

Cross-Cultural Variations in Menopausal Attitudes and Their Impact on Psychological Wellbeing: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a systematic review to explore the relationship between cultural perspectives on menopause and the psychological wellbeing of women. Menopause, a natural and significant phase in a woman's life, occurs typically between the ages of 45 and 55, marking the end of the reproductive years. It brings both physical symptoms, such as hot flashes and sleep disturbances, and psychological symptoms, including mood fluctuations and cognitive changes. The systematic review highlights how these experiences are not solely biological but deeply entwined with cultural attitudes and societal perceptions. Across different cultures, menopause is viewed variably; from negative, stigmatised transition associated with aging and loss of femininity to a positive, empowering stage symbolising wisdom and liberation. This thesis included a comprehensive literature review across the databases PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. In total 14 articles were found eligible for further analysis. The analysis of the thesis revealed a predominant trend of negative attitudes towards menopause across different cultures, which often exacerbates psychological distress among women. However, instances where menopause is perceived positively, associated with wisdom and liberation, highlights the variance in cultural narratives. These contrasting perceptions underscore the complex role of societal influences in shaping women's psychological experiences of menopause. The findings point to the need for broader cultural understanding and greater openness in discussing menopause to mitigate its negative impact on women's wellbeing. In conclusion, the thesis calls future research to further explore these cultural differences and their consequences on psychological wellbeing, advocating for more inclusive and supportive approaches to menopause care.

Keywords: Menopause, culture, attitudes, psychological wellbeing, Ryff's model of psychological wellbeing, societal perceptions

Cross-Cultural Variations in Menopausal Attitudes and Their Impact on Psychological Wellbeing: A Systematic Review

Menopause, a natural biological process, represents a significant transitional phase in a woman's life as it marks the end of her reproductive years (WHO, 2022). The transition typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, although the timing can vary among individuals (Takahashi & Johnson, 2015; Valéra et al., 2018). As women approach menopause, their ovarian function gradually declines, leading to decreased production of oestrogen and progesterone contributing to a range of physical symptoms (Su & Freeman, 2009; Tsavachidou & Liebman, 2002). Some of the most reported symptoms are hot flashes, night sweats, feelings of fatigue and irritability, vaginal dryness, negative impact on bone health, increased abdominal fat, and decreased muscle mass (Delamater & Santoro, 2018; Ji & Yu, 2015; Kodoth et al., 2022; Skaznik-Wikiel et al., 2016; Waetjen et al., 2018).

The psychological symptoms and experiences of menopause are equally significant. The hormonal changes that occur during menopause can impact various aspects, including mood, cognition, and emotional health (Gava et al., 2019). Due to fluctuations in hormone levels, women experience heightened emotional responses, ranging from sadness and anxiety to frustration and anger (Gava et al., 2019; Turek & Gąsior, 2023). These mood changes can be disruptive and have an impact on relationships, work, and overall quality of life (Woods & Mitchell, 2011). Hormonal fluctuations, coupled with the life changes and challenges that often accompany menopause, can increase vulnerability to these mental health issues (Wang et al., 2021). Women who have a history of anxiety and depression may be at a higher risk during this transition (Alblooshi et al., 2023; Mulhall et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, psychological effects during menopause are not solely determined by hormonal changes but are also shaped by individual and sociocultural factors and can vary among different cultures (Namazi et al., 2019). Personal as well as cultural beliefs, attitudes, and prior experiences with menopause can shape how women perceive and respond to

psychological changes they may be experiencing (Richard-Davis et al., 2022). As an example, in western countries, menopause is usually perceived as a negative or stigmatised experience, associated with aging, loss of fertility, and a decrease in societal value (de Salis et al., 2017; Namazi et al., 2019). Besides, women get confronted with a pressure to maintain youthfulness and physical attractiveness (Namazi et al., 2019). Similarly, middle Eastern cultures tend to associate menopause with a loss or deficiency (e.g., Ayranci et al., 2010; Javadijala et al., 2018). In such cases, women can face societal expectations to bear children or fulfil traditional gender roles (Namazi et al., 2019). The cessation of menstruation is therefore seen as a source of shame or disappointment, contributing to emotional distress and a sense of a diminished femininity (Ali et al., 2020; Namazi et al., 2019). Opposed to this, several cultural contexts view menopause as a natural and normal phase in a woman's life (Kelly, 2011). Some cultures celebrate menopause as a milestone of wisdom, maturity, and empowerment (Kelly, 2011). For instance, in Native American communities, menopause is seen as a time of spiritual transformation, honouring women for their wisdom and contributions to the community (Jones et al., 2012). These cultural differences and views on menopause can have significant impact on the experience of menopause symptoms and may affect psychological wellbeing (Richard-Davis et al., 2022).

The existing body of research includes investigations on how attitudes towards menopause can be shaped by various cultural, social, and psychological factors. As an example, Ayers et al. (2010) conducted a study focusing on the relationship between attitudes towards menopause and the symptoms experienced by women in this stage of life. Some of their key findings highlighted a link between depression and both negative attitudes and menopausal symptoms. The research further provides evidence that negative societal attitudes and individual negative perceptions of menopause can adversely influence the experience of menopausal symptoms (Ayers et al., 2010). Other sources, such as the systematic literature review carried out by Hoga et al. (2015), examined how sociocultural setting, background, and

approaches of women during this life phase shape experiences globally. The main findings indicated that women interpreting menopausal changes negatively tend to have more challenging experiences. The perception of menopause, whether positive or negative, is intricately connected with personal, family, and sociocultural backgrounds (Hoga et al., 2015).

