



Research Article

# Understanding the Relationship between Consumption and Happiness: Quantitative Research in Portugal

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## Abstract

Can consumption generate happiness, or is it time to question this premise and seek a deeper understanding of the true pillars of human achievement? To answer this question, we examined how consumption is represented as a pathway to happiness, and the factors that influence this link. The types of material and experiential consumption and their relationship with the happiness of consumption were studied, as well as social approval, as it is one of the most relevant factors for those who seek happiness through consumption. Quantitative research was conducted with data collection by questionnaire in a sample of 525 respondents. The results found support that it is material consumption that reveals a direct effect on consumption happiness. Social approval has not been shown to have a direct effect on consumer happiness. Consumer happiness, in turn, has not been shown to contribute to happiness. However, concerning the types of consumption, there was a direct relationship between experiential consumption and happiness. From the results obtained, we speculate the justification by changes in consumption patterns and consumers' evolution, who have become more intelligent and demanding.

**Keywords:** Happiness, happiness from consumption, material consumption, experiential consumption.

## Introduction

Human beings' interest in the theme of happiness dates back to Antiquity, and philosophers such as Aristotle consider happiness the main goal that most people aspire to in life (Frey and Stutzer, 2008). However, the search for understanding happiness has been a constant concern over time, with an increasingly multidisciplinary perspective, which involves not only philosophy, but also psychology, economics, sociology, among other areas of knowledge.

Being happy is currently one of the main goals, if not the ultimate goal, of the human race (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). However, happiness is a vast term, with numerous attempts to define it (Sumner, 1996; Pavot and Diener, 2008; Layard, 2011; Brodsky, 2015). For some, happiness can be considered a final measure for which life goals are set, and, for others, just an ingredient in the recipe for a good life (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). For common sense, happiness is essentially achieved through health, money, and love, being, however, an extremely subjective definition for each person (dos Santos, 2020).

From a marketing perspective, happiness can be defined as a high-level satisfaction that can result from positive experiences related to the purchase of products or services (Kesebir and Diener, 2009). In this way, we can say that the consumption of products and services can play a fundamental role in the search for individual and collective happiness. The underlying idea is that by acquiring certain goods and experiences, people can achieve a higher state of contentment and satisfaction with their lives.

For centuries, researchers have wondered where and how people can find happiness. In the last decade, the role and influence of consumption in driving happiness began to be analyzed, through articles on gift-giving, consumer experiences, and the search for variety (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014; Etkin and Mogilner, 2016). Thus, consumption inevitably emerged as an

essential concept to be explored, since it is through consumption that it is possible to evaluate consumers and their buying habits.

Consumption can be defined as the act of acquiring goods or services through a purchase, with the last stage of economic activity being preceded by production and distribution. It is, therefore, the phase in which goods and services reach the consumer, who will acquire them to satisfy their needs (Carvalho, 2019). Consumption can be considered an important component of subjective well-being and can generate satisfaction and contribute to happiness (Torres, 2012).

In a very current reflection, Frankenthal (2022) brings together the factors that lead the consumer to buy, namely, the social role, the personal role, the culture, fears and needs, the stage of life, new trends, social class, the market and economy, and finally, the opinion of other consumers.

This complex interplay of factors thus affects consumer happiness. In addition, the type of consumption made by the consumer can also be an important determinant of happiness, when opting for material purchases or experiential purchases (Torres, 2012).

Throughout this study, we will examine how consumption is represented as a pathway to happiness, and the factors that influence this link. Can consumption generate happiness, or is it time to question this premise and seek a deeper understanding of the true pillars of human achievement?

The present study is organized as follows. After an introduction to the research topic, the second section is dedicated to the literature review and formulation of the hypotheses to be tested, and the third section describes the methodology. Then, in section 4, the results are presented and discussed. Finally, the last section is devoted to the main conclusions and limitations.

### Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, it is intended to study how consumption can influence consumption happiness and this influences personal happiness. To fulfill the purpose of this study, it is then necessary to introduce the concept of "happiness from consumption", defined as well-being generated through consumption. In this way, we distinguish "happiness from consumption" from "happiness".

As mentioned, consumption can be one of the components of happiness and is generally structured by the properties of what is consumed (Torres, 2012). Thus, it is important to analyse the differences and similarities in the achievement of well-being regarding the types of experiential and material consumption. Let's start by distinguishing between these two types of consumption.

