

The Paradox of Consumption: Material Happiness vs. Environmental Impact

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Abstract

This article analyses the correlation between consumerism and happiness, investigating whether owning more material goods contributes to increasing happiness levels. The research addresses the issue of the ecological footprint since the consumerist lifestyle contributes significantly to increasing environmental impact. The methodology adopted is quantitative, using a questionnaire to collect the data. The data was statistically analysed to identify patterns, correlations, and possible differences between the groups, considering variables such as age, monthly income, gender, and the region of the planet where the participants lived most of their lives. The results show that monthly income does not influence happiness, and that young people are concerned about the environment. However, those aged 18 to 24 are the ones who acquire more goods for the sake of status, especially males. They tend to prioritise personal relationships over material achievements as they get older. This work will contribute to the discussion on the role of consumerism in contemporary society, reflecting not only on the implications for individual happiness but also for global sustainability.

Keywords: Consumerism · Happiness · Ecological Footprint · Sustainability · Relationships

1. Introduction

Excessive consumption habits have a significant impact on climate change.

The production and consumption of household goods and services are responsible for around 60% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Ivanova et al., 2015). In Western countries, purchasing power facilitates access to a wide range of consumable goods, often acquired in pursuing experiences that promise to contribute to happiness. Large amounts of energy must be used to meet the growing demand for goods (UN, 2020). Despite efforts towards an energy transition, most of the energy consumed globally still depends on fossil fuels such as coal and oil, contributing significantly to the environmental impact (Enerdata, 2022; Meinrenken et al., 2020; Ritchie & Rosado, 2024). However, the relationship between consumption and well-being is complex. The World Happiness Report 2024 stresses that although economic growth can be associated with increased subjective well-being after basic needs have been met, further increases in the consumption of material goods do not always translate into higher happiness levels of happiness (Helliwell et al., 2024).

Brands use marketing and advertising strategies to persuade consumers to buy their products. Although everyone has the right to seek a more comfortable life, unbridled consumerism has become a critical problem.

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This phenomenon often leads to purchasing unnecessary goods, motivated more by artificially induced desires than by real needs (Braga & Baracho, 2018; Dias et al., 2014). Although there are efforts to produce greener goods, effective climate change mitigation requires not only a significant reduction in consumption but also the adoption of more minimalist lifestyles (Wiedmann et al., 2020). Some studies, such as that by Sirgy et al. (2019), report that more money can translate into more happiness.

On the other hand, studies by Galbraith et al. (2024) show that communities with low monthly incomes can report high levels of life satisfaction, comparable to those in wealthier countries. This shows that it is possible to achieve high well-being without owning large amounts of material goods. Regardless of economic power, opting for a minimalist lifestyle has been shown to have a positive impact on happiness and general well-being (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020) and helps to reduce the ecological footprint; the ecological footprint is an indicator that measures the impact of human activities on the environment, expressing the amount of natural resources needed to sustain the lifestyle of a person, community or country (Jørgensen & Fath, 2008). With this study, the correlation between monthly income, material possessions, geographical region, and levels of happiness is analysed. It is recognised that the concept of happiness is subjective and can vary substantially based on each participant's individual point of view and experiences (Haybron, 2011; Lyubomirsky, 2014). Despite the inherent subjectivity of happiness, previous research has shown that consumer behaviour and material aspirations can significantly influence well-being (Oishi, 2024). At the same time, studies examining sustainable consumption highlight discrepancies between pro-environmental attitudes and actual behaviour, known as the attitude-behaviour gap (Sherrington, 2023). Although the existing literature contributes important insights into the relationships between income, consumption, subjective well-being, and sustainability, a substantial theoretical gap remains: few studies integrate these elements within a single analytical framework, particularly when accounting for different geographic and sociodemographic contexts (Leonidou et al., 2022; Fanning & O'Neill, 2019). Moreover, the literature commonly treats consumption patterns, happiness levels, and environmental attitudes as distinct research streams rather than interconnected components of consumer experience. This fragmentation leaves unanswered how these variables jointly operate and interact within individuals' decision-making and value systems. Therefore, to advance current understanding and respond to the limitations identified, this study seeks to systematically examine the drivers of happiness and consumption behaviour while incorporating ecological awareness into the analysis. In this sense, the research is guided by the following question: "What is the relationship between consumerism, subjective happiness, and environmental awareness across demographic groups?"

