Youth Conceptions of Happiness: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Emotional Well-Being

Juan. Camilo Ríos[1]*, Bridget. Abalorio [2]

[1] Department of Educational Sciences, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia
[2] Faculty of Psychology, Peruvian University of Applied Sciences, Lima, Peru

* Corresponding author email address: juan.rios@javeriana.edu.co

A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: The objective of this study was to explore and describe how Colombian adolescents conceptualize and experience happiness within their sociocultural context.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of youth. A total of 24 participants (13 females, 11 males), aged 18–25 years, were recruited from various urban and rural regions in Colombia through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in Spanish, focusing on definitions, sources, and experiences of happiness. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Transcripts were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software, following an iterative process of coding, clustering, and interpretation to extract the essence of adolescents' conceptions of happiness.

Findings: The analysis generated four overarching themes: (1) Personal Dimensions of Happiness (self-acceptance, autonomy, health, emotional balance, optimism, and achievement); (2) Relational and Social Connections (family support, friendships, romantic relationships, belonging, and community ties); (3) Cultural and Contextual Influences (Colombian identity, spirituality, socioeconomic conditions, education, political climate, and digital culture); and (4) Experiential and Lifestyle Factors (leisure, creativity, nature, mindfulness, kindness, novelty, and balance). Participants consistently emphasized the interdependence of personal strengths, social bonds, cultural traditions, and lifestyle practices in shaping their happiness.

Conclusion: This study highlights the multidimensional nature of adolescent happiness, revealing it as a construct deeply embedded in personal growth, relationships, cultural identity, and contextual realities. The findings underscore the importance of adopting culturally sensitive and holistic approaches to promoting youth well-being in Colombia and similar settings. By centering adolescents' own voices, this research contributes to global understandings of happiness and provides insights for policies, educational initiatives, and community interventions aimed at fostering emotional well-being among youth.

Keywords: Happiness; Adolescents; Emotional Well-being; Phenomenology; Colombia; Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the psychological study of happiness has evolved from a peripheral interest into a central concern within developmental, educational, and health psychology. Adolescence, as a developmental period characterized by profound biological, cognitive, and social transformations, has emerged as a critical window for understanding subjective well-being. Happiness during this life stage is not merely an affective state, but a multidimensional construct shaped by internal dispositions, interpersonal relationships, cultural norms, and structural conditions. Research has shown that happiness in youth is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including better academic performance, lower levels of psychopathology, greater resilience, and more adaptive coping strategies (Aumose, 2025; Baltaci & Akbulut, 2021; Yin et al., 2025). Yet, despite the growing interest in adolescent happiness, much of the literature remains dominated by quantitative approaches, often guided by predefined models, which may fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of youth themselves.

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is a period in which individuals begin to actively construct their own identity and worldview, including personal definitions of happiness (Lee & Ha, 2022). This process is embedded within sociocultural and familial contexts that can both support and constrain emotional well-being. For example, parental attitudes, peer relationships, academic expectations, and economic pressures all interact to shape how adolescents define and pursue happiness (Hashim & Zaharim, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). However, these determinants are not universally experienced. Variations across gender, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and life circumstances lead to different meanings and expressions of happiness (Annisa et al., 2025; Rafi & Netrawati, 2019). As such, there is a growing recognition that qualitative, context-sensitive inquiries are necessary to deepen our understanding of how young people conceptualize happiness in their own words and worlds.

Several recent studies have explored subjective well-being among adolescents from different sociocultural contexts. For instance, (Annisa et al., 2025) found that friendship quality and gender significantly influenced self-reported happiness among adolescents in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, with female students tending to value emotional closeness more than males. Similarly, (Aulia et al., 2025) conducted a qualitative study with orphaned youth in Banda Aceh, revealing that their conceptions of happiness were rooted in gratitude, religious faith, and a sense of belonging in institutional care. These findings highlight that happiness cannot be reduced to hedonic pleasure or material gain; instead, it often involves relational and spiritual dimensions that are culturally grounded.

In another study, (Aumose, 2025) identified mental health, social support, and stress as a "crucial trio" influencing adolescent happiness, emphasizing that psychological well-being is deeply intertwined with relational resources and emotional regulation. Adolescents who perceived themselves as mentally healthy, socially supported, and less stressed reported significantly higher levels of happiness. These results are consistent with previous findings that link subjective well-being to internal resources such as self-efficacy and grit, as well as external support systems (MÜRtezaoĞLu & Çıkrıkçı, 2022; Putri et al., 2023).