Experiential consumption is directly associated with purchases related to obtaining life experiences (travel, going to the theatre or a concert). Regarding material consumption, it is characterized by its utilitarian value, that is, it occurs when the consumer's objective is to obtain a functional and practical benefit, thus meeting their consumption needs (Torres, 2012).

Experiential purchases, compared to material purchases, are shown to be more capable of increasing happiness in consumers, and numerous studies demonstrate this (Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003; Nicolao *et al.*, 2009; Thomas and Millar, 2013; Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014; Gilovich *et al.*, 2015; Kumar, 2022). Dunn *et al.* (2011) also state that, generally, the way consumers spend their income does not maximize their happiness. The authors also state that to increase happiness, one must (1) buy experiences instead of things, (2) buy small pleasures in larger quantities instead of large pleasures in small quantities, and (3) pay now and consume later, thus reinforcing that goods and services have different impacts on happiness outcomes.

On the other hand, there are authors who argue that experiential purchases may not always have the most positive result, and it is the social interaction in the experiences that will determine the happiness achieved (Nicolao *et al.*, 2009). Thomas and Millar (2013) also found evidence that individuals with low economic status are more likely to achieve higher levels of happiness with material purchases than with experiential purchases.

Thus, to verify which type of consumption – material or experiential – most influences the happiness of consumption, the following hypotheses were generated:

H1a - Material consumption has a positive effect on consumption happiness.

H1b - Experiential consumption has a positive effect on consumption happiness.

As already mentioned, consumption is a comprehensive topic influenced by numerous factors, with the "social factor" being one of the most relevant. The influence of these social factors focuses on reference groups, e.g. family, friends, among others, and on the achievement of social status. Within the influence of the social factor, social approval is one of the most significant motivations at a time of purchase (Kotler *et al.*, 2014; Secco *et al.*, 2014; Bastos and Brucks, 2017; Chéron *et al.*, 2022).

In a study of compulsive shoppers, the importance of obtaining social approval through purchases that satisfy self-expression needs was verified. In addition, it was also found that providing information on the number of other buyers can have a positive effect on consumers' purchasing decision, further emphasizing the importance of social approval, reflected in the need to belong to a certain group (Kukar-Kinney *et al.*, 2016).

Social approval can also contribute to life satisfaction as it increases conversational value, and talking about a certain purchase increases happiness. In a research study on conversational value, it was found that social approval is one of the main factors

that helps explain the greater conversational value of experiential purchases over material purchases (Gilovich *et al.*, 2015; Bastos and Brucks, 2017). Also, a study on sustainable consumption and happiness considered social approval as a key issue for this type of consumption. Consuming sustainable products generates life satisfaction, as consumers feel that they are positively impacting the planet and its inhabitants, while satisfying their need for social approval (Chéron *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, in order to study this relation between social approval and consumption, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H1c - Social approval has a positive effect on consumer happiness.

The rising number of studies on the emotions created by marketing, product, and brand stimuli suggests that rewarding experiences with products and services make consumers feel good about their purchase decision and experience positive feelings with the use of the product, increasing happiness (Bettingen and Luedicke, 2009; Mishra *et al.*, 2014).

The experience and use of the product, the interaction with the store environments, with the salesperson and with other consumers, generate emotions that explain variables such as word-of-mouth communication, repurchase and attitude towards the brand (Laros and Steenkamp, 2005). In addition, Lee and Sirgy (2004) highlight that companies that focus on increasing customer happiness are likely to achieve a positive corporate image, goodwill, and a better chance of prospering in the long run.

The same authors also proposed that consumer satisfaction is due to the

acquisition of products, material possessions or both. Royo (2007) also argues that consumption can be an important component of well-being, generating satisfaction and contributing to consumer happiness.

