



The Relationship between Social Support and Subjective Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

Subjective well-being has become an important indicator of individual quality of life and psychological functioning, while social support is frequently regarded as a key factor influencing well-being outcomes. However, empirical findings regarding the relationship between social support and subjective well-being remain inconsistent across studies and contexts. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the overall relationship between social support and subjective well-being through a meta-analytic approach. This study employed a quantitative meta-analysis by synthesizing empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. The literature search was conducted systematically through the Scopus database using several related keywords associated with social support and subjective well-being. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, six empirical studies with a cumulative sample of 3,087 participants were included in the analysis. Statistical analysis was performed using a random-effects model with Fisher's Z transformation to estimate the pooled effect size and heterogeneity across studies. The findings revealed that social support demonstrated a positive but weak and statistically non-significant relationship with subjective well-being (pooled effect = 0.137; p 0.005). In addition, substantial heterogeneity was identified, indicating that the relationship varied considerably across populations, contexts, and measurement approaches. The results suggest that social support does not function as a universally consistent predictor of subjective well-being, but rather operates as a context-dependent relational resource influenced by cultural, psychological, and organizational conditions. This study contributes to management and psychological literature by emphasizing the complexity of social support and encouraging more context-sensitive approaches in future well-being research.

Introduction

Subjective well-being (SWB) has become one of the central constructs in contemporary psychological research because it reflects how individuals evaluate and experience their lives both cognitively and emotionally. The concept generally encompasses life satisfaction, the presence of positive affect, the absence of negative affect, and broader eudaimonic dimensions such as meaning, personal growth, and self-actualization (Mackie & Smith, 2015; Tadić, 2010; Velasco et al., 2024). In recent decades, SWB has increasingly been recognized as an important indicator of mental health, adaptive functioning, and overall quality of life across various cultural and demographic groups. Individuals with higher levels of subjective well-being tend to demonstrate better psychological adjustment, stronger interpersonal relationships, greater academic and occupational performance, and healthier lifestyles (Chattu et al., 2020). Consequently, understanding the determinants of SWB has become an important concern

within psychological science, particularly in efforts to identify protective factors that promote resilience and long-term psychological functioning. Among the factors frequently associated with subjective well-being, social support has consistently attracted considerable scholarly attention (Huang & Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Sun, 2024). Social support refers to the perceived availability of emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal assistance obtained from family, friends, peers, and broader social networks (Boren, 2017; Lai, 2014). Psychological literature generally positions social support as an important psychosocial resource capable of reducing psychological distress and strengthening coping capacities during stressful experiences. The stress-buffering perspective proposes that individuals who perceive greater social support are more capable of managing adversity, thereby experiencing better emotional adjustment and higher levels of well-being (Lai, 2014). In this context, social support is not merely a social resource, but also a psychological mechanism that influences how individuals interpret and respond to life challenges.

Empirical findings have repeatedly demonstrated positive associations between social support and subjective well-being across diverse populations (Buecker et al., 2023). Previous studies reported that individuals who experience stronger social support tend to show higher life satisfaction, lower psychological distress, and greater emotional stability (Appau & Awawory, 2020; Poulin & Rong, 2012). Positive relationships between these variables have been identified among adolescents, university students, older adults, medical professionals, teachers, and individuals experiencing chronic illness (Fu et al., 2022; Hadjar & Kotitschke, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). For example, Yang et al. (2023) found that perceived social support contributed positively to subjective well-being among patients with advanced cancer through increased psychological resilience. Similarly, Jeon et al. (2016) demonstrated that social support was positively associated with subjective well-being among elite student athletes, particularly when combined with self-compassion and adaptive coping mechanisms. These findings reinforce the assumption that supportive social relationships play an important role in enhancing individuals' psychological functioning and emotional satisfaction (Rahman et al., 2025).

