What Drives College Students' Happiness?

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We examine what domains from college students' campus life drive their happiness. Using the online survey data obtained from ratemyprofessors.com (RMP), we analyze the relationships between college students' happiness and several campus domains. The main results show that college students' happiness is significantly related to Facilities and Social domains and that Social makes the largest contribution to happiness. Our study is expected to help college administrators, staffs, or faculty promote their students' happiness within campuses.

Keywords: happiness, college students, campus domains, social

INTRODUCTION

Happiness is lexically defined as a positive emotional state or contentment. However, it is hard to describe happiness with one generalized concept for it can be subjective and emotional satisfaction people may feel in many different manners (Lopez, Pedrotti & Snyder, 2018). Also, while happiness is the most desirable state people pursue in their daily lives, it is challenging to figure out what really drives individuals' happiness. In this study, we attempt to identify what drives college students' overall happiness by focusing on domains from their campus life.

We employ survey data that are already publicly available rather than directly measure college students' happiness. The survey data are collected from RateMyProfessors.com (RMP) which is a very popular website to college students. Many researchers have used the data available from the RMP in order to evaluate the relationships between college students' teaching ratings and research (Jalbert, 2019, 2020), test three assumptions about student use and misuse (Bleske-Rechek & Michels, 2010), and compare online and official student evaluations of teaching (Brown, Baillie & Frase, 2009). Since we examine the relationships between college students' happiness and other domains from their campus life, we also use professors' average teaching ratings provided by the RMP.

Based on a total of 99 schools (50 public and 49 private) and 29,876 ratings from the RMP, first of all, we find that public and private schools have statistically significant differences in Professor Teaching, Clubs, Food, and Social ratings. While private schools have a higher average rating for Professor Teaching, public schools have higher average ratings for Clubs, Food, and Social. In fact, the main results from our regression analysis show that college students' happiness is significantly related to Facilities and Social regardless of whether their schools are public or private and Social turns out to make the largest contribution

to happiness. In addition, among ten domains, Social, Facilities, and Safety explain about 70-80% variations in college students' happiness. Our study is expected to help college administrators, staffs, or faculty promote their students' happiness within campuses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relatively, there have not been many previous studies on college students' happiness and most of them usually focus on personal domains that can influence happiness. Staats, Cosmar, and Kaffenberger (2007) examine if there are any differences in sources of students' school happiness and general happiness over the 20-year time period and identify an increase in happiness but the rank order of sources of happiness remain stable across time. Oishi, Koo, Akimoto (2008) investigate cultural differences that may exist in interpersonal processes to lead happiness and find that European and Asian Americans' happiness is enhanced in a different way depending on personal self and collective self, respectively. Okuna, Levyb, Karolya, Ruehlmana (2009) investigate the relationship between dispositional happiness and college students' GPA and find that dispositional happiness has both positive and negative indirect influences to cumulative GPA and thus, those opposite effects are offset together. Xiao, Tang, and Shim (2009) studies how financial behaviors can reach individuals' overall satisfaction. Their study is interesting in that they use specific financial behaviors as a link to students' overall satisfaction. They find that positive financial behaviors make contributions to overall life satisfaction through academic performance and satisfactions. Mitchella, Lebowa, Uribea, Grathousea, and Shogerb (2011) attempt to clarify the relationships between internet use and several domains associated with personal dimensions and social activities and find that specific types of internet use boost happiness and social support. O'Donnell, Chang, and Miller (2013) examine a link between individual autonomy and attribution styles associated with happiness. They find a bidirectional effect on the link, which means that happiness positively interacts with styles related to individual autonomy. Flynn and MacLeod (2015) study the relationship between college students' happiness and six life domains and find that self-esteem, academic success, and financial security make the most contribution to students' happiness. Samaneh, Hossein, and Mahnaz (2015) examine if there exist differences in happiness and social intimacy between internet users depending on the degree of their addiction. They find that while there is no difference in happiness and social intimacy between normal users and users who are slightly addicted, normal users' happiness is significantly higher than users who are severely addicted. Most of these studies above use personal domains or specific behaviors that can affect happiness.

