Creativity and Aging in Thailand: A Systematic Review of Recent Studies

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Abstract

Previous studies exhibited that creative engagement throughout life promotes well-being and reduces loneliness, depression, and stress, improving both physical and mental health.However, unequal access to creative programs necessitates expanding these initiatives and revising theoretical frameworks to embrace diverse creative expressions and their social and environmental contexts. Specifically, this study investigated factors influencing creativity among the Thai elderly, assessed the benefits of creative activities on their well-being, and analysed barriers to their creative engagement. Analysis of six relevant studies on Bangkok University one search database systematically showed that older adults readily participated in creative activities and interventions, such as art experiences, lifestyle, and the like. While health-based programs were more common, they effectively improved physical and mental well-being, enhancing creativity. This review challenges the misconception that cognitive decline is inevitable with age, highlighting the strong link between creativity and healthy aging. The sustainability of this improvement depends on effective initiative design and management. Despite the small number of studies reviewed, the findings clearly demonstrated that older adults have creative potential.To nurture this creativity, it's important to establish supportive environments and implement various health and non-health initiatives. These efforts can help reduce the impact of past negative experiences and improve overall well-being. However, refining the design and management of these initiatives is crucial for further enhancing older adults' physical and mental health. By valuing the experiences of older adults and challenging ageist biases, we can harness the power of creativity to foster vibrant and fulfilling aging for everyone.

Keywords: *Creativity, Old Adult, Aging Society, Systematic Literature Review, Thailand*

1. Introduction

According to the Encyclopaedia of Creativity (2011), creative ability develops gradually throughout life, from childhood to adulthood. This development is a complex process involving continuous growth and occasional significant, transformative changes in how creativity is expressed. A growing body of research highlights the significant role of creativity in promoting healthy aging, challenging the pervasive stereotype of declining cognitive abilities in older adults. While some studies indicate an age-related decline in abstract reasoning impacting certain aspects of creativity, the overall consensus points to a remarkable preservation of creative potential throughout life, even in individuals with dementia (Ross et al., 2023). This resilience of creativity is strongly linked to improved well-being; a Creative Ireland report demonstrated the positive correlation between creative engagement (attending performances, hobbies, etc.) and reduced loneliness, depression, and stress in older adults, although access disparities based on socioeconomic status and health were noted (Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin, 2021). The positive impact extends to physical health, with studies revealing improved overall health and reduced doctor visits among older adults participating in creative pursuits (Staff Writer, 2023). These benefits are further emphasised by the success of Creative Aging programs focusing on skill development, social interaction, and reflection (Staff Writer, 2023) and the findings of a symposium that highlighted the need for greater inclusivity in research and programme accessibility among the older adults (English et al., 2023).

However, the field of creative aging faces challenges. Older theories of creativity often perpetuated negative stereotypes, necessitating a shift towards more inclusive perspectives, such as sociocultural theory, which values diverse creative expressions, including traditional crafts (Adams-Price & Morse, 2024).

Furthermore, research often overlooks the exchange between social and physical environments in shaping creative well-being, neglecting older adults' subjective experiences (Aula & Masoodian, 2023). A sociological perspective emphasising "profiguration"—promoting connections between generations—offers a valuable framework for understanding how well-being and active aging can be supported by creative engagement (Molina-Luque et al., 2022). Studies reveal a persistent age bias in evaluating creativity (Oh et al., 2023), while research also indicates that older workers demonstrate a lower propensity for information technology innovation compared to their younger counterparts (Tams & Dulipovici, 2022). This disparity, however, can be mitigated through improved job control, support, and user-friendliness.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Combating social isolation and boosting well-being are key benefits of creative aging programmes, but require increased funding, accessibility, and visibility (Oleschuk, 2024). Interventions should nurture both inward-looking strategies (like reflection and self-care) and outward-looking strategies (like building social connections and participating in group activities) to enhance social engagement (Kòrlof et al., 2024). Community-based programmes, such as Meals on Wheels, have proven effective in reducing loneliness and improving well-being through social connection (Gao, Liang, Xu, 2024), while digital art programmes can also enhance social engagement. However, digital literacy disparities necessitate targeted interventions (Gao et al., 2024). Finally, research should embrace a holistic perspective, acknowledging the subjective experiences of older adults and actively involving them in the research process (English et al., 2023), thereby moving beyond negative stereotypes to celebrate the enduring capacity for personal growth and creative expression in later life (Lee, Aula, & Masoodian, 2023). To foster creativity in older adults, supportive environments are crucial. These include opportunities for creative activities (e.g., art projects, workshops), social interaction with creative individuals, mindfulness practices, and a safe and secure living situation that encourages trying new things (The Growth Catalysts Team, 2024).

