

Seeking Happiness, Finding Discontent: Navigating the Complex Pursuit of Well-Being

Srikant Manchiraju¹, Swagata Chakraborty², and Amrut Sadachar³

¹The Jim Moran College of Entrepreneurship, Florida State University, United States

²Department of Merchandising and Digital Retailings, University of North Texas, United States

³Department of Consumer and Design Sciences, Auburn University, United States

The pursuit of happiness is a universal human aspiration; yet existing research suggests that it can paradoxically lead to a decrease in well-being. This phenomenon is often explained by a goal-pursuit framework, which posits that setting high standards for happiness, engaging in counterproductive activities, and excessively monitoring one's emotional state can have a detrimental effect on well-being. This study aimed to evaluate the pursuit of happiness using the goal-pursuit framework empirically. Specifically, it aimed to investigate how valuing happiness, monitoring emotions, and setting various standards (realistic versus unrealistic) influence subjective well-being (SWB), and to explore the moderating effects of these factors. An online survey of 323 US participants collected data using reliable and valid measures for valuing happiness, emotional monitoring, standard setting (perfectionism/excellencism), and extrinsic aspirations. Statistical analysis, including path modeling, was employed to test direct and moderating hypotheses regarding the influence of these variables on subjective well-being. Valuing happiness, emotional monitoring, and perfectionism hurt subjective well-being (SWB), whereas excellencism (i.e., setting realistic goals) has a positive influence, with extrinsic aspirations showing a marginal positive effect. Unexpectedly, emotional monitoring and perfectionism positively moderated the relationship between valuing happiness and SWB, suggesting a buffering effect under certain conditions, while other factors showed no significant moderation. The study provides empirical support for the goal-pursuit framework, distinguishing between beneficial realistic standards and detrimental unrealistic ones, while also offering practical insights for interventions. Practitioners should focus on reducing perfectionism and enhancing emotional regulation, while policymakers can support programs that promote intrinsic goals and mindfulness to improve overall well-being.


Keywords: Valuing happiness, well-being, goal pursuit, counteractive activities

The pursuit of happiness is a universal human aspiration (Manchiraju, 2013). However, existing research (e.g., Kim & Maglio, 2025; Manchiraju & Damhorst, 2020; Manchiraju, 2013) has demonstrated the paradoxical effect of pursuing happiness, which includes aspects such as a decrement in physical and mental health. Researchers (e.g., Ford & Mauss, 2014; Schooler & Mauss, 2010) have attempted to explain this paradoxical effect, as it has both theoretical and practical implications. For instance, by recognizing that the pursuit of happiness itself may become a source of pressure, practitioners can develop interventions that focus on fostering acceptance of a range of emotions rather than solely promoting happiness (Humphrey et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2014).

Consistently, Ford and Mauss (2014) proposed a theoretical

framework, namely, the happiness goal-pursuit framework, which explained that these paradoxical effects can be noted due to 1) setting high standards for happiness, 2) engaging in counterproductive happiness attainment activities, and 3) excessively monitoring one's emotional state. To date, to the researchers' knowledge, the happiness goal-pursuit framework has been empirically tested. Thus, the present study aimed to empirically evaluate the pursuit of happiness, utilizing a goal-pursuit framework as proposed by Ford and Mauss (2014).

This study is essential because it addresses critical gaps in the existing literature by providing empirical validation for the theoretical framework explaining the "paradoxical effects of pursuing happiness". While previous research identified this paradox, this study empirically tests the specific mechanisms proposed by Ford and Mauss (2014). It provides a more nuanced understanding of how different types of goal setting (i.e., realistic "excellencism" versus unrealistic "perfectionism") distinctly impact subjective well-being, a distinction not always clearly delineated in prior work. Additionally, the research highlights the moderating

Srikant Manchiraju  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3858-9087>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amrut Sadachar, Ph.D. Department of Consumer and Design Sciences, College of Human Sciences, 360 Spidle Hall, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849 USA. Email: amrut@auburn.edu Phone: 334-844-1316

roles of emotional monitoring and standard setting, providing insights into the "potential boundary conditions of the happiness paradox" and explaining when and how the pursuit of happiness can become detrimental. This helps resolve some of the complexities and seemingly conflicting findings in the broader literature on the pursuit of happiness.

To this end, the manuscript is organized as follows: first, the concept of happiness and its effects on individuals. Next, happiness as a goal and the process as proposed by the happiness goal-pursuit framework (Ford & Mauss, 2014) is discussed. Based on the extant literature, a set of hypotheses is proposed, which were subjected to empirical testing. This is followed by a discussion section where the study's results are detailed. Ultimately, the article examines the drawbacks, implications, and future directions associated with the topic.

Literature Review

Happiness

Happiness refers to a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life (Diener et al., 1999). Several concepts have been associated with happiness: subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Diener et al., 1999; Manchiraju, 2020; Shir et al., 2024). In this study, happiness is associated with positive emotion, which many consider a priority (Manchiraju & Damhorst, 2020; Russell, 2003). Thus, the pursuit of happiness has been explored by researchers (e.g., Humphrey et al., 2022) and has been associated with concepts such as wanting/valuing (Mauss et al., 2011), pursuing (Schooler et al., 2003), and emotional regulation (Ford & Mauss, 2014).

