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How to be happy from east to west: social and flexible pursuit of happiness is associated with positive effects of valuing happiness on well-being

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Abstract

Recent evidence has suggested that valuing happiness to an extreme degree has a potential downside in Western but not in East Asian countries. We tested how valuing happiness relates to well-being in mainland China ($N=721$) and Western countries (UK, US, and Canada) ($N=349$) in two online survey studies. We predicted that pursuing happiness in a socially engaged yet flexible (i.e., feasible and achievable) way underlies a positive association between valuing happiness and well-being. Indeed, in study 1, a socially engaged definition of happiness mediated the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being in a Chinese sample. Specifically, increased valuing happiness was associated with a higher socially engaged definition of happiness, which in turn was related to higher well-being. Demonstrating the role of flexibility in pursuing happiness, Chinese participants reported more items overall and more feasible items to achieve happiness, though not more social items than participants in the Western sample). In study 2, we repeated the study during the Covid-19 lockdown in Chinese ($N=308$) and Western ($N=185$) samples and also tested if participants were able to adopt a mindset of flexibly pursuing happiness by adding a survey with social actions that were still feasible (e.g., a call instead of meeting in-person). We found the association holds in times of emotional stress and social restrictions in both samples, suggesting that people flexibly pursue social activities that relate to happiness. We propose that a socially engaged but also feasible and flexible way to pursue happiness is associated with higher well-being.

Keywords Happiness · Well-being · Emotion · Collectivism · Goal pursuit

Introduction

Happiness is viewed and valued as an important goal across cultures (Barrett, 1996; Diener et al., 2005, 2013; Kesebir & Diener, 2008; Tamir & Ford, 2012). Happiness could refer either to a positive feeling that people experience, or to a state that represents a wider construct including being satisfied with life generally, being psychologically healthy and having high subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999). These descriptions are not independent of each other, and

they are often overlapping or related (Ford & Mauss, 2014). In this paper, we refer to the term “happiness” as a positive emotional state.

Experiencing happiness has countless positive outcomes, for instance, it is beneficial to psychological and physical health, and it improves people’s social interactions (Diener et al., 2018; Diener & Chan, 2011; Diener & Tay, 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson et al., 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Myers & Diener, 2018; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and performance at work (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2022; Greenier et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022). However, people vary in the extent to which they value happiness (Mauss et al., 2012). Some people aspire to experience happiness sometimes, whereas others want to experience happiness to an extreme degree (e.g., wanting to feel a very intense level of happiness) and very frequently; this tendency to desire positive emotion and prefer a positive hedonic status has

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been termed “valuing happiness” (Mauss et al., 2011). In the present paper, we investigate how valuing happiness and different approaches to pursuing it relate to well-being in participants from mainland China and those considered Western (from UK, US and Canada).

The paradox effect of valuing happiness on well-being

Does valuing happiness lead to achieving happiness? It may seem reasonable to assume valuing happiness should always be linked to beneficial outcomes, for instance, because valuing an emotional state raises the likelihood to achieve it (e.g., Tamir et al., 2019). Nevertheless, numerous studies over the past decade have demonstrated that this is not always true. For instance, participants who were instructed to value happiness reported having a less positive emotional experience while watching a happy movie clip than participants who were not instructed to value happiness (Mauss et al., 2011). Surprisingly, obsessive pursuit of happiness may even impair well-being (see Ford & Mauss, 2014; Hansenne, 2021), for overviews). This negative association is particularly evident in Western countries, like the US or the UK, which are often characterised by cultural practices with origins in Western Europe, including democratic governance and secular ideals (Henrich et al., 2010; Lou & Noels, 2021; Nisbett, 2003; Pokhrel, 2011). In this context, higher levels of valuing happiness are associated with negative emotional outcomes such as depressive symptoms (Ford et al., 2014; Mahmoodi Kahriz et al., 2020; Mauss et al., 2012), increased loneliness (Mauss et al., 2012), and bipolar disorder (Ford et al., 2015a).

In order to understand these paradoxical effects, the present paper applied a goal framework. Happiness and its pursuit can be considered as a goal-oriented state (e.g., Ford & Mauss, 2014; Hennecke & Brandstätter, 2017; Yıldırım et al., 2021). People might differ in their standards for the pursuit of happiness (e.g., how often and how strongly they expect to feel happy), how they guide their actions towards achieving happiness (e.g., how they pursue it), and how they monitor their progress on gaining happiness (e.g., how quickly they might be concerned by an absence of happiness). Any of these factors can lower happiness if pursued in a maladaptive way (cf. Ford & Mauss, 2014).

Firstly, individuals who place a high value on happiness tend to set elevated standards for experiencing happiness (cf. Ford & Mauss, 2014; e.g., Tsai et al., 2006). This can lead to disappointment because, for instance, it is unrealistic to be happy in all contexts or to a constantly high degree (Gruber et al., 2011). As a result, people may evaluate a positive emotional experience as more negative because it is not in line with their standards. For instance, when participants

were instructed to feel as happy as possible while listening to music, they reported to be less happy than participants who were instructed to simply listen to the music (Schooler et al., 2003; see also Mauss et al., 2011).

Secondly, people who highly value happiness to an extreme degree might also monitor their emotional state more, which might then alter the hedonic experience itself (cf. Ford & Mauss, 2014). For instance, when people constantly monitor their emotional status, any signal of failing to achieve happiness could cause negative emotions and impair the positive experience itself (e.g., Bailen et al., 2019; van Bockstaele et al., 2020). As a result, this may be linked to a reduced sense of happiness from the event. Indeed, Mahmoodi Kahriz et al. (2020) investigated how emotional attention control and emotion regulation impact the relationship between valuing happiness and depression and found that highly valuing happiness is associated with depressive symptoms via poor ability to disengage attention from negative emotional information and lower levels of savouring positive events.

