Perceived Social Support, Meaningful Activity Engagement and General Happiness among University Students

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Abstract

This study evaluated the relationship between Perceived Social Support, Meaningful Activity Engagement and General Happiness in University students. Cross-sectional research design was used. For data collection, non-probability purposive sampling technique was used. One hundred and fifty (150) university undergraduates aged 19 to 26 years (M=21.43,SD=1.75) were included in this study. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (EMAS) and Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) were used. Results of Pearson Correlation showed significant positive correlation between perceived social support, meaningful activity engagement and general happiness. Multiple Regression analysis showed that Meaningful Activity Engagement and Perceived Social Support significantly predicted general happiness. It was concluded that an increase in Social Support and Meaningful Activity Engagement can increase Happiness in University students. It was suggested that there should be social support groups in universities to increase the students' social support, and some meaningful activity programs to increase students' subjective happiness.

Key Words: *Perceived Social Support, Meaningful Activity Engagement, General Happiness.*

Introduction

Happiness is an art . It is associated with positive emotions, activity engagements, significant relationships, accomplishments and meaning in life (Chilwan, 2016). One can find happiness from different sources including family, companions, relationships, love and community as well (Haybron, 2013).

According to PERMA model, people feel satisfaction and happiness in life after having positive emotions, relationships, engagement, meaning and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). It has been proposed that heredity defines 50% of happiness, purposeful activities define 40% of happiness and different life conditions such as age, marriage and education etc, define 10% of happiness. Hence, a person himself impacts 50% of his own happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2005).

Many theorists have defined happiness differently. According to the Griffin's (1986) Desire theory, a person would be happy if he gets all that he needs. Whether the person gets pleasure or not, his

happiness increases after the fulfillment of his desires. Objective list theory (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 1992) associates happiness with the acquisition of important objects such as health, companionships, love, education, professional achievements and beneficial interests. Seligman (2002) defined these categories of happiness: a life with meaning and purpose (meaningful life), life engagements and the pleasures and joys of life (pleasant life).

For being happy, human beings need social support. They usually get happiness while interacting with each other in daily activities (Gentry, n.d). The Main Effect Model of social support postulates that wellbeing increases with increase in social support (House et al., 1988; Uchino, 2009; Cohen and Wills, 1985). Stress Buffering Model takes social support as a protection and a means of reducing stress (Taylor & Aspinwall, 1997). According to different theories ,human beings and the other species rely on genetic functioning for social interactions and social relationships because it is mandatory for their survival (Mendoza, 1984).

Social support comes in different forms: emotional support includes peoples' care for others. Instrumental support includes physical support. Informational support includes help to others by giving them knowledge. A person's social support and his health go side by side. Bhanthumnavin (2003) indicated three interlinked dimensions of workplace support including emotional support, financial support and informational support. People who have high social support, usually give the best performance because increased social support increases work efficiency. According to Driscoll et al (2004) social support plays an important role in increasing family satisfaction and decreasing conflicts.

Unsatisfied and poor relationships with others have negative impacts on person's well-being and psychological state (Fairbrother, 2011). The people who are socially isolated and lonely are at risk of having psychological illnesses, cardiovascular diseases and other health hazards (Ditzen, 2014).

Another significant source of happiness are meningful activities. There are some activities that connect the people with one another, for example eating meals together or watching TV. Some solitary activities are good for person's health, for example rest and relaxing (Weinrib, 2016).

The activity levels were presented by Engestrom, Miettinen, and Punamaki in 1999. First level "goal" is administered by a community or social circle. Second level "action towards a specific goal" is administered by a group or an individual. The third activity level "operating structure" is based on certain situations.

Principles of meaningful activity were presented by Kaptelinin and Nardi in 2006. According to the first principle "object-orientedness", people live in reality that is objective in nature. The second principle "internalization/externalization" differentiates between internal and external activities. Both the internal and external activities shifts themselves; that's why one cannot understand the internal activities without understanding the external ones. Mediation is the third principle of activity theory. According to this principle, activities of humans are affected by rewards. These rewards are motivating factors which affect peoples' behavior and their psychological functioning. (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

