# The Big Five, happiness, and shopping

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### A B S T R A C T

This study assessed the relationships between the Big Five dimensions of personality and individual happiness with three indicators of shopping and spending for non-grocery items using a sample of 660 U.S. adults. The data from an online survey showed that all five of the Big Five traits correlated positively with self-reported happiness, even controlling for the effects of age and gender. Regression analysis showed, however, that the positive relationships between happiness and Agreeableness and Openness to Experience were no longer significant, indicating that they are real, but redundant to the other traits. The correlations also showed that happiness, Openness to Experience, and Extraversion correlated positively with the three shopping indicators. Finally, happiness appears to have a direct effect with shopping and mediates the influence of Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, and Extraversion on happiness.

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## 1. Introduction

A popular greeting card states: "Whoever said 'Money can't buy happiness' didn't know where to shop". Indeed, popular culture contains a variety of expressions of this sentiment. In contrast, many people subscribe to the adage that money can't buy happiness. Ben-Shahar (2007) for instance, repeatedly warns against trying to buy true happiness in the absence of its other sources. Viewed from a broad perspective, perhaps a solution to this contradiction lies the extreme contingent nature of the phenomenon. Some people shop when they are happy. Others enjoy shopping and do it to gain happiness. Other factors can sway the feelings back and forth. Shopping can be a chore for some people in some situations, but a joy in other situations. Other life events can determine a person's overall mood and thus lead to relative degrees of the happiness-shopping connection.

Some researchers seek to find "signal" in this noisy phenomenon. That is, they search for regularities or generalizations that partially explain variability in shopping such as differences in its enjoyment, frequency, and spending. For example, Miller (1998) approached the question from an anthropological point of view and concluded that "shopping is about relationships" and that (women) shoppers do so as an "act of sacrifice" in order to obtain what will please their families. Another approach has sought to identify the motivation for shopping. Wagner and Rudolph (2010), for example, describe a hierarchical model of shopping motivation that includes the desire to be in a pleasant physical environment, the need to experience positive affect, and the desire to socialize. Other research such as Goldsmith et al. (2011) finds evidence that materialism and brand engagement in self-concept motivate liking to shop offline.

The present study asks if the Big Five personality traits have any relationships with a tendency to shop or spend for non-grocery items,

especially clothing. Moreover, we examine the possible role of "happiness" as both another precursor of shopping and a possible mediator between the Big Five and shopping. While links between the Big Five and happiness are well studied, how the Big Five relate to shopping is still an open question deserving further study.

## 2. Objectives

The first objective of the present study was to assess whether any of the Big Five personality dimensions are related to shopping frequency. Researchers have explored the relationships between the Big Five and a multitude of other traits and behaviors, but shopping has been little studied. Thus, our study seeks to fill this gap in the literature. The second objective was to assess whether happiness might behave as a mediator between any of the Big Five traits and shopping frequency. Many studies show that the Big Five are predictive of happiness, and a few studies show that happiness predicts shopping frequency. Consequently, we hypothesized that if scoring high on the Big Five traits indicates greater happiness, then happiness might be a mechanism linking the Big Five to increased shopping. We first discuss the impact the control variables, age and gender, might have on these relationships because how they are related to the Big Five and to happiness are both well studied.

## 3. Control variables: age and gender

Many studies find relationships between both age and gender and the Big Five and between those demographic variables and happiness. Consequently, we treat age and gender as control

variables in our analyses. Our purpose for using age and gender as control variables is to "account for other meaningful variables" in the analysis, and so it is their relationships with both the Big Five and with happiness that is of interest. We first discuss and hypothesize how age and gender are related to the Big Five and then how they are related to happiness.

According to Carlson and Wu (2012), researchers should explain the reasons for including control variables and distinguish between *theoretical* and *artifact* control variables in hierarchical analyses. Theoretically meaningful control variables should be hypothesized to have specific relationships with the dependent variable and have the opportunity to account for variance in the dependent variable prior to the focal variables because they offer explanations for variance in the dependent variable (Spector and Brannick, 2011). Because there is a large body of research on these subjects, we treat age and gender as theoretical control variables and review some of the most relevant findings in order to propose hypotheses for how age and gender relate to each of the Big Five factors and to happiness. Because control variable influence differs depending on correlations with either or both the independent and dependent variables (Carlson and Wu, 2012), we present the correlations and the regression results in a hierarchical linear regression to test the substantive hypotheses between the Big Five and happiness.