Despite the generally positive theoretical assumptions, the empirical evidence regarding the relationship between social support and subjective well-being remains far from consistent (Xu et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2025). Several studies have reported strong positive associations, whereas others identified weak, indirect, or even negative relationships depending on the characteristics of the population and research context (Ban et al., 2021; Xue et al., 2025). Such inconsistencies indicate that the relationship between social support and SWB may not be universal or linear. Instead, it appears to be influenced by complex contextual, demographic, and psychological factors. Donnelly et al. (2023) emphasized that community and cultural environments substantially shape individual well-being processes, while Ouyang et al. (2021) found that social support may function differently depending on stress exposure, depressive symptoms, and individual vulnerability. These varying findings suggest that social support cannot automatically be assumed to produce uniformly positive outcomes for all individuals and contexts.

The inconsistencies in previous findings also raise important theoretical questions regarding the mechanisms through which social support influences subjective well-being. Existing research increasingly indicates that social support often operates indirectly through mediator variables such as resilience, self-efficacy, coping strategies, and emotional regulation (Guo & Li, 2025; Li et al., 2014). In some cases, social support has been found to moderate the impact of stressful life events on well-being rather than directly predict SWB itself (Ouyang et al., 2021). Furthermore, certain studies suggest that excessive or poorly matched support may contribute to feelings of dependency, loss of autonomy, or perceived burden, thereby reducing psychological well-being rather than improving it (Ban et al., 2021). These findings illustrate

that the psychological role of social support is multidimensional and context dependent, requiring a more integrative understanding beyond simple positive correlations.

Another important issue concerns the substantial variation in demographic and cultural contexts across existing studies. Factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic conditions, health status, and cultural orientation appear to influence the magnitude and direction of the relationship between social support and subjective well-being (Donnelly et al., 2023; Hadjar & Kotitschke, 2021). In collectivistic societies, social support may be perceived as a normative obligation embedded within social relationships, whereas in individualistic societies it may function as a more distinct protective resource. Consequently, the meaning, perception, and effectiveness of social support can vary considerably across cultural contexts. Previous research has not adequately synthesized how these contextual variations contribute to inconsistent empirical outcomes, leaving important gaps in the broader psychological literature.

Although numerous empirical studies have examined social support and subjective well-being, existing evidence remains fragmented and methodologically diverse. Many studies focus only on specific groups such as adolescents, patients, or older adults, limiting the generalizability of their conclusions (Appau & Awaworyi Churchill, 2020; Fu et al., 2022). Moreover, previous meta-analytic studies have often been geographically restricted or concentrated on particular populations, making it difficult to determine whether the relationship between social support and SWB remains stable across broader contexts (Yalçın, 2015). Since recent studies have produced increasingly divergent findings, an updated meta-analytic synthesis is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the overall relationship between these variables.

The growing complexity of recent psychological research further justifies the need for a new meta-analysis. Contemporary studies increasingly incorporate moderator and mediator variables, investigate diverse vulnerable populations, and employ different operationalizations of both social support and subjective well-being (Guo & Li, 2025; Xue et al., 2025). These methodological variations may contribute substantially to inconsistent effect sizes across studies. Without systematic synthesis, it remains difficult to identify whether the observed inconsistencies reflect genuine contextual differences, methodological limitations, or theoretical weaknesses in the conceptualization of social support itself. A meta-analytic approach therefore offers an important methodological contribution by quantitatively integrating empirical findings, estimating the overall effect size, and identifying the degree of heterogeneity across studies.

