



GLOBAL HAPPINESS DYNAMICS: A COMPARATIVE SOCIOECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF WELL-BEING, GOVERNANCE, AND SOCIAL TRUST

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ABSTRACT

The determinants of global happiness by a comparative socioeconomic model, which looks at the contributions of economic prosperity, social support, and the quality of governance. The research uses cross-national data of the world happiness data set to adopt a quantitative approach to examine cross-country variations in subjective well-being. The results suggest that the combination of economic and non-economic has a role in determining happiness, and GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, and freedom to make life choices turned out to be important predictors. Of these, social support proves to have a particularly strong effect, which is why interpersonal relationships and social cohesion prove to have a stronger influence on determining well-being. Governance, which is proxied by corruption perceptions, also demonstrates a significant contribution, implying that institutional trust and transparency have a crucial role in improving life satisfaction. Conversely, the role of generosity in happiness appears to have a rather weak impact. The paper highlights the multidimensionality of well-being and reiterates that sustainable increases in happiness must be achieved through a multi-faceted approach beyond economic growth. The research becomes part of the larger discussion on global well-being and it provides the policy developers with insights on developing inclusive and sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the notion of happiness and subjective well-being has come to gain growing prominence in the social sciences as an alternative measure of societal progress in addition to traditional economic measures. The scholars have contended that economic growth does not adequately reflect the quality of life that individuals experience and therefore necessitate the use of broader frameworks that consider the psychological, social and institutional aspects of life that individuals experience. According to Diener et al. (2018), subjective well-being has become one of the central concepts when it comes to the understanding of human development since it reflects the cognitive and emotional assessments of their life by individuals. The change has prompted policymakers and researchers to consider multidimensional indicators that are a more accurate measure of human welfare. The increasing acceptance of well-being as a policy goal also has affected the global development agenda. As De Neve and Sachs (2020) state, sustainable development is directly related with the improvements in the human well-being, where economic, social and environmental factors interact to affect the overall level of life satisfaction. This opinion observes the need to have integrated approaches that would not only be based on income but also on more holistic determinants of happiness.

Happiness is being comprehended as being multidimensional and complex, impacted by a broad assortment of factors, such as the quality of institutions, social relationships and economic conditions. Diego-Rosell et al. (2018) state that material and non-material factors determine the subjective well-being, and thus, people are not only provided with satisfaction through income but also other non-material determinants. This multidimensionality challenges the simplistic construals of the concept of happiness and requires more multidimensional analytical modes. Moreover, the impact of the social environments on the well-being development has been commonly recognized. According to Helliwell et al. (2020) supportive social environments, which are characterized by trust and cooperation, are extremely beneficial to the level of happiness in any society. This brings out the significance of social capital and interpersonal relationships as the important aspects of well-being.

In addition to economic variables, social and institutional factors are determinant variables in establishing the happiness. The social capital which also includes trust, networks, norms of reciprocity has been identified as the key determinant of subjective well-being. The results of a study by Neira et al. (2019) can be used to support the claim about the relevance of social cohesion in promoting well-being. The institutional quality, especially governance and corruption also plays an important role in the happiness. As Ciziceno and Travaglino (2019) demonstrate, the perceived corruption has a negative effect on the life satisfaction due to its influence on the institutional trust. Likewise, Li and An (2020) discover that corruption negatively affects happiness by diminishing trust in the institutions and decreasing the perceived fairness in the society. These results imply that the way of governance is crucial to explaining differences in well-being by country.

Although economic prosperity is a factor that is still important, it does not have a linear and sufficient relationship with happiness. The social basis of happiness has become popular in explaining cross-country variations, as highlighted by Helliwell et al. (2017). Trust and community-engagement represent the social foundations of happiness that are equally important in explaining cross-country differences. This view questions the conventional economic thought process and emphasizes on the importance of a more balanced approach that incorporates both economic and social aspects. Even in the context where the economic resources are not substantial, high levels of well-being have been observed. As shown by Miñarro et al. (2021), societies with lower income levels can be counterbalanced by high levels of subjective well-being, which can be achieved by the means of social cohesion and cultural factors.

