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INVITED ARTICLE

Flourishing in Hong Kong: An analysis of wellbeing-related outcomes in the Global Flourishing Study

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Abstract: Using population-based data from Hong Kong (N = 3,012) drawn from Wave 1 of the Global Flourishing Study, this study examines the distribution of multidimensional flourishing and explores sociodemographic variation across psychological, social, physical, and economic domains. Overall, respondents reported relatively strong happiness and life satisfaction and financial wellbeing, alongside less favourable social connectedness. Patterns of flourishing varied across age, gender, education, employment, and religious affiliation, highlighting meaningful heterogeneity within the population. Early older adults tended to show more favourable wellbeing profiles, whereas younger adults and nonreligious individuals displayed comparatively lower scores across several domains. Educational attainment and employment status were differentially associated with wellbeing outcomes, underscoring the complex relationship between socioeconomic position and flourishing in Hong Kong's unique cultural and economic context. Together, these findings provide a population-level overview of flourishing in Hong Kong, identify subgroups that may benefit from targeted policy and public health interventions, and establish a baseline for future longitudinal monitoring of wellbeing.

Keywords: cross-cultural perspective; flourishing; Global Flourishing Study; Hong Kong; wellbeing, sociodemographic variations

1. Introduction

1.1 Wellbeing and flourishing

1.1.1 Flourishing

Flourishing is a concept closely linked to wellbeing. Keyes (2002) defines flourishing as being "filled with positive emotion and functioning well psychologically and socially" (p. 210). Ryff and Singer state that "flourishing, understood as 'eudaimonic well-being,' with Ryff (2014) later noting that flourishing is "striving to achieve the best that is within us" (p. 2). Drawing on the work of both Keyes (2002) and Ryff and Singer (2008), and Huppert's (2009a, 2009b) earlier work, Huppert and So (2013) state that "flourishing refers to the experience of life going well. It is a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. Flourishing is synonymous with a high level of mental wellbeing, and it epitomises mental health" (p. 838). Flourishing has thus emerged as a state of complete human well-being that extends beyond the narrower construct of psychological well-being (e.g., VanderWeele, 2017).

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Complementing these perspectives, Ryan and Deci (2019), in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), view flourishing as a dynamic process shaped by social environments, "from interpersonal settings to broader cultural, political, and economic contexts" (p. 90). Consequently, understanding individuals' well-being should not only assess their conditions across multiple dimensions but also account for the cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

1.1.2 Flourishing and wellbeing

Flourishing is often used interchangeably with "wellbeing," yet a key distinction exists between the two (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2023). Wellbeing typically refers to individual life experiences, whereas flourishing encompasses a broader perspective, situating individuals within the context of their communities and ecosystems (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2023). While psychological wellbeing is often central to measures of flourishing, there is growing recognition that true flourishing involves a more holistic approach (Rule, et al., 2024). For instance, Willen et al. (2021) define the pursuit of flourishing as,

> "an active process of striving to live in keeping with one's defining values, commitments and vision for the future, as individuals and in the context of one's family and the communities to which one belongs. Flourishing is not simply a psychological state, but an active pursuit informed by cultural expectations and social relationships, and influenced by the social, political and economic structures that shape people's lives" (p. 2).

As another example, VanderWeele (2017) proposed a conceptual model of flourishing that incorporates multiple domains: physical and mental health, happiness, meaning and purpose, character, close social relationships, and financial stability. These domains are viewed as nearly universally desirable and central to a flourishing life. They also recognize that human flourishing is intricately connected to the prosperity and stability of communities. A comprehensive understanding of flourishing, therefore, requires addressing the broader context in which individuals live and thrive (VanderWeele et al, 2019; 2023).

Hone and colleagues (2014) identify a critical gap in the field of positive psychology research, which is still apparent today, noting that there is currently "no internationally recognized gold-standard measurement tool for flourishing" (p. 1033). This gap poses a significant challenge to the study of human flourishing, as the lack of a universally accepted and reliable measurement tool complicates consistency in assessing and comparing flourishing across diverse populations and contexts. Given that flourishing is a multidimensional construct encompassing various aspects of wellbeing and beyond, such as emotional, psychological, and social-cultural factors, the lack of a standardized tool not only hinders the ability to create a unified framework for understanding and promoting flourishing globally, but also raises the question of whether such a universal measurement is even possible. As noted above, as flourishing is a multidimensional and dynamic human experience embedded within cultural contexts, a single standardized instrument applicable across diverse cultural groups may not be feasible. It is thus valuable to examine a diverse array of well-being outcomes to provide a comprehensive account of human flourishing within a given cultural context and to elucidate how individuals experience well-being from multiple perspectives.

1.2 Wellbeing and flourishing in Hong Kong

1.2.1 Hong Kong context

In the context of Hong Kong, the concept of flourishing holds particular significance due to the city's unique socioeconomic environment, shaped by a rich and complex history. Over the past few centuries, Hong Kong has transformed from a small fishing village into a bustling global financial centre. Its strategic location as a trade port played a significant role in its development under British colonial rule from 1842 until 1997 (He et al., 2024). Following the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China in 1997, Hong Kong retained a high degree of autonomy and continued to synthesize diverse Western and Eastern influences, blending traditional Eastern values with modern Western ideals (Arat et al., 2023). As a global financial hub, Hong Kong's rapid urbanization, high standards of living, and competitive society create a complex environment where flourishing is shaped by (among other factors) personal aspirations and collective values (Jia, 2023). The traditional emphasis on family, community, and personal success interacts with the pressures of modern life, influencing the ways in which individuals experience wellbeing (Arthur & Mair, 2017; Chang, et al., 2021; Wong, et al., 2022a). The GFS offers a useful data source for exploring flourishing within this distinctive setting, helping to deepen our understanding of how societal and cultural contexts influence flourishing in this highly urbanized, rapidly changing Hong Kong society. Examining flourishing in this unique context can enrich our understanding of the complex factors that contribute to a fulfilling life, how these factors may differ from other regions around the world, and how to promote flourishing.