This study is positioned to contribute to the psychological literature in several important ways. First, it seeks to clarify the overall strength and direction of the relationship between social support and subjective well-being by synthesizing available empirical evidence. Second, the study addresses inconsistencies in prior findings by examining variability across studies rather than assuming uniform positive effects. Third, this meta-analysis highlights the importance of contextual and demographic factors that may influence the effectiveness of social support in promoting well-being. Finally, the study contributes theoretically by challenging simplified assumptions regarding the universally protective role of social support and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of psychosocial resources within well-being research. Through a comprehensive synthesis of empirical evidence, this research is expected to strengthen the conceptual and methodological development of psychological studies concerning social support and subjective well-being.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative meta-analytic approach to examine the relationship between social support and subjective well-being (SWB). Meta-analysis was selected because it enables the systematic integration and statistical synthesis of empirical findings from multiple independent studies, thereby providing a more comprehensive estimate of the overall relationship between variables than individual studies alone. In psychological research, meta-analysis is particularly useful for identifying consistencies, variations, and patterns across studies that may differ in sample characteristics, contexts, and methodological designs. Through this approach, the present study aimed not only to estimate the pooled effect size between social support and subjective well-being, but also to evaluate the degree of variability across studies and assess the stability of existing empirical evidence. The study adopted a correlational meta-analysis design because the primary objective was to synthesize correlation coefficients reported in previous empirical studies examining the association between social support and subjective well-being. Given the substantial differences in participant characteristics, research settings, and measurement instruments across studies, a random-effects model was considered more appropriate than a fixed-effects model. The random-effects approach assumes that the true effect size may vary between studies due to contextual and methodological differences, making it suitable for psychological research involving heterogeneous populations and environments.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search process was conducted systematically to identify empirical studies relevant to the relationship between social support and subjective well-being. Data collection was performed in April 2026 using the Scopus database as the primary source because of its broad coverage of peer-reviewed international journals in psychology and social sciences. To increase the comprehensiveness of the search process, several combinations of keywords and related terminology were utilized rather than relying on a single phrase only. The search terms included “social support,” “perceived social support,” “subjective well-being,” “psychological well-being,” “life satisfaction,” and “well-being.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were applied to broaden the search scope and capture studies using related conceptual terminology. The search strategy was intentionally designed to identify quantitative empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. This publication range was selected to ensure that the meta-analysis reflected recent developments in psychological research concerning social support and well-being. In addition, the reference lists of selected articles were manually examined to identify potentially relevant studies that may not have appeared during the initial database search process. Although Scopus served as the principal database, the study acknowledges that relying on a single database may limit the inclusion of broader international evidence. Therefore, the search strategy was expanded through keyword diversification and manual screening procedures to minimize the risk of excluding relevant literature. The initial search process yielded 197 articles. After removing duplicate and irrelevant records, the remaining studies were screened systematically based on titles, abstracts, and full-text eligibility criteria. The study selection procedure followed a staged screening process to ensure methodological transparency and consistency.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure that only studies directly relevant to the research objective were included in the meta-analysis. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) empirical quantitative studies examining the relationship

between social support and subjective well-being; (2) published between 2020 and 2026; (3) written in English; (4) published in peer-reviewed journals; (5) reporting sufficient statistical information to calculate effect sizes, particularly correlation coefficients (r) or equivalent statistics; and (6) involving human participants. Studies were excluded if they: (1) did not directly examine the association between social support and subjective well-being; (2) used qualitative or theoretical approaches without empirical statistical data; (3) lacked sufficient statistical information for effect size calculation; (4) were conference abstracts, editorials, book chapters, or review articles; or (5) duplicated data from previously published studies. These criteria were developed to enhance the internal consistency and comparability of the studies included in the analysis. The screening process was conducted in several stages. First, articles were filtered based on publication year, reducing the dataset from 197 to 126 studies. Second, studies outside the psychology-related subject area were excluded, resulting in 30 articles. Third, document type screening limited the sample to peer-reviewed research articles, leaving 28 studies. Fourth, language screening restricted the sample to English-language publications, resulting in 27 studies. Finally, full-text screening based on methodological eligibility and statistical completeness produced six studies suitable for meta-analysis.

