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The Paradox of Happiness: Exploring the Relationship Between Fear of Happiness, Subjective Well-being, and Life Satisfaction in Students

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Abstract
Fear of happiness is a relatively new concept in psychological research, referring to the tendency to feel uneasy or uncomfortable when experiencing positive emotions such as joy, contentment, and satisfaction. While previous studies have explored the relationship between positive emotions and subjective well-being, little is known about how fear of happiness may impact overall well-being and life satisfaction. This study aims to investigate the effects of fear of happiness on subjective well-being and life satisfaction among students. A cross-sectional research design will be employed, with data collected using standardized measures of fear of happiness, subjective well-being, and life satisfaction. The results are expected to show a significant negative relationship between fear of happiness and life satisfaction, as well as a significant negative relationship between fear of happiness and subjective well-being. Additionally, a significant positive relationship between subjective well-being and life satisfaction is anticipated. The findings of this study may provide valuable insights into the role of positive emotions in psychological well-being and inform interventions designed to help individuals overcome their fear of happiness, ultimately improving their overall well-being.

Keywords: Fear of Happiness, Subjective Well-being, Life Satisfaction, Students

Introduction

Happiness has long been regarded as a universal aspiration and a central indicator of psychological health. It is commonly associated with positive affect, self-satisfaction, resilience, and adaptive functioning. Within contemporary psychological literature, happiness is closely linked to constructs such as subjective well-being and life satisfaction, both of which contribute significantly to mental health, academic achievement, and interpersonal relationships (Diener et al., 2018; Luhmann et al., 2021). However, emerging research suggests that happiness is not universally embraced as a desirable emotional state. For some individuals, positive emotions may evoke discomfort, anxiety, or apprehension—a phenomenon conceptualized as *fear of happiness*. This paradox challenges the dominant assumption that happiness is inherently beneficial and universally sought after.

The idea that feeling joy or contentment could lead to unfavourable outcomes like bad luck, loss, punishment, jealousy, or one's own demise is known as fear of happiness (Joshanloo, 2013; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). Individuals who hold such beliefs may avoid fully engaging in positive experiences due to anticipatory anxiety or superstitious thinking. Cultural and religious narratives often reinforce the idea that excessive happiness

may attract adversity or divine punishment. Recent cross-cultural studies indicate that fear of happiness is more prevalent in collectivistic societies where modesty, emotional restraint, and concerns about social harmony are emphasized (Joshanloo, 2022). Furthermore, Gilbert et al. (2014) found that individuals with higher levels of self-criticism and shame may have trouble accepting positive emotions, perceiving them as threatening rather than rewarding.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is defined as an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of life, comprising life satisfaction, the presence of positive affect, and the absence of negative affect (Diener et al., 2018). It represents how people experience and evaluate their lives according to their own standards. High subjective well-being has been linked to better academic performance, improved physical health, stronger social relationships, and greater psychological resilience (Luhmann et al., 2021). Among students, subjective well-being plays a critical role in coping with academic stress and life transitions. However, if individuals actively suppress or fear positive emotions, their overall evaluation of life may be negatively affected.

Life satisfaction, a key cognitive component of subjective well-being, refers to a global assessment of one's life quality according to self-chosen criteria (Diener et al., 2018). Unlike momentary happiness, life satisfaction reflects a broader and more stable evaluation of life circumstances. Research indicates that life satisfaction is associated with motivation, academic engagement, psychological adjustment, and long-term well-being (Bücker et al., 2018). Although life satisfaction is influenced by factors such as income, health, and relationships, these factors are subjectively weighted by individuals, making it inherently personal and context-dependent (Diener & Pavot, 1993).

Despite extensive research on the benefits of happiness and well-being, limited empirical attention has been given to how fear of happiness may undermine subjective well-being and life satisfaction, particularly among students. University students face numerous academic, social, and developmental challenges that may heighten emotional vulnerability. In contexts where fear of happiness is present, students may experience reduced positive affect, increased rumination, and diminished life satisfaction, thereby compromising their psychological adjustment.

Given the increasing global concerns regarding student mental health, examining the association between fear of happiness, subjective well-being, and life satisfaction is both timely and necessary. Understanding this paradox may contribute to the development of culturally sensitive psychological interventions aimed at reducing maladaptive beliefs about happiness and promoting healthier emotional functioning. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between fear of happiness, subjective well-being, and life satisfaction among students, with the objective of clarifying how beliefs about happiness influence overall psychological well-being.

Literature Review

Fear of Happiness and Emotional Avoidance

Fear of happiness refers to the belief that experiencing happiness or joy may lead to negative consequences and therefore should be avoided. Empirical evidence indicates that fear of happiness is negatively associated with subjective well-being and positively associated with depression, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation (Joshanloo, 2013; Joshanloo, 2022). Importantly, fear of happiness does not operate in isolation; it is strongly correlated with broader emotional avoidance tendencies. Individuals who fear happiness often report fear and avoidance of other emotions, including sadness and anger, as well as discomfort with receiving compassion from others or directing compassion toward themselves (Gilbert et al., 2014).

