

LIFE ORIENTATION, PERSONALITY TRAITS AND SELF-ESTEEM AS PREDICTORS OF SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS AMONG NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Happiness doesn't have a specific definition because how individuals experience it differs. Happiness is a sense of wellbeing, joy or contentment and it's one of the most sought after disposition in human life. There has been growing concern over the low level of subjective happiness experienced by Nigerian undergraduates. Few research efforts have been devoted to how life orientation, personality traits and self-esteem predict subjective happiness among these undergraduates. This study therefore explored the prediction of subjective happiness among Nigerian undergraduates by these variables. An expo-facto research design was adopted. Accidental sampling technique was used to select total sample of 247 (male=107 and female=140) undergraduates from two universities in Ondo state whose ages range from 15-28 (Mean=20.22, SD=2.69). Self-report measures of life orientation, Big-five personality traits, self-esteem and subjective happiness were responded to. One hypothesis was generated and tested using Hierarchal Regression and Independent t-test. The Hierarchal regression analysis revealed that life orientation, personality traits (extraversion), and self-esteem significantly predicted Nigerian undergraduates' subjective happiness ($\beta = .17p < .05$), ($\beta = .16p < .05$) and ($\beta = -.17p < .05$) respectively. Similarly, Gender significantly predicted subjective happiness among the undergraduates ($\beta = -.17p < .05$) with the male experiencing higher subjective happiness. All variables of study accounted for 10% variance of subjective happiness. Based on these findings, it is recommended that Government, institutions and individuals should encourage Nigerian undergraduates by giving scholarships, assisting the less privileged, organize programs that bolster self-esteem and also screen for personality factors that could predispose the students to psychological challenges in the course of study.

Keywords: Life orientation, personality traits, self-esteem, subjective happiness

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian undergraduates have been observed by the researcher to be despondent about the state of affairs in the country especially in the respect of economy. The students are in despair because of high unemployment rate in the country; they virtually don't have much to look forward to as they are aware that ex-graduates are still unemployed. Some lament the financial situations of their parents, parents are not paid their wages which makes it difficult for them to give their wards adequate care and even sponsor their education. Lecturers also are affected by irregular wages hence academic calendar are disrupted while some students complain about the rigors of academics. Some of them have relationship problems; either with parents, lecturers or peers. These are some of the myriads of problems identified by the students which could of course throw them into states of unhappiness and depression.

Happiness is one of the most sought after dispositions. Regardless of culture, socioeconomic status and geography, happiness appears to be universally recognized as presented by the World Happiness Report (2012). Despite the human pursuit of happiness, it still remains an elusive concept with its factors, determinants and characteristics differing greatly from one individual to the next and across cultures. While one person may appear happy even during adversity, another can be lavished in luxuries and still feel unhappy. One may conceivably appraise oneself as a very happy person, despite having only a somewhat happy life. Conversely one may identify oneself as a generally unhappy person, despite having felt pleased, proud or particularly excited in the previous month (Karakasidou, Pezirkiandis, Stalikas, Galanakis, 2016; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Similarly, **an experience that would evoke in someone in Nigeria "a particularly good day" is completely different for a person in Madrid or New York.** Most of us probably don't believe we need a formal definition of happiness, we know it when we feel it, and we often use the term to describe a range of emotions, including joy, pride, contentment, and gratitude.

Africans usually are a jolly and optimistic set of people especially when it comes to perception about the future. In 2017, the World Happiness Report noted that despite facing happiness deficit, Africans had exceptional levels of optimism and resilience. Pew Research (2019), showed that Africa had the highest global median of people having "particularly good days" in contrast to "typical or "bad day"; Nigeria is not an exception. Supportive social network, religiosity and resilience have been reported as contributive factors to this subjective feeling. However, reports of Sustainable Development Solution Network (2018) released that in spite of World Happiness Report of 2018 still claiming high rank position of Nigerians' happiness, a number of Nigerians reported not being happy but rather, dogged or resilient. The reasons given for this are not too far from the undergraduates' concerns which are unemployment, insecurity, inflation, mass retrenchment from organizations amongst others. They felt acting happiness is different from being genuinely happy which is a true reflection of what is happening to one.

