

Research Paper

Exploring the Drivers of Happiness: A Study on Youth of Bihar

Ruby Kumari¹, Prof. Dhruv Kumar^{2*}

ABSTRACT

The pursuit of happiness and well-being has gained prominence in recent decades. With global initiatives, emphasis has been made on the importance of subjective well-being alongside other economic indicators of progress. In India, mental health concerns are significant among adolescents and young adults. Therefore, understanding the factors that contribute to happiness is particularly relevant. The present study explored the drivers of happiness among 272 school and college students in the Purnea district of Bihar, using a sentence-completion method (“I feel happy because...”) to elicit authentic responses. Content analysis revealed nine key sources of happiness: academic success, family bonding, quality time with friends, altruism, music and nostalgia, recognition and reward, relaxation, plantation/gardening, and travelling. Among these, academic achievement, family ties, and prosocial behaviour emerged as the strongest contributors to youth well-being. Gender and socioeconomic variations were also observed, with male students from higher-income groups emphasizing leisure and socializing, while female students and those from lower-income backgrounds highlighted family connections and altruistic acts. The study highlights the need for educational institutions and policymakers to foster supportive environments that promote academic growth, emotional connection, and opportunities for leisure and altruism, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of youth.

Keywords: *Happiness, subjective well-being, academic success, family bonding*

Mental Health is an important concern for us. Our country accounts for a substantial share of the global burden of mental health conditions, contributing nearly 18% of depressive disorders and 15% of anxiety disorders worldwide (WHO, 2017). Studies estimate that between 8 to 11 million adolescents in India require mental health services at any given time (Gururaj et al., 2016). The COVID-19 crisis worsened existing psychological vulnerabilities among youth, largely due to prolonged restrictions, isolation from peers, and uncertainties in education and livelihood (Singh et al., 2020).

Historically, development was measured largely through economic growth indicators such as “Gross Domestic Product (GDP)” or “Gross National Product (GNP)”. Hicks and Streeten (1979) highlighted that while the World Bank once considered GDP as the central indicator of development, scholars and policymakers increasingly argue that it fails to capture human well-being adequately. Responding to this, “the United Nations General

¹Research Scholar, Univ. Dept. of Psychology, L.N. Mithila University, Darbhanga

²Professor, Univ. Dept. of Psychology, L.N. Mithila University, Darbhanga

*Corresponding Author

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Assembly” in July 2011 adopted a resolution encouraging nations to measure happiness and well-being alongside economic progress. This initiative culminated in the first high-level “UN Conference on Happiness” in April 2012, which aimed to redefine development by integrating human flourishing into the discourse (Helliwell et al., 2012).

Bhutan remains a notable example, where “Gross National Happiness (GNH)” is prioritized over GDP as the key marker of progress (Ura et al., 2012). A broader alternative framework, the “Human Development Index (HDI)”, incorporates education, life expectancy, and “Gross National Income (GNI)” as its pillars of measurement (UNDP, 2024). Every year, the UN publishes the “*World Happiness Report*”, ranking nations based on subjective well-being. In its 2019 edition, Finland was ranked as the happiest country globally for the second consecutive year (Helliwell et al., 2019).

Many philosophers and psychologists contend that happiness is deeply personal and not always captured by aggregate measures. Figures such as the Buddha, Nanak, Vivekanand, Aurobindo etc. exemplify individuals who embodied happiness despite difficult external circumstances. This raises the central question: What truly drives happiness at the individual level, particularly among young people in regions such as Bihar?

The Concept of Happiness

The modern study of happiness gained momentum with the advent of positive psychology. In 1998, Martin Seligman emphasized happiness and well-being as essential areas of psychological inquiry (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Alongside Seligman, scholars such as Csikszentmihalyi and Peterson contributed to shaping this field, which sought to balance traditional psychology’s focus on pathology with an emphasis on human strengths and flourishing (Srinivasan, 2015). Positive psychologists highlight several pathways to happiness, including strong social relationships, engagement in physical activity, mindfulness practices, and community involvement (Seligman, 2011). Although financial resources can enhance well-being, their influence diminishes after basic needs are met (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Happiness is often conceptualized as comprising two dimensions: affective (emotional) well-being, which reflects the balance of positive and negative emotions, and cognitive well-being, which refers to overall life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Argyle et al. (1989) proposed that happiness encompasses frequent positive emotions, infrequent negative emotions, and high life satisfaction. Furnham and Cheng (2000) further distinguished between happiness as a transient emotional state and life satisfaction as a more stable evaluation of one’s circumstances. These perspectives underscore the combined influence of personality traits and environmental contexts on individual happiness.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The present study was conducted among 272 Secondary, Sr, Secondary and college students from the Purnea district of Bihar. The sample had a mean age of 21.82 years (SD = 4.09), ranging from 15 to 33 years. Of the total respondents, 64 were male and 208 were female. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure adequate representation of different social categories and educational levels. The sample comprised 80 secondary students, 24 senior secondary students, and 168 college students.

