

## What Makes Private University Students Happier?

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### Abstract

This objective of this study is to explore the dimension of happiness among private university students in the year of 2023. As part of the processes for both individual and group counselling, a thorough interview was conducted. Employing a framework for wellbeing and happiness, the inductive thematic analysis was undertaken using the fully qualitative research approach. Participants in this study ranged in age from 20 to 24 and were all enrolled in private universities. There were ten people in attendance, six men and four women from three different universities. Present research comes out with three themes related to the dimension which make the private University students happier such as financial conditions, family, and academic success. The findings also shown that by achieving the academic achievement would be their ultimate happiness, this could be to enhance their motivation to achieve the good result and become happier. These results indicated the necessity for intervention to raise student happiness levels for their future career and professional growth.

**Keywords:** Happiness, Private University Students, Well-Being, Motivation, Joy, Positive Emotions

### Introduction

#### 1.0 Background of Study

Everyone has their definition of happiness and wants to be happier. Happiness is the part of the positive psychology topics. The positive psychology movement has made a significant contribution to psychology by increasing the focus on the positive (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). It also can help many people to improve the quality of their life. Happiness can be described as a condition in which someone encounters positive feelings such as joy and excitement (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Happiness can boost people to live an enjoyable life, affianced life, eloquent life, and achieving lifestyle (Martin Seligman, 2002). As everybody wants to live a satisfying life and happiness with healthy minds, being happy is the most important thing in our life.

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

The students are assets of the country as they are going to be the future of the nation. They need to succeed in their academic performance. One of the factors of happiness is accomplishment (Martin Seligman, 2012). Accomplishment can be derived from many ways, such as accomplishment in education, workplace, justice, organization community, and many other parts of our life. According to Schmidkonz, happiness comes from success (Schmidkonz, 2014). He talked about success as the main factor of a happy life. Through the observation, he made some comparisons between males and females; it seemed male students are happier than females. Male students achieve a slightly higher value and female's lower values. In addition, according to research if the students are happier, their academic performance will be more successful. According to Bianca (2017), there is a positive relationship between emotional and psychological well-being and academic achievement. The relationship between social well-being and academic performance in the included studies has not been examined. In general, students with higher levels of psychological and emotional well-being also show higher levels of academic achievement, including the public or private University students. Therefore, the gap is to explore the happiness definition and dimension to achieve their goal in the private University. Nevertheless, the positive psychological topics are elusive and still developing. Many researchers have focused more on negative psychological topics like mental illness like depression, stress, burn out, personality disorders and many more instead of positive psychology.

One study, published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health in 2021, investigated how the pandemic affected the mental health and academic achievement of Malaysian university students. According to the research, during the pandemic significantly harmed students' mental health, as evidenced by the rise in anxiety, stress, and depression that students experienced makes them unhappy. When the students are unhappy it affects their health issues was found to be associated with decreased academic success, with students experiencing lower grades and decreased motivation to study. This is consistent with earlier research suggesting that students who not happy to perform poorly in their studies, both locally and globally. (Adeoye, 2015; Afolayan, Donald, Onasoga, Babafemi, & Juan, 2013). It has affected their grades in terms of GPA is supported by previous studies which suggest that happiness is an essential component that has a positive contribution to their learning process (Bianca, 2017).

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

In this study, researcher intends to achieve the following objectives:

RO1 : To identify the meaning of happiness based on private university student's perception.

RO2 : To explore the dimension of happiness among private university students.

RO3 : To find out the way to be happier among private university students.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The research questions are as follows:

RO1 : What is the meaning of happiness based on private university student's perspectives?

RO2 : What are the dimensions of happiness among private university students?

RO3 : How to be happier among private university students?

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study will give many benefits to the private university students and lecturers who are involved in the social sciences field, especially in counseling and psychology fields, because this study mainly focuses on the variables which correlate to their academic achievement. Furthermore, this study can be used by counselors in schools, universities, therapists, and clinical psychologists in the hospitals as it can guide them in developing new techniques and conducting new programs which can help the students to perform well in their academic achievement as well as helping them to cope with their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and the happiness level. Thus, it can lead to producing students with positive well-being and excellence in academic performance.