On the other hand, some studies focus more on social relationships associated with happiness. Booth, Bartlett, and Bohnsack (1992) examine the relationship between college students' happiness, loneliness, and shyness and find that happiness is inversely related with shyness and loneliness. In fact, this means that the more sociable, the more happy. Abdel-Khalek (2006) investigates if there exist gender differences (college-student sample) in happiness, physical health, mental health, and religiosity and finds that males and females show differences in those variables and mental health is most significantly associated with happiness. Kim and Lee (2011) studies whether Facebook influences personal subjective well-being. They find that while the number of Facebook friends and positive self-presentation can facilitate personal happiness, perceived social supports may not arbitrate this association. Bum and Jeon (2016) investigate the relationship between social support, self-esteem, depression, and happiness for college students. They find that social support increases self-esteem and in turn, self-esteem influences happiness. In sum, these studies show how individual social activities are related to happiness. Since our study is also based on several domains including Social, Facilities, and Safety within college campuses, we expect to add contribution to the literature by examining the relationships between college students' happiness with several domains considered important at colleges.

DATA

We use college survey data that are publicly available from the RMP. The RMP surveys college students for their satisfaction on eleven domains from their campus life: Professor Teaching, Happiness, Reputation, Internet, Opportunity, Clubs, Location, Food, Facilities, Social, and Safety. Each domain is evaluated with an 1-5 rating scale (5 is the highest rating).

First, we select two highest-ranked schools (one public and one private) of each state from 2020 Best National University Rankings of the U.S. News & World Report (USNEWS). Then, we search these schools on the RMP website and collect rating data for all domains. The rationale that we select top-ranked schools of each state is that most of them are well-known and popular schools and thus, they tend to be more exposed to the RMP survey. All of our sample schools are 4-year institutions. However, we have two issues on data collection. A few states do not have private schools ranked nationally on the USNEWS website. In this case, we randomly select 4-year private schools in these states from the RMP. Another issue is that only one state has no 4-year private school. As a result, we collect the RMP rating data for 50 public and 49 private schools. The total number of ratings for 50 public schools is 22,852 (on average, 457 per school) while the total number of ratings for 49 private schools is 7,024 (on average, 143 per school). Additionally, we use the average teaching rating of each school because the RMP shows individual professors' teaching ratings separately.