Many of the researchers use the term happiness, interchangeably with "subjective wellbeing", which they measure by simply asking people to report how satisfied they feel with their own lives and how much positive and negative emotion they are experiencing. In her book, *The How Of Happiness*, positive psychology researcher Lyubomirsky (2001) elaborates, describing happiness as the experience of joy, contentment, or positive wellbeing, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile. That definition captures the fleeting positive emotions that

come with happiness, along with a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life and suggests how these emotions and sense of meaning reinforce one another. When people describe what they most want out of life, happiness is almost always on the list, and very frequently it is at the top of the list. When people describe what they want in life for their children, they frequently mention health and wealth, occasionally they mention fame or success but they almost always mention happiness. People will claim that whether their kids are wealthy and work in some prestigious occupation or not, "I just want my kids to be happy". Happiness appears to be one of the most important goals for people, if not the most important (Diener, 1984).

People's levels of happiness are influenced by both internal factors, such as personality and outlook, and external factors, such as the society in which they live. Some of the major determinants of happiness are a person's inborn temperament, the quality of their social relationships, the societies they live in, and their ability to meet their basic needs (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas 2009). To some degree people adapt to conditions so that overtime these circumstances may not influence happiness as much as one might predict they would. Importantly, researchers have also studied the outcomes of happiness and found that "happy people" are more likely to be healthier and live longer, to have better relationships, and to be more productive at work. In other words, people high in happiness seem to be healthier and function more effectively compared to people who are chronically stressed, depressed, angry. Thus, happiness does not just feel good, but it is good for people and for those around them.

A great starting place to increase level of happiness is to develop self-awareness, and a great place to develop self-awareness is to understand one's personality. Personality is thought to be a set of generally stable and consistent traits or tendencies we possess. These are the natural behaviour responses we tend to elicit in any given situation (Pishva et al., 2011). According to the researchers, one theory which has shown to be universal in nature is The Big Five Theory of personality, which posits that there are five overarching traits that cover our attitudinal and behavioural inclinations, which includes: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Personality can be examined by considering where a person falls on the spectrum of these traits related to their behaviour and overall tendencies, considering the fact that our natural personality tendencies can help us navigate life more effectively, and to approach different situations with the awareness of how we can adapt to experience happiness. Various studies investigating the relation of personality traits to happiness have yielded consistent findings. Extraversion and neuroticism have been constantly found to be the strongest predictors of happiness (e.g. Costa, & McCrae, 1987; Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002). Individuals who are more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable were reported to experience greater satisfaction with life, more frequent positive affect, and less frequent negative affect (DeNeve, & Cooper, 1998; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). Whereas previous research have examined the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and happiness under the umbrella of subjective well-being, this research sought to investigate this relationship using a measure of overall subjective happiness which is a global, subjective assessment of whether one is a happy or an unhappy person.

Life orientation is the study of the self in relation to others and to society. It is measured by looking at one's optimism versus pessimism. Optimism is a generalized expectancy, that one will experience good outcomes in life, attitude or worldview to interpret past or present events in a positive manner (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom,

2010). This expectancy that differs from person to person is a predictor of behavior (Scheier & Carver, 1992) and leads to perseverance and striving toward goal-directed behavior (Carver et al., 2010). Rathore, Kumar & Gautam (2015) in their study, found life orientation to significantly predict life satisfaction which is a component of subjective happiness.

According to previous research, those who are happy also tend to feel good about themselves and those who lack self-worth are generally unhappy. But a study suggests that what makes people in mid and later life happy or gives them feelings of worth are not necessarily tied to each other, except for the feelings of optimism. Characteristics of happy individuals with high and low self-esteem and characteristics of unhappy individuals with high and low self-esteem were examined to determine if these traits are synonymous or distinct from each other. To determine their similarities and differences, researchers Lyubomirsky, Tkach, and DiMatteo (2006) asked a sample of 621, 51 to 95 year old retired employees of a large utility company to fill out questionnaires about what made them happy and what gave them self-worth. Some advantages for using older adults in studying these traits, say the authors, were- the finding could be generalized to other samples more easily than with a younger sample. This sample more accurately reflects the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the general population. The sample has stronger self-definitions and more certain attitudes about the world.