While emerging evidence emphasises the role of attitudes and cultural influences in shaping women's experiences of menopause (e.g., Ayers et al., 2010; Garba et al., 2022; Hoga et al., 2015; Hybholt, 2022), there remains a lack of focused research on how these cultural attitudes specifically affect the psychological wellbeing of women during this phase. Most existing studies broadly address physical and social experiences without isolating the psychological impacts directly tied to cultural perceptions. To bridge the existing gap in research, this study will use the psychological wellbeing model proposed by Ryff (1989) to examine how cultural attitudes influence psychological wellbeing of women during menopause across different cultural contexts. Ryff's model identifies six key dimensions of psychological wellbeing: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. These dimensions collectively contribute to an individual's overall sense of psychological wellbeing, which can be influenced by both positive and negative life events. Self-acceptance is essential for recognising strengths and weaknesses without judgment, serving as the foundation for building meaningful connections with others and underscoring the importance of positive relationships. Autonomy allows for decisions that reflect personal values, aligning choices with individual identities. Mastery over one's environment is key to effectively navigating life's challenges. A sense of purpose provides direction and motivation, guiding individuals towards fulfilling their goals. Lastly, personal growth involves continuous development and striving towards reaching full potential, ensuring ongoing evolution and advancement.

The existing research on menopause largely focuses on mental illness outcomes, often overlooking the aspect of psychological wellbeing, despite its importance. Notably, there is

some evidence of positive perceptions of menopause in certain cultures, but the connection between these attitudes and women's psychological wellbeing is not clearly established. Furthermore, the literature has not sufficiently explored how various cultural views on menopause affect women's psychological wellbeing, nor has it focused explicitly on the concept of psychological wellbeing. This thesis seeks to address these gaps by examining what is known about the various cultural attitudes towards menopause and how these attitudes influence the psychological wellbeing of women being exposed to them.

Methods

Eligibility criteria

This systematic review adhered to the guidelines outlined by the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021) and focused on qualitative research examining the experiences of women who were undergoing or had undergone age-related menopause between the ages of 40 and 60 years. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, inclusion was limited to studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Furthermore, these studies were required to be available in English or German language. The research specifically included studies that explored external cultural attitudes, beliefs, practices, and societal perceptions regarding menopause and studies that explored external societal attitudes, stereotypes, or stigmas associated with menopause. Moreover, the review included studies conducted between the years 2000 and 2023, to ensure that the findings remain relevant to the current cultural attitudes and the psychological wellbeing of women experiencing menopause.

Conversely, criteria for exclusion were established. This research focused on the cultural and psychological dimensions of menopause, explicitly excluding studies of women with medical or psychiatric symptoms under medical supervision, as well as those concentrating on premature, early, or induced menopause. These exclusion criteria were applied based on review of the literature to ensure relevance to the reviews focus on the age-related menopausal experience. The rationale for these exclusions come from the limited research available on

topics such as premature menopause, which might not offer sufficient data for drawing valid conclusions. Additionally, the primary interest was in understanding the general experience of menopause among women, rather than examining the impacts of specific medical interventions or conditions and without the confounding effects of medical treatments or psychiatric conditions. Table 1 represents the given information shortly.

Table 1

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Qualitative Studies on age-related menopause (ages 40-60)	Studies of women with medical or psychiatric symptoms
Published in peer-reviewed journals	Studies on premature, early, or induced menopause
Available in English or German	
Exploring cultural attitudes, beliefs, and societal perceptions	Studies examining impacts of specific medical interventions or conditions
Exploring societal attitudes, stereotypes, or stigmas	
Conducted between 2000 and 2023	

Search Strategy

The systematic literature search spanned the electronic databases: PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. To ensure a comprehensive exploration of menopause within the cultural context, the initial search was not field-specific. Search criteria were streamlined to focus on journal articles and consideration given solely to open-access publications. Search strings incorporated various terms associated with menopause, culture, and psychological wellbeing, using Boolean operators to expand the scope. The variation in search strategies across databases is attributed to the distinct functionalities and limitations of each platform. For

clarity and transparency, the search strings, their corresponding outcomes, and the date of search are provided in Table 1.

Table 2

Search Strategy and Results

Date	Source	Search String*	Hits
13.10.2023	PubMed	menopause AND (attitudes OR beliefs OR perceptions OR opinions) AND (well-being OR psychological well-being OR mood) AND women from	924
13.10.2023	ScienceDirect	menopause AND (attitudes OR beliefs OR perceptions OR opinions) AND (well-being OR psychological wellbeing OR mood) AND women from	1000
13.10.2023	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (menopause OR post menopause OR perimenopause OR climacteric) AND ALL (attitudes OR beliefs OR perceptions OR opinions OR practices) AND ALL (health OR "mental health" OR well-being OR "mental well-being" OR "psychological experiences" OR mood OR anxiety OR depression) AND (culture OR western OR eastern OR aboriginal OR indigenous OR "south american" OR african) AND PUBYEAR > 1999 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Menopause")) AND (LIMIT-TO (243


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LANGUAGE , "English" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO (
OA , "all" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SRCTYPE , "j"
) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "NEUR" )
OR LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "SOCI" ) OR
LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "MULT" ) OR
LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "PSYC" ) OR LIMIT-
TO ( SUBJAREA , "ARTS" ) OR LIMIT-TO (
SUBJAREA , "Undefined" ) OR LIMIT-TO (
SUBJAREA , "HEAL" ) )