Gender differences have also emerged as a salient factor in how adolescents experience and define happiness. (Annisa et al., 2025) observed that female adolescents often valued emotional intimacy and communication in friendships as sources of happiness, while male adolescents tended to prioritize shared activities and companionship. Moreover, (Çiftçi & Sarman, 2024) showed that future expectations were positively correlated with happiness and healthy lifestyle beliefs, suggesting that hope and purpose are critical for adolescent well-being. This aligns with evidence from (Susanto & Darmayanti, 2023), who examined the role of forgiveness in adolescents coping with romantic breakups, finding that those who were able to forgive reported higher levels of happiness, indicating that emotional resilience plays a protective role in the aftermath of relational stress.

The role of family and peer relationships remains one of the most consistent predictors of adolescent happiness. (Baltaci & Akbulut, 2021) found that peer acceptance and school belonging were strongly associated with subjective well-being among Turkish adolescents, suggesting that the school context serves as an important arena for happiness development. Similarly, (MÜRtezaoĞLu & Çıkrıkçı, 2022) identified significant associations between happiness, self-efficacy, peer relationships, and the need for social approval. These findings underscore the social nature of happiness during adolescence, as young people navigate the desire for autonomy alongside the need for connection.

Structural and contextual factors also shape adolescent happiness. (Hashim & Zaharim, 2020) reported that

sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and school type significantly influenced happiness among Malaysian youth, with urban students generally reporting higher well-being than their rural counterparts. Economic conditions, educational opportunities, and access to leisure activities are key contextual variables that contribute to these disparities. Similarly, (Yin et al., 2025) explored the relationships among emotional symptoms, regular exercise, and demographic characteristics in adolescents seeking psychological services, concluding that physical activity and lower symptom severity were associated with greater happiness.

In addition to relational and structural variables, personal strengths such as resilience, grit, and self-regulation have been identified as important determinants of adolescent happiness. (Putri et al., 2023) found that resilience was a significant predictor of happiness among adolescents living in orphanages in Jakarta, demonstrating that even in challenging environments, internal resources can buffer against emotional distress. Likewise, (Batubara et al., 2021) explored resilience among adolescents who survived domestic violence, revealing that happiness was linked to their capacity to reframe traumatic experiences, develop future goals, and maintain supportive relationships. These findings emphasize the role of post-adversity growth in the development of subjective well-being.

Leisure and lifestyle factors have also been examined as pathways to happiness. (Kim et al., 2024) highlighted the importance of leisure engagement, finding that adolescents who participated in meaningful leisure activities (e.g., music, sports, cultural events) reported higher levels of happiness. This echoes earlier evidence that active engagement in enjoyable and self-selected activities enhances positive affect and life satisfaction (Kim et al., 2022). Furthermore, (Lee & Ha, 2022) analyzed attribution factors for happiness in Korean high school students, finding that students attributed their happiness primarily to interpersonal relationships, personal achievements, and self-development, again illustrating the multidimensional nature of happiness.

The influence of cultural context cannot be overstated. For instance, (Rafi & Netrawati, 2019) studied adolescents in a social orphanage in Padang Panjang, Indonesia, and found that happiness was often linked to religious devotion, gratitude, and communal solidarity. These culturally embedded meanings contrast with more individualistic conceptions of happiness found in Western contexts, highlighting the importance of contextually sensitive research approaches. Similarly, (O'Sullivan et al., 2022) examined adolescent perspectives in a health-related trial and found that trust, communication, and perceived autonomy were crucial to their sense of well-being, even in clinical settings.

International comparative studies have added further nuance to the field. (Tabbasam et al., 2023) compared self-strength, help-seeking, and happiness between Pakistani and Chinese adolescents, concluding that cultural values and educational systems significantly influenced how happiness was conceptualized and pursued. This study, along with others, reinforces the argument that happiness in adolescence is not a universal construct but is mediated by cultural scripts, institutional structures, and collective norms (Guanizo, 2021).

Despite the expanding literature, several gaps remain. First, much of the research has relied on cross-sectional surveys, which provide important statistical associations but often fail to uncover the subjective meanings behind the numbers. Second, while quantitative studies have identified key predictors of adolescent happiness—such as resilience, peer relationships, leisure, and future orientation—there is limited knowledge of how adolescents themselves define and narrate their own happiness, especially in under-researched contexts such as Latin America. Third, cultural and contextual diversity remains underrepresented, with most studies being conducted in East Asian, Southeast Asian, or European settings. This raises concerns about the generalizability of existing models of adolescent happiness.