The Effects of Pursuing Happiness

Recent studies (e.g., Kim & Maglio, 2025; Humphrey et al., 2022) have found that pursuing happiness as a goal can be detrimental to an individual. For example, correlational studies examining the relationship between individuals' valuation of happiness and their reported emotional well-being revealed a negative correlation (Ford & Mauss, 2014). Additionally, an individual's level of valuing happiness was positively correlated with loneliness experienced (Mauss et al., 2011). Ford and Mauss (2014, p. 366) consistently noted, "several lines of evidence converge to support the hypothesis that the pursuit of happiness—measured through questionnaires or induced through experimental manipulations—can lead to increased negative outcomes, including, paradoxically, decreased happiness."

Happiness: A Goal

The pursuit of happiness is a goal-oriented state (Ford & Mauss, 2014). Goals are internal representations of desired states that guide an individual's actions to pursue the goal (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Given that the goal is desirable to the individual, one monitors their progress toward it (Lawrence, Carver, & Scheier, 2002; see also achievement goal theory, Urdan & Kaplan, 2020). Thus, goals involve establishing standards, guiding action toward the goal, and monitoring progress. When happiness is the goal, per the Ford and Mauss framework (2014), the process might resemble (1) setting high standards for one's happiness, (2) engaging in specific actions to attain happiness, and (3) monitoring one's progress toward one's happiness.

Additionally, these three mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, allowing for the possibility of multiple mechanisms operating simultaneously (Ford & Mauss, 2014). Each mechanism is individually discussed in the present study.

Setting Unrealistic Standards

When individuals pursue happiness as a goal, they set high standards, which is reasonable. However, there is a distinction between setting high standards deemed achievable (e.g., excellencism, Gaudreau et al., 2022) and the high standards that are impossible to achieve (e.g., perfectionism, Shafran & Mansell, 2001). Ford and Mauss (2014) maintained that the former is expected, but the latter is problematic or detrimental to the individual. For instance, wanting to feel happy at a rapid frequency is detrimental to the individual. For instance, wanting to feel happy across all contexts is maladaptive since experiencing a monotonous emotional state is detrimental to the individual (e.g., Quoidbach et al., 2014). Likewise, wanting to feel happy with greater intensity will likely lead to disappointment when one's current state falls short; disappointment, in turn, impedes the experience of happiness itself.

Misguided Attempts to Pursue Happiness

Existing research (e.g., Ferber et al., 2024; Manchiraju & Damhorst, 2020; Manchiraju & Son, 2013) has highlighted the negative consequences of pursuing extrinsic goals, such as materialism and physical beauty, which are prevalent among many. For example, people who invest in activities that end in themselves (e.g., activities that one enjoys or acquiring memorable life experiences) are more likely to be happy in the long run compared to people who engage in activities that are a means to an end (e.g., activities that focus on acquiring material possessions or fame or physical beauty) (Manchiraju & Son, 2013; Manchiraju & Damhorst, 2020; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Monitoring Happiness

Monitoring one's emotional state can be counterproductive to happiness because it induces "meta-awareness" of one's hedonic state, leading to reflection on one's experiences rather than simply experiencing them (Mauss et al., 2011). This meta-awareness precludes the ability to be fully engaged and absorbed in the present moment, which is associated with people's most rewarding and contented moments (e.g., flow experience; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Overall, the more one thinks about one's experience of happiness, the less likely one is to experience happiness. Research indicates that constant evaluation of one's happiness can lead to heightened anxiety and negativity, as individuals may fixate on perceived shortcomings in their emotional states (Luhmann et al., 2016). This preoccupation may lead individuals to feel pressured to maintain happiness, with the detrimental effect of inducing further disappointment and discontent when they inevitably experience mood fluctuations. In summary, monitoring one's emotional state can be counterproductive to happiness as it leads to a decreased experience of happiness through meta-awareness and reflection on one's experiences, ultimately undermining the happiness experience (Eid & Diener, 2001).

Hypotheses

Based on the extant literature reviewed, the pursuit of happiness as viewed from a goal-pursuit framework (see Figure x), the

following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: An individual's valuing of happiness negatively influences one's subjective well-being (SWB).

H2: Monitoring one's emotions negatively influences one's subjective well-being (SWB).

H3: Setting high standards (regarding unrealistic expectations, i.e., perfectionism) negatively influences subjective well-being (SWB).

H4: Setting high standards (setting realistic expectations to achieve excellence, i.e., excellencism) positively influences subjective well-being (SWB).

H5: Engaging in counterproductive activities (i.e., extrinsic aspirations) negatively influences subjective well-being (SWB).

H6: Monitoring one's emotions has a moderating effect on valuing happiness–SWB relationship.

H7: Setting high standards (in terms of unrealistic expectations, i.e., perfectionism) moderates valuing happiness–SWB relationship.

H8: Setting high standards (setting realistic expectations to achieve excellence, i.e., excellencism) moderates the valuing of happiness–SWB relationship.

H9: Engaging in counterproductive activities (e.g., extrinsic aspirations) moderates valuing happiness–SWB relationship.

Methods

Participants

Data were collected through an online survey administered on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The online survey link was created using the Qualtrics program. The convenience sample of the US nationals consisted of male and female consumers ages 18 and over. Each participant was given a nominal financial incentive for their time and participation in the survey.