To situate this research question within existing knowledge, it is important to examine how previous studies have addressed the links between consumption, happiness, and environmental attitudes. This overview helps clarify what is already established and where important gaps remain.

Thus, the next section presents the key literature and the main theoretical gap that motivates this study.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Gap

Although previous research has extensively examined the relationship between income and happiness, with classic and contemporary findings showing that income tends to increase well-being up to a certain threshold (Oishi, 2023), these studies typically analyse economic predictors of happiness in isolation, without incorporating broader behavioural or ecological variables. At the same time, a growing body of literature investigates sustainability attitudes and pro-environmental behaviour (Guo, 2024; Leonidou et al., 2022), as well as the persistent attitude-behaviour gap that highlights discrepancies between declared values and actual consumption practices (Sherrington, 2023). However, these strands of research generally remain fragmented: studies focusing on environmental attitudes rarely integrate measures of subjective well-being or income, while happiness research often overlooks consumer motivations or ecological awareness.

Furthermore, despite increasing attention to cultural variations in environmental beliefs and consumption patterns, cross-cultural or cross-continental comparisons remain relatively scarce. Existing analyses either concentrate on national samples (Guo, 2024) or compare countries at an aggregate level rather than examining

individual-level interactions between consumerism, happiness, and ecological consciousness (Fanning & O'Neill, 2019). As highlighted by Leonidou et al. (2022), there is still a need for integrative models that simultaneously account for demographic, psychological, and cultural factors across diverse populations.

Consequently, very few studies have examined income, purchasing motivations, happiness, and environmental attitudes within a single analytical framework, particularly using non-probabilistic multicultural samples, which are increasingly common in globalised digital research contexts. This study addresses this gap by jointly analysing how income, consumer motivations (e.g., functional vs. status-driven), and geographical background correlate with both happiness and ecological attitudes, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness between economic conditions, consumption behaviour, and environmental consciousness.

2.1. Methods

This study uses a quantitative, descriptive approach and tries to understand the correlation between consumerism, happiness, and ecological footprint. The questionnaire was created from scratch, but it was validated by two experts, one in environmental education and the other in anthropology, both with PhDs in their respective fields.

Built on Google Forms, which was applied to a convenience sample of 178 respondents over the age of 18 from different geographical regions and different socio-economic profiles. The questionnaires included informed consent and sociodemographic characterisation. The questionnaire was validated by two experts in the field, one in anthropology and the other in psychology. All the data was treated confidentially, and the participants would have access to the general information and conclusions of the study if they so wished.

Figure 1 shows the geographical characterisation of the study participants, who were spread across 5 continents: Africa, North America, South America, Asia and Europe.

