

THE PHENOMENON OF HAPPINESS IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VALUE SYSTEM OF YOUNG STUDENTS

O FENÔMENO DA FELICIDADE NO SISTEMA DE VALORES PSICOLÓGICOS DOS JOVENS ESTUDANTES

EL FENÓMENO DE LA FELICIDAD EN EL SISTEMA DE VALORES PSICOLÓGICOS DE LOS JÓVENES ESTUDIANTES



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How to reference this paper:

Prosandieeva, L., Kostiuchenko, O., Voronova, V., Drobot, O., & Kyrychenko, V. (2026). The phenomenon of happiness in the psychological value system of young students. *Revista on line de Política e Gestão Educacional*, 30(esp2), e026083. <https://doi.org/10.22633/rpge.v30iesp2.21387>



| Submitted: 02/04/2026
| Revisions required: 26/05/2026
| Approved: 14/06/2026
| Published: 01/08/2026

Editor: Prof. Dr. Sebastião de Souza Lemes

Deputy Executive Editor: Prof. Dr. José Anderson Santos Cruz

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ABSTRACT: The article presents theoretical analysis and generalization of approaches to the definition of happiness in the system of socio-psychological values of student youth and substantiates its role in self-realisation. An empirical experiment involving students of Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, V. I. Vernadsky Taurida National University and Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University revealed the main value components of experiencing happiness. The results showed a predominance of a hedonic orientation in the perception of happiness. Specifically, 25% of respondents defined happiness as a positive emotional state, 42% reported high satisfaction in “Relationships,” and 58% demonstrated an average level of satisfaction in “Achievement” according to the PERMA model. Health was identified as the most important factor (21%), followed by interpersonal relationships (18%). The findings highlight opportunities for application in university educational practice, particularly the development of emotional intelligence and psychological resilience programs to improve students’ well-being.

KEYWORDS: Happiness. Free-associative Experiment. Student Youth. Hedonic Orientation. Psychological Well-being.

RESUMO: O artigo apresenta uma análise teórica e a generalização de abordagens para a definição de felicidade no sistema de valores sociopsicológicos de jovens estudantes e fundamenta o seu papel na autorrealização. Uma experiência empírica envolvendo estudantes da Universidade Nacional de Cultura e Artes de Kiev, da Universidade Nacional V. I. Vernadsky Taurida e da Universidade Estatal Ivan Franko de Zhytomyr revelou os principais componentes de valor da experiência da felicidade. Os resultados mostraram uma predominância de uma orientação hedônica na percepção da felicidade. Especificamente, 25% dos inquiridos definiram a felicidade como um estado emocional positivo, 42% relataram elevada satisfação nas “Relações” e 58% demonstraram um nível médio de satisfação na “Realização”, de acordo com o modelo PERMA. A saúde foi identificada como o fator mais importante (21%), seguida das relações interpessoais (18%). As conclusões destacam oportunidades de aplicação na prática educativa universitária, particularmente no desenvolvimento de programas de inteligência emocional e resiliência psicológica para melhorar o bem-estar dos estudantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Felicidade. Experiência de associação livre. Jovens estudantes. Orientação hedônica. Bem-estar psicológico.

RESUMEN: El artículo presenta un análisis teórico y una generalización de los enfoques para la definición de la felicidad en el sistema de valores sociopsicológicos de la juventud estudiantil y fundamenta su papel en la autorrealización. Un experimento empírico en el que participaron estudiantes de la Universidad Nacional de Cultura y Artes de Kiev, la Universidad Nacional «V. I. Vernadsky» de Taurida y la Universidad Estatal «Iván Franko» de Jitomir reveló los principales componentes de valor de la experiencia de la felicidad. Los resultados mostraron un predominio de la orientación hedónica en la percepción de la felicidad. Concretamente, el 25 % de los encuestados definió la felicidad como un estado emocional positivo, el 42 % declaró una alta satisfacción en «Relaciones» y el 58 % mostró un nivel medio de satisfacción en «Logros» según el modelo PERMA. La salud se identificó como el factor más importante (21 %), seguida de las relaciones interpersonales (18 %). Los hallazgos ponen de relieve oportunidades de aplicación en la práctica educativa universitaria, en particular el desarrollo de programas de inteligencia emocional y resiliencia psicológica para mejorar el bienestar de los estudiantes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Felicidad. Experimento de asociación libre. Juventud estudiantil. Orientación hedónica. Bienestar psicológico.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of happiness is still among the most sophisticated and controversial constructs in modern psychology. Over the past few years more focus has been given to the socio-psychological and moral-value aspect of a satisfying life, especially to the case with student youth.