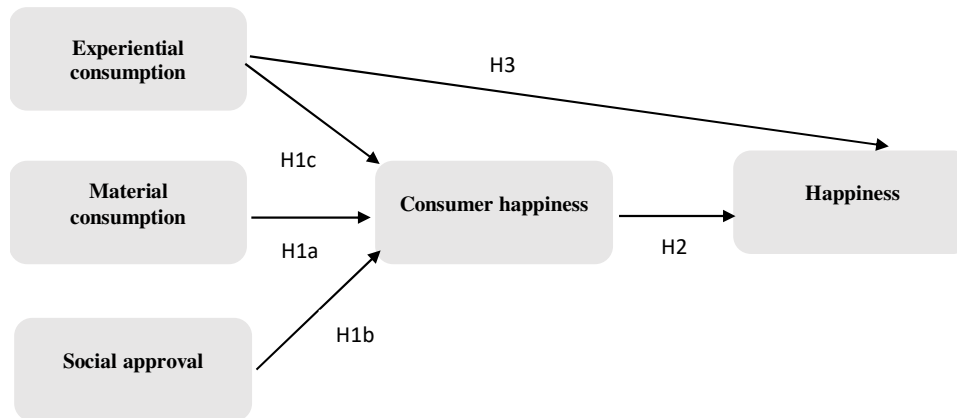
In the same sense, Bettingen and Luedicke (2009) argue that happiness can result from consumers' experiences with brands. Williams (2014) states that consumers are expected to make purchases that increase their overall happiness. The study developed by Watson *et al.* (1992) showed an association between high levels of well-being and more frequent involvement in different activities, including the act of shopping.

However, consumers may have different emotional reactions or even no reaction to the same event or happening, as the evaluation of the event depends on the consideration of each person's goals (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999). From the theoretical perspectives found, the relationship between consumption and happiness is narrowed, leading us to the following two hypotheses:

H2 - Consumer happiness positively influences happiness.

H3 - Experiential consumption has a positive effect on happiness.

With the aim of answering the research questions and testing the three hypotheses formulated, the conceptual model was elaborated as shown in Fig 1, presented below, with the independent variables (material consumption, experiential consumption and social approval), dependent variables (consumption happiness and happiness) and hypotheses of the study.



**Fig 1: Conceptual model**

*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The data were collected through a structured questionnaire, with an online application, carried out on *Google Forms*, allowing respondents to answer the questionnaire through different types of electronic devices. The questionnaire was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Polytechnic of Coimbra and was unanimously deferred at a meeting on September 28, 2022.

After approval, a pre-test of the questionnaire was carried out using ten random individuals. The objective of this pre-test was to adapt the questionnaire to the study objective, identify and correct possible errors, and validate the questionnaire questions. The questions were validated in terms of comprehension, ambiguity of questions, clarity, and average duration time, which turned out to be about 5 minutes.

All questions were translated from the original English to Portuguese, emphasizing the importance of performing a pre-test. The evaluation of the results obtained indicated the need for minor changes in the final version of the data collection

instrument, as well as clarification of any instructions to facilitate its completion.

Data collection began on April 5, 2023, and ended on July 6, 2023. For data collection, the questionnaire was made available on social platforms, more specifically, on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and LinkedIn, and sent directly to friends and family, also asking them to disseminate it.

For this study, the questionnaire model used was obtained by elaboration based on existing scales of several authors, to create a model that would meet the intended study variables. This study includes 14 questions and is structured in seven sections. The first section refers to the study submission and study participation consent form. In the second section, we find the sociodemographic data, divided into seven questions. This is followed by the third section with four questions that evaluate happiness. Then, the fourth and fifth sections compare material and experiential purchases with each other, through three questions each. Subsequently, social approval is verified through two questions in the sixth section. Finally, the seventh and last section, which includes two questions about the happiness of consumption, that is, the act of consuming itself and its relationship with happiness.

For the collection of the data obtained, the non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was used, and the respective statistical analysis was carried out using the IBM SPSS - *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*, version 29. and RStudio, version 4.1.1.

Regarding the target population, the most heterogeneous adult target population possible was considered for this study, restricting only the age to 18 years old or older.

### **Statistical Techniques**

In this study, Descriptive Statistics methods were initially used, with the objective of summarizing and describing the attributes found, in order to characterize the sample. In order to test the hypotheses H1 (a, b, c), H2 and H3, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will initially be performed, and then a structural equation model (SEM) will be estimated. The CFA, within the SEM, is used to assess the overall quality of the adjustment, the reliability and validity of the model.