A total of 323 usable cases were collected over one week. There was almost equal representation of male and female participants. Most of the respondents were white (74.3%), between the ages of 25 and 34 (44.6%), with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (46.4%), and were married (57.0%). See Table 1 for the detailed demographic characteristics of the sample. Ethical approval was received from the Florida State University Ethics Board with decision date/number: 08.20.2018/IRB00000446.

Measures

Existing reliable and valid measures were used to measure the research variables. Data related to demographics were also collected. The scales employed in the present study are explained in the following paragraphs.

Valuing happiness. The 7-item scale developed by Mauss et al. (2011) was used in the study to measure the variable of valuing happiness. Sample items were “How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is” and “I value things in life only to the extent that they influence my personal happiness.” These were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strongly Agree.”

Subjective well-being (SWB). The 4-item scale developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) was used to measure subjective well-being. Sample items were “In general, I consider myself:” and

“Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:” Responses were recorded as per the original scale on a Likert-type format scale.

Monitoring one's emotions (or happiness). The 5-item scale developed by Swinkels and Giuliano (1995) was adapted for the study to measure the variable of monitoring one's emotions. Sample items were “I often evaluate my positive emotions or happiness” and “I find myself thinking about my positive emotions or happiness during the day.” These were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strongly Agree.”

Table 1. Demographic profile of the sample ($n = 323$)

Demographics	%
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	49.5
Female	50.5
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
White	74.3
Hispanic or Latino	6.2
Black or African American	14.6
Native American	1.5
Asian or Pacific Islander	2.8
Other	0.6
<i>Age</i>	
18-24	4.6
25-34	44.6
35-44	28.8
45-54	12.7
55-64	6.8
65-74	2.2
> 75	0.3
<i>Education</i>	
High school degree	21.1
Associate degree	13.9
Bachelor's degree	44.9
Master's degree	16.7
Professional or doctorate degree	3.1
Other	0.3
<i>Income</i>	
< \$50,000	38.1
\$50,000-\$100,000	46.4
\$100,001-\$150,000	10.5
\$150,001-\$200,000	4.0
> 200,000	0.9
<i>Marital status</i>	
Married	57.0
Widowed	1.2
Divorced	5.6
Separated	2.2
Never married	34.1

Setting high standards. The 15-item scale developed by Hewitt et al. (1991) was adapted for the study to measure the variable of setting high standards. Sample items were “I often feel frustrated because I can't meet my goals” and “My best just never seems to be good enough for me.” These were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strongly Agree.” Factor analysis revealed that this construct consisted of two factors: setting unrealistic expectations (i.e., perfectionism) and setting realistic expectations (i.e., excellencism).

Extrinsic Aspirations (or engaging in counterproductive activities). The 45-item aspiration scale developed by Kasser and Ryan (1996; Aspiration Index) was adapted for the study to measure

Table 2. Measurement scale items with their factor loadings from CFA and reliabilities

Items	AVE	CFA Factor loading	CR	α
Valuing Happiness	.50		.83	.83
1. How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is.		.65		
2. If I don't feel happy, maybe there is something wrong with me.		.59		
3. I value things in life only to the extent that they influence my personal happiness.		.77		
4. I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy.		.74		
5. To have a meaningful life, I need to feel happy most of the time.		.76		
Monitoring One's Emotions	.71		.88	.88
1. I often evaluate my positive emotions or happiness.		.81		
2. I find myself thinking about my positive emotions or happiness during the day.		.85		
3. On my way home from work or school, I find myself evaluating my positive emotions or happiness.		.88		
Setting High Standards 1	.69		.96	.96
1. I often feel frustrated because I can't meet my goals.		.73		
2. My best just never seems to be good enough for me.		.89		
3. I rarely live up to my high standards.		.89		
4. Doing my best never seems to be enough.		.91		
5. I am never satisfied with my accomplishments.		.87		
6. I often worry about not measuring up to my own expectations.		.85		
7. My performance rarely measures up to my standards.		.90		
8. I am not satisfied even when I know I have done my best.		.84		
9. I hardly ever feel that what I have done is good enough.		.89		
Setting High Standards 2	.57		.91	.92
1. I have high expectations for myself.		.84		
2. I set very high standards for myself.		.86		
3. I expect the best from myself.		.73		
4. I try to do my best at everything I do.		.88		
5. I have a strong need to strive for excellence.		.88		
Focusing on External Goals: How important is it for you?				
Focusing on External Goals: Wealth	.61	.74	.89	.88
1. To be a very wealthy person.		.86		
2. To have many expensive possessions.		.76		
3. To be financially successful.		.67		
4. To be rich.		.92		
5. To have enough money to buy everything I want.		.66		
Focusing on External Goals: Fame	.78	.96	.95	.95
1. To have my name known by many people.		.91		
2. To be admired by many people.		.85		
3. To be famous.		.92		
4. To have my name appear frequently in the media.		.91		
5. To be admired by lots of different people.		.83		
Focusing on External Goals: Image	.66	.92	.91	.91
1. To successfully hide the signs of aging.		.74		
2. To have people comment often about how attractive I look.		.88		
3. To keep up with fashions in hair and clothing.		.81		
4. To achieve the "look" I've been after.		.80		
5. To have an image that others find appealing.		.83		
Subjective Well-Being				
1. In general, I consider myself _____	.80	.92	.93	.93
2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself _____		.91		
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?		.87		

[only] extrinsic aspirations (e.g., wealth, fame, and image). Participants rated (1) the importance to themselves of each aspiration, (2) their beliefs about the likelihood of attaining each, and (3) the degree to which they have already attained each aspiration. Sample items were "Life goal: To be a very wealthy person." These were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = "not at all" and 7 = "very."

