

Marketing positivity: Will an intervention enhance marketing students' subjective happiness scores?

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Abstract

The field of positive psychology has blossomed in research, training, and instruction to provide grounded ways to pursue happiness. Universities are now offering courses on happiness, centers are offering training certificates, and consultants are working with organizations to enhance workers' positivity and wellbeing because research affirms that positivity impacts personal and professional well-being and affects organizational culture and industry growth. This research provides a summary review of the positivity literature and discusses a short, positivity intervention study designed to increase subjective happiness in a marketing research course significantly greater than in a sibling course with no intervention.

Students across the experimental and control groups reported similar levels of happiness at the end of the semester, despite the experimental group having completed the positivity intervention. The experimental group did not reflect any increase in their subjective happiness scores from the beginning to the end of the semester. Thus, we find that one positivity intervention is not sufficient to raise students' subjective happiness. Research limitations as well as future research foci are discussed.

Keywords: Subjective happiness, Marketing students

INTRODUCTION

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” (Declaration of Independence, 1776).

Although the creators of America’s Declaration of Independence recognized the right to pursue happiness, the field of positive psychology did not hit mainstream academia until late last century. Now, as technology jettisons us into an increasingly high-tech environment where change is the only constant, humans are searching for personal well-being and happiness. As a result, the field of positive psychology has blossomed in research, training, and instruction to provide grounded ways to pursue happiness. Universities are now offering courses on happiness; centers are offering training certificates; and consultants are working with organizations to enhance workers’ positivity and wellbeing because research affirms that positivity impacts personal and professional well-being and affects organizational culture and industry growth.

Conversely, at the same time university faculty are being asked to teach more courses with larger class sizes while meeting increasingly higher research and service demands. Many business colleges are cutting back course offerings and discouraging faculty from developing new “soft skill” courses. Faculty may realize the benefit of students’ wellbeing yet struggle with fitting it into an existing course. One way to introduce students to a new way of thinking about and achieving happiness through a positive mindset may be to include a module that briefly discusses the concept and provides ways to build a positive mindset for more personal happiness and improved personal and professional success. This manuscript provides a summary review of the positivity literature and discusses a short, positivity intervention study designed to increase subjective happiness in a marketing research course significantly greater than in a sibling course with no intervention.

HAPPINESS REVIEW

“Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence” (Aristotle, cited in Ben-Shahar, 2007, p.31).

Historians note that references to happiness date back to philosophers in Ancient Greece and Rome. However, positive psychology took decades to gain traction in the United States. Positivity themes were introduced by William James and Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1954). It gained form when Martin Seligman asked Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Ray Flower to spend a week together to invent the field of Positive Psychology. In 1998, as president of the APA, Seligman and his colleagues promoted positive psychology as an academic research field (Seligman, 2019). Seligman rallied supporters and received over a million dollars of funding from The John Templeton Foundation, Gallup, and anonymous donors. Ed Diener and his colleagues elevated the prominence of happiness when he persuaded economists and international political leaders to include well-being in its measure of national success. Since then, the positive psychology revolution continues to gain popularity through university research, positive psychology centers, courses, documentaries, books, websites, and articles (Seligman, 2019).

Business professionals continue to participate in professional certificates in workplace happiness. Specifically, Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley offer professional certificates in workplace happiness. Similarly, executives are becoming certified in applied positive psychology coaching through places such as The Flourishing Center. For this research, positivity is used interchangeably with happiness, as experiencing positive emotions, and meaning while having an optimistic mind-set. It is important to briefly review the benefits of happiness, how it improves organizations and individuals, as well as current undergraduate positivity interventions.

