Students' Perceptions about Society and Life Satisfaction: Evidence from Pakistan

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the social and economic factors contributing to life satisfaction or happiness among graduate and undergraduate students of Pakistan, which is characterized as a developing and traditional society. The total sample consists of 564 individuals from all provinces of Pakistan, a variety of socio-economic and demographic factors are analyzed using a self-reported questionnaire. The research concludes that happiness score differs significantly across different ages, provinces, and income groups. In addition, family's economic situation, an active social life, and better expected scenarios/outcomes of the current field of study are positive covariates of a student's happiness and life satisfaction. We further investigate that health-related problems and childhood memories pose a negative correlation.

Keywords: youth, life satisfaction, developing country, social and economic determinants, happiness

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Introduction

Happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being are interchangeably used in different disciplines of social sciences, for instance, in economics, psychology, and sociology. In all social science disciplines, these terms are understood in different contexts. For instance, Cherry (2020) defines happiness and well-being as an emotional state along with feeling of joy, contentment and fulfillment in life. On the other hand, Fabio and Santos (2010) and Diener (2015) consider these terms more scientifically. According to Medvedev and Landhuis (2018), existing definitions of happiness, subjective well-being, and quality of life in economic literature suggests a conceptual overlap between these constructs. Considering the multidisciplinary nature of these terms and concepts, this paper is an attempt to bring variables from different social domains to study the life satisfaction of students toward their lives during their adulthood.

Limited studies are available on well-being in a regional context and in particular, very few studies focus on youth. One of the distinguishing features of this study is that it includes childhood memories as one of the determinants. Childhood experiences have a significant impact on behavior in later stages of life (Hughes, et al., 2016; Conti and Heckman, 2010; Oshio, et al., 2013). With the use of this variable, we capture the experiences of early life in absence of longitudinal data.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the life satisfaction among graduate and undergraduate students (from both public and private sector institutes) of Pakistan. Pakistan is one of countries with a huge youth bulge. Almost 64% of youth is below 30 years of age. To provide them education, necessary skills, employment, and other amenities of life, is a significant challenge for the government and administrative bodies, especially in a country like Pakistan – which is already in the midst of a social, economic and climate crisis (Ahmed et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2022; Sabir, 2007; and Adnan and Fatima, 2007). Recent events, surveys, reports, and papers have highlighted the concerning situation of youth in Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of exploring factors that contribute to increased life satisfaction and well-being in students. Identifying these factors can be beneficial for both public and private sector administrations, as enhancing well-being may subsequently improve efficiency and productivity.

Happiness can play a significant role in determining economic outcomes by enhancing productivity, serving as a predictor of future income, and influencing performance in the labor market. Studying youth or students' happiness is not only beneficial for their overall life satisfaction but also has the potential to contribute to a thriving economy by nurturing happier, more productive individuals who are well-equipped for the challenges and opportunities of the future (Piekałkiewicz, 2017; Oswald, Proto, and Sgroi, 2015).

In 2018, an online survey published by 'Dawn' (Rehman and Haque, 2020) sought to understand the trends and context surrounding suicide in Pakistan. A majority of the respondents were aged between 18-40 years old. The survey revealed that 9% of the respondents had attempted suicide, while an alarming 45% had contemplated suicide, though they never acted on it. Over the past five years, hundreds of students have attempted suicide, with at least a dozen cases resulting in death. A study conducted by Khokher and Khan (2005) found that the overall rate of suicidal ideation among Pakistani students was 31.4%.

To strengthen the argument, it is essential to consider additional indicators regarding

the challenging situation faced by young people in Pakistan, such as the high unemployment rate. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate for individuals aged 15-24 years was 8.5% in 2020-2021. Additionally, the World Bank reported that the youth unemployment rate in Pakistan reached 9.8% in 2021. High unemployment rates, coupled with mental health struggles, can exacerbate feelings of hopelessness and despair among young people. Considering these findings, it is crucial to explore factors that can improve life satisfaction and well-being among students. By doing so, public, and private sector administrations can develop targeted policies and interventions to better support the mental health and overall well-being of young people in Pakistan.

