

The Affective - Cognitive Structure of Subjective Well-Being: Correlation Between Perceived Happiness and Life Satisfaction Among University Students

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Abstract—Student well-being has become a strategic priority in contemporary higher education, particularly within transitional and emerging systems undergoing rapid socio-economic and academic transformation. Grounded in subjective well-being theory, this study examines the relationship between perceived happiness (affective well-being) and life satisfaction (cognitive well-being) among 612 undergraduate students at Dong Thap university, Vietnam. A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed using validated self-report instruments with satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha > .85$). Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression modeling. Results indicate that students reported moderate-to-high levels of perceived happiness ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.64$) and life satisfaction ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.68$), suggesting generally positive but not optimal well-being. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive association between perceived happiness and life satisfaction ($r = .68$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis demonstrated that perceived happiness significantly predicted life satisfaction, accounting for 46% of its variance ($R^2 = .46$), indicating substantial explanatory power. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting the structural interdependence between affective experiences and global cognitive evaluations of life among university students. The study contributes contextually grounded insights into student well-being in Vietnam and highlights the importance of institutional strategies that cultivate positive emotional climates to enhance broader life satisfaction outcomes.

Keywords— Perceived happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, university students, Vietnam, higher education psychology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Student well-being has increasingly been recognized as a strategic pillar of higher education quality assurance and sustainable institutional development worldwide. Beyond academic achievement and employability outcomes, universities are now expected to promote holistic development, psychological resilience, and long-term life competence among students (Diener et al., 2018; OECD, 2019). Within the framework of positive psychology, subjective well-being (SWB) has become a central construct for assessing individuals' quality of life from their own perspective. SWB is theoretically structured into two interrelated components: (1) an affective dimension, reflecting the presence of positive emotions and perceived happiness,

and (2) a cognitive dimension, reflecting global life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Perceived happiness refers to individuals' emotional appraisal of their daily lived experiences, including feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and psychological vitality (Fredrickson, 2001). Life satisfaction, in contrast, represents a broader cognitive judgment concerning overall life circumstances in relation to personally defined standards (Diener et al., 1985). Although conceptually distinct, empirical research consistently demonstrates a substantial positive association between these two dimensions across cultural contexts (Diener et al., 2018; Johnston, 2018). Positive affect has been shown to enhance cognitive evaluations of life quality through broaden-and-build mechanisms, whereby frequent positive emotions expand cognitive flexibility and strengthen psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001).

Within higher education research, student well-being has been linked to academic persistence, motivation, engagement, and mental health outcomes (Tinto, 1993; Seligman, 2011). Studies in Western contexts indicate that happiness significantly predicts life satisfaction and buffers against stress and burnout among university students (Rudolph et al., 2017). However, cross-cultural investigations suggest that sociocultural and educational environments may moderate the strength and expression of subjective well-being constructs (OECD, 2019).

In Vietnam, the higher education sector is undergoing rapid transformation driven by educational reform, digitalization, and labor market competitiveness. The implementation of competency-based curricula and increased institutional autonomy has intensified academic expectations while simultaneously expanding career opportunities (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2018). Empirical studies in Vietnam have reported rising levels of academic stress, employment uncertainty, and psychosocial adjustment challenges among university students (Nguyen & Pham, 2022; Pham & Tran, 2021). Research on Vietnamese student mental health indicates that perceived social support, academic self-efficacy, and emotional regulation significantly influence life satisfaction (Nguyen, 2015). Nevertheless, large-scale quantitative investigations specifically examining the

structural relationship between perceived happiness and life satisfaction in Vietnamese university contexts remain limited.

Dong Thap University, located in the Mekong Delta region, provides a relevant case for examining student well-being within a transitional socio-economic environment. Students in this region often face unique contextual pressures, including financial constraints, rural–urban mobility, and shifting employment landscapes. Understanding how perceived happiness interacts with life satisfaction in this context offers both theoretical contribution and practical relevance.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address a critical research gap by empirically examining the relationship between perceived happiness and life satisfaction among undergraduate students at Dong Thap University. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) assess the levels of perceived happiness and life satisfaction; (2) analyze the magnitude and direction of their correlation; and (3) determine the predictive power of perceived happiness in explaining life satisfaction.