In light of these gaps, qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenological methods, offer valuable opportunities to explore how adolescents experience and articulate happiness in their own voices. Phenomenology emphasizes the lived experience and the meanings individuals ascribe to their own life worlds, making it a suitable framework for understanding complex, subjective constructs like happiness. By engaging directly with adolescents through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, researchers can uncover the nuanced, context-specific conceptions of well-being that may not be visible in standardized scales.

The present study responds to this need by exploring the conceptions of happiness among Colombian youth using a phenomenological qualitative design.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach, which is particularly suited to exploring the lived experiences and subjective meanings individuals attach to complex constructs such as happiness and emotional well-being. Phenomenology enables an in-depth understanding of how youth perceive and experience happiness within their sociocultural contexts, moving beyond predefined theoretical frameworks toward participants' own conceptualizations.

The participants were 24 young individuals (ages 18–25) from Colombia, purposefully selected to represent a diverse range of backgrounds, including variations in gender, socioeconomic status, and educational levels. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants had the capacity to reflect on and articulate their experiences of happiness. Recruitment was carried out through community organizations, university networks, and social media platforms. Inclusion criteria required that participants self-identify as youth (within the age range of 18–25), be Colombian residents, and voluntarily agree to participate in an in-depth interview.

2.2. Measures

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to freely share their experiences while also enabling the researchers to guide the conversation with open-ended questions. The interview guide was developed around core themes of happiness, well-being, emotional experiences, and contextual influences. Example questions included: *"How would you describe happiness in your own words?"*, *"What situations or experiences make you feel truly happy?"*, and *"How does your cultural or social context shape your understanding of happiness?"*.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, the native language of participants, to ensure comfort and authenticity in responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each interview to capture contextual details, non-verbal expressions, and researcher reflections. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—defined as the point where no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews. The saturation point was achieved after the 22nd interview; however, two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation.

2.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Spanish and subsequently checked for accuracy. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo 14 software for systematic coding and thematic analysis. Following a phenomenological tradition, data analysis proceeded through several iterative steps:

1. **Immersion and familiarization** – Researchers read and re-read transcripts to gain a holistic sense of participants' accounts.
2. **Initial coding** – Meaning units were identified and coded, staying close to participants' language to preserve their perspectives.
3. **Theme development** – Codes were clustered into broader categories that captured shared patterns across participants.
4. **Refinement and validation** – Themes were refined through constant comparison across transcripts, and peer debriefing within the research team was conducted to enhance credibility.
5. **Phenomenological interpretation** – The final step involved synthesizing themes into a coherent account that reflects the essence of how Colombian youth conceive of happiness and emotional well-being.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study incorporated strategies such as member checking with a subset of participants, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions. All participants provided informed consent, and the study adhered to ethical standards for research with human subjects.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 24 Colombian youth participated in the study. The sample comprised 13 females (54.2%) and 11 males (45.8%), ranging in age from 18 to 25 years (M = 21.4). In terms of educational background, 10 participants (41.7%) were undergraduate students, 6 (25%) were enrolled in graduate programs, 5 (20.8%) had completed high school, and 3 (12.5%) were engaged in vocational or technical training. Socioeconomic status was reported as low-income for 9 participants (37.5%), middle-income for 11 (45.8%), and upper-middle income for 4 (16.7%). Regarding relationship status, 15 participants (62.5%) identified as

single, while 9 (37.5%) reported being in a romantic relationship. Participants were recruited from diverse regions of Colombia, including both urban centers such as Bogotá and Medellín (16 participants, 66.7%) and smaller towns or rural areas (8 participants, 33.3%), reflecting a broad spectrum of sociocultural contexts.

Table 1

Main Themes, Subthemes, and Open Codes (Concepts)