In the student environment, a system of hierarchical values is chosen, which is able to regulate behavior, determine its corresponding personal and social models, ways and types of a person's reaction to an event or situation, and influence decision-making.

In this study, the category of "student youth" is not treated only as an age group. It is also understood as a population situated within a specific educational environment, in which academic demands, professional expectations, peer relationships, and the experience of institutional belonging shape the ways young people define well-being and happiness. For this reason, the analysis seeks to connect students' psychological representations of happiness with issues that are relevant to university education, including emotional regulation, learning motivation, social support, resilience, and professional self-determination.

Psychologists state that as a result of the transformation of modern society (surviving significant social cataclysms, pandemics and wars), a deep personality crisis is observed, which is primarily related to the violation of identity, without which the feeling of happiness is impossible.

Simultaneously, even with the heightened interest in happiness, the existing research indicates that neither general psychology nor educational psychology has formulated a unified concept framework and a consistent battery of action steps towards the promotion of the emergence of a thriving, psychologically sound personality.

The aim of this article is to identify and interpret the value components through which Ukrainian university students understand and experience happiness, with particular attention to the relationship between happiness, self-realization, interpersonal relationships, psychological resilience, and educational engagement. To achieve this aim, the study combines a theoretical review of psychological approaches to happiness with an empirical analysis of students' free associations and questionnaire responses. The article therefore examines happiness not only as an individual psychological state, but also as a factor that may influence students' motivation, adaptation, well-being, and participation in university educational life.

The idea of personal happiness within the context of modern psychology can be best explained in those schools of thought that have developed the idea of happiness as not simply

a momentary emotional condition, but a holistic experience of life contentment and personal bliss.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hernández-Torrano and Tursunbayeva (2026) used a psychological network method to analyze hedonic and eudaimonic levels of well-being in 1,549 emerging adults and discovered that the two traditions do not exclude each other, but are closely interdependent.

Chen and Zeng (2022) examined the relationship between the two orientations and affective well-being and academic success of students, concluding that credit to eudaimonic orientation, the relationship between the two orientations is always more predictive of long-term goals pursuits and academic involvement, and the high hedonic orientation may remove sustained efforts and augment procrastination.

The PERMA model created by Seligman (2002) can be considered one of the most popular frameworks to measure happiness among students. Kovich et al. (2023) empirically confirmed that all five constructs of PERMA, including Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, are valid in a sample of a university population, and Accomplishment can be introduced as the most potent predictor of well-being.

This observation is consistent with the achievement-based aspect of happiness in the current study since students equate happiness to self-realization and achievement of goals, as confirmed by Mota et al. (2023), who found that all the aspects of psychological wellbeing, positive relationships, feelings of competency, and purpose are positively related to subjective happiness among university students.

Hobbs et al. (2022) provide the final discussion of the practical implications of the research by presenting a systematic review of 27 studies, which concluded that 85% of university positive psychology courses had positive impacts on student well-being, including higher life satisfaction and happiness.

These studies indicate that happiness and psychological well-being among university students are closely related to educational processes. They are connected not only with individual emotions, but also with academic engagement, the construction of life projects, the quality of interpersonal relationships in the university environment, and students' capacity to remain psychologically resilient under conditions of social instability. This framework supports

the present analysis by situating happiness within the broader relationship between psychological well-being and students' educational development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The philosophical level of the research methodology is based on the basic principles of scientific knowledge: determinism, which allows interpreting the phenomenon of happiness through the interaction of external and internal aspects of empirical research; systematicity—happiness and its components are known depending on the value-meaning system; development—enables the study of changes in the experience of happiness due to the reasons that generate them. The general scientific level allows studying the genesis of personality and its happiness depending on the social sources of influence, which contribute to the active creative self-realization of its social experience in communication and activity, the determination of life orientations, the assimilation of values, attitudes, strategies of behavior in society.