### **Results**

This section presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and the quantitative results that were collected through the questionnaire. The statistical procedures used in its treatment are also referenced, and the results obtained in the scope of the research carried out are also discussed, with the purpose of answering the research questions and verifying the hypotheses formulated.

### **Sample Characterization**

A total of 529 responses were registered, of which 4 were considered invalid as they

were under the minimum age allowed of 18 years old. Thus, 525 valid responses were considered for analysis, which constitute the valid sample for this study.

Regarding the sociodemographic characterization of the study sample, it is noted that we are dealing with a mostly female sample, with a percentage of 70% female respondents and 30% male.

Concerning the level of complete education, the sample consists mostly of graduates (46%), followed by individuals with secondary education (29%), individuals with a master's degree (19%), individuals with 1st/2nd/3rd cycle of schooling (4%) and, finally, individuals with a PhD (2%).

In the characterization of the sample referring to the professional situation, it is found that the most observed situation, with 50%, is that of worker, followed by full-time student (25%), and worker-student (22%). With less representation are unemployed individuals (2%) and, lastly, retired individuals (1%).

### **Validation Of Hypotheses**

#### **Analysis Of the Reliability and Validity of Latent Variables**

In this study, to evaluate the reliability of the latent factors/variables used, *Cronbach's Alpha coefficient* and McDonald's Omega coefficient were used, which analyse the internal consistency of the questions that constitute each of the latent variables. These coefficients assume values between 0 and 1. Internal consistency is considered acceptable if the minimum value of these coefficients is 0.7. Table 1 presents the results obtained.

**Table 1: Analysis of the reliability and validity of latent variables**

Variable	Sentences	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	McDonald's Omega	AVE
Happiness (H)			0,835	0,838	0,565
	H1	0,810			
	H2	0,673			
	H3	0,849			
	H4	0,681			
Material Consumption (CM)			0,759	0,772	0,534
	MC1	0,816			
	MC2	0,749			
	MC3	0,606			
Experiential Consumption (CE)			0,875	0,880	0,711
	EC1	0,836			
	EC2	0,911			
	EC3	0,764			
Social Approval (AS)			0,925	0,925	0,861
	SA1	0,913			
	SA2	0,944			
Consumer Happiness (FC)			0,880	0,884	0,793
	CH1	0,926			
	CH2	0,850			

Source: Authors' own elaboration

By analysing the results obtained, we can say that all the latent variables under study have a reliability at least acceptable, since the values of the coefficients are all higher than 0.70. In addition, our results reveal that the factor loadings of latent variables exceed 0.7, with the exception of 3 items (H2, H4, and MC3), and therefore in accordance with the item reliability test (Hair *et al.*, 2022). The robust indices generally used to measure the quality of factor adjustment were also calculated: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The values obtained CFI = 0.950 > 0.90; TLI = 0.934 > 0.90; RMSEA = 0.072 < 0.08 and SRMR = 0.043 < 0.08 indicate that we are facing a good adjustment. The convergent validity (when the items that constitute the latent variable present positive and high correlations with each other) of each of the latent variables is also evaluated by calculating the average extracted variance (AVE).

According to Hair *et al.* (2022), the minimum acceptable for an acceptable convergent validity is 0.5. As can be seen in Table 1, all variables have convergent validity, since the AVE is greater than 0.50. In short, the convergent validity test demonstrated that the latent variables proposed in the research model are adequate.

Next, discriminant validity was carried out, with which it is intended to verify whether a latent variable is distinct from the other variables. According to Hair *et al.* (2022), a high discriminant validity shows that the latent variable is unique and captures some phenomena that the others do not. The same authors state that a rigorous test is to compare the AVE values for any two variables with the square of the correlation coefficient estimated between these two variables. The AVE should be greater than the squares of the estimated correlation coefficients.

Table 2 shows the mean values and standard deviations (SD) of the variables under study, as well as the square of the correlation coefficients and the AVE. As we

can see, the square of the correlation coefficients does not exceed the values of the AVE, and thus we can verify that in this study there is discriminant validity.

