

Crafting joy: A Phenomenological Study of Happiness Among Malaysian University Students

Ahmad Azmi AbdelHamid Esmail¹
Ismail Maakip^{1*}
Dg Norizah Binti Ag kiflee @ Dzul kifli¹
Murnizam Halik¹
Rimsha Ajmal²

¹Faculty of Psychology and Education, University Malaysia Sabah

²Department of Psychology, The University of Haripur, Pakistan

*Corresponding e-mail: [daeng@ums.edu.my]

This study investigates the elusive concept of happiness, a fundamental yet incompletely understood aspect of human experience. Focusing on university students' perspectives, this research aims to shed light on what constitutes happiness. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving interviews with 15 students from a Malaysian public university. The data was analyzed using an interpretivist phenomenological approach, facilitating a deeper understanding of students' subjective experiences and perceptions. The findings reveal two central themes in the students' views of happiness. The first theme emphasizes the individual's role in crafting their happiness, highlighting the significance of personal agency and introspection in defining what happiness means on a personal level. The second theme underscores society's role in fostering individual well-being, encompassing aspects such as providing peace and freedom, reducing stress, and supporting individuals within the community. This research offers both theoretical and practical insights. On a theoretical level, it enriches the existing discourse on happiness, expanding our understanding of this vital human pursuit. Practically, the findings have implications for policies and strategies in education, community development, and psychology aimed at promoting well-being. In the field of psychology, these insights can inform therapeutic approaches and interventions designed to enhance individual and collective happiness. In conclusion, this study provides a valuable perspective on happiness from Malaysian university students, enhancing our comprehension of this complex and significant aspect of human life.

Keywords: happiness; perceptions; university; students; qualitative

Happiness, universally pursued by individuals and aimed for by policymakers, remains a complex and multifaceted concept. Veenhoven (2012) notes its interchangeable use with terms like well-being, life satisfaction, and quality of life, yet its definition is shrouded in ambiguity. Scholars like Cassel (1954) view happiness as a state of pleasantness, intertwined with goal setting and striving, emphasizing the individual's role. In contrast, Goldings (1954) describes it as a spectrum of hedonic experiences, ranging from elation and

contentment to depression and discontent. This spectrum is further divided into objective and subjective interpretations. The objective perspective ties happiness to universal standards of a 'good life,' whereas the subjective approach focuses on individual, experiential phenomena (Veenhoven, 1984).

A pivotal contribution to understanding happiness is Martin Seligman's well-being model, encompasses five elements: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and

accomplishment (Donaldson et al., 2022). Positive emotion, including feelings of joy and love, forms the bedrock of this theory. Engagement, or deep absorption in tasks, aligns with the concept of 'flow,' a state achieved when challenges meet individual strengths (Bonaiuto et al., 2016).

Seligman's model also emphasizes the significance of positive relationships—connections with others that provide support, love, and value. The aspect of meaning in his theory relates to connecting with something greater than oneself and includes coherence, purpose, and significance as its dimensions. Coherence involves understanding life's patterns, purpose gives direction to actions, and significance pertains to the perceived value of one's life (Martela & Steger, 2016).

The final element, accomplishment, relates to mastering skills and achieving significant challenges. Studies have shown a positive correlation between these elements and overall well-being (Gander et al., 2016; Umucu et al., 2022). Beyond Seligman's model, research indicates that happiness is influenced by various factors such as faith, family, and friends (Ng, 2022), social support (Lu, 1999). Beside that, health status, social comparison, and cultural values have been found to influence happiness (Graham, 2008; Singh et al., 2023; Su et al., 2021). Psychological aspects like self-concept and self-esteem (Garaigordobil, 2015), gratitude, hope, optimism, and life satisfaction are important predictors of psychological well-being (Kardas et al., 2019), and personality traits like extraversion (Jun, 2023), as well as demographic and socioeconomic factors (Wang & Wong, 2011; Wu, 2014). The media, through the construction of happiness under cultural perspectives, influences happiness through collectivistic and individualistic values (Su et al., 2021). Moreover, religiosity has

been studied as a determinant of happiness, indicating the influence of cultural and religious beliefs on individual well-being (Gundlach & Opfinger, 2011). Moreover, demographic factors such as age, gender, and marital status have been linked to satisfaction with life and happiness (Lee et al., 2022; Lobos Andrade et al., 2021). Biological aspects also play a role (Dfarhud et al., 2014).