A detailed methodological framework was adopted in order to meet the goals of the research. On the theoretical level, the study was based on a critical evaluation of previous academic research, and the process of generalizing and organizing the modern ideas of happiness into the socio-psychological value system. The major focus was made on explaining the structural elements and determinants of happiness and streamlining the most established theoretical models that shed light on its contribution to personal development, professional, and overall functioning of life. At the empirical level the research included a structured questionnaire prepared according to the questionnaire that was developed by the author himself titled “My Happiness” which was used to capture the subjective images of the participants and their evaluative moods. Also, the free associative technique was implemented as a projective method of psychology, which allowed identifying spontaneous cognitive-emotional reactions, implicit value orientations regarding the feeling of happiness. Central tendencies and percentage distributions were then calculated using quantitative statistical procedures, and the hierarchical patterns of the frequency of the responses of the participants were established. This multidimensional analysis of the psychological structure of happiness and its functional value in the context of the student environment were guaranteed by such an integrated methodological approach.

Data collection combined the author-designed “Student Happiness Architecture” questionnaire with a free-associative task in which students completed the phrase “Happiness is...”. The questionnaire collected data on subjective definitions of happiness, PERMA-based satisfaction parameters, and personal and social factors associated with happiness. Responses were coded into semantic categories and then examined through frequency distributions and percentage analysis. This procedure made it possible to compare the psychological content of happiness with dimensions of student life, including academic achievement, relationships, self-realization, and psychological resources for coping with instability.

The empirical stage was conducted between 2022 and 2024 with 400 students aged 17 to 21 from Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, V. I. Vernadsky Taurida National University, and Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University. Participants were invited through the academic environment of the institutions and took part voluntarily. Before data collection, they were informed about the aim of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymized treatment of responses, and the use of aggregated data for scientific purposes. The study followed the ethical principles indicated in the final author statement, including informed consent, respect for participants’ autonomy, confidentiality of responses, and compliance with professional ethical standards and the Helsinki Declaration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It should be noted that the concept of happiness still continues to “fight” for its institutional conceptual nature since for a long time it was replaced by “more holistic theoretical” constructions (Bianko, 2017, p. 20) in various scientific fields, such as: “psychological well-being”, “well-being”, “well-being”, etc., although they do not exhaust the completeness of its content.

Recent reports released by the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024) show that the world happiness depends more on social cohesion and institutional trust than on the pure economic indicators. As an example, whereas Finland stays the happiest country in the world, such countries as Ukraine show impressive psychological strength; in spite of the existing conflict, recent surveys show that about 58% of Ukrainians are still happy, and this percentage goes up to 75% among the younger adults aged 18–29 (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology [KIIS], 2024). This compliments the long-term findings of the Harvard Study of

Adult Development that states that the quality of social relationships is the primary indicator of life satisfaction in the long term (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023).

“The state of a person, which corresponds to the greatest internal satisfaction with the conditions of his existence, fullness and meaningfulness of life, the realization of his human destiny” (Bianko, 2017, p. 16).

