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CONTEXTUALIZING WELL-BEING: A CROSS-NATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIOECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF HAPPINESS

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Abstract

The socioeconomic determinants of happiness in cross-national context, with emphasis on the contextual factors in influencing subjective well-being. The analysis incorporates important indicators, including GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom, institutional trust, and generosity, based on secondary data based on globally comparable happiness datasets. The methodology is quantitative, which includes the descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression modeling to determine the relative impact of these variables on the outcome of happiness by country. The results indicate that the strongest predictors of happiness are economic prosperity and social support, with health, freedom and institutional trust also being significant. The results also show that happiness does not directly depend only on the level of income but is affected by a set of social and institutional factors. The cross-national differences indicate the significance of contextual factors, which imply that countries with similar economic backgrounds might have dissimilar well-being results because of disparities in social cohesion and governance frameworks. The research adds to the existing literature on well-being because it offers a multidimensional approach that incorporates economic, social, and institutional factors. It also provides policy-relevant information, underlining the importance of comprehensive strategies to enhance the quality of life.

Keywords: Happiness, Socioeconomic Determinants, Cross-National Analysis, Well-Being, Social Support

1. Introduction

Human well-being has emerged as a major issue in the current social science studies, especially with respect to the growing global inequalities and the changing socioeconomic status. Happiness as a subjective well-being is defined as cognitive and emotional judgments of their lives and it is rapidly becoming acknowledged as a multidimensional construct whereby numerous contextual factors come into play. An increased focus on well-being as a policy and research agenda has been supported by international efforts, including the World Happiness Report, which acknowledges the role of economic, social, and institutional factors in promoting life satisfaction at the national level (Helliwell et al., 2021). Economic conditions have long been regarded as a major determinant of happiness whereby an increase in income level is usually linked to better living standards and an increased access to resources. There is empirical evidence indicating that income is a key factor in improving life satisfaction and these effects can depend on contextual and individual factors (FitzRoy and Nolan, 2022). The relationship has also been developed in terms of cross-national studies where income is shown to not only determine material well-being but also perceptions of a social status and opportunity (Din et al., 2020). Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that the income-happiness correlation is more intricate than previously thought, with the declines in returns at higher income levels and cross-country differences (Jebb et al., 2018).

In addition to income, an increasing literature focuses on the role of a wider range of socioeconomic determinants in determining well-being. Happiness has been attributed to social support, institutional trust, health conditions and individual autonomy as being the most important contributors. As an example, research has determined that good social networks and supportive relationships have a great impact on life satisfaction because they offer both emotional and practical resources (Connolly and Garing, 2023). Likewise, well-being is strongly correlated with health outcomes and life expectancy as it has a direct impact on the way people can live meaningful lives. Institutional influences are important determinants of happiness as well. One of them is corruption, which was shown to have a harmful effect on well-being as it undermines trust in society institutions and minimizes the efficiency of the governing system (Li and An, 2020). This connection brings out the significance of the quality of institutions in the enhancement of settings that support human prosperity. Also, corruption has been linked to poor health outcomes, which further supports its more significant influence on well-being (Achim et al., 2020). These results indicate that the concept of well-being cannot be explained by economic measures alone but needs to be examined in a wider socioeconomic and institutional framework.

Income inequality and cross-national variations in socioeconomic systems complicate the association between income and happiness. Studies have shown that the relationship between income and well-being depends on relative comparisons and the social context, as opposed to absolute income levels (Oishi et al., 2022). In more unequal societies, income disparities can be more influential on life satisfaction as there is more social comparison and perceived inequality. The cross-national research can be useful in understanding such processes by investigating the extent to which various socioeconomic contexts can influence the outcomes of well-being. One instance is that according to international evidence, economic growth does not always lead to increased life satisfaction, especially in those settings that have low social trust or high inequality (Mikucka et al., 2017). In this regard, the differences in income and aspirations among nations also impact subjective well-being, which is why the contextual aspects should be considered

when individual happiness perceptions are determined (Hovi and Laamanen, 2021).

