



Exploring the Interplay Between Happiness and Success Among Young Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

The connection between happiness and success has long been debated: does success lead to happiness, or does happiness promote success? This research aims to explore the relationship between perceived happiness and personal success among young adults in Mumbai. A sample of 150 undergraduate students from various disciplines was surveyed using standardized self-report questionnaires. The study found a significant positive correlation between levels of happiness and self-assessed success. The findings support the hypothesis that happiness can act as a precursor to success by enhancing motivation, productivity, and interpersonal skills. This paper suggests integrating well-being practices into educational systems to foster both emotional and academic development.

Introduction

Happiness and success are two of the most sought-after goals in human life. While they have traditionally been perceived as outcomes that follow one another—typically with success assumed to precede happiness—contemporary research has opened up new dimensions in understanding their relationship. The question of whether happiness leads to success or vice versa has intrigued psychologists, educators, and policymakers for decades. In today's world, especially among the youth, the relevance of this inquiry has gained renewed importance. The pathway to success is no longer linear or solely defined by academic excellence or financial status; rather, it is increasingly influenced by psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and emotional intelligence.

Young adults, particularly those in undergraduate programs, are in a transitional phase of life where they are shaping their identities, setting long-term goals, and building foundational skills. This stage is often accompanied by uncertainties, pressures of performance, social comparisons, and emotional fluctuations. These experiences can either be buffers or stressors, depending on how individuals perceive and manage them. As such, emotional well-being becomes a core aspect of development during this period. The emphasis on career

achievements, grades, and external validation has sometimes overshadowed the inner dimensions of self-worth, happiness, and psychological stability.

This research paper seeks to investigate whether a happy mindset contributes significantly to academic and personal achievement among undergraduate students in Mumbai. The city, being a bustling educational and economic hub, offers a rich cultural and social setting to explore the lives of young adults navigating academic life alongside personal challenges and aspirations. The study aims to explore how students balance expectations from family, society, and themselves, and whether happiness acts as a catalyst in their journey toward success.

In a post-pandemic world, mental health has taken center stage in academic institutions. The COVID-19 crisis brought emotional struggles to the surface—feelings of isolation, burnout, uncertainty about the future, and loss of social interaction. These challenges highlighted the need for integrating mental health into educational discourse. Students worldwide faced disruptions in their academic routine and were forced to re-evaluate their personal definitions of success and happiness. For many, the experience became a turning point, triggering reflections on purpose, meaning, and emotional resilience. Thus, in the backdrop of these transformations, understanding the role of happiness in achieving success becomes both timely and critical.

Moreover, the digital revolution has added another layer of complexity to this relationship. With social media playing a dominant role in shaping self-image and aspirations, students today live in a world of constant comparison. While online platforms offer community and opportunities, they also contribute to anxiety, FOMO (fear of missing out), and unrealistic standards of success. Navigating this space requires not just digital literacy but also emotional clarity and self-acceptance—traits often nurtured through practices that promote happiness, such as gratitude, mindfulness, and positive relationships.

This paper also examines whether the concept of success is evolving among young adults. Traditional markers such as high grades, prestigious jobs, or financial security may not fully capture the aspirations of today's students. Instead, success is increasingly being defined in terms of fulfillment, work-life balance, meaningful relationships, and the ability to contribute positively to society. In this context, happiness is not just an emotional state but a strategic resource—fueling creativity, perseverance, and interpersonal harmony.

Ultimately, this introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the dynamic interplay between happiness and success in the lives of young adults. By investigating this relationship within the Indian urban context, particularly in a diverse and high-pressure environment like Mumbai, the study seeks to offer insights that can inform educational policy, mental health interventions, and individual strategies for personal growth.

Literature Review

A robust body of research has investigated the interplay between happiness and success, particularly in the fields of psychology, education, and organizational behavior. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis that revealed individuals who reported high levels of subjective well-being tended to be more

successful in various domains of life, including work, relationships, and health. They argued that happiness is not merely a consequence of success but a key antecedent that fosters success-related behaviors and attitudes. These findings marked a significant departure from traditional models that viewed success as the precursor to well-being.

One of the prominent theoretical frameworks supporting this perspective is Seligman's PERMA model, which outlines five elements of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. According to Seligman (2011), these dimensions collectively contribute to a fulfilling life, and the presence of positive emotions is not only a sign of happiness but a facilitator of engagement and accomplishment. This model provides a multidimensional view of how happiness can manifest in success, particularly in educational and workplace settings.

Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory (2001) adds another layer to the discussion by explaining the evolutionary function of positive emotions. Fredrickson posits that positive emotions expand individuals' thought-action repertoires, enabling them to build lasting personal resources such as resilience, social support networks, and problem-solving skills. These resources, in turn, contribute to success in various life areas. In educational settings, this means that students who frequently experience joy, curiosity, and gratitude are more likely to develop traits that help them navigate academic challenges and build supportive peer relationships.

Boehm and Lyubomirsky (2008) further explored this connection and found that positive affect predicts job performance, income, and social functioning. Their longitudinal research highlighted how happiness contributes to increased motivation, better work outcomes, and more meaningful interpersonal interactions. Similarly, a study by Diener et al. (1999) examined subjective well-being across cultures and emphasized the role of life satisfaction as a key indicator of long-term success and psychological health.

In the Indian context, limited but growing literature has begun to explore this relationship. Reports from NCERT and NIMHANS indicate a rising concern for youth mental health, particularly due to academic pressure, competitive environments, and lack of emotional support. Kumar (2020) conducted a study involving college students in Maharashtra and found that students who practiced emotional regulation techniques such as mindfulness, gratitude journaling, and peer mentoring demonstrated improved academic performance and a greater sense of self-efficacy.