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Total Amount of Hits

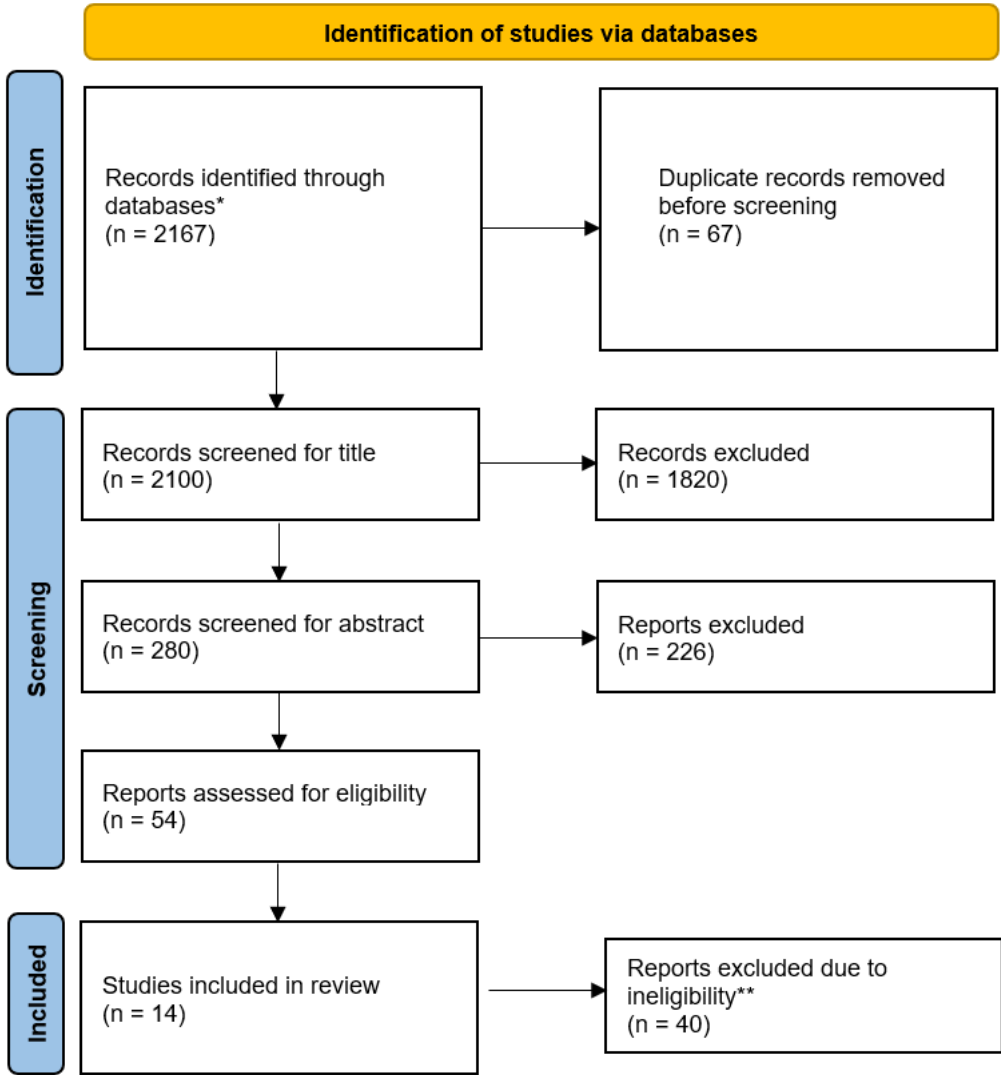
2167

Data Extraction

The data collection process was executed by a single researcher. Following the initial search across the specified online databases, the located articles were imported into EndNote (EndNote, 2023), a reference management tool used for efficient organisation of literature. Within EndNote, duplicate entries (N = 67) were removed, and the sources underwent title and abstract screening. Within this preliminary search, close attention was paid to the content of the articles, specifically assessing whether they provided qualitative and subjective information from the participants. This evaluation aimed to identify whether the information within the papers contained recognisable patterns, such as common beliefs, attitudes, or experiences that could possibly contribute to the identification of overarching themes or subthemes. For example, the expression of positive or negative attitudes in regard to menopause or information on psychological wellbeing. The remaining articles were compiled into a RIS file, subsequently loaded into ASReview, a digital tool that employs active machine learning techniques to enhance the screening and selection of articles. Upon uploading the RIS file, the artificial intelligence (AI) within ASReview initiated by requesting assessments of both relevant and

irrelevant articles. These assessments provided crucial input to the system, enabling the AI to propose the most promising titles for initial review. Once 280 articles with seemingly pertinent titles were identified, the AI ceased suggesting new relevant articles. Subsequent titles recommended by the AI were unrelated to the research topic, concluding the title screening phase. Although ASReview facilitated the identification of relevant articles, to ensure accuracy, the remaining articles were briefly screened. The set of relevant articles was then exported to a RIS file and integrated into Covidence; a web-based tool designed for review organisation (Covidence, 2023). Following this integration, the 280 articles underwent abstract screening, leading to the exclusion of 226 articles due to their lack of relevance (see Eligibility Criteria). The remaining 54 articles were further evaluated by reading them in their entirety, with each paper's eligibility assessed against the established inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 14 articles that were found eligible for inclusion in the review. Figure 1 illustrates, in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021), a flowchart outlining the study selection process.

Figure 1
PRISMA Flowchart of Study Selection Process



Note. *Scopus (n = 243), PubMed (n = 924), ScienceDirect (n = 1000). **For further information see Eligibility Criteria.

Quality Assessment

Following the study selection process, all eligible identified final studies underwent critical appraisal. One independent reviewer appraised the selected qualitative literature using the Joanna Briggs Institute Quality Appraisal Instrument (JBI-QARI). The JBI-QARI is a widely used tool designed to assess the strengths and limitations of qualitative studies, comprising 10 items, each rated as “yes”, “no”, “unclear” or “not applicable”. The checklist includes questions such as: “Is there congruity between the research methodology and the

methods used to collect data?” or “Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis or interpretation of the data?”. None of the selected studies needed to be excluded due to an insufficient quality.

Data Synthesis

In order to synthesise the findings from the included studies, a thematic synthesis approach was employed. Thematic synthesis is a recognised method in qualitative research that facilitates the identification of key themes, patterns, and concepts within a body of literature (Thomas & Harden, 2008). However, thematic synthesis goes beyond the well-known thematic analysis method, which is often used to analyse data in primary qualitative research. Thematic synthesis is, therefore, a method that can be employed within a systematic review to synthesise findings from multiple qualitative studies. The thematic synthesis has three main stages: (1) coding the findings, (2) generating descriptive themes, and (3) generating analytical themes. The first step included open coding, which is also referred to as “line by line” coding. The studies were coded one by one before moving onto theme building. Related codes were grouped together and labelled to form descriptive themes. The descriptive themes were grouped and developed further through using them to address the review question. The analytical themes were then generated by a process of interpretation. As an example, from this review, a code that was found across the literature (1) Menopause gets linked with aging and the loss of youth, was further summarised to a descriptive theme (2) Concerns about aging, Fertility, and Loss of Womanhood, and finally to the analytical theme of (3) Negative Attitudes Towards Menopause.