**Table 2: Mean values and standard deviations of the variables under study and Discriminant validity**

Latent variables	Mean	SD	H	MC	EC	SA	CH
<b>H: Happiness</b>	<b>3,369</b>	<b>0,741</b>	<b>0,565</b>				
<b>MC: Material consumption</b>	3,557	0,763	0,020	<b>0,534</b>			
<b>EC: Experiential consumption</b>	3,954	0,866	0,067	0,196	<b>0,711</b>		
<b>SA: Social approval</b>	2,450	1,149	0,001	0,044	0,027	<b>0,861</b>	
<b>CH: Consumer happiness</b>	4,413	0,666	0,017	0,158	0,075	0,001	<b>0,793</b>

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Following, the structural equation model based on covariances was estimated in order to analyse the hypotheses associated

with our conceptual model. The results obtained are shown in Table 3, presented below.

**Table 3: Structural path estimates**

Hypotheses	Path	Coefficients	Statistics t	P-value
<b>H1a</b>	MC -> CH	0,402	6,548	<b>0,000</b>
<b>H1b</b>	EC -> CH	0,057	1,173	0,241
<b>H1c</b>	SA -> CH	-0,051	-1,871	0,061
<b>H2</b>	CH -> H	0,088	1,581	0,114
<b>H3</b>	EC -> F	0,238	4,531	<b>0,000</b>

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Analysing the results of the estimated model, we can conclude that material purchase has a positive effect on consumption happiness, significant at the significance level of 5% (p-value < 5%), validating hypothesis H1a. Experiential purchase is not significant for consumption happiness (p-value > 5%), so hypothesis H1b is not validated. Social approval harms consumer happiness, considering a significance level of 10% (p-value < 10%). Thus, the H1c hypothesis is not validated, as we would be expecting a positive effect.

Hypothesis H2 is not validated (p-value > 5%), so we can say that consumption happiness does not influence happiness. Hypothesis H3 is validated (p-value < 5%),

and we can thus conclude that experiential buying has a positive and significant effect on happiness.

**Discussion of the results**

The main objective of this research was to verify the relationship between consumption and happiness. The study was also extended to the type of consumption, comparing material consumption with experiential consumption in terms of happiness provided in consumption. The relationship between social approval and happiness in consumption was also verified. Thus, Table 4 presents a summary regarding the validation of the hypotheses.



**Table 4: Validation of hypotheses**

H1a	H1b	H1c	H2	H3
Accepted	Rejected	Rejected	Rejected	Accepted

Source: Authors' own elaboration

From the perspective of the type of consumption, the relationship between experiential and material consumption with consumption happiness was investigated, through hypotheses H1a and H1b. In dissonance with most studies on the subject, it was found that material consumption generates consumption happiness, an association that was not verified about experiential consumption. In line with this result, some authors argue that experiential purchases are not the ones that have the most positive result in consumer happiness, and social interaction referring to any type of consumption is the determinant of this well-being.

Regarding conversational value, there are people who prefer to talk about objects rather than experiences since they consider it easier to find things to say about their objects (Bastos and Brucks, 2017). In addition, experiential purchases can also be considered negative, and a lifetime of negative experiential purchases can lead to a rather unhappy life. The authors consider that material purchases, when considered negative by the consumer, do not leave such a negative mark on their lives (Nicolao *et al.*, 2009).

Another point of view may be the interconnection between material and experiential consumption. There are authors who claim that the consumption of material goods can be seen from an experiential point of view, going beyond their functionalities and acquiring meaning in the lives of consumers, involving them for what they represent and changing their motivation, being able to provide experiences. This motivation, which was previously to acquire products and services with functional and advantageous characteristics, becomes to acquire those capable of providing experiences (Torres,

2012). Another factor to be considered for this result is the economic status of consumers, which moderates the relationship between the type of consumption and the happiness of consumption. Thomas and Millar (2013) found evidence of individuals with low economic status achieving higher levels of happiness with material purchases than with experiential purchases. This result may be a parallel to ours, and to the economic situation currently experienced in Portugal, in which the population sees its economic status decreasing and the economic crisis intensifying.