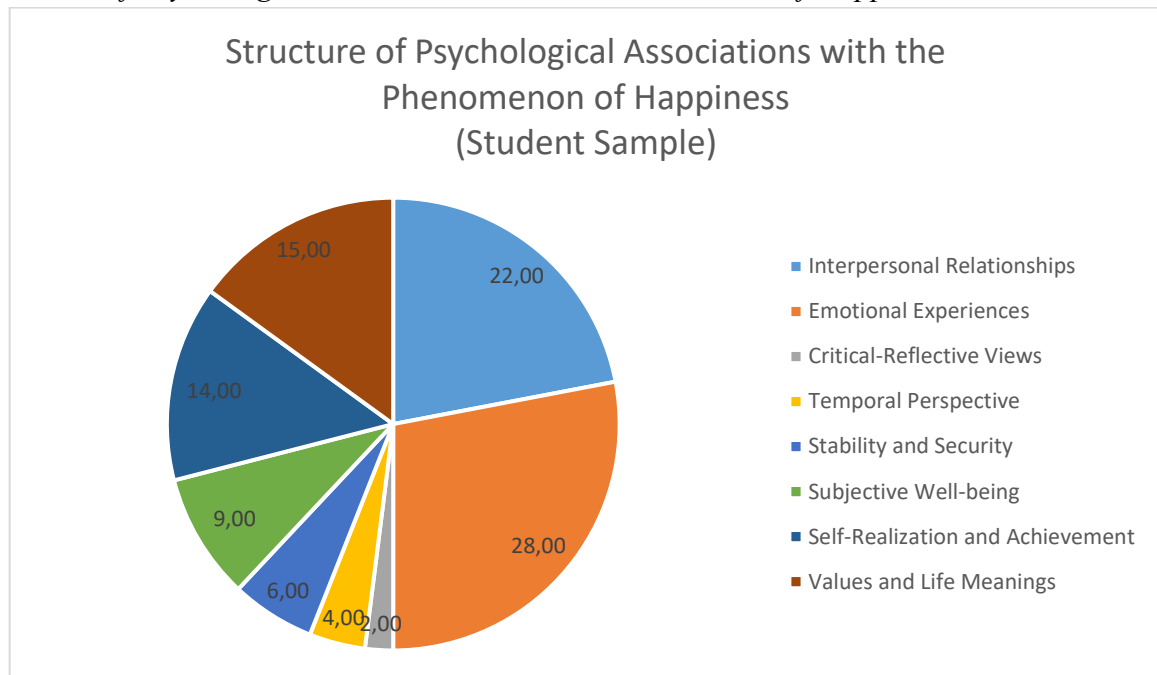
The concept of personal happiness is based on the awareness of it as the highest value, connected with the agreed ratio of “I-physical”, “I-emotional”, “I-cognitive”, “I-social”, “I-spiritual” (Prosandieeva, 2013, 2021). Happiness according to Seligman (2002) is a positivist five-element construct – PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement).

The empirical study was the work that took place in 2022-2024 and included 400 students (age 17–21) who represented many fields of study and different years of study at Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University, and V. I. Vernadsky Taurida National University.

The interpretation of the empirical material was guided by the educational specificity of the sample. Since all respondents were university students, the analysis considered whether happiness was associated only with general life satisfaction or also with factors that structure student experience, such as achievement, engagement, professional self-realization, peer and family support, and the ability to maintain psychological stability during study. This analytical focus was especially relevant in the Ukrainian context, where war and social uncertainty intensify the need to understand students’ well-being as a condition for learning, adaptation, and future professional development.

Figure 1.

Structure of Psychological Associations with the Phenomenon of Happiness



Note. The Authors.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Interpersonal relationships occupy a central position in the structure of students' representations. Love, emotional closeness, social support, friendship, and family are identified as key sources of happiness and psychological resilience. In addition to the emotional dimension, a distinct motivational-achievement component was identified. Happiness is associated with self-realization, goal attainment, professional development, and a sense of life success. For contemporary students, happiness is not reduced to a transient emotional episode but is understood as an outcome of personal agency, persistence, and psychological stability.

Overall, students' psychological associations form a multidimensional structure of the happiness construct, integrating emotional, relational, value-based, and achievement-oriented components.

To collect empirical data for this study, the original questionnaire "Student Happiness Architecture" was developed, based on Martin Seligman's (2002) PERMA model. First, students were asked to define happiness in one or more words, continuing the sentence: "Happiness is...". As a result of the survey (Figure 2), it was found that students mostly define it as a positive state (25%).

According to the PERMA happiness system, students were asked to rate their level of satisfaction on a 10-point scale (from "0" – completely dissatisfied, "5" – partially satisfied,

“10” – completely satisfied) with components / factors / parameters of happiness. It was found out (Figure 2) that a high level of satisfaction prevails for 42% of those interviewed for the “Relationships” parameter; medium level—according to the parameter “Achievement” (in 58%) a low level was found for the parameter “Involvement” (at 32%). In general, the majority of students (48%) demonstrated an average level of satisfaction in all parameters.