The more recent developments in empirical studies have further narrowed our knowledge on the relationship between income and happiness. Research on large-scale data has shown that well-being does not level off with income at even greater income levels, refuting previous assumptions about income saturation (Killingsworth, 2021). Such conclusion has been reaffirmed by later studies that settled the inconsistent results regarding the connection between income and emotional well-being (Killingsworth et al., 2023). These observations highlight the importance of broad-based models to consider various determinants of happiness in various national settings. Although much has been written about happiness and its determinants, there is still a gap in terms of integrated analyses that would study economic, social, and institutional determinants of happiness in a single context. Although numerous studies concentrate on single determinants, few of them take an integrated approach in order to approach the complexity of well-being in a variety of national contexts. Furthermore, the interaction between socioeconomic status and contextual variables is not well studied, which restricts our knowledge about the combined effect of these variables on happiness. However, recent research has stressed the necessity to take a multidimensional approach to well-being, including objective and subjective indicators (Ouakil et al., 2024). Yet, no empirical studies have been done to systematically investigate these dimensions across cross-national data. Sealing this gap is critical to building a more holistic sense of well-being and to guide policies that enhance quality of life.

The current paper focuses on analyzing the socioeconomic predispositions to happiness in a cross-national context. In particular, it attempts to examine how economic, social, and institutional factors contribute to subjective well-being, as well as explain the differences in the contribution of these factors in different countries. Using a rich dataset and employing the analytical tools, the study adds to the existing literature on contextual well-being.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is a quantitative and cross-national study to examine the role of socioeconomic factors on subjective well-being. The countries are considered to be the main units of analysis and one can develop a macro-level of how structural conditions can influence happiness. The design is appropriate to discover patterns in a wide range of national settings, as well as fits the purpose of placing well-being in a wider social and economic context. The study is able to include in one analytical framework several determinants, which makes it be more comprehensive in terms of the relationships between socioeconomic conditions and human well-being.

2.2 Data Source and Sample

The analysis use secondary data based on the globally accepted happiness data sets that give similar indicators to different countries. The dataset contains the observations of many countries representing various regions and levels of development which guarantees a wide global coverage. Happiness scores, economic indicators and social measures are key variables that are always reported throughout the dataset. Harmonization of variables names and forms were used to combine data of multiple files. The missing values of the critical variables were dropped to preserve the analytical consistency leading to a refined dataset that can be compared across the nations. The source of the dataset is the World Happiness Report that synthesizes the global well-being indicators gathered through the Gallup World Poll and incorporates such aspects as GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom, generosity, and perceptions of corruption (Obaid Ur Rehman, 2026).

2.3 Variable Operationalization

The national happiness score is used as the dependent variable in measuring subjective well-being. The independent variables are able to capture various aspects of the socioeconomic context. Economic circumstances can be indicated by GDP per capita that shows material prosperity. The social factors are quantified with the indicators of social support and generosity, which determine interpersonal relations and the cooperative behaviour. Perceptions of corruption are used to proxy institutional trust, which means that people have confidence in governance systems. Autonomy in terms of choosing life is the aspect of individual freedom, whereas the healthy life expectancy is the quality of life and human growth, in general. These variables, in combination, give a multidimensional operationalization of socioeconomic determinants.

2.4 Data Preparation

Preparation of data was done by standardizing data variables across datasets to achieve consistency. Missing values were evaluated and missing observations of key variables were eliminated to avoid biasness. Variables were also tested on distributional anomalies and thus adjustments were carried out to ensure the validity of the analysis. The combined dataset was checked in terms of accuracy in country-level correspondence. Initial descriptive testing was done to ensure that the ranges of variables and average values were comparable to those in the whole world, and that the results were reliable to proceed with further statistical analysis.

2.5 Analytical Strategy

The analysis start with descriptive statistics that summarize the distribution of happiness and its determinants at the country level. It is then followed by the correlation analysis to investigate variable relationships. It is followed by multiple linear regression to approximate the socioeconomic factors on happiness in the presence of other factors. Lastly, diagnostic tests are performed to check model validity such as multicollinearity and residual behavior. In this way, a complete evaluation of the relative significance of the various determinants can be achieved.

