Accentuating the Positive: Can Student Positivity Withstand a Pandemic?

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Abstract

This study extends positivity research to identify whether college students' positivity can sustain itself under extreme changes in lifestyle. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether students' positivity would hold in the midst of a pandemic and while shifting from a high-touch, in-class experience to an online, virtual learning space in a Midwest university business course. For these particular students, positivity levels remained high during the pandemic and the move to online instruction. This supports previous research indicating that happy people maintain that outlook even when experiencing adversity.

Keywords: Positivity, College Students, Business Education, Marketing Education

INTRODUCTION

"As significant as our major life events are to each of us, studies suggest that they actually determine…[only] a tiny percentage of our happiness" (Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 41).

This study extends positivity research to identify whether positivity can sustain itself under extreme changes in lifestyle. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether students' positivity would hold in the midst of a pandemic and while shifting from a high-touch, in-class experience to an online, virtual learning space.

Positive psychology themes originated in the early 1900's by Harvard psychologist and professor William James and was reinforced in 1954 through Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualization. Though, its popularity rapidly increased when Martin Seligman, who teamed up with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, began advocating for and revolutionized positive psychology in academic research while president of the American Psychology Association (Linley, et al., 2006; Seligman, 2019). The growing field of positive psychology has spread from individuals to organizations, education, public policy, and even developing nations (Seligman, 2019; Diner, et al., 2020; Luthans, et al., 2012; Al-Maktoum, 2017, as cited in Sameer, 2018). The phenomenon gained popularity through academic journals, the Gallup World Poll, World Happiness Report, Gross National Happiness, pop culture, popular Ted Talks, and endless self-help books. A plethora of research has examined positivity relating to enhanced individual, organizational, and student outcomes.

For this particular research, we define positivity as experiencing positive emotions while having an optimistic and resilient mind-set. Positivity's broad definition includes "tendency to view life and experiences with a positive outlook" (Caprara, 2012); "dispositional optimism (hope, attributional style, self-efficacy), self-esteem and life satisfaction" (Caprara et al., 2012; Heikamp et al., 2014 as cited in Lauriola and Lani, 2019; Carver & Scheier, 2014); "an emphasis on strengths, capabilities, and possibilities rather than problems, threats, and weakness'' (Cameron, 2008, p. 8 as cited in Youssef and Luthans, 2012); positive affect, a part of subjective well-being, is often used interchangeably with happiness (Diener, 1984; Busseri & Sadava, 2011 as cited in Deiner & Tov, 2013); PERMA [positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment] (Seligman, 2018); and Psychological Capital [efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience] (Youssef and Luthans, 2004).

Positivity and happiness have evolved into an international obsession. Collectively, happiness has been conceptualized as a future goal that can be attained once an individual reaches success. Nevertheless, research supports the opposite is true. Happiness precedes success (Achor, 2011). Another common myth denotes that happiness is based on individual circumstances or that happiness levels cannot be increased. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade's research suggest that much of our happiness is in our control. While genetics represent 50% and circumstances account for 10%, intentional choices and activities represent the remaining 40% of an individual's well-being and happiness (2005). Indeed, to sustain happiness, individuals must commit and work hard instead of merely changing one's circumstances (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Happiness expert Shawn Achor noted, "If you can raise levels of happiness and optimism, not only can you raise every business and educational outcome, but we can make this a better world" (Koster, 2016, para. 27).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Businesses who are investing in their employees' happiness and well-being are seeing increased productivity, job satisfaction (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), engagement (Deiner et al., 2020), presenteeism (Seppala & Cameron, 2015), creativity and innovative behavior (Sameer, 2018), organizational citizenship behaviors (Kaplan, et al., 2009), and customer satisfaction (Zhao, 2019; Pugh, 2001, Barger & Grandey, 2006, Tsai & Huang, 2002, in Diner, et al., 2020; Diener et al., 2017, Tenney et al., 2016 as cited in Seligman, 2019; George, 1995 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Conversely, organizational cultures encouraging high-pressure and high-stress associate with increased health care costs, costs of disengagement, and turnover costs. Employees miss more than 550 million days each year due to stress at work; workplace stress accounts for 50 percent increase in employee turnover (Seppala & Cameron, 2015).