Results

Within the 14 selected studies, the studies utilised a variety of qualitative data collection methods. The majority of the data was obtained through qualitative structured, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews, accounting for eight studies. Additionally, three studies collected data through online forum messages, two through focus group discussions, and one via participant observations. In terms of geographical distribution, the research included a significant focus on

America (including North America, Central America, and South America), with five studies conducted in this region, including four that focused on specific subgroups, such as South Asian American women. The remaining studies were conducted in Asia ($N = 3$), Australia ($N = 2$), the Middle East ($N = 2$), and Africa ($N = 1$). The analysis of the data collected from these studies revealed a prevalent negative attitude towards menopause, identified in 12 studies. In contrast, expressions of positive attitudes were noted in eight studies. Themes related to the psychological wellbeing of menopausal women were evident in all studies ($N = 14$).

After all, the thematic analysis of 14 selected studies resulted in the synthesis of 16 descriptive themes into three analytical themes: (1) Negative Attitudes Towards Menopause, (2) Positive Attitudes Towards Menopause, and (3) Psychological Wellbeing of Menopausal Women. Detailed characteristics of the sources, including the occurrences of each theme within these sources, are presented in Table 2.

Table 3*Study Characteristics of Included Studies and Occurrences of Themes*

Author, Year	Country	Target Population (N = 1435)	Data Collection Method	Negative Attitudes Towards Menopause	Positive Attitudes Towards Menopause	Psychological Wellbeing 'Dimensions'
Cifcili et al., 2009	Turkey	Menopausal Turkish women (N = 16)	In-depth interviews		✓	Positive Relation with Others, Purpose in Life,
Dhillon & Gammage, 2023	Canada	Menopausal and Post- menopausal South Asian	Semi-structured interviews	✓		Autonomy, Self-Acceptance
Drew et al., 2022	Zimbabwe and South Africa	Menopausal women from Zimbabwe and South Africa (N = 40)	Interviews	✓	✓	Positive Relation with Others,

Hakimi et al., 2014	Iran	Azeri menopausal women living in Iran ($N = 18$)	Semi-structured in-depth interviews	✓		Autonomy, Environmental Mastery
Hall et al., 2007	Cross- Cultural	Includes menopausal women from Europe, Africa, America, and Asia ($N = 997^*$)	Literature review**	✓	✓	Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Purpose in Life, Self- Acceptance
Im et al., 2008	USA	White women in menopausal transition ($N =$ 23)	Online forum messages	✓		Personal Growth, Purpose in Life
Im et al., 2009	USA	Menopausal Hispanic women ($N = 27$)	Online forum messages	✓	✓	Positive Relations with Others, Self- Acceptance

Im et al., 2011	USA	Asian American women in menopausal transition ($N = 13$)	Online forum messages	✓	✓	Autonomy, Personal Growth
Jones et al., 2012	Australia	Menopausal Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Literature review**	✓	✓	Positive Relation with Others, Purpose in Life, Self-Acceptance
Jurgenson et al., 2014	Australia	Menopausal Australian Aboriginal women ($N = 25$)	Interviews and focus group discussions	✓	✓	Positive Relation with Others, Purpose in Life, Self-Acceptance
Ong et al., 2019	Singapore	Singaporean perimenopausal women ($N = 20$)	Semi-structured interviews	✓		Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Positive Relation with Others
Sarkar et al., 2023	India	Post-menopausal women from India ($N = 18$)	In-depth interviews	✓		Personal Growth, Self-Acceptance

Shea, 2020	China	Chinese menopausal women ($N = 156$)	Participant observation and semi-structured interviews	✓	Autonomy, Positive Relation with Others
Villarruel et al., 2002	USA	Menopausal women living in the Midwest, only Latin American women ($N = 18$)	Focus group discussions	✓	Personal Growth

Note. This table displays the literature utilized for the review, including sections that indicate whether the literature mentions the analytical themes and specifies which dimensions of the Psychological Wellbeing model are discussed within each source.

*This source includes several countries from all continents.

**This literature reviews include the analysis of qualitative data either within a country (Jones et al., 2012) or across several countries (Hall et al., 2007).

Negative Attitudes Towards Menopause

The analysis underscored a prevalent inclination towards negative attitudes in various cultural contexts regarding menopause. In 85.71 % of the 14 selected studies, the primary theme of “Negative Attitudes Towards Menopause” was discussed, establishing itself as the most prevalent topic. Within this overarching theme, the coding process revealed four distinct subthemes: (1) Concerns about Aging, Fertility, and Loss of Womanhood, (2) Silence and Secrecy, (3) Physical Limitations, and (4) Body Image Pressure.

Concerns about Aging, Fertility, and Loss of Womanhood

Among the twelve studies exploring the overarching theme “Negative Attitudes Towards Menopause”, seven addressed the specific subtheme “Concerns about Aging, Fertility, and Loss of Womanhood” (58.33%). Prominently, it emerged in the study by Sarkar et al. (2023) underlying the negative attitudes towards menopause in India. Indian women expressed physical discomfort associated with the aging process that is strongly connected to the menopausal transition. Cultural pressure underlines the desire for women to maintain a youthful appearance, with many Indian women articulating a sense of feeling old and fearing menopausal symptoms due to societal expectations (Sarkar et al., 2023). Similarly, South Asian women express discomfort with aging, particularly intertwined with the symptom experience of menopause, often expressing a sense of betrayal towards their bodies (Dhillon & Gammage, 2023). A study conducted by Hall et al. (2007) provides evidence suggesting that societies placing a high value on fertility, such as middle Eastern societies, tend to harbour more negative attitudes towards menopause. This is further observed in Zimbabwe, where women associate menopause with various losses, including infertility and a decline in sexual intimacy (Drew et al., 2022). Furthermore, women often report a sense of loss concerning womanhood and femininity. Specifically, in Singapore, menopause is perceived as a shift away from womanhood, intertwined with the cessation of menstruation and the inability to bear children. This association, as well as beliefs about traditional gender roles, such as being a “good” wife