Study Characteristics and Data Extraction

The final meta-analysis included six empirical studies with a total cumulative sample of 3,087 participants. All included studies were conducted in China and involved diverse participant populations, including patients with advanced cancer, left-behind children, special education teachers, parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, vocational school adolescents, and female medical professionals. The diversity of participant characteristics provided important contextual variation, although the exclusive concentration of studies within one country also limits broader cross-cultural generalizability. A structured data extraction process was performed to ensure consistency across studies. Information extracted from each study included the author(s), year of publication, country of origin, participant characteristics, sample size (N), correlation coefficient (r), Fisher's Z transformation value, variance estimates, and standard errors. The extracted data were subsequently organized into a summary table to facilitate statistical synthesis and comparison across studies. The included studies demonstrated considerable variation in both the direction and magnitude of correlations. Positive relationships between social support and subjective well-being were identified in studies such as Yang et al. (2023), Fu et al. (2022), Ouyang et al. (2021), and Wang et al. (2020), whereas Xue et al. (2025) and Ban et al. (2021) reported negative correlations. Sample sizes also varied substantially, ranging from 198 to 1,096 participants. These variations justified the use of a random-effects model and highlighted the importance of examining heterogeneity within the meta-analysis.

Quality Assessment and Risk of Bias Evaluation

To strengthen methodological rigor, the quality of included studies was evaluated systematically prior to statistical synthesis. Each study was assessed based on several methodological indicators, including clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of sampling procedures, adequacy of statistical reporting, validity of measurement instruments, and completeness of data presentation. Studies with incomplete statistical information or unclear methodological procedures were excluded during the screening phase. In addition, publication bias and small-study effects were examined through visual inspection of funnel plot asymmetry. Funnel plots were used to evaluate whether studies with smaller sample sizes tended to produce disproportionately extreme effect sizes. However, given the relatively small number of included studies ($n = 6$), publication bias diagnostics were interpreted cautiously because funnel plot interpretation becomes less reliable with limited datasets. Therefore, the

results related to publication bias were treated as preliminary indicators rather than definitive conclusions.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using JASP software with a classical meta-analysis procedure. All correlation coefficients were transformed into Fisher's Z values prior to analysis to improve variance stability and normalize the distribution of effect sizes. After analysis, pooled effect estimates were interpreted in relation to their confidence intervals and statistical significance. A random-effects model was used to estimate the pooled effect size because substantial variability between studies was expected. This approach accounts for both within-study sampling error and between-study variance, making it more appropriate for heterogeneous psychological data. Heterogeneity across studies was evaluated using Cochran's Q statistic, tau squared (τ^2), and prediction intervals. High heterogeneity values were interpreted as indications that study outcomes varied substantially across contexts and participant groups. Although moderator analysis could potentially explain variations across studies, it was not conducted in the present research due to the limited number of eligible studies available for synthesis. Nevertheless, contextual differences such as population characteristics, psychological conditions, and social environments were considered important factors contributing to heterogeneity and were therefore discussed qualitatively in the interpretation of findings.

Ethical and Methodological Considerations

This study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from previously published empirical research and therefore did not involve direct interaction with human participants. Consequently, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study adhered to principles of academic integrity and transparency throughout the data collection, screening, extraction, and analytical processes. Several methodological limitations were acknowledged to maintain transparency in interpretation. First, the relatively small number of included studies limited statistical power and restricted the ability to conduct more advanced analyses such as subgroup or moderator analysis. Second, the concentration of all included studies within China reduced cultural diversity and limited the external generalizability of findings to broader international populations. Third, despite efforts to diversify keywords and screening procedures, reliance on Scopus as the primary database may have excluded relevant studies indexed elsewhere. These limitations should therefore be considered when interpreting the results of the present meta-analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Literature Data

Studies	Country	r	Number of Participants
Yang et al., 2023	China	0,641	338
Xue et al., 2025	China	-0,48	719
Fu et al., 2022	China	0,385	496
Ban et al., 2021	China	-0,36	198
Ouyang et al., 2021	China	0,292	1.096
Wang et al., 2020	China	0,248	240