Trying to know how possible it is to have high self-esteem and still be unhappy, the authors speculate that it may be that unhappy people who have high self-esteem feel that they have not reached their goals, they know they are smart, skilled, attractive and “have what it takes” but just have not accomplished what they wanted to in life. The authors also address how happy individuals can have low self-esteem. “Happy individuals with low self-esteem experienced more positive than negative moods, felt relatively satisfied with their lives, tended to be extraverted and satisfied with their leisure time, felt a purpose in life and experienced good health”, said Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade (2005). It may be that the key to these individuals happiness in spite of their low self-worth is their extraverted nature. They are simply more social and outgoing, which bolster their happiness but not their self-esteem. Erozkan, Dogan and Adiguzel (2016) finding that self-esteem is related to happiness is similar to the findings of this current study. The variables of life orientation, personality traits and self-esteem are therefore examined for their influence on subjective happiness since there is dearth of literature of these variables being studied among Nigerian undergraduates.

Hypothesis

Life orientation, personality traits, self-esteem, age, gender and academic level will significantly predict undergraduates’ subjective happiness.

METHODS

Design: This study adopted an expo-facto research design.

Participants: A total of 247 undergraduates (107 (43.3%) males and 140 (56.7%) females) were accidentally selected from the six faculties each of the two universities in Ondo state used. The participants age ranged from 15-28 (Mean=20.22 SD=2.69). Educational level varies; 53(21.5%) were from 100-level, 94(38.1%) were from 200-

level, 59(23.9%) were from 300-level, 29(11.7%) were from 400-level and 12(4.9%) were from 500-level respectively. The settings were the lecture halls.

Instruments

Data were gathered via the use of a validated self-report questionnaire which comprised of demographic variables such as age, gender and educational level in addition to the measures of self-esteem, life-orientation, personality traits, and subjective happiness.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSEC): Participants were measure using self-esteem scale developed by (Rosenberg, 1965).A 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale is believed to be unidimensional. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from 1=strongly agree to 4=strongly disagree. Cumulative scores are derived. The sample items include; “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”, “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”, “I feel I do not have much to be proud of” “I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others” and “I take a positive attitude toward myself”. Rosenberg (1965) obtained a reliability coefficient of Cronbach’s alpha of .93. The present study obtained an overall Cronbach’s alpha of .67. The high mean score indicated high level of self-esteem among undergraduates.

Life Orientation Scale (LOS) developed by Wong (1989) was administered on the participants. Scale is 10-item scale rated on 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The sample items includes; “I can find something meaningful or significant in everyday events”, “There is a reason for everything that happens to me”, “There is no ultimate meaning and purpose in life”, five of the items are reversed in scores. Cronbach’s alpha of .79 was obtained for the scale while the present study yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .74. The high score above the mean indicated high and optimistic life orientation among undergraduates

Big Five Personality Traits. The personality traits inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to measure personality traits of Extraversion (8 items), Agreeableness (9 items), Conscientiousness (9 items), Neuroticism (8 items), and Openness (10 items). It is a 44-item inventory rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Disagree Strongly to 5= Agree Strongly). Sample items include, “I see myself as someone who is outgoing and sociable”. John et al. (1991) reported a reliability of .80. Big Five Personality Inventory had a Cronbach alpha of .92 obtained in this study. The higher one’s score is on each of the dimension indicates personality traits among undergraduates.

Subjective Happiness. Subjective happiness was measured using Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) developed by (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), a 4-item scale in Likert format with a seven-point response option measuring subjective happiness on a continuum. On the low extreme is 1=not a very happy person to the high extreme 7=a very happy person. The sample items include “In general, compared to most of my peers, I consider myself very happy”. Lyubomirsky & Lepper (1999) obtained Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.79 to 0.94 and test-retest reliability of 0.55 to 0.90. The present study obtained an overall Cronbach’s alpha of .47. Those whose scores tend towards the high extreme are said to experience high level of subjective happiness and vice-versa among the undergraduates.

