

Age and Gender Differences in Happiness of School and College Students

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ABSTRACT

Happiness, often referred to as subjective well-being, is a fundamental human emotion influenced by various psychological and demographic factors. This study aimed to examine the impact of age and gender on happiness levels among senior secondary and college students. A total of 390 students (150 males and 240 females) participated in the study, completing the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. Statistical analysis using t-tests revealed that younger students (below 19 years) reported significantly higher happiness levels than older students, challenging previous studies suggesting a U-shaped happiness curve. Additionally, female students exhibited significantly higher happiness scores than males, contradicting existing research that often finds men to be happier. These findings highlight the complexity of happiness and suggest that contextual factors, such as academic environment and future aspirations, play a critical role. Further research is needed to explore additional social and psychological determinants of happiness.

Keywords: Happiness, subjective well-being, emotion, academic environment

1. INTRODUCTION

In psychology, happiness is a feeling of emotional well-being (Britannica, 2025). In simple terms, we feel happy when something good happens at a particular moment. It is basically a way of looking at life positively. Happiness is also interchangeably used as "subjective well-being." It is different from both positive and negative emotions. Happiness often appears on a person's face as a smile or a loving expression (Britannica, 2025; Verywell Mind, 2024). People across the world have a similar understanding of happiness and can recognize it in others. Because of this, happiness is considered one of the basic human emotions (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Wiese et al., 2018).

Subjective well-being refers to a broad experience of happiness rather than just a temporary feeling. People who experience this kind of happiness often have more positive emotions and fewer negative ones (Krueger et al., 2009; Layard, 2006; Stone & Mackie, 2013). However, happiness is not only about emotions; it also involves thinking. When happy people reflect on their lives, they tend to see things in a positive way (Alexander et al., 2021; Kettlewell et al., 2020). Because of this, they report being satisfied with different aspects of their lives (Britannica, 2025).

When people are asked what matters most to them, happiness is usually at the top of the list. It is even more important than wealth, good health, or religious beliefs. One key idea in psychology is that humans and animals are naturally drawn to things that bring pleasure and avoid things that cause pain. This behaviour helps them survive by leading them toward resources and away from danger. Psychologists also believe that humans have a deep need for strong and supportive relationships. Research on happiness supports this idea. By studying happiness and its causes, psychologists hope to help people live happier lives.

Predictors of Happiness

Several factors influence a person's level of happiness. These include age, gender, income, and education. Psychologists have studied these factors to understand what truly contributes to happiness. Surprisingly, some common beliefs about happiness do not always hold true.

Age and Happiness

According to the *World Happiness Report 2024*, life satisfaction tends to decrease from childhood through adolescence and early adulthood. However, young people (ages 15-24) still report higher happiness levels than older adults (González-Carrasco et al., 2017). This trend is seen in most countries, though it is changing in different regions. For example, in Western Europe, the happiness gap between young and older adults is getting smaller. Meanwhile, in Sub-Saharan Africa, young

people have reported an increase in happiness. Happiness tends to be lower during the mid-thirties to fifties before increasing again in later years (Gerdham & Johannesson, 2001; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Deaton, 2008; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008, 2019; Cheng et al., 2018).

One reason for the drop in happiness during teenage years is puberty. At this stage, children start forming their own opinions, which may lead to disagreements with parents. They might also become interested in romantic relationships but lack experience, leading to disappointment. Academic pressure also increases during this time, adding stress to their lives.

Gender and Happiness

Studies show that girls report lower life satisfaction than boys starting at age 12. This difference becomes more noticeable at ages 13 and 15, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more significant. However, this data mainly comes from high-income countries, as happiness levels for young people in other regions are not widely recorded.

Between 2006 and 2013, there was no major difference in happiness between men and women aged 15-24. However, from 2014 onwards, women began reporting higher life satisfaction than men. This trend has since balanced out (The World Happiness Report, 2024). Gender differences in happiness also vary by region, with greater gaps found in lower-income countries. In high-income countries, there is little difference between men's and women's happiness levels.

Research by Inglehart (2002) found that gender differences in happiness exist but are influenced by age. Women under 45 tend to be happier than men, but older women report lower happiness levels. For example, 24% of young men and 28% of young women described themselves as very happy. However, among older adults, only 20% of women considered themselves very happy, compared to 25% of men. A significant factor influencing women's happiness is societal expectations. In developed countries, women have made great progress in education and careers, but media and advertising often emphasize youth and beauty, which can affect older women's self-worth (Bluhm, 2000).

Another study by Brakus et al. (2022) found that men and women find happiness in different ways. Women tend to feel happier from meaningful experiences, while men find more joy in pleasurable activities. Many researchers have also linked gender equality to overall happiness and well-being (Audette et al., 2019; Yorulmaz, 2016; Lim et al., 2020; Kabene et al., 2016).

Study Objectives

Keeping in view of the above research findings, this study was conducted with an aim 1. to assess the overall happiness levels of students.

2. to examine the impact of age on happiness levels among senior secondary and college students.

3. to investigate gender differences in happiness among the student population.