Table 1 presents a summary of the literature data used in the analysis, consisting of 6 empirical studies all conducted in China. Each study reports the correlation coefficient (r) value between the variables studied and the number of participants involved. In general, reported correlation values vary in both direction and strength. Three studies showed a positive correlation, namely Yang et al. (2023) with an r value of 0.641, Fu et al. (2022) of 0.385, and Ouyang et al. (2021)

of 0.292, and Wang et al. (2020) of 0.248. These values indicate the existence of a unidirectional relationship between the variables studied, with the strength of the relationship ranging from weak to strong, where the study of Yang et al. (2023) shows the highest correlation. On the other hand, two studies showed a negative correlation, namely Xue et al. (2025) with an r value of -0.48 & Ban et al. (2021) of -0.36. This shows that there is a relationship in the opposite direction between the variables in the study, with the strength of the relationship in the medium category. In terms of number of participants, sample sizes in these studies varied quite widely, ranging from 198 to 1,096 respondents. The study with the largest number of participants is Ouyang et al. (2021) with 1,096 respondents, while the smallest is Ban et al. (2021) with 198 respondents.

Result and Discussion

Table 2. Meta-Analytic Estimates

<i>Meta-Analytic Estimates</i>						
	Estimate	Standard Error	95% CI		95% PI	
			Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Pooled effect	0.137	0.200	-0.377	0.651	-1.217	1.491
τ	0.487	0.156	0.301	1.201		
τ^2	0.237	0.152	0.091	1.442		

The meta-analysis results show that the pooled effect size between social support and subjective well-being is 0.137 with a standard error of 0.200. This value indicates a positive relationship with weak strength. However, the 95% confidence interval ranges from -0.377 to 0.651 which includes the zero value, thus indicating that the effect is not statistically significant. In addition, the very wide 95% prediction interval, namely between -1.217 to 1.491, indicates that in other similar studies, the direction and strength of the relationship can vary in extreme ways, both negative and positive. This reflects the inconsistency of effects between studies. The tau (τ) value of 0.487 and tau squared (τ^2) of 0.237 indicates that there is quite large variability between studies in this meta-analysis. Thus, it can be concluded that although there is a tendency for a positive relationship between social support and subjective well-being, this relationship is not stable and is strongly influenced by differences in the characteristics of each study