The significance of learning about happiness has all the more been made clear in the light of the current global crises. Indicatively, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive influence on the mental health and well-being of people all over the world. Akinin et al. (2022) point out that the mental health and social resilience of people are widespread psychological impacts of the pandemic, which is why policies are required to address these issues. This has further enhanced the argument in favor of the inclusion of well being indicators in policy frameworks. Furthermore, the inclusion of well-being in

the policy-making process has become a trend both among governments and among international organizations. Graham et al. (2018) believe that well-being measures have a lot of usefulness in policy making because they capture aspects of human welfare that can be easily ignored in conventional economic analyses. It has resulted in more people becoming interested in coming up with evidence-based measures that can enhance happiness and satisfaction in life.

Happiness measurements across countries like those published in the World Happiness Report can be of valuable use in cross-country comparisons and the determination of underlying factors. The recent report indicates the ongoing disparities in well-being by region based on the difference in economic development, social support, and governance structures (Helliwell et al., 2025). Although there is an increasing literature, there is still a necessity in integrated empirical studies which can concurrently examine economic, social and institutional factors. The current literature tends to concentrate on one of the dimensions of happiness individually, thus making it hard to understand the complete intricacy of well-being. This paper seals this gap by taking a holistic approach, which involves a combination of various determinants in a single analysis framework.

The main aim of this research to investigate the determinants of world happiness through the analysis of joint effect of socioeconomic factors, social support and quality of governance across nations. The research focus on determining the interaction of these dimensions and how they relate to determine subjective well-being and to gain a comparative insight into differences in the level of happiness.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The type of research design employed in this study is a quantitative and comparative research design that will aim at investigating the determinants of happiness across countries. The design is a combination of cross-sectional and longitudinal designs which permits the investigation of the spatial variations and the temporal trends of the well-being. The analysis links economic, social and institutional features of development to the subjective well being through the interdisciplinary approach. The design is an explanatory one, as the aim is to establish statistically significant relations between the selected predictors and the level of national happiness without losing sight of the already established theoretical perspectives in the study of social sciences.

2.2 Data Source and Sample

The empirical study is supported by the secondary data based on the World Happiness dataset, which is released annually in different countries (Sachidanandan, 2024). The dataset provides harmonized indicators of a very wide set of different socioeconomic and institutional settings. Observations on a country-year basis, which enabled them to put together a pooled panel dataset. The data are then systematically cleaned and standardized before analysis in order that the data is consistent over years. Variables names and format are harmonized and minor errors are corrected. The missing data is assessed and analyzed carefully to reduce the bias. The resultant data provides a wide global coverage which makes the findings more robust and generalizable.

2.3 Variable Selection and Operationalization

Happiness score is the dependent variable in this study which is a proxy of subjective well being. The independent variables are chosen so as to represent important theoretical constructs. GDP per capita is used to indicate economic conditions by showing material prosperity. Social trust is operationalised by the social support which depicts the accessibility of interpersonal networks. Physical well being is captured by the healthy life expectancy, and the autonomy of individuals to make choices in their lives, is represented by the freedom. Generosity is added as a behavioral measure of pro-social involvement. Perceptions of corruption are a proxy of governance, which is a measure of the quality and transparency of the institution. These are the variables that are considered as continuous measures, and the choice of these variables is based on both the empirical relevance and theory justification.

2.4 Data Processing and Analytical Procedure

Data processing entails combining annual data into a single format and ensuring the integrity of each variable. The descriptive statistics are calculated to summarize the central tendency and dispersion, and provide a global overview of the patterns in happiness and determinants of happiness. Exploratory analysis is performed in order to enumerate initial connections between variables. Correlation analysis can be applied to determine the direction and intensity of association, and provides preliminary insights on the potential associations.

2.5 Model Specification

The model defines happiness score to be the dependent variable and GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption to be independent variables. The model isolates the individual contributions of each predictor by conditioning out others, thus capturing the marginal effects of each predictor. The estimation is done with ordinary least squares, since the variables are continuous. The dataset has a pooled structure that enables the measurement of both the cross country variation and the dynamic.