Our study delves into student perceptions of happiness, an area not extensively explored in previous research, particularly among undergraduate students in Asian contexts (Al-Naggar et al., 2010). By building upon qualitative studies like Suldo et al. (2014) and Mickel et al. (2008), this research seeks to fill a notable gap in the current understanding of happiness from this demographic perspective.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, selected for its suitability in exploring the intricacies and depth of student experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). The study employs a purposive sampling strategy, targeting individuals with in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. This ensures an efficient use of limited research resources (Palinkas et al., 2015). Additionally, we utilize convenient sampling to reduce both cost and time associated with data collection. However, we acknowledge its limitations, particularly the potential to reduce the generalizability of our findings due to the increased risk of bias inherent in our sampling approach.

Fifteen students were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Four of them were foundation, and the rest were degree students. The study included seven females and eight males. The interview

protocol was developed following the guidance of (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Respondents were asked two main questions:

1. "What are your thoughts on the concept of happiness? When and where do you believe happiness can be found?"
2. "If financial constraints were not a concern, what would you choose to do with your life?"

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by one of our research team members, ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the data. For data analysis, we utilized Atlas.Ti 23, a robust tool for qualitative data analysis. Our analytical framework was grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is particularly suited for understanding the subjective experiences of individuals. IPA allowed us to delve into the students' perspectives, capturing their views and internal thought processes (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Our analysis involved an immersive engagement with the data, requiring multiple readings to increase familiarity and comprehension. Each member of our research team independently identified emerging themes, which were later discussed collectively to refine and finalize our findings. This collaborative approach not only enriched our analysis but also helped in mitigating individual biases and enhancing the interpretive depth.

Finally, the results were compiled and presented in a manner that articulates the students' viewpoints and the psychological processes underlying their thoughts on happiness and life aspirations. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive and meaningful interpretation of the data, highlighting the nuances of student experiences and perceptions.

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Themes and sub-themes of the findings

Themes	Sub-themes
Our role in creating happiness	Knowing what we want
	Being and contented with what we have
	Aiming for something that has no end
	Developing ourselves
	Having a small source of happiness
	Being with whom we love
	Finding money
	Helping our families
The societal role of promoting happiness	Contributing to our society
	Providing peace and freedom
	Having a manageable level of stress
	Showing appreciation for others

We extract two main themes from our respondents that we will convey participant conception of happiness. The first one related to the role of the personal

agents in promoting happiness. The second one focused on the role of the society.

Theme 1: our role in creating our happiness

This theme delves into students' perceptions of happiness as a subjective experience. Student 3 captures this essence, stating, "Happiness is subjective for each person," highlighting that happiness is contingent on what each individual values. Others echo this sentiment, underscoring the personal nature of defining happiness. This necessitates a deeper level of introspection for students to discern what they deem essential for their happiness, a task made more challenging in an era of constant distractions such as smartphones. Such distractions often lead to a preoccupation with fleeting pleasures at the expense of meaningful self-reflection.

"Happiness is subjective for each person." (Student 3) "And I would also maybe think happiness coming from what I think is important." (Student 3)

"In yourself. that can you. because everybody, the definition of happiness is different. Maybe some, maybe other people, think that a lot of money is happiness, other people think, a big house or fancy car is happiness." (Student 8)

Another student emphasizes the importance of accepting life's realities to lead a more meaningful existence. This concept of acceptance and finding meaning in our circumstances is echoed by Student 1, who explains, "Meaningful means. you accept every condition as it is." Furthermore, a different student highlights the importance of pursuing everlasting objectives like character development, distinguishing such pursuits from fleeting ones. This perspective aligns with Ryan and Deci's research, distinguishing between internal goals, like self-development and societal contribution, and external goals, such as wealth and recognition, with the former more closely linked to genuine well-being and happiness (Wong, 2013).

"I think happiness is a temporary thing. It is a moment where you have. you feeling. happiness is actually. In my opinion, it's a temporary thing. It does not last. because happiness, you only feel happiness whenever something that you think is good happens to you. if something bad happens to you. you will not feel happy. you will feel sad, stressed, and depressed. So, where you can get happiness it's. It is based. you think it is good for you. For me, I think, something that last is more joy. it may not feel as intense as happiness. That it lasts longer? And whenever you are facing difficult times. In those difficult times, you may as well feel joy, but will not happiness because it is difficult. because you feel joy. You think that you go through. You feel as if that is to prepare you. how to say, it prepares you for something better. something like that. For me, joy is better happiness." (Student 11)

Further, students discuss the importance of ongoing personal development. This includes mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth, seen as key to achieving happiness. This notion is supported by Seligman's well-being model, specifically the accomplishment aspect (Seligman, 2012), and aligns with research that highlights personal growth's role in fostering happiness (Scoffham & Barnes, 2011; Sood & Gupta, 2014).

