indicated that, human flourishing is associated with better mental and physical health outcomes. By understanding the needs of the elderly people may help in identifying and implementing strategies that promote flourishing in their later years.

Malaysia is best known for being a multi-cultural country, however research into the concept of flourishing among elderly people representing a multi-racial society remains limited. The first flourishing study on elderly was conducted by Momtaz et al. (2016) solely among Malay elderly aged 60 years old and above. The aim of this study was to identify the prevalence and socio-demographic and health factors associated with flourishing. The Complete State Model of Mental Health (CMH) by Keyes (2002) was the conceptual framework used to explain the concept of flourishing in Momtaz et al. (2016) study. Furthermore, the Flourishing Scale (FS) which was developed by Diener et al. (2010) was used to measure and capture for the eudaimonic dimensions of well-being in this study. Results in Momtaz et al.'s study (2016) found that, 50.1% of the elderly in their study were flourishing in life, 36.3% were languishing, 8.4 percent were struggling, and 5.2 percent were floundering in life. Results further revealed that socio-demographic factors play an important in impacting level of flourishing among Malay elderly. In which, gender, employment status, level of education, having living children, and chronic medical conditions are significantly associated with flourishing among Malay elderly, whereas, age, marital status, living alone, and economic status did not have much impact on flourishing of the Malay elderly.

No doubts the prevalence of flourishing among Malay elderly in Momtaz et al.'s study (2016) was high at 50.1% ($M = 50.2$) when compared to most of the Western and European studies, but we cannot ignore the fact that half of the elderly in Momtaz et al.'s study did not flourish. Hence, it is critical to perform a comprehensive flourishing study that includes a more representative sample of Malaysians of all races.

In contrast to the Malaysian study on flourishing of elderly by Momtaz et al. (2016), the level of flourishing among elderly in Western and European countries was

reported relatively lower than Malaysian elderly. For example, in Hone, Jarden, & Schofield (2013) and Didino et al.'s study (2019), the mean score reported by the New Zealanders elderly and Russian elderly aged 60 years old and above were $M = 45.5$ and $M = 40.9$, respectively, whereas in Momtaz et al.'s study (2016), mean score reported by the Malaysian elderly was $M = 50.2$. In this regard, we propose using the same Flourishing Scale (FS) as developed by Diener et al. (2010), which was also used in previous flourishing studies by Hone et al. (2013), Momtaz et al. (2016) and Didino et al. (2019) among the same population (elderly group), to further analyse the prevalence of flourishing in the context of a diverse cultural older population in order to gain more insights.

In different context, Sorrell (2017) in her study on promoting human flourishing in aging suggest that an elderly who is flourishing and mentally stable has a high degree of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Many older adults emphasise the challenging mental and physical challenges of ageing, emphasising that growing old is not pleasant. Having said that, the elderly continues to evolve and change even at their advanced age. The flourishing elderly still showing a different perspective in which they display a sense of personal development. A flourishing elderly population often sees their lives as having meaning. We can conclude from Sorrell's study (2017) that, even at their advanced years, elderly people have the desire for self-growth and to continue working to live a fulfilling life. One of the crucial things that might continue to propel the elderly towards a flourishing life is a sense of meaningful life in old age.

In addition, Keyes' (2005) flourishing study concluded that mentally stable adults who flourish had a variety of positive life outcomes. For instance, a flourisher had less health restrictions in everyday events, the fewest missed workdays, the fewest