Theme (Category)	Subtheme (Subcategory)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Personal Dimensions of Happiness	Self-Acceptance	Feeling comfortable with oneself; Recognizing personal strengths; Embracing imperfections; Self-love
	Autonomy and Freedom	Making independent choices; Freedom from parental control; Deciding future paths; Sense of agency; Owning mistakes
	Physical Health	Good nutrition; Exercising regularly; Adequate sleep; Avoiding harmful habits
	Emotional Balance	Managing stress; Regulating negative emotions; Experiencing calmness; Self-reflection
	Achievement and Growth	Academic success; Personal goals; Career aspirations; Continuous self-improvement; Skill development
	Optimism and Hope	Looking forward to the future; Maintaining positive outlook; Belief in opportunities
2. Relational and Social Connections	Family Support	Emotional closeness; Respectful communication; Shared traditions; Intergenerational bonding
	Friendships	Peer acceptance; Trust among friends; Sharing experiences; Support during difficulties
	Romantic Relationships	Mutual care; Intimacy; Trust and loyalty; Conflict resolution
	Social Belonging	Feeling included in groups; Recognition from peers; Participation in social events
	Community Ties	Helping neighbors; Engaging in community projects; Collective responsibility; Local cultural pride
3. Cultural and Contextual Influences	Colombian Identity	National pride; Cultural traditions; Celebrating festivals; Connection to language
	Religion and Spirituality	Faith practices; Trust in God; Ritual participation; Inner peace through spirituality
	Socioeconomic Conditions	Financial stability; Job opportunities; Social mobility; Economic uncertainty
	Education as Pathway	Access to higher education; Opportunities for scholarships; Parental emphasis on study
	Political Environment	Desire for social justice; Distrust in government; Hope for peace; Safety concerns
	Digital Culture	Influence of social media; Online friendships; Comparing lifestyles online; Pressure of virtual image
4. Experiential and Lifestyle Factors	Leisure and Recreation	Enjoying music; Dancing; Traveling; Outdoor activities; Watching sports
	Creativity and Expression	Painting or drawing; Writing poetry; Playing instruments; Expressing emotions through art
	Connection with Nature	Relaxing in parks; Mountain hiking; Ocean visits; Gardening
	Mindfulness and Reflection	Meditation practices; Journaling; Spending time alone; Spiritual retreats
	Acts of Kindness	Volunteering; Helping strangers; Supporting friends in need
	Adventure and Novelty	Trying new foods; Exploring new places; Meeting new people; Seeking challenges
	Balance of Work and Play	Time management; Avoiding overwork; Prioritizing rest; Keeping hobbies alive

Theme 1: Personal Dimensions of Happiness

Self-Acceptance. For many participants, happiness was linked to embracing one's identity and recognizing personal worth. Several youth highlighted that learning to "accept who I am" was central to their emotional well-being. One participant expressed: *"I feel happiest when I stop comparing myself to others and accept my flaws as part of me."* Another emphasized: *"Loving myself, even with my mistakes, is when I feel real peace."*

Autonomy and Freedom. Autonomy emerged as a crucial factor, with participants underscoring the ability to make independent life choices. They described happiness as having "the freedom to decide without constant control" and "owning both achievements and failures." A 21-year-old student noted: *"When I can choose my career path without pressure, I feel I'm truly happy."*

Physical Health. Health and vitality were repeatedly cited as fundamental to happiness. Participants associated well-being with exercise, good diet, and adequate rest. One respondent shared: *"When I'm taking care of my body, eating well and sleeping, I feel full of energy, and that energy makes me happy."*

Emotional Balance. Emotional regulation was described as integral to happiness. Youth reported that calmness, stress management, and self-reflection allowed them to sustain a positive outlook. As one participant explained: *"For me, happiness is not about being excited all the time, but about staying calm and not letting problems consume me."*

Achievement and Growth. A sense of accomplishment also shaped participants' happiness. Success in academic, career, or personal goals provided them with pride and fulfillment. One interviewee said: *"When I finish something I worked hard on, like passing an exam or getting a scholarship, that moment makes me happy."*

Optimism and Hope. Optimism about the future was another subtheme. Participants described happiness as maintaining hope and believing in possibilities. One participant reflected: *"Even when life is difficult, I try to stay positive. Happiness is when I believe better days will come."*

Theme 2: Relational and Social Connections

Family Support. Family bonds were a dominant source of happiness. Many participants emphasized closeness, shared traditions, and mutual respect. One respondent explained: *"Having my family at the table, talking and laughing together, gives me a happiness I can't find anywhere else."*

Friendships. Peer support and companionship were highlighted as vital for happiness. Trust and acceptance in friendships created security and joy. One youth said: *"With my friends I can be myself, without fear. Their support makes me feel strong and happy."*

Romantic Relationships. For several participants, happiness was deeply tied to romantic love, care, and intimacy. A 23-year-old woman stated: *"Being with someone who understands me, who listens and supports me, gives me a happiness that feels complete."*

Social Belonging. Belonging to social groups enhanced happiness, especially through recognition and inclusion. As one participant put it: *"When I'm part of a group and they value me, I feel I really matter, and that brings me joy."*