An older adult's creative success hinges largely on their own engagement. As Scherer (2024) notes, active participation, personal interpretation, autonomy in choosing activities, and a sense of empowerment are key to a fulfilling creative journey.

Various studies have revealed that creativity and well-being are mutually reinforcing: higher levels of well-being foster creativity, and creative pursuits enhance well-being (Tan et al., 2021), though. Likewise, existing gerontological theories offer diverse perspectives on aging, yet few directly address the sustained engagement in culturally relevant creative pursuits among older adults. This paper proposes a novel framework integrating Erikson's psychosocial theory of development with Glaveanu's creativity theories (Adams-Price, 2023) to illuminate this gap. Erikson's model, emphasising lifelong psychosocial development through sequential crises and the acquisition of virtues, and provides a framework for understanding how sustained engagement in creative activities can contribute to successful aging, particularly in the later stages focused on generativity and integrity (Cherry, 2024; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). This framework complements the focus on continuity in personality and behaviour emphasised by the Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1989).

In contrast, the Disengagement Theory, which posits a natural withdrawal from social roles in later life, is increasingly challenged by empirical evidence (Nickerson, 2023; Zhang & Lin, 2022). While acknowledging individual variations in disengagement (Nickerson, 2023), this theory stands in stark contrast to Activity Theory (Tirmazee-Kaleem, 2024; Hoff, 2024; Versey, 2015), which emphasises the positive relationship between social engagement, physical activity, and well-being (Tirmazee-Kaleem, 2024; Hoff, 2024; Versey, 2015). The proposed framework builds upon Activity Theory by specifically examining the role of culturally meaningful crafts—activities that often align with continuity and active engagement—in fostering positive development and a sense of purpose. The creation and sharing of culturally relevant crafts, such as quilting among African American women (Adams-Price, 2023), offer opportunities for skill-building, identity formation, social interaction, and the creation of lasting cultural legacies, aligning with both Erikson's emphasis on generativity and the principles of Activity Theory (Tirmazee-Kaleem, 2024; Hoff, 2024; Versey,

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2015). This integrated approach provides a richer understanding of the multifaceted benefits of creative engagement in later life than any theory can offer alone.

Adult development and creativity models, particularly Graveanu's work, highlight the contextual nature of creativity. What might be considered uncreative in one situation can be perceived as highly creative in another. For example, researchers suggest that younger generations may mistakenly label older adults as either creative or uncreative based solely on perceived differences in thinking styles. This misconception aligns with established theories of aging, including continuity, disengagement, and activity theories, which emphasize the diverse ways individuals adapt and engage with life across the lifespan. We also frequently judge and offer things to others without a deep and insightful understanding of their perspectives. This lack of understanding can significantly hinder the development of creativity in older adults. Our research has, therefore, redefined creativity among older adults as a highly individual and variable phenomenon.