or woman reflect concerns about femininity among Singaporean women (Ong et al., 2019). Another aspect of loss is echoed in the perception of women from the US, who frequently link it with aging and the loss of youth, describing it as a phase where they feel they are losing a part of themselves. Similar perspectives on a sense of loss in the context of aging are shared among Aboriginal and Indigenous women, with the aging process being perceived as a somewhat unwelcomed stage of life (Jones et al., 2012; Jurgenson et al., 2014).

Silence and Secrecy

The second subtheme “Silence and Secrecy” was discussed in approximately 41.67 % of the studies. An extreme example of cultural influence is observed among women in Zimbabwe, where menopause is subject to a particularly strict taboo (Drew et al., 2022). Women repeatedly report experiencing feelings of shame, as cultural norms rule that women in menopause are morally unacceptable. The consequence is a silence, with women in Zimbabwe finding themselves unable to openly discuss menopause, opting to keep their symptoms as a closely guarded secret (Drew et al., 2022). Similarly, an inclination towards discretion is further observed in Singaporean women, where the topic of menopause is also regarded as a taboo topic. Women tend to be reluctant sharing or discussing their experiences with menopause (Ong et al., 2019). A distinct form of silence is noticeable among women in Latin America, where there is a tendency to minimise the importance of menopause and adopt a more reserved attitude towards openly discussing their experiences. This pattern is reminiscent of the perspective held by Asian American women, who similarly perceive menopause as a phase to be endured in silence (Im et al., 2011; Villarruel et al., 2002). There are also cultures marked by less rigid views, exhibiting a certain level of acceptance and openness towards open communication, nevertheless, the cultural context introduces an element of discretion and privacy to the topic. This is evident among Hispanic women, where discussions surrounding menopause are perceived as a private, female-centric matter (Im et al., 2009).

Physical Limitations and Beauty Standards

In the course of the analysis, there were evident overlaps between the subthemes "Physical Limitations" and "Beauty Standards," with these two subthemes both represented in 25 % of the studies. South Asian women often have to deal with the cultural ideals of beauty and attractiveness, with a thin and slender body being equated with these standards. Those who do not conform to these norms face harsh criticism. When a woman's body changes during menopause, it no longer conforms to cultural ideals of beauty, which alters her self-perception (Dhillon & Gammage, 2023). Similar outcomes can be seen in women from India, where cultural expectations emphasize the importance of staying young. The physical discomfort of menopause leads to worries about ageing and a feeling of discomfort in one's own body (Sarkar et al., 2023). Physical discomfort is also associated with concerns about aging and the related physical limitations. Women from India, who already contend with cultural beauty standards, feel physically restricted by the symptoms of menopause and often experience fatigue or muscle pain, further constraining them in their daily lives. A similar trend is observable among women from Iran (Hakimi et al., 2014; Sarkar et al., 2023). Women from Iran also express significant concerns about the loss of autonomy due to menopausal symptoms. They fear becoming a burden to the family as they might be physically restricted, relying on family assistance. Another concern, discussed within the subtheme of physical limitations, is the apprehension among Iranian women that menopausal symptoms such as irregular/excessive bleeding and urinary incontinence may prevent them from fulfilling their religious obligations; since these symptoms signify impurity and may potentially affect their ability to perform daily prayers (Hakimi et al., 2014).

Positive Attitudes Towards Menopause

In contrast to the negative attitudes, positive attitudes towards menopause appeared less frequently (57.14 %) in the studies. Within this theme, the coding process revealed the following three subthemes: (1) Gain of Wisdom, Maturity, and Status, (2) Relief, Cleanliness, and Convenience, and (3) Cultural Awareness, Support, and Acceptance.

Gain of Wisdom, Maturity, and Status

One of the most prevalent subthemes was “Gain of Wisdom, Maturity, and Status” being mentioned at 62.50 %, this subtheme discussed various positive attitudes towards menopausal transition. As an example, Hall et al. (2007) explored that traditional cultures, which encompass the longstanding beliefs, practices, and social norms passed down through generations within a community, oftentimes associate menopause with increased status, which is also referred to as “wise women status”. Women express the feeling of being treated with more respect and feel a sense of gaining wisdom on their menopausal journey (Hall et al., 2007). Similarly, this phenomenon is further observed in Aboriginal and Indigenous women, the transitional phase is highly appreciated, seen as the next stage of life, and a natural aging process (Jones et al., 2012; Jurgenson et al., 2014). Aboriginal women explain this also with gained respect in the community as well as transitioning to important roles such as “grandmotherhood” (Jurgenson et al., 2014). Further, Indigenous women underline this with articulating a status gain as well as feeling more respected (Jones et al., 2012). Additionally, the Tuareg, an Islamic religious tribe in Niger, disengage from the view of losing womanhood and describe menopause as the opportunity to participate in new social, ritual, and healing activities, where feminine and maternal aspects are not relinquished but redefined in new roles (Hall et al., 2007). Other cultures, for example Ireland, women even mention to find joy during menopause or South American women celebrate reaching an older age and becoming respected elders. Also, Turkish women tend to focus on the positive outcomes of menopause, such as being experienced and able to guide younger generations through menopause (Cifcili et al., 2009; Drew et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2007).