Lastly, people could also differ in their actions to achieve happiness; certain actions could be counterproductive (e.g., spending money on oneself instead of others, Cui et al., 2021; Dunn et al., 2011). Interestingly, the actions people take seem to differ between cultures (e.g., Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Previous studies have therefore highlighted the need to investigate the impact of culture on the pursuit of happiness and its effects on well-being. (see Ford et al., 2015a; Uchida & Oishi, 2016).

Culture and the pursuit of happiness

Culture impacts how people define and pursue happiness. People from European American cultures (i.e., individualistic cultures) tend to view themselves as independent individuals separated from others and act on their own goals. In contrast, people from East Asian cultures (i.e., collectivistic cultures) tend to view themselves as interdependent and motivated by not only themselves but also the needs of others (cf. Hofstede, 1980; see also Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 2018; Uchida & Oishi, 2016).

As a consequence, individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in their definition of happiness. Kitayama et al. (2000) asked American and Japanese participants to report their experience of positive emotions and found that Americans associate general positive emotions, such as happiness, with positive emotions that do not involve engagement with other people like, pride (i.e., focusing on one’s own achievements) whereas Japanese people, for instance, tend to associate positive emotions with social engagement such as friendly feelings towards others. Relatedly, general positive feelings (e.g., happiness) are linked with non-social

emotions in an American sample but with social emotions in Japanese samples (Kitayama et al., 2006). Similarly, Americans relate happiness with personal achievements, whereas Japanese participants describe it referring to social harmony (Uchida & Ogihara, 2012; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Therefore, Asian people are highly motivated to pursue more socially engaged forms of happiness instead of self-focused happiness (Uchida et al., 2004).

Indeed, social connections are one of the most important factors driving well-being (Heliwell & Putnam, 2004), and social engagement is considered a necessary factor for happiness (Diener & Oishi, 2005). Further, a socially engaged way of pursuing happiness predicts increased life satisfaction (Rohrer et al., 2018). In Rohrer and colleagues' study (2018), participants were interviewed about their ideas for how to improve life satisfaction. After a year, individuals who reported socially engaged strategies reported a higher level of life satisfaction. Similarly, experts on happiness suggested that one of the most effective strategies to improve well-being is engaging in interpersonal or pro-social activities such as investing in social networks (Buettner et al., 2020).

Building on these findings, Ford et al. (2015a) predicted that the way people pursue happiness will impact the effect of valuing happiness on well-being differentially in individualistic and collectivistic cultures; specifically, they suggested that pursuing happiness in a social way may contribute to a positive association between valuing happiness and well-being in East Asian samples. To investigate this hypothesis, Ford and colleagues investigated the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being across four regions that vary in their emphasis on social engagement in the pursuit of happiness (Varnum et al., 2010): United States, Germany, Russia, and East Asia. Indeed, in individualistic cultures, valuing happiness predicted lower well-being such as in the US sample, while it did not predict well-being in the German sample (which is relatively less individualistic, e.g., Koopmann-Holm & Matsumoto, 2011). In the collectivistic cultures, valuing happiness predicted higher well-being, and the positive effect was stronger in the East Asian samples (which are relatively more collectivistic than Russia) compared to the Russian sample. The authors concluded that culture moderates the link between valuing happiness and well-being, and pursuing happiness in a socially engaged way prevents the paradoxical effects of valuing happiness on well-being and instead leads to happiness.

However, it is important to investigate these relationships in various collectivistic cultures because collectivistic cultures differ and may vary in their attitudes towards happiness. For example, Mexicans value positive affect associated with high activation (e.g., excitement), while East Asians value positive affect associated with low activation

(e.g., calmness; Ruby et al., 2012). Thus, although both cultures are considered collectivistic, participants might display opposite preferences in pursuing happiness or in what is considered to be happiness. Therefore, conducting studies across different regions and cultures can contribute to form a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of valuing happiness on well-being. More specifically, it is necessary to examine the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being in more collectivistic regions. In the present study, we therefore used samples from mainland China.

The role of feasibility and flexibility

A closer look at the items mentioned in Ford's study (Ford et al., 2015a) suggests that the social pursuit of happiness might also comprise a more flexible and achievable way of pursuing happiness. For instance, "caring for others in need" could be considered a very feasible activity. This is because an individual could achieve it in potentially very viable ways such as by donating a small amount of money to a charity for people in need or by simply sending a kind message to a family member or friend that is going through a difficult time. Thus, such actions are more controllable and achievable for the person, and could therefore occur regularly, making it potentially easy to carry out in day-to-day life. Further, because various activities would serve the same purpose, people are not limited to one activity and can pursue a socially engaged way of happiness more flexibly. Indeed, none of the items in the socially engaged definition of happiness scale (Ford et al., 2015a) refer to social activities that would be difficult to pursue on a regular basis. This reasoning is in keeping with theories of goal pursuit suggesting that goal pursuit requires persistence but also the adaptation of feasible plans and flexibility in case activities are blocked (e.g., Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Marien et al., 2012).

Indeed, the successful pursuit of happiness is associated with social engagement but also with the pursuit of varied and feasible activities (e.g., Krasko et al., 2020). Parks and Biawas-Diener, (2013)) reviewed the results from previous positive intervention research and revealed that engaging in pleasant activities in one's day-to-day life (e.g., expressing gratitude and helping others) increases happiness. Similarly, Catalino et al. (2014) suggested that prioritizing positivity by integrating several positive but very feasible activities (e.g., talking to their family in a local park, drinking tea while reading a newspaper) in daily life is an effective way to pursue happiness. They developed the prioritizing positivity scale (PPS) to measure to what level participants aim to capture positive emotional experiences when structuring day-to-day life (e.g., "A priority for me is experiencing happiness in everyday life"). Supporting their reasoning,

prioritizing positivity was linked with higher well-being while valuing happiness was linked with lower well-being (see also Hansenne, 2021).