As for creativity, a growing body of work advocates for a paradigm shift in creativity studies, moving beyond individualistic perspectives toward a sociocultural understanding. This approach recognises creativity as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon deeply intertwined with psychological, social, material, and cultural factors, including power dynamics (Glaveanu et al., 2019; Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014; Storytank, 2023). These sources consistently highlight several key arguments: Relational nature of creativity: Creativity is fundamentally relational, arising from interactions between individuals, their audiences, and societal perceptions (Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014; Storytank, 2023). It is a "dialogue of perspectives" where rather than focusing on individual creativity, this approach emphasises the interaction and evolution of diverse perspectives through ongoing dialogue (Storytank, 2023). Dynamic and contextual nature of creativity: Creative identities are not static but evolve over time, shaped by interactions and societal perceptions (Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014). Creativity itself is dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by cultural mediation (Glaveanu et al., 2019). Multifaceted nature of creativity: Creativity is culturally mediated action, intrinsically meaningful, and vital for society (Glaveanu et al., 2019). Understanding creative identities requires considering a typology of promoted, denied, and problematic identities, which can either support or hinder creative endeavors (Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014). In essence, these sources collectively call for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of creativity, emphasising its social, cultural, and relational dimensions and advocating for research methodologies that reflect this complexity.

Pitso's (2013) creativity model (originally presented in 2007) further comprises six stages: conceptual understanding, outcome idealization and consideration, problem definition, pattern evolution analysis, principle consideration, and resource/input evaluation.

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In summary, several factors can enhance creativity, improving health and well-being among older people. Conversely, there are also barriers that can occasionally impede creativity in older adults. Without fostering creativity, elderly individuals risk being stigmatised and viewed as disadvantaged by younger generations. This study emphasises that "it is time to advocate for the elderly." This research would, therefore, investigate factors influencing creativity in Thai elders, assess how creative activities benefit their well-being, and analyse barriers to creativity within this population.

2. Objectives

The study aimed to:

1) To identify factors influencing creativity in elderly people in the context of Thailand
2) To assess the benefits of creative activities on the well-being of the elderly people in the context of Thailand
3) To analyse the barriers to creativity in elderly people in the context of Thailand

3. Materials and Methods

This study used a systematic literature review, searching Bangkok University's ONE search database for English-language, peer-reviewed articles published within the past 12 months using keywords: "creativity", "aging" (and synonyms like ageing or elderly or older adults or seniors or geriatrics or older people), and "Thailand". While the initial search yielded 9,622 results, only six met all criteria and were included in the analysis. Articles not centred on creativity or conducted in Thailand were excluded from the study. The review of numerous articles revealed increasing irrelevance, leading to their exclusion. Despite the limited number of qualifying samples, the researchers believed the findings from these studies could serve as an initial guideline and foundation for encouraging stakeholders to promote creativity among the growing elderly population. The selected articles were analysed based on the research objectives and the literature reviewed. These sampled articles' abstracts were summarised:

1) Charoenkiatkan, Khositditsayana, and Wannupatam (2024). A two-day holistic training programme designed to improve the quality of life for older adults in Thailand showed significant positive results. The programme, which incorporated physical activity, arts, and health education, led to demonstrable improvements in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and understanding of healthy aging practices.

2) Phanpheng et al. (2024). A study comparing Ram Thai dance exercise (RTND) and brisk walking in older adults with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) found that both improved cardiovascular fitness and lower body strength. However, RTND significantly improved upper body flexibility and cognitive function more than brisk walking, suggesting it is a superior exercise for this population.

3) Kasemsarn et al. (2024). This review analysed research (2000-2023) on accessible digital storytelling in museums for older adults and people with mobility issues. It highlighted the scarcity of resources, identified key themes (inclusive design, technology trends, accessibility guidelines), and aimed to promote more inclusive museum experiences for these under-served groups, both physically and online.

4) Bhatiasevi, V. (2024). A survey of 1,176 Bangkok residents examined Thai adults' and older adults' social media use, its effects on social lives, and mental health. Applying the uses and gratifications theory, the study found positive correlations between social media use and information seeking, entertainment, social connection, relationship maintenance, and improved social relationships and psychological well-being. Surprisingly, self-discovery showed a negative correlation.