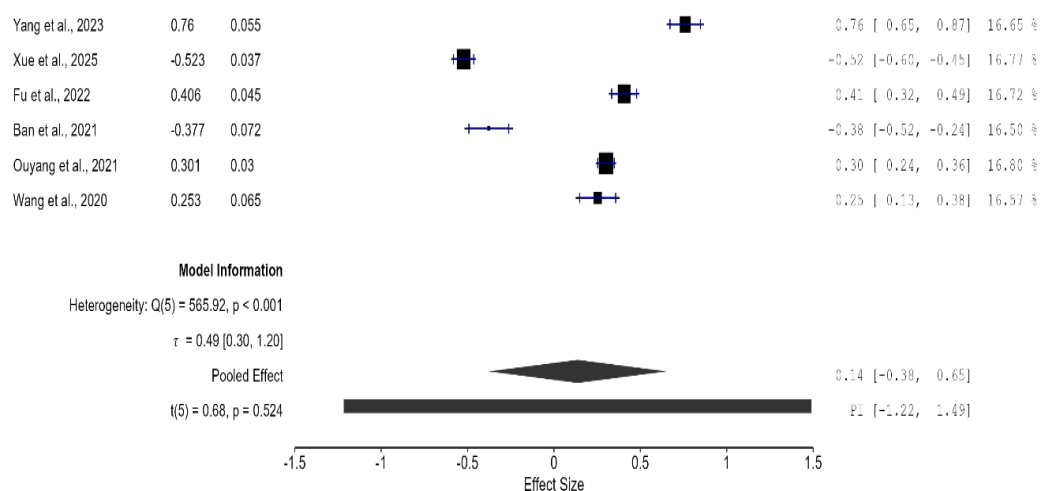


Figure 2. Forest Plot

Based on the forest plot displayed, the results of individual research show variations in the direction and strength of the relationship between social support and subjective well-being. Some studies, such as Yang et al. (2023), Fu et al. (2022), Ouyang et al. (2021), and Wang et al. (2020) shows a positive relationship, while the study of Xue et al. (2025) and ban et al. (2021) shows a negative relationship. The range of confidence intervals in individual studies also varied, although most did not cross zero, indicating that effects at the individual study level were likely significant. However, when all studies were combined, a pooled effect of 0.14 was obtained with a 95% confidence interval between -0.38 to 0.65, which includes zero, so it is not statistically significant ($p = 0.524$). In addition, the very high heterogeneity value ($Q(5) = 565.92$; $p < 0.001$) indicates significant differences between studies. This is reinforced by the wide prediction interval value (-1.22 to 1.49), which indicates that the relationship effect can vary greatly in other studies. Thus, although some studies show a significant relationship, overall, the relationship between social support and subjective well-being is inconsistent and is strongly influenced by variations in study characteristics.

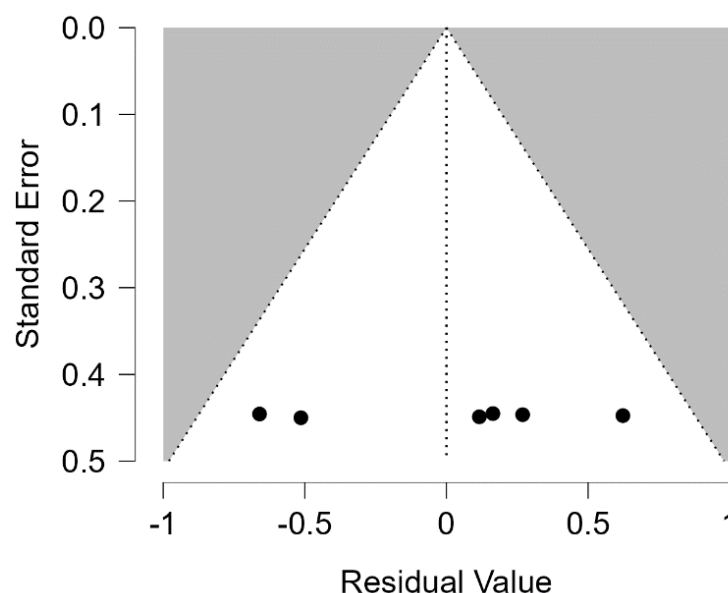


Figure 3. Residual Funnel Plot

Based on the funnel plot residuals, the distribution of study points does not show a perfect symmetry pattern with respect to the vertical line representing the pooled effect size after controlling for heterogeneity. Although most studies are still within the funnel limits, there is a tendency for uneven distribution between the left and right sides, especially in areas with larger standard errors. This pattern indicates the possibility of small study effects, where studies with small sample sizes tend to produce more extreme effect estimates. Apart from that, this asymmetry can also be an early indication of potential publication bias. However, this interpretation cannot be done definitively, considering that the number of studies in this meta-analysis is relatively limited ($n = 6$), so the diagnostic power of the funnel plot is low. On the other hand, a high level of heterogeneity between studies also has the potential to influence the shape of the funnel distribution, so that the asymmetry that appears is not solely caused by publication bias.

Beyond the Universal Benefit Assumption of Social Support

The present study challenges one of the most enduring assumptions within organizational and psychological research: namely, that social support operates as a universally beneficial

resource for improving subjective well-being. The findings suggest that such an assumption is theoretically convenient but empirically unstable. For decades, management and organizational scholarship have tended to position social support as an inherently protective mechanism capable of enhancing employee adjustment, reducing stress, and strengthening psychological functioning. The evidence synthesized in this meta-analysis indicates that the relationship is considerably more conditional, context-sensitive, and structurally dependent than much of the literature has acknowledged. This is not merely a statistical issue; it represents a conceptual problem in how support has been theorized within well-being research (Agustina et al., 2026). Much of the existing literature implicitly treats social support as a uniformly positive organizational asset without sufficiently interrogating the social dynamics through which support is interpreted, enacted, and experienced by individuals in different environments (Raggiotto & Scarpi, 2023; Muris & Otgaar, 2023; High et al., 2024).