By examining the happiness dimension among university students, future researchers also can assess the efficacy of various initiatives designed to advance mental health and wellbeing. Best practices for promoting students' happiness can be informed by this knowledge. Finally, studies on happiness among private university students can advance knowledge of how to attain their mental health and wellbeing. Future researchers can use the outcomes of this study as a gap to conduct further research relating to this topic. Besides, this research is significant to contribute to more research in Malaysia, especially on various topics relating to our current issues, culture, and the environment in Malaysia, to broaden people's knowledge about this topic.

### **THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Theory**

The theory which is used and related to happiness is from the father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman. As the founder of positive psychology, his original ideas about happiness and well-being contribute to the emergence of positive psychology (Compton & Hoffman, 2013). His latest theory of well-being involves positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, which create the acronym PERMA (Seligman, 2011). His new well-being theory explains that positive emotion, engagement, and meaning are not enough to create well-being because people also need positive relationships and positive accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). Seligman believes that these five elements can help a person to get a life of fulfilment, happiness, and meaning. PERMA stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning, and achievement. Therefore, in this research it is suitable to explore the happiness dimension among private University students for their future achievement as stated in the PERMA theory.

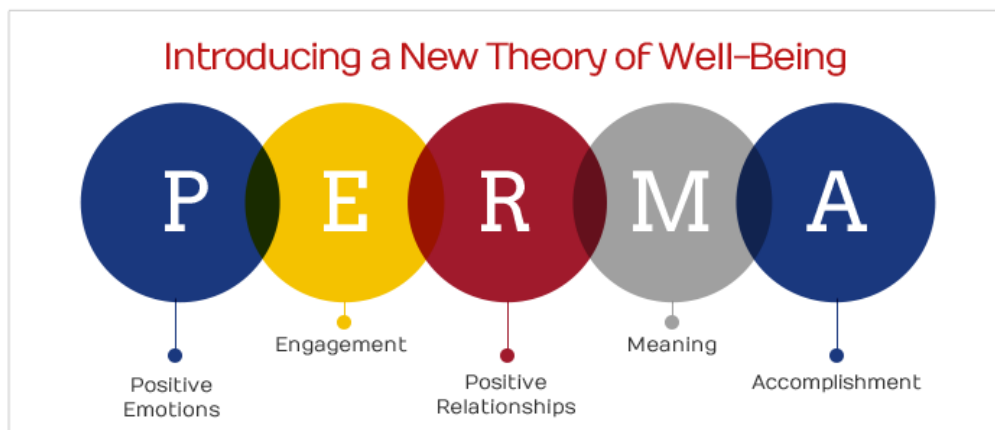


Figure 2.1: PERMA Model from the Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being by Dr. Seligman.

According to current study, there are five primary components that impact human to thrive and flourish: having happy emotions, self-engagement, a healthy relationship with others, the meaning of life, and achievement in life. The PERMA technique examines private university students' happiness and life satisfaction and aids in understanding the reciprocal interaction between persons and their surroundings.

## 2.2 Literature Review

Academic performance is influenced by private university students' happiness. When students are at their happiest, they perform better academically. One of the types of research conducted by the researchers expressed that academic achievement is one of the most important indicators to assess progress in education and it is the only goal for the entire educational system to achieve (Tabbodi, et.al, 2015). This is because of their acceptance and feeling of joy to study had impacted their motivation to study. Aguilar (2015); Corradino and Forgarty (2016) stated that happy students appear to accomplish a higher level at school compared to those students who are not happy. However, if students are at their lowest peak of feeling unhappy, it would cause a drop in their CGPAs.

Happiness also boosts our life satisfaction. Based on the result of data collected by Melissa Malik, Norshidah Nordin, et al (2013), the research describes that students with high life satisfaction and low levels of emotional instability own significantly high GPAs than those students with low life satisfaction and low levels of emotional instability. The results of the research conducted by Mussarat (2013) also had stated that students' ability to manage their emotional state is impartially important because the study has shown that the condition of unhappiness in students could cause students to get low CGPAs thus could affect their academic achievement.

In the other study, Abecia et al. (2014) are the researchers who have constructed the happiness index of the University of Mindanao students. A total of three hundred eighty-one (381) students were randomly chosen. They were asked how happy they were on thirty-nine (39) pre-determined sources of happiness. Factor analysis was employed to extract the source of happiness. There were eight (8) happiness constructs that were extracted. These are the competition dimension, lifestyle dimension, intellectual, technology, altruism, nightlife, care dimension, and celebration. Also, it was revealed that the top five (5) sources of happiness are family, health, academics, recognition, and extending help to others. Overall, the University of Mindanao students a very happy individual.