Benefits of Happiness Overall

Happier individuals are seeing improvements in their physical and mental health, personal relationships, and income. Happier individuals have stronger immune systems (Diener & Chan, 2011 as cited in Diener, et al., 2019), have higher quality relationships, are married longer, are less lonely, earn more money and give more freely to charity than their less happy peers (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Moreover, optimism improves resiliency, which increases problem solving abilities as well as positive reframing (Carve et al., 1993 in Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). People with higher positivity procrastinate less and plan more thoroughly when seeking employment (Turban et al., 2013 as cited in Walsh, 2018). Not only are individuals and professionals seeing improvements in nearly every area of their lives, but happiness practices continue to positively impact organizations.

Benefits of Happiness at Work

Some of today's more successful businesses place employee happiness at the core of their values and culture. Companies such as Zappos, Patagonia, Green Cargo, and Replacements, Ltd., have incorporated happiness activities, such as flow, into their company culture (Perschel, 2010). Flow is viewed as "a state of intense absorption and involvement with the present moment" (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 181). As a result, these companies continue to reap benefits such as increased profit, lower turnover rates, positive cultures, and consistent recognition on lists of best places to work (Perschel, 2010).

Research supports that investing in employee happiness results in increased profit, lower turnover, and a more desirable place to work. Happier employees are more creative and innovative (Sameer, 2018; Rego et al., 2012 as cited in Diener, et al., 2019); provide better customer service (Zhao, 2019; Pugh, 2001, Barger & Grandey, 2006, Tsai & Huang, 2002, as cited in Diener, et al., 2020; Diener et al., 2017, Tenney et al., 2016 as cited in Seligman, 2019; George, 1995 as cited in Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005); improve team work and collaboration (Edmondson, 2012 as cited in Diener, et al., 2019); increase positive leadership (Wu Lee, 2017); and are more committed to corporate social responsibility (Yousef and Luthans, 2007).

Advantages of Happiness in College

Positivity improves students' lives personally, professionally, and academically. The top ten percent of the happiest college students studied report having strong relationships. Further, happier college students set higher goals (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), and are more energized after setting their goals (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). Similarly, more positive female college students were more cooperative with other female students (Cowan et al., 1998 as cited in Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Positive college students achieve higher academic achievement and overall are more satisfied with their life than their less happy peers (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Moreover, students who are happier often outperform their less happy peers in college. In a 2003 study of 170 college students at a university in the South, students who scored high in situational optimism and achievement striving earned a higher GPA than their less happy peers (Nonis & Wight, 2003). Similarly, in an exploratory study, Luthans, Luthans, & Jenson support a significant, positive relationship between psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism) and GPA (2012). Happier college students are more productive and receive higher ratings (Deluga & Masson, 2000, as cited in Walsh, 2018). Positive students are more creative when searching for jobs and more successful obtaining an interview (Burger & Caldwell, 2000). Similarly, student's happiness predicted internships and job offers (Coffee et. al., 2014).

Undergraduate Positivity Interventions

The positive psychology revolution continues to grow exponentially as research continues to support the notion that happiness increases nearly every aspect of individuals' personal and professional life through specific, intentional activities. Ed Diener supports this notion as he notes, "Probably the biggest insight ... is that happiness is not just a place, but also a process. ... happiness is an ongoing process of fresh challenges, and... it takes the right attitudes and activities to continue to be happy" (Lino, 2020, paras. 2).

Many colleges and universities are implementing happiness interventions into their curriculum at various levels (Meek et al., 2018; Seligman, 2019). Tal-Ben-Shahar's happiness class at Harvard, and Laurie Santos' happiness class at Yale are two of the most popular classes in their university's history. In 2015, Lucas and Goodman shared a study of college students participating in a semester long, Project-Based Learning (PBL) simulation with a client focusing on increasing positive organizational scholarship (POS), which focuses on employees cultivating resilience, positive energy, and flourishing (Positive Organizational Scholarship, 2020). Over the course of the semester, students reported higher levels of well-being, meaning, and purpose (Lucas & Goodman, 2015).