### 3.1. Age and the Big Five

Large scale studies of age and the Big Five (Donnellan and Lucas, 2008; McCrae et al., 1999; Noftle and Fleeson, 2010; Srivastava et al., 2003) tend to show small differences in Big Five scores over the life span, although they also reveal a great deal of inter-individual variability. Data come from a variety of countries (Britain, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Croatia, and South Korea, as well as the U. S.). As age goes up, scores on Extraversion and Openness to Experience seem to go down slightly; Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability seem to go up slightly. Following these findings, we propose the following:

**H1a.** Age is negatively correlated with scores on Extraversion and Openness to Experience.

**H1b.** Age is positively correlated with scores on Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability.

### 3.2. Gender and the Big Five

Weisberg et al. (2011) replicate previous findings with a large sample of Canadians that show women report higher scores on the Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (the reverse of Emotional Stability) dimensions than do men. The latter finding is consistent with Burton et al.'s (2010) study of U.S. college students. Thus our second set of hypotheses is:

**H2a.** Women score higher than men do on a measure of Extraversion.

**H2b.** Women score higher than men do on a measure of Agreeableness.

**H2c.** Men score higher than women do on a measure of Emotional Stability.

### 3.3. Age and happiness

A comprehensive analysis of data from Germany and Britain (Frijters and Beatton, 2012) shows a variable or non-linear pattern of the relationship between age and happiness and only weakly supports a U-shaped pattern with the minimum in the 35-50 age range. Overall, there seems to be "not much of a relationship" (Frijters and Beatton, 2012, p. 525). Easterlin (2006) provides the most comprehensive view of age and happiness for the U.S. based on the U.S. General Social Surveys. His analysis shows that happiness rises somewhat (again, not much of a relationship) from ages 18 to midlife and declines slowly thereafter. Thus, different studies of happiness that do not include this full age range might show either positive, negative, or zero correlations between happiness and age. Because some recent evidence does support a positive correlation between age and happiness, explained by a decrease in stress and acceptance of life (Graham and Nikolova, 2014), our third control hypothesis (H3) proposes a positive, weak association between age and happiness.

**H3.** Age is positively correlated with happiness.

### 3.4. Gender and happiness

Who overall are happier, men or women? As with many questions of this sort, the answer seems to be "it depends": many factors contribute to or detract from individual happiness (Tesch-Römer et al., 2008). Whether men or women are happier overall depends on an individual's age, marital status, country and their socio-economic characteristics, and religious circumstances. Several sources, however, conclude on the basis of large data sets, that women do tend to be happier in many countries despite frequent discriminating differences in educational resources and economic circumstances (Graham and Chattopadhyay, 2012; Zweig, 2014). For the U.S., studies find either no significant difference or a small female advantage in happiness (Baumgardner and Crothers, 2014, p. 93). Owing to the possibility that gender differences in happiness might influence the analysis, we also include gender as a control variable. Because the evidence suggests that there may be a small female happiness advantage, our fourth control hypothesis is that happiness is related positively to being female.

**H4.** Women report higher happiness scores than do men.

## 4. Focal relationships: the Big Five, happiness, and shopping

### 4.1. The Big Five and happiness

In contrast to the weak relationships between the two demographic variables and happiness, across the world, studies of the Big Five and happiness (or Subjective Well Being, SWB) show larger and more consistent effects despite variability in the specific relationships. A 1998 meta-analysis by DeNeve and Cooper (1998) found significant correlations between all of the Big Five components and SWB, with Emotional Stability having the strongest relationship ($r=.25$). They also found that Conscientiousness was the strongest positive correlate of life satisfaction. Subsequent studies have also shown similar findings. For instance, Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) show that in a sample ($n=500$) of U.S. college students, happiness is positively related to Extraversion and negatively related to Neuroticism (the negative expression of Emotional Stability) where these traits are measured by the big Five Inventory (John et al., 1991). Momeni et al. (2011) report that among a sample of 274 Iranian college students, happiness is related positively to the NEO-PI measures of Extraversion and negatively related to Neuroticism. Another Iranian study (Pishva et al., 2011), this time with adult participants ($n=150$) and using the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire measures, shows a similar positive relationship between happiness and Extraversion and a negative relationship between happiness with Neuroticism. Recently, Tanksale (2014) shows that in a survey of 183 Indian adults,