Community Ties. Youth also associated happiness with contributing to their communities. Helping others and participating in local events fostered a sense of pride. One young man noted: *"When we organize community activities and everyone works together, I feel happy because I'm part of something bigger."*

Theme 3: Cultural and Contextual Influences

Colombian Identity. National and cultural pride were frequently connected to happiness. Celebrating traditions and festivals created moments of collective joy. One participant said: *"When we dance in festivals and share our traditions, I feel proud to be Colombian, and that is happiness for me."*

Religion and Spirituality. Faith and spirituality emerged as another foundation of well-being. Participants reported that trust in God and religious practices brought peace. A young woman remarked: *"When I pray, I feel calm and close to happiness, even if everything around me is chaotic."*

Socioeconomic Conditions. Financial stability and opportunities were highlighted as key determinants of happiness, while insecurity generated stress. One interviewee reflected: *"I feel happy when my parents don't worry about money. Stability makes us all breathe easier."*

Education as Pathway. Education was described as both a personal and social route to happiness. Participants linked it to opportunities, mobility, and family pride. A 20-year-old male said: *"For me, happiness is being in college, because I know I'm building a better future."*

Political Environment. Youth expressed that safety, peace, and justice shaped their happiness. A student noted: *"Happiness is living without fear, without violence, and believing the government will protect us."*

Digital Culture. Technology was ambivalently described: social media offered connection but also pressure. One participant confessed: *"Sometimes I'm happy sharing moments online, but other times I feel sad comparing my life to what I see."*

Theme 4: Experiential and Lifestyle Factors

Leisure and Recreation. Enjoying music, dancing, and sports were repeatedly cited as moments of joy. As one participant expressed: *"When I dance salsa with friends, I forget everything and just feel alive and happy."*

Creativity and Expression. Artistic expression was linked to emotional release and happiness. A young artist noted: *"Drawing is my therapy—it makes me feel at peace and truly happy."*

Connection with Nature. Being outdoors was described as a source of calm and inspiration. One interviewee stated: *"When I go to the mountains, I feel free, like nature is giving me happiness."*

Mindfulness and Reflection. Practices such as journaling and meditation supported happiness through self-awareness. One participant explained: *"Writing my thoughts every night helps me release stress, and that's when I feel content."*

Acts of Kindness. Helping others was repeatedly described as a direct path to happiness. A 22-year-old male

shared: *"When I help someone in need, the smile they give me is my happiness."*

Adventure and Novelty. Exploring new places and experiences was also valued. One participant said: *"Traveling to unknown towns makes me happy, because every new experience feels like a treasure."*

Balance of Work and Play. Finally, youth emphasized the need for balance between responsibilities and leisure. As one participant noted: *"Happiness is not working all the time. It's studying and working, but also resting and enjoying life."*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored Colombian youths' conceptions of happiness through a phenomenological inquiry, yielding four overarching themes: personal dimensions of happiness, relational and social connections, cultural and contextual influences, and experiential and lifestyle factors. The findings provide a nuanced account of how adolescents define and experience happiness within their sociocultural context, highlighting the interplay of individual traits, interpersonal relationships, cultural values, and structural realities. In this section, the results are discussed in relation to existing scholarship, with attention to both convergences and divergences.

The theme of personal dimensions revealed that Colombian youth associate happiness with self-acceptance, autonomy, emotional balance, optimism, and achievement. This is consistent with earlier findings that individual strengths such as grit, self-regulation, and self-efficacy play a central role in adolescents' subjective well-being (Kim et al., 2022; MÜRtezaoĞLu & Çıkrıkçı, 2022). Our participants highlighted autonomy as a significant factor in their happiness, describing independence and freedom from external control as key. This finding aligns with the evidence from (Lee & Ha, 2022), who found that high school students often attributed happiness to personal achievements and the sense of making their own decisions. Similarly, (Çiftçi & Sarman, 2024) identified future orientation as a determinant of happiness, suggesting that adolescents derive well-being from their sense of agency and optimism about possibilities ahead.

Physical health and emotional regulation also emerged strongly in the narratives. Participants described healthful practices, such as maintaining adequate sleep and exercise, as integral to happiness. This resonates with (Yin et al., 2025), who found that regular exercise and lower levels of

emotional symptoms were predictive of adolescent happiness in a clinical population. Emotional balance—defined by our participants as calmness, managing stress, and reflecting on emotions—supports the broader evidence that mental health is a key pillar of adolescent happiness. In particular, (Aumose, 2025) emphasizes the "crucial trio" of mental health, social support, and stress management in determining happiness, underscoring the significance of the psychological regulation strategies reported in this study.