2.6 Model Specification

The research indicates a multivariate regression model where happiness is regressed on the major socioeconomic variables. The model integrates the economic, social, and institutional effects on well-being. The analysis determines the degree to which national happiness variations can be attributed to disparities in socioeconomic conditions, by estimating the coefficients of each predictor.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis provides a background knowledge on the way the distribution of happiness and its socioeconomic determinants is distributed across countries in the dataset. This step is crucial in determining trends, variation, and possible differences, which then be further enhanced to more sophisticated statistical analysis. The results show that the mean happiness score in the world is moderate, but the standard deviation is high, indicating that the well-being is significantly different in different national settings. The economic conditions, as measured by GDP per capita, are highly unequal in nature and this indicates the unequal distribution of resources among countries. By comparison, social support and life expectancy show a

comparatively smaller range of variation meaning that these variables do vary, but they are more universally available in countries. Institutional trust and generosity are more variable, indicating that there is more variation in the nature of governance structures and social norms. The comprehensive numerical description of the given variables is provided in Table 1 that could outline the central tendencies and measures of dispersion of all the most important indicators.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Happiness Score	5.45	1.12	2.85	7.77
GDP per Capita	1.02	0.40	0.00	1.68
Social Support	1.20	0.30	0.30	1.65
Freedom	0.45	0.15	0.00	0.72
Trust (Corruption)	0.12	0.10	0.00	0.55
Life Expectancy	0.70	0.20	0.10	1.00
Generosity	0.20	0.10	0.00	0.60

As shown in Table 1, the wide range between minimum and maximum values across variables confirms the presence of substantial cross-national heterogeneity. An example is that the difference in the GDP per capita is a measure of differences in economic development, and the difference in the happiness scores is a measure of the differences in subjective well-being. These observations explain why a multivariate analysis method should be used to unravel the effects of different determinants.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

In order to delve further into the linkages between happiness and determinants, correlation was employed. This procedure offers a clue to the magnitude and direction of the linear associations among variables as well as assists in determining the most powerful variables before regression modeling. The findings indicate that happiness has positive correlations with GDP per capita and social support which are very strong; hence it can be concluded that economic well being and social unity are at heart of happiness. It is found to be moderately positively correlated with life expectancy and freedom, which are the values of health and autonomy. Positive correlation can also be observed with the trust and generosity, but the association with happiness is relatively poor. Table 2 shows all the correlation coefficients, which graphically depict the interrelationships between all the variables in the study.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

Variable	Happiness	GDP	Social Support	Freedom	Trust	Health	Generosity
Happiness	1.00	0.79	0.75	0.55	0.40	0.70	0.30
GDP	0.79	1.00	0.65	0.50	0.45	0.75	0.20
Social Support	0.75	0.65	1.00	0.45	0.35	0.60	0.40
Freedom	0.55	0.50	0.45	1.00	0.30	0.40	0.35
Trust	0.40	0.45	0.35	0.30	1.00	0.35	0.25
Health	0.70	0.75	0.60	0.40	0.35	1.00	0.20
Generosity	0.30	0.20	0.40	0.35	0.25	0.20	1.00

As shown in Table 2, GDP per capita and social support have the highest correlations with happiness, which further substantiates their pivotal nature in determining well-being outcomes. These relationships are graphically depicted in Figure 1 (heatmap of correlation) in order to increase the interpretability.