2.6 Diagnostic Tests and Robustness Checks

Diagnostic tests are carried out so that to guarantee the validity of the results. Multicollinearity is assessed to make sure that the independent variables are not overly correlated. The heteroskedasticity is determined in a manner that it keeps the variance constant over the observations. The robustness checks are done by testing other specifications and by testing the stability of the coefficients. The sensitivity analysis is also done to find out the effects of outliers or some group of countries. The procedures mentioned above increase the credibility of the findings and prolong the overall empirical rigor of the study.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The data indicates that there is a significant source of variation in national well-being, which is shown to be the variation in economic conditions, institutional quality, and social structures. The mean happiness score of 5.52 implies that most of the countries are located within a moderate well-being range, but the standard deviation is relatively high, indicating that there are significant differences in the level of well-being between high-performing and low-performing countries. Countries that are at the top of the distribution are those that have strong institutional frameworks, high income levels and robust social systems, whereas those at the lower end are those that are characterized by structural weaknesses.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Happiness Score	5.52	1.11	1.72	7.84
GDP per Capita	1.20	0.47	0.00	2.21
Social Support	1.03	0.33	0.00	1.62
Life Expectancy	0.54	0.22	0.00	1.14
Freedom	0.53	0.16	0.00	0.86
Generosity	0.16	0.09	0.00	0.57
Corruption Perception	0.14	0.12	0.00	0.59

The above Table 1 confirmed that although the dispersion of the economic variables is relatively high, the dispersion of social variables like support is more stable. This implies that although the distribution of wealth might differ considerably across countries, social cohesion might be more uniformly embedded in the societies.