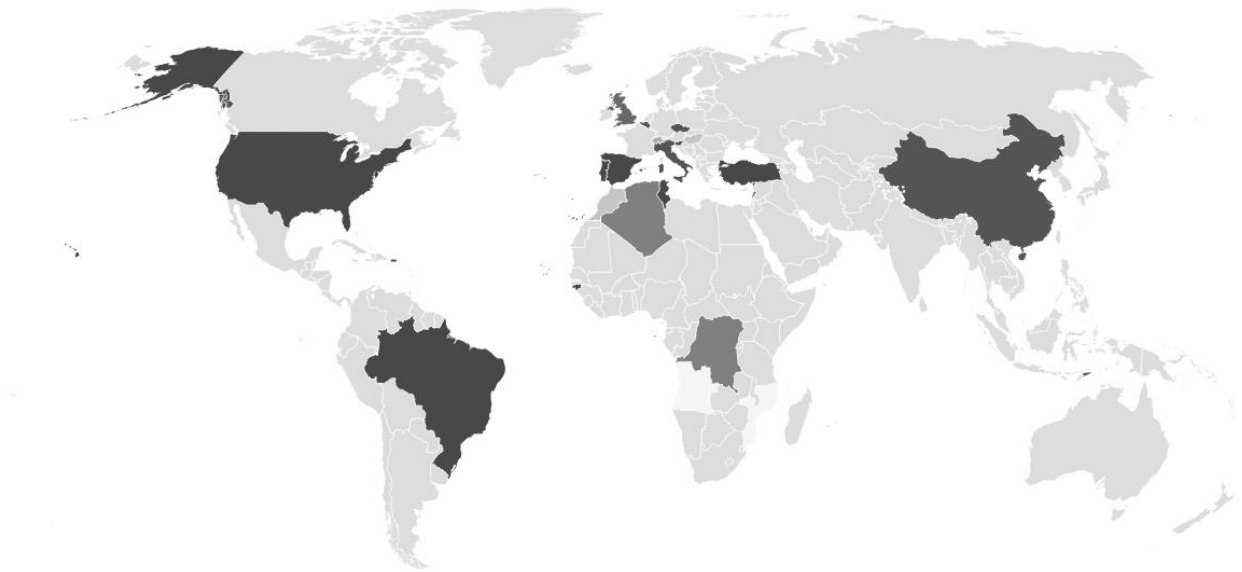


Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of Respondents Across Continents

Various statistical tests were carried out to analyse the data, such as calculating means and medians, depending on the type of variable analysed. Among the methods used were Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (ρ) to assess relationships between variables and the Kruskal-Wallis Test for non-parametric group comparisons.

2.2. Sociodemographic characterisation and variables

The 18-24 age group is the most representative group, with 28 females (15.7%) and 29 males (16.3%), totalling 32% of the sample. The 41-64 age group and the over-65 age group had lower relative participation, especially among older men. In all age groups, there is a relatively even distribution between men and women, except in some groups, such as 25-30 years, where the number of women is significantly higher.

Table 1. Participant Distribution by Gender and Monthly Income

	Income (€)	Sex	Counts	% of Total
(1)	Below 1000	(1) Female	52	29.2 %
		(2) Male	38	21.3 %
(2)	1001-1500	(1) Female	19	10.7 %
		(2) Male	29	16.3 %
(3)	1501-2000	(1) Female	6	3.4 %
		(2) Male	16	9.0 %
(4)	+2001	(1) Female	14	7.9 %
		(2) Male	4	2.2 %

The largest group of participants is in the income bracket of up to 1000 euros, representing 29.2% of women and 21.3% of men, totalling 50.5% of the sample.

The scale was not originally intended to measure a single construct homogeneously. Variables that address different dimensions related to the participant's experience (e.g., overall happiness, job satisfaction, income), rather than a unidimensional scale, are included. Cronbach's alpha is not suitable for heterogeneous item sets, so low internal consistency values are expected and do not indicate methodological flaws.

3. Results:

3.1. Continent and happiness

Firstly, to know if the continent where the respondents lived most of their lives influenced their happiness, the first test carried out was the correlation between (monthly) income and the level of happiness, using Spearman's Coefficient (ρ), which measures the strength and direction of the association between two ordinal variables. Assuming that the data is ordered, the test checks whether, as income increases, happiness also increases or decreases consistently (Carlson & Winquist, 2021).

In our study, the Spearman coefficient (ρ) is -0.426 , indicating a moderate negative correlation between income and the happiness scale.

This means that as the participants' monthly income increases, their happiness levels tend to decrease (and vice versa). The happiness index was assessed using a Likert scale from 1 to 10, categorised into three levels: 1-4 indicating low happiness, 5-7 representing moderate happiness, and 8-10 corresponding to high happiness.

The results in Figure 2 suggest that a higher monthly income does not lead to higher happiness levels. According to studies by Kahneman and Deaton (2010) and Buttrick and Oishi (2023), well-being increases with income, but only up to a certain limit, such as US\$75,000 (€72,047) per year. Above this value, the impact on happiness is nil.

Thus, happiness seems to grow until basic needs are met. Although some studies such as (World Population Review, 2024; World Happiness Report, 2024) indicate that African countries tend to have lower levels of happiness than Western countries, it is important to point out that, in this particular study, the participants from Africa, despite having spent a large part of their lives on the African continent, the participants in this particular

sample reside in Europe. This may positively influence their levels of happiness since, in some cases, their basic needs may have been met to a greater extent in the European context.