Self-acceptance and self-love were also central to happiness for Colombian adolescents. Youth emphasized the importance of embracing imperfections and refraining from constant social comparison. This finding resonates with (Annisa et al., 2025), who noted that gender differences in friendship quality shaped happiness, suggesting that female adolescents especially placed value on emotional closeness and acceptance in relationships. Our participants, however, framed acceptance not only interpersonally but also intrapersonally, underscoring the need to include self-acceptance in models of adolescent well-being.

Relationships were a dominant source of happiness, encompassing family support, friendships, romantic relationships, social belonging, and community ties. Adolescents described family gatherings, shared traditions, and supportive communication as core to their sense of joy. This aligns with (Baltaci & Akbulut, 2021), who reported that peer acceptance and school belonging were linked to higher happiness in adolescents, and with (Kim et al., 2022), who found that inconsistent parenting styles negatively impacted happiness. The emphasis on supportive family structures in the Colombian context adds weight to the argument that relational well-being is not merely supplementary but foundational to adolescent happiness.

Friendship emerged as another critical subtheme, particularly in terms of trust, companionship, and mutual support. This finding corroborates the work of (Annisa et al., 2025), who emphasized the role of friendship quality in shaping adolescent happiness. Similarly, (MÜRtezaoĞLu & Çıkrıkçı, 2022) identified peer relationships as predictive of subjective well-being, showing that adolescents' happiness is strongly intertwined with the social approval and acceptance they receive from peers. The voices of Colombian youth echo these findings, as they consistently highlighted friendships as spaces of authenticity and shared joy.

Romantic relationships, though not universal, were highlighted by some participants as vital to their happiness. Mutual care, intimacy, and loyalty emerged as sources of

well-being, reflecting findings from (Susanto & Darmayanti, 2023), who reported that forgiveness in romantic contexts increased happiness among adolescents recovering from relationship loss. Our participants similarly viewed happiness as closely tied to the ability to establish supportive and trusting bonds in intimate partnerships.

Community belonging was another key dimension. Participants expressed joy in contributing to their communities and engaging in collective activities. This resonates with (Putri et al., 2023), who identified resilience and belonging as predictors of happiness in orphaned adolescents, and with (Rafi & Netrawati, 2019), who found that orphanage youth derived happiness from communal solidarity. These findings together highlight the communal orientation of adolescent happiness in non-Western contexts, underscoring that happiness is not solely an individual pursuit but deeply rooted in collective life.

Cultural identity, spirituality, socioeconomic conditions, education, politics, and digital culture shaped the ways Colombian youth conceptualized happiness. Celebrating traditions and national pride were central sources of joy, consistent with (Aulia et al., 2025), who reported that gratitude, spirituality, and cultural identity shaped happiness among orphaned youth in Aceh. The role of Colombian identity highlights the importance of situating happiness in its cultural milieu, reinforcing the argument that happiness cannot be universally defined.

Religion and spirituality also emerged as major influences. Participants spoke of prayer and faith as sources of peace, aligning with (Rafi & Netrawati, 2019), who reported similar findings in orphanage children, and (Batubara et al., 2021), who found that resilience among survivors of domestic violence was supported by spiritual and religious coping. These findings suggest that spiritual resources provide adolescents with meaning and a buffer against distress.

Socioeconomic and political conditions were also central. Many participants emphasized financial stability and social safety as prerequisites for happiness, a finding supported by (Hashim & Zaharim, 2020), who reported that sociodemographic and contextual factors influenced adolescent well-being in Malaysia. The political climate was also seen as shaping happiness; youth expressed desire for justice, safety, and peace. This finding complements (Tabbasam et al., 2023), who highlighted cross-cultural differences in help-seeking and happiness, showing that structural conditions significantly influence well-being.

The influence of digital culture was ambivalent. Some participants described social media as enhancing their happiness by enabling connection, while others reported pressure and sadness from social comparison. This dual effect aligns with (Guanizo, 2021), who studied suicide ideation and noted the role of academic and social pressures, often amplified by digital interactions. Thus, the digital context constitutes both an opportunity and a challenge in the pursuit of adolescent happiness.

Happiness was also linked to leisure, recreation, creativity, nature, mindfulness, kindness, novelty, and balance. Participants emphasized dancing, sports, and music as vital activities, echoing findings by (Kim et al., 2024), who demonstrated that meaningful leisure engagement predicted happiness. Creativity and artistic expression also emerged as strong contributors to well-being, resonating with (Lee & Ha, 2022), who found that personal growth and self-expression were key attribution factors for happiness.