This approach proved valuable in extremely negative circumstances such as the Covid 19 pandemic. For example, according to Yirci and colleagues (Yirci et al., 2022), the ability to adapt to negative situations using a variety of ways to achieve happiness was part of participants' psychological resilience and positively impacted on participants' happiness during the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, Satici et al. (2023; see also De Lorenzo et al., 2023) conducted a cross-sectional survey to investigate the relationship between psychological resilience and subjective happiness, and the results indicated that individuals with the ability to find adaptive ways to cope with the pandemic were more likely to achieve higher well-being.

Finally, it is also important to understand whether people can spontaneously recall such feasible and social activities to pursue happiness as an indicator of whether they would recognize or initiate them in daily life (cf. Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). For instance, people who highly value happiness may not know what makes them happy (Ford & Mauss, 2014), which could result in failing to achieve happiness. Indeed, having awareness of what contributes to one's happiness is beneficial for pursuing it effectively (e.g., Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). Lacking an accurate understanding how to achieve happiness might be linked with ineffective and counterproductive activities to enhance happiness (cf. Ford & Mauss, 2014). For instance, opposite to what many people may believe, people who spend money on themselves are reported to be less happy than those who spend money on others (Dunn et al., 2008, 2011). In other words, some efforts to become happy could be counterproductive. To our knowledge, limited research has directly investigated what people do to pursue happiness in a cross-cultural context. To test whether cultures differ in both the degree of social engagement and the degree of feasibility in these activities, we took a qualitative approach in our studies by asking participants to spontaneously recall activities that they believe would make them happy or improve their emotional status.

Current investigation

The present study had several aims. First, we aimed to replicate Ford et al.'s study (2015a) in a mainland Chinese sample. We used samples from mainland China because Ford and the colleagues' study (2015b) only used East-Asian samples from Japan and Taiwan. Therefore, it remains unknown if valuing happiness predicts higher well-being in other Eastern Asian regions such as mainland China. Oyserman et al. (2002) evaluated the theoretical assumptions and

meta-analyses on individualism and collectivism and suggested that (mainland) Chinese are the only Asian group that showed large effects of being more collectivistic and less individualistic than Americans. However, Steele and Lynch (2013) argued that the Chinese increasingly value individualistic factors in assessing their own well-being and consider their society more individualistic. Based on these considerations, we selected a Chinese sample to represent a collectivist culture and aimed to examine whether valuing happiness predicts higher well-being also in mainland China. We also recruited participants from the UK, US, and Canada as those having higher individualism compared to other Western countries (Oyserman et al., 2002); Mahmoodi Kahriz et al., 2020).

Additionally, we aimed to examine which activities people generated when asked how they pursue happiness using open questions. To our knowledge, there is no existing study on the topic of valuing happiness that has provided such data. This will give insight into which activities people spontaneously think of without being presented with activities or being prompted by questions that could result in response biases. As a consequence, these answers might represent more realistically what activities people are aware of and act upon in daily life (cf. Shah et al., 2018).

Importantly, to test our framework, we investigated whether people differ in how *social* but also how *feasible* their generated activities are to understand whether people and cultures differ with regards to these dimensions. Specifically, in order to evaluate feasibility, we recorded the number of items people generated to understand whether people are able to report a variety of items (cf. Krasko et al., 2020) because being aware of more activities raises the likelihood of pursuing an activity that contributes to happiness. We also coded the feasibility of the single items (i.e. how likely it can happen in the foreseeable future and happen regularly in people's day-to-day life). Further, we coded how socially engaged the activities were (i.e. the level of social engagement involved in the activity, such as being connected with others, helping others, or interacting with others).

Taken together, we aimed to replicate previous work (Ford et al., 2015a) with samples from different cultural backgrounds. We also added new open questions measuring the activities people generate to pursue happiness to understand the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being in more depth. Therefore, using a mixed-method design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, our hypotheses were: (a) valuing happiness will predict higher well-being in the Chinese sample, as found in the previous study with East Asian samples (Ford et al., 2015a); (b) a socially engaged way of pursuing happiness plays a protective role in the relationship between valuing happiness

and well-being in both samples; (c) compared to Western participants, Chinese participants would report more social and feasible ways to pursue happiness and would generate activities that can make them feel happy / improve their emotional status in open questions.

Study 1

Method

Power analysis

We ran a power analysis in G Power (Faul et al., 2009) aiming to achieve a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.29$) with a power of 0.95 and α of 0.05 based on the sample size of previous studies (Ford et al., 2014, 2015a; Mauss et al., 2011). On the basis of these calculations, we aimed to recruit a minimum size of 187 participants and as many as possible within the data collection period. We did not analyse the data until the data collection was completed.

Participants

Participants from China and the West were recruited ($N=577$). Chinese participants ($N=413$, 362 females, age range 18–81, $M=26.37$ years, $SD=10.72$) were recruited from the Chinese online platform “Wen Juan Xing”. The majority of participants were full-time university students or working full-time (83.05%) and lived in a city or town area (98.79%). Western participants ($N=164$, 80 females, age ranging 18 to 60, $M=29.98$, $SD=9.8$) were recruited from the UK ($N=155$), US ($N=7$) and Canada ($N=2$) from the online platform Amazon MTurk. The majority of participants were full-time university students or working full-time (89.02%) and lived in a city or town (84.76%). Before they took part in the survey, all participants gave informed consent and were informed that they had the right to withdraw their data at any time.