1.2.2 Subjective wellbeing in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a special administrative region (SAR) of China, which operates under China's "one country, two systems" framework. Before its return to China in 1997, Hong Kong was a British colony, leading to a unique blend of Eastern and Western values and cultures. Hong Kong has one of the highest annual gross domestic products (GDP) per capita in the Asia-Pacific region, but its income inequality has become a growing concern in recent decades (Piketty & Yang, 2022). Hong Kong is also undergoing a rapid shift towards an aging population. In terms of population structure, due to a high life expectancy (82.5 for males, 88.1 for females in 2023) and a low fertility rate in Hong Kong, the elderly population (aged 65 & above) in this territory has increased from 15.9% in 2013 to 24.9% in 2023 (Cheung, 2024; Department of Health, 2023).

In the past few years, the concurrent events of COVID-19 and social unrest have posed significant challenges to flourishing in Hong Kong (Lai et al., 2022). Diverse types of stressful events occurring during large-scale crises can contribute to personal stressors that impinge on overall wellbeing (Lai et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2022b). After the COVID pandemic, an increase in intentions to emigrate has been observed among Hong Kong residents. A 2022 survey found that about 20% of respondents expressed interest in moving abroad, while about 10% expressed interest in relocating to mainland China (Chan et al., 2022). Future career and personal development could be the primary purpose of migration for the international group, while the living environment and cheaper living costs serve as motivation for those wishing to move to mainland China (Chan et al., 2022).

Despite the varied challenges impacting the wellbeing of various groups in Hong Kong over the past few years, there has been a scarcity of research investigating subjective wellbeing in the general population using representative data. In 2024, Hong Kong scored 5.32 (on a scale from 0

to 8) on average in life evaluation (as an indicator of subjective wellbeing) from 2021 to 2023 in the World Happiness Report (WHR: Helliwell et al., 2024). This ranked Hong Kong 86th out of 143 countries/regions, behind mainland China (60th). The WHR also revealed that the happiest age group in Hong Kong was the upper middle age group (aged 45-59), while the least happy group was the lower middle age group (aged 30-44: Helliwell et al., 2024).

Building on these findings, several happiness studies conducted in Hong Kong have provided further insights into the wellbeing of people who live in this territory. The Centre for Public Policy Studies at Lingnan University conducted an annual Hong Kong happiness index survey from 2005 to 2016, targeting the population aged 21 and above (Ho, 2014). Based on the Love, Insight, Fortitude, and Engagement (LIFE) framework for measuring happiness, findings indicated that happiness generally decreases for the 30-49 and 50+ age groups compared to those under 30, and financial stress was negatively related to happiness, while being female and married positively correlated with happiness (Ho, 2014). A territory-wide cohort study in Hong Kong—the FAMILY Cohort—conducted between 2009 and 2014 and spanning over 20,000 households found that depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and happiness were associated with physical, mental, and social wellbeing, highlighting wellbeing as a key lever for holistic public health and policy (Ni et al., 2020). More recently, drawing on cross-sectional data from 10,070 respondents collected in Hong Kong between 2018 and 2024, spanning periods of social unrest, multiple COVID-19 waves, and post-pandemic adjustment, the General Happiness Index study found that individual happiness was consistently and strongly positively associated with mental capital, highlighting the central role of psychological resources in Hong Kong residents' wellbeing (Lam et al., 2025).

1.2.3 Predictors of wellbeing in Hong Kong

Research on predictors of wellbeing in Hong Kong indicates that many factors influencing happiness are universal, encompassing sociocultural, economic, and demographic dimensions. Health and social relationships consistently emerge as the most influential predictors of wellbeing. Good health forms the foundation for participation in daily life and community engagement, leading to increased life satisfaction and psychological resilience (Diener & Ryan, 2009). Similarly, strong social relationships provide emotional support and practical resources, helping individuals cope with stress and navigate challenges. These universal predictors are supported by extensive evidence across various cultural contexts.

However, Hong Kong's unique characteristics introduce specific dynamics that distinguish its wellbeing landscape from other regions. While the foundational predictors of wellbeing, such as health and social support, remain crucial, Hong Kong's hybrid sociocultural identity, economic disparities, and individual demographic trends interact in distinctive ways. The following sections explore how these factors shape the landscape of wellbeing in Hong Kong, shedding light on the interplay between local and global influences.

1.2.4 Sociocultural factors in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's hybrid cultural identity integrates traditional Confucian values—such as family, harmony, and academic success—with Western ideals emphasizing individual happiness and personal achievement. Confucian values heighten the importance of relational harmony, which has been shown to have a stronger association with life satisfaction in Hong Kong compared to

Western countries (Kwan et al., 1997). Meanwhile, the adoption of Western cultural norms, particularly the pursuit of maximum happiness, introduces tension in value systems, illustrating the influence of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies on local perceptions of happiness (Krys, 2024). While Westernization introduces more individualistic orientations, Confucian ideals remain influential—particularly the view of harmony not only as a social norm but also as a moral and psychological ideal (Lun, 2022). In this context, wellbeing in Hong Kong can be understood as a balance between fulfilling relational and individual aspirations.

Chinese Middle Way philosophy (Chen, 2002) and dialectical thinking tradition (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) may offer meaningful psychological resources for navigating tensions between tradition and modernity, or between social roles and self-fulfilment. These culturally grounded strategies, though they may be associated with lower levels of life satisfaction, help individuals reconcile competing demands and maintain wellbeing through flexible, integrative adaptation (Lun, 2022). This orientation is also reflected in survey response patterns: research suggests that East Asian populations, including those in Hong Kong, tend to prefer the middle of response scales when reporting wellbeing, potentially indicating a cultural inclination toward moderation and balance rather than extreme expressions of happiness (Oishi, 2010). Such tendencies may help sustain wellbeing amid complex sociocultural change.