Hence, organizations should focus on creating a positive workplace to not only decrease costs, but attract, develop and retain the talent needed to be productive and successful. Psychological Capital (PsyCap) predicts creative and innovative behavior, which may lead to higher employee engagement and overall satisfaction in the workplace (Sameer, 2018). Similarly, optimism, a core construct of PsyCap, predicts employee creativity in the workplace (Rego et al. 2012 as cited in Diener, et al., 2020). PsyCap positively contributes to job effectiveness, satisfaction, positive emotions at work, and organizational commitment (Youssef and Luthans, 2007; Luthans, et al., 2008 as cited in Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Positive leadership increases knowledge sharing, and in turn, it enhances their employees' PsyCap (Wu and Lee, 2017). Youssef and Luthans (2007) argue that investing in employees' PsyCap elevates companies toward achieving corporate social responsibility and ultimately a competitive advantage.

While investing in employees' PsyCap advances a company toward competitive advantage, positive organizational potential (POP), defined as positive organizational climate and culture that enhances positive employee behavior, results in a similar advantage (Newes & Stankiewicz, 2012). Furthermore, positive leadership and POP may keep employees engaged during change management (Achor, 2011; Newes & Stankiewicz, 2012). A meta-analysis supports that positive affect predicts job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors, in which employees voluntarily extend to areas outside of the scope of their responsibilities for the benefit of the organization (Kaplan, et al., 2009). Because of the impact of positivity in business, research has been expanding to student success.

Positivity and College Students

Positivity improves nearly every aspect of a college student's life, from better relationships, to increased likelihood of interviews. The happiest students have strong relationships with others (Diener & Seligman, 2002 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Happier female college students demonstrated less adversarial behavior toward females than their less happy female peers (Cowan et al., 1998 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Not only do happier college students have better relationships, but college students perform better in their campus jobs. Specifically, students working as residential assistants receive higher ratings. Likewise, resident assistants with higher positive affect working at

residence halls demonstrated higher productivity than students with lower levels of positive affect (Deluga & Masson, 2000, as cited in Walsh, 2018).

Students with high subjective well-being (Frisch et al., 2004, as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Solberg, et al., 2009 in Carver & Scheier, 2014) and higher Hope Scale scores (Snyder et al., 2002) increase their likelihood in graduating college. College students with higher positive affect and high extraversion reported to be more resourceful when searching for jobs and achieved more success in securing follow-up interviews three months following graduation (Burger & Caldwell, 2000). Similarly, in a multi-study (cross-sectional and longitudinal), students scoring high across all dimensions of PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) in their sophomore year predicted post-graduate opportunities such as internships, admission to graduate school, and job offers (Coffee et al., 2016). In fact, optimistic first year law school students go on to have higher salaries ten years following law school (Segerstrom, 2007 as cited in Carver & Scheier, 2014), and happy teenagers earn more money 15 years later than their less happy peers (Diener & Seligman, 2002, as cited in Seligman, 2019).

Positivity and Business Students

Business students and business schools benefit from students with positive mind-sets. These students experience higher levels of academic success and life satisfaction (Bressler, et al., 2010; Staw & Barsade, 1993 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Business schools continue to create a competitive advantange, develop human capital needed for organizations to flourish, and best prepare students to enter an competitive job market by focusing on revelent organizational trends, such as a positive workforce. A number of universities incorporate positive education into their ciriculum (Seligman, 2019; Meek, et al., 2018). In fact, an alumni study completed at a business school in a Midwestern university indicates that teaching interpersonal skills, which include having a positive attitude and getting along with others, is important when preparing students for career success (Tucker, et al., 2020).

In a 2010 study of undergraduate online accounting students, results indicated that hope, a contruct of optimism, can improve academic success (Bressler, et al., 2010). Simarly, a study examining marketing students from a Southern business school supported that students who are optimistic, academically prepared, and motivated predict academic success (Nonis, 2005). Another study revealed undergraduate business students, with high levels in achievement and situational optimism, outperformed their peers in academic measures such as CGPA, CECA ration, and perceived performance (Nonis and Wright, 2003). Master of Business Administration (MBA) students earned higher performance marks than their less happy peers (Staw & Barsade, 1993 as cited in Walsh, 2018). Happier business students are more likely to be successful academically, experience life satisfaction (Staw & Barsade, 1993 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) and set higher goals (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Similar traits from both hope and optimism create goal attitude, which positively impacts academic success (Rand, 2009; Snyder et al., 1991 as cited in Bressler, 2010). Psychological Capital (PsyCap) may precede goal setting and pursuit, which may increase performance in the classroom (Martinez et al., 2019). Positive undergraduate students set higher goals (Baron, 1990, Home & Arbuckle, 1988 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), feel more enthusiastic about their goals, and continue to set goals following college than their less happy peers. College students experience higher academic success and life satisfaction (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