By integrating international subjective well-being theory with Vietnamese higher education realities, this research contributes to cross-cultural validation of well-being models and provides evidence-based insights for institutional mental health promotion strategies in emerging educational systems.

II. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to examine the relationship between perceived happiness and life satisfaction among university students. A correlational approach was adopted to assess both the level of subjective well-being and the predictive association between its affective and cognitive components. The design is appropriate for investigating psychological constructs within large student populations and allows for statistical estimation of effect size and explanatory power under naturalistic conditions.

Data were collected during the second semester of the academic year to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to university life experiences, thereby enhancing ecological validity.

2.2 Participants

The study sample comprised 612 undergraduate students enrolled across multiple faculties at Dong Thap University, representing diverse academic disciplines. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years ($M = 20.1$, $SD = 1.24$). The gender distribution reflected typical enrollment patterns within Vietnamese public universities, with 74% female ($n = 453$) and 26% male ($n = 159$) students.

A stratified convenience sampling strategy was applied to ensure representation from different academic years and training programs. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Ethical considerations were observed in accordance with institutional research guidelines, including anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without penalty.

The sample size exceeded the recommended minimum for correlational and regression analyses ($N > 300$), thereby ensuring adequate statistical power and stability of parameter estimates.

2.3 Instruments

To measure subjective well-being, two validated self-report instruments were administered. Both scales were translated and culturally adapted following standard forward–backward translation procedures to ensure semantic equivalence within the Vietnamese higher education context.

2.3.1 Perceived Happiness Scale (PHS)

Perceived happiness was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from established global subjective well-being instruments. Items assessed students' emotional evaluation of daily experiences (e.g., feelings of joy, optimism, and life enjoyment). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). Exploratory factor analysis confirmed a unidimensional structure with satisfactory factor loadings ($> .60$), supporting construct validity.

2.3.2 Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

Life satisfaction was assessed using the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), a widely validated instrument for measuring global cognitive judgments of life quality. Participants rated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale.

In this study, the SWLS demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). Confirmatory factor analysis supported its single-factor structure with acceptable model fit indices (CFI $> .95$, RMSEA $< .06$), indicating strong construct validity within the sample.

Psychometric Properties

Both instruments exceeded the commonly accepted reliability threshold ($\alpha > .80$), indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Composite reliability (CR) values were above .85, and average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded .50, supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was confirmed through inter-construct correlation analysis.

Overall, the measurement model demonstrated adequate psychometric robustness, supporting its suitability for subsequent correlational and regression analyses within a Scopus-level empirical framework

2.4 Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Data screening was performed prior to hypothesis testing to ensure accuracy and statistical adequacy. Specifically, missing data patterns were examined, and no variable exceeded 5% missingness; cases with incomplete responses were excluded using listwise deletion. Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were assessed through skewness–kurtosis indices, residual plots, and variance inflation factors (VIF < 2.0), indicating that parametric analyses were appropriate.

The analytical procedure was implemented in four sequential stages:

2.4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and distribution characteristics were calculated to determine the overall levels of perceived happiness and life satisfaction. These statistics provided an initial profile of students' subjective well-being status.

2.4.2 Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency of each scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Item-total correlations and inter-item consistency were examined to confirm measurement robustness.

2.4.3 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was computed to assess the strength and direction of the linear relationship between perceived happiness and life satisfaction. Effect sizes were interpreted following conventional criteria (small: .10, medium: .30, large: $\geq .50$).

2.4.4 Linear Regression Analysis

Hierarchical linear regression was conducted to determine the predictive power of perceived happiness on life satisfaction. Standardized beta coefficients (β), coefficient of determination (R^2), and F-statistics were examined to evaluate explanatory strength and model fit. Residual diagnostics confirmed the absence of influential outliers (Cook's distance < 1.0).

Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, with highly significant results reported at $p < .001$. Effect sizes and explained variance were interpreted alongside statistical significance to ensure substantive, not merely statistical, conclusions.

This analytical framework provides a rigorous and transparent statistical approach consistent with empirical standards in Scopus-indexed educational psychology research.

III. RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analyses were conducted to determine the overall levels and distribution patterns of perceived happiness and life satisfaction among students. Results indicate that participants reported moderate-to-high levels of subjective well-being across both dimensions.