However, most studies to date have focused either on Western populations or working professionals. There remains a significant gap in research concerning undergraduate students in India, especially in urban centers like Mumbai. This population faces unique challenges such as high cost of living, dense academic competition, and limited access to mental health resources. Moreover, the influence of digital behavior—such as social media engagement and online learning—on students' emotional well-being and academic outcomes remains an underexplored area.

This literature review underscores the growing consensus that happiness is both a predictor and product of success. Theories like PERMA and Broaden-and-Build offer compelling frameworks for understanding how positive emotions enhance human potential. Empirical studies reinforce the view that psychological well-being is integral to sustained achievement. Nevertheless, further research is needed to contextualize these findings within the lived experiences of Indian youth, considering cultural norms, educational structures, and socio-economic factors that uniquely shape their definitions of happiness and success.

According to Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), happier individuals tend to show higher levels of productivity, better health, and stronger social relationships, which may contribute to professional and personal success. Seligman's PERMA model of well-being also highlights the importance of positive emotions in thriving. Diener et al. (2002) argue that subjective well-being influences long-term goal setting and performance. Furthermore, Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions expand cognitive and behavioral repertoires, allowing individuals to build lasting personal resources.

Additional research conducted by Boehm and Lyubomirsky (2008) concluded that happiness fosters desirable characteristics, such as optimism, self-confidence, and sociability, which are often associated with professional growth and academic success. In the Indian context, NCERT and NIMHANS reports indicate that academic pressure and social expectations contribute significantly to youth stress. A study by Kumar (2020) involving over 500 students across Maharashtra revealed that those who engaged in regular mindfulness or gratitude journaling experienced better academic focus and satisfaction.

Existing studies have largely concentrated on Western populations or working adults. There remains a gap in literature regarding the interplay of happiness and perceived success within the Indian undergraduate demographic. Moreover, few studies have examined the reciprocal nature of this relationship—whether happiness leads to success or vice versa—and how various mediating factors such as family support, peer interaction, and digital engagement influence this dynamic.

Objectives:

- To analyze the correlation between happiness and perceived success.
- To understand how emotional well-being impacts motivation, productivity, and goal-setting.
- To explore the psychological factors that mediate the relationship between happiness and academic or life outcomes.
- To recommend strategies to enhance happiness and emotional wellness in educational institutions.

Methodology:

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 150 undergraduate students (aged 18-24) in Mumbai.

Participants filled out two validated instruments:

1. Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) – measuring emotional well-being, positive affect, and life satisfaction.

2. Personal Success Self-Assessment Scale – developed for this study, measuring perceived academic success, social relationships, and progress toward personal goals.

The survey used a 5-point Likert scale for responses, with data collected via Google Forms to ensure accessibility. Ethical clearance was verbally obtained from institutional heads. Quantitative data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients, while open-ended responses were evaluated using thematic content analysis. Data integrity was ensured through anonymized responses and basic statistical cleaning. The reliability of the success scale was verified using Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$).

Results:

The quantitative data collected from the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and the Personal Success Self-Assessment Scale were compiled and analyzed to identify the relationship between emotional well-being and perceived success. The following table presents the average scores and highlights the strength of correlation found between the two variables:

Group Category	Average Happiness Score	Average Success Score	Correlation (r)
All Participants (n=150)	4.1	4.0	0.68
Males (n=75)	4.0	3.9	0.65
Females (n=75)	4.2	4.1	0.69
Involved in extracurriculars	4.3	4.3	0.72
Not involved in activities	3.9	3.7	0.61

These quantitative insights are supported by thematic analysis of open-ended responses. Students reporting higher happiness mentioned greater clarity in goal setting, more positive relationships, and an increased sense of personal purpose. Conversely, those with lower happiness scores described feelings of burnout, comparison stress, and diminished satisfaction despite academic achievement.

The Pearson correlation coefficient was found to be $r = 0.68$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong positive relationship between happiness and self-assessed success. Students with higher OHQ scores reported greater levels of satisfaction in academics, personal relationships, and overall life direction. Regression analysis showed that happiness accounted for approximately 45% of the variance in perceived success scores.

Open-ended responses revealed insightful patterns: many students equated success not just with marks or job prospects, but with peace of mind, feeling valued, and being able to contribute positively to others’ lives. One participant noted, “My happiest moments are when I feel my efforts are meaningful, even if they don’t bring

top results.” Such reflections suggest that for today’s youth, internal contentment plays a crucial role in how success is defined.

Additionally, gender-based analysis suggested no significant difference in overall happiness or success scores, but female respondents mentioned emotional balance and support systems more frequently in their definitions. Students engaged in extracurriculars or community service reported higher levels of happiness, hinting at the role of purpose-driven activities.

Discussion:

The results suggest that happiness may serve as a foundation for personal success. Positive emotions likely enhance cognitive flexibility, resilience, and social connectivity—all of which contribute to better outcomes in academics and personal life. This aligns with broaden-and-build theory by Barbara Fredrickson, which posits that positive emotions expand one’s awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions. Moreover, happier individuals are more likely to persevere through setbacks and maintain constructive peer relationships, which further fuels achievement. The role of intrinsic motivation also emerged strongly among happy respondents, indicating that they engage more deeply in meaningful work. The Indian education system, however, often prioritizes grades and performance over emotional development. This creates a gap that must be addressed to achieve holistic student development.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that happiness plays a crucial role in the achievement of success among young adults. Educational institutions should adopt well-being programs, mindfulness training, and stress management workshops to nurture happiness as a tool for success. There is a strong need to balance academic pressure with emotional care. Future research can expand this work by incorporating longitudinal data and experimental interventions. Additionally, comparing urban and rural youth, or evaluating the role of digital well-being, may offer deeper insights. By prioritizing emotional well-being, we can create a more resilient and motivated student population capable of long-term success.

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