A study of 457 Mexican American students reported that higher levels of positive affect increase their likelihood of having a positive academic experience (Ojeda, et al., 2011). Student optimism (Singh & Jha, 2013), hope (Rand, 2009), and positive affect (Saklofske et al., 2012) predict academic success with undergraduate students and early adolescents (Tetzner & Becker, 2018). Further, higher levels of PERMA (Coffee et al., 2016), optimistic explanatory style (Maleva, 2014), and hope (Barlow, 2002; Snyder et al., 2002) predict GPA. In a study using a questionnaire to survey undergraduate college students in Spain (N=389) and Portugal (N=243), PsyCap and academic engagement positively impacts and predicts academic success (Martinez et al., 2019). Similar studies support these results (Enright & Gitomer, 1989; Luthans, et al., 2012, Oswald et al., 2004, Salanova et al., 2010, Zajacova, et al., 2005 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019).

Some studies are not favorable. Individually, optimism did not impact students' grade expectancies (Rand, 2009) or GPA (Barlow, 2002; Majer, 2009). Likewise, an inverse correlation was indicated between optimism and academic achievement in African-American students (McBride, Robinson, Rose, & Turner, 2007 as cited in Robinson, 2009). Moreover, positive affect negatively relates to high school and college achievement (Nickerson et al., 2010). Satterfield and his colleagues (1997 as cited in Maleva, 2014) demonstrated that law students with pessimistic explanatory style had a higher GPA than law students with optimistic explanatory style. However, the majority of the research supports the benefits of a positive outlook.

Positivity, Resiliency, and College Students' Perseverance

Additionally, positivity helps college students and workers cope better during highly stressful times. Optimism leads to better coping strategies such as problem-solving and positive reinterpretation (Scheier & Carver, 1992; Schmidt et al., 2010 in Diener, 2020), laughter, and positive reframing (Carver et al., 1993 in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Even in the most stressful times, such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, resilient people were less depressed and even increased their personal growth capacity (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003 as cited in Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Furthermore, during the financial crisis of 2008, managers who viewed stress with a positive mind-set enhanced their happiness (Achor, 2012).

Coping strategies, a result of positive emotions (Diener, 2020), lead to increased student success and college satisfaction (Saklofske et al., 2012). In fact, perseverance predicts GPA and academic performance (Duckworth et al., 2007 as cited in Coffee, 2016; Weisskirch, 2016; Saklofske et al., 2012). Likewise, college students with higher perseverance adjusted better to campus, experienced higher feelings of association (Bowman et al., 2015 as cited in Weisskirch, 2016), and engaged in extracurricular activities (Duckworth et al., 2007 as cited in Coffee, 2016).

This study extends positivity research to identify whether positivity can sustain itself under extreme changes in lifestyle. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether these students' positivity would hold in the midst of a pandemic and while shifting from a high-touch, in-class experience to an online, virtual learning space.

THE STUDY

This study began in week eight of the 2020 spring semester, which was the week prior to Spring Break—a time when most students are ready for a break and highly anticipating it. This was also the week prior to COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic and the university moving to all online instruction.

Sixty-four undergraduate students, who enrolled in two sections of Marketing Research classes at a Midwestern university during Spring Semester of 2020, participated in this study and completed both the mid-term survey, as well as the semester-end survey. Twenty remaining students did not complete both surveys and were not included in the research, resulting in a 76% participation rate. The sixty-four undergraduate students who participated in the study represented mostly seniors (62.5%) and juniors (35.94%), with the remaining 1.56% representing sophomores. Most of the student respondents enrolled in these Marketing Research classes were business students (89.06%), with the largest number of these students majoring in Marketing (68.42%).

Students' quantitative data were collected both before and after the "novel coronavirus" global pandemic was declared. The online surveys were created in Qualtrics, and the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) was used for the positive well-being survey questions with indicator statements based on a seven-point Likert scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The Likert items ranged from one to seven, in which a response of "one" indicated the lowest agreement/happiness level, a response of "four" indicated a neutral score, and a response of "seven" indicated the highest agreement/happiness level. Surveys were distributed to both class sections halfway through the semester (week 8, 1-1/2 weeks before the global pandemic was officially declared), and distributed again to both class sections at the end of the semester (weeks 15-16, amidst the global pandemic). The following SHS items were included in the pre-survey, as well as the post-survey:

SH1. In general, how happy of a person do you consider yourself?
SH2. Compared with most of your peers, how happy do you consider yourself?
SH3. 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?

The following additional questions using a similar format were added to the surveys and distributed to the same students at the end of the semester to assess positive well-being levels after the global pandemic was declared as compared to beforehand:

"If your level of happiness has changed since before Spring Break 2020 to now, do you believe it is related to transitioning from in-person classes to fully online?"