In the field of happiness economics, the economic dimensions of subjective well-being and happiness extend beyond traditional economic metrics, such as income or wealth. Instead, this domain embraces a comprehensive understanding of welfare and utility, incorporating various aspects of economic behavior and social life (Jain, Sharma, and Mahendru, 2019). Although economic factors contribute to happiness, other non-economic factors, including social relationships, health, and personal values, are also critical determinants of well-being. Happiness economics posits that a multidimensional approach is essential to fully understand the intricate relationship between economics and human happiness. This perspective aligns with the philosophy of utilitarianism, which views well-being as a discrete and subjective state of individuals (Maffioletti, Maida, and Scacciati, 2019). B.M.S. Van Praag argued that mainstream economists primarily discuss utility rather than happiness, but the choice of terminology is inconsequential in this context (as cited in Maffioletti et al., 2019). In fact, it was the idea that reported levels of well-being could be treated as a measure of utility that enticed economists to incorporate life satisfaction and happiness data into their studies. In their seminal paper, "Habits, Peers, and Happiness: An Evolutionary Perspective," Luis Rayo and Gary S. Becker (2007) linked happiness to decision-making and the capitalization of utility. They proposed that happiness should be considered a fundamental component of economic science, relating it directly to the process of decision-making and maximizing utility. By adopting a multidimensional approach and expanding the concept of utility to include life satisfaction and happiness data, which may help significantly to understand public policy and what needs to be done for a better society.

Besides public policy, happiness research can help to calculate the aggregate effects of various tradeoffs, and to evaluate the net effects in terms of individual utilities (Oishi and Diener, 2014). Happiness research can have significant contributions toward the understanding of linkage between behavior and economic variables such as inflation and unemployment, consumer preferences and social welfare (Kahenman and Krueger, 2006). Secondly, these studies also highlight the linkage of strong institutional conditions such as democracy, political stability, social justice to life satisfaction and well- being of individuals (Stutzer and Frey, What Can Economists Learn from Happiness Research? 2002).

Some of the earliest theories in the realm of measuring happiness came from 19th century moral philosophers Bentham and Mill who viewed happiness or utility as the sum of good minus bad feelings (Nikolova and Graham, 2020). Modern happiness research departs from the usual tradition in economic research. Instead of inferring preferences from observed choices, happiness researchers ask questions like, are you happy? or not too happy? Direct reports of subjective well-being are considered to have a significant role in the measurement of consumer preferences and social welfare (Kahenman and Krueger, 2006). The deductions from such reports can then be used to tackle questions like What makes people happy? What

factors or policy choices would lead to happy societies? These might seem like difficult or tough questions to answer quantifiably but they are worth the effort (MacCulloch and Tella, 2006; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004).

Happiness is a cognizant state of thought; hence it can be accessed in large scale surveys via interrogation or even single questions. According to Myers and Diener (1995), many standard format questionnaires have shown to be valid and sufficiently reliable. Surveys that ask individuals to rate their satisfaction with life, using either a single question or multiple questions are popular in measurement of subjective happiness and life satisfaction. This approach focuses on capturing an individual's overall assessment of their life, rather than specific aspects of it (Stutzer and Frey, 2012).

Economists are progressively analyzing data on life satisfaction and subjective well-being and there is evidence to support that subjective well-being measures such as overall life satisfaction are sufficiently reliable (Krueger and Schkade, 2008; Goksoy, 2017). The fact that answers to subjective well-being questions are impacted by people's health, thought process and individualities, and the prediction of several behavior patterns suggests that the data is a valid subject for study in the sense that they capture at least some features of individuals' emotional states (Kahenman and Krueger, 2006).