Connection with nature was another frequently mentioned source of happiness, suggesting that adolescents perceive green spaces and outdoor activities as therapeutic. Mindfulness practices such as journaling and meditation were also reported, reflecting a global trend toward integrating self-reflective practices into adolescent well-being strategies. These findings extend the evidence of (Aumose, 2025), who highlighted stress regulation as a pathway to happiness, by showing that adolescents themselves identify mindfulness practices as effective coping strategies.

Acts of kindness and helping others were consistently described as pathways to happiness, aligning with (Putri et al., 2023) and (Susanto & Darmayanti, 2023), both of whom noted that resilience and forgiveness in relational contexts promote happiness. Adventure and novelty, such as exploring new places, also contributed to well-being, echoing (O'Sullivan et al., 2022), who found that autonomy and new experiences shaped adolescents' perspectives in clinical trials. Finally, participants emphasized balance—managing time between work and play—as central to happiness. This emphasis supports (Baltaci & Akbulut, 2021), who noted that subjective well-being is influenced by the ability to balance academic obligations with social and personal needs.

Taken together, the findings highlight that Colombian adolescents view happiness as an integrated construct shaped by personal acceptance, relational bonds, cultural identity, and lifestyle practices. These results converge with prior studies emphasizing resilience, social relationships,

leisure, and spirituality as pillars of adolescent well-being (Annisa et al., 2025; Aulia et al., 2025; Batubara et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024; Rafi & Netrawati, 2019). At the same time, the current study adds depth by situating these elements within the Colombian sociocultural and political context, where national identity, community participation, and safety concerns also strongly influence conceptions of happiness. This underscores the importance of adopting context-sensitive frameworks when studying adolescent well-being across diverse global populations.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample size, while sufficient for qualitative phenomenological analysis, was relatively small (24 participants) and may not represent the full diversity of Colombian adolescents. Second, the participants were primarily recruited through community and educational networks, which may have biased the sample toward youth who are relatively engaged and articulate, potentially excluding marginalized voices. Third, while interviews were conducted in Spanish, the process of transcription and translation may have led to some loss of nuance in participants' expressions. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits our ability to examine changes in conceptions of happiness over time. Finally, although NVivo 14 facilitated rigorous coding, researcher subjectivity in thematic interpretation remains an inherent limitation in qualitative inquiry.

Future studies could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs to explore how conceptions of happiness evolve across the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Expanding research to include larger and more diverse samples, including marginalized groups such as rural youth, displaced adolescents, or those outside formal education, would provide a more comprehensive picture. Comparative cross-cultural studies, building on work such as (Tabbasam et al., 2023) and (Guanizo, 2021), could deepen understanding of how cultural contexts shape happiness. Furthermore, mixed-methods approaches could integrate phenomenological insights with quantitative measures, enhancing both depth and generalizability. Finally, exploring the impact of digital media and political instability on youth happiness in Latin American contexts could offer critical insights for policy and practice.

Practically, the findings suggest that interventions to promote adolescent happiness should adopt a holistic framework that integrates personal, relational, cultural, and experiential dimensions. Schools and community organizations can play a central role by fostering supportive peer environments, promoting resilience, and providing opportunities for meaningful leisure. Policies that address socioeconomic disparities, ensure safety, and strengthen family support systems are equally critical. Encouraging mindfulness, creativity, and community participation can further enhance well-being. Importantly, practitioners should recognize the cultural and contextual specificities of happiness, ensuring that programs are culturally responsive and grounded in adolescents' lived realities.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

References

Annisa, N. I., Lutfianawati, D., & Putri, A. M. (2025). The Role of Gender and Friendship Quality on Happiness Among Adolescents in Bandar Lampung. *Seurune Jurnal Psikologi Unsyiah*, *8*(1), 42-48. https://doi.org/10.24815/s-jpu.v8i1.41016

Aulia, M., Junaidi, W., Adha, F. A., Suyida, N. A., Nurjihan, T., & Sari, K. (2025). Makna Kebahagiaan Pada Remaja Yatim Piatu Di Banda Aceh. *SKPJ*, *3*(1), 30-43. https://doi.org/10.24815/skpj.v3i1.30772

Aumose, L. (2025). The Crucial Trio for Adolescent Happiness: Mental Health, Social Support and Stress. *Journal of Information Systems Engineering & Management*, *10*(33s), 933-941. https://doi.org/10.52783/jisem.v10i33s.5738