Urooj Tahir (2016) researched what could happen when students are not in their best condition. When students are not happy or going through stress, students tend to binge eating. Which causes changes in their physical shape. Cristina Nanu, Diana Taut, et al., (2014) had researched student's perceptions towards body image. Undoubtedly, students will experience a change in their physical appearance as they grow older. Cin Cin and Chong Man (2014) stated that there is a correlation between feeling unhappy and eating disorders.

Previous study was done by Carmona-Halty, Salanova, Llorens, and Schaufeli (2021) to investigate the relationship between positive emotions and academic performance. They postulate that students in Chilean high schools that experienced a higher frequency of positive emotions were more likely to achieve high academic performance. This is supported by the B&B theory by Fredrikson (1998), where individuals who experience and express positive emotions have more personal resources and are more likely to function at optimal levels and perform well.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This is qualitative research design. Qualitative research is inductive, and the researcher generally explores meanings and insights in each situation (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Levitt et al., 2017). This qualitative study was conducted in March of the academic year 2022 among 10 students who come from three different universities in Petaling Jaya. This study used the method of triangulation to collect data. This is to ensure to get in-depth data. Triangulation also has been viewed as a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the connection of information from different sources (Carter N, Bryant-Lukosius D, et al. 2014).

### **3.2 Participants**

A total of 10 students were chosen to take part in the interview session consist of 4 females and 6 males. These participants were chosen randomly among the 3 local universities and their age range is between 20 to 24 years old. These 10 participants all come from different backgrounds and are pursuing their studies in different courses. The researcher targeted students who are in their first year of degree because they just started to enter university life. This means they must adjust themselves to the new environment, new schedule, a new culture to adapt and meet new people who come from different places. Because this study was conducted in the Klang Valley area, the selected private university students were interviewed and observed. Students from the designated universities, UNITAR International University, Kelana Jaya, KDU University and Multimedia University (MMU), Cyberjaya, participated in a semi-structured interview.

### **3.3 Instrumentation**

Because semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection method in this investigation, the instruments employed to conduct this study are reasonably easy and straightforward. A semi-structured interview guide is a series of interview questions designed to cover major subject areas while still allowing for some freedom and spontaneity. It is the primary research instrument. The interview guide, which acts as a reference throughout the interview to ensure that all important areas are covered, has a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The question guide was separated into three sections, each of which served a different purpose from the study.

### **3.4 Procedures**

The researcher interviewed by meeting the participants to get their information and feedback. The method of an interview can help the researcher to explore and understand the experience and the thought of happiness among the participants (Khairuddin, 2017). Before starting the interviews, the researcher starts by explaining the study that will be conducted so that the participants understand their role in the interview. Besides, the researcher also builds rapport with the participants. When the participants feel comfortable and ready to be interviewed, the researcher distributed "informed consent" to be signed as their consent to join the interview. Confidentiality is very important, and the researcher will not use the real name of the participants to be recorded in the study without their consent. The researcher is going to record the responses from the participants by going through interviews and having an open-ended questionnaire. The interview session will be recorded using an audio recorder (smartphone). These instruments were asked to the participants individually and not by pair or group. Later, the researcher would group the data based on the categorization for easy access for readers to understand.

The researcher will replace their name by recorded as "Respondent" if the researcher wishes to publish the results of the study to protect the personal rights of individuals involved. Each of the participants will be asked 14 items. The target duration for the interview will be between 15 to 20 minutes. The data will be recorded and kept for references. This study used the method of triangulation to collect data.

### **3.5 Analysis**

In conducting this study, qualitative data is an ongoing process that continues from the data collection throughout the entire data entry until the analysis stage. Two methods are known as content and thematic analysis. Data collected was coded, categorized and grouped according to the themes that are congruent with the conceptual framework and the problem statement defined in the first chapter. Data analysis for qualitative research is the range of processes and procedures whereby the researcher moves from the qualitative data that have been collected, into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations the researcher is studying.

## **RESULTS**

### **4.1 Descriptive Analysis**

This study was conducted among ten private university students from three private universities around Klang Valley area. An equal number of genders whereby six male and four female students from ten respondents were interviewed. The respondents, who ranged in age from 20 to 24, were enrolled in a variety of diploma, degree, and master's programmes. Eight of them are single respondent whereby two of them were married.

Table 4.1 shows a detailed demographic description of each respondent.