From an educational perspective, these results suggest that students’ happiness is shaped by both relational and achievement-oriented dimensions. The high level of satisfaction with relationships indicates the importance of social support networks for maintaining well-being in university life, while the predominance of an average level in achievement suggests that academic and professional self-realization remain areas of active development. The lower indicators for engagement point to the need for institutional strategies that strengthen students’ involvement in meaningful academic, creative, and professional activities.

Figure 2.

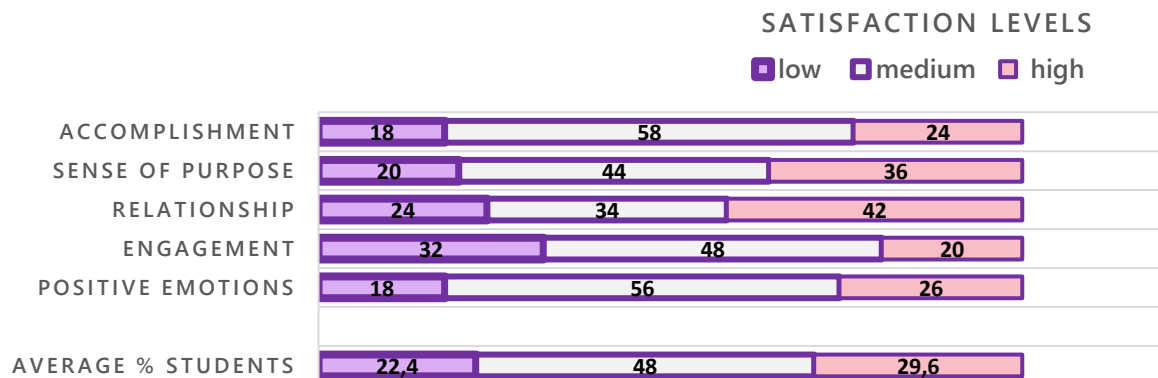
Frequency Distribution of Definitions of Happiness among Students



Note. The Authors.

Figure 3.

Histogram of the Distribution of Students (in %) by Levels of Satisfaction Parameters of Happiness



Note. The Authors.

The meaningful equivalent of experiencing happiness is the phenomenon of subjective well-being of an individual (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Adler, 2019), which cognitively and affectively evaluates life and significantly depends on guidelines and personally accepted values and goals that determine the priority of those or other vital needs.

The concept of flow as an optimal experience in psychology was applied by M. Csikszentmihalyi together with his followers at the end of the 20th century (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura 1999). His concept of flow is, in fact, a theory of achieving happiness in activity M. Csikszentmihalyi and J. Nakamura applied another complex form of flow-related experiences in psychology—vital engagement (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, 2020).

Among the youth audience, the Japanese concept of a long, happy and meaningful life “Ikigai” has become relevant, popular and effective (García & Miralles, 2017). Hryniv (2014) distinguishes four groups of approaches to the study of the psychological well-being of an individual: eudemonistic and hedonistic theories; research of psychological well-being based on the positive psychological functioning of the individual; psychological well-being from the point of view of preservation of psychophysiological functions; as a holistic subjective experience of an individual.