Procedure

Using convenient sampling technique, self-report questionnaires were administered on different groups of students in selected lecture halls in the six faculties on each of the campus by reason of their availability after lectures. Instructions were stated on the questionnaires to help the respondents fill correctly. The questionnaires were distributed to participants that consented to participate in the study. Collection of data was within two months. 247 questionnaires were eventually retrieved.

Data analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis and independent sample t-test were used to test the hypothesis.

RESULTS

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was conducted to test the relationships among the variables of the study. The results are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Correlation matrix showing the relationship among the study variables (n = 247)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	1										
2. Gender	-.04	1									
3. Academic Level	.50**	-.05*	1								
4. Self-Esteem	-.04	.05	-.03**	1							
5. Life Orientation	-.03	.01	-.01	.29**	1						
6. Extraversion	-.14*	.04	-.09	.22**	.43**	1					
7. Agreeableness	-.07	-.00	-.03	.33**	.43**	.75**	1				
8. Conscientious	-.06	.12	-.09	.31**	.43**	.79**	.82**	1			
9. Neuroticism	-.08	.09	-.51	.32**	.44**	.79**	.83**	.90**	1		
10. Openness	-.09	-.07	-.00	.26**	.45**	.65**	.76**	.67**	.78**	1	
11. Subjective Happiness	.05	-.17**	.05	.19**	.15*	-.03	.05	.02	.02	.04	1
Mean	20.20	1.57	2.41	20.22	31.40	24.53	27.28	28.90	24.79	29.39	23.32
SD	2.69	.50	1.10	4.33	6.66	4.31	4.80	5.46	4.83	5.27	3.85

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

The results revealed that of all the variables, only gender ($r = -.17, p < .05$), self-esteem ($r = .19, p < .01$), and life orientation ($r = .15, p < .05$) have significant relationships with subjective happiness, respectively. The results imply that males experience higher subjective happiness than the female undergraduates, those with higher self-esteem and positive life orientation amongst them also experience higher subjective happiness than others.

Test of Hypothesis**Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression showing the influence of age, gender, academic personality traits, life orientation and self-esteem on subjective happiness**

Predictors	Step 1 (β)	Step 2 (β)	Step 3 (β)	Step 4 (β)	t-value
Age	.02	.01	.013	.01	.30
Gender	-.17	-.17	-.18	-.18	-2.60
Academic level	.03	.04	.02	.03	.47
Extraversion	-	-.17**	-.20**	-.17**	-1.53
Agreeableness	-	.11	.10	.06	.44
Conscientiousness	-	.11	.09	.07	.46
Neuroticism	-	-.01	-.00	-.03	-.18
Openness	-	-.01	-.06	-.05	-.44
Life Orientation	-	-	.19	.16**	2.19
Self-Esteem	-	-	-	.17**	2.55
R	.18	.21	.27	.31	
R ²	.03	.04	.07	.10	
ΔR^2	.03	.01	.03	.03	
Df	3,243	5,238	1,237	1,236	
F	2.57	1.36	2.03**	2.52**	
ΔF	.06	.66	.01	.01	

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. $N=246$

At the first step, demographic variables (age, gender and academic level) yielded a significant variance of 3% [$R = .18$, $R^2 = .03$, $F(3, 243) = 2.57$]. Of the demographic variables, only gender significantly predicted subjective happiness among undergraduates ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$), suggesting that male undergraduates experience subjective happiness than their female counterparts. At the second step, the table above reveals that personality traits of (extraversion) significantly predicted subjective happiness among undergraduates ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .05$), while the other traits did not. Extraversion, even though not significant in the correlation matrix, was found to slightly significantly predict subjective happiness; this implies that the higher the scores on extraversion, the lower the subjective happiness experience. Such negative relationship was also observed between neuroticism and subjective happiness even though not significant. At the third step, life orientation was added and the result revealed a significant variance of 7% contributed by the variables on subjective happiness [$R = .27$, $R^2 = .07$, $F(1,237) = 2.03$] as life orientation significantly predicted subjective happiness ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). This implies that the higher or more optimistic the undergraduates life orientation, the higher their subjective happiness tend to be. Self-esteem was added and the result revealed a significant variance of 10% contributed by the variables on subjective happiness [$R = .50$, $R^2 = .10$, $F(1, 236) = 2.52$], ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$).