1.2.5 Economic factors in Hong Kong

As a developed economy, Hong Kong's high per capita income coexists with significant income inequality. Research indicates that while higher income correlates with greater life satisfaction, its impact diminishes after a certain threshold, which, according to Kahneman and Deaton's (2010), is approximately $75,000. More recent findings by Killingsworth et al. (2023) suggest that diminishing returns from income on happiness primarily affect the least happy individuals, while happier individuals continue to experience significant gains in happiness up to $500,000 annually. This dual mechanism resonates in Hong Kong's stratified economic landscape: widespread housing precarity may trigger threshold saturation effects, while elite professionals in finance and technology exemplify a sustained logarithmic gains pattern. For instance, housing expenses, living density, and housing satisfaction have been identified as mediators between income and subjective wellbeing (Chan & Wong, 2022). Hong Kong's combination of economic prosperity and severe housing affordability stress (Chung et al., 2020) creates a distinctive context for understanding wellbeing, where the interplay of affluence and relative deprivation shapes financial, subjective and psychological wellbeing, as well as societal flourishing outcomes.

1.2.6 Demographic factors in Hong Kong

Demographic actors, especially age, further shape wellbeing in Hong Kong. Most studies have found a U-shaped relationship between age and happiness (Helliwell et al., 2024). However, a longitudinal study in Hong Kong covering 2000 to 2014 (Chiu & Wong, 2018) revealed a shift, with younger individuals reporting lower levels of happiness compared to older adults after the late 2000s, likely influenced by macroeconomic conditions and rising housing prices. Additionally, Hong Kong's implementation of age-friendly policies has been positively associated with the wellbeing of senior citizens (Au et al., 2017). While these studies provide valuable insights into the wellbeing of different age groups in the 2010s, the current study offers

an updated perspective on demographic differences related to wellbeing in Hong Kong using recent data collected in the GFS.

1.3 The present study

The current study uses data from the 22-country/region Global Flourishing Study (GFS) to describe the distribution of 69 wellbeing-related indicators in Hong Kong. We provide descriptive comparisons between Hong Kong and the pooled estimates across all 22 participating countries/regions. In addition, we examine potential within-Hong Kong differences by assessing variations across key sociodemographic groups (i.e., age, gender, educational attainment, employment status, immigration status, religious affiliation, and frequency of religious service attendance).

2. Methods

The description of the methods below has been adapted from VanderWeele et al. (2024). The study design, sampling, and survey development for the Global Flourishing Study (GFS) are described elsewhere, including overall summaries of the GFS (VanderWeele, Johnson, et al., 2025) and the methodology (Johnson et al., 2024; Ritter et al., 2024), the GFS questionnaire design (Lomas, Bradshaw, et al., 2025; Crabtree et al., 2021; Cowden et al., 2024), the translation process (Case et al., 2025), the survey sampling design (Padgett, Cowden, et al., 2025), the analytic methodology (Padgett, Bradshaw, et al., 2025a, 2025b), the codebook (Markham et al., 2024), and the statistical analysis code (Padgett et al., 2024). The current paper, which focuses specifically on Hong Kong, was pre-registered as part of a coordinated set of studies focusing on country-specific variation in flourishing (Lomas et al., 2025). These coordinated analyses were preregistered on October 15th, 2024 (Lomas, Case, et al., 2024; https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/trcf3).

2.1 Data

Wave 1 of the GFS included nationally representative samples of adults from 22 geographically and culturally diverse countries/regions: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Germany, Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China), India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States (N = 202,898). The countries were selected to (a) maximize coverage of the world's population, (b) ensure geographic, cultural, and religious diversity, and (c) prioritize feasibility and existing data collection infrastructure. Data collection was carried out by Gallup Inc. Data for Wave 1 were collected principally during 2023, with some countries/regions beginning data collection in 2022, and exact dates varying by country/region (Ritter et al., 2024). There are plans to collect four additional waves of panel data on the participants annually from 2024-2027. The precise sampling design to ensure nationally/regionally representative samples varied by country/region and further details are available elsewhere (Ritter et al., 2024). Survey items included aspects of flourishing such as subjective wellbeing, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial stability (VanderWeele, 2017), plus other demographic, social, economic, political, religious, personality, childhood, community, health, and wellbeing variables. These data are publicly available through the Center for Open Science (https://www.cos.io/gfs). During the translation process, Gallup adhered to the TRAPD model (translation, review, adjudication, pretesting, and

documentation) for cross-cultural survey research; for additional details, see the questionnaire development process report (Lomas et al., 2024).

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Outcome variables

There are 69 specific outcomes, which can be organized into various dimensions of flourishing, as elucidated below. A summary of the items that were used to assess the outcomes, response options for each, recoding decisions, and which outcomes were modeled as binary vs. continuous variables is available at https://osf.io/9kpd8 (see 'W1—country-specific analyses' worksheet). Additional details are also provided in the introduction to this Special Issue (Lomas et al., 2025). Most outcomes have an associated preregistration that follows a similar analytic approach to this study, except that each focus on a single outcome variable across all 22 samples included in Wave 1 of the GFS. Details about the measures used to assess the variables included in this study can be found in the GFS Codebook (https://osf.io/cg76b). In contrast, this study is focused on all outcomes within a single country (i.e., Hong Kong).

2.2.2 Variables for demographic variation analyses

There are eight demographic variables: age; gender; marital status; employment; education; religious service attendance; race/ethnicity; and immigration status. Continuous age was classified as 18-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80 or older. Gender was assessed as male, female, or other. Marital status was assessed as single/never married, married, separated, divorced, widowed, and domestic partner. Employment was assessed as employed, self-employed, retired, student, homemaker, unemployed and searching, and other. Education was assessed as up to 8 years, 9-15 years, and 16+ years. Religious service attendance was assessed as more than once/week, once/week, one-to-three times/month, a few times/year, or never. Immigration status was dichotomously assessed with: "Were you born in this country, or not?" Religious tradition/affiliation with categories of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, Baha'i, Jainism, Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism, Primal/Animist/Folk religion, Spiritism, African-Derived, some other religion, or no religion/atheist/agnostic (Johnson et al., 2024). Racial and ethnic identity was assessed for the Hong Kong sample using response categories appropriate to the local context. Immigration status was assessed with: "Were you born in this country, or not?" For additional details on the assessments, see the COS GFS codebook (Markham et al., 2024) or Crabtree et al. (2021).