Literature Review

Literature reveals that the people who have good social relations or belongingness are the happiest (Doh and Chung, 2020). High sense of social interactions are the cause of higher levels of happiness (Sjastad, Zhang, Masvie & Baumeister, 2020). Happiness creates empathy in both the individual and the whole society (Ali and Bozorgi, 2016). Lopez, Extremera, Orts, and Rey (2018) associated happiness with social

support. Happiness of university students has been shown to depend on their relationships with their peers (Chan, Miller & Tcha, 2015). High or moderate physical activity can also increase the level of happiness (Pengpid & Peltzer, 2019). Significant recreational activitites provide entertainment to the people (Ahmet, Oguz, Abdulmenaf & Cagri, 2012). People who are physically active are happier than the people who are not engaged in any physical activity (Murphy et al., 2017). The children who have happy parents usually have higher levels of happiness (Alemdag, Alemdag & Ozkara, 2016). With respect to gender, females have been shown to have higher levels of happiness than males (Goodarzi, Rajabi, Yousefi & Mansoor, 2008). On the basis of literature it is hypothesized that:

- There would be a significant relationship between perceived social support, meaning ful activity engagement and general happiness of university students.
- Perceived social support will predict the general happiness of university students.
- Meaningful activity engagement will predict the general happiness of university students.

Method

Research Design

In the present study cross-sectional research design was used.

Sample

Data was collected by using non-probability purposive sampling technique. 150 students were taken from different universities from the age of 19 to 26 years (M=21.43, SD = 1.75).

Variables

General Happiness

Happiness can be defined as feeling joy, being contented and having well-being. A happy person feels life as good, meaningful and worthwhile. Positive emotions are denoted by happiness, for example having a purpose and meaning of life. Both of these feelings reinforce one another (Lyubomirsky, 2007). To measure students' subjective happiness in the present study, Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) was used (Lepper & Lyubomirsky, 1999).

Perceived social Support

Social support is to get love, care and respect from others. It comes from different sources: friends and family, teachers, community and social groups in which the person is engaged. It may come in the form of perceived social support which others provide (Dzulkifli & Yasin, 2010). In the present study Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Farley, Zimet, Dahlem & Zimet, 1988) was used to measure perceived social support in university students.

Meaningful Activity Engagement

It includes engagement in religious, social and cognitive activities. Cognitive activities include reading books and newspapers and playing games. Social activities include going out, visiting friends and arranging parties (Tand, Chi, Zhang & Dong, 2018). To measure meaningful activity engagement in university

students, Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey [(Brintell, Goldberg & Goldberg (2002) as amended by Eakman (2012)] was used.

Assessment tools

General Happiness Scale

It is a 7 point Likert type scale having 4-self report items. Total score of this scale is calculated by taking average of all the items. The 4th item is reverse coded. Its high scores show greater happiness whereas low scores show less happiness. Its Cronbach's alpha reliability ranges from .79 to .94. Convergent validity of this scale is .52 to .72 (Lepper & Lyubomirsky, 1997).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

This scale has 12 items with 4 items for each subscale that assesses support from friends, family and significant others. It uses 7-point Likert scale (from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.93 (Mitchell & Zimet, 2000). Its subscales' reliability is 0.91 to 0.81 (Khalil & Ann, 2015).

Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey

It is a 12-items scale with responses ranging from 1=never to 5=always. Its internal consistency is 0.89. Test-retest reliability of this scale ranges from 0.48 to 0.72 (Eakman, Carlson & Clark, 2010).

Demographic Sheet

Information on participants' age, gender, socioeconomic status and education was obtained.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted for this study by the Applied Psychology department of Lahore College for Women University. Through Email, authors of the scales granted permission for using them. Data was collected through online Google forms due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Research data was collected from different universities and post-graduate colleges: including Lahore College for Women University, Govt. Post Graduate College Gulberg. Rabia Basri College, Punjab University, Govt. College University, Services Institute of Medical Sciences, Quaid-e-Azam Medical College Bahwalpur, Bahawalpur Islamia University and Govt. Postgraduate Islamia College Faisalabad.Researcher briefly explained the research project and confidentiality terms to the participants. First, demographic sheet was completed by the participants and then the questionnaires. The data was statistically analyzed by using SPSS. Correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between perceived social support, meaningful activity engagement and general happiness among university students. Multiple regression analysis was used to see the perdictive role of perceived social support and meaningful activity engagement for general happiness. T-test was used to analyze the demographics. Reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha was also checked for all the variables.