Relief, Cleanliness, and Convenience

Moreover, women discussed the subtheme “Relief, Cleanliness, and Convenience” at 37.50 %, showing a tendency to more positive attitudes towards menopause. As an example, Asian American women repeatedly mentioned a relief from menses and general easement (Im

et al, 2011). Also, Turkish women underline this by reporting more relaxation due to the cessation of menses, less use of products, and general cleanliness of not having menstruation every month. Turkish women further point out positive sides such as the diminished need to regularly check clothes for being stained or not or less anxiety about getting unwillingly pregnant (Cifcili et al., 2009). A similar view is shared among Hispanic women, who perceive the physical changes as positive and “liberation” from menstruation is highlighted as significant aspect of a new beginning and more freedom (Im et al., 2009).

Cultural Awareness, Support, and Acceptance

Positive attitudes towards menopause are further enhanced through “Cultural Awareness, Support, and Acceptance” discussed at 25 %. In the study conducted by Shea (2020), it becomes evident that Chinese women are informed about menopause, the accompanying symptoms, as well as the difficulties women face during this phase. Culturally, women are offered an environment where they can openly talk about their symptoms and general experience with menopause. Women who have stronger symptoms, such as hot flashes, do not feel embarrassed when they experience excessive sweating in public places. Further, Chinese women experience no judgement when having mood swings or experience irritability; the opposite is the case. Culturally, health-related venting is highly valued and seen beneficial for the overall health of women (Shea, 2020). Similarly, Hispanic women experience support in their cultural context from people being aware of menopause and offering space for relaxation and increased rest. Since menopause is seen as a time of need, women are able to take their time and fulfil their needs or use the time for introspection or reorientation (Im et al., 2009).

Psychological Wellbeing

Strong Aspects of Psychological Wellbeing

The thematic analysis of menopausal experiences across different cultures underscores a significant finding: women who encounter positive cultural perceptions and open

conversations about menopause generally exhibit stronger dimensions of psychological wellbeing as formulated by Ryff. For instance, in China, the cultural milieu that encourages open discussions about menopause without shame can probably support women's autonomy and fosters positive relations with others. Women are empowered to share their experiences, feeling supported rather than isolated during this transition (Shea, 2020). Similarly, viewing menopause positively – as a relief from menstruation-related issues or as a welcomed cessation – correlates with greater environmental mastery. Women in various cultural contexts, including Hispanic, Asian American, and Turkish communities, report feeling more in control of their lives and the menopausal transition (Cifcili et al., 2009; Im et al., 2011; Villarruel et al., 2002). This sense of control extends to personal growth, as seen in cultures that attribute a "Wise Woman" status to post-menopausal women. For instance, Maya women in Guatemala associate menopause with freedom and an elevated status, expressing joy and experiencing an enhanced sense of purpose during this phase (Hall et al., 2007). Hispanic women, too, perceive menopause as a period conducive to self-reflection and reorientation, fostering strong feelings of autonomy, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance (Im et al., 2008; Villarruel et al., 2002). The notion of entering new roles, such as "grandmotherhood," further contributes to a woman's sense of purpose in life and supports personal growth, as highlighted by the perspectives of indigenous women and those who feel they can now guide younger generations through life's phases (Cifcili et al., 2009; Jurgenson et al., 2014).

Discussion

This thesis systematically reviewed the role of cultural attitudes on the psychological wellbeing of menopausal women. Utilising Ryff's model of psychological wellbeing and analysing qualitative data from various cultural contexts, the study uncovered a predominance of negative attitudes towards menopause, evident in 85.71% of the 14 selected studies. These negative perceptions are largely driven by concerns related to aging, fertility loss, and societal beauty standards, further exacerbated by a cultural reluctance to discuss menopause openly,

leading to feelings of isolation and shame among women. In contrast, the research also identified cultures that perceive menopause more positively, associating it with increased respect and status. In such contexts, menopause is celebrated as a transition to greater wisdom and maturity, with 62.50% of the studies that discussed positive attitudes towards menopause highlighting themes of wisdom, maturity, and status gain. Additionally, the presence of positive cultural perceptions and open conversations about menopause is associated with stronger dimensions of psychological wellbeing among women experiencing this transition. The examination of psychological wellbeing, using Ryff's model (1989), revealed insights into the positive influence of cultural perceptions and open discussion about menopause. Cultures fostering open conversations and positive views on menopause were associated with enhanced psychological wellbeing among women, including self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, purpose, and personal growth, highlighting the importance of embracing such attitudes for women's wellbeing during this transitional phase.

Prevalence of Negative Attitudes

The analysis underscored a tendency of negative perceptions of menopause, echoing research that points to societal and cultural stigmatisation during this life transition. Several studies revealed a notable gap in information and education about menopause, with many women reportedly feeling uninformed about what to expect before they reach their forties, indicating a profound educational deficit (e.g., Currie & Moger, 2019; Gebretatyos et al., 2020; Munn et al., 2022; Tariq et al., 2023). This lack of knowledge leads to women entering menopause feeling unprepared and uninformed, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and anxieties associated with this transitional phase (Aljumah et al., 2023; Harper et al., 2022). Such an absence of awareness or preparedness furthers the internalisation of negative societal narratives about menopause, often emphasising loss over transition or renewal (Tariq et al., 2023; Yisma & Ly, 2018). These findings align with the thematic pattern of silence and secrecy highlighted within this review. Societal taboos and a lack of open discourse contribute to stigmatisation and

misinformation about menopause (e.g., Duffy et al., 2011; Williams, 2023). Among women in Zimbabwe, the findings reflect the cultural taboos surrounding menopause in Sub-Saharan African societies, and Singapore, where conservative societal norms contribute to a lack of open discussion and information about menopause, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and unpreparedness (Drew et al., 2022; Im et al., 2009). This further aligns with broader societal challenges in discussing and managing natural biological processes openly and with dignity, as seen in research on menstrual taboos (Maulingin-Gumbaketi et al., 2022; Mukherjee et al., 2020). The reticence to discuss menopause openly affects women's psychological wellbeing and social participation, complicating their experience of this natural life transition (Gupta, 2022; Lock & Kaufert, 2001).