Measures

Data were collected through an interview schedule comprising two sections:

1. **Demographic Information** – Age, gender, caste, income, residence (rural/urban), and educational level.
2. **Drivers of Happiness** – A sentence-completion task formed the core of data collection. Participants were asked to complete ten sentences beginning with “I feel happy because...”. This qualitative approach enabled students to freely articulate personal sources of happiness, capturing both conscious and subconscious influences on their well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The central aim of this study was to identify and analyse the drivers of happiness among school and college students of Bihar. Through a sentence-completion method, students expressed diverse sources of happiness, which were systematically categorized into nine major themes: academic success, family bonding, quality time with friends, altruism, music and nostalgia, recognition and reward, relaxation, plantation/gardening, and travelling. The frequency of responses indicated that academic achievement, family ties, and altruistic behaviour emerged as the most significant contributors to student well-being.

Table-1 Emerged Drivers of Happiness at Glance

Drivers	Academic Success	Family Bonding	Time with Friends	Plantation	Altruism	Relaxation	Music	Reward	Travelling
No. of Responses	258	239	210	72	232	92	213	98	62

1. Academic Success as a Primary Driver

Academic achievement emerged as the most frequently cited source of happiness, with 258 responses emphasizing success in examinations and educational pursuits. Students expressed pride, confidence, and motivation when they performed well academically, which is consistent with the strong social and cultural emphasis on education in Indian society (Kumar, 2020). In the context of Bihar, where competitive examinations and career aspirations dominate youth concerns, success in academics represents not only personal accomplishment but also a gateway to social mobility and financial stability. Similar findings have been reported by studies linking academic performance with higher self-esteem and subjective well-being among adolescents (Moksnes et al., 2010).

2. Family Bonding and Emotional Security

The second most prominent driver was family bonding (239 responses). Students derived happiness from spending time with parents, siblings, and extended family, highlighting the importance of emotional support and belonging. For students living in hostels or away from home, the longing for family connections was especially pronounced. Indian collectivist culture, which emphasizes interdependence and strong family ties, likely enhances the role of family in sustaining youth happiness (Kumar & Dixit, 2014). Prior research has shown that strong family relationships buffer against stress and contribute to positive psychological outcomes in adolescents (Shek, 2005).

3. Quality Time with Friends

Friendship and peer interactions were another dominant theme, with 210 students reporting happiness from conversations, social gatherings, and shared leisure activities. Friendships serve as a crucial coping mechanism for academic pressure, allowing students to relax and express themselves freely. Male students from higher-income families were more likely to associate happiness with socializing and leisure with peers, aligning with earlier research indicating that peer relationships are particularly salient for adolescent happiness (Demir & Davidson, 2013).

4. Altruism and Helping Others

Altruism was cited by 232 respondents as a source of happiness. Many participants expressed joy in helping others, particularly the underprivileged. Such responses resonate with the cultural and spiritual ethos of India, where service to others (Seva) is considered a moral duty. Prosocial behaviour is well-documented as a predictor of happiness, with research suggesting that acts of kindness increase both hedonic (pleasure-oriented) and eudaimonic (purpose-oriented) well-being (Aknin et al., 2013). This finding demonstrates the importance of community engagement and empathy in shaping youth happiness.

5. Music and Nostalgia

A large number of students (213 responses) highlighted music—especially old songs—as a source of comfort and joy. Music provided relaxation, emotional expression, and nostalgia, transporting students to past happy memories. This aligns with research showing that music not only enhances mood but also fosters identity development in adolescents (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). In contexts of academic and social stress, music functioned as both a coping mechanism and a source of aesthetic pleasure.

6. Recognition and Reward

Recognition for achievements, whether academic or extracurricular, was reported by 98 students. External validation boosted their confidence and motivated them to work harder. This reflects the cultural value placed on achievement and societal acknowledgment in collectivist societies like India. Studies confirm that recognition enhances self-concept, which in turn contributes to overall well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

7. Relaxation and Rest

Relaxation (92 responses) was described as moments of peace, sleep, or simply doing nothing. Given the academic pressure and demanding schedules, students valued opportunities to rest and recharge. Leisure activities are essential for maintaining mental balance, and research suggests that rest enhances emotional regulation and cognitive functioning, contributing to higher life satisfaction (Pressman et al., 2009).

8. Plantation and Gardening

Engagement with nature, including gardening and plantation activities, was mentioned by 72 students. Participation in environmental activities fostered a sense of responsibility and pride. Previous studies have shown that exposure to natural environments enhances positive affect and reduces stress (Capaldi et al., 2014). In Bihar, where NGOs and schools often organize plantation drives, such activities may contribute both to ecological sustainability and student well-being.