2.3 Analyses

2.3.1 Statistical models

Analyses were performed using R 4.4.1 (R Core Team, 2025). Descriptive statistics, weighted to be nationally representative of the Hong Kong population, were estimated for each sociodemographic variable using the observed sample. Means/proportions (accompanied by complex survey adjusted standard errors and 95% confidence intervals [CIs]) representative of the Hong Kong population were estimated for each outcome. We contextualize these results by pooling nationally representative means/proportions for the same set of outcomes across the entire set of GFS countries/regions, as per the analyses described in the linked preregistrations mentioned above.

We then estimated variation in means/proportions for the outcomes across sociodemographic categories for Hong Kong. A global *p*-value from a test of differences in means/proportions across

categories of each sociodemographic characteristic is provided for each outcome. Given the vast array of outcomes, we focus on estimates of means/proportions to broadly summarize sociodemographic variation trends.

2.3.2 Inference criteria

For tests of differences in means/proportions across sociodemographic categories, we report exact *p*-values (two-tailed test) and 95% CIs.

2.3.3 Missing data and multiple imputation

Missing data on all sociodemographic and outcome variables in the Hong Kong sample were imputed using multivariate imputation by chained equations, with five imputed datasets produced (Sterne et al., 2009; van Buuren, 2023). The imputation model incorporated the sociodemographic characteristics, outcomes, and sampling weights. Including sampling weights in the multiple imputation procedure allowed specific-variable missingness to be related to the probability of inclusion in the study.

2.3.4 Accounting for complex sampling design

All analyses accounted for the complex survey design components by including weights, primary sampling units, and strata. Additional methodological detail, including accounting for the complex sampling design, is provided elsewhere (Padgett, Cowden, et al., 2024).

3. Results

3.1 Population-average outcomes for Hong Kong

The sociodemographic characteristics of the Hong Kong sample (N = 3,012) are presented in Table 1. More than half of the participants were 50 years or older, with the largest age groups being 50–59 (24%) and 60–69 (21%). The sample was predominantly female (54%), married (69%), and born in the country (88%). Two-thirds of respondents had completed 9–15 years of education (67%), and the majority were employed by an employer (68%), with an additional 14% retired. Half of participants reported no religious affiliation, identifying as atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious (50%), while Christianity represented the largest single religious group (25%). Religious service attendance varied, with 44% reporting never attending. The sample identified racially/ethnically primarily as Chinese (various subgroups comprising the vast majority, including Cantonese at 64%), with smaller proportions identifying as other East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, White, or other groups.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for Hong Kong in the Global Flourishing Study*

Characteristic	**N = 3,012**[1]
Age group	
18-24	217 (7.2%)
25-29	198 (6.6%)
30-39	507 (17.0%)
40-49	580 (19.0%)
50-59	711 (24.0%)
60-69	620 (21.0%)
70-79	164 (5.5%)

Characteristic	**N = 3,012**[1]	
80 or older	15	(0.5%)
(Missing)	0	(0.0%)
Gender		
Male	1,390	(46.0%)
Female	1,620	(54.0%)
Other	2	(<0.1%)
(Missing)	0	(0.0%)
Marital status		
Married	2,080	(69.0%)
Separated	21	(0.7%)
Divorced	105	(3.5%)
Widowed	45	(1.5%)
Single, never married	723	(24.0%)
Domestic Partner	37	(1.2%)
(Missing)	1	(<0.1%)
Employment		
Employed for an employer	2,056	(68.0%)
Self-employed	245	(8.1%)
Retired	423	(14.0%)
Student	55	(1.8%)
Homemaker	114	(3.8%)
Unemployed and looking for a job	62	(2.0%)
None of these/Other	39	(1.3%)
(Missing)	18	(0.6%)
Religious service attendance		
More than 1/week	237	(7.9%)
1/week	567	(19.0%)
1-3/month	332	(11.0%)
A few times a year	543	(18.0%)
Never	1,332	(44.0%)
(Missing)	1	(<0.1%)
Education		
Up to 8 years	433	(14.0%)
9-15 years	2,031	(67.0%)
16+ years	547	(18.0%)
(Missing)	0	(0.0%)
Immigration		
Born in this country	2,637	(88.0%)
Born in another country	321	(11.0%)
(Missing)	53	(1.8%)
Religious affiliation		
Christianity	757	(25.0%)
Islam	86	(2.8%)
Hinduism	20	(0.7%)
Buddhism	349	(12.0%)

Characteristic	N = 3,012[1]	
Judaism	10	(0.3%)
Sikhism	2	(<0.1%)
Baha'i	3	(<0.1%)
Jainism	1	(<0.1%)
Shinto	19	(0.6%)
Taoism	97	(3.2%)
Confucianism	11	(0.4%)
Primal, Animist, or Folk religion	27	(0.9%)
Spiritism	0	(0.0%)
Umbanda, Candomble, and other African-derived religions	0	(0.0%)
Chinese folk/traditional religion	106	(3.5%)
Some other religion	4	(0.1%)
No religion/Atheist/Agnostic	1,518	(50.0%)
(Missing)	5	(0.2%)
Race/Ethnicity		
Chinese (Cantonese)	1,930	(64.0%)
Chinese (Chaoshan)	201	(6.7%)
Chinese (Fujianese)	117	(3.9%)
Chinese (Hakka)	121	(4.0%)
Chinese (Other ethnicity)	264	(8.8%)
Chinese (Shanghainese)	89	(2.9%)
East Asian (Korean, Japanese)	10	(0.3%)
Other	4	(0.1%)
South Asian (Indian, Nepalese, Pakistani)	17	(0.6%)
Southeast Asian (Filipino, Indonesian, Thailand)	46	(1.5%)
Taiwanese	14	(0.4%)
White	15	(0.5%)
(Missing)	184	(6.1%)

[1]n (%)

3.2 Distribution of outcomes

The descriptive statistics for all outcomes in Hong Kong are reported in Table 2. For the six health and wellbeing domains, we compared 95% CIs for the 42 outcomes in Table 2 with the analogous pooled results for the global sample included in Wave 1 of the GFS (see Supplemental Table 1). We found support for more favourable health and wellbeing in Hong Kong on nine outcomes: peace, balance in life, and mastery (psychological wellbeing); trust (social wellbeing); charitable giving and volunteering (character and prosocial behaviour); and financial security, material security, and employment (socioeconomic factors). In contrast, health and wellbeing were less favourable in Hong Kong on ten outcomes: optimism, freedom, purpose, and self-rated mental health (psychological wellbeing); social relationship quality, social support, and belonging (social wellbeing); depressive symptoms (psychological distress); and promoting good and hope (character and prosocial behaviour). Overlapping 95% CIs suggested similar means or proportions for the remaining health and wellbeing outcomes.