What emerges more convincingly from the present findings is that social support should not be understood as a direct determinant of subjective well-being, but rather as a contingent relational resource whose effectiveness depends on organizational context, individual psychological conditions, and sociocultural expectations. This distinction is critically important within management studies because organizations frequently invest in support-oriented initiatives under the assumption that increasing supportive interactions will automatically improve employee well-being and performance. However, the present study suggests that support does not operate independently from the broader organizational environment in which it is embedded. In high-pressure institutional settings, support may be perceived as meaningful and protective because it reduces emotional isolation and uncertainty. In other contexts, particularly those characterized by surveillance cultures, hierarchical dependency, or excessive managerial intervention, support may instead be interpreted as intrusive, performative, or autonomy-reducing. The implication is that support cannot be evaluated solely by its presence; its psychological consequences depend fundamentally on how it is socially constructed and organizationally delivered (Liu et al., 2026; Dong et al., 2026; Budjanovcanin & Yang, 2026).

This has important implications for contemporary management practices, particularly within organizations increasingly concerned with employee well-being, mental health, and retention. Many workplace interventions continue to prioritize symbolic forms of support: team-building exercises, peer-support initiatives, wellness campaigns, or managerial empathy training without addressing whether employees actually experience these practices as psychologically empowering. The findings of this study suggest that organizations may overestimate the effectiveness of support when structural stressors remain unresolved. Employees are unlikely to derive meaningful well-being benefits from supportive climates if workloads remain excessive, decision-making autonomy is restricted, or organizational trust is weak. In this sense, support functions less as a substitute for organizational quality and more as a complementary condition whose effectiveness depends on broader institutional arrangements. Management scholarship therefore needs to move beyond romanticized notions of workplace support and instead examine how support interacts with power relations, organizational justice, role expectations, and employee agency.

The inconsistent findings across studies also indicate that subjective well-being itself cannot be treated as a culturally neutral outcome variable. Much organizational literature implicitly assumes that well-being represents a universally comparable psychological state across social contexts. However, the concentration of all included studies within China highlights the extent to which well-being and support are culturally embedded constructs. Within collectivistic environments, social support may not carry the same psychological meaning that it does in more individualistic contexts. In collectivistic societies, support is often normalized as part of expected relational obligations rather than interpreted as a distinctive interpersonal resource.

Consequently, the psychological impact of support may become less visible because supportive exchanges are socially routine rather than emotionally salient. This is particularly relevant for management scholars seeking to globalize theories of employee well-being. The assumption that support-oriented managerial strategies developed in Western organizational systems can be universally transferred across cultures becomes increasingly difficult to defend when the meaning of support itself varies socioculturally.

The findings also raise important questions concerning the managerial tendency to individualize well-being problems. Organizational interventions frequently frame well-being as a matter of improving interpersonal support systems, resilience, or coping capacity at the employee level (Avey et al., 2023; Awashreh & AlGhunaimi, 2024; Kosycarz et al., 2025). While these approaches are attractive because they are relatively inexpensive and politically non-disruptive, they risk obscuring structural organizational conditions that generate psychological strain in the first place. The present study indirectly suggests that support may have limited effectiveness when organizational stressors remain institutionally embedded. In practical terms, organizations cannot expect supportive supervision or collegial relationships to compensate indefinitely for chronic workload intensification, emotional labor demands, precarious employment arrangements, or toxic leadership cultures. This is particularly evident in high-strain professions represented within the included studies, such as healthcare and caregiving environments, where emotional exhaustion is often systemic rather than interpersonal. Consequently, management research must be more willing to examine the structural determinants of well-being instead of over-relying on psychosocial explanations alone. Another important implication concerns the multidimensional nature of social support itself. Much of the empirical literature continues to operationalize support as a singular construct despite the fact that emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support may produce fundamentally different psychological consequences. This conceptual oversimplification likely contributes to the instability observed across studies. Emotional reassurance from colleagues, for example, operates differently from managerial monitoring framed as assistance. Instrumental support may reduce workload burdens in one context while simultaneously reinforcing dependency in another. Without distinguishing between forms, sources, and perceptions of support, management research risks generating overly generalized conclusions that obscure the relational complexity of organizational life. The present study therefore reinforces the need for more theoretically differentiated models of support within organizational behavior and human resource management research.