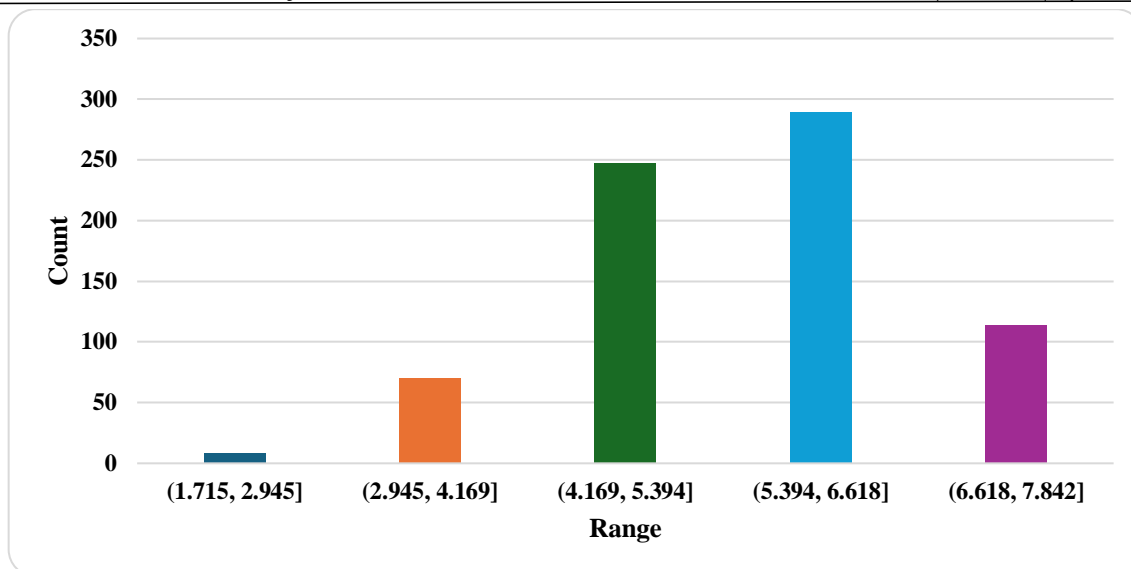


Figure 1: Global Distribution of Happiness Scores

Figure 1 shows the distribution, which supports the descriptive results, indicating that the majority of the countries are concentrated in the middle of the range of happiness scores. The right skewed distribution implies that there are more countries with a moderate well-being, whilst there are only a few countries which are classified under very low levels of happiness. According to this trend, even though there are extreme cases of deprivation, most of the countries are at the minimum levels of well-being maintained by different proportions of economic and social factors.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis offers preliminary information about the relationships between happiness and its determinants, and shows strong interconnections between economic, social, and institutional variables. The findings reveal that the strongest correlations with happiness are social support and GDP per capita, which means that both material resources and the level of social cohesion are important in determining the outcome of well-being. There are also strong positive correlations between life expectancy and freedom indicating that health conditions and the freedom of a person are crucial elements of a fulfilling life. Interestingly, the moderately positive correlation between happiness and perceptions of corruption, nevertheless, is statistically significant. This shows that the non-negligible role of institutional quality in determining subjective well being does exist. Conversely, generosity exhibits a weak correlation with happiness, which suggests that pro-social behaviour can be associated with the functioning of societies, but at the same time, it might have limited or context-specific effects on happiness at the national level.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variable	Happiness	GDP	Social Support	Health	Freedom	Generosity	Corruption
Happiness	1.00	0.68	0.70	0.65	0.59	0.05	0.44
GDP	0.68	1.00	0.61	0.48	0.48	-0.22	0.37
Social Support	0.70	0.61	1.00	0.54	0.46	-0.03	0.21

Table 2 correlation map demonstrates the complementary condition of both economic and social variables with GDP and social support both showing significant correlation with happiness. The comparatively lower associations of some predictors imply that there is no severe multicollinearity, and it is possible to conduct meaningful regression analysis.

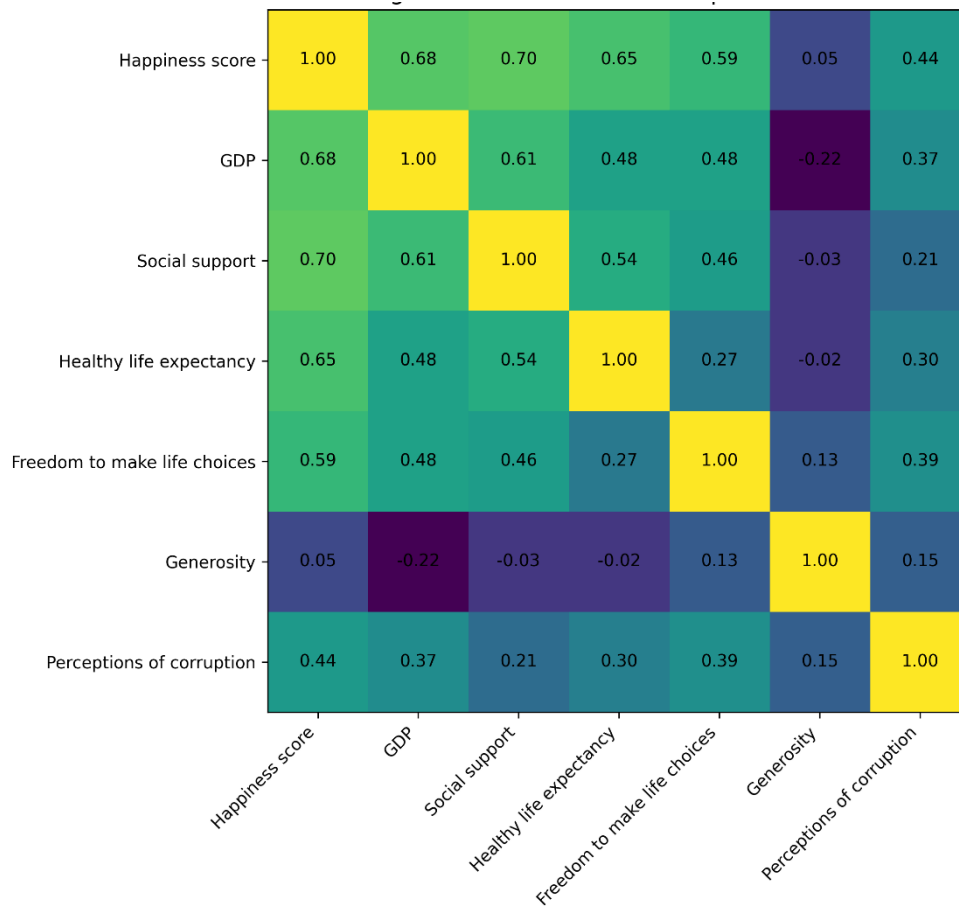


Figure 2: Correlation Heatmap of Determinants of Happiness

Figure 2 visually highlights the concentration of strong relationships especially between happiness, GDP, and social support. The fact that well-being is not a monodimensional factor but rather a multidimensional one, confirms the necessity of a multidimensional approach to analytical work.