Regarding hypothesis H1c, it was found that social approval has an inverse relationship with consumption happiness, and this hypothesis was not validated. It was found that the greater the need for social approval of the consumer, the lower the happiness achieved in consumption. This theory can be quickly understood. In the close connection between social approval and happiness in consumption, consumers need to consume products, not always a basic necessity to feel socially approved both by their reference groups and by society. However, the greater this need for social approval, the more unbridled consumption will have to be to generate consumption happiness. Our respondents may have a high need for social approval and the consumption they practice may not be enough to generate happiness in consumption. The phenomenon of market alienation, in which the consumer feels the absence of market control and a lack of ability to influence the behaviour of companies, also harms social approval and consequently consumer happiness. It is therefore necessary for organizations to focus on the consumer (Chéron *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the current consumer happiness found through material consumption, the primary objective of this research was to verify the generation of true happiness in life, full and lasting, after the happiness found in consumption. H2 has not been validated, indicating that consumption happiness does not contribute to overall happiness. This can be explained by the consumerism experienced in today's society. The currently existing consumer culture, which induces the need to have the most current products, in a market with an infinity of products available, generates a constant search for happiness. This desire for more and more can level happiness by demonstrating that the acquisition of goods can generate immediate but temporary satisfaction, not necessarily translating into lasting happiness (De Moura, 2018; Lazar, 2024). In addition, consumers may have different emotional reactions or even no reaction to the same event and consumption for some consumers does not translate into happiness to any extent (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999).

On the other hand, H3 was verified, finding a relation between experiential consumption and happiness. One of the explanations may be the positive reinterpretation of experiences, which over time are optimized in our mental representations, in which we tend to forget the less positive aspects, keeping more memories of the positive aspects. In addition, experiences are central to a person's identity, who often evaluate their life by the sum of their experiences. Experiences have even greater social value, since it is more pleasurable to talk about them, more effectively promoting successful social relationships, closely linked to happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003).

While consumers may want to be happy and make purchases that increase their overall happiness, the meaning of happiness is malleable and can vary between consumers, driven by numerous determinants, including the individual's gender.

## Conclusions

Throughout this study, we explored the complex relationship between consumption and happiness in the context of Marketing. The fundamental question we set out to investigate was whether consumption can, in fact, generate happiness. The answer to this question is neither simple nor definitive, since, as we have seen, the impact of consumption on happiness is influenced by a series of interconnected variables, including the characteristics of the consumer, the environment in which he or she finds himself/herself, and the nature of the products or services purchased.

As we analysed diverse perspectives and evidence, it became evident that the relationship between consumption and happiness is multifaceted and subject to change over time, however it was possible to observe a probable relation between consumption and happiness in this study. For a better analysis of this study, happiness was distinguished from the consumption of happiness, the first referring to the happiness achieved through consumption, usually instantaneous, and the other to general happiness with life.

It was observed that acquisitions of material goods seem to generate positive feelings and even moments of joy, and it was verified that material consumption probably generates happiness from consumption. By deepening the study on the two types of consumption, material and experiential, we were able to verify that experiential consumption seems to have the ability to generate general and lasting happiness in the consumer's life.

Social approval was also addressed in this study, and an inverse relationship was found between it and consumption happiness. Given the centrality of consumption in contemporary society, it is worth reflecting, as Bragaglia and Bastos (2017) point out, on the use of goods as passwords for the relationship between individuals, as well as the exclusion of those who do not have equal purchasing power.

Regarding the main research topic, the relationship between consumption happiness and happiness was analysed, but no relationship was found between both, and it is worth reflecting on this conclusion. One of the main characteristics of consumption, observed in today's society, is its evolution, and with it, the evolution of consumers, who have become more intelligent and more demanding, often demanding the same quality at lower prices.

### Limitations

Throughout this investigation, some limitations were found that prevented stronger results, limitations that should be considered for future research within the theme. The first limitation found is related to the complexity and quantity of topics covered. Happiness has been a topic of study since the beginning of humanity and currently continues to arouse interest, although it is far from being completely understood. Consumption is also an extremely studied topic with growing importance, being the fuel of today's economies.

Ultimately, pursuing happiness through consumption is a personal and subjective journey. Happiness is built from a complex combination, including relationships, health, life purpose, and job satisfaction. Consumption can play a role, but it is only one of many elements that contribute to the experience of happiness. Thus, we can conclude that Happiness Marketing can be both beneficial and harmful, depending on how it is applied and the consumer's awareness. It is essential to recognize that genuine happiness is often not found in the act of consuming, but rather in meaningful relationships, self-development, and contributing to the common well-being. Therefore, Happiness Marketing should be centred not only on stimulating consumption but also on promoting values that sustain true lasting happiness.

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