Statistical Analysis

SPSS 25.0 was used to perform descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability analysis, and MPlus 8.0 was used for testing validity, confirmatory factor analysis, and hypothesized relationships. This study followed the guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Institutional Review Board approval on human subjects was obtained before collecting the data.

All participants were informed about the study, and all provided informed consent.

Results

Reliability and Validity of Scales

The reliability and validity of the scales were checked with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in MPlus. The CFA model fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 1738.29$, $df = 722$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2 / df = 2.40$; RMSEA = .07; CFI = .91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .06). The measurement scales had average variance extracted (AVE) ranging between .50 and .80, indicating adequate convergent validity. The factor loadings were reliable, ranging between .59 and .96. The range of composite reliability and Cronbach's α ranged between .83 and .96, indicating adequate construct reliability and internal consistency in the scales, respectively (see Table 2). The square roots of the factor loadings were higher than the inter-construct correlations, indicating adequate discriminant validity for all the measurement scales (see Table 3). Therefore, all the measurement scales had the required validity and reliability.

Hypothesis Testing

All hypotheses were tested using a single, comprehensive path model in MPlus. The model had a good fit ($\chi^2 = 1738.29$, $df = 722$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2 / df = 2.40$; RMSEA = .07; CFI = .91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .06). Composite scores of the variables were used in the path model to test both the direct paths (*H1-H5*) and to create the interaction terms to test the moderating hypotheses (*H6-H9*). Hypotheses *H1-H4* were supported. **H1** Valuing happiness ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .05$), **H2** monitoring one's emotions ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .01$), and **H3** setting high standards in terms of setting unrealistic expectations (i.e., perfectionism) ($\beta = -.61$, $p < .001$) negatively influenced SWB. **H4** Setting high standards in terms of setting realistic expectations to achieve excellence (i.e., excellencism) ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$) positively influenced SWB. The positive influence of **H5** external goals on subjective well-being was non-significant ($\beta = .22$, $p = .09$).

The interaction between **H6** valuing happiness and monitoring one's emotions ($\beta = .90$, $p < .001$) and **H7** valuing happiness and setting high standards in terms of setting unrealistic expectations (i.e., perfectionism) ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$) had positive influences on SBW. There was no significant interaction between **H8** valuing happiness and setting high standards in terms of setting realistic expectations to achieve excellence (i.e., excellencism) ($\beta = -.26$, $p = .24$) and **H9** valuing happiness and focusing on external goals ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .76$) on SBW. About 76% ($p = .001$) of the variance in SBW was explained by the identified independent variables and the interactions between valuing happiness and monitoring one's

emotions, as well as between valuing happiness and setting high standards (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate and empirically validate the paradox of pursuing happiness and its impact on subjective well-being (SWB), drawing upon the happiness goal-pursuit theoretical framework proposed by Ford and Mauss (2014). The findings suggest that pursuing happiness, when operationalized as valuing happiness, monitoring one's emotions, and setting high standards, can have both positive and negative implications for SWB. These findings contribute to the existing literature by empirically validating the proposed hypotheses and shedding light on the mechanisms underlying the happiness paradox. The findings of our study can be explained by drawing on the existing literature on happiness, affect, and well-being.

An individual's valuing of happiness negatively influences one's SWB (*H1*). The findings supported this hypothesis, aligning with previous research indicating that placing excessive importance on happiness can paradoxically lead to decreased well-being (Ford & Mauss, 2014; Humphrey et al., 2022; Tamir & Ford, 2012). Collectively, the literature suggests that valuing happiness too highly may result in disappointment when happiness is not achieved, contributing to lower SWB.

Per *H2*, monitoring one's emotions has a negative influence on SWB. The results supported this hypothesis and were consistent with prior research (Conner & Reid, 2012; Ford & Mauss, 2014; Kim & Maglio, 2025; Luhmann et al., 2016). Constantly monitoring one's emotional state can lead to heightened self-awareness, which may detract from fully experiencing positive emotions and diminish overall SWB (Mauss et al., 2011). Constant self-monitoring can alter and often detract from the hedonic experience, leading to decreased happiness and well-being (e.g., Luhmann et al., 2016). According to *H3*, setting high standards (in terms of unrealistic expectations, i.e., perfectionism) negatively impacts SWB. This study supported the hypothesis, aligning with the notion that setting unattainable standards for happiness can lead to dissatisfaction and a decrease in SWB (Ford & Mauss, 2014). This is consistent with previous research highlighting the detrimental effects of perfectionistic tendencies on well-being (Shafran & Mansell, 2001). The negative impact of setting high standards and not reaching those goals on SWB can be further explained by the frustration that arises from the discrepancy between desired and actual levels of happiness, which can undermine the happiness experience.