3.3 Regression Analysis

The regression analysis provides a stronger test of the determinants of happiness since it takes into consideration several determinants simultaneously. The results show that GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, and freedom of making life choices have statistically significant positive effects on happiness. Among the most prominent predictors of them is social support, which provides insight into the important role of social relationships and trust networks in enhancing well-being. A high positive impact is also observed on GDP, which confirms that prosperity in the economy is a major source of happiness. Nevertheless, its influence is complemented by non-economic aspects of well-being like health and freedom, which implies that income might be inadequate to explain differences in well-being. Corruption perceptions show a significant and positive relationship with happiness, indicating that improved governance and institutional trust have a positive and significant impact on life satisfaction. Generosity on the other hand does not seem to have statistically significant effect and thus its effect might be indirect or situational.

Table 3: Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Significance
GDP	Positive	Significant
Social Support	Strong Positive	Significant
Life Expectancy	Positive	Significant
Freedom	Positive	Significant
Generosity	Weak	Not Significant
Corruption	Positive	Significant

Table 3 findings confirm that happiness is shaped by a combination of economic, social, and institutional factors, with social support and GDP playing particularly prominent roles.

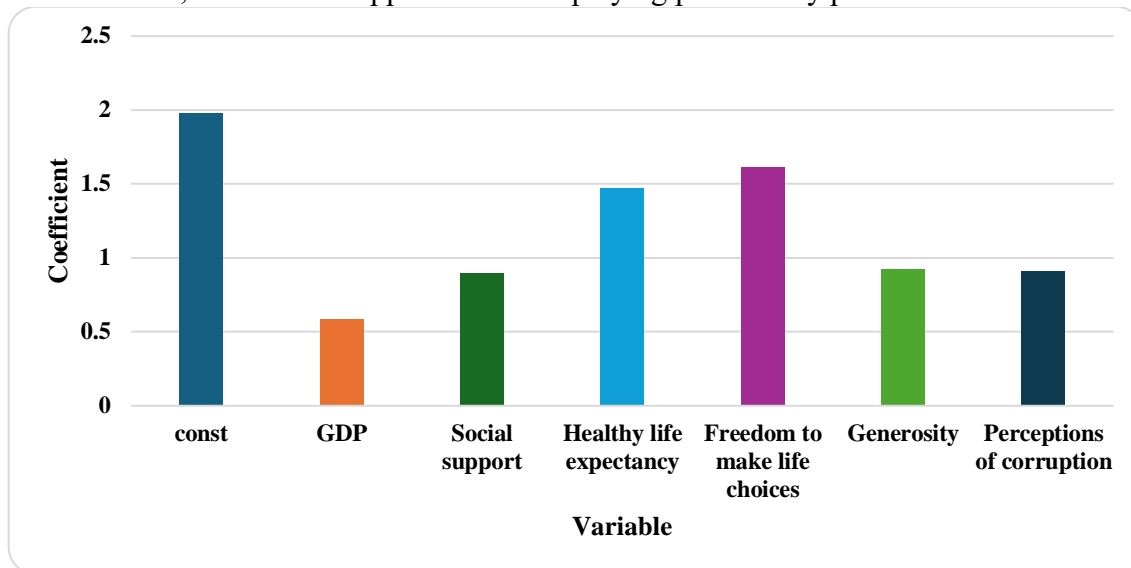


Figure 3: Regression Coefficients Plot

Figure 3 also helps in understanding the relative importance of the predictors by obtaining a visual comparison between the magnitude of the coefficients. The chart shows that all the major variables are positively contributing to happiness, but the most influential ones are social support and GDP, followed by health and freedom.

3.4 Comparative Insights

The comparative analysis shows that there are distinct differences between high-performing and low-performing countries in well-being and its determinants. Happy nations are always characterized by a high level of economic performance, a high level of social support and good governance systems. The countries are more likely to have well-developed institutions, more life expectancy, and individual freedom, which creates the environment favorable to well-being. On the other hand, states which have low happiness indexes are typified by poor economic standing, poor social support networks, and low quality of institutions. These differences indicate a compounding impact of various structural influences in determining well-being outcomes. The comparative approach emphasizes that the progress in one of the aspects might not be adequate, but instead a balanced approach is required, through integration of economic growth, social cohesion, and governance reform.