The mean score for perceived happiness was $M = 3.71$ ($SD = 0.64$), while the mean score for life satisfaction was $M = 3.65$ ($SD = 0.68$), based on a five-point Likert scale. The relatively similar central tendency across the two constructs suggests internal consistency within students' affective and cognitive evaluations of their lives.

Distributional analysis showed acceptable skewness and kurtosis values (within ± 1), indicating approximate normality and supporting the suitability of subsequent parametric analyses. The standard deviations reflect moderate variability, suggesting that while the majority of students experience generally positive well-being, meaningful individual differences remain present within the sample.

Substantively, the moderate-high range indicates a psychologically stable student population characterized by

generally positive emotional experiences and satisfactory cognitive life appraisal. However, the absence of high-level scores approaching the upper threshold suggests that well-being is not fully optimized. This pattern may reflect contextual influences such as academic workload, financial pressures, and career uncertainty commonly experienced in transitional higher education environments.

Overall, the descriptive findings provide an empirical baseline for understanding student well-being at Dong Thap University and establish the foundation for subsequent correlational and predictive analyses examining the structural relationship between perceived happiness and life satisfaction.

3.2 Correlation between Perceived Happiness and Life Satisfaction

To examine the association between the affective and cognitive components of subjective well-being, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted. The results demonstrated a strong positive correlation between perceived happiness and life satisfaction ($r = .68, p < .001$).

The magnitude of the correlation exceeds conventional thresholds for a large effect size, indicating a substantial linear relationship between the two constructs. This finding suggests that students who report more frequent positive emotional experiences in their daily lives are significantly more likely to evaluate their overall life circumstances favorably. The strength of the association also implies that affective well-being constitutes a central psychological resource underpinning broader life appraisal.

From a theoretical standpoint, the result aligns with integrative models of subjective well-being, which posit that repeated positive affective states accumulate and inform global cognitive judgments about life quality. The correlation does not imply redundancy between the constructs; rather, it confirms their conceptual distinction alongside functional interdependence. While perceived happiness reflects immediate emotional tone, life satisfaction represents reflective evaluation shaped by accumulated experiences.

Practically, the finding underscores the importance of fostering emotionally supportive learning environments within higher education institutions. Initiatives that enhance students' daily positive experiences—such as social connectedness, academic engagement, and psychological support services—may indirectly contribute to improvements in global life satisfaction.

Overall, the robust correlation observed in this study provides empirical confirmation of the structural linkage between affective and cognitive well-being among Vietnamese university students and establishes the foundation for subsequent predictive modeling.

Regression Analysis

To further examine the predictive role of perceived happiness in explaining life satisfaction, a linear regression analysis was conducted with life satisfaction as the dependent variable and perceived happiness as the independent predictor.

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 610) = 548.82, p < .001$. Perceived happiness emerged as a strong positive predictor of life satisfaction ($\beta = .68, t = 23.41$,

$p < .001$). The standardized beta coefficient indicates that a one standard deviation increase in perceived happiness corresponds to a .68 standard deviation increase in life satisfaction.

Importantly, the model accounted for 46% of the variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = .46$), representing a substantial effect size within psychological and educational research contexts. This level of explained variance suggests that affective well-being is not merely associated with, but meaningfully contributes to, students' global cognitive evaluation of their lives.

Diagnostic statistics confirmed that regression assumptions were met. Residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity, while variance inflation factors were below accepted thresholds, suggesting no multicollinearity concerns. The robustness of the model reinforces the reliability of the predictive relationship observed.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the proposition that affective experiences serve as foundational inputs into cognitive life appraisal processes. Frequent positive emotions may enhance interpretive frameworks through which students evaluate their life circumstances, thereby strengthening overall life satisfaction.

From a practical standpoint, the substantial explanatory power of perceived happiness highlights the importance of institutional strategies aimed at fostering positive emotional climates within university environments. Interventions targeting emotional regulation, social engagement, and supportive academic experiences may have downstream benefits for students' broader life satisfaction and psychological adjustment.

Overall, the regression results provide strong empirical evidence that perceived happiness functions as a core psychological determinant of life satisfaction among university students in this emerging higher education context.