Happiness can be significantly linked to various economic variables. Higher income translates to higher utility as it guarantees higher status in society and enables individuals to afford more goods and services therefore people with a higher income tend to be happier than those who have less money (Stutzer and Frey, 2002). Inflation and employment both have a negative correlation with citizen's happiness. "Unemployment depresses reported well-being more than does inflation" (Tella, et al. 2001). Happiness is linked to similar socio-economic and demographic variables around the globe. A research study on economic well-being in Russia reported employed, more educated and healthier individuals have higher self-reported well-being (Ravallion and Lokshin, 1999).

The literature on Pakistan suggests that single and employed people are happier. Good health is naturally associated with an increased degree of happiness. The variable of Age exhibits a U-shaped relationship with an individual's level of happiness (Jabeen and Khan, 2016). Abdul Rahim, Hyder, and Ahmed (2017) in their study, found a significant relationship between self-perceived governance and happiness in Pakistan. Mixed evidence is found in different studies on gender in its relation to happiness, see for instance Awan, and Bibi (2015), Hashmi and Abbas (2018), and Kadow and Shams (2018).

Youth, particularly students, suffer from various psychological stresses such as lack of interest in the field of study, immigration, cultural changes, difficulty in hostile environments, academic issues, course loads, and future expectations. Studies in students' happiness are vital as the foundation of a country's future growth and prosperity undoubtedly rely on its education system (Nix et al., 1999; Waterman et al., 2008, and Omar et al., (2013). Relationships, academic success, and financial security are among the variables considered important for explaining students' happiness and well-being (Lee, Ha and Lee, 2019; Tuntiwarodom and Potipiti, 2008).

Studies discussing students' happiness appear sparingly in economic literature in Pakistan. This paper tries to fill this gap by studying factors that relate to life satisfaction of college and university students in Pakistan. Exploring the main factors behind student happiness and life satisfaction can be of value to educational policy planners, enabling better learning outcomes, cost-efficient public education, and a highly motivated future workforce.

Pakistan, the fifth most populous country globally, is a culturally diverse and developing nation in South Asia. Its young population, with around 60% under the age of 30, contributes to the country's dynamic social landscape. Despite the government's efforts to prioritize education, challenges such as low enrollment rates, gender disparities, and limited resources persist. The official languages are Urdu and English, and Islam is the dominant religion. The economy is primarily agriculture-based, with the service sector experiencing significant growth in recent years. However, economic challenges like extreme poverty, inflation, and unemployment continue to impact the country's progress. Urbanization, population growth, and demographic shifts in Pakistan play a crucial role in shaping the lives of its citizens, particularly students. These trends have implications for the country's economy, infrastructure, and social services, including education and healthcare. Understanding these overarching trends is essential for examining the factors that influence students' happiness within the context of happiness economics in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted via Google forms and had 214 responses. The scope of that study was limited to Karachi, a metropolitan city. The population of Karachi is from varied social-economic and ethnic backgrounds (Khan at al. 2013). The respondents were students from graduate and post graduate institutes in Karachi only. The age range of the sample was 18 years and above. The institutes represented both the public sector and private sector entities.

The results of OLS regression analysis of the pilot study depicted that male student are happier than female students in Karachi. The coefficient for time spent with family members and promising career scenarios were both positive and significant (for both male and female students). The impact of relationships on the happiness of students surprisingly had a negative coefficient. During the pilot study, the realization was that many students during adolescence are still living with their childhood memories, due to the shorter time distance from childhood to adulthood. Thus, we added an additional question on childhood memories in the questionnaire. For the pilot study, we noticed that the participants were quite reluctant to fill in a lengthy survey form. Longer questionnaires can result in greater respondent burden and may lead to lower response rates and diminished quality of response (Lavrakas, 2008). Based on feedback from the pilot study, the number of questions in the first section was reduced to ten. The questions chosen were based on parameters more relevant for the sample demographics such as autonomy, prospects and general environment etc. (Plenty and Mood, 2016; Zare et al., 2019).

The Questionnaire

The Questionnaire of this study is divided into different sections. The first part covers demographics and is based on questions related to age, family income, province of residence, institute, and CGPA. Happiness across the male and female samples are also compared to see if gender plays a dominant role in a student's life satisfaction and well-being.