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation, and correlations of the research variables

Measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlations</i>							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Valuing happiness	4.18	1.40	.71							
2. Monitoring one's emotions	4.83	1.42	.62**	.84						
3. Setting high standards 1	3.77	1.70	.55**	.36**	.83					
4. Setting high standards 2	5.61	1.15	.27**	.41**	.13**	.75				
5. External goals: Wealth	4.06	1.60	.48**	.42**	.40**	.27**	.78			
6. External goals: Fame	2.62	1.83	.63**	.54**	.53**	.26**	.63**	.88		
7. External goals: Image	3.23	1.76	.57**	.52**	.43**	.32**	.68**	.83**	.81	
8. Subjective well-being	4.88	1.48	.26**	.32**	-.13**	.39**	.22**	.39**	.39**	.89

Note. ** $p < .01$. Numbers in the diagonal represent the square roots of the AVEs of the constructs

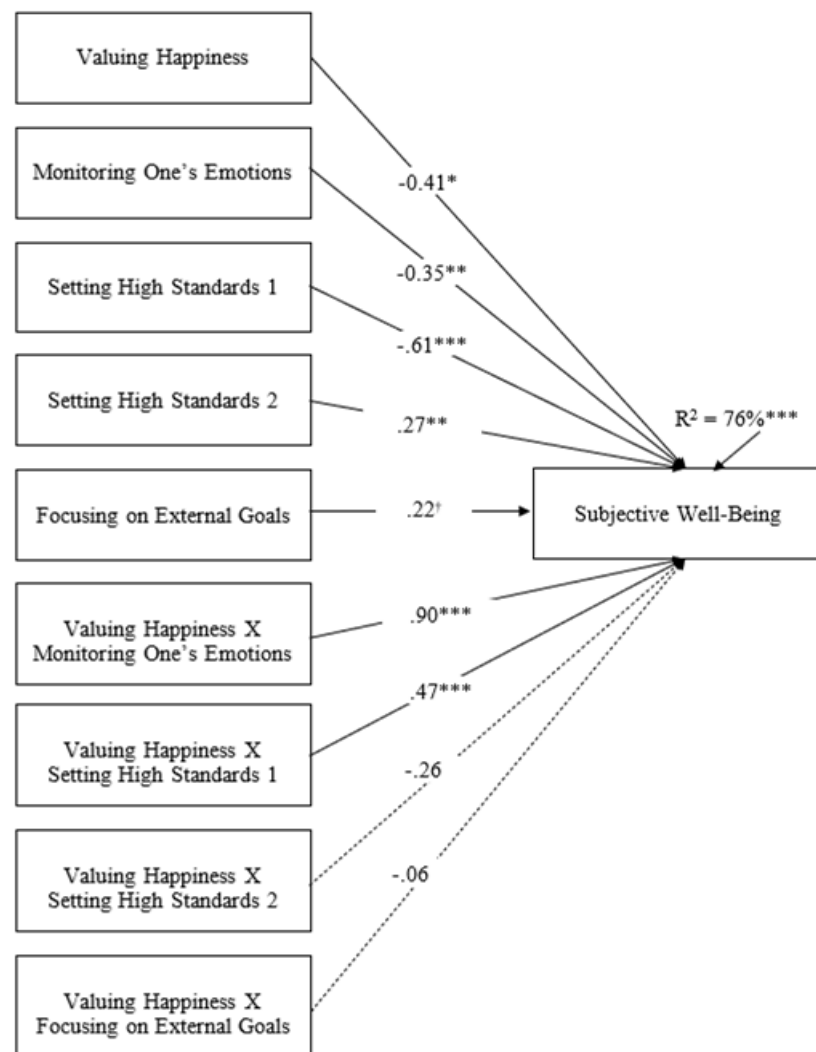


Figure 1. Path diagram with standardized coefficients. † $p < .10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

On the other hand, per *H4*, setting high standards (in terms of setting realistic expectations to achieve excellence, i.e., excellencism) has a positive influence on SWB. This hypothesis was supported, suggesting that setting realistic and attainable standards can contribute to a higher level of SWB (Gaudreau et al., 2022). Individuals who strive for excellence without demanding perfection are likely to experience greater satisfaction and well-being, possibly because they have more realistic and attainable goals.

H5 proposed that engaging in counterproductive activities (i.e., extrinsic aspirations) negatively influences SWB. This hypothesis was not supported. However, the literature (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2023) suggests that pursuing extrinsic goals, such as materialism and fame, can ultimately lead to a decline in well-being. Recently, there has been some evidence that extrinsic aspirations and pursuits may not always hinder well-being. For example, reframing extrinsic goals that align with personal meaning, social connectedness or some broader communal values rather than just as a purely material gain (Kim & Maglio, 2025). However, further research may be necessary to elucidate the extent of these effects fully.