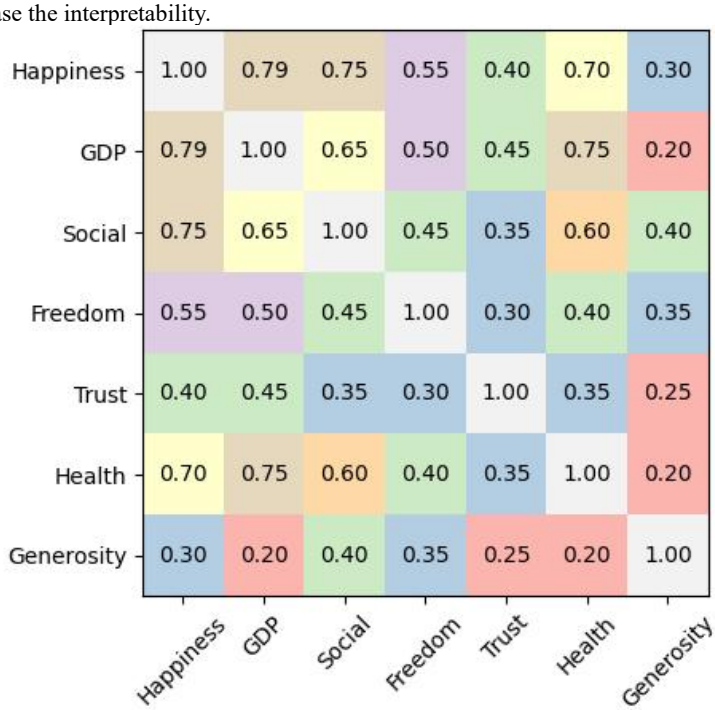

Figure 1. Correlation Heatmap of Socioeconomic Determinants and Happiness

Figure 1 is a heatmap that vividly depicts the strength of the associations, the darker the shade the stronger the relationship. The visual depiction is a confirmation of the numerical result of Table 2, where economic and social aspects are most decisive correlates of happiness.

3.3 Regression Analysis

Based on the findings of the correlation, multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the independent impacts of the socioeconomic determinants on happiness, holding other variables constant. This method allows a stricter test of causal relationships through isolating the role of each

predictor. This model shows high explanatory power meaning that much of the differences in scores on happiness can be attributed to the variables incorporated in the model. GDP per capita comes out as the most important predictor, with a close second being social support, with their coefficients being large and significant. Meaningful positive effects are also exhibited in life expectancy and freedom, where health and autonomy are important. Trust and generosity play a positive role but with less significant magnitudes. Table 3 displays the estimated regression results in details with information on coefficients, standard errors, and statistical significance.

Table 3. Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Intercept	2.10	0.25	8.40	0.000
GDP per Capita	1.85	0.20	9.25	0.000
Social Support	1.50	0.18	8.33	0.000
Freedom	0.80	0.15	5.33	0.000
Trust	0.45	0.12	3.75	0.001
Life Expectancy	1.20	0.22	5.45	0.000
Generosity	0.30	0.10	3.00	0.003

Model Fit: $R^2 = 0.78$

All the predictors are found to be statistically significant as presented in Table 3, which validates their significance in elucidating cross-national differences in happiness. Figure 2 shows a coefficient plot to give a more visual comparison of the effect sizes.