Moreover, the review indicated that negative perceptions are significantly shaped by cultural differences. This resonated with wider literature discussing how cultural beliefs and societal attitudes influence menopausal experiences (e.g., Ayers et al., 2010; Bowles, 2013; Richard-Davis et al., 2022). Studies suggest that societal stigma and the medicalisation of menopause in Western cultures contribute to its negative portrayal, influencing women's perceptions and experiences of menopause (Afridi, 2017; Hickey et al., 2022). Within the findings this was observed in Western cultures like the US, where medicalisation is prominent. However, it is noteworthy that similar patterns emerge in Eastern cultures like South Asia, despite their rich tapestry of beauty standards. This suggests a broader influence of societal perceptions on menopause experiences transcending geographical boundaries. Also, historical views that have pathologised menopause further established negative views and experiences, with medical narratives often promoting hormone therapy as a solution to the supposed disadvantages of menopause (Tobell, 2008; Whiley et al., 2023). These factors collectively contribute to a challenging narrative surrounding menopause, characterised by negative views, lack of information, cultural stigmas, and societal reluctance to engage in discourse.

Positive Attitudes towards Menopause

The analysis revealing positive perceptions of menopause presents an important counterpoint to prevailing narrative that often emphasises the negative aspects of this life stage. The findings suggest that many women associate menopause with gains in autonomy, freedom from menstruation, and an elevated social status.

Central to these findings is the claim that societal narratives, family dynamics, and cultural contexts play a crucial role in shaping women's perceptions and experiences of menopause (Hoga et al., 2015; Yisma & Ly, 2018). In the review, the more spiritual and religious countries such as Japan or China seemed to hold spiritual beliefs about menopause, viewing it as entering a new stage of life or an opportunity for self-reflection. This perspective is further reflected in the results, with Indigenous and Aboriginal cultures, historically rooted in spiritual traditions, also associating menopause with increased respect, wisdom, and significant new roles in their communities. For instance, Japan and China view menopause not merely as a biological milestone but as an opportunity for personal growth and spiritual rebalancing. In Japan, menopause is associated with the term "konenki" which describes the transition as a time of renewal, regeneration, and new energy (Southin, 2023). This perspective reflects a broader societal attitude towards aging, laying emphasis on regeneration and new possibilities during this life stage, which can be compared to the findings of Indigenous cultures where women can find themselves in new roles (e.g., Jones et al., 2012; Jurgenson et al., 2014). Concurrently, the Chinese perspective interprets menopause as a transition from a predominantly "yin" state, where yin qualities are more pronounced, to a more balanced state of "yin and yang". This balance is considered essential for health and wellbeing, and practices like acupuncture, herbal remedies, and dietary adjustments are used to manage menopausal symptoms and restore harmony between yin and yang energies (Gonzalez, 2024). These views have a sharp contrast with Western narratives that often frame menopause in terms of loss and decline, underscoring the influence of cultural narratives in fostering positive or negative menopausal experiences.

Moreover, one of the findings concerned the role of cultural awareness, support, and acceptance in fostering positive experiences which in turn enhances psychological wellbeing of women undergoing menopause. The analysis revealed that societies where menopause is openly discussed and perceived as a natural stage of life, women reported more positive experiences compared to those where the topic is shrouded in silence and negativity. The WHO (2022), emphasises the importance of understanding menopause as a natural stage in a woman's life, highlighting its physical, emotional, mental, and social consequences. This perspective supports the notion that cultural openness and education around menopause could lead to more positive experiences for women transitioning through this phase (WHO, 2022). Additionally, a supportive community context, characterised by knowledge sharing and cultural dialogue, enhances women's perceptions of menopause, often leading to a sense of relief from the constraints of menstruation and a newfound autonomy over one's body (Guthrie et al., 2003). Within the findings, China stood out for its openness in discussing menopause (Shea, 2020). Chinese women are encouraged to share their experiences and express their emotions, including anger and frustration, without fear of judgment. This open dialogue seems to facilitate better emotional management and support, contributing to more positive menopausal experiences and overall wellbeing.

A positive evaluation of menopause is further evident within certain cultural and religious context, highlighting the significance of cultural beliefs in shaping the menopausal experience. As seen in the review, menopause is perceived variably across cultures, often influenced by religious and social norms (Namazi et al., 2019). For instance, in Islamic traditions, the cessation of menstruation simplifies religious practices such as prayer, offering a form of spiritual release (Ishak et al., 2021). In the findings, Turkish women mentioned the relief they experience from menopause due to the cleanliness it brings, allowing them to pray more freely and without interruption. Similarly, Indigenous cultures and the Tuareg community associate menopause with an increase in social status and wisdom (Hall et al., 2007; Rasweswe

& Mulaudzi, 2022), which contrasts with Western perspectives that often emphasise loss. Further, Hindu cultures view menopause as a transition to increase spiritual purity (Ilankoon et al., 2021), picturing the diverse interpretations and experiences of menopause that are shaped by cultural contexts.

Positive experiences seem to be linked to societies that discuss menopause openly and perceive it as a natural life stage, with more traditional cultures often viewing it as an opportunity for personal or even spiritual growth. These perspectives challenge Western narratives that are focused on decline and give suggestions to cultural openness and support enhancing the menopausal experience. Nonetheless, attempting to categorise countries based on cultural framework proved challenging due to the coexistence of both positive and negative perceptions of menopause. The pattern of attitudes towards menopause was not distinctly different between, for example, collectivistic and individualistic societies. For instance, traditional cultures generally exhibited more negative attitudes towards menopause, yet they also approached it more naturally compared to modern cultures like the US. In the US, menopause is frequently medicalised and associated with a negative outlook on aging and the self. This duality suggests that while traditional societies may have negative views, their holistic and natural approach to menopause provides a counterbalance. This contrasts with the medicalised and often stigmatised perspectives prevalent in more modernised societies.