Equally significant is the possibility that support may generate unintended psychological costs under certain organizational conditions. The dominant literature rarely addresses the ambivalence of support relationships because support is normatively assumed to be beneficial. Support may create implicit expectations of reciprocity, dependence, or emotional obligation that individuals experience as psychologically burdensome. Employees may perceive support as a reminder of vulnerability, inadequacy, or reduced competence, particularly within competitive organizational cultures that reward independence and performance self-sufficiency. In such contexts, receiving support may threaten professional identity rather than strengthen well-being. This possibility is especially important for management studies because organizations increasingly institutionalize support mechanisms without adequately considering how these interventions are psychologically interpreted by employees themselves.

The present study also underscores a broader methodological concern within organizational well-being research. The extreme heterogeneity across studies suggests that the field may currently lack sufficient conceptual precision regarding how support and well-being are measured and connected (Swope et al., 2022; Tonetti et al., 2023; Holzmeister et al., 2024; Kamp, 2024). Different studies appear to capture fundamentally different relational processes

while using similar terminology. This creates the illusion of cumulative knowledge despite substantial conceptual fragmentation beneath the surface. Management scholarship has often prioritized statistical associations between psychosocial variables without adequately clarifying the organizational mechanisms linking them. As a result, the field risks producing increasingly sophisticated empirical analyses built upon theoretically unstable constructs. Future research therefore needs to place greater emphasis on conceptual specificity, contextual sensitivity, and cross-cultural validity rather than merely accumulating additional correlational findings.

The findings should not be interpreted as evidence that social support lacks value within organizations. Rather, the study demonstrates that support alone is insufficient as a universal explanatory mechanism for subjective well-being. Effective organizational support must be contextually aligned, psychologically meaningful, and structurally credible. Employees evaluate support not only based on interpersonal interactions but also through broader organizational experiences involving fairness, autonomy, recognition, and institutional trust. Support becomes psychologically effective when individuals perceive it as authentic, voluntary, and autonomy-enhancing rather than managerial rhetoric disconnected from organizational realities. This distinction is crucial because many contemporary organizations publicly prioritize employee well-being while simultaneously maintaining institutional structures that undermine psychological security. This study contributes to management scholarship by questioning simplistic assumptions regarding supportive organizational environments and employee well-being. The relationship between social support and subjective well-being appears neither universal nor linear. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interaction between organizational structures, cultural expectations, interpersonal relationships, and individual interpretations. The future direction of management research should therefore move beyond asking whether support improves well-being and instead investigate the organizational conditions under which support becomes psychologically meaningful, culturally legitimate, and institutionally sustainable.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between social support and subjective well-being through a meta-analysis of empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. The findings reveal that although social support tends to demonstrate a positive association with subjective well-being, the relationship remains weak and statistically non-significant, indicating that current empirical evidence does not support a stable or universally consistent effect. The substantial heterogeneity across studies further suggests that the influence of social support is highly dependent on contextual factors, including population characteristics, psychological conditions, cultural environments, and differences in measurement approaches. The existence of both positive and negative correlations challenges the dominant assumption within psychological and management literature that social support always functions as a protective factor for individual well-being. Instead, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of social support depends on how it is perceived, experienced, and embedded within broader social and organizational contexts. In management settings, this implies that supportive organizational practices alone may not automatically improve employee well-being without being accompanied by healthy structural conditions such as fairness, autonomy, and manageable work demands. Furthermore, because all included studies were conducted in China, the findings should be interpreted within a collectivistic cultural context and should not be generalized broadly across different societies. Despite several methodological limitations, this study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the contextual and multidimensional nature of social support and by encouraging future research to adopt more culturally sensitive,

theoretically nuanced, and methodologically comprehensive approaches to understanding subjective well-being.

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