FIGURE 1
AVERAGE RATING OF EACH DOMAIN

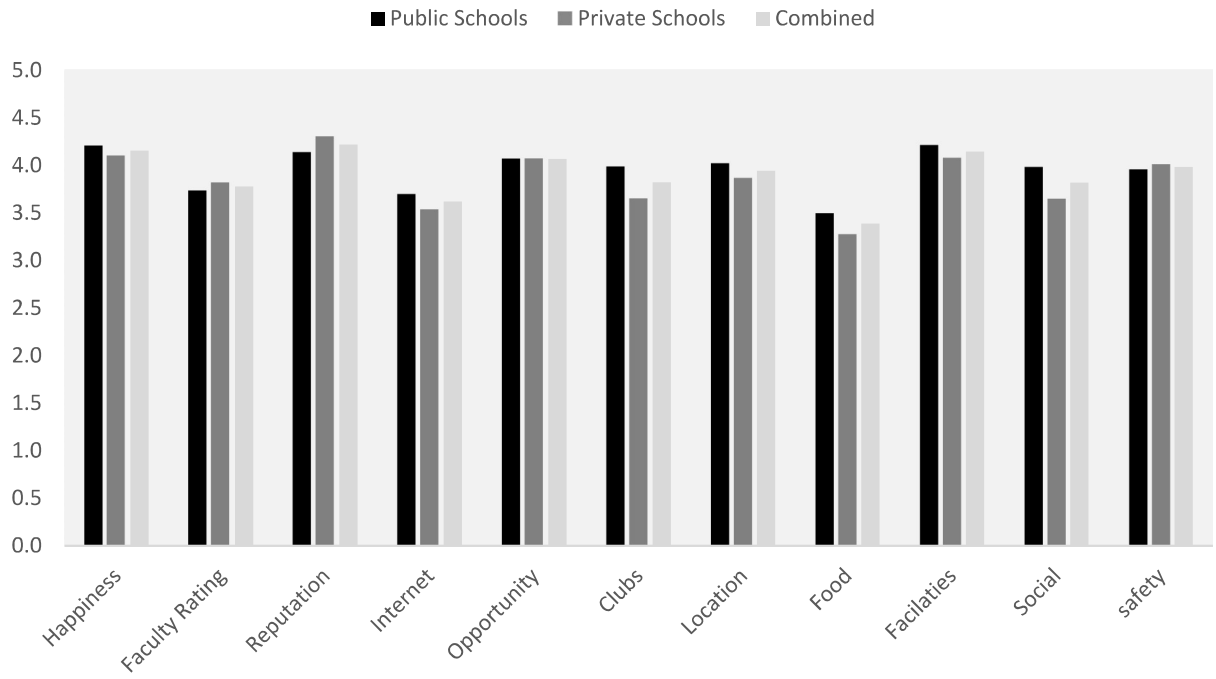

Figure 1 shows the average rating of each domain for public schools, private schools, and the combined data. While public schools have the highest average rating for Happiness (4.2 average) and the lowest average rating for Food (3.5 average), private schools have the highest average rating for Reputation (4.3 average) and the lowest average rating for Food (3.3 average). It seems that on average, public school students have higher happiness level than private school students. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all domains. Based on their means, private schools have relatively higher ratings only for Faculty Rating and Reputation whereas public schools have higher ratings for all other domains. However, the standard

deviations of private schools are much larger than those of public schools for all domains. This means that across 50 states, private schools' ratings are much more variable than public schools'.

METHODS AND RESULTS

The purpose of our study examines what drives college students' happiness. First, we conduct one-way ANOVA within each domain by dividing the domain into two different groups, public and private schools.

TABLE 2
ONE-WAY ANOVA

Item	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F-ratio
Happiness	Between Groups	0.2889	1	0.2889	2.43
	Within Groups	11.5180	97	0.1187	
	Total	11.8069			
Professor Rating	Between Groups	0.1588	1	0.1588	11.94**
	Within Groups	1.2900	97	0.0133	
	Total	1.4488			
Reputation	Between Groups	0.6823	1	0.6823	3.51
	Within Groups	18.8450	97	0.1943	
	Total	19.5273			
Internet	Between Groups	0.6599	1	0.6599	3.10
	Within Groups	20.6208	97	0.2126	
	Total	21.2807			
Opportunity	Between Groups	1.0555E-05	1	1.0555E-05	6.94E-05
	Within Groups	14.7566	97	0.1521	
	Total	14.7566			
Clubs	Between Groups	2.8109	1	2.8109	12.24**
	Within Groups	22.2827	97	0.2297	
	Total	25.0936			
Location	Between Groups	0.6079	1	0.6079	2.67
	Within Groups	22.0539	97	0.2274	
	Total	22.6618			
Food	Between Groups	1.2250	1	1.2250	3.95*
	Within Groups	30.0804	97	0.3101	
	Total	31.3054			
Facilities	Between Groups	0.4613	1	0.4613	3.44
	Within Groups	13.0005	97	0.1340	
	Total	13.4618			
Social	Between Groups	2.7783	1	2.7783	13.02**
	Within Groups	20.6958	97	0.2134	
	Total	23.4741			
Safety	Between Groups	0.0622	1	0.0622	0.18
	Within Groups	34.3114	97	0.3537	
	Total	34.3736			

In Table 2, the null hypothesis that there is no difference between two groups is not rejected for Happiness, which means that students in both groups show insignificant difference in their happiness.

However, the null hypothesis is rejected for Professor Teaching, Clubs, Food, and Social. Thus, their rating differences are statistically significant. In fact, while private schools have the higher average for Professor Teaching, public schools have the higher averages for Clubs, Food, and Social.