"So, I think. first, I have to be strong physically. and I have to be smart. If I am not smart. How can I help other people? If I am not strong, I cannot possibly protect people. I have to have, wealth. Because with wealth comes power. And with power comes the ability" (Student 6)

"So basically, I need to be strong mentally and physically. physically because. I need to be strong mentally physically, emotionally. and spiritually" (Student 11)

The students also note the significance of small joys in life. Happiness, they suggest, does not always stem from grand

achievements; even minor pleasures can be sources of happiness. This idea correlates with the positive emotion dimension in Seligman's model and is supported by studies emphasizing the role of positive emotions in promoting happiness (Fredrickson, 2000; Quoidbach et al., 2010). Moreover, positive activities are known to act as moderators of well-being (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013).

"Food also can make me happy if I eat something very delicious. Then I like it, and I will feel happy. Because I think happiness is not such a big thing. Like someone buys you a phone or something. It can be things small things also. Like someone praise like" You look beautiful today". I can be happy." (Student 7)

"But I think my happiness came from what, the smallest happiness in my daily life is when I have a complete my task." (Student 12)

Additionally, the importance of relationships in achieving happiness is underscored by the students. Student 5, for instance, finds joy in spending time with her loved ones, including family and boyfriend. This emphasis on relationships is supported by literature which highlights the significant role of connections in our lives, with research identifying relationships as a key source of meaning and happiness (Debats, 1999; Glaw et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2016; Holder & Coleman, 2009).

"And the second maybe could always be with the person I love, I think. Like my mom, my father. They could be here. and also, my love person." (Student 5)

"For me, my happiness is like doing the things I like. Or spending my time with people I like." (Student 13)

"Being with the person I love. Spending time with her. But she is very far. Right now. So maybe that is why I try to keep myself busy so I do not think about it. Yeah, I think. maybe there is another one. Spending time with my family. Because

right now, we are all grown up right. And it is very hard. For all of us to gather. Even have a meal together. I think that would make me very happy also." (Student 6)

Finally, students discuss the role of money in happiness. While some argue that financial stability is a prerequisite for enjoyment in life, others view it as a means to power and influence. This debate is grounded in research that demonstrates a link between wealth and happiness, though this relationship is influenced by factors like stress levels (Headey et al., 2008; Muresan et al., 2020; Demenech et al., 2022).

"So, if I want to ask if money can buy happiness. I will say yes" (student 1)
"Achieving like stable income. And the source of income. or maybe, finding a better life of my family." (Student 1)

"Ideal! Because since young seeing my parents are. they have quite a debt. So, I want that to change. I just want them to leave free of debt. I think that is the ideal life. even though, we cannot be described. but at least no debt. that is the ideal life for me." (Student 1)

"So, I would say that I work and look forward to saving money. Because some people will say" Money does not buy happiness". Money does buy happiness." (Student 2)

"I have to have wealth. because with wealth comes power. And with power comes the ability" (Student 6)

In sum, Theme 1 offers a comprehensive exploration of the nuanced and multifaceted concept of happiness, emphasizing individual perception, personal growth, simple pleasures, relationships, and financial stability as key components in shaping one's experience of happiness.

Theme 2: Societal role of creating happiness.

Some students envision an ideal life

characterized by tranquility, devoid of animosity or hatred. Student 1 describes this state of peace as essential for a meaningful life: "Life is meaningful when you do not have any. Dendam (hatred), musuh (enemy). And then you have peace in a peace out of peace out of peace out of peace." Meanwhile, Student 4 sees financial stability as a pathway to peace, suggesting that sufficient money could lead to a peaceful existence with one's possessions. On the other hand, Student 10 associate's happiness with the autonomy to make personal choices, believing that this freedom is integral to her peace and well-being.

"Life is meaningful when you do not have any. Dendam (hatred), musuh (enemy). And then you have peace in a peace out of peace out of peace out of peace." (Student 1) "If money is not an issue. I think I would probably just with peace with my stuff. and I do not know, well there are just so many things. But it is so complex." (Student 4) "But happiness means for me. That is by the choices I have in life. I make them. I decide on my life. and due to my choices, I would never be regretted. I mean, we will be regretted about our choices many times of course. But to have. to have the freedom as I said before, to choose what I want as a human. And this will help me to live in peace. because peace is very important. For my life" (Student 10).