Baltaci, Ö., & Akbulut, Ö. F. (2021). Ergenlerin Mutluluk Ve Okulda Öznel İyi Oluş Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi. *TAY Journal*, *5*(1), 24-50. https://doi.org/10.29329/tayjournal.2021.489.02

Batubara, I. M. S., Daulima, N. H. C., Wardani, I. Y., Kusumawati, H. N., Setiyawan, S., Oktariani, M., & Rumiyati, E. (2021). Resilience of Adolescents Survivors of Domestic Violence: A Qualitative Study. *Open Access Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences*, *9*(G), 211-216. https://doi.org/10.3889/oamjms.2021.6772

Çiftçi, N., & Sarman, A. (2024). The Effect of Future Expectation on Happiness and Healthy Lifestyle Belief in Adolescents: A Structural Equality Model. *Sağlık Bilimleri Dergisi*, *33*(1), 138-144. https://doi.org/10.34108/eujhs.1376049

Guanizo, M. (2021). Suicide Ideation Among Early Adolescents in Selected Academic Institutions: A Basis for Specialized Guidance and Counseling Program. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, *10*(14). https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2021.a068

Hashim, I. H. M., & Zaharim, N. M. (2020). Happiness Among Malaysian Adolescents: The Role of Sociodemographic Factors and Everyday Events. *Sage Open*, *10*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020940695

Kim, E.-J., Kang, H.-W., & Park, S. M. (2024). Determinants of the Happiness of Adolescents: A Leisure Perspective. *PLoS One*, *19*(4), e0301843. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0301843

Kim, M. H., Kim, H. J., & Choi, J. H. (2022). The Mediating Effect of Attention and Grit on the Relationship Between Parents' Inconsistent Parenting Attitude and Adolescent's Happiness. *Korean Association for Learner-Centered Curriculum and Instruction*, *22*(11), 17-32. https://doi.org/10.22251/jlcci.2022.22.11.17

Lee, Y. K., & Ha, Y. S. (2022). Analysis of Attribution Factors for Happiness in High School Students. *Korean Association for Learner-Centered Curriculum and Instruction*, *22*(14), 723-736. https://doi.org/10.22251/jlcci.2022.22.14.723

MÜRtezaoĞLu, Ç., & Çıkrıkçı, Ö. (2022). Ergenlerde Mutluluk, Öz-Yeterlik, Akran İlişkileri Ve Sosyal Onay İhtiyacı Arasındaki İlişkilerin İncelenmesi. *Erzincan Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, *24*(3), 483-498. https://doi.org/10.17556/erziefd.1103962

O'Sullivan, I. C., Costa, N. C. d., Smith, M. M. F., Vicenzino, B., Crossley, K. M., Kamper, S. J., Middelkoop, M. v., Menz, H. B., Tucker, K., O'Leary, K. T., & Collins, N. J. (2022). Adolescent Perspectives on Participating in a Feasibility Trial Investigating Shoe Inserts for Patellofemoral Pain. *Journal of Foot and Ankle Research*, *15*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s13047-022-00537-4

Putri, R. D., Mansoer, W. W. D., & Nesi, N. (2023). Resilience as a Predictor of Adolescent Happiness in Orphanages in Jakarta. *Kne Social Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v8i19.14357

Rafi, M., & Netrawati, N. (2019). Happiness of Adolescent Social Orphanage Children Tri Murni Padang Panjang. *Jur. NeoKons.*, *1*(4). https://doi.org/10.24036/00163kons2019

Susanto, M. R., & Darmayanti, K. K. H. (2023). The Effect of Forgiveness on Happiness in Adolescents After Broken Love in Palembang City. *Jurnal Sains Psikologi*, *12*(1), 90. https://doi.org/10.17977/um023v12i12023p90-98

Tabbasam, U., Amjad, A. I., Ahmed, T., & Xing, Q. (2023). Comparison of Self-Strength, Seeking Help and Happiness Between Pakistani and Chinese Adolescents: A Positive Psychology Inquiry. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, *25*(3), 389-402. https://doi.org/10.32604/ijmhp.2023.024130

Yin, N., Zhang, J., Ren, H., Wang, B., Zhao, G., & Du, Y. (2025). Examining the Relationships of Happiness and Emotional Symptoms, Regular Exercise and Demographic Characteristics Among Adolescents Seeking Psychological Services: Cross-Sectional Study With Mediation Analysis. *BJPsych Open*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2025.22