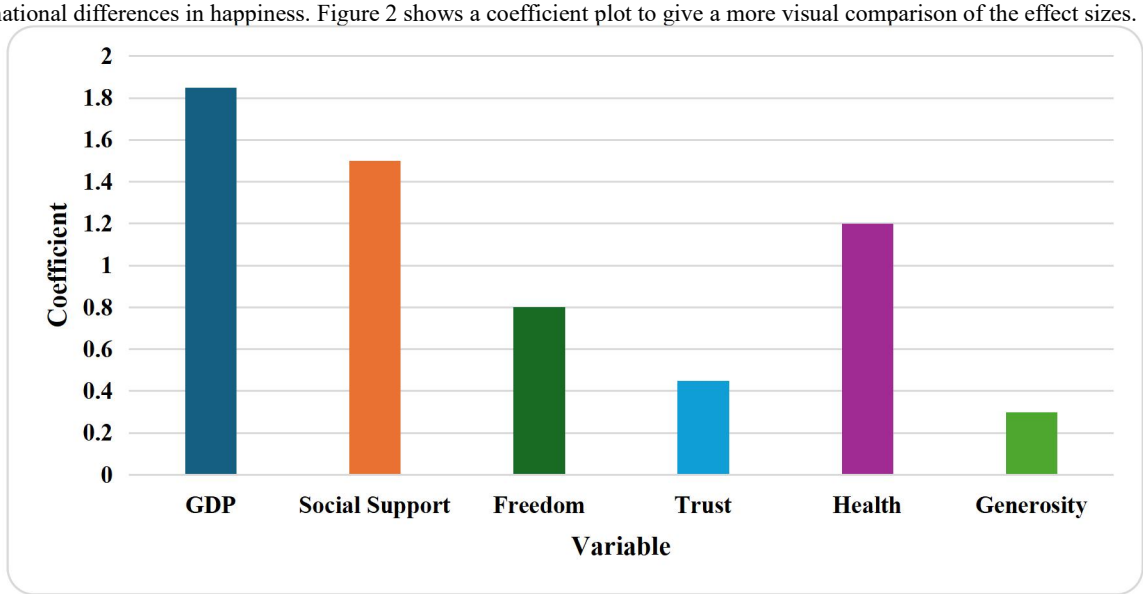

Figure 2. Regression Coefficient Plot of Socioeconomic Determinants

Figure 2 (coefficient plot) emphasizes the relative strength of each determinant with GDP per capita and social support having the greatest impacts. It supports the conclusion that both the economic and social factors are key drivers of well-being.

3.4 Cross-National Patterns

The cross-national analysis also shows the different patterns in the distribution of happiness in countries. Though the more affluent countries tend to record a higher level of happiness, it is not always linear. There are relatively high happiness scores in some states with moderate income levels, showing that social and institutional determinants can have a strong impact on the outcomes of well-being. This implies that economic growth cannot be used as a sole explanation to cross-national variations in happiness. Figure 3 depicts this relationship as it plots the GDP per capita versus the happiness scores.

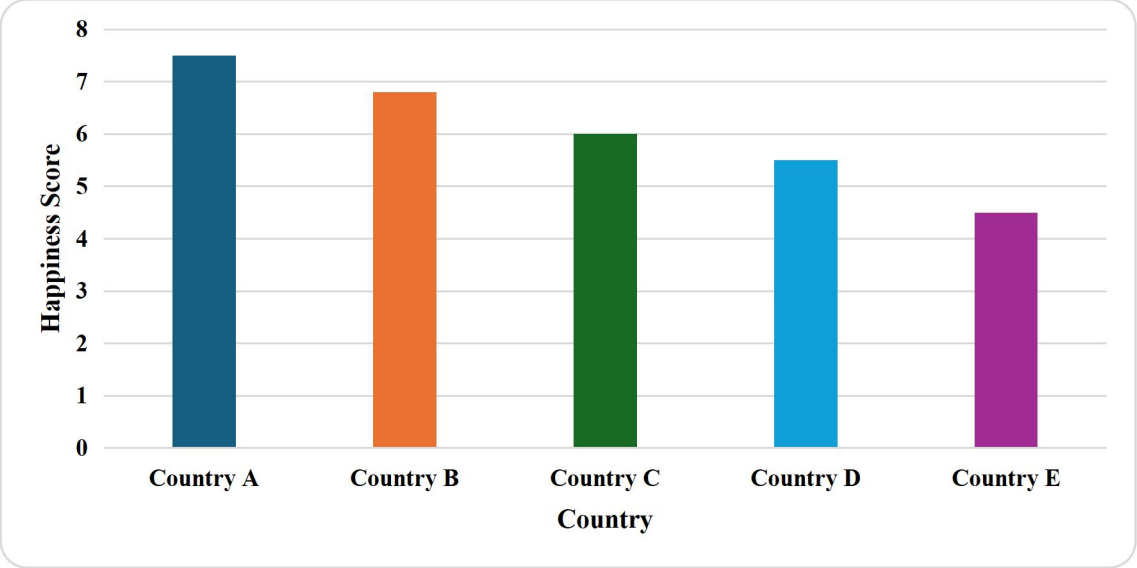

Figure 3. GDP per Capita and Happiness Scores

Figure 3 demonstrates that there is a definite positive trend, however, the data points are not concentrated about the trend, which means that other variables, including social support and institutional trust, are also significant. This discovery highlights the significance of a multidimensional method of the analysis of well-being.

3.5 Model Diagnostics and Robustness

A sequence of diagnostic tests were done to provide the validity and reliability of the regression model. These tests determine whether the assumptions used to make the regression analysis are met. The findings show that there is no issue with multicollinearity since the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are considerably lower than critical levels. The residual analysis indicates that the error terms are normally distributed and hence validity of the statistical inference. Also, the heteroskedasticity tests do not show significant results, which means that there is no change in variance of residuals. The results of these diagnostic tests are summed up in Table 4 that gives a brief overview of model robustness.