H6 proposed that monitoring one's emotions has a moderating

effect on valuing happiness—SWB relationship. In other words, the *H6* hypothesis posited that the impact of valuing happiness on SWB would be contingent upon individuals' tendency to monitor their emotional states. Individuals who frequently assess their emotional states may develop a heightened awareness of their feelings, leading to increased sensitivity to both positive and negative emotions (Humphrey et al., 2022). This dual awareness can create pressure to feel happy, resulting in "emotional perfectionism," where individuals feel they must respond to emotional states with insistence rather than acceptance (Bastian et al., 2014). This increased emphasis can paradoxically decrease overall well-being, as the focus shifts from experiencing emotions to evaluating them, which is supported by research indicating that individuals who highly value happiness may suppress negative emotions (Humphrey et al., 2022). Thus, it was anticipated that individuals who highly value happiness and frequently monitor their emotions may experience exacerbated adverse effects on SWB. Conversely, those who value happiness but do not engage in excessive monitoring may exhibit a less pronounced decrease in SWB. The study's results indicated a positive moderating effect, suggesting that monitoring

emotions may buffer the negative impact of valuing happiness on SWB such that the negative association between valuing happiness and SWB is weakened for individuals who frequently and excessively monitor their emotions. It indicates a complex interplay between these factors, where a strong desire for happiness may mitigate the adverse effects of monitoring one's emotions. This unexpected finding warrants further investigation and may indicate potential protective mechanisms or adaptive coping strategies associated with emotional self-awareness.

Similarly, per *H7*, setting high standards (regarding unrealistic expectations, i.e., perfectionism) moderates the value of the happiness—SWB relationship. This hypothesis explored the potential moderating role of setting unrealistic standards in the relationship between valuing happiness and SWB. Building on the literature on perfectionism and well-being (Shafran & Mansell, 2001), it was hypothesized that individuals who highly value happiness and set unattainable standards may experience exacerbated decreases in SWB. Conversely, those who value happiness but maintain more realistic standards may exhibit a less pronounced decline in well-being. Contrary to expectations, the study's results indicated a positive moderating effect, highlighting the less detrimental impact of perfectionistic tendencies on the pursuit of happiness and well-being. This finding is consistent with some previous findings (e.g., Liu et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2016). Research indicates that perfectionistic strivings, often associated with adaptive perfectionism, can lead to higher levels of life satisfaction, suggesting that not all forms of perfectionism uniformly result in dissatisfaction (Liu et al., 2022). This perspective is supported by studies showing that positive perfectionism can buffer the negative influence of negative perfectionism on emotions such as anxiety and depression (Xia et al., 2016). Furthermore, respondents' social desirability bias for perfectionism may have played a role, as reflected in the relatively low mean scores for this dimension.

Setting high standards (in terms of setting realistic expectations to achieve excellence, i.e., excellencism) was proposed to have a moderating effect on the valuing happiness- SWB relationship (*H8*). This hypothesis posited that setting realistic standards for happiness, characterized by a pursuit of excellence rather than perfectionism, may buffer the adverse effects of valuing happiness on SWB. Drawing on research that emphasizes the benefits of striving for excellence while maintaining flexibility and accepting imperfection (Gaudreau et al., 2022), it was expected that individuals who value happiness and pursue excellence would experience enhanced well-being. Nevertheless, the relationship between setting realistic standards (excellencism) and the valuation of happiness (subjective well-being, SWB) is complex and may not be firmly substantiated for several reasons. First, there is a tendency to assume that higher standards correlate with greater happiness; however, this assumption often overlooks the psychological implications of perfectionism. Specifically, while some forms of perfectionism (such as positive perfectionism) can enhance feelings of accomplishment and happiness through positive achievement-related drive, other forms (like perfectionistic concerns) can lead to heightened stress and negative self-evaluation, which can detract from overall happiness (Abdollahi et al., 2019). Consequently, high expectations may not always lead to increased happiness and can instead foster anxiety

and dissatisfaction when those standards are not met. Additionally, the impact of socio-economic conditions can exacerbate or mitigate the effects of high standards on happiness. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds may experience heightened pressures associated with social comparisons, which can lead to lower happiness levels despite their efforts to strive for excellence. This indicates that socio-economic context and the resulting pressures influence the relationship between excellencism and happiness, further complicating a direct correlation (Jiang & Renema, 2021).