Books such as *The How of Happiness* by Sonja Lyubomirsky and *Happier* (2007) by Tal Ben-Shahar provide simple, scientifically supported activities to increase individual happiness. In *The How of Happiness*, observations from Lyubomirsky's research indicate that the happiest participants in her studies practice gratitude, positive thinking, nurture social relationships, practice acts of kindness, live and enjoy the present moment, habitually care for their mind and body, commit to their goals, and practice resiliency (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Research is supporting the premise that a semester course in positivity and well-being results in students' increased positivity and wellbeing. However, not as clear is whether one module embedded in a business marketing course can positively impact students' happiness over one semester. Lyubomirsky and Layous indicate that identifying how often to complete the activity varies by individual and intervention (2013). This study seeks to determine whether an intervention consisting of a class presentation and activity can inspire a significant increase in students' self-perceived happiness when compared to a similar class without the intervention.

THE STUDY

This study expands on previous positivity research, with the goal of assessing the impact of a positivity intervention on student's subjective happiness scores, using a control group and an

experimental group. The research data sets were collected from January through April of 2021, when society remained in the middle of a global viral pandemic. During this time, many college courses were being delivered in a virtual/remote format nationwide. By incorporating a positivity intervention within the experimental group, the positivity levels of those students were projected to increase significantly as compared to those students who were part of the control group with no intervention. This forecasted result prior to the data collection process was especially anticipated due to anecdotal observations regarding students' mental health and wellbeing levels being negatively impacted due to various COVID-19 impacts, especially as the pandemic persisted.

During Spring Semester of 2021, 110 students at a Midwestern university taking a marketing research online courses participated in this study, with 75 of those students making up the experimental group, and the remaining 35 students being part of the control group. All participating students were undergraduate students, with most being juniors and seniors studying business. The majority of the business students were marketing majors. The students in the experimental group were exposed to a positivity intervention at the beginning of the semester; they were instructed to watch two videos online and then complete a guided reflection assignment where they practiced positivity and gratitude. There was no positivity intervention for students in the control group.

The positivity intervention included a guest presentation, which was originally planned to be done in-person, inside the classroom. However, due to these courses being changed from traditional in-person to virtual/remote delivery, the guest presentation was recorded, and the video link was provided to all students within the experimental group to watch online asynchronously during their own time. As part of the positivity intervention, the students in the experimental group were also instructed to watch a Ted Talk online asynchronously during their own time. After watching both videos, the students were asked to complete a reflection assignment. For example, at the beginning of the reflection form, they were instructed to practice some of the methods to increase happiness, which were discussed in the videos. Then they were asked to type their thoughts in a few sentences regarding how they felt afterward. Examples of the positivity practices included things such as engaging in two minutes of deep breathing, recalling the most meaningful experience they had in the past 24 hours, and writing three things they were grateful for on that day. The students in the experimental group were also asked to type their "best possible self-reflection" and then to explain how the exercise made them feel, what impact it had, and whether they felt differently about their future. The graded reflection assignment was due at the beginning of the second week of the semester. The rubric for grading this assignment was not as rigorous as a standard class assignment, as long as they fully completed it with few or no grammatical errors. All the students, in both the experimental group and control group, completed two online surveys throughout the semester. Qualtrics was used to create the surveys, and identical questions were asked to the participating students in both the experimental and control groups. Therefore, data was collected at the beginning of the semester, followed by the positivity intervention exercise in the experimental group, and at the end of the semester.

The survey questions measured subjective positivity levels by using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) with indicator statements based on a seven-point Likert scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The student survey respondents were asked the following series of questions with a successive response structure ranging from one (indicating the lowest

agreement/positivity level) to seven (signifying the highest agreement/positivity level), with four representing a neutral response.

Subjective Happiness Question 1: In general, how happy of a person do you consider yourself?

Subjective Happiness Question 2: Compared with most of your peers, how happy do you consider yourself?

Subjective Happiness Question 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?