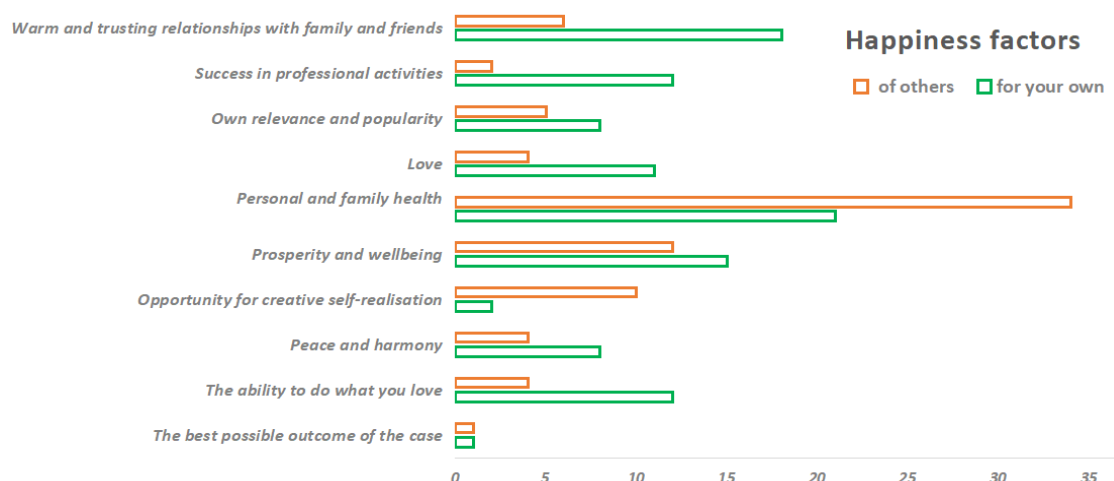
Based on the idea of Abraham Maslow (1954) that the content of happiness is the satisfaction of needs, we define such mandatory components of happiness as satisfaction (the ratio I have/want), which arises as a result of the realization of needs of lower levels (Irkhin et al., 2021). We consider the age aspect of experiencing personal happiness in combination with

the value-motivational sphere, with the peculiarities of the formation of life strategies and projects (Drobot, 2024; Kyrychenko, 2024). An image of well-being and happiness is formed through the prism of one's own values and a full worldview (Kostiuchenko, 2022, 2023).

In order to identify the value components of experiencing happiness, respondents were asked to identify: 1) values, needs, desires, the implementation of which will contribute to their happiness; 2) the most important factor in their own happiness and 3) for most of the people they know. Health turned out to be the most important factor for one's own happiness (21%) and the happiness of others (34%), warm and trusting relationships with family and friends are also important for one's own happiness in 18%, but only 6% believe that it is important for others (Figure 3).

Figure 4.

Histogram of Partial Distribution of Factors Influencing Happiness Respondents (Row 1) and the Majority of People Known to the Respondents (Row 2)



Source. The Authors.

The same number of respondents (12%) consider success in professional self-realization and the opportunity to do what they love to be the most important for their own happiness, but for other respondents, the distribution of the importance of these factors is different (2% and 4%, respectively). In our previous study (2020-2021), among the different groups of values (adaptability, socialization, individualization), the first one prevailed (preferences for values: “health”, “material security”, “self-confidence”, “emotional saturation of life or process”, “survival”) (Kostiuchenko & Bryl, 2020). This testifies to the fact that the most important values for student youth are multifaceted health, including healthy relationships; there are also significant differences in the definition of one's own values and the values of others, which

indicates a revision of the values that have been prioritized for so long: success, power, money, compared to such as family and friendship ties, health and well-being.

The given phenomenon can be tracked down to the examination of their semantic patterns and the opportunity of particular individual constructs to obtain a unique evaluative meaning (Kyrychenko, 2024). In our 2025 research based on a sample of adolescents and young adults, we found that objects, phenomena, and people that help an individual to be successful are also critical resources to stay happy internally.

According to our study conducted in 2023, when exposed to the reality of war, young people started to give the notions of physical health and mental health a higher level of evaluative significance as the key prerequisites to success in life (Kyrychenko, 2024).

In this regard, the findings show that the university environment may function as an important space for supporting young people's psychological stability. Programs aimed at emotional intelligence, peer support, resilience, reflective practices, and career self-determination may help transform the experience of happiness from a merely hedonic emotional state into a resource for learning, adaptation, and personal development. The educational relevance of the study therefore lies in identifying which components of happiness can be strengthened through university-based psychological and pedagogical support.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study determined that happiness, as an integral personal formation, occupies an important place in the consciousness of students and functions as a condition for self-realization in different spheres of life. It includes spiritual dimensions, such as meaning, self-identification, and life mission; social dimensions, such as quality relationships, trust, and benevolence; intellectual dimensions, such as curiosity and enthusiasm; emotional dimensions, such as the ability to experience and regulate a full range of emotions; and physical dimensions, especially health, working capacity, and endurance. In the student environment, these dimensions are also connected with learning motivation, academic persistence, professional expectations, and the formation of life projects.