Lastly, *H9* hypothesized that engaging in counterproductive activities (i.e., extrinsic aspirations) moderates the value of the happiness—SWB relationship. This hypothesis examined the potential moderating effect of engaging in counterproductive activities, such as pursuing extrinsic goals, on the relationship between valuing happiness and SWB. Consistent with previous research highlighting the detrimental effects of extrinsic aspirations on well-being (Manchiraju & Son, 2014), it was hypothesized that individuals who highly value happiness and prioritize extrinsic goals may experience exacerbated decreases in SWB. Conversely, those who value happiness but focus on intrinsic aspirations may exhibit a less pronounced decline in well-being. However, the results did not support this hypothesis, indicating that pursuing extrinsic goals did not significantly moderate the relationship between valuing happiness and SWB. This unexpected finding suggests the need for further exploration of the complex interplay between goal pursuit, values, and well-being outcomes. One explanation could be offered. For instance, cultural and socio-economic factors may further mediate the relationship between valuing happiness and the achievement of extrinsic goals. The findings by Zhang and Wang (2019) suggest a complex interaction where contextual factors, such as environmental pollution, can adversely affect subjective perceptions of well-being, regardless of personal achievement. This emphasizes that external conditions can overshadow the influence of personal goals.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study have several theoretical implications. First, they provide empirical support for the goal-pursuit framework of happiness proposed by Ford and Mauss (2014). By demonstrating the detrimental effects of valuing happiness, monitoring emotions, and setting unrealistic standards, this study extends previous theoretical accounts and underscores the complexity of pursuing happiness. Second, the findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between different types of goals and their consequences for SWB. Specifically, while setting high standards in terms of realistic expectations (i.e., excellencism) to achieve excellence positively influences SWB, setting unrealistic standards (i.e., perfectionism) negatively impacts SWB. This nuanced understanding highlights the importance of future research to consider the multidimensional nature of goals and their varying effects on well-being. Third, the moderating role of monitoring emotions and setting high standards in the relationship between valuing happiness and SWB provides insights into potential boundary conditions of the happiness paradox. Understanding the interplay between these variables can inform interventions promoting well-being by mitigating the adverse effects of excessive pursuit of happiness.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have practical implications for interventions aimed at enhancing well-being. First, interventions targeting the reduction of perfectionistic tendencies and unrealistic standards may help individuals experience greater SWB. Psychoeducation and cognitive-behavioral techniques focused on challenging maladaptive beliefs about happiness and fostering self-compassion could be beneficial. Second, promoting activities emphasizing intrinsic aspirations over extrinsic goals may facilitate greater well-being. Encouraging engagement in meaningful experiences, fostering social connections, and cultivating gratitude and mindfulness practices can protect against the negative consequences of pursuing happiness. Third, interventions aimed at enhancing emotional regulation skills and reducing excessive emotional monitoring may help individuals achieve a healthier balance in their pursuit of happiness. Mindfulness-based interventions, emotion regulation strategies, and acceptance and commitment therapy techniques can equip individuals with the tools to navigate emotional experiences more effectively.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal interpretations. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish temporal precedence and causality between variables. Second, relying on self-report measures may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects. Future studies could utilize multi-method approaches, including behavioral observations and physiological measures, to comprehensively assess well-being and goal pursuit. Third, the sample predominantly consisted of individuals from the United States, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Future research should examine cultural variations in the pursuit of happiness and its implications for well-being across diverse populations.

For example, future research should investigate specific boundary conditions that may influence the paradoxical effects of pursuing happiness. For instance, individual resilience can act as a buffer, where highly resilient individuals may be less susceptible to the negative impacts of valuing happiness or setting high standards, even when they excessively monitor their emotions. Likewise, emotional rumination, a maladaptive form of emotional monitoring, could exacerbate adverse outcomes, while adaptive emotional self-awareness might offer protective benefits, warranting investigation into these distinct forms of emotional processing (McLaughlin et al., 2011; Chervonsky & Hunt, 2019). Also, cultural norms represent a crucial boundary condition; the study's US-centric sample limits generalizability, suggesting that cultural values regarding happiness and self-worth could significantly alter the observed relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pursuing happiness is a multifaceted phenomenon that affects individuals' well-being. This study elucidated the mechanisms underlying the happiness paradox and provided empirical support for the goal-pursuit framework of happiness. By identifying the roles of valuing happiness, monitoring emotions, and setting high standards, this study advances our understanding of the

complexities of happiness and offers practical insights for promoting well-being. Despite its limitations, this study lays the groundwork for future research to unravel the intricacies of happiness and inform interventions to enhance individuals' quality of life.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding. The authors have received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval was received from the Florida State University Ethics Board with decision date/number: 08.20.2018/IRB00000446.

Informed Consent. Consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

Data Sharing Statement. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its [supplementary material](#).

Author Contributions. SM, AS, and SC--contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results, and to the writing of the manuscript.

Received: June 30, 2025

Accepted: October 17, 2025

Published Online: October 28, 2025

References

- Abdollahi, A., Hosseini, S., Panahipour, H., Najafi, M., & Soheili, F. (2019). Emotional intelligence as a moderator between perfectionism and happiness. *School Psychology International, 40*(1), 88-103.
- Austin, J. T., & Vancouver, J. B. (1996). Goal constructs in psychology: Structure, process, and content. *Psychological Bulletin, 120*(3), 338.
- Barrett, L. F., & Russell, J. A. (1999). The structure of current affect: Controversies and emerging consensus. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 8*(1), 10-14.
- Bradshaw, E. L., Conigrave, J. H., Steward, B. A., Ferber, K. A., Parker, P. D., & Ryan, R. M. (2023). A meta-analysis of the dark side of the American dream: Evidence for the universal wellness costs of prioritizing extrinsic over intrinsic goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 124*(4), 873.
- Chervonsky, E., & Hunt, C. (2019). Emotion regulation, mental health, and social wellbeing in a young adolescent sample: A concurrent and longitudinal investigation. *Emotion, 19*(2), 270.

