

# What Makes Young Indian Adults Happy? Exploring Predictors of Subjective Happiness

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## ABSTRACT

Young adults are at a very vulnerable stage in life. They are full of dreams and passions and at the same time are anxious as to how to cope with obstacles that life will throw at them. The current study attempted to understand what variables predicts subjective happiness the most among young Indian adults. For this purpose, a sample of 120 students was selected from the age range of 18-25 years. Students were administered measures of happiness, flourishing, gratitude, life satisfaction, positive and negative experiences, and resilience. Results showed flourishing, positive experiences and life satisfaction to be the most significant predictors of happiness. Inter correlation analysis revealed significant correlations of subjective happiness with all positive psychological variables chosen in the current study implying the need to lay emphasis upon such variables at the right time and earlier age so that adolescents grow up to have a resilient and happy mindset. Therefore, the study has implications for well being and happiness development programmes in the Indian context.

**Key Words :** Well being, Happiness, Correlates, Flourishing, Life satisfaction, Resilience, Gratitude, Gender differences, Positive negative experiences

## INTRODUCTION

India's rank on the 'World Happiness Index' has dropped down from 122<sup>nd</sup> rank in 2017 to 133<sup>rd</sup> rank in 2018 (Business Standard, 2018). This ranking was done by the United Nations on the basis of GDP, per capita, social freedom, absence of corruption, life expectancy, social support and generosity. Therefore, there is a dire need to understand those protective factors or positive psychosocial variables that may lead to an improved rank of India on World Happiness Index.

The topic of happiness and well-being has received a lot of attention since the advent of positive psychology. Happiness has been widely explored in self-help books, motivating talks and speeches given by eminent personalities, spiritual philosophers and academic psychology researchers. Researches have been conducted across gender, all age groups and various professions with reference to happiness and well being

(NG, 2015; Seligman, 2012). However, the current study wanted to add to the existing literature, correlates of subjective happiness among the young Indian adult population.

The term subjective happiness is often used interchangeably with subjective well being. Happiness is understood most commonly as "how much one likes the life than one lives or the degree to which one evaluates one's life-as-a-whole positively" (Veenhoven, 2008). There are different definitions of happiness depending upon whether the construct is approached as a cognitive state, affective state or attitudinal state.

Cognitive definition of happiness involves an evaluation process. It is defined as a "global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his chosen criteria" (Shin and Johnson, 1978). Affective definitions of happiness define happiness as a particular emotion or as "the sum of pleasures and pains" which also involves the notion of an "affect balance" (Veenhoven, 2008).

Affect balance involves a balance between the experiencing of positive emotions and negative emotions. It comes under the broader concept of subjective well being or hedonic well being as the aim in this kind of happiness is to optimize positive emotions and reduce the intensity and frequency of negative emotions. On the other hand, the supporters of Eudiamonic approach to happiness assert that negative emotions are also a necessary part of life in order to experience real psychological growth and long lasting contentment (Ryff and Singer, 2006; Linley and Joseph, 2011).

Attitudinal definitions of Subjective Happiness define happiness as a positive attitude towards life (Feldman, 2004). Veenhoven (2000) gave the following concept of subjective happiness and its components as represented in Fig. 1.

Global assessment	Overall happiness Satisfaction with one's life as a whole	
Subtotals:	Hedonic level of affect	Contentment
	Balance of pleasant and unpleasant affect	Perceived realization of wants
Information basis	Affective experience	Cognitive comparison

Diener *et al.* (1999) defined happiness as a combination of three components: infrequent instances of negative affect, frequent instances of positive affect and a high level of satisfaction with life. According to Lyubomirsky *et al.* (2005), happy people are more successful, accomplished, confident, optimistic, self efficient, sociable, physically healthy and immune (Frederickson, 2009).

**Indian conception of happiness and well being:**

According to the Indian Vedas, for instance, Taittiriya Upanishad, human beings make the error of thinking that happiness, joy or suffering is due to the presence or absence of certain objects, which one is attached to. However, this is not viewed as real or true happiness by the Upanishads. Real happiness comes from moments, which lead to the manifestation of unconditional bliss or joy (Anand, 2016). This permanent state of happiness or bliss is also called *Ananda*.

Inertia, dullness, darkness, depression, anger and anxiety, which are also called *tamas*, stop us from moving towards *ananda* or supreme happiness, which is true to

our original nature. The principle that is responsible for a bright mind, illumination, transparency, and authentic being is called *sattva*. Greater the transparency of the mental faculties, *i.e.*, *sattva*, greater is the experience of spontaneous *ananda* (Kumar, 2003).