The next section aims to measure the level of each individual's overall happiness. The questions are based on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (a pre-existing happiness indexing questionnaire) developed by Oxford Brookes University. Since it was not feasible to adopt the complete list of 29 questions, 10 questions were chosen that were easier to understand and related well with the sample's demographics. The happiness score of each respondent was calculated (see construction of the dependent variable).

The next set of questions in Section 1 – Section 4 consist of statements to which the respondent was asked to respond by choosing 'agree' or 'disagree' or 'yes' or 'no' and to rank certain choices. Section 1 seeks information regarding the social aspects of the respondent's life. A few questions concerning family, friends, and social life are posed here. Section 2 assesses several aspects of personal circumstances. It includes statements about the respondent's health problems, ruminating on bad memories from the past, tobacco/alcohol/banned substance addiction, and financial condition. Section 3 aims to evaluate how the respondents feel about certain aspects of their socio-economic environment and our country's governance; country's economic situation, law and order, extent of social justice and climate change measures adopted by the government. Section 4, the last section seeks information concerning the academic environment and prospects.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a primary sample survey of students from graduate and post-graduate institutes in Pakistan. Social media groups of various institutes were used to reach out to the target population.

The overall sample size is at 564 and these respondents were engaged in varied fields of study such as Business Administration, Economics, Social Sciences, Engineering, Medical Sciences etc. After data collection, it was coded and statistically analyzed using statistical software Stata. The age range of the sample is 18 years and above. The institutes represent both the public and private sector institutes. The online survey through google forms was quite effective due to the demographics of the population under consideration. This technique proved to be speedier and more cost effective than other methods of distributing the survey form. The total sample size is 564 students. The summary of statistics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Statistics

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	60.8
Female	39.2
Age	
18 – 22	44.9
23 – 27	40.1

28 – 32	11.0
33 and above	04.0
Location / Province	
Sindh	29.8
Punjab	56.4
Balochistan	07.8
Khyber Paktunkhwa	04.8
Gilgit Baltistan	01.2
Type of Institute	
Public Sector	47.7
Private Sector	52.3
Household Income	
50,000 or Below	27.0
51000 – 75000	22.3
76000 - 150,000	23.2
151,000 - 250,000	15.2
251,000 -350,000	06.6
351000 and above	05.7

Construction of the Dependent Variable

The study is convened on the idea to estimate a happiness score of the population sample (the dependent variable) and then regress it on various social and economic factors to estimate how they affect the overall life satisfaction and happiness of the students.

Questions from the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) are used. The instrument is widely used and considered reliable. According to numerous studies the Cronbach's alpha and Test– retest reliability scores for OHQ are ≥ 0.70 and ≥ 0.78 respectively Are enough to

confirm the reliability of the questionaire (Bekhet, Zauszniewski, and Nakhla 2009, Hadinezhad and Zaree, 2009, and, Argyle and Hills, 2002).

Another deviation from the Oxford happiness questionnaire is that this study uses a 4-point scale instead of the original 6-point scale. Though there is evidence that the presence or absence of a midpoint on an important scale produces distortions in the results obtained. Still the study eliminates the mid points in the hopes of acquiring more definite answers/opinions. Some evidence in research literature supports that social desirability bias (respondents' desires to not be seen as biased or pleasing the interviewer by giving what they perceive to be a socially unacceptable answer) can be minimized by excluding the mid-point from Likert Scales (Garland, 1991). In their research paper titled "Cultural Differences: Why Do Asians Avoid Extreme Responses?" authors have hinted that further research might indicate that the use of even points scales (no midpoint) as a better option for capturing opinions of the Asian Population than the 5-point scale. Other diverse studies like Gheldof et al., (2015) and Leung (2011) established that questionnaires with a mid-point formula were not significantly more reliable and valid than a questionnaire without a mid-point. In the later inquiry, the authors concluded that there is no major difference in internal structure of the two separate questionnaires in terms of means, standard deviations, item–item correlations, item– total correlations, Cronbach's alpha, or factor loadings.