Materials

Valuing happiness scale

We used a revised version of the Valuing Happiness Scale (Mauss et al., 2011) to measure participants’ motivation to pursue happiness. The original version consists of seven items that assess to what extent the participants are motivated to pursue happiness (e.g., “Happiness is extremely important to me”). In the current version, there are two newly added items: “I get somewhat distressed if I don’t feel happy” and “If I don’t feel happy, I worry about it”.

Participants rated these items on a scale of 1 (“*strongly disagree*”) to 7 (“*strongly agree*”). Their responses to these nine items are averaged to generate the final score for this scale. A higher score means a higher level of valuing happiness (Full sample: $\alpha=0.78$; China: $\alpha=0.73$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.80$). A higher score means participants tend to have a higher level of valuing happiness.

Socially engaged definition of happiness scale

To measure how socially engaged participants’ definitions of happiness are, we asked the participants to fill in the socially engaged definition of happiness scale (Ford et al., 2015a), which consists of eight items (e.g., “spending time with friends and family”) that all start with the prompt “happiness means to me...”. Participants were required to rate how much these definitions apply to them on a scale of 1 (“*strongly disagree*”) to 5 (“*strongly agree*”) (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.83$; China: $\alpha=0.84$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.82$). A higher score means participants tend to have a more socially engaged way of pursuing happiness.

Well-being

Considering the concept of well-being may vary across cultures, we assessed participants’ well-being using lower ill-being, cognitive, hedonic, and psychological measures in line with the study conducted by Ford et al. (2015a). The following measures were later combined as a latent variable of “well-being” that demonstrates participants’ overall level of well-being.

Ryff scales of psychological well-being

Psychological well-being was measured by Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-being (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which consists of 18 items (e.g., “In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live”). Participants indicated how much they agree with the statement on a scale of 1 (“*strongly disagree*”) to 5 (“*strongly agree*”) (Full Sample: Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.90$; China: $\alpha=0.85$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.75$). A higher score means participants have a higher level of psychological well-being.

The satisfaction with life scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) was used to measure cognitive well-being. It has five items that measure how satisfied participants are with their lives (e.g., “In most ways my life is close to ideal”). Participants rate how much they agree with these items on a scale of 1 (“*strongly disagree*”) to 7 (“*strongly agree*”) (Full Sample:

$\alpha=0.90$; China: $\alpha=0.89$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.91$). A higher score means participants tend to be more satisfied with their lives.

The positive and negative affect schedule

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) was used to measure participants' hedonic well-being. It contains ten positive emotions (e.g., "enthusiastic") and ten negative emotions (e.g., "scared"). Participants were asked to rate to what extent they generally feel these emotions on a scale of 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). In line with Ford et al. (2015a) we created the final score of participants' hedonic well-being by dividing the mean score of positive emotions by the mean score of negative emotions to measure the ratio of positive affect to negative affect (full sample: $\alpha=0.82$; China: $\alpha=0.83$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.79$). A higher score means participants have a higher level of hedonic well-being.

Beck's depression inventory

Ill-being was assessed by Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1996). It includes 21 depression symptoms, and participants answered them according to how severely they experienced these symptoms in the past two weeks, ranging from zero (e.g., "I do not feel sad") to three (e.g., "I am so sad or unhappy that I cannot stand it"). A composite depressive symptoms score was created by summing up all the answers from the questionnaire. The score ranges from 0 to 13 indicates minimal depression; 14 to 19 indicates mild depression; 20 to 28 indicates moderate depression, while 29 to 63 suggests severe depression symptoms (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.91$; China: $\alpha=0.90$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.92$). A lower score means participants have a lower level of depression.

Temporal experience of pleasure scale

In addition, the Temporal Experience of Pleasure scale (TEP; Gard et al., 2006) was used for an exploratory reason, that is, to understand whether valuing happiness also relates to the ability to anticipate and experience the moment of pleasure. This questionnaire listed 18 items of anticipatory pleasure and consummatory pleasure experiences, and participants were instructed to self-report how much do they agree with each statement ranging from 1 (*very false for me*) to 6 (*very true for me*) and responses for anticipatory pleasure and consummatory pleasure were separately calculated into two scores (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.85$; China: $\alpha=0.86$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.83$). A higher score means participants tend to be more able to anticipate and experience pleasure.

Open questions

Lastly, to understand people's spontaneous thoughts about how to pursue happiness in general and when feeling down, participants were asked four open questions: "What do you normally do to make yourself happy?" "What do you normally do to cheer yourself up when you are in a bad mood?" "What do you think most people do to make themselves happy?" and "What do you think most people do to cheer themselves up when they are in a bad mood?". Participants were asked to write as much as they could and try not to use informal language such as internet slang.

All answers were coded by two individuals who were fluent in Chinese and English and who had been trained at a master's level in psychology but were blind to the hypotheses. The first author trained and checked the coding standard in several training sessions. In order to understand how much people tend to go for socially engaged activities in the pursuit of happiness and how feasible the activities were, the coders rated them on a scale of 1–5; 1 implies not socially engaged/feasible at all and 5 means very socially engaged/feasible. They also recorded how many items participants listed in each question. See [supplementary material](#) for an example of participants' responses and how they were coded.