This pattern suggests that fear of happiness may reflect a generalized emotion regulation strategy aimed at minimizing emotional intensity rather than a specific aversion to positive affect. Recent research within the emotion regulation framework supports this interpretation, indicating that experiential avoidance predicts lower psychological well-being and greater psychopathology (Kashdan et al., 2018; Chawla & Ostafin, 2020). Thus, fear of happiness may represent a maladaptive cognitive schema that contributes to diminished well-

being through chronic emotional suppression.

Childhood Trauma, Dissociation, and Fear of Happiness

Childhood psychological trauma has been widely studied as a developmental stressor associated with long-term mental health consequences. One well-established outcome of early trauma is dissociation, defined as disruptions in normally integrated psychological functions such as memory, identity, consciousness, perception, and sense of agency (Lysenko et al., 2013; Şar, 2020). Dissociation frequently co-occurs with mood, anxiety, and personality disorders and is strongly linked to childhood adversity.

Although the direct association between childhood trauma, dissociation, and fear of happiness remains underexplored, theoretical links can be proposed. Children who experience punishment, criticism, or emotional neglect following expressions of joy may internalize beliefs that positive emotions are unsafe (Gilbert, 2007). Over time, this learning history may foster cognitive distortions in which happiness becomes associated with danger or loss. Trauma-informed perspectives suggest that individuals exposed to unpredictable or abusive environments may develop hypervigilance toward positive affect, anticipating negative outcomes after pleasurable experiences (Briere & Scott, 2015; Cloitre et al., 2019).

Emerging evidence also suggests gender differences in trauma-related cognitive vulnerabilities, with women reporting higher levels of rumination and internalizing symptoms, which may increase susceptibility to fear-based beliefs about happiness (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Joshanloo, 2022). However, empirical investigations examining gender as a moderator in the relationship between trauma and fear of happiness remain limited, highlighting a gap in the literature.

Cultural Context of Fear of Happiness

Cultural narratives significantly shape beliefs about happiness. Cross-cultural research demonstrates that fear of happiness is more prevalent in collectivistic societies where emotional moderation, humility, and social harmony are emphasized (Joshanloo, 2014; Joshanloo, 2022). In certain Islamic cultural contexts, overt displays of happiness may be viewed as spiritually distracting or morally questionable (Chittick, 2005). Historical and sociocultural analyses suggest that in post-revolutionary Iran, for instance, happiness has sometimes been associated with superficiality, whereas sadness has been linked to depth and moral seriousness (Good & Good, 1988).

Beliefs such as the "evil eye" and common proverbs implying that excessive joy precedes misfortune reinforce culturally embedded fears of happiness (Moshiri & Tafreshi, 2009). However, large-scale cross-national analyses using multigroup confirmatory factor analysis have demonstrated that the Fear of Happiness Scale shows measurement invariance across multiple nations, supporting its cross-cultural validity (Joshanloo, 2013; Joshanloo, 2022). These findings indicate that although the expression of fear of happiness may vary culturally, the underlying belief structure appears psychometrically robust across contexts.

Conceptualizations of Subjective Well-Being and Life Satisfaction

Subjective well-being (SWB) is commonly conceptualized as comprising three components: life satisfaction (cognitive evaluation), positive affect, and negative affect (Diener et al., 2018). Unlike normative or virtue-based definitions of happiness rooted in Aristotelian eudaimonia, modern psychological conceptualizations emphasize individuals' subjective evaluations of their lives (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SWB is inherently subjective, involves positive indicators rather than merely the absence of distress, and typically includes a global life assessment (Diener et al., 2018).

Life satisfaction, specifically, refers to a global cognitive appraisal of one's life as a whole (Shin & Johnson, 1978). It differs from momentary emotional states and is relatively stable over time. Research consistently demonstrates that high life satisfaction is associated with positive interpersonal relationships, healthier behaviors, academic achievement, and resilience among youth (Proctor et al., 2009; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

Importantly, life satisfaction and psychopathology are not opposite ends of a single continuum. The dual-factor model of mental health proposes that well-being and psychopathology are related but distinct dimensions (Keyes, 2005; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Adolescents with high subjective well-being—even when experiencing psychological symptoms—demonstrate better functioning compared to peers with low well-being. These findings highlight the importance of examining positive functioning independently of distress symptoms.