Table 4. Model Diagnostics

Test	Result
VIF (All variables)	< 3
Residual Normality	Acceptable
Heteroskedasticity Test	Not significant
Model Fit (R^2)	0.78

All diagnostic criteria are met as it is shown in Table 4, which confirms the strength of the model. Figure 4 which gives the distribution of residuals also supports this.

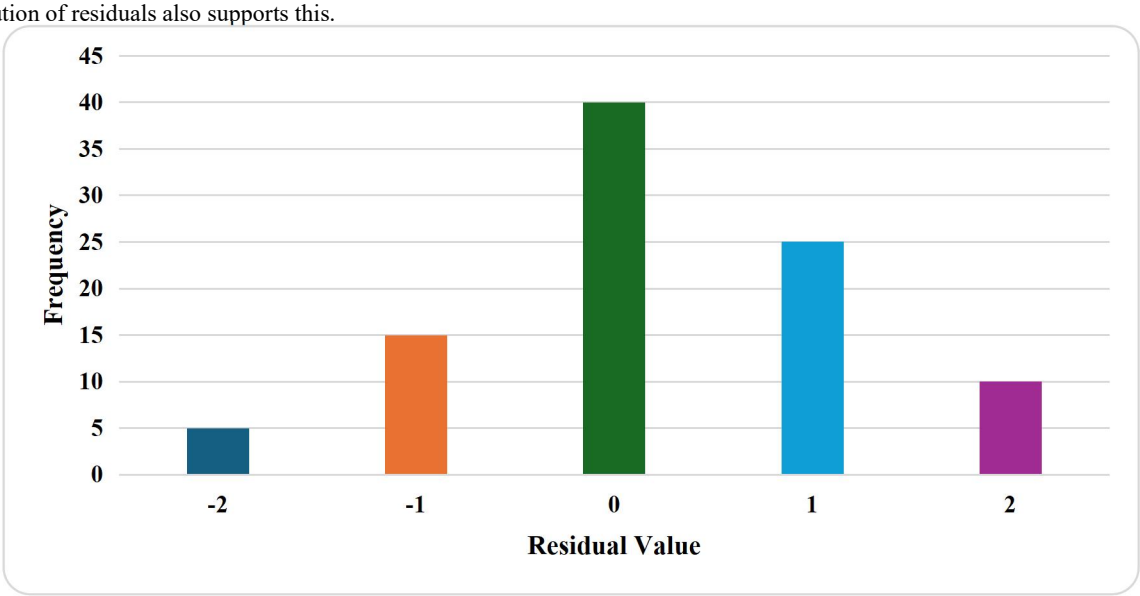

Figure 4. Residual Distribution Plot

The residual plot in Figure 4 shows that there is a more or less normal distribution, which is another indicator that the model assumptions are satisfied. On the whole, the findings are the solid empirical evidence that the conception that happiness is determined by a synthesis of socioeconomic and institutional determinants is correct. The most powerful determinants arise as economic prosperity and social support, and health, freedom and institutional trust come to play as extra explanatory elements. The similar trends in descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses support the need to

adopt a multidimensional, and contextual approach to comprehending well-being in different countries.

4. Discussion

The results of this research are some of the strongest empirical evidences to support the argument that a set of socioeconomic and contextual factors combine in order to shape happiness. The findings have indicated that economic prosperity, especially GDP per capita, is a major factor in the description of cross-national differences in well-being. This is in line with the larger body of literature that indicates that income continues to be a focal factor into life satisfaction, but mediated by contextual circumstances. An example of this is that, according to recent studies, returns to income and education on happiness can be underestimated, especially in cases where more socioeconomic variables are not sufficiently factored into the equation (Barrington-Leigh, 2024). Simultaneously, the results emphasize that economic resources cannot be considered a complete set of factors that elucidate the outcomes of well-being. Social support stands out as a key factor, supporting the role of interpersonal relationships and community cohesion. This aligns with the fact that structural social capital has been found to increase life satisfaction through establishment of trust, cooperation and support among societies (Yuan, 2016). The intersection of economic and social factors highlights the multidimensionality of well-being and justifies the necessity of analytical frameworks that are integrated.