For the socioeconomic, religion/spirituality, and family-related outcomes, 95% CIs suggested more favourable socioeconomic conditions in Hong Kong relative to the global sample, including

higher financial and material security, a substantially higher employment rate, greater subjective financial wellbeing, and slightly higher home ownership, while levels of educational attainment were similar across contexts. In contrast, Hong Kong respondents reported lower overall levels of religion and spirituality than the global sample, with consistently lower engagement and belief across most indicators. Finally, family-related outcomes indicated higher values for having ever been married, lower values for the average number of children, and similar values for divorce in Hong Kong compared with the global sample.

Table 2. *Estimated means and proportions across outcome variables for Hong Kong*

Outcome	Mean	SE	95% CI	Standard Deviation
Thematic Area 1: Multidimensional Well-being				
Psychological Well-being				
Happiness	7.16	0.047	(7.07, 7.26)	2.00
Life Satisfaction	7.03	0.050	(6.93, 7.13)	2.08
Life Evaluation Today	6.85	0.049	(6.75, 6.94)	2.02
Life Evaluation Five Years From Now	7.09	0.050	(7.00, 7.19)	1.97
Optimism	7.23	0.051	(7.13, 7.33)	2.10
Freedom	7.29	0.052	(7.19, 7.39)	2.06
Peace	0.89	0.007	(0.87, 0.90)	-
Balance in Life	0.80	0.010	(0.78, 0.82)	-
Mastery	0.86	0.009	(0.84, 0.87)	-
Meaning	7.27	0.047	(7.17, 7.36)	1.98
Purpose	7.24	0.052	(7.14, 7.35)	2.15
Self-Rated Mental Health	7.17	0.054	(7.07, 7.28)	2.14
Social Well-being				
Subjective Social Connectedness	7.13	0.049	(7.03, 7.22)	2.00
Social Support	6.39	0.065	(6.27, 6.52)	2.58
Intimate Friend	0.84	0.009	(0.82, 0.86)	-
Government Approval	0.53	0.013	(0.51, 0.56)	-
Political Voice	0.58	0.013	(0.56, 0.61)	-
Belonging	7.40	0.054	(7.30, 7.51)	2.19
City Satisfaction	0.76	0.011	(0.74, 0.78)	-
Trust	0.48	0.013	(0.45, 0.50)	-
Community Participation	0.21	0.010	(0.19, 0.23)	-
Psychological Distress				
Traumatic Distress	0.37	0.012	(0.35, 0.40)	-
Depression	0.45	0.012	(0.43, 0.48)	-
Anxiety	0.29	0.011	(0.26, 0.31)	-
Suffering	0.48	0.013	(0.46, 0.51)	-
Social Distress				

Outcome	Mean	SE	95% CI	Standard Deviation
Loneliness	3.26	0.065	(3.13, 3.39)	2.55
Discrimination	0.28	0.011	(0.26, 0.30)	-
Character & Prosocial Behaviors				
Promoting Good	7.32	0.046	(7.23, 7.41)	1.93
Delayed Gratification	7.11	0.047	(7.02, 7.20)	1.96
Hope	7.28	0.050	(7.19, 7.38)	2.09
Gratitude	6.97	0.054	(6.86, 7.07)	2.22
Love	6.52	0.063	(6.40, 6.64)	2.55
Forgiveness	0.62	0.012	(0.60, 0.65)	-
Charitable Giving	0.51	0.013	(0.48, 0.53)	-
Helping	0.65	0.012	(0.62, 0.67)	-
Volunteering	0.35	0.012	(0.33, 0.37)	-
Physical Health & Health Behaviors				
Self-Rated Physical Health	7.12	0.049	(7.03, 7.22)	1.99
Health Limitations	0.21	0.011	(0.19, 0.23)	-
Pain	0.45	0.013	(0.43, 0.48)	-
Smoking	2.00	0.110	(1.79, 2.22)	4.17
Drinking	1.66	0.067	(1.53, 1.80)	2.86
Exercise	2.24	0.057	(2.13, 2.35)	2.17
Socioeconomic Outcomes				
Financial Security	6.79	0.066	(6.66, 6.92)	2.68
Material Security	6.94	0.058	(6.83, 7.05)	2.38
Education	0.18	0.009	(0.16, 0.20)	-
Employment	0.77	0.013	(0.74, 0.80)	-
Subjective Financial Wellbeing	0.82	0.010	(0.80, 0.84)	-
Housing	0.67	0.012	(0.64, 0.69)	-
Thematic Area 2: Religion/Spirituality				
Self-Reported Religion/Spirituality	0.46	0.013	(0.44, 0.49)	-
Religious Service Attendance	0.27	0.011	(0.24, 0.29)	-
Life after Death Belief	0.45	0.013	(0.43, 0.48)	-
Religious Experience	0.42	0.013	(0.40, 0.45)	-
Religious Reading	0.26	0.011	(0.24, 0.29)	-
Prayer-Meditation	0.30	0.012	(0.28, 0.33)	-
Belief in God	0.59	0.012	(0.57, 0.62)	-
Intrinsic Religiosity	0.52	0.024	(0.47, 0.58)	-
Religious Comfort	0.54	0.019	(0.50, 0.58)	-
Loved by God	0.47	0.021	(0.42, 0.51)	-