Refer to tables 4.1 below. Demographic Description of Each Respondent as follows:

<b>Respondent (R)</b>	<b>Age (years old)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Name of private university</b>	<b>Programme enrolled</b>	<b>Marital status</b>
R1	20	Female	UNITAR International University	Bachelor of Education	Single
R2	22	Male	UNITAR International University	Bachelor of Psychology	Single
R3	23	Female	KDU	Bachelor of International Business	Single
R4	21	Male	KDU	Bachelor of engineering	Single
R5	20	Female	KDU	Bachelor of Science in psychology	Single
R6	22	Male	KDU	Bachelor of Business Admin	Single
R7	24	Male	MMU	Bachelor Business Admin	Married
R8	24	Male	MMU	Bachelor of Law	Married
R9	21	Female	MMU	Diploma in Accounting	Single
R10	23	Male	UNITAR	Diploma in Accounting	Single

Table 4.1 Demographic Description of Each Respondent

**The meaning and dimension of happiness among students**

“...happiness? I love love love to shop lah so it would be nice to shop using my own money rather than to use my parents' money the feelings is... different when you shop using your own money, satisfaction... eh, it's hard for me to describe lah...”

(R2, male, 22 years)

“...buying things that I want without looking at the price tag. yes, that would be awesome! I can invest in modifying my car because I love to modify my car although my car is not that expensive if we know how to make it look exclusive expensive..., people would be like. shocked...kan...”

(R1, female, 20 years)

"...I would define happiness as a feeling of freedom without problems that could cause me headaches and stress. but living life as a student, I'd never been free from the problem like in short of money..."

(R4, male, 21 years)

“Freedom and joy... are the meaning of happiness for me. If I am rich, I will have a financial freedom and do whatever I want, right? ...”  
(R7, male, 24 years)

From the data above, it shows that most of the meaning of happiness means the feeling of freedom and peace without any problems, especially about the financial problem. In this research, the results are shown by other previous researchers in which the results mentioned that happiness is the state of joy of freedom of life. Therefore, it is quite accurate with some support from other researchers who stated about peaceful and joyful. (Diener, 2003, Argle, 2002).

Based on the data below, it shows the results from the theme factor and of happiness among private university students.

Name	Age	Gender	A	B	C
R1	20	Female	✓		
R2	22	Male			✓
R3	23	Female			✓
R4	21	Male	✓		
R5	20	Female	✓		
R6	22	Male	✓		
R7	24	Male		✓	
R8	24	Male		✓	
R9	21	Female	✓		
R10	23	Male		✓	
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>

Note: N=10, A=Financial issue, B=Academic achievement, C=Love (Family/Partner)

“...well... when you have money, it is easier for you to live as a student. Because you know, students’ life right... a lot of assignments to be done, and all the assignments you need money to pay for transportation, printing and all that. I got a scholarship from BKNS, but sometimes it comes out late (cheque). so, I need to save my money as much as possible. So yeah... it plays an important role, without money also can make a person stress out...”  
(R1, female, 20 years)

“.. The main factor why we are unhappy because we don’t have enough money. When I face financial issues, I can’t pay my tuition fees, having a good meals during my study.huhu..”  
(R4, male, 21 years)

“...erm.. well of course if you mentioned about things that make life happy and easy in university, I would say money la. financial is important because everything also needs money. to eat, pay rent, fuel, print past year questions for tests and to buy books. if I don't buy books, I would miss out a lot. if I only print the book or borrow from friends, it cost so much and would trouble my friend. so having decent wealth make sure bills are settled, having money to buyfoods and ultimately to travel when we have the desire but traveling is still a long way to go now. hahaha...”  
(R5, female, 20 years)



“...ya ya money is important and it played an important role for me as a student. those who said money is not important or money can't buy happiness most probably been living with a silver spoon since birth. (R6, male, 22 years)

“...as for me, I must work part time to get extra money but now I can't find extra money because I have to put my focus on my studies. it's very tough to work part-time when I'm a full-time student. hard to balance time. even if I have extra rm5 in my walletlah, ‘...I would already feel happy. that's how hard studying in semenanjung. price ticket would cost us Borneo students so much already. ugh.. cheaper to go oversea than to go back to our hometown...” (R9, female, 21 years)

Students in private universities think that the dimension of happiness is all about money. Based on the results, although other factors affect the student's happiness, financial is the main factor of happiness among students in the private institution. As the students aged between 20 years to 24 years, the importance of money in their life as a student is crucial. Another factor is academic achievement and family as the factors of happiness. As we have discussed, the family bond/relationship brings happiness in the life of “Masyarakat Melayu”. ( Khairudin Che Tak, 2017, YK Ng, 2015) . Some researchers stated that happiness also should be preferred in most cases, particularly concerning what individuals and society should be interested in ultimately. Studies show that married people report being happier than those who are single, divorced, or widowed (Diener et al., 2000).