Results

Table 1: Reliability Coefficients and Descriptive Statistics of Scales (N=150)

Scales	No. of items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean(M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Chronbach's alpha (α)
1. Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey	12	15	48	32.64	6.889	.830
2. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support	12	12	84	60.63	14.193	.897
3. Subjective Happiness Scale	4	4	28	18.13	5.373	.742

Table 2: Correlations between Perceived Social Support, Meaningful Activity Engagement and General Happiness (N=150).

Variables	1	2	3	M	SD
Meaningful Activity Engagement	-	.330*	.374*	32.64	.889
Perceived Social Support	-	-	.483*	60.63	4.193
General Happiness	-	-	-	17.92	.444

Note: *p < 0.01

A positively significant correlation is found between meaningful activity engagement and perceived social support (r = .33, $p<0.01$), meaningful activity engagement and general happiness (r =.37, $p<0.01$) and perceived social support and general happiness (r = .48, $p< 0.01$).

Table 3: Meaningful Activity Engagement and Perceived Social Support predicting General Happiness (N=150)

Dependent Variable: General Happiness

Model	R	R2	R2 change	B	SE	β	t	P
(Constant) Engagement in Meaningful Activities	.374	.140	.134	10.051	1.641	.374	6.126	.000
(Constant) Perceived Social Support	.534	.285	.275	5.188	1.744	.404	2.974	.000

Note: p < 0.01

Results showed that Meaningful Activity Engagement significantly predicted general happiness, $β$ = .37, t = 6.13, p < 0.01. Perceived Social Support significantly predicted general happiness, $β$ = .40, t = 2.97, p < 0.01. Perceived Social Support is a stronger predictor than Meaningful Activity Engagement. Overall model is significant, R^2 = .29, $F (2, 147)$ = 29.31.

Table 4: Education (undergraduate groups) and General Happiness (N=150).

	SS	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between groups	9.271	3	3.090	.154	.927
Within groupsTotal	2933.769	146	20.094		
Between groups	2943.040	149			

Note: p > 0.05

Results did not reveal any significant difference between the groups with respect to their happiness scores, $F(3, 146) = .15$, $p > 0.05$.

The four undergraduate groups were made on the basis of the years of graduation program. Group 1 includes 1st year of graduation, Group 2 includes 2nd year of graduation, Group 3 includes 3rd year of graduation and Group 4 includes 4th year of graduation.

Table 5: Independent sample T-test comparing means of both genders in general happiness (N= 150).

Boys n=61			Girls n=89				95% CI	
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	t (148)	P	LL	UL
General Happiness	18.38	3.583	17.61	4.944	1.043	.299	-.689	2.230

Note: p > 0.05

Independent sample T-test did not reveal any significant gender differences in General Happiness.

Discussion

Universities of Pakistan are producing over a half million graduates every year since 2010 (Pakistan's Rising College Enrollment and Graduation Rates, 2015), and this number is increasing day by day due to growing population and increasing enrollments in universities. But the important point to discuss is the problems which they face during their study time. The students are future of a country but they are usually ignored. Everyone notices their aptitudes and grades but their overall well-being, happiness and satisfaction with life is usually ignored. This study sought to study this neglected side. The findings are discussed.

It was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between perceived social support, meaningful activity engagement and general happiness among university students. Results of this study supported this hypothesis. According to Chilwan (2016) happiness is composed of relationships, engagements and meaning. Engagement of an individual is highly connected to his purposeful life. Meaningfulness of life is to serve something greater than oneself. Good relationships comprise positive and significant connections with family, friends, peers and significant others.

Haybron (2013) indicated the sources of happiness as family, community, relationships and significant activities. According to him, happiness of a person doesn't depend on a single entity but on his ability to live and desire to do something. People are usually happy and give their best when they engage with one another in daily activities. Their productive and useful activities give them happiness, joy and satisfaction that leads to their ultimate survival (Gentry, n.d.). Banthumnavin (2003) found that people who are engaged in different activities usually have high social support.

University students' subjective happiness was measured by Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) by Lepper and Lyubomirsky (1999). Mean score of SHS for this sample is 18.13 that is average. In all the scale items, participants selected the average level of happiness. It can be their negligence or it may be due to Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the fear of pandemic, fear of losing jobs, fear of losing loved ones and fear of being affected by the virus, every one's level of satisfaction and happiness around the world has been affected.