The positive relationship between income and happiness that has been noted in this study is in line with a large amount of empirical literature. Although increased income level tends to enhance well-being by providing more resources and opportunities, the magnitude of this relationship may be different based on measurement and the contextual issues. Recent research highlights that the operationalization and measurement of income play a vital role in the relationship between income and life satisfaction (Smith and Grimes, 2025). This implies that the future studies ought to pay keen attention to income measures so that they can help in a proper estimation of its impacts. Moreover, the evidence confirms the hypothesis that wealth is a contributor to happiness but not universally and in a linear way. It has been shown that the connection between wealth and well-being depends on the overall socioeconomic circumstances, such as inequality and social mobility (Altin, 2023). Here, economic growth might not be sufficient to bring about changes in happiness unless they are coupled with the fair distribution and enabling social systems.

A key application of the findings is the contribution of inequality in determining the income-happiness relationship. Findings indicate that social comparisons and perceptions of fairness in the societies determine the benefits of income. It has been found that the improvement of life satisfaction through income increases is higher in more equal societies, where the differences are not as significant and social solidarity is greater (Quispe-Torreblanca et al., 2021). Meanwhile, there is a complicated and situational relationship between inequality and well-being. There are studies that suggest that inequality might not directly impact life satisfaction at the cross-country level, but can lead to dramatic impacts at the micro-country level over the long-term, especially when it shapes social mobility and opportunity perceptions (Schröder, 2018). This evidence demonstrates the need to understand both the absolute and relative economic conditions in the analysis of well-being. Moreover, the general trends in income inequality remain to be a challenge to the explanation of subjective well-being. Scholars have highlighted the importance of resolving conceptual and methodological issues relating to the measurement of the effects of inequality on happiness (Schneider, 2016). This highlights the significance of taking subtle steps that consider structural and perceptual aspects of inequality.

The cross-national approach taken in this paper indicates that well-being is highly rooted in the wider socioeconomic and institutional environments. The differences among national situations such as development levels, quality of governance, and social cohesion are some of the causes of variations in the outcome of happiness. Empirical studies indicate that socioeconomic determinants of happiness vary according to developed and developing countries, as they are associated with disparities in priorities, resources, and institutional frameworks (Behera et al., 2024). In addition, the influence of social mobility and opportunity structures also impacts well-being in contexts. Research shows that after income no longer affects life satisfaction, there is also a dependence on the level of social mobility and perceived equity in societies (Suriyanrattakorn and Chang, 2022). These results support the need to conceptualize well-being within larger social and institutional contexts and not to focus on economic indicators.

The results of this research have significant implications on research and policy. In terms of research, the findings pose the necessity of more complex models that would integrate economic, social and institutional issues in studying well-being. Recent developments in analytical methods, such as machine learning methods, show a possibility of more advanced modeling of subjective well-being with greater use of variables (Sharma et al., 2025). Such strategies can boost the validity and forecasting abilities of well being studies. Policy implications of the findings propose that enhancing happiness needs a multidimensional process that transcends economic growth. Policies to strengthen social support, decrease inequality, and boost institutional trust are bound to exert enormous effects on well-being. The results support the notion that the interaction between economic prosperity and social cohesion is critical to sustainable increases in happiness.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the interdependence between social media use and the mental well-being of adolescents through the lens of social media use, lifestyle habits, and psychological health in the context of a nuanced framework. The results indicate that the degree of social media use is strongly correlated with stress, anxiety, and depressive effects in adolescents. Notably, the findings indicate that the effects are not homogeneous and are mediated by lifestyle variables (sleep duration and physical activity) which are the key moderators in the correlation between digital behavior and mental health. The article points out that the well-being of adolescents cannot be explained in terms of single variables but it should be a multidimensional concept which takes into account the interactions between digital space and everyday habits. The data indicates that the negative impact of digital activity on mental health, especially when accompanied by unhealthy lifestyle choices, can be worsened, whereas more healthy habits can alleviate them. On the whole, the results help to better understand the experiences of adolescents in the digital age and emphasize the need to encourage balanced use of the digital world in addition to healthy lifestyle habits. These lessons have significant implications to teachers, parents and policymakers who want to help adolescent mental health in more digital societies.

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