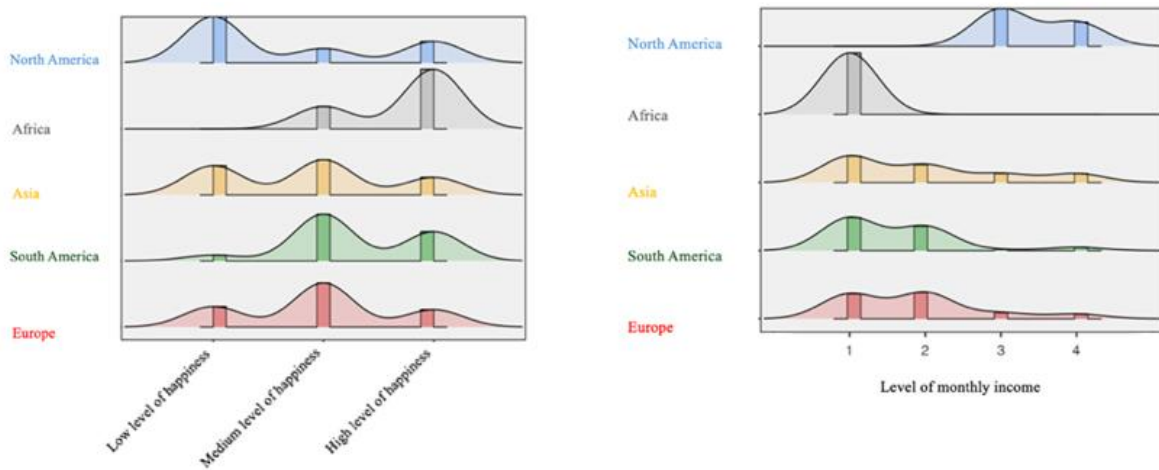


Figure 2. Relationship Between Happiness Levels and Monthly Income by Continent

The study results revealed that the happiest individuals, despite having the lowest incomes, came from the African and South American continents. On the other hand, participants from North America and Asia reported the lowest levels of happiness despite having significantly higher monthly incomes.

3.2. Environmental concerns when buying material goods.

To research if respondents took sustainability into account when making purchases, the following question was formulated: “How would you describe your relationship with consumption and the environment?”, which offered four response options:

- I prioritise sustainability in my choices.
- I try to balance consumption and sustainability.
- I consume more than I would like, but I don't think much about the environmental impact.
- Honestly, I don't worry about sustainability.

This question aimed to explore the participants' perception of their consumption practices and how they relate to environmental impact and sustainability issues. Figure 3 shows that respondents from the North American and Asian continents have the least eco-friendly attitude when buying products, with their answers focusing more on answers (c) and (d). South American and European respondents report thinking more about sustainability when purchasing new products.

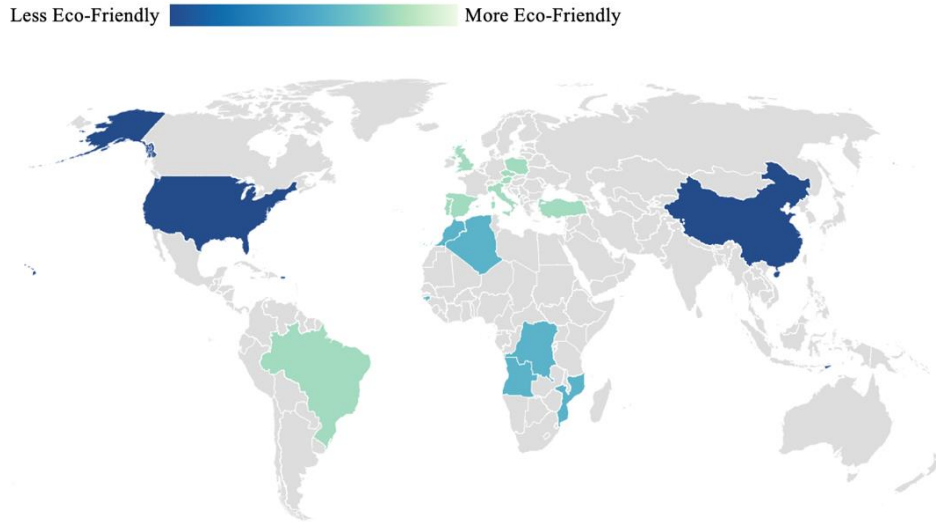


Figure 3. Environmental Considerations in Purchasing Decisions Across Continents

In fact, although there is a long way to go, Europe is the continent that has made the most efforts to mitigate climate change from infrastructure, transport, and education (EU, 2022; Ritchie, 2021; Singh, 2024), and this can be seen in the responses of the participants in this study.