2. METHODS

Sample

The study involved senior secondary and college students enrolled in intermediate and bachelor's degree programs. A total of 390 students participated comprising of 150 males and 240 females' students to make sample more representative.

Measures

Participants completed a survey with two main parts:

1. **Demographic Information** – Participants provided details such as age, gender, family income, and education level.
2. **Oxford Happiness Questionnaire** – This 29-question survey, developed by Michael Argyle and Peter Hills at Oxford University, measures happiness. It uses a six-point scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 6 means "strongly agree." The reliability score of this questionnaire is 0.91, indicating its accuracy in measuring happiness.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Data obtained on the scales stated above was statistically analysed keeping in view to test hypothesis advanced earlier. Therefore, t-ratio was calculated to measure the differences in happiness between high and low age group as well as between male and female respondents. The entire calculation was made using SPSS software.

Age and Happiness

It was earlier hypothesised that there would be a significant difference in the happiness level between the higher and lower age group of respondents. To test this hypothesis, t-ratio was computed which is presented in Table-1. Out of 390 respondents who were studying in the undergraduate and in the professional courses, 144 respondents age was below 19 years while remaining 246 respondents were placed into higher age group as their age was more than 19 years. The average happiness score for younger students was $M = 97.83$ ($SD = 7.41$), while for older students, it was $M = 95.39$ ($SD = 9.48$). The statistical

analysis (t -ratio = 2.652, $p < .008$) showed a significant difference, meaning younger students were generally happier than older students.

Table-1 Difference between higher and lower age group of respondents on happiness

| | Age | N | Mean | Std. Dev. | SEM | t-ratio | Significance |
|-----------|----------|-----|---------|-----------|--------|---------|--------------|
| Happiness | >= 19.00 | 246 | 95.3902 | 9.48781 | .60492 | 2.652 | .008 |
| | < 19.00 | 144 | 97.8333 | 7.41195 | .61766 | | |

This contradicts previous studies that suggest happiness follows a U-shaped curve—declining in midlife but increasing later. One reason for this could be the sample group. Younger students were likely experiencing the excitement of college life, meeting new people, and dreaming about their future. Older students, however, faced stress from academic pressure, job placement, and real-world responsibilities, which may have lowered their happiness levels.

Deaton (2008) in the Gallup survey of 340,000 American adults also found that stress levels were highest between ages 22-25, decreasing after age 50. The happiest people were those in their teens and early twenties. Interestingly, people in their seventies and eighties reported fewer negative emotions, even compared to young adults.

Another study by Laaksonen (2018) found that happiness varies with age but does not follow a simple pattern. While many studies suggest happiness is U-shaped, Laaksonen's research found that the lowest happiness levels occur at different ages in different countries. In general, men's happiness improves around age 70, while women's happiness continues increasing for another decade.

Gender and Happiness

To test the hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in the happiness of male and female respondents, the data obtained on the happiness scale were dichotomised by male and female responses. The t -ratio was computed between both groups. The result is presented in Table-2. The obtained mean and SD of male respondents were 94.6800 and 9.56807 and female respondents mean and SD were 97.3000 and 8.22752 respectively. The obtained t -ratio is 2.871 which is significant at .004 level. These results indicate that women were significantly happier than men. However, this finding contradicts general research, which often suggests that men are happier than women.

Table-2 Difference of Happiness in Male and Female

| | Sex | N | Mean | Std. Dev. | S. E. M. | t-ratio | significance |
|-----------|--------|-----|---------|-----------|----------|---------|--------------|
| Happiness | Male | 150 | 94.6800 | 9.56807 | .78123 | 2.871 | .004 |
| | Female | 240 | 97.3000 | 8.22752 | .53108 | | |

It is said that while men and women follow similar emotional patterns as they age, women tend to experience more stress, sadness, and worry. Researchers considered factors like unemployment, being single, and having children but found that these did not significantly impact happiness levels (Lim et al., 2020; Kabene et al., 2016).

The reason for the difference in this study could be the participants' backgrounds. Many female students in the study were pursuing B.Tech. degrees at the Women's Institute of Technology, LNMU, Darbhanga. This may have made them feel more optimistic about their future. Meanwhile, most male students were in traditional degree programs, where career opportunities might be less certain.

Other studies have suggested that women experience greater emotional variation than men. While women are generally happier, they also experience more extreme highs and lows (Strickland, 1992). Women often focus on personal and family life, while men are more concerned with work, appearance, and financial success. This may explain why happiness levels differ between genders.

Tkach & Lyubomirsky (2006) found that although men and women report similar happiness levels overall, they use different strategies to stay happy. Casas et al. (2008) also found that girls are happier in areas related to learning, family, and friendships, while boys find more satisfaction in physical activities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that younger students were generally happier than older students, possibly due to differences in life experiences and responsibilities. Women also reported higher happiness levels than men, likely influenced by their academic environment and future expectations. However, happiness is complex and influenced by many factors, including personal experiences, societal expectations, and cultural background. Future research should explore these factors in more detail to understand the deeper reasons behind happiness differences.

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