5) Saengrut, Panuthia, Chintanawat, and Suwankruhasn (2024). A study found that a collaborative learning programme on food literacy significantly improved healthy eating habits and blood sugar control in older adults with uncontrolled type 2 diabetes compared to standard care. This suggested that the programme is an effective intervention for diabetes management and that nurses could be trained to implement it.

6) Jehloh, Songwathana, and Kitrungrote (2024). A feasibility study of a new e-health programme for family caregivers of older adults with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) significantly reduced emergency room visits within 30 days of hospital discharge (27.18% to 6%) by improving caregivers' ability to manage dyspnea.

4. Results and Discussion

Six studies contributed to this research, examining creativity in Thai elders. Four studies, conducted in diverse regions (Northeastern Thailand: Buriram and Loei provinces; Northern Thailand; Deep South Thailand), investigated factors influencing creativity, the benefits of creative activities on well-being, and barriers to creative expression (Charoenkiatkan et al., 2024; Phanpheng et al., 2024; Saengrut et al., 2024; Jehloh et al., 2024, respectively). Additionally, one study focused on public spaces in Thailand (Bhatiasevi, 2024), and a literature review by Thai authors (Kasemsarn et al., 2024) was also included.

Four of the six studies investigated how creative interventions enhanced creativity in Thai elders. These interventions involved: a two- day program incorporating music, art, health, and exercise (Charoenkiatkan et al., 2024); traditional Ram Thai dance with the nine-square method and structure to improve cognitive function (Phanpheng et al., 2024); a food literacy programme entitled the Collaborative Learning-Based Food Literacy to promote healthy eating and blood sugar control (Saengrut et al., 2024); and an e-health program so-called the Transitional Care Based e-Health Programme to manage dyspnea (shortness of breath) in family caregivers, indirectly supporting the well-being of the elders (Jehloh et al., 2024).

Social media can be a valuable tool for enhancing creativity in older adults, enabling them to access information and connect with others, especially families and friends (Bhatiasevi, 2024). Like Charoenkiatkan et al. (2024), Creating positive and enjoyable museum experiences was also key to fostering creativity, especially for older adults and those with mobility challenges. Museum designers should prioritise the needs and preferences of these visitors, incorporating inclusive design, accessible technology (user-friendly apps, AI, VR/AR), and relatable digital storytelling to enhance engagement and learning (Saengrut et al., 2024). According to the six sampled articles, several factors were identified as enhancing creativity among the elderly. These included engaging in diverse creative activities, initiatives, and training programmes related to both health and non-health topics, utilising social media platforms for accessing a wealth of information, and participating in experiential learning through creative design. However, it was crucial to respect and understand the perspectives of older individuals deeply.

Several recent Thai studies (Charoenkiatkan et al., 2024; Phanpheng et al., 2024; Saengrut et al., 2024; Jehloh et al., 2024) showed that creative activities benefit the physical and mental health of older adults. These studies used various creative interventions and demonstrated positive effects on the well-being of participants. To a greater extent, Charoenkiatkan et al.'s (2024) study disclosed significant improvements in older adults' music, art, exercise, and healthcare skills after completing the training programme. The study also emphasised the increased mental well-being and enjoyment experienced by the participants. Phanpheng et al.'s (2024) study also found that the structured yet accessible nature of traditional Ram Thai Dance—a blend of physical and mental exercise—promoted both cognitive health and physical fitness in older adults. Furthermore, Saengrut et al.'s (2024) food literacy program should be widely adopted by nurses to help older adults eat healthier and better manage type 2 diabetes. Similarly, Jehloh et al.'s (2024) e-health transitional care programme, used by family caregivers, effectively reduced hospital visits for older adults experiencing shortness of breath (dyspnea).

Bhatiasevi (2024) and Charoenkiatkan et al. (2024) moreover suggested that creative strategies, such as social media (for information sharing and social connection) and museum visits (providing informational and sensory engagement), accordingly, contributed to improved health and well-being. In summary, regardless of the type, creative activities, initiatives, and training programs related to both health and non-health topics can enhance creativity in older people, leading to physical, cognitive, psychological, and emotional improvements. Additionally, social media can play a significant role in keeping the elderly informed and more connected.