**Related constructs: Positive and negative experiences:**

Positive psychology focuses on positive experiences that arise in one's life due to positive events, such as, happiness, joy, inspiration and love. Positive emotions open up our thought repertoire and broaden our scope of action (Frederickson, 2006). They have been shown to have several advantages, such as, increasing employee engagement, making the individual more receptive to change, open mindedness and many more (Nelson, 2009).

Negative experiences on the other hand, arouse emotions such as, distressed, nervous, afraid, ashamed, etc. The good news is that negative emotions are not viewed as completely detrimental in positive psychology. Researchers have shown that negative experiences also have a positive role to play. They lead to a narrowed down process of thinking, and therefore help in getting one's work done in a more accurate and organized manner (Biswas-Diener and Kashdan, 2014). Negative experiences make one aware of the potential dangers. These experiences can also motivate one to take healthy and careful actions (Rossen, 2008).

**Resilience:**

Resilience is the ability to bounce back in the face of life's adversities. Some individuals go through PTSD after facing a lot of suffering, while others remain resilient or mentally tough no matter how harsh life gets. Such individuals are also shown to be high on the personality disposition of hardiness (Maddi, 2013). The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress."

Resilience is also thought of as a positive coping mechanism or positive adaptation strategy after a stressful event has occurred (Hopf, 2010). Resilience research focuses on individuals who see life with hope and humor despite devastating losses. Factors that lead to development of a resilient personality are: self-confidence, commitment, internal locus of control,

individual and environmental factors, positive identity, social support and being achievement-oriented (Mampane, 2014).

### **Gratitude:**

Harvard Medical School (2017) gave the following definition of gratitude: “a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives... As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals – whether to other people, nature, or a higher power” (Positive Psychology Program, 2017).

According to Sansone and Sansone (2010), gratitude is “the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself and represents a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation.” Forster *et al.* (2017) also defined gratitude as “an emotion that is typically evoked when one receives costly, unexpected, and intentionally rendered benefits, and is thought to play a key role in regulating the initiation and maintenance of social relationships.” Another simple definition of gratitude that comes from psychology research is: “a social emotion that signals our recognition of the things others have done for us” (Fox *et al.*, 2015).

Gratitude takes place in two stages (Emmons, 2008): the first stage involves acknowledgment of the good in one’s life. Second stage involves recognizing that some of the sources of this good life lie externally. For example, being grateful to nature, other people, animals or the divine power.

Gratitude is also considered to be a character-strength (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). It has been found to optimize well-being by improving relationships (DeShea, 2003), increasing optimism, building stronger self control (DeSteno *et al.*, 2014) and improving overall life quality.

### **Flourishing:**

Flourishing refers to a state where individuals are filled with high levels of positive emotions (emotional well-being), are functioning well psychologically (psychological well-being) and in society (social well-being) (Keyes, 2002). Flourishers are those individuals with both higher levels of eudaimonic and hedonic levels of well being (Diskstra *et al.*, 2016). Flourishing individuals show a better functioning in life and are even at a lower risk for developing mental illness (Golena, 2016; Keyes and

Simoes, 2012).

On the opposite end of flourishing lies the concept of languishing, which means living a dull, empty life marked by stagnation, hollowness, and a void. Individuals, who are neither flourishing nor languishing, are considered to have moderate level of mental health (Keyes, 2004). Studies have shown that individuals who languish and don’t focus on flourishing are at a higher risk for depression and other mental health issues. Languishing individuals even show greater risk for cardio vascular disease (Keyes, 2004; Golena, 2016).

What kind of individuals indulge in flourishing oriented behaviors? According to Huppert and So’s model (2013), an individual flourishes when he or she experiences positive emotions in combination with emotional stability, vitality, optimism, resilience and self esteem. Also flourishers show more scores on engagement coping strategies, competence, meaning in life and positive relationships with others (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2016). Personality traits also seem to be influencing one’s levels of flourishing. For instance, Golena (2016) discovered that extroverts and conscientious individuals were more likely to flourish. Highly educated individuals also showed higher scores on flourishing. Even though the concept of has gained a lot of popularity in the recent times, but the science of flourishing is still in its infancy.