Table 2 explains the description of all variables used in the analysis.

Table 2: Description of Variables

Description	Variables
I have family member(s) I can rely on. The quality time I spend with my family is fulfilling.	Fam.Eco_situation
i. I have friends I can rely on. I enjoy spending time with my friend(s) ii. I am presently in a relationship. iii. I use (log on to) social networking sites frequently.	Social_life
I overthink my bad memories.	Past_Memories
I have some major chronic or recurring health problem/disability	Health_Problem
I have time to relax (have time to do everything I want to do)	Relax_time
I am satisfied with the prospects of my chosen field	Edu_future
I am satisfied with my country's ECONOMIC situation (enough employment opportunities etc)	Country_Eco.

I am satisfied with country's LAW and ORDER situation.]	Law
I feel JUSTICE prevails in my country / society (everyone is treated fairly, there is no discrimination)	Justice
I am satisfied with how the government is dealing with problems related to environment and climate change	Environment

Analysis and Discussion

We rely on Ordinary Least Square method for analysis. The dependent variable is the happiness score and forms the following equational form:

Happiness = f (gender, family's economic situation, CGPA, prospects in the field, memories, time to relax, social life, health, countries economic situation, rule of law, justice and environment)   *(1)*

The estimated outcomes of equation 1 are presented in Table 3 and discussion on statistical results is in order.

As in this analysis, we include students from different income groups but here we are considering their perceptions regarding the economic situation of their family, which may or may not include many other variables. This is also a better variable to use as compared to using the exact family income. For instance, there is possibility that a family with 100,000 monthly incomes have much higher dependency ratio or much larger financial issues as compared to another family with the same income level. The 'Fam_Eco_Situation' has a significant and positive impact on students' happiness or life satisfaction. The economic literature is significantly skewed toward this result and there is ample evidence to support the argument. (See for example, Howell and Howell, 2008; Habibzadeha and Allahvirdiyani, 2011; and Rahim and Hyder, 2017).

We used two variables to capture the effect of their academic progress and the discipline they are looking for as their future career. Current academic progress is measured by CGPA. The students getting a high CGPA are not necessarily happy at the same time because they are sacrificing many social and other activities in the company of their friends. Also, the higher level of education does not guarantee a higher level of life satisfaction or happiness. Thus, we do not establish any significant relationship between high grades and happiness. However, the disciplines students are currently pursuing (if they think have great future prospects), increases their level of life satisfaction. Few studies found that the people who have a high sense of happiness are more active in academic performance and progress of higher education (Lee, Ha, and Lee, 2019; Habibzadeha and Allahvirdiyani, 2011). Our results, from the perspective of a developing country, presents different outcomes. In Pakistan, societal expectations often pressure students to secure employment and begin earning income immediately after completing their education. Given the limited job opportunities available in the country, students must compete fiercely for desirable positions. Consequently, it is not surprising that satisfactory job prospects emerge as significant factors in the regression of overall happiness and life satisfaction.

Table 3: OLS Regression Results

DV: Happiness Score (Low to High)	Coef.
Gender (Male)	-.727**
	(0.337)
Fam_Eco_situation	2.016***
	(0.359)
CGPA	.002
	(0.006)
Edu_future	2.165***
	(0.426)
Social_life	.265
	(0.149)
Health_Problem	-1.782***
	(0.425)
Past_Memories	-2.204***
	(0.357)
Relax_time	.996***
	(0.352)
Country_Eco	-.942**
	(0.451)
Law	.407
	(0.428)
Justice	.548
	(0.444)
Environment	.683*
	(0.357)
Constant	24.744***
	(0.595)
Mean dependent var=26.601	26.601
R-squared=0.286	0.286
F-test=18.365	
N	564
*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1	

Young people usually enjoy having friends and partners and also has a positive influence on one's happiness and life satisfaction. Social life and sense of community give a greater level of happiness (Borooah, 2006; Manago and Vaughn, 2015). This is an expected outcome. Our study reinforces the significance of the social life of youth. An important policy implication coming from this result is the urban infrastructure in many developing or less developed countries, which do not have enough spaces for youth to socially meet. This situation is rather disappointing for girls.