- Conner, T. S., & Reid, K. A. (2012). Effects of intensive mobile happiness reporting in daily life. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3(3), 315-323.
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276.
- Eid, M., & Diener, E. (2001). Norms for experiencing emotions in different cultures: inter- and intrainational differences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(5), 869.
- Ferber, K. A., Bradshaw, E. L., Noetel, M., Wong, T. Y., Ahn, J. S., Parker, P. D., & Ryan, R. M. (2024). Does the apple fall far from the tree? A meta-analysis linking parental factors to children's intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Psychological Bulletin*, 150(10), 1155.
- Ford, B., & Mauss, I. (2014). The paradoxical effects of pursuing positive emotion. *Positive emotion: Integrating the light sides and dark sides*, 363-382.
- Gaudreau P, Schellenberg BJI, Gareau A, Kljajic K, Manoni-Millar S. (2022). Because excellencism is more than good enough: On the need to distinguish the pursuit of excellence from the pursuit of perfection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 122(6):1117-1145. doi: 10.1037/pspp0000411.
- Gollwitzer, P. M., & Moskowitz, G. B. (1996). Goal effects on action and cognition.
- Gross, J. J. (2014). Emotion regulation: Conceptual and empirical foundations. *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*, 2, 3-20.
- Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., Turnbull-Donovan, W., & Mikail, S. F. (1991). The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale: Reliability, validity, and psychometric properties in psychiatric samples. *Psychological Assessment: A Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 3(3), 464.
- Humphrey, A., Szoka, R., & Bastian, B. (2022). When the pursuit of happiness backfires: The role of negative emotion valuation. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 17(5), 611-619.
- Jiang, N., & Renema, J. A. (2021). Immigrant-native disparities in happiness among middle-aged and older adults in Western European countries: the moderating role of social capital. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 33(5/6), 427-441.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1996). Aspiration index. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- Kim, A., & Maglio, S. J. (2025). Happiness depletes me: Seeking happiness impairs limited resources and self-regulation. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 17(1), e70000.
- Lawrence, J. W., Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (2002). Velocity toward goal attainment in immediate experience as a determinant of affect. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 32(4), 788-802.
- Liu Q, Zhao X, Liu W. (2022). Are Perfectionists Always Dissatisfied with Life? An Empirical Study from the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory and Perceived Control. *Behavior Science*. 12(11), 440. doi: 10.3390/bs12110440
- Luhmann, M., Necka, E. A., Schönbrodt, F. D., & Hawkey, L. C. (2016). Is valuing happiness associated with lower well-being? A factor-level analysis using the Valuing Happiness Scale. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 60, 46-50.
- Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. S. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research*, 46, 137-155.
- Manchiraju, S. (2020). Psychometric evaluation of the Ryff's Scale of psychological wellbeing in self-identified American entrepreneurs. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 14, e00204.
- Manchiraju, S. (2013). Materialism in consumer behavior and marketing: a review. *Management & Marketing*, 8(2), 329.
- Manchiraju, S., & Damhorst, M. (2020). "I want to be beautiful and rich": Consumer culture ideals internalization and their influence on fashion consumption. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 11(4), 325-342.
- Manchiraju, S., & Son, J. (2014). Materialistic (and unhappy?) adult now, economically deprived child then: How are felt formative economic deprivation, materialism, and well-being measures related? *Journal of Business and Management Research*, 5, 125-127.
- Mauss, I. B., Savino, N. S., Anderson, C. L., Weisbuch, M., Tamir, M., & Laudenslager, M. L. (2012). The pursuit of happiness can be lonely. *Emotion*, 12(5), 908.
- Mauss, I. B., Tamir, M., Anderson, C. L., & Savino, N. S. (2011). Can seeking happiness make people unhappy? Paradoxical effects of valuing happiness. *Emotion*, 11(4), 807.
- McLaughlin, K. A., Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Mennin, D. S., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2011). Emotion dysregulation and adolescent psychopathology: A prospective study. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 49(9), 544-554.
- Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). The concept of flow. *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 89, 105.
- Quoidbach, J., Gruber, J., Mikolajczak, M., Kogan, A., Kotsou, I., & Norton, M. I. (2014). Emiversity and the emotional ecosystem. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(6), 2057.
- Russell, J. A. (2003). Core affect and the psychological construction of emotion. *Psychological Review*, 110(1), 145.
- Schooler, J. W., & Mauss, I. B. (2010). To be happy and to know it: The experience and meta-awareness of pleasure. *Pleasures of the Brain*, 244-254.
- Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Positive Psychology: An Introduction*, 55(1), p. 5). American Psychological Association.
- Shafran, R., & Mansell, W. (2001). Perfectionism and psychopathology: A review of research and treatment. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21(6), 879-906. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358\(00\)00072-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358(00)00072-6)
- Shir, N., Wiklund, J., & Manchiraju, S. (2025). Satisfaction with life as an entrepreneur: From early volition to eudaimonia. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 199(4), 777-798.
- Swinkels, A., & Giuliano, T. A. (1995). The measurement and conceptualization of mood awareness: Monitoring and labeling one's mood states. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21(9), 934-949.
- Tamir, M., & Ford, B. Q. (2012). When feeling bad is expected to be good: emotion regulation and outcome expectancies in social conflicts. *Emotion*, 12(4), 807.

- Urdan, T., & Kaplan, A. (2020). The origins, evolution, and future directions of achievement goal theory. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101862.
- Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(6), 1193.
- Xiao, C., Jiang, H., Zheng, W., & Zhang, X. (2016). The moderating effect of positive perfectionism on anxiety and depression. *Chinese Journal of Behavioral Medicine and Brain Science*. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/15f7f8c88c743f5740e73ba9b4fce8cc70d5ff4d>