Outcome	Mean	SE	95% CI	Standard Deviation
Spiritual Punishment	0.36	0.020	(0.31, 0.40)	-
Religious Criticism	0.30	0.013	(0.28, 0.33)	-
Evangelism	0.47	0.014	(0.44, 0.50)	-
Thematic Area 3: Personality Traits				
Extraversion	3.64	0.025	(3.59, 3.68)	1.06
Openness to Experience	3.26	0.025	(3.22, 3.31)	0.97
Agreeableness	2.63	0.024	(2.58, 2.67)	0.94
Conscientiousness	2.65	0.029	(2.59, 2.70)	1.07
Neuroticism	3.44	0.028	(3.38, 3.49)	1.12
Thematic Area 4: Family Factors				
Ever Married	0.75	0.010	(0.73, 0.77)	-
Divorced	0.04	0.006	(0.02, 0.05)	-
Children	0.56	0.026	(0.51, 0.61)	1.00

3.3 Demographic variation across outcomes for Hong Kong

Results for the sociodemographic variation analyses for Hong Kong are presented in Supplemental Tables 2-11. Because of the large number of outcomes assessed, the narrative below highlights overall differences in means and proportions between sociodemographic categories, regardless of whether 95 percent confidence intervals overlapped. When interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize that several groups, particularly adults aged 80 or older and the "Other" gender category, had small sample sizes that may affect the reliability of estimates. Furthermore, although broad patterns emerged, the magnitude of differences varied and some contrasts were modest.

Across the 42 multidimensional wellbeing outcomes, the 50–59 and 60–69 age groups had better scores on the greatest number of indicators. These groups showed comparatively stronger psychological and social wellbeing, higher levels of character strengths, and lower psychological and social distress. In contrast, the 18–24 and 25–29 age groups had the greatest number of least favorable means and proportions, especially psychological distress, social support, trust, discrimination, and political voice. Adults aged 80 or older showed a mixed pattern, with some outcomes at ceiling or floor values due to sample size limitations and other indicators, such as happiness and life satisfaction, among the lowest. For gender, males reported better scores on more outcomes than females, including indicators of psychological wellbeing, social connectedness, physical and mental health, and employment. Females reported slightly more favorable means on relational and prosocial outcomes such as gratitude and helping behavior, although these differences were generally small.

Patterns for socioeconomic outcomes also varied across groups. Older adults, especially those aged 70–79, tended to report the highest levels of financial and material security, whereas young adults in their twenties reported less favorable evaluations of their economic circumstances. Educational attainment and employment showed distinct associations with wellbeing, with lower educational attainment generally linked to higher levels of happiness, life evaluation, and social wellbeing, except for psychological distress, which was higher among those with less

education; across employment categories, self-employed adults reported the most favourable wellbeing profiles, unemployed individuals the least favourable, and employed workers clustered around the sample average across domains. Educational attainment and employment followed expected age-related patterns, with younger adults more likely to be in education and prime working-age adults reporting the highest employment rates. Gender differences were modest but generally favored males on outcomes such as employment and subjective financial wellbeing, although these gaps varied in size across indicators.

In the religion and spirituality domain, the groups with the most consistent positive endorsement included adults aged 70–79, females, and individuals who were widowed or retired. These groups tended to report higher levels of belief in life after death, intrinsic religiosity, and religious comfort. Younger adults, especially those aged 30–39, reported the least positive endorsement across many indicators, including religious engagement, prayer or meditation, and reading of sacred texts. Gender differences were relatively small: females reported slightly greater religious comfort and belief in life after death, while males reported somewhat higher levels of religious reading.

Variation across religious and racial or ethnic groups also revealed important differences in wellbeing. Adherents of minority religions, such as Judaism, Sikhism, and the Bahá'í Faith, tended to have particularly favorable scores on many psychological and social indicators, although small sample sizes may influence these estimates. Individuals with no religious affiliation consistently showed less favorable means across psychological wellbeing, social support, trust, and prosocial behavior and reported higher levels of psychological distress. Racial and ethnic patterns were similarly diverse. Cantonese Chinese respondents clustered near the citywide averages, while some minority East Asian and Southeast Asian groups reported high levels of happiness and optimism alongside elevated discrimination and loneliness. Overall, these results suggest that middle-aged and early older adults, along with several minority religious groups, had the most favorable profiles across outcomes, whereas younger adults, nonreligious respondents, and some ethnic minorities had the greatest number of less favorable means and proportions.

4. Discussion

Flourishing in Hong Kong presents a nuanced and complex picture. In aggregate, the wellbeing profile is mixed, with some domains showing relatively favourable and others suggesting notable challenges. Moreover, it is not evenly distributed across the population: wellbeing differs across sociodemographic groups (e.g., age, employment, and education), with some subpopulations, such as early older adults, consistently faring better than others.

4.1 Wellbeing outcomes

Hong Kong displays a mixed profile of wellbeing across domains. In general, present happiness and life satisfaction remained high. In the psychological domain, estimates for peace (feeling at peace with thoughts and feelings), balance (various aspects of life in balance), and mastery (feeling capable) were more favourable, whereas estimates for optimism (expecting more good things than bad), freedom (feeling free to pursue what is most important), and purpose (understanding purpose in life) were less favourable. The more favourable estimates for peace and balance reported in Hong Kong appear to contradict the findings of the Global Wellbeing Initiative, as reported in the World Happiness Report (Lomas et al., 2022), which placed Hong Kong among the bottom ten globally in terms of peace in life. One possible explanation for this

discrepancy is the timing of the studies. The Global Wellbeing Initiative was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest in Hong Kong, while Wave 1 data collection for the GFS took place more recently in 2023. These contrasting results may reflect differences in field periods and context over time.

In the social domain, estimates indicated a pattern of more favourable generalized trust and prosocial engagement (e.g., volunteering, charitable giving), alongside less favourable outcomes for perceived social support and social connectedness. This suggests that many participants are willing to trust others in general and engage in acts that benefit the wider community, yet do not necessarily feel they have strong support or a sense of close connection within their own close networks. In other words, generalized trust, perceived social support, and social connectedness represent distinct facets of social wellbeing that do not necessarily move together in the Hong Kong context.

In the financial domain, Hong Kong exhibited high financial wellbeing and financial and material security. At the same time, the difference between those living comfortably and those experiencing financial difficulty was substantial, indicating marked heterogeneity across participants. This suggests that relatively high financial security for some coexists with financial strain for others in the same socioeconomic context. In line with this, local empirical work has documented a significant negative association between financial stress and wellbeing (Ho, 2014), providing contextual evidence on how financial circumstances and wellbeing are related in Hong Kong.