Table 4: Top vs Bottom Countries (Illustrative Comparison)

Indicator	Top Countries	Bottom Countries
Happiness Score	High (>7)	Low (<4)
GDP	High	Low
Social Support	Strong	Weak
Governance	Transparent	Weak

Table 4 shows the sharp differences that exist between countries with one end of the happiness spectrum and the other end.

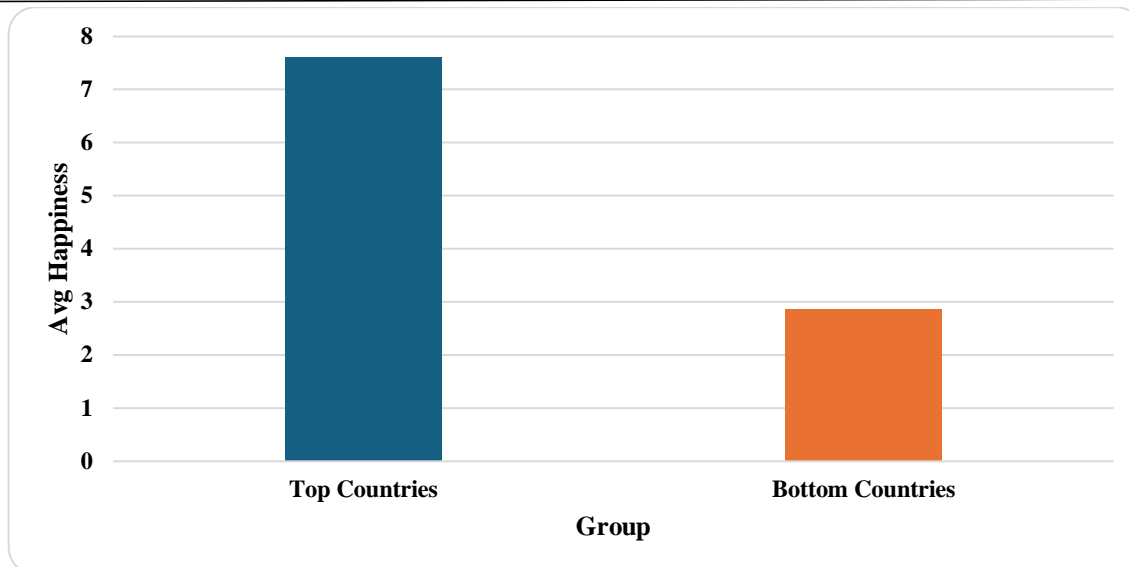


Figure 4: Comparative Trends Across Country Groups

Figure 4 shows that there are continually higher levels of happiness in high-performers countries, whereas low-performers countries are unable to close the gap. This trend indicates that institutionalized inequalities are still entrenched in the world distribution of well-being.

3.5 Key Findings

The general results indicate that happiness is a multidimensional concept that is affected by a set of economic prosperity, social cohesion, and the quality of the institutions. Although a solid base is required with the help of GDP, social support becomes a key determiner, which proves the significance of trust and community networks. The role of governance is also important, which means that the impact of transparent and accountable institutions is higher well-being. The findings in general underscore the idea that policies that are designed to enhance happiness should not be limited to economic growth, but must also extend to include investments in social capital, and development of institutions. This combined view offers a more holistic view of global well-being and is consistent with more broad-based interdisciplinary approaches to social science research.

4. Discussion

The results of this research support the perception that the concept of happiness is multiple in nature and is influenced by interplay of economic, social and institutional factors. The elevated relevance of GDP and social support that has been observed in the results falls in line with the bigger pool of empirical evidence that has indicated that both material terms and social relations are major determinants of subjective well-being. The same authors Ahmadiani et al. (2022) indicate that income, social arrangements, and personal situations are combined and contribute to happiness, which presupposes that economic growth does not suffice to assure well-being. The results of this study further support this argument, by showing that the social support has an especially significant influence and that the interpersonal networks play an important role in promoting life satisfaction.

Economic prosperity continues to be one of the key determinants of happiness as it is supported by the positive relationship between GDP and well-being. This finding is in line with the literature that underscores the importance of financial stability and access to resources in life satisfaction determinants. Zyphur et al. (2015) claim that the subjective well-being depends on income, not only directly but also through psychological and environmental mechanisms. Nonetheless, the findings also show that there are diminishing returns on income when it is taken in conjunction with social and institutional factors. Behera et al. (2024) support this view by showing that in both developed and developing countries, socioeconomic factors have a different weight, indicating that the context is a critical factor that determines the strength of these relationships.