Studies by Charoenkiatkan et al. (2024), Kasemsarn et al. (2024), and Jehloh et al. (2024), nonetheless, revealed obstacles to the widespread adoption of creative activities for older adults, despite their known benefits. The challenges could be categorised into two main areas: initiative design and initiative management.

- Initiative design: The design of some initiatives limited their applicability to a specific area rather than nationwide implementation (Jehloh et al., 2024). Similarly, creative approaches to digital storytelling in museums, particularly for older adults and people with disabilities, were restricted to classroom, educational, and game-based strategies, overlooking the unique needs of older adults and people with disabilities (Kasemsarn et al., 2024).
- Initiative management: The lack of creativity among older adults might stem from poorly organised, ineffective, and insufficient existing and new initiatives (Charoenkiatkan et al., 2024).

While the studies examined were few, they obviously demonstrated that older adults were capable of creativity. To foster this, supportive environments and diverse health and non-health initiatives were crucial, potentially mitigating the impact of past negative experiences and improving overall well-being. However, initiative design and management improvements were needed to further enhance the physical and mental health of older adults.

The findings built upon existing and previous studies (Tan et al., 2021), confirming a strong link between creativity and the health and well-being of older adults—a mutually reinforcing relationship. The review identified various creative activities, including health-based and non-health-based initiatives (such as social media engagement), that positively impacted physical and mental well-being. Support and engagement increased with the number of creative interventions offered. The study refuted the Disengagement Theory, supporting the Activity Theory, Continuity Theory, and Erikson's model by exhibiting that past negative experiences did not preclude creativity and well-being in later life. Contrary to common assumptions, creativity could actually increase with age and should not be underestimated by younger generations or other stakeholders.

The review called on administrators, policymakers, and healthcare providers to implement well-organised, sustainable, and strategic initiatives to support the growing older adult population in Thailand. The terms "well-organised, sustainable, and strategic" were used because fostering creativity in older adults requires a multifaceted approach. This includes understanding their needs and preferences, employing diverse communication strategies (informational, educational, persuasive, and inspirational), and incorporating continuous feedback and evaluation for ongoing improvement.

Despite the researchers' best efforts, this study has limitations. Further research is needed to understand the prevalence of health-based interventions over non-health-based ones. Moreover, a comparative study, ideally across Asian countries, would be beneficial, as creativity is influenced by psychological, social, material, and cultural factors, including power dynamics (Glaveanu et al., 2019; Glaveanu & Tanggaard, 2014; Storytank, 2023). The study also falls short in exploring and demonstrating the role of creativity in addressing challenges encountered in later life, which is increasingly necessary today (Kahana et al., 2021). Furthermore, owing to the small sample size of this research, the researchers acknowledge that the findings may not be generalizable to contexts in other countries. Additionally, the study presents challenges for future research in developing innovative activities to enhance various aspects of well-being among older Thai individuals. Lastly, authorities and administrative bodies are encouraged to formulate policy recommendations and initiatives to support the elderly population.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review investigated creativity in older adults in Thailand, exploring factors influencing creativity, the benefits of creative activities on well-being, and the challenges of implementing creative programs. While challenges undoubtedly exist in fostering creativity among older adults, it is crucial to recognize their significant creative potential. Many factors can significantly enhance this potential, but realizing it requires a concerted and serious effort. Overcoming obstacles necessitates a multi-pronged approach involving supportive environments, readily accessible resources, and a fundamental shift in societal attitudes towards aging and creativity. This includes active engagement from various stakeholders: governmental and non-governmental organisations, families, and the broader community must collaborate to cultivate and nurture the creative expressions of older adults, ensuring their talents and contributions are valued and supported. Ignoring this untapped reservoir of creativity represents a significant loss for society.

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