After an initial reading of all answers given by participants, we did not find sufficient information in responses to the second set of open questions (i.e., "What do you think most people do to make themselves happy?" and "What do you think most people do to cheer themselves up when they are in bad mood?"). These questions were included to see whether there is a difference between what people would personally do and what they believe the other people would do. Unfortunately, participants did not give much information in their answers. For instance, several participants responded to the second set of questions with vague answers such as "they would do what they like to do" or just wrote "same". Thus, only responses to "what do you generally do to make yourself happy?" and "what do you normally do to cheer yourself up when you are in a bad mood?" were coded. Invalid answers such as "I don't know" were also removed from the database. In total, data from 410 participants in the Chinese sample and 152 participants from the Western sample were coded.

High degrees of reliability were found between coders in each sample. In the Western sample, the rating for social engagement for the question "what do you generally do to make yourself happy?" shows an intraclass correlation (ICC) of 0.911 ($p < .001$), and the rating for feasibility for the same question shows an ICC of 0.83 ($p < .001$); ratings of the level of social engagement for the question "what do you normally do to cheer yourself up when you are in

bad mood?” shows an ICC of 0.89 ($p < .001$) and the rating for feasibility shows an ICC of 0.78 ($p < .001$). In the Chinese sample, ratings for social engagement for the question “what do you generally do to make yourself happy?” show an ICC of 0.816 ($p < .001$) and ratings for feasibility for the same question show an ICC of 0.73 ($p < .001$); ratings for social engagement for the question “what do you normally do to cheer yourself up when you are in a bad mood?” show an ICC of 0.87 ($p < .001$) and the ratings for feasibility show an ICC of 0.8 ($p < .001$).

Translation

Because all Chinese participants in this study were residents of mainland China, all scales were translated from their original traditional Chinese version from the previous research (Ford et al., 2015a) into a simplified Chinese version for the Chinese sample. Due to the language differences between mainland China and Taiwan, adjustments were made in the version that we used in our study. The translation was completed by a researcher who is a native Chinese speaker with a master’s degree in psychology and is familiar with both happiness and cross-cultural research. Then, in order to verify the accuracy (Brislin, 1970), the translated material was translated back to English by two research assistants fluent in both Chinese and English with bachelor’s degrees in psychology. After discussion between the researchers and slight adjustments of the wordings, a finalised version was confirmed for the current study.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations between valuing happiness and all other variables across Chinese ($N=413$) and western ($N=164$) participants; western sample values appear in parentheses

Variables	M	SD	Correlation
Valuing happiness	4.71(4.46)	0.9(1.02)	-
Socially Engaged Pursuit of happiness	4.05(4.14)	0.55(0.5)	0.233*(0.031)
Psychological Well-being	3.94(4.15)	0.64(0.6)	-0.160**(-0.036)
Satisfaction with Life	3.65(4.26)	1.21(1.5)	-0.007(-0.050)
Anticipatory Pleasure	4.2(4.13)	0.78(0.9)	0.190**(-0.032)
Consummatory Pleasure	4.43(4.41)	0.89(0.9)	0.153**(-0.121)
Hedonic Well-being	1.43(1.57)	0.61(0.8)	-0.115*(-0.040)
Depression	11.48(13.29)	9.17(10.19)	0.160**(0.170*)

Socially engaged pursuit of happiness represents score of socially engaged definition of happiness scale, Hedonic Well-being represents the ratio of positive/negative affect measured by PANAS, Anticipatory pleasure and Consummatory pleasure are scores from the subscales of TEP, Depression represents the score of BDI; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Procedure

All questionnaires and scales were presented to participants using online platforms. The survey was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were given an information sheet, informed of their rights and signed an online consent form. Then, following the procedure of the previous study (Ford et al., 2015a), they were instructed to fill in the scales that measure their level of valuing happiness, socially engaged definition of happiness and well-being (psychological well-being, hedonic well-being, depression, satisfaction with life, and ability to anticipate and experience pleasure). After that, participants were asked to answer the four open questions. They were instructed to come up with as many items as they could think of. Then, they were asked to fill in a demographic questionnaire about their age, gender, employment status, education level, marital status, family income, and the number of people in their current household. Lastly, they were debriefed.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the Chinese and Western samples are analysed by SPSS version 25 and presented in Table 1. Opposite to the pattern found in the previous study (Ford et al., 2015a), for Chinese participants, valuing happiness is negatively associated with psychological well-being, PANAS, and positively associated with depression, but not associated with satisfaction with life. In addition, valuing happiness is positively associated with anticipatory pleasure and consummatory pleasure. For the Western participants, valuing happiness is positively associated with depression, but not associated with all other well-being related factors. In addition, valuing happiness is associated with a higher socially engaged definition of happiness in Chinese but not in the Western sample. After Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons (correcting for the seven correlations), all reported significant correlations remained significant apart from the positive association between valuing happiness and PANAS.

Primary analyses

Replicating previous work (Ford et al., 2015a), we used structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyse the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being. Specifically, we used SEM analysis with Mplus version 8.4 to examine whether and how the socially engaged definition of happiness mediates the relationship between valuing happiness