The desire for peace can be linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, specifically the need for safety, which includes security, family, and resources. A study by Sophie et al. (2022) demonstrates a correlation between internal peacefulness, mindfulness, and subjective well-being. However, if this peace is interpreted as the total avoidance of challenges or struggles, it might not contribute positively to happiness. This is because Seligman's concept of Flow involves engaging with challenges that require one's best efforts.

Furthermore, the relationship between freedom and happiness is noted in studies by Abdur Rahman & Veenhoven (2018) and Haller & Hadler (2004), which suggest that the ability to make choices is integral to happiness.

Another student ties happiness to managing stress effectively. Research indicates that stress can negatively impact happiness (Kim & Lim, 2017; W. Ng et al., 2009; Xiang et al., 2019). Student 8 defines happiness as enjoying one's activities without being overwhelmed by stress: "But for me if you enjoy what you do. You not being too much stressful, you know."

"But for me if you enjoy what you do. You not being too much stressful, you know. But you, yeah, of course, there is stress in what I am doing now. But it is not too much like I cannot handle anymore. No is not like that. So, my definition of happiness is doing what you like" (student 8).

Finally, some students highlight the importance of being appreciated and supported by others for happiness. Student 5 expresses a desire for simple acknowledgment: "Oh, there is a lot. but the things that I want the people to surround me to do is appreciate me." This need for social support and appreciation is well-documented in research, with studies showing that social support can enhance well-being (Turner, 1981; 王秀紅, 1998), reduce stress, and provide a buffer against stressful events (Hobfoll, 2001; Krause, 1986, 1987). Additionally, showing appreciation and support to others is associated with increased life satisfaction, positive affect, better health, and reduced stress (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Deichert et al., 2019; Inagaki & Eisenberger, 2016). moreover, social support and its dimensions have been found to predict happiness, indicating the significant role it plays in promoting well-being (Moeini et al., 2018). Beside that, perceived social

support has been chosen as a mediator for its significant predictive role in happiness and its positive relationship with the sense of mattering, emphasizing its influence on individuals' subjective well-being (Foo & Prihadi, 2021).

"Oh, there is a lot. but the things that I want the people to surround me to do is appreciate me. Just a simple appreciation for me. just can make feel grateful already." (Student 5)

In summary, these students' perspectives on happiness encompass a range of factors, including peace, financial stability, freedom of choice, manageable stress levels, and the need for appreciation and social support. These elements collectively contribute to their understanding of what constitutes an ideal, happy life.

Conclusion

In this research, we delved into students' conceptions of happiness, uncovering two pivotal themes. The first theme centers on the role of personal agency in cultivating happiness, highlighting the importance of individual introspection and self-determination in defining what happiness means on a personal level. The second theme underscores society's influence in nurturing an individual's well-being, suggesting a collective responsibility in fostering environments conducive to happiness.

Our findings underscore the critical need to assist students in recognizing and articulating their own happiness. This involves guiding them to explore and understand their unique definitions of happiness, which may vary significantly from one individual to another. For example, while one student might find happiness in the solitude of nature, another may find it in the bustling energy of a social gathering. These personal preferences, as diverse as they may be –

such as varying tastes in YouTube channels or leisure activities – are valid and important.

However, our research also points to universal aspects of human experience that consistently contribute to well-being. These include the need for positive social connections and the fulfillment of fundamental physiological needs. Such universal needs suggest that, despite the vast array of personal preferences, there are common threads in the human pursuit of happiness. Society, particularly families and educators, plays a vital role in this context. They are not only responsible for reminding individuals of these basic human needs but also for providing the support and environment necessary for their fulfillment. This includes setting clear, realistic expectations and guidelines about what constitutes long-term, sustainable happiness, as opposed to the transient pleasures often offered by modern distractions like the internet.

In conclusion, our study reveals that happiness is a multifaceted concept, influenced by both personal agency and societal factors. While individual preferences play a significant role in defining happiness, there are underlying universal needs that are crucial for everyone's well-being. Recognizing and addressing these dual aspects – the personal and the universal – is key to fostering a holistic understanding of happiness among students. This dual approach not only aids in personal development but also ensures that societal norms and educational frameworks are aligned with the fundamental needs that underpin human flourishing.

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