Measurement and Cross-Cultural Validity of Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction research has evolved significantly since early social indicator studies in the 1960s (Campbell et al., 1976; Andrews & Withey, 1976). Contemporary large-scale cross-nationa l databases, such as the World Database of Happiness, provide strong evidence that life satisfaction can be reliably measured across cultures (Veenhoven, 2012). Research addressing concerns regarding linguistic bias, desirability effects, and response styles has largely supported the cross-cultural comparability of life satisfaction measures (Ouweneel & Veenhoven, 1991; Diener et al., 2018).

Although life satisfaction correlates with objective conditions such as income, health, and relationship quality, it is not reducible to these variables (Diener et al., 2018). Adaptation theories suggest that individuals adjust to changing circumstances; however, longitudinal research indicates that sustained improvements in life conditions can produce lasting changes in well-being (Luhmann et al., 2012; Diener et al., 2018).

Life Satisfaction as a Psychological Strength

Recent research within positive psychology conceptualizes life satisfaction not merely as an outcome but as a protective factor that promotes resilience. Youth with high life satisfaction exhibit fewer behavioral problems, better school engagement, and stronger coping capacities (Proctor et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2006). Moreover, systematic reviews in clinical populations demonstrate that life satisfaction remains sensitive to health-related factors and psychosocial support, underscoring its relevance across medical and psychological domains (e.g., burn patient review, 2022).

Collectively, the literature suggests that fear of happiness may undermine subjective well-being and life satisfaction through emotional avoidance, trauma-related cognitive schemas, and culturally reinforced beliefs. Despite increasing interest in cross-cultural and clinical dimensions of fear of happiness, limited research has examined its role in shaping life satisfaction and subjective well-being among students. Addressing this gap may provide valuable insight into the cognitive-emotional processes that inhibit optimal functioning in young adults.

Methodology

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between fear of happiness and life satisfaction among students.
2. To study the relationship between fear of happiness and subjective well-being among students.
3. To explore the relationship between life satisfaction and subjective well-being among students

Hypothesis

1. There will be significant negative relationship between fear of happiness and life satisfaction among students.
2. There will be significant negative relationship between fear of happiness and subjective well - being among students.
3. There will be significant positive relationship between life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

Research Design
The present study was based on quantitative cross-sectional research design and data collected by using the survey method.

Participants
The current study comprised of 300 participants (150 males & 150 females). This study uses a convenient sampling technique in research study for data collection. For the present study, participants were selected from the government colleges and the university of District Haripur.

Operational definition
The operational definition of the variables are given below:

Fear of Happiness
The fear of happiness scale is an operational tool designed to measure fear of happiness. A higher number indicates a greater degree of happiness-related dread. A lower value implies a lower degree of happiness-related anxiety. The idea that happiness can have negative effects on humans is known as fear of happiness (Joshanloo, 2013). Highly valuing happiness might end up being linked to sadness, despite this seeming paradox (Ford et al., 2014).

Subjective Well-being
The subjective well-being scale (SWB) is an operational instrument for measuring subjective happiness. A larger amount indicates a higher standard of subjective well-being, while lower number indicates a lower level. The phrase "subjective well-being" (SWB) represents how people view and evaluate their life as well as certain areas and pursuits. (Layard, 2006; Krueger et al., 2009)

Life Satisfaction
The life satisfaction scale (SWLS) is used to assess life satisfaction operationally. A greater number suggests higher levels of life satisfaction, while a lower number indicates a lower level. The Latin phrase "satisfaction" means "to make or do enough." Satisfaction with one's life denotes acceptance or contentment with one's existence in its whole. Life satisfaction is essentially a personal evaluation of one's life's quality (Sousa, L., & Lyubomirsky, S. 2001).

Instrument:
Fear of happiness scale
Joshanloo (2013) designed Fear of Happiness Questionnaire to investigate the widely held belief that experiencing happiness, especially in excess, may have negative consequences. The scale consisted of five separate items, which rated on a Likert scale with seven points, ranging from 1 ('Strongly Disagree') to 7 ('Strongly Agree'), with an overall score ranging from 5 to 35. A greater score indicates a greater fear of happiness.

Subjective Well-being scale
The BBC Subjective Well-being Scale (BBC-SWB) is a widely developed instrument designed by Diener et al (1985) to assess individual subjective emotions across a broad spectrum of dimensions, typically found in definitions of well-being. While it was previously shown to be a valid and reliable indicator of subjective well-being in the public with satisfactory psychometric characteristics, the initial version was constrained by the inclusion of response on a 4-point Likert-style scale.

Life Satisfaction scale

Diener et al. (1985) devised the SWLS, a short 5-item questionnaire intended to assess worldwide cognitive judgments of life satisfaction. The rating system typically requires approximately one minute of a participant's time, and responders reply on a scale called a Likert scale. The inquiries remain open to interpret, make this scale suitable for adults representing a range of backgrounds. It is best suited towards usage in non-clinical settings. Score can be made up of raw score (between 5 and 35). Ratings that are higher suggest higher life satisfaction. The scorers can be categorized into six well-being categories, with clarifying vocabulary provided for each.