3.3. Age

Age also significantly influences consumption decisions, with notable differences between the categories. Figure 4 confirms that young adults (18-40 years old) are more likely to adopt more eco-friendly choices. Middle-aged groups (41-64) are less concerned about sustainability in their consumption decisions. Conversely, seniors (65+) fall between the two extremes (sustainable choices and ignoring the environmental impact). To confirm this thesis, a Kruskal-Wallis test was carried out, which found $p < 0.001$: A very low p-value indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the groups.

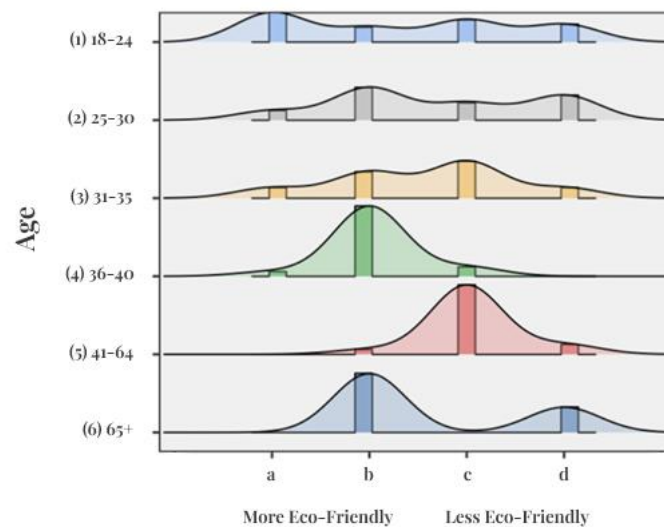


Figure 4. Age Differences in Sustainable Consumption Attitudes

Other works, such as (Poortinga, Demski and Steentjes, 2023), state that younger generations generally have higher levels of climate-related beliefs, risk perceptions and emotions than older generations. However, even if young people have more environmentally concerned attitudes, sometimes it may not result in behaviours because contrary to popular stereotypes, a meta-analysis of studies carried out between 1970 and 2010 found small positive relationships between age and pro-environmental behaviours, suggesting that older adults adopt these behaviours in the workplace a little more often (Wiernik, Dilchert, and Ones, 2016; Shin and Kim, 2023).

3.4. Motivation for acquiring material goods

Next was looked into what motivates the respondent to buy a new item, and this was characterised into the answers (1) functionality, (2) pleasure and fun, (3) status, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to correlate with age, which is appropriate when you want to compare the distribution of an ordinal variable (age) between various categories of a nominal variable (shopping motivation: functionality, pleasure/fun and status) (Carlson & Winqvist, 2021). The result of $p < 0.001$: the p-value indicates that the difference between the distributions is highly significant.

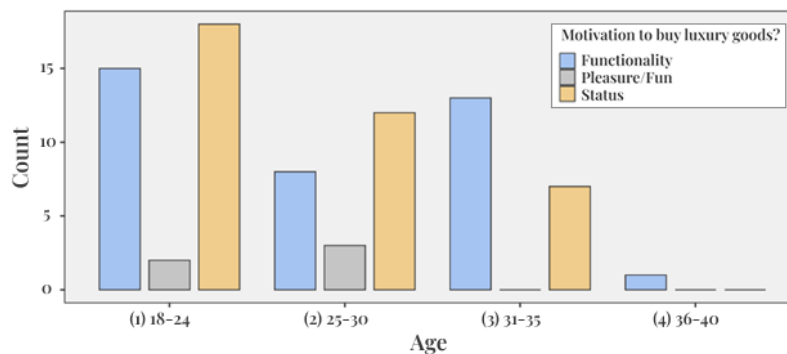


Figure 5. Motivations for Purchasing Material Goods Among Young Adults

By analysing Figure 5, it shows that young people acquire the most items for status reasons. It's worth noting that material goods don't mean necessities such as food, but rather superfluous goods. This distinction was made clear to the respondents.