### **Satisfaction with life:**

Life satisfaction is defined as a cognitive evaluation of one’s life as a whole (Diener *et al.*, 1985) rather than the feelings and emotions that are experienced in the moment. According to Veenhoven (1996), following are the major contributors of life satisfaction:- individual behavior, simple sensory experiences, higher cognition, stable characteristics of the individual, the environment, and chance factors.

A recent survey examining levels of life satisfaction of different countries found that India’s level of life satisfaction has increased from 70% in 1995 to 80% in 2018 (Roser and Ospina, 2017). The correlation between income and life satisfaction is higher in poorer countries compared to more affluent countries. Life satisfaction tends to be higher in egalitarian countries where people experience less inequality and more freedom. Variables such as mental and physical health, energy, extroversion, and empathy have all been shown to be strongly correlated to satisfied individuals (Moreira *et al.*, 2014).

**Statement of the problem:**

The current study attempted to understand the correlates and predictors of subjective happiness among young Indian adult sample. Correlates explored in this study were positive and negative experiences, resilience, gratitude, flourishing, and satisfaction with life.

**Hypotheses:**

Following hypotheses were proposed based on the review of literature:

1. Subjective happiness was expected to be positively related with positive experiences, satisfaction with life, resilience, gratitude and flourishing; and negatively related with negative experiences.
2. Subjective happiness was expected to be positively predicted by positive experiences, satisfaction with life, resilience, gratitude and flourishing; and negatively predicted by negative experiences.
3. Gender differences were expected on subjective happiness and its correlates among the young Indian adult population.

**METHODOLOGY****Sample:**

120 students were selected from various colleges and universities of Chandigarh, Panchkula and Mohali using random sampling technique. Initially, a list of 150 students was obtained from different undergraduate and postgraduate classes of Panjab University and Chandigarh University out of which 120 agreed to participate. Out of 120 students selected, 50 were males (Mean age=22) and 70 were females (Mean age=21). Literate individuals were selected. All students were within the age range of 18-25 years. 59% students were from humanities stream, 30% from science stream and the remaining 11% from performing arts department.

**Measures:**

To meet the objectives of the current study, following standardized tests and tools were used:

1. Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) by Ed Diener (2009)
2. Subjective Happiness Scale (also known as General Happiness Scale) by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999)
3. Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) by Smith *et al.* (2008).
4. The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6) by McCullough *et al.* (2002)
5. Flourishing Scale by Ed Diener (2009)
6. Satisfaction with Life Scale by Ed Diener (1985)

All scales had significantly high reliabilities and validities. In addition, demographic information and informed consent of the participants was also obtained.

**Statistical analysis:**

Means and standard deviations were obtained for all the study variables. To understand the correlates of subjective happiness, bivariate Pearson product moment intercorrelation analysis was carried out. After satisfying the assumptions of multicollinearity and homoscedasticity (correlation among predictor variables should not be more than .80; Litch, 1996), stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted with subjective happiness being the dependent variable and positive and negative experiences, resilience, gratitude, flourishing and life satisfaction being the independent variables. For gender differences, comparisons were found out using t-test.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION****Correlates and predictors of subjective happiness:**

Glance at intercorrelation analysis tables (Table 1-3) revealed a significant correlation of subjective

**Table 1 : Means, Standard Deviations and t-ratios for males and females on all the variables included in the study**

Variable	Males (n=60)		Females (n=60)		t-ratio
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	
Subjective Happiness	19.52	3.18	19.64	2.95	.77
Positive experiences	21.18	4.62	21.75	3.54	.80
Negative experiences	14.82	4.55	15.47	4.26	.21
Satisfaction with Life	21.10	6.01	23.18	4.91	2.08*
Resilience	19.42	3.12	18.05	3.11	2.36*
Gratitude	31.40	6.45	30.98	4.99	.39
Flourishing	41.84	8.41	43.44	6.32	1.91

\* t-ratio significant at .05 level = 1.96

\*\* t-ratio significant at .01 level = 2.58

happiness with positive experiences ( $p < .01$ ), satisfaction with life ( $p < .01$ ), brief resilience ( $p < .01$ ), gratitude ( $p < .01$ ) and flourishing ( $p < .01$ ) among both the total sample as well as young male adults. For the young female adult sample, subjective happiness was found to be positively related to positive experiences ( $p < .01$ ), satisfaction with life ( $p < .01$ ), gratitude ( $p < .05$ ) and flourishing ( $p < .01$ ) only. Therefore, hypothesis 1 stands accepted in most of the cases.