Procedure

Each participant were briefed about the objective of this research and provided guarantee of confidentiality of their provided information and will be used only for research. Participants were given the right to leave the research at any stage. Proper instructions were given to them regarding how to fill scale. Then informed consent was taken from the participants. After this their personal information content was obtained through demographic data sheet. After the completion of scales, the researcher checked the scales to ensure that all items were complete. About 20 to 30 minutes were consumed by the respondents to complete scale.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed by using statistical package of social sciences (SPSS) version 23 .

Results

Table 1

Alpha Reliability Coefficients of Fear of Happiness, Subjective Well-being & Life Satisfaction Scale

Source	N	A
Fear of Happiness	6	.70
Subjective Wellbeing	24	.86
Life Satisfaction	5	.75

Note: N =Item no, α=Alpha coefficient

Table I describes that the alpha coefficient for Fear of Happiness is 0.70, the alpha coefficient for Subjective Wellbeing is.86 and alpha coefficient for Life Satisfaction is 0.75 which indicates that the scale items internally consistent. Consequently, these are more reliable for measuring the Fear of Happiness, Life satisfaction and Subjective wellbeing.

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Participants (N=300)

Demographic Variables	F	%
Gender		
Male	150	50.0
Female	150	50.0
Total	300	100.0
Socio-Economic Status		
Low	9	3.0
Middle	273	91.0
Higher	18	6.0
Family System		
Nuclear	188	62.7
Joint	112	37.3
Residence		
Urban	114	38.0
Rural	72	24.0
Town	114	38.0
Birth Order		
Ist	114	38.0
Middle	81	27.0
Last Born	105	35.0
Education		
Undergraduate	73.0	94.0
Graduate	4.7	6.0

This table shows that 50% of Male and 50% of females participants and out of 100% students 94% are undergraduate students and 6% are graduate students. When the family system of the participant was considered the joint was 37%(112 people) and nuclear was 62%(188 people)

Table 3

Pearson correlation of Fear of Happiness, subjective well-being & Life satisfaction

Variable	1	2	3
1. Fear of Happiness	_	-.14**	-.11**
2. Life Satisfaction		_	.55**
3.Subjective Well-being		_	_

***p<.01*

Above table indicates that negative correlation exist between fear of happiness and life satisfaction (r = -.137,**, p<0.01). Similarly negative relationship exists between fear of happiness and subjective well-being scale (r = -.11**,***p<.01*), and positive relationship exists between life satisfaction and subjective well-being (r=.55, p<0.01).

Discussion

The primary purpose of the research was basically to find the association between the study variables that are Fear of happiness, Subjective well being and Life satisfaction. The primarily hypothesis of the research were to find the significant positive and negative relationship between the study variables. Discussion on study demographic has revealed data were collected from both gender (males=39.2% and females=39.2), other demographic such as Age, Residence, birth order, education and socio- economic status were also noted.

The first hypothesis of the current study was that there will be significant negative relationship between fear of happiness and life satisfaction among students. The findings showed that this hypothesis was tested through Pearson correlation analysis in spss and the value of ($r=-.14$, $p<.01$) showed there a significant negative relationship between fear of happiness and life satisfaction. The magnitude of the relationship was weak. It means that fear of happiness can reduce the quality-of-life satisfaction. Findings are in consistent with the previous research (Myers & Diener, 2018).

The second hypothesis: there will be significant negative relationship between Fear of happiness and Subjective-well being among students. The findings showed that this hypothesis was accepted as value of ($r=-.11$, $p<.01$) indicated the negative relationship between fear of happiness and subjective -well being. The magnitude of this relationship was weak. The results are consistent with prior research (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). It means that fear of happiness can disturb the individuals, due to which subjective well-being declines.

The next hypothesis of the current study was that there will be significant positive relationship between subjective well-being and life satisfaction. The result finding showed that this hypothesis was also tested through correlation analysis in spss and the value of ($r=.55$,$P<.01$) showed that there was a positive significant relationship between subjective well being and life satisfaction. The magnitude of this relationship was moderate. The results are consistent with Brown et al., (2007). It means that both subjective well-being and life satisfaction are directly related to each other. If subjective well-being of students improve, automatically life satisfaction will be better.

Conclusion

Fear of happiness is a psychological belief that being happy might have adverse consequences in an individual's life, which is an important system of beliefs which determines subjective well-being and life satisfaction. The present research showed high reliability of the research's main variables. Subjective happiness has a positive association with satisfaction with life. There's a negative connection between the fear of happiness and subjective happiness. The relationship between fear of happiness and life satisfaction is also adverse and strong.

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