Figure 6 below shows that male respondents buy more items for status, while females buy for functionality:

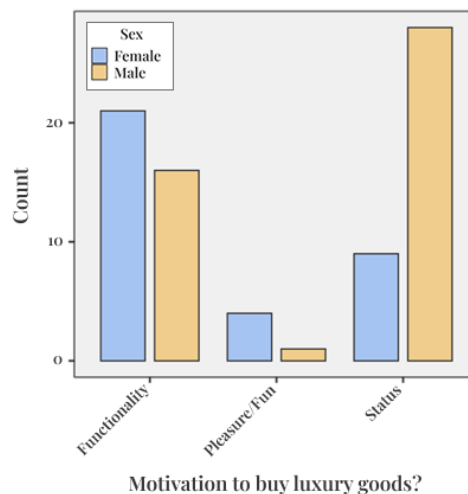


Figure 6. Gender Differences in Motivations for Purchasing Material Goods

These results indicate an important issue that has already been mentioned in the area of consumer behaviour: the difference between attitudes (values and beliefs) and actual behaviour.

Previously, it was observed that young participants indeed express greater ecological awareness in terms of attitudes, which can be reflected in statements of support for sustainable practices or concerns about the environment (Figure 4). However, when the actual consumption behaviour was analysed, such as buying items for status, contradictions emerged that indicate a possible “attitude-behaviour gap”. This gap can be explained by social pressure and cultural influence, i.e. young people may be more exposed to social pressure and cultural trends that value status and material goods. This can lead to choices that prioritise appearance or social acceptance to the detriment of sustainability (Colombo et al., 2023; Silva et al., 2023). Differences between males and females were also found, with males prioritising status more. Without wishing to generalise, the differences between boys and girls in prioritising status vs. functionality when purchasing superfluous goods can be explained by a combination of psychological, cultural, and social factors. For example, the status associated with masculinity: studies show that, in many cultures, there is greater pressure on boys to demonstrate status, power, and success through tangible objects, such as gadgets or luxury brands. Owning expensive or technologically advanced items can symbolise social status and virility (Eastman et al., 2018; Naumova et al., 2019).

Through Figure 7, it also shows that as age advances, respondents admit that less than half of material items actually contribute to their happiness; on the other hand, the younger they are, the more they value material items when it comes to their happiness.

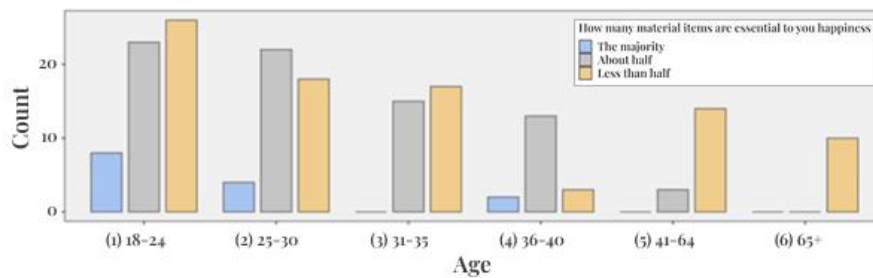


Figure 7. Perceived Contribution of Material Goods to Happiness Across Age Groups

Young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are still consolidating their identity and often associate material possessions with status, belonging, and personal fulfilment. Owning possessions can position oneself socially or assert independence (Eastman et al., 2018; Naumova et al., 2019). In Figure 8 below, the older ages (41+) are looked at in detail.

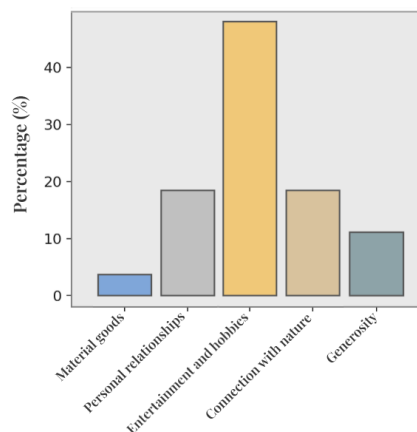


Figure 8. Key Contributors to Happiness Reported by Older Adults (41+ years)

As people get older, they come to value interpersonal experiences and relationships more, as the focus shifts to internal fulfilment and building emotional connections (Branje et al., 2021; Ku, 2014). The next question focuses on understanding what would contribute most to the respondents' happiness:

- *When you think of the small moments of happiness in your life, are they associated with:*