As hypothesized (hypothesis no. 2), significant negative correlation was found between subjective happiness and negative experiences ( $p < .01$ ) among the total sample but not among young male adult sample and young female adult sample. Therefore, hypothesis 2

stands partially accepted for the total sample group only.

Looking at stepwise multiple regression results in Table 6, it can be inferred that flourishing, positive experiences and satisfaction with life are significant predictors of subjective happiness among the total sample.

For young male adults (Table 7), flourishing emerged to be the only significant predictor of subjective happiness while for young female adults, satisfaction with life, positive experiences and flourishing emerged to be the only significant predictors of subjective happiness (Table 8).

In sum, one can observe that *flourishing* is the most significant contributor of happiness among young Indian adults followed by *positive experiences* and *satisfaction*

**Table 2 : Descriptive statistics and intercorrelation analysis among all the study variables for the total sample (n=120)**

Sr. No.	Variables	Means	S.D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Subjective Happiness	19.59	3.04	–						
2.	Positive Experiences	21.52	4.02	.46**	–					
3.	Negative Experiences	15.20	4.38	-.17*	-.41**	–				
4.	Satisfaction with Life	22.32	5.47	.51**	.40**	-.04	–			
5.	Brief Resilience	18.63	3.16	.24**	.06	-.14	.18*	–		
6.	Gratitude	31.16	5.63	.33**	.37**	-.15	.40**	.23**	–	
7.	Flourishing	42.78	7.28	.57**	.35**	-.10	.51**	-.22*	.51**	–

\*Correlation value significant at .05 level = .17

\*\*Correlation value significant at .01 level = .23

**Table 3 : Inter-correlation analysis among all the study variables for male young adults (n=50)**

Sr. No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Subjective Happiness	–						
2.	Positive Experiences	.43**	–					
3.	Negative Experiences	-.21	-.51**	–				
4.	Satisfaction with Life	.51**	.47**	-.07	–			
5.	Brief Resilience	.52**	.17	-.11	.44**	–		
6.	Gratitude	.41**	.44**	-.15	.53**	.43**	–	
7.	Flourishing	.69**	.43**	-.15	.54**	.58**	.63**	–

\*Correlation value significant at .05 level = .27

\*\*Correlation value significant at .01 level = .34

**Table 4 : Inter-correlation analysis among all the study variables for female young adults (n=70)**

Sr. No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Subjective Happiness	–						
2.	Positive Experiences	.51**	–					
3.	Negative Experiences	-.14	-.33**	–				
4.	Satisfaction with Life	.51**	.30**	-.05	–			
5.	Brief Resilience	.05	.004	-.14	.05	–		
6.	Gratitude	.25*	.30**	-.15	.28*	.04	–	
7.	Flourishing	.46**	.23	-.07	.46**	-.04	.39**	–

\*Correlation value significant at .05 level = .24

\*\*Correlation value significant at .01 level = .30

**Table 5 : Stepwise Multiple Regression Equations for the Total Sample (n=120)**

Sr. No.	Independent Variables	Means	SD	Regression Coefficient	$\beta$ Coefficient	t	p	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df	p	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	p
1.	Flourishing	42.78	7.28	.57	.37	4.55	.0001	.33	57.97	118	.0001	.33	57.97	.0001
2.	Positive feelings	21.52	4.02	.64	.25	3.24	.002	.41	40.72	117	.0001	.08	16.07	.0001
3.	Satisfaction with Life	22.32	5.47	.66	.21	2.57	.01	.44	30.66	116	.0001	.03	6.62	.01

Multiple R<sup>2</sup> = 0.44; F-value = 30.66; df = 1,116; p < 0.01

**Table 6 : Stepwise Multiple Regression Equations for Young Male Adults (n=50)**

Sr. No.	Independent Variables	Means	SD	Regression Coefficient	$\beta$ Coefficient	t	p	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df	p	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	p
1.	Flourishing	41.84	8.41	.69	.69	4.55	.0001	.48	44.98	48	.0001	.48	44.98	.0001

Multiple R<sup>2</sup> = 0.48; F-value = 44.98; df = 1,48; p < 0.0001

**Table 7 : Stepwise Multiple Regression Equations for Young Female Adults (n=70)**

Sr. No.	Independent Variables	Means	SD	Regression Coefficient	$\beta$ Coefficient	t	p	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df	p	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	p
1.	Satisfaction with Life	23.98	4.91	.51	.29	2.75	.008	.26	24.64	68	.0001	.26	24.64	.0001
2.	Positive feelings	21.75	3.54	.63	.36	3.75	.0001	.40	22.43	67	.0001	.13	15.11	.0001
3.	Flourishing	43.44	6.32	.66	.24	2.30	.02	.44	17.70	66	.02	.04	5.33	.02

Multiple R<sup>2</sup> = 0.44; F-value = 17.70; df = 1,66; p < 0.02

with life.