IV. DISCUSSION

The present findings provide empirical support for contemporary models of subjective well-being that conceptualize affective happiness and cognitive life satisfaction as structurally related yet analytically distinct components. The strong positive association observed in this study ($r = .68$) confirms that students' day-to-day emotional experiences are closely linked to their broader evaluative judgments of life quality. At the same time, the magnitude of the relationship—while substantial—does not indicate conceptual redundancy, thereby reinforcing the theoretical distinction between affective and cognitive dimensions of well-being.

The explanatory power demonstrated in the regression model further substantiates the central role of affective well-being in shaping global life appraisal. Emotional experiences appear to function as interpretive filters through which students assess academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, and future prospects. From an educational psychology perspective, perceived happiness may be understood as reflecting students' capacity for emotional regulation, psychological vitality, and engagement in

meaningful activities. In contrast, life satisfaction represents a relatively stable cognitive synthesis of accumulated experiences and personal standards. The findings suggest that sustained positive affect provides the experiential foundation upon which cognitive life evaluations are constructed.

Within Vietnam's rapidly transforming higher education landscape, the relationship between happiness and life satisfaction warrants contextual consideration. Students navigate academic competition, shifting labor market expectations, digital learning environments, and evolving social norms. In this setting, perceived happiness may be strongly influenced by relational factors such as peer connectedness, family cohesion, and supportive lecturer–student interactions. Additionally, perceptions of academic progress and future employability likely contribute to both emotional positivity and life satisfaction. The moderate-to-high well-being levels observed in this study indicate relative psychological stability, yet they also reveal potential vulnerability to contextual stressors.

These findings carry important institutional implications. If affective well-being significantly predicts life satisfaction, then university policies aimed at enhancing students' emotional experiences may yield broader developmental benefits. Higher education institutions should therefore extend their focus beyond academic performance indicators toward integrated well-being frameworks. Such strategies may include strengthening campus mental health services, implementing evidence-based positive psychology interventions, promoting structured social engagement programs, and expanding career guidance and mentoring systems. By cultivating emotionally supportive academic environments, universities can enhance not only students' daily happiness but also their long-term life satisfaction and adaptive capacity.

Overall, the results highlight the necessity of adopting a holistic, psychologically informed approach to student development in emerging higher education systems. Recognizing the interplay between emotional and cognitive well-being provides a foundation for sustainable educational policies that prioritize human flourishing alongside academic excellence.

V. CONCLUSION

This large-scale quantitative investigation provides robust empirical evidence that perceived happiness constitutes a significant psychological determinant of life satisfaction among undergraduate students at Dong Thap university. By examining both the level and structural relationship between affective and cognitive components of subjective well-being, the study contributes contextually grounded insights to the growing body of international well-being research in higher education.

Several key conclusions emerge from the findings. First, students reported moderate-to-high levels of perceived happiness and life satisfaction, indicating general psychological stability within the sample. However, these levels did not reach the upper threshold of the measurement

scale, suggesting that well-being remains improvable within the current institutional and socio-economic context.

Second, the strong positive correlation between perceived happiness and life satisfaction confirms the structural interdependence of affective and cognitive well-being components. While conceptually distinct, the two constructs operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, with emotional experiences closely informing global life evaluation.

Third, regression analysis demonstrated that perceived happiness explains nearly half of the variance in life satisfaction. This substantial explanatory power underscores the foundational role of emotional well-being in shaping students' broader cognitive appraisal of life quality. The results suggest that daily positive affect functions not merely as a transient emotional state but as a core psychological resource influencing long-term evaluative judgments.

From a practical standpoint, these findings carry significant implications for higher education policy and student development strategies. Universities seeking to enhance overall student well-being should prioritize interventions that cultivate positive emotional climates, strengthen social connectedness, and provide accessible mental health services. Institutional efforts that promote engagement, belonging, and perceived future opportunities may yield measurable improvements in life satisfaction outcomes.

Despite the strengths of a large and statistically robust sample, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches to examine developmental trajectories of student well-being over time and to identify contextual moderators such as academic discipline, socioeconomic status, and social support networks. Such research would deepen understanding of the mechanisms linking affective experiences to cognitive life evaluation and inform sustainable, evidence-based well-being initiatives within emerging higher education systems.

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