In this study, it was further hypothesized that perceived social support will predict the general happiness of university students. Findings of this study supported this assumption. Multiple Regression Analysis showed perceived social support as a strong predictor of general happiness. The study of Lee and Padila (2015) is consistent with the results of this present study; their study suggested that the perceptions of social support especially from the close social circle of university significantly predicted happiness. Their study affirmed the importance of friends and family relationships.

Chilwan (2016) described happiness as having positive associations with others. Seligman (2011) described relationships as pivotal to live a significant life. Individuals who live happily and live long usually have more secure and more beneficial relationships with others. Stronger associations with others give support, love, meaning and self-esteem (King, 2016).

University students' perceived social support was measured by Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet (2016). The mean score of this scale was 60.63 for this sample. In this study, students' social support was high presumably due to their supportive family and peers who help them when they are in need. Additionally, the university students usually have group of friends or peers who help each other in need.

It was hypothesized further that meaningful activity engagement will predict general happiness of university students. Multiple regression analysis supported this prediction. The study of Ito, Walker, Mitas and Liu (2018) supports these findings. Their results from multiple regression analysis found the association of happiness with different social activities, sports and exercises. According to Haybron (2013) happiness has a component of engagement with circumstances which means that person enjoys the activities in which he has been engaged.

Model of Sustainable Happiness states that purposeful activities determine 40% of happiness. These purposeful activities may be physical activities, sports, meditation, learning a new skill and so on. These types of activities provide the individual relaxation, satisfaction and feelings of happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2005). Findings of Choi's (2016) study are also compatible with the present study. His study associated the students' happiness to engagement in studies, as meaningful activity engagement includes studying and reading books and newspapers.

Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (EMAS) by Goldberg, Goldberg & Brintnell (2002) as amended by Eakman (2012) was used to measure the students' activity engagement. In the present study, mean of this scale is 32.64 which isn't as high as compared to MSPSS (60.63) because of different reasons. There may be the factor of Covid-19 pandemic; due to the pandemic people usually remained inside their house and their outdoor activity schedule was badly affected. People could get social support from social media platforms and phone calls but couldn't engage themselves in leisure activities.

The gender differences in happiness were examined by Mahon, Yarcheski and Yarcheski (2005). No gender differences were found in their study . The present study also found no gender differences. The reason may be the participants' social support network and their activities. People with higher social support

from friends, family and significant others usually are not affected by their low education or lesser age. Additionally, the university students either boys or girls usually have family support which may be the reason of not having gender differences in general happiness.

In a study of university students' happiness, their happiness was not linked to their years of graduation but to their friendships, grades, lectures, extracurricular activities and facilities by the institutes (Chan, Miller, & Tcha, 2015). This study supports present study's findings in which results of ONE-WAY ANOVA did not demonstrate any differences between the groups of education in terms of happiness level.

Limitations

- As the present study is purely quantitative in nature, it did not give in-depth information about the general happiness of university students.
- Demographics such as: birth order, religion, monthly income and socio-economic status were not controlled.

Recommendations

- Although Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) is used in this study to measure the general happiness but it was later realized that it's a 4-item measure, which may not have measured the construct comprehensively.
- More in-depth research in this area is highly recommended in Pakistan and happiness in the youth should be studied by examining other variables as predictors and correlates as well.

Implications

This research opens the doors for future researchers to do more in-depth work on the Happiness of university students because this area is usually ignored. This study revealed that high perceived social support and meaningful activity engagement make students happier. Hence it is demonstrated that happiness is not a unitary thing limited to the individual person but comprises social relations, good and satisfied relationships with loved ones, meaningfulness in life, participation in different activities, and accomplishments. It is suggested that there should be social support groups in universities to increase the students' social support, and there should be some activity programs which are meaningful for the students to increase their subjective happiness. Different initiatives should be taken to promote extracurricular and leisure time activities and social support among students.

Conclusion

Results of the present study demonstrated that perceived social support and meaningful activity engagement predicted the happiness of university students, while perceived social support was found to be a stronger predictor. Happiness of university students can be increased by increasing both these variables. In contrast, gender and grade did not predict happiness. Previous literature supports these findings.

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