Psychological Wellbeing

In light of Ryff's psychological wellbeing model, the findings from the analysis offered insights in how societal perceptions and attitudes shape women's psychological wellbeing during menopause. "Autonomy" and "Environmental Mastery" appeared to be shaped by cultural attitudes towards menopause. In cultures where menopause is discussed openly and without stigma, women often feel empowered, being an indication of enhanced autonomy. This openness further can foster a sense of environmental mastery, as women feel better informed and prepared for the changes they are experiencing. For instance, Shea (2020) found that

Chinese women, benefiting from culture of open discussion about menopause, reported feeling more autonomous and in control of their wellbeing. In contrast, societies where menopause is a taboo subject, such as the reported silence in Zimbabwe (Drew et al., 2022), women's autonomy and sense of control can be undermined, leading to increased anxiety and helplessness.

The "Personal Growth" and "Positive Relations with Other's" dimensions of Ryff's model are reinforced in environments that view menopause more positively. Cultural practices that celebrate the transition as an increase in status or wisdom, as seen in the respect for "wise women" in Aboriginal cultures (Jones et al., 2012; Jurgenson et al., 2014), underline the potential for personal growth. Such positive constructs might foster stronger community bonds and support networks, aligning with Ryff's emphasis on positive relations. The work of Hall et al., (2007) on Indigenous women's perceptions of menopause as a natural and respected life stage shows an example for how cultural attitudes can foster personal development and enhance social connections. Moreover, "Purpose in Life" and "Self-Acceptance" seem to be deeply influenced by how societies frame menopause. Cultures that redefine menopause as a time for new roles and activities, offer women opportunities for renewed purpose and self-acceptance. The Tuareg's view of menopause (Hall et al., 2007), as an entry into new social and ritual activities, does not only provide women with a clear purpose after menopause, but might also promote a positive self-image. Similarly, research by Cifcili et al. (2009) on Turkish women illustrates how a positive outlook on menopause, focusing on the cessation of menstruation and the opportunity for guidance, can foster a strong sense of self-acceptance and a renewed sense of life's purpose.

Limitations and Recommendations

Upon evaluating the review concerning cultural differences in the menopausal experience and its influence on psychological wellbeing, it is essential to highlight and address various limitations and recommendations that emerged throughout the study. The methodology

of the review relied on the judgement and interpretation of a single researcher during all stages of the review. While this approach was guided by systematic principles, such as the PRISMA, the subjective nature of qualitative research underscores the potential for biases in interpreting the findings. The inclusion of an additional researcher or researchers in the process of analysis could have offered more balance in the interpretation of the findings. A Positive Psychology practitioner might focus on the potential growth and resilience aspects of menopause, while a sociologist might emphasise the influence of societal structures, highlighting how different professional lenses could minimize interpretative bias. Collaborative approaches can enrich the analysis through diverse perspectives, especially in qualitative research focusing on subjective experiences. Moreover, the review focused on age-related menopause to explore the general experience of menopause. This means that experiences related to premature, early, or induced menopause, which are often accompanied by different psychological and cultural factors, were not considered within the scope of this review. This choice limits the applicability to all menopausal experiences and potentially omits insights from women undergoing menopause due to medical interventions or conditions. Future research should also encompass the experiences of women undergoing premature, early, or induced menopause. Understanding these experiences can provide a more comprehensive view of the psychological wellbeing of all women navigating menopause, regardless of its onset. It can be expected that these experiences might reveal different psychological and social challenges compared to those undergoing age related menopause, such as heightened anxiety and stress due to the unexpected and abrupt nature of the transition. This can potentially lead to more insights and targeted support strategies.

Further, using AI tools like ASReview for the initial screening of articles, is an innovative and efficient method, but carries the risk of missing relevant studies. In this study, the risk was mitigated by manually reviewing a random subset of the excluded articles to ensure no pertinent studies were overlooked. This combined approach balanced the efficiency of AI

with the accuracy of manual screening, reducing the likelihood of significant omissions. The complexity of qualitative research, particularly regarding culture and psychological wellbeing, may not be fully captured by AI algorithms, potentially omitting important insights. Future research methodologies should balance efficiency with the understanding that comes from human analysis, especially in qualitative research. Lastly, the focus was on studies conducted between 2000 and 2023, which ensured the relevance of the data. However, this temporal limitation may exclude important historical perspectives or long-term studies initiated before 2000. This might lead to the potential of overlooking the evolution of societal attitudes towards menopause. Extending the range of publication years in future reviews could uncover long-term trends in cultural attitudes towards menopause and its psychological implications. This might reveal how perceptions and stigmas have evolved, offering insights into changing societal narratives.

Besides these, there are also other interesting ways future research could expand on the topic of this thesis. Future research could explore how intersecting identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, influence the menopausal experience. This could provide insights into the various factors affecting women's health and psychological wellbeing. Also, in this digital age, exploring the role of digital and social media in shaping attitudes towards menopause could be pertinent, given the increasing influence of these platforms on public discourse. Research could, for example, assess how online communities and media representations contribute to destigmatising or perpetuating myths about menopause. Another interesting aspect would be to include the perspectives of men on menopause, particularly in how they perceive and support women undergoing menopause in relation to family but also in context of work where men have a leading position. This could provide a more holistic view of the societal attitudes towards this phase of woman's life. Understanding men's awareness and attitudes could also highlight areas for educational efforts to support partners and families. In addition, evaluating the outcomes of educational interventions aimed

at improving knowledge and attitudes towards menopause among healthcare providers, woman, and the wider community could inform strategies to combat stigma and improve support. This could include assessing changes in perceptions and the quality-of-care post intervention.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the cultural and psychological dimensions of menopause and its consequences on psychological wellbeing, guided by a systematic review of qualitative studies. The analysis revealed that cultural attitudes towards menopause vary significantly, with some cultures holding mainly negative views that contribute to stigma and psychological distress among women. Conversely, other cultures also recognise menopause as a transition to a respected life stage, which can positively influence women's psychological wellbeing. The findings from this thesis underline the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in addressing menopause and suggests directions for future research to enhance support for women during this transitional stage of life.

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