TABLE 3
REGRESSION RESULTS

	Public Schools			Private Schools			Combined (Public and Private Schools)		
Independent Variable	Coefficient	t-ratio	Semi-partial	Coefficient	t-ratio	Semi-partial	Coefficient	t-ratio	Semi-partial
Constant	0.7659	0.77	-	0.0170	0.02	-	-0.3496	-0.64	-
Professor Rating	0.0837	0.32	0.23%	0.2389	0.99	3.95%	0.2991	2.15*	7.18%
Reputation	0.2807	2.54*	11.86%	-0.2125	-1.37	7.64%	-0.0146	-0.18	0.00%
Internet	-0.1180	-1.55	4.39%	-0.0949	-0.89	3.19%	-0.0762	-1.29	2.59%
Opportunity	-0.2153	-1.50	4.16%	0.2802	1.30	6.88%	0.1257	1.03	1.67%
Clubs	-0.2994	-1.76	5.70%	-0.0815	-0.59	1.43%	-0.1324	-1.51	3.51%
Location	0.0730	1.68	5.23%	-0.0152	-0.22	0.17%	0.0258	0.65	0.67%
Food	-0.0013	-0.03	0.00%	0.0152	0.19	0.08%	0.0026	0.06	0.00%
Facilities	0.2502	2.50*	11.55%	0.4465	2.57*	26.87%	0.3699	3.90**	23.71%
Social	0.6941	4.88**	43.73%	0.4162	3.18**	41.31%	0.4557	5.49**	46.91%
Safety	0.0924	2.68*	13.16%	0.0622	1.44	8.48%	0.0810	2.97**	13.77%
R-Squared (Adjusted)	0.9069 (0.8830)			0.8155 (0.7670)			0.8356 (0.8169)		

** and * are the 1% and 5% significance levels, respectively.

Now, we investigate what domains actually drive students' happiness. Using the RMP survey data, we implement a linear regression as follows.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=1}^{10} \beta_j X_{ij} + \varepsilon_i$$

where Y_i is school i's happiness rating and X_{ij} is the j^{th} domain rating of school i. We also calculate squared semi-partial correlations that explain how much each independent variable contributes to the total variation in dependent variable. For the sake of convenience, we report semi-partial correlations as a percentage rate of total contributions of all independent variables. We repeat the above regression separately for public schools, private schools, and the whole samples.

Table 3 shows the results. Facilities and Social have a significant effect on Happiness across all three regressions. This means that college students' happiness is most significantly influenced by these two domains regardless of whether their schools are public or private. In addition, based on semi-partial correlations, Social has the largest contribution which is more than 40%. In sum, Social, Facilities, and Safety have almost 70-80% contributions in all three regressions.

DISCUSSION

Results show that college students' happiness is significantly influenced by Social, Facilities, and Safety. These results can be explained by two psychological theories of happiness, need/goal satisfaction theories and process/activity theories. According to need/goal satisfaction theories, happiness can be achieved by the reduction of tension and the satisfaction of need (Lopez et al., 2018). One of the need/goal satisfaction theories is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In his theory, the second and third levels of the hierarchy are safety needs and belongness and love needs which correspond to Safety and Social in the

results of our study (Maslow, 1968). Thus, safety on college campuses should be a key factor that enhances college students' happiness and also, college students' belongness and love needs should be met through interactions with other people which satisfy needs for affection, acceptance, and companionship. One study identifies the same relationship between college students' sociality and happiness by showing that college students feel happier when they become more social given inverse relationships between their happiness and loneliness/shyness (Booth et al., 1992). Another study conducted by Kim and Lee (2011) shows that two social factors, the number of Facebook friends and positive self-presentation, can promote happiness.

Process/activity theorists propose that engaging in particular activities produces happiness. One of the theorists, Csikszentmihalyi (1997), suggests that people tend to be happy in daily life when they experience "flow", which is engagement in activities they like. For example, people who like playing tennis feel happy when/after they play tennis. However, they need tennis courts to enjoy activities. Similarly, students can experience "flow" and promote their happiness by using various facilities at college.

CONCLUSION

Although there have been previous studies that explore determinants of college students' happiness, most of them concentrate on personal domains or specific behaviors that may influence happiness. However, we attempt to identify the relationship between college students' happiness and ten domains from their campus life based on the RMP survey data. First, we find that public and private schools have statistically significant differences in Professor Teaching, Clubs, Food, and Social ratings. Private schools have a higher average rating for Professor Teaching whereas public schools have higher average ratings for Clubs, Food, and Social. Second, college students' happiness is significantly associated with Facilities and Social across public and private schools. Furthermore, Social turns out to have the largest contribution to happiness. This means that social activities within college campuses play an important role in enhancing students' happiness. As a result, we expect our study to help college administrators, staffs, or faculty promote their students' happiness within campuses.

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