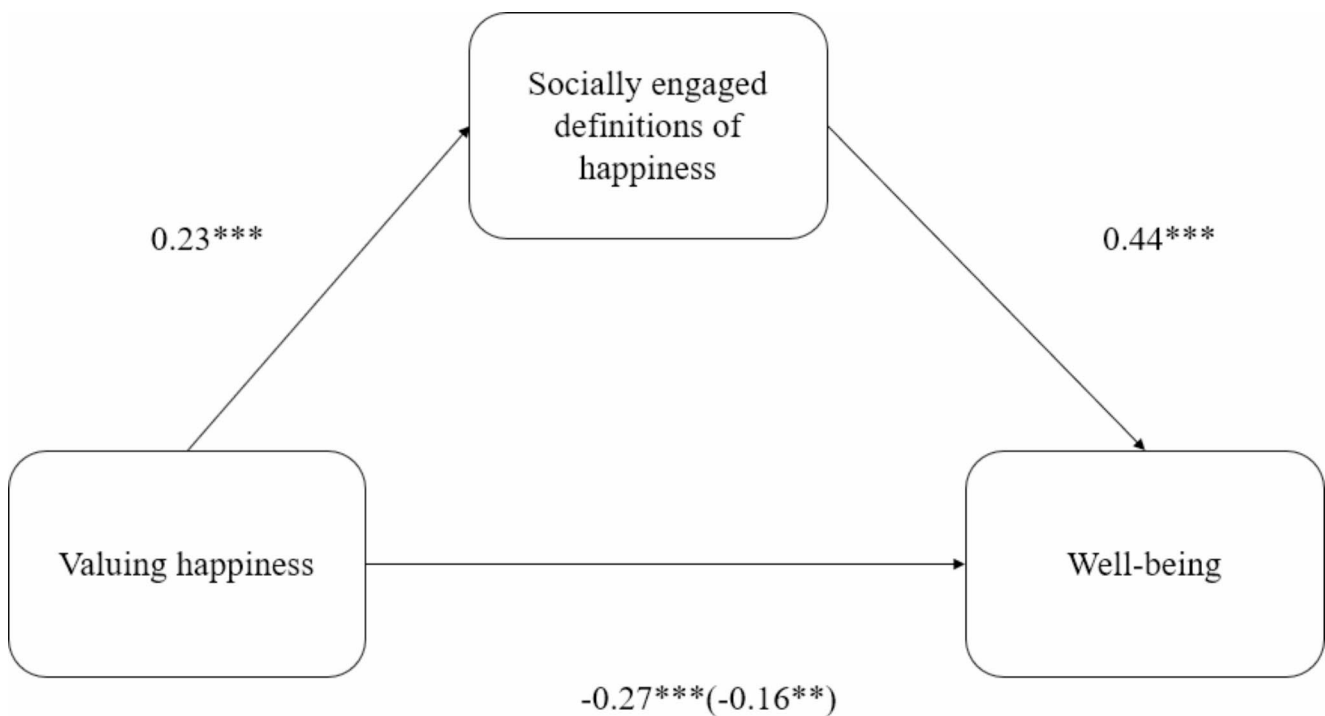


Fig. 1 Mediation model based on previous study (Ford et al., 2015a): the socially engaged definition of happiness mediates the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$. Numbers represent B coefficients, and numbers in parentheses represent B coefficients controlling for the mediator

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of open questions

	M (SD)					
Sample	Q1 Social	Q1 Feasible	Q2 Social	Q2 Feasible	Q1 Items	Q2 Items
Chinese	1.97 (0.9)	4.73 (0.48)	1.63 (0.91)	4.82 (0.47)	4.24 (2.44)	2.41 (1.64)
Western	1.98 (1.02)	3.77 (0.94)	1.57 (0.73)	4.39 (0.54)	2.54 (1.8)	3.07 (1.98)

Q1 = “What do you generally do to make yourself happy?”, Q2 = “What do you normally do to cheer yourself up when you are in bad mood?”, Social=rating for the level of social engagement, Feasible=rating for the level of feasibility, Item=number of items participants reported in each question

and well-being (see Ford et al., 2015a). We created a latent variable for well-being, which consists of the scores of PANAS, Satisfaction with Life, Psychological Well-Being, and BDI (reverse coded); the loadings ranged from 0.64 to 0.86. TEP variables (anticipatory pleasure and consummatory pleasure) were not included in the latent variable due to poor loading estimates ($Bs < 0.47$). The model demonstrated an adequate model fit, $\chi^2(8) = 33.84, p < .001$, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.03 in the Chinese sample but not the Western sample, $\chi^2(10) = 25.797, p < .05$, CFI = 0.72, RMSEA = 0.10, SRMR = 0.08.

In the Chinese sample, the socially engaged definition of happiness mediated the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being (see Fig. 1). The direct relationship between valuing happiness and well-being was initially significant ($b = -0.27, p < .001$), and remained significant with the addition of the mediator ($b = -0.16, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.26,$

$-0.06], p < .01$). Analysis of the indirect pathway indicated that social engagement ($b = 0.10, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.06, 0.15], p < .001$) partially mediated the effects of valuing happiness on well-being (see Fig. 1). In other words, if happiness is pursued via socially engaged ways, it is associated with higher well-being.

Open questions results

Descriptive statistics of open questions are presented in Table 2.

To compare the spontaneous thoughts of pursuing happiness from the Chinese sample and Western sample (See Table 3), independent sample t-tests were conducted. The results showed that Chinese participants reported more feasible activities to make themselves happy ($M = 4.73, SD = 0.48$) than Western participants ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.94$),

Table 3 Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation of valuing happiness and open questions for Chinese ($N=413$) and western ($N=164$) participants, western sample values appear in parentheses

Variables	M	SD	Correlation
Valuing happiness	4.71 (4.63)	0.91 (0.94)	-
Social rating for pursuit of happiness question	1.97 (1.98)	0.9 (1.02)	0.106* (0.051)
Feasibility rating for pursuit of happiness question	4.73 (3.77)	0.48 (0.94)	0.066 (-0.092)
Social rating for emotion regulation question	1.63 (1.57)	0.91 (0.73)	0.029 (-0.047)
Feasibility rating for emotion regulation question	4.82 (4.39)	0.47 (0.54)	-0.085+ (-0.047)
Number of items for pursuit of happiness question	4.04 (2.45)	2.44 (1.8)	0.107* (0.030)
Number of items for emotion regulation question	2.41 (3.07)	1.64 (1.98)	0.134** (0.176*)