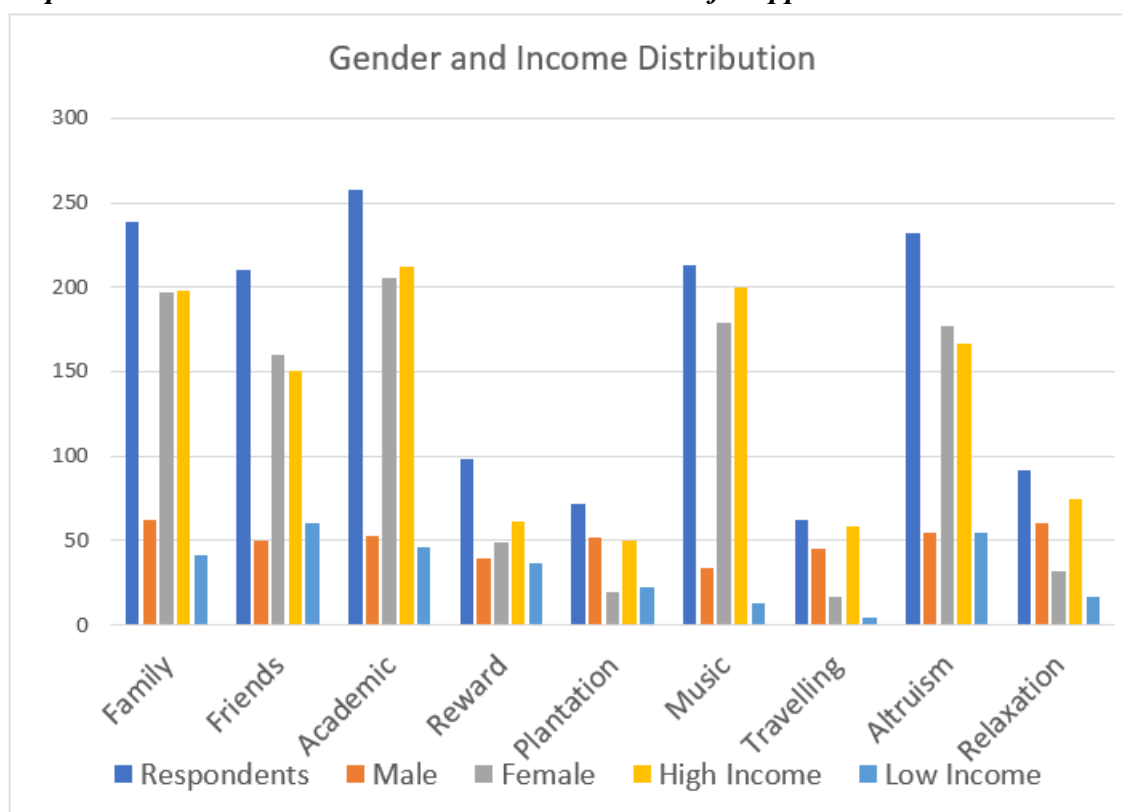
9. Travel and Exploration

Travelling, reported by 62 students, was identified as a driver of happiness, particularly among higher-income groups. Exploring new places, tasting different cuisines, and experiencing cultural diversity brought excitement and novelty. Travel experiences are widely associated with increased life satisfaction and broadened perspectives (Nawijn et al., 2010).

Gender and Socioeconomic Variations

The findings revealed interesting gender and income differences. Male students, particularly from higher-income families, emphasized socializing with friends and leisure activities such as travelling. Female students, on the other hand, more frequently highlighted family bonding, altruism, and music. These variations are consistent with broader literature indicating that socioeconomic and gender factors significantly influence the sources of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Graph-1 Gender and Income Distribution in Drivers of Happiness



The results collectively suggest that student happiness in Bihar is shaped by a balance of academic, relational, altruistic, and leisure-related factors. Academic success and family connections appear to dominate, reflecting the dual emphasis on achievement and collectivist values within Indian society. At the same time, leisure activities such as music, relaxation, gardening, and travel highlight the importance of creativity, rest, and personal expression. These findings reinforce the multidimensional nature of happiness, integrating both hedonic (pleasure, relaxation) and eudaimonic (purpose, altruism, growth) dimensions (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

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The findings indicate that academic achievement, social connectedness (family and friends), and altruism are the dominant sources of happiness for youth in Bihar. Interestingly, leisure activities such as gardening, travel, and music also emerged as significant, suggesting that happiness is shaped not only by achievement but also by moments of relaxation and creativity.

Gender and Socioeconomic Variations

Gender and income differences were also observed in the data. Male students from higher-income families emphasized socializing with friends and leisure travel, whereas female students more frequently reported happiness derived from family bonding and altruistic activities. These results align with previous findings that socio-demographic variables such as gender, income, and cultural background significantly influence subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that happiness among students in Bihar is driven by a combination of academic success, strong family and peer relationships, altruistic behaviour, and leisure pursuits such as music, travel, and gardening. These findings reflect the interplay of cultural values, socioeconomic status, and individual preferences in shaping subjective well-being.

Understanding these drivers is crucial for educators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners seeking to promote youth well-being. Interventions that foster academic achievement, strengthen family and peer connections, encourage prosocial behaviour, and provide opportunities for leisure and creativity can significantly enhance the quality of life of young people. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and mixed-method approaches to capture the evolving dynamics of happiness among diverse youth populations.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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