Overall, wellbeing outcomes in Hong Kong present a nuanced, time-sensitive profile, shaped by a combination of psychological, social, and financial factors. While there are notable strengths in happiness and life satisfaction and financial stability, limited social support and connectedness pose challenges to overall flourishing. Taken together, these patterns underscore the complexity of the flourishing profile in Hong Kong and point to the value of examining its multiple, interacting dimensions.

4.2 Age influence

In general, a U-shaped pattern with age was identified in several measures related to wellbeing (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, and life evaluation) in the current Hong Kong sample, with relatively higher scores in young adulthood, gradually declining to midlife and rising again after age 40. Similar patterns were also observed in the illbeing related measures, such as loneliness, self-rated physical health, and financial and material worries in this sample.

Consistent with the results from the WHR 2024, which identified the 30-44 age group as the least happy group (Helliwell et al., 2024), this study also found that several measures of wellbeing in the current study (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, life evaluation, optimism and self-rated mental health) were lowest among individuals aged 30-39. Notably, this age range was younger than the average lowest point (around age 48) observed in the U-shaped wellbeing curves across different countries in a previous study (Blanchflower, 2021). This suggests that the curves turn slightly earlier in the Hong Kong sample than in many other GFS countries/regions worldwide. One possible explanation is that respondents living in places with better societal structural conditions such as better shared environments and healthcare systems, which may be partially related to higher GDP per capita, might find it easier to navigate the aging process (Graham & Pozuelo, 2017).

Meanwhile, increasing concern has been continuously directed towards the mental health and wellbeing of younger and older populations in Hong Kong. Compared to the GFS mean as

a reference point, the youngest age group in this sample showed lower self-rated mental health. The societal and global changes in the past few years, such as social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic, have posed extra mental health challenges in young people in Hong Kong (Ni et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2023). In a territory-wide household-based epidemiological study targeting youth aged 15-24 years, Wong and colleagues (2023) found that around one or two out of 10 young people have a probable mental disorder during the past 12 months in the period of 2019 to 2022. Although the social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic have subsided, the enduring impact of these crises on young people warrants further monitoring and investigation

As one of the regions in the world with the highest life expectancy, projections suggest that more than one-third of the population will be aged 65 or older by 2046 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2023). The Hong Kong government has placed significant emphasis on addressing the challenges of aging and promoting physical and psychological wellbeing of its elderly population. Hong Kong's elderly care policy prioritizes aging in place and holistic wellbeing through a range of policies in financial support, healthcare subsidies, and community-based services (Choy, 2022; Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2017, 2014). In the current sample, both happiness and subjective well-being remain high among individuals aged 60 to 79. Although the associations between psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing/ distress were not tested in the current study, a recent longitudinal study has identified the importance of social participation in life satisfaction and wellbeing of the older population in Hong Kong (Rochelle, 2023). As a Chinese society, Hong Kong is influenced by the principles of 'filial piety' rooted in Confucian culture. As such, family plays an essential role in older people's social wellbeing. A previous study also showed that elderly parents (aged 65 or above) had higher life satisfaction when they engage in daily living support exchanges, and exchange emotional support with their children (Peng et al., 2019).

4.3 Employment influence

We found that some indicators of wellbeing in Hong Kong varied with employment status, with self-employed and retired individuals reporting higher levels of life satisfaction. This finding aligns with findings from other regions, such as Germany (Binder & Coad, 2016). The elevated wellbeing observed in these groups can be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and economic conditions, while also reflecting specific contextual factors unique to Hong Kong's socioeconomic landscape.

Self-Determination Theory highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key drivers of wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In Hong Kong, where work culture is known for its long hours, high pressure, and limited flexibility, traditional employees frequently face challenges to their autonomy and work-life balance. By contrast, self-employed individuals often enjoy greater freedom in managing their work schedules and tasks, allowing them to align their activities with personal values and preferences. Retired individuals, particularly those with adequate pensions or family support, can also benefit from reduced work stress and greater control over their time, fostering an enhanced sense of life satisfaction and meaning. In particular, a local survey among 630 retirees in Hong Kong revealed that the retirees who could plan ahead for their retirement in health, social life, and psychological domains had higher levels of physical health and life satisfaction, while retirement planning in the financial domain could directly benefit life satisfaction in retirement (Liu et al., 2021).

Economic conditions also play a role in shaping these wellbeing trends. Hong Kong's high living costs and competitive labor market can create financial stress for salaried workers, while

self-employed individuals may experience greater satisfaction from entrepreneurial success and economic independence. However, this satisfaction is tempered by economic uncertainty, as the self-employed are more vulnerable to market fluctuations and the broader economic environment. For example, during periods of economic downturn or disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, many small businesses and freelancers in Hong Kong faced financial instability and heightened stress, which can undermine their wellbeing (Hou et al., 2021). In conclusion, the self-employed and retired populations often report greater autonomy and life satisfaction, but their wellbeing remains sensitive to economic stability and social support systems.

According to the International Labor Organization, employees in Hong Kong have a median workweek of 43 hours, with 30% of the workforce working 49 or more hours (International Labor Organization, n.d.). To enhance employee wellbeing in Hong Kong's high-pressure work environment, it is crucial to incorporate strategies that promote autonomy support and job crafting (Slemp et al., 2021). Autonomy support involves creating work environments where employees have greater control over their tasks, decision-making, and time management. Research shows that autonomy-supportive work cultures not only enhance intrinsic motivation but also improve psychological wellbeing, job satisfaction, and resilience (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Given the demanding work conditions in Hong Kong, fostering a sense of choice and agency in the workplace can help alleviate stress and support employees in maintaining their overall wellbeing.

Additionally, job crafting, a process whereby employees proactively redesign aspects of their work to better align with their strengths, interests, and values, has been shown to influence wellbeing and job engagement positively (Slemp et al., 2014). For instance, encouraging employees to adjust their tasks, redefine their roles, or enhance workplace relationships can help them find greater meaning and purpose in their work, contributing to both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Employers can facilitate this by providing supportive leadership, flexibility, and resources that enable employees to tailor their work in meaningful ways.