The correlation between the quality of governance and people being happy is positive, which is why the institutional trust and transparency are important. The results indicate that the lower the perceived

corruption the higher the well-being as the level of confidence of the citizens in the public institutions increases. This is in line with the work of Cárcaba et al. (2022) who determine that effective governance on a national and local level has a significant positive impact on subjective well-being. Equally, Shiroka-Pula et al. (2023) show that institutional quality is an important factor in determining happiness in European countries, with the government being a key stakeholder in influencing well-being by designing and implementing policies. All these findings point to the fact that governance is not a background determinant of life satisfaction but a central determinant of life satisfaction.

The proxy of social trust, social support, comes out as one of the best predictors of happiness in this research. This underscores the importance of social capital in promoting well being. Zhao et al. (2024) are a powerful piece of evidence based on meta-analysis and demonstrating that trust is a significant factor in the life satisfaction of various individuals in different settings. The results of this paper also contribute to the discussion that powerful social networks and community involvement present a conducive environment that boosts the well-being of individuals. The complex role of social capital in welfare systems as noted by Akaeda (2025) makes the role of social support either complementary or substitutive to institutional provisions depending on the circumstances. This stresses the need to balance formal institutions with the informal social organization.

The comparative analysis shows that there are significant differences in the level of happiness in countries based on differences in the socioeconomic development of a country, the quality of governance of a country, and the social cohesion of a country. Such findings are in line with the international literature which underlines structural disparity in well being. As it is mentioned by Paleologou (2022), a combination of democratic institutions and good socioeconomic conditions contributes to an increase in happiness, which confirms the need to address the issue of integrated policy responses. Besides, as it is demonstrated by Yang and Xie (2025), global patterns in the level of happiness can be successfully analyzed with the help of the advanced modeling techniques that can be applied to analyze the global patterns in the level of happiness. The continuation of the inequalities implies that it is necessary to pursue efforts on the global inequalities at multiple levels.

These findings complement the theoretical conceptualization of well-being in that they support a multidimensional conceptualization of well-being, one that integrates economic, social, and institutional conceptualizations of well-being. Another point that Tay et al. (2014) emphasize is the importance of outlining detailed metrics that may reflect the intricacies of the societal happiness, and the findings of this study are aligned with this policy. Policy-wise, the results suggest that governments must pursue comprehensive policies that go beyond economic growth to include social capital investments and institutional quality. Improvement of governance, transparency, and social cohesion are important in enhancing well-being. The findings can be particularly applicable to the policymakers who may also be interested in developing interventions that can go beyond the material aspects of development to include the non-material aspects of development as well.

It is possible that the complexity of these constructs is not adequately represented by using proxy variables to represent the governance and social trust. Moreover, the use of country-level data restricts the possibility of considering the individual-level differences in well-being. Research in the future could overcome these limitations by taking micro-level data and investigating other aspects like cultural factors and inequality. Enhancing the analysis structure to incorporate dynamic modelling approaches, might also yield deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of global happiness.

5. Conclusion

A systematic analysis of the global happiness through the incorporation of the economic, social and institutional aspects in a comparative analytical approach. The results show that economic prosperity does not exclusively determine happiness but rather social support networks and quality of governance play a significant role in happiness. Although, GDP per capita continues to be a significant predictor, the findings point to the fact that the countries with a higher degree of social cohesion and institutional trust are more likely to achieve higher levels of well-being. The analysis also indicates that social support is a very important factor that contributes to increasing happiness and the importance of interpersonal relationships and community networks. On the same note, governance as reflected in less perceptions of corruption is also positively related to life satisfaction as it creates trust

and stability in societies. These realities help to support the multidimensional concept of well-being and question the traditional attribution of the most important development indicator to economic growth. In general, the paper highlights the necessity of policy frameworks based on a holistic approach to development through the balanced approach to economic growth and investments in social capital and institutional quality. This is a necessary method towards sustainable increases in the global well-being and to fill the gaps in national happiness distributions.

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