Prior researches have also reported similar findings, giving utmost preference to flourishing as a significant predictor of happiness (Seligman, 2013). There is a conceptual overlap between the two constructs of happiness and flourishing. Through the role of successful relationships, growth, mastery, engagement, and positive emotions, flourishing individuals can experience happiness and joy (Hone *et al.*, 2014).

While validating their measure of subjective happiness (the scale which also forms a part of the current study), Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) correlated subjective happiness scale with other measures of happiness and well-being, such as, optimism (Scheier and Carver, 1985), positive emotionality and negative emotionality (Tellegen, 1985), and self esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). The findings showed that individuals who were high on subjective happiness also scored significantly higher on optimism and positive emotions.

Quezada *et al.* (2016) studied subjective happiness in relation to perceived stress in order to find the convergent validity of the scale. As expected, subjective happiness was found to be negatively associated with

stress symptoms indicating that happiness is not marked by perceived invulnerability.

Diener *et al.* (2010) also found similar results wherein subjective happiness was found to be significantly related with satisfaction with life and flourishing scale.

In a recent study, Karakasidou *et al.* (2016) extensively explored the correlates of subjective happiness *viz.*, presence of meaning in life, satisfaction with life, positive and negative emotions, inspiration, hope, psychological resilience, psychological health and optimism among Greek population. Inter correlation analysis showed subjective happiness to be negatively related with the experiencing of negative emotions, stress, depression and anxiety. It showed a positively moderate correlation with life satisfaction, meaning in life, psychological resilience, inspiration, hope and experiencing of positive emotions. The study offered useful insights into the positive and negative correlates of subjective happiness. Similar findings stand true in the current study with context to the relationship of subjective happiness with gratitude, resilience and positive emotions.

Watkins *et al.* (2003) studied the relationship between subjective well-being and various measures of

gratitude. Gratitude was found to share a positive relationship with satisfaction with life and positive affect. It also showed an inverse relationship with negative affect and depression. In addition to measures of well being, the virtue of gratitude was found to be also related with intrinsic religiosity.

Therefore, the current study shows that subjective happiness and its positive correlates can act as protective factors and enhance one's psychological immunity. Practicing these constructs in one's day to day life, such as, resilience, gratitude, positive emotions and satisfaction with life can contribute greatly to a life of flourishing and a life well-lived upto its optimal potential.

### **Group comparison: Gender differences in subjective happiness and its correlates:**

Out of all the variables explored in the current study, gender differences were only found on *Satisfaction with Life* and *Resilience*. No gender differences were found on subjective happiness, gratitude, flourishing, negative experiences and positive experiences.

Prior researches have shown similar findings while others have shown mixed results. For instance, Al-Attiah and Nasser (2016) found females to be scoring higher on satisfaction with life similar to the finding of the current study. This could be due to the current generation of young Indian females exploring themselves at a faster pace. An analysis of majority number of researches shows the trend of life satisfaction to be favoring young female adults more than males. According to Al-Attiah and Nasser (2016), this could be due to young female adults living in a pampered manner with their parents and not having the same pressure as young males to make a career as soon as possible. In the Indian culture, females are accepted even if they rely upon their parents as dependents and rely upon their husbands as housewives. But the same does not stand to be true for young male adults as they are expected to fetch a job for themselves at an earlier age. Therefore, young female adults enjoy the satisfaction of being accepted even as a dependent in the age range of 18-30 years.

In a recent study on a Pakistani sample of individuals with burns, gender differences were explored on resilience (Masood *et al.*, 2016). The findings revealed a significant gender difference on resilience with men showing more resilience in comparison to women. Women experienced more psychological stress than men, which hindered their attempt to bounce back at a better

rate than men.

Therefore, it can be concluded that programmes focusing on enhancing well being among individuals must also consider the role of gender as different variables contribute to happiness for males and females separately.

This study has implications in enhancing well being through the role of flourishing, positive experiences, life satisfaction, resilience and gratitude.

Life is a sacred gift and should be treated as such!

### **Conflict of interest:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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