To further show the gender difference on subjective happiness an independent t-test was conducted. The result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Independent t-Test Showing Gender Difference on Subjective Happiness

<i>Gender</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Male	107	24.06	3.55	245	5.39	<.01
Female	140	22.75	3.99			

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

The results indicated a significant mean differences between male and female undergraduates on subjective happiness, ($t(245) = 2.67, p < .01$). An observation of the mean difference showed that males ($M = 24.06$) obtained high scores on subjective happiness compared to their females ($M = 22.75$) counterparts.

DISCUSSION

The significance of life orientation in predicting subjective happiness supports a wealth of literature showing this relationship. Souri and Hejazi (2014) reported that positive life orientation played a minor mediation role between resilience and life satisfaction which is component of subjective happiness. Mittal and Mathur (2011) posited that professionals scored average and high on the scale of learned optimism and life satisfaction which in turn resulted into well-being. Thus creating an environment to remain healthy, emotive and productive, one has to be optimistic for future success. It has been found from research results that optimism is the second contributing factor of happiness. A substantial body of researches indicated that optimism is associated with psychological and physical well-being. Researchers in occupational health and health psychology have demonstrated that well-being is impacted by hope (Snyder, Lehman, Kluck & Monsson, 2006) Optimism helped people to cope with stress and reduce risk of illness (Horowitz, Adler, & Kegeles 1988).

Self-esteem was found to predict happiness which is in line with literature (Kiang, Witkow & Champagne 2006; Orth, Robins & Widerman 2012; Shelton et al., 2005) from their studies concluded that self-esteem predicted wellbeing. Surprisingly, despite the well documented influence of personality traits on subjective happiness, it was only extraversion that was significant, and negative at that. This contradicts literature. Gocet-Tekin and Satici (2014) from their study submitted that hierarchical regression results indicated that extraversion, agreeableness, openness, consciousness were significantly positive predictors while neuroticism was a negative predictor of subjective happiness. Big five personality traits were found to account for the 36% of the subjective happiness variance collectively. Thomas, Shan, Christopher and Holden (2016) also spoke of positive relationship between happiness and extraversion, locus of control, self-esteem, and optimism. Cloninger (2013) found that extraverts are observably happier than those who score lower on this variable.

Age and level of education were also not significant. Regarding age, the results of this investigation are not coherent with the U-Shaped happiness theory, where the higher levels of happiness are experienced before the twenties and after the fifties (Vera-Villaruel et al., 2011); so the results do not lend credence to this theory by revealing insignificant influence of age on happiness. Similarly, results on level on education do not support previous research findings. Lounsbury, Saudargas, Gibson, and Leong (2005) from their survey revealed that the more education you have, the happier you get. They opined that this may be an indirect effect of the positive relationship that education

has on a person's earning power, health, ability to cope with stresses and strains of everyday life and longevity. Nonetheless, gender significantly predicted subjective happiness in this research which buttresses the findings of Pew Research Centre (2003) that confirmed gender influence on subjective happiness.

Limitation of the study

Findings of the study should be generalized with caution due to the following reasons; data might be open to response set because data were collected using self-report questionnaires, secondly, the study only made use of only 247 participants which may not be enough for such generalization, and finally, participants were drawn from only two universities in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Institutions should without delay come up with policies for improvement of schools' facilities both academic and recreational to make students comfortable in classrooms and school environment to increase their level of subjective happiness. Nigeria government, institutions and organizations should consider the less privileged undergraduates by giving them scholarships. The smart students should also be encouraged with scholarships in the course of their study as well. Unemployment should be addressed by the government so the undergraduates can have brilliant future to look forward to which would serve as motivation to improve their focus on their academics, and also increase their level of subjective happiness. Early signs of unhappiness or depression should be detected in girls and mental health intervention given as this has implication for life satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study has empirically demonstrated that variables of study, life orientation, personality traits- openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism and specifically extraversion, and self-esteem significantly predict subjective happiness among Nigerian undergraduates.

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