Pursuit of happiness question = “What do you generally do to make yourself happy?”, Emotion regulation question = “What do you normally do to cheer yourself up when you are in bad mood?”, * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, + $p < .1$

$t(560) = 15.68, p < .001$. Chinese and Western samples did not significantly differ on the social rating scores regarding what would generally make them happy, $t(560) = -0.063, p > .05$. In addition, the results showed that Chinese participants reported more feasible activities to cheer themselves up ($M = 4.82, SD = 0.47$) than Western participants ($M = 4.39, SD = 0.54$), $t(560) = 9.352, p < .001$. The social rating scores between the two samples for this question were also not significant, $t(560) = 0.712, p > .05$. Chinese participants also reported significantly more things to make themselves happy ($t(560) = 7.321, p < .001$) but fewer things that cheer themselves up ($t(560) = -4.013, p < .001$) than Western participants.

Study 2

Introduction

Study 1 showed that a higher level of valuing happiness is associated with lower (not higher) well-being in a mainland Chinese sample. This is the opposite of the previous findings from an East Asian sample (Ford et al., 2015a). However, in line with Ford et al.’s (2015a) results, our findings did demonstrate that a socially engaged way of defining happiness mediates the relationship between valuing happiness and could therefore protect well-being from the negative effects of valuing happiness. Further to this, in open questions results, we found that compared to Western participants, Chinese participants reported more feasible activities to make themselves happy and cheer themselves up whilst there was no significant difference in the ratings of

how socially engaged the activities were from both samples. Additionally, Chinese participants also reported a larger number of activities to make themselves happy. In sum, our results support that Chinese participants pursue happiness in a more feasible and flexible approach in line with our framework. While the results from the open question do not reveal a difference in the level of social engagement in spontaneously recalled activities, the mediation results still support the relevance of pursuing happiness in a socially engaged way.

In study 2, we attempted to replicate these findings with samples from the same countries in May 2020, at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic started in December 2019 and was a global crisis affecting people worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020), and a significant number of studies highlighted its intense negative impact on mental health. For instance, Huang and Zhao (2020) reported that the Covid-19 pandemic caused 20.1% of participants to have major depressive symptoms and 35.1% to have generalised anxiety disorder. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic posed a major threat to happiness. We were therefore interested to see whether we would find similar results in this context.

Additionally, to reduce the local infection rate during the Covid-19 pandemic, governments ordered restrictions, including lockdown and social distancing policies, which significantly reduced social engagement (Rolandi et al., 2020). We were therefore interested to see whether the protective effect of a socially engaged way of pursuing happiness persists in these circumstances. This means, we used this unique situation to test our hypotheses on the role of flexibility and feasibility in the social pursuit of happiness (cf. Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010) because the lockdowns required people to flexibly change how they interact socially with others, and in-person interactions were limited because of the social distancing rules and lockdowns. To this end, we created two versions of the socially engaged definition of happiness scales. In the first version, all items from the original existing socially engaged definition of the happiness scale were specified to be in person, for instance, “spending time with friends and family in person”. In the second version, all items were specified to be in a virtual form, for instance, “making the people I care about feel good when I speak with them online or on the phone”. With these measures, we were able to investigate how flexible people were during the Covid-19 pandemic by comparing their responses to blocked social engagements (in-person) and unblocked social engagements (virtual). It is noteworthy that at the time, the lockdown implemented in mainland China had officially finished (Zhong & Wang, 2020), whereas Western countries such as the US, the UK and Canada were still in lockdown (Allen, 2022). With regards to flexibility, we

predict that if participants who are in lockdown endorse the unblocked version of the socially engaged definition of happiness (i.e., associate both online and in-person versions of social engagements with happiness rather than only the in-person social engagements), the previous protective effect on well-being can be replicated.

For exploratory reasons, we also added questionnaires measuring adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies to see whether flexibility in the socially engaged pursuit of happiness might only be possible if people are capable of adaptively regulating their emotions (cf. Folkman et al., 1986).

In this study, we predicted that valuing happiness will be positively associated with lower well-being in both Chinese and Western samples, and the socially engaged definition of happiness will protect well-being under the impact of valuing happiness. Additionally, we predicted that participants who endorse the unblocked version of the socially engaged definition of happiness would display the protective effect.

Method

Power analysis

Based on prior studies (e.g., Ford et al., 2015a; study 1), we conducted the power analysis in G Power (Faul, 2009), aiming to determine a sample size that can achieve a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.29$) with a power of 0.95 and an α of 0.05, we aimed to recruit at least 100 participants from each sample (200 in total) but as many as possible during May 2020.

Participants

Chinese participants ($N=392$) were recruited from “Wen Juan Xing”, and Western participants ($N=264$) recruited from Amazon Mturk. In order to ensure better data quality, participants who failed to respond to the attention check question (“please select the third option for this item”) or took an extremely short amount of time to complete (3^*SDs lower than the sample’s M) were removed. After data cleansing, Chinese participants ($N=308$, 247 females, $M=28.33$ years, Range=18–98, $SD=12.46$) and Western participants ($N=185$, 84 females, $M=40.19$ years, Range=18–73, $SD=13.16$, 152 from US, 13 from Canada, 20 from UK) were analysed. A large number of the participants were full-time university students or working full-time (Chinese: 78.25%, Western: 82.8%). All participants gave informed consent before they took part in the survey and were informed that they had the right to withdraw their data at any time.