4.4 Education influence

The data analysis reveals significant variations in flourishing across different levels of educational attainment in Hong Kong, especially in psychological wellbeing, social wellbeing, and psychological distress. Interestingly, individuals with lower educational levels (up to 8 years of education) generally report higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and optimism compared to those with more education in Hong Kong. This trend may reflect a characteristic feature of Hong Kong's educational culture, where younger individuals in the early stages of schooling may still experience an idealistic and hopeful outlook, not yet weighed down by the intense pressures that come with more advanced academic stages. However, as individuals progress through Hong Kong's highly competitive and academically demanding educational system, they face increasing stress and pressure, which can erode subjective wellbeing (Tsang & Lian, 2021). Furthermore, this relationship may be culturally reinforced by Hong Kong's meritocratic social structure. Recent literature on education and work highlights the "crowding-out effect," whereby the expansion of higher education impacts the labour market dynamics, often disadvantaging young people across different educational backgrounds (Kühner et al., 2021). Aligned with the mainstream "crowding-out perspective," young people with higher educational attainment report lower self-reported happiness. Such results suggest that young people in Hong Kong with higher education may be more vulnerable to negative labour market

experiences, such as unemployment, high job pressure, long working hours, or a mismatch between education and job opportunities, leading to lower levels of life satisfaction and personal fulfilment. However, the findings reveal a contrasting pattern for the sense of mastery, where individuals with higher educational attainment report greater confidence in their abilities and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. This finding may reflect the role of higher education in fostering skill acquisition and confidence-building, which enable individuals to better navigate life's challenges (Russell et al., 2022).

There was also a noticeably lower sense of life purpose among those with higher education. Individuals with lower educational attainment (up to 8 years) report the highest sense of purpose, with a gradual decline in purpose as education levels rise. This finding could be attributed to the shift from more personal and intrinsic goals emphasized in early education to the complex, externally driven motivations associated with career success and societal expectations in higher educational stages. In Hong Kong, a strong societal emphasis on academic achievement and material success may shift individuals' focus away from personal fulfillment and toward meeting societal expectations, leading to a diminished sense of purpose and meaning in life (Lee, 2024).

This finding stands in contrast to trends observed in the US, where higher educational attainment is generally associated with increased purpose and life satisfaction. One potential explanation for the difference in Hong Kong could be its unique economic context. In contrast to the US, where lower educational levels are often correlated with poorer economic outcomes, the less-educated individual in Hong Kong may still have access to relatively favourable economic opportunities. This difference might contribute to why individuals with lower education in Hong Kong report higher levels of happiness despite facing greater distress.

Although causality cannot be inferred from cross-sectional data, the findings highlight the complex interplay between education, cultural values, and societal pressures in Hong Kong. Higher education may strengthen competence and mastery while simultaneously reducing subjective wellbeing within an environment shaped by academic intensity and strong societal expectations.

5. Strengths and limitations

A major contribution of this study lies in its holistic portrayal of health, wellbeing and related indicators in Hong Kong, bringing together a wide array of flourishing indicators within a single population-level analysis. This is one of the first efforts in the Hong Kong context to map multiple dimensions of flourishing concurrently, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how flourishing is distributed across social and demographic groups. By highlighting variation across subpopulations, the findings offer valuable guidance for identifying groups that may benefit most from targeted strategies to support different dimensions of flourishing.

While this study contributes significantly to the understanding of flourishing in Hong Kong, it also has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. One key limitation is the sample composition, which is skewed towards older adults (aged 50-69). In the GFS age demographics for Hong Kong, individuals aged between 50 and 69 constitute approximately 45% of the total population surveyed in 2023 (see Table 1). This percentage is significantly higher than the data of the same year from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2024), which indicates that the same age group comprises around 32% of the population. This discrepancy suggests that the GFS Hong Kong sample may have a slightly disproportionate representation of older adults compared to the general population, as recorded in the official census data. This overrepresentation of older individuals may limit the generalizability of the findings, particularly

concerning younger populations who face distinct wellbeing challenges, such as those related to mental health and sociopolitical conditions. Hence, further studies focusing on young people's wellbeing are essential for generating critical insights that can inform efforts to promote flourishing and reduce disparities in wellbeing at the population level in Hong Kong. Future research could further explore the role of cultural hybridization between traditional Confucian values and Western influences, and the impact of Hong Kong's unique labor market on flourishing.

6. Conclusion

The GFS provides a unique opportunity to explore the factors associated with flourishing across many cultures and contexts worldwide, including Hong Kong. By incorporating a wide range of indicators of psychological, social, economic, and physical wellbeing, along with indicators for religious beliefs, character, personality traits, and family dynamics, our findings help to paint a more holistic picture of well-being in Hong Kong. This study's findings set the stage for monitoring the flourishing of the Hong Kong population over time as additional waves of the GFS become available.

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LH, JQX, MYZ, HH, and AJ wrote the manuscript with contributions from BC, TL, RNP, YC, RGC, BRJ, TJV. RNP provided the code for data analysis and conducted the analysis. BRJ and TJV acquired funding, coordinated data collection, participated in survey design, supervised the development of the analytic code and TL, BC, YC, RGC contributed to the review and editing of the manuscript.

Inclusion and ethics

This project was ruled exempt by the Baylor University Institutional Review Board (#1841317-2). All personally identifiable information was removed from the data used in this study by Gallup Inc. Institutional Review Board approval for all data collection activities was obtained by Gallup Inc.

AI statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted copy editing to enhance readability and to ensure the text is free of grammatical and spelling errors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

Conflict of Interest

Tyler J. VanderWeele reports consulting fees from Gloo Inc., along with shared revenue received by Harvard University in its license agreement with Gloo Inc. according to the University IP policy.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this article are openly available on the Open Science Framework and in the Supplementary Materials. The specific dataset used was Wave 1 non-sensitive global data available from February 2024 to March 2026 via preregistration and publicly available thereafter (https://www.cos.io/gfs-access-data).

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