Subjective Happiness Question 4: Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

RESULTS

The end of the semester subjective happiness data set of the experimental group was compared to the end of the semester subjective happiness data set of the control group using the independent samples t-test. The end of the semester subjective happiness mean reported by the experimental group was slightly higher than that of the control group; however, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. As shown in Table 1 (See Appendix) results revealed that students were not significantly happier in the experimental group ($M_{\text{experiment}} = 5.22$, $SD = 0.92$) than in the control group ($M_{\text{control}} = 5.10$, $SD = 0.89$; $t(108) = .65$, $p = .514$).

Next, the pre (beginning of the semester) and post (end of the semester) subjective happiness data sets from the experimental group were compared using a dependent sample t-test. Subjective happiness levels had increased slightly according to the post subjective happiness data; however, the difference between the pre and post subjective happiness data was not statistically significant ($M_{\text{post}} = 5.22$, $SD = 0.92$; $M_{\text{pre}} = 5.17$, $SD = 0.85$; $t(74) = .55$, $p = .581$).

In summary, in the between-subject analysis, students across the experimental and control groups reported similar levels of happiness at the end of the semester, despite the experimental group having completed the positivity intervention. In the within-subject analysis, the experimental group did not reflect any increase in their subjective happiness scores from the beginning to the end of the semester. While the study did not yield any significant results, it highlights two important findings. First, the results suggest that *one* module of positivity intervention in the semester is *not enough* to create an impact on students' subjective happiness levels. Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) suggest that the intervention frequency may vary for different individuals. The results demonstrate the fact that one intervention is not enough and substantiates the fact that frequency of the intervention is likely to be an important factor. Second, the results did not find a significant difference in the pre and post levels of subjective happiness scores when the time lag between the pre and post was nearly the full semester. This finding suggests that there may be latency effects that caused the intervention effects to have diminished over time. Therefore, the results suggest that the impact of positivity intervention may diminish over time and be reflected in the subjective happiness scores decreasing over time.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of the experiment were not anticipated; the experimental group did not report significantly increased subjective happiness scores from having participated in the positivity intervention. The anticipated results from the positivity intervention were not found, possibly due to three reasons. First, the positivity intervention in the experimental group only occurred once, and it took place relatively early in the semester. The impact of the positivity intervention exercise may diminish over time, thereby leading to lower-than-expected levels of subjective happiness detected during the end-of-the-semester survey. Future research should measure the impact of the positivity intervention immediately after the intervention, and subsequently over different time periods during the semester to track the time-effects in the students' self-reported subjective happiness scores.

Second, during Spring Semester of 2021, all class sections of the marketing research course were delivered in an online format. It is possible that the positivity intervention would have been more impactful if delivered in-person. Furthermore, it is possible that students were experiencing difficulties during the semester from the ongoing viral pandemic that may have overshadowed the impact of the positivity intervention. Future research on the impact of positivity interventions on students' subjective happiness scores may be more fruitful in a traditional in-person classroom setting and in more "normal" times.

Finally, limitations in the sample size may have been another factor: both the experimental (N = 75) and control groups (N = 35) were small in. Future research could increase the sample size to include the intervention efforts in other Marketing courses to overcome the sample size limitation, and simultaneously enhance the generalizability of the results.

CONCLUSION

Although the results of this single-intervention study are not significant, these findings do provide feedback that indicates the need for more systematic and lengthy intervention. Further, these results do not diminish the need for business schools to "market" and train our graduates in subjective happiness to enhance their personal and professional lives. As the prominent Columbia University scholar, Mark Van Doren, reminded us a century ago, "Our best chance for happiness is education." (Ben-Shahar, 2007, p. 83).

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Dependent Sample *t* Test Results for Subjective Happiness

| Measure | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>d</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Pre (T1) | 5.17 | 0.85 | | | |
| Post (T2) | 5.22 | 0.92 | | | |
| | | | 74 | .55 | .581 |

$p > .05$