RESULTS

Students enrolled in these Marketing Research classes were able to maintain positive well-being levels, even with the unexpected transition that had to be made from a high-touch, in-class experience to a fully online, virtual learning environment due to the global pandemic. The data collected from Marketing Research students before Spring Break, which was mid-semester

and the week prior to the official declaration of the COVID-19 global pandemic, revealed the average rating was slightly under the "moderately happy" rating (a 5.92 average score out of the 7-point scale). Spring Break was at first extended and then all university courses were moved online for the remainder of spring semester. At the end of spring semester, students reported average happiness levels of "moderately happy" (a 6.13 score out of the 7-point scale). When asked how happy they considered themselves in comparison with most of their peers, student respondents reported, on average, that they viewed themselves as "slightly more happy" than most of their peers. Again, this rating was not only maintained during the shift to the online, virtual course delivery amidst the pandemic, but also slightly increased from a 4.95 average score at the halfway point of the term to a 5.14 average rating at the end of the semester.

Student respondents were also able to maintain their positive well-being levels in regard to life in general between the halfway point of the term (before Spring Break 2020 and prior to the global pandemic) and the end of the term during the pandemic. When responding to this survey question, "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?", the average response on both surveys was "somewhat true," with an average rating of 5.26 out of 7 on the first survey, and an average rating of 5.19 on the second survey.

Respondents also maintained a similar well-being average rating when asked the following question: "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?" The average response to this question on both surveys was just under "somewhat not true," with an average rating of 3.25 out of 7 on the first survey, and "somewhat not true" on the second survey with an average rating of 2.96 out of 7.

Additional questions were asked in the second survey at the end of the semester to further assess student positivity after the global pandemic was declared as compared to beforehand. Students were asked how happy they considered themselves at the end of the semester, compared to how happy they remembered being before Spring Break at the halfway point of the term. The average response to this question was between "slightly less happy" and neutral ("neither more happy nor less happy-- the same"), an average rating of 3.45 out of 7. Also, in the second survey, respondents were asked if they believed any changes in their level of happiness since before Spring Break 2020 might be related to transitioning from in-person classes to a fully online, virtual delivery. The most common answer was yes, with 46.88% of students indicating they did believe their change in happiness was related to the transition from in-person course delivery to a fully online, virtual course delivery (28.13% indicated no, 20.31% reported maybe, while the remaining 4.68% responded that they were unsure).

Dependent sample *t* tests were conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences of students' subjective happiness levels between the pre-survey data (collected before the pandemic) compared to the post-survey results (collected 7-8 weeks later, amidst the pandemic). The *t* test results showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the two sets of means (the subjective well-being levels of the students before the pandemic as compared to amidst the pandemic), $p > .05$; this was true for all subjective well-being measures, including individual happiness, happiness compared to peers, and general life happiness. Table 1 (Appendix) contains more details of the dependent sample *t* tests.

CONCLUSION

For these particular students, positivity levels remained high during the pandemic and through the remainder of the semester after the move to online instruction. This supports previous research indicating that happy people maintain that outlook even when experiencing adversity. Martin Seligman posits that "Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers them better" (Martin Seligman & Positive Psychology, 2018, para. 3)

However, one caveat to be noted is that, amidst this transitional time when society, as a whole, experienced new and heightened levels of adversity, people in general became more supportive and encouraging of each other. This was especially true in the university community, which cultivated an even more accommodating environment that encouraged instructors to be extra supportive of students facing new and difficult situations. For example, some missed assessments were reopened for students to retake with point deductions; before the pandemic, this missed work could only be made up if the student provided a university-approved excuse with documentation. These accommodations might positively impact the results.

Not addressed by this study is the theory that happiness levels can be enhanced through instruction. Future research might consider including a happiness intervention in alternate classes to determine whether students' happiness levels can be increased through instruction in a semester. During these tenuous times, providing students a venue for increasing their positivity may give the encouragement needed for some to make a change and consciously build a more positive outlook. According to Lyubomirsky "The world can be a horrible, cruel place, and at the same time, it can be wonderful and abundant. These are both truths. There is not a halfway point; there is only choosing which truth to put in your personal foreground" (2008, p. 111).

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Dependent Sample t Test Results for Subjective Happiness

Measure	**T1-T2 *M***	***df***	***t***	***d***
SH 1 (Individual Happiness)	1.78	63	-1.78 (*ns*)	-13
SH 2 (Ind. Happiness vs. Peers)	*1.23*	63	-1.23 (*ns*)	-12
SH 3 (Happiness with Life)	0.62	63	0.62 (*ns*)	5

* $p < .05$