Childhood or early life experiences have a significant impact on the current level of happiness. One of the contributions of this study is that we account for the memories. Earlier studies in economics hardly used this specific variable while measuring life satisfaction of young people. Another important point to mention is that we consider the overthinking of adverse or bad memories. We found that the more someone thinks about past adverse events, his/her current life satisfaction decreases. Thus, this study emphasizes the significance of childhood experiences. The childhood experiences of the majority of people in developing countries are not necessarily good, rather there are higher chances of bad experiences. However, at the same time the policy regarding early childhood is difficult to advocate in developing or least developed countries due to limited resources and limited knowledge. Similarly, we include the impact of major health problems or disabilities. Some other studies like Borooah (2006), and AhmediGatab, Shayanb, and Taheric (2011), also report similar results. Studies like Stutzer and Frey (2002), Jabeen and Khan (2016) and Untiwarodom and Potipiti (2008) and others have found mixed results in terms of gender. However, in our case, as compared to women their male counterparts enjoy much freedom and better life satisfaction.

The coefficient for a country's economic situation appears with a negative sign and is significant at 95% confidence interval. It's understandable that economic progress correlates negatively with life satisfaction. It signifies that a country's economic situation gets better, there is more competition, market forces are getting stronger, individual life satisfaction decreases, one of the explanations can be widening income inequality. There are examples of countries in which economic growth was accompanied with flat or downward-looking trends for subjective well-being and happiness. For example, in a research study conducted using the Latino barometer, a comprehensive survey of 18 Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, the researchers concluded that for this set of countries, economic growth was associated with a negative overall effect on happiness (Kesebir, 2016).

The rule of law and availability of justice to ordinary citizens have a significant impact on life satisfaction and the estimates are as expected. Similarly, a better environment also contributes positively toward happiness and better life satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study aims to enhance the existing body of knowledge in happiness economics by examining the factors influencing well-being and life satisfaction among students in a developing country. Through the analysis of data from 564 participants representing all provinces of Pakistan, several significant determinants were identified across a range of socio-demographic and economic factors. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was utilized for estimation purposes.

The study's findings indicate that there is no substantial difference in happiness between genders; however, variations in happiness scores are observed across age groups, provinces, and income categories. Residents of Punjab and Gilgit Baltistan appear to be happier than those from other provinces. Understanding the unique challenges and circumstances faced by different demographic groups can help develop targeted policies and interventions to enhance well-being. For instance, tailored approaches can be designed to address the needs of students from various provinces or income groups to ensure more equitable outcomes.

Considering these findings, several propositions and recommendations are made, which can provide a basis for further exploration and also for the policy makers. The data suggests

that a stable economic situation and positive physical and mental health can substantially increase students' life satisfaction. Therefore, policy initiatives should prioritize factors with the most significant impact on happiness, such as employment, health, and work-life balance. Government spending should be directed toward initiatives that promote welfare and contribute to the development of a happier future workforce. Educational institutions can also play a role in improving students' physical and mental health. Curriculum design should emphasize skill development and proactively address the evolving demands of the modern workplace. Additionally, educational institutions can play a vital role in fostering an environment that supports students' social lives and overall well-being, for example, by offering extracurricular activities, mental health services, and opportunities for social interaction.

It is important to note that surveys requiring participants to select from predefined response categories inherently limit the range of possible responses. Unlike interviews, where respondents can seek clarification, survey participants often must rely solely on the survey text for guidance on how and where to respond. Despite the theoretical and practical implications of this study, there are a few limitations. Data collection was conducted through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce bias. For future research, data could be gathered at different time intervals to minimize this bias. Additionally, subsequent studies should consider employing alternative sampling techniques.

In conclusion, this research study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing well-being and life satisfaction among students in Pakistan. By deepening our understanding of these factors, policymakers, educators, and researchers can work together to develop targeted strategies and interventions that promote happiness and well-being for students across the country.

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