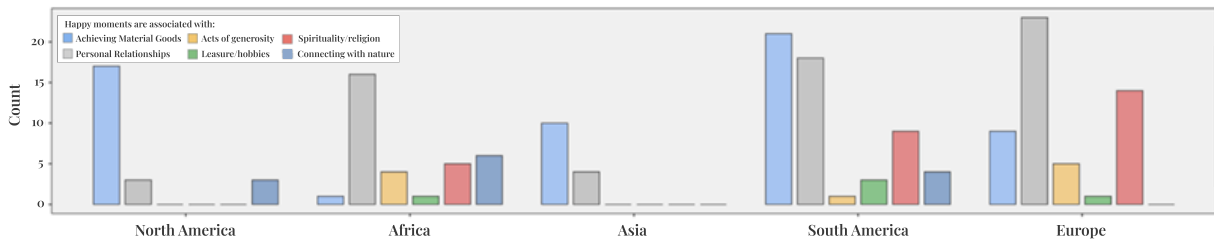


Figure 9. Self-Reported Sources of Day-to-Day Happiness Across Continents

The results show that respondents from North America value acquiring material goods the most, while Africans and Europeans value interpersonal relationships the most.

4. Conclusions

This study revealed important insights into the relationship between consumerism, happiness, and sustainability, highlighting various behavioural and demographic nuances. The results confirm that possessing material goods is not an absolute determinant of happiness. In fact, participants from regions such as Africa and South America, with lower incomes, reported higher levels of happiness than participants from North America and Asia, even with significantly higher incomes. Another important aspect relates to attitudes towards sustainability, and participants from the South American and European continents showed greater concern for sustainable consumption practices. At the same time, North Americans and Asians reported a more negligent attitude regarding the environmental impact of their purchases. This pattern reinforces the idea that continued efforts in education and infrastructure, as observed in Europe, can positively influence environmental awareness.

Analysis by age group showed that young people (18-35 years old) have a greater tendency to adopt more eco-friendly attitudes. Still, contradictorily, they are also the group that attaches most importance to status as a motivator for consumption. This “attitude-behaviour gap” suggests that although young people express concern about sustainability, their actual consumption practices are not always in line with these statements. In addition, it was found that with advancing age, individuals begin to value material goods less as sources of happiness, indicating a change in the perception of well-being throughout life.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while social and environmental factors shape consumer behaviour and self-reported happiness, there are deeper, underlying mechanisms that also influence well-being. To better understand why happiness is not simply a matter of income or consumption, it is helpful to consider biological and evolutionary perspectives. Human beings have evolved to prioritise survival and reproduction rather than permanent happiness, and our neurological systems are structured to seek stimuli that enhance survival chances—such as food, safety, and reproduction—while the dopaminergic system, responsible for pleasure, is not designed to maintain long-term satisfaction (Allen & Badcock, 2006; Harris & Aisbett, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Neuroscience, 2019; Workman et al., 2020). Phenomena such as hedonic adaptation demonstrate how people quickly return to baseline happiness after major achievements or material gains (Brickman & Campbell, 1971).

The “happiness industry” capitalises on this biological tendency, promoting the idea that constant and complete happiness is attainable through consumption. Self-help, cosmetics, fitness, technology, and food

industries promise a formula for permanent happiness, creating a cycle of dissatisfaction in which individuals continuously seek the next novelty or trend (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

Based on the above, it is clear that the search for lasting happiness through consumerism is not only biologically unfounded but also environmentally unsustainable. To counter this model, it is necessary to encourage a minimalist lifestyle in which people learn to value the essentials and avoid waste. Schools and society in general have a fundamental role to play in shaping more aware citizens. It is stressed that this article is not meant to criticise consumerism or romanticise poverty but rather to encourage debate on valuing “being” over “having.”

5. Research limitations:

It is important to note that this study does not represent a general overview of the population, as the data were collected randomly via the Internet. Furthermore, it is assumed that most respondents from South America and Africa are immigrants from Europe. This factor may introduce a bias into the results since the experience of living outside their country of origin may influence their perception of happiness, deviating from the real conditions of their countries of origin.

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Author contribution Conceptualisation (RR), Methodology (RR), Writing – Original Draft (RR), Supervision (MJR), (IR), Data Curation (IR), Formal Analysis (MJR), Visualisation (MJR), Writing – Review & Editing (IR), (RR), Investigation (RR), Validation (IR), Software (RR) Funding Acquisition (MJS).

Ethical statement All participants in this study provided informed consent after reading and understanding the purpose and procedures involved. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. The questionnaire was anonymous, and responses were treated with strict confidentiality. Additionally, the survey instrument was previously validated by two specialists—one in anthropology and one in psychology—ensuring its relevance and appropriateness for the study's objectives.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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