### **Attaining happiness**

The results below show how far the students would go to attain their happiness. Farhana Yasmin et .al (2018) stated that challenges most students faced during their years in the university are for the reason to shape and build them as an individual to be ready to enter the world of work in the future. These challenges would also help them to be grateful to the opportunity that they get by being able to continue to pursue their studies at a higher level, as not every individual is as fortunate as them.

“...financially I was broken because I lost my part time job...almost when crazy without money...It was so stressful I had to keep asking my mother for money which I don't do...at one part I felt like focussing back on my studies will make me feel happier in the future...” (R6, male, 22 years)

“...err I will achieve my highest happiness if I get to graduate with ANC award. I can die peacefully if that thing happens. Amen!...” (R7, male, 24 years)

"...getting the opportunity to make my parents smile with my academic results can make me happy. my parents have worked hard for me since I am small to give this chance for me. I think every parent also likes that not easy for them to find the money. that's why it always makes me angry to see people who get culture shock once they entered university. ungrateful bah!...” (R8, male, 24 years)

“...as long as I am not exposed to danger or trouble, I'd go as far as I could to attain my happiness. I'd just consider financial issues as obstacles or challenges for me to go through as students...  
(R10, male, 23 years)

Based on the results, the first theme to attain happiness, most of the respondents mentioned that by achieving the academic achievement would be his ultimate happiness, this could be their motivation to achieve the dean list and higher level of study effort to not focus on only the challenges. Financial difficulties were cited as a typical source of unhappy experiences, especially for students who might have experienced income loss due to the pandemic. For several students, if they want to be happier in the future, academic performance is important. The following theme is based on the unhappy experiences faced by respondents where they claimed that many challenges and changes brought on by the pandemic have caused them stressful experiences. Most of the respondents identified the following element as a significant way to attain happiness.

“... Actually, I will really feel so bad and worried for my family situation because my father lost his job during the pandemic... I felt useless as a son can't do anything to help as well...But I can feel that we must support each other to be happier in our life. Family makes me feel happier...”  
(R1, female, 20 years)

“Covid is the main reason... it really made me feel unhappy. Because things were so bad that we couldn't go anywhere, our whole life was interrupted. The only things which make me happy that I realized is my family. When we want to have a happy life, we have to stick to our family.”

(R2, male, 22 years)

... I couldn't go for jogging as it was part of my daily routine...I begin to feel unhappy when I am unhealthy. I felt so weak and it definitely impacted my sleep and slowly my mental health was influenced... my sisters and brothers who always makes me happy..I love them so much...”  
(R4, male, 21 years)

This element is one of the core fundamentals of happiness. Family or having good friends, for instance, will also bring happiness. It has been proven by the researchers that family is the most influential factor in happiness among high school students (Zhenzhu Wu, 2014). So much positivity will arise from great relationships in the family. It is supported by the theory of PERMA that achievement is one of the important things to attain happiness. (Seligman, 2002).

### Discussion of Study

As the aim of the study is to explore the dimension of happiness among private higher institutions in 2023, the results indicate that there are a few factors that affected student's happiness in the higher institution. Students in the private higher institution have trouble with their financial issues. This issue not only affected their happiness as a student learning in the private sector, but it also becomes the main concern for the students to fulfill their physiological needs. Without a proper flow of financial support, it would be difficult for them to have a nutritious supply of food intake and to fulfill other basic needs in their life as a student. Furthermore, another factor that affects the student's happiness is an academic achievement and the factors of their family and loved ones. The factor of academic achievement shows that the students have set their goals. If they managed to achieve, it will

contribute to their self-fulfillment. Participants that mentioned love (family/partner) could long for security and attention in which they received from their loved ones. Having a strong bond and receiving love helps them to feel secure. Therefore, the study has shown that those dimensions of happiness should be focused more to succeed in the private higher institution. "The authors thank UNITAR International University for the support of the publication of this research."

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