The empirical results showed that students' representations of happiness are predominantly hedonic, since many respondents associate happiness with positive emotions, joy, satisfaction, and interpersonal closeness. At the same time, the data also reveal eudaimonic and educationally relevant components, especially achievement, self-realization, professional

development, and the search for meaning. The results of the PERMA-based questionnaire indicate that relationships are a particularly strong source of satisfaction, while achievement and engagement require further attention in university practice. These findings suggest that happiness among students should be understood as a multidimensional construct that combines emotional well-being, social support, value orientations, and educational development.

Finally, happiness in the value system of students should not be interpreted only as a final state or as an individual emotional experience. It is also a process of self-actualization through which professional success, psychological resilience, social belonging, and internal harmony are combined within a single semantic vector. The study therefore shows that the educational significance of happiness lies in its connection with students' capacity to remain engaged in learning, construct future-oriented goals, maintain supportive relationships, and cope with social instability. These findings may inform university practices aimed at developing emotional intelligence, resilience, psychological support, and meaningful student participation. The study is limited by its focus on Ukrainian students in a context marked by war and social uncertainty; future research should compare different educational contexts and examine how university interventions can strengthen the components of happiness identified in this research.

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APPENDIX

Student Happiness Architecture Questionnaire

I. Subjective Definition

1. Complete the following phrase: “For me, happiness is...”

II. Self-Assessment via the PERMA Model

2. Please rate your level of satisfaction with each parameter on a scale from 0 to 10 (where 0 is “completely dissatisfied,” 5 is “partially satisfied,” and 10 is “completely satisfied”):

P (Positive Emotions): How often do you feel joy, contentment, peace, and interest in your daily life?

E (Engagement): Do you have activities (studies, hobbies) that you get fully absorbed in, losing track of time (state of flow)?

R (Relationships): How satisfied are you with the quality of communication and support from friends, family, and peers?

M (Meaning): Do you feel that your activities are important and serve a higher purpose (e.g., social value, self-actualization)?

A (Accomplishment): How satisfied are you with your success in your studies or personal goals?

III. Resources and Priorities

3. Select your TOP 3 components (one from each category) whose realization would most significantly increase your happiness right now:

Values: self-development, freedom, love, integrity, creativity, other.

Needs: financial independence, quality sleep/rest, sense of security, social recognition, other.

Desires: travel, successful graduation, purchasing a specific item, new acquaintances, other.

IV. Key Factors (Personal vs. Social)

4. Identify the SINGLE most critical factor for your OWN happiness (the one without which everything else loses its meaning): Good health (your own and your loved ones'); Having a significant other / family support; Opportunity to pursue your passion/favorite activity; Material well-being and financial stability; Freedom of choice and action; Other.

5. In your opinion, what is the most important factor of happiness for the MAJORITY of people you know (friends, classmates, colleagues)?

CRediT Author Statement

- ☐ **Acknowledgments:** Not applicable.
 - ☐ **Funding:** The development of this research did not receive financial support from any funding agency.
 - ☐ **Conflicts of interest:** None.
 - ☐ **Ethical approval:** All participants of empirical measurements (respondents) were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent for voluntary participation, processing and use of the obtained results. The research was carried out in accordance with the Code of Ethics of a Ukrainian scientist, Article 42 of the Law of Ukraine “On Education”, norms of professional ethics, as well as the Helsinki Declaration of 1964.
 - ☐ **Data and material availability:** The data sources are publicly available on the respective websites.
 - ☐ **Authors’ contributions:** Liudmyla Prosandieeva: Conceptualization, supervision, theoretical framework, manuscript preparation. Olena Kostiuchenko: Literature review, methodological design, data analysis. Vilena Voronova: Pedagogical expertise, critical review, manuscript revision. Olga Drobot: Data collection, analysis, visualization of educational materials. Viktor Kyrychenko: Data collection, analysis, visualization of educational materials.
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Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação
Proofreading, formatting, normalization and translation