Materials

Replicating the survey in Study 1, we used the Valuing Happiness Scale (the same revised version as we used in study 1, Full Sample: $\alpha=0.82$; China: $\alpha=0.78$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.86$), the socially engaged definition of happiness scale, unblocked version (specifies virtual social engagements; full sample: $\alpha=0.95$; China: $\alpha=0.86$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.91$), and the blocked version (specifies in-person social engagements; full sample: $\alpha=0.96$; China: $\alpha=0.90$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.91$), PANAS (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.84$; China: $\alpha=0.83$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.86$), Satisfaction with life scale (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.88$; China: $\alpha=0.88$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.91$), Ryff’s psychological well-being scale (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.92$; China: $\alpha=0.83$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.80$) and Beck’s Depression Inventory (Full Sample: $\alpha=0.96$; China: $\alpha=0.91$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.94$), and we added two additional scales in the current study.

Difficulties in emotion regulation scale

We used the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) to measure participants’ ability to regulate emotions. It consists of 36 items linking to six dimensions: the nonacceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal-directed behaviour when experiencing negative emotions, impulse control difficulties when experiencing negative emotions, lack of awareness of emotions, limited access to strategies for regulation, and lack of emotional clarity. Participants were instructed to rate how much these statements apply to them currently, from 1 (“almost never”) to 5 (“almost always”). To generate a final score for this scale, their responses were averaged. A higher score indicates more difficulties in regulating emotions (Full Sample, $\alpha=0.92$, China, $\alpha=0.90$, Western countries, $\alpha=0.94$). A higher score means participants tend to have more difficulties regulating emotions.

Cognitive emotion regulation strategies Scale

We used the short version of the cognitive emotion regulation strategies scale (CERQ-short; Garnefski et al., 2001) developed by Garnefski and Kraaij (2006), which is an 18-item self-report scale that measures nine types of emotion regulation strategies. The subscales were sorted into two categories: adaptive strategies (Positive refocusing, Planning, Positive reappraisal, Putting into perspective and Acceptance) and maladaptive strategies (Self-blame, Other-blame, Rumination, Catastrophizing). Participants gave their responses on a scale of 1 (“almost never”) to 5 (“almost always”). Responses in each category were summed to

generate a final score for adaptive and maladaptive strategies (full sample, $\alpha=0.73$, China, $\alpha=0.78$, Western countries, $\alpha=0.80$) and a higher score means participants tend to apply more adaptive/maladaptive strategies to regulate emotions. For the subscales, the internal consistencies in both samples range from 0.04 to 0.07.

Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, we also added questions asking about how people are coping with the situation at the time: “I often engage myself with the COVID-19 related news”, “I am worried because of the COVID-19 situation”, “I have completely accepted the current COVID-19 situation”, “I follow the social distancing/ isolation rules”, “My health will be severely damaged if I contract COVID-19” and “COVID-19 has added extra caring work for me (such as caring for old people or children)”. Participants selected their answers on a scale of 1 (“not at all”) to 7 (“very much so”).

Translation

All Chinese participants in Study 2 received the same simplified Chinese version of the scales measuring their motivation to pursue happiness and well-being. For the additional CERQ-short and DERS, a similar translation procedure to Study 1 was completed by the research team.

Table 4 Means, standard deviations, and correlations between valuing happiness and all other variables across Chinese ($n=308$) and western ($n=185$) participants, amounts of the western sample appear in parentheses

Variables	M	SD	Correlation
Valuing Happiness	4.8(4.4)	1(1.1)	-
Socially Engaged Pursuit of Happiness (in person)	3.9(4)	0.6(0.6)	0.249**(0.300**)
Socially Engaged Pursuit of Happiness (online)	3.6(3.9)	0.7(0.7)	0.222**(0.330**)
Difficulties to Regulate Emotion	2.7(2.4)	0.6(0.7)	0.256**(0.613**)
Psychological Well-being	4(4.2)	0.6(0.8)	-0.158**(-0.322**)
Satisfaction with Life	3.6(3.3)	1.2(1.4)	0.051(0.129)
Hedonic Well-being	1.4(2.2)	0.6(1.2)	-0.184**(-0.222**)
Maladaptive Emotion Regulation	2.9(3.2)	0.7(0.7)	0.223**(-0.323**)
Adaptive Emotion Regulation	3.6(2.4)	0.6(0.8)	0.01(0.301**)
Depression	12(11.7)	9.7(11.3)	0.177**(0.362**)

Socially engaged pursuit of happiness represents score of blocked (in person) and non-blocked (online) versions of socially engaged definition of happiness scales, Hedonic Well-being represents the ratio of positive/negative affect measured by PANAS, Maladaptive emotion regulation and adaptive emotion regulation represent the scores of sub-scales of CERQ-short; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Procedure

The survey was conducted in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. After giving informed consent, participants completed questionnaires anonymously via an online platform to measure their level of valuing happiness, the socially engaged definition of happiness, well-being, difficulties in regulating emotions and emotion regulation strategies. Lastly, their responses to Covid-19-related questions were recorded before they were debriefed.

Results

Preliminary analyses

See Table 4 for descriptive statistics and correlations between valuing happiness and all other questionnaire variables for the Chinese and Western samples and see supplementary material for descriptive statistics for Covid-19-related questions. For both Chinese and Western participants, valuing happiness is positively associated with socially engaged happiness (in both blocked and unblocked versions), and with difficulties to regulate emotions and depression. Valuing happiness is also negatively associated with psychological well-being, PANAS, but did not correlate with satisfaction with life or adaptive emotion regulation. These results are in line with the results of study 1, which states that valuing happiness is linked to lower well-being outcomes. In addition, for the emotion regulation strategies, valuing happiness is positively associated with maladaptive emotion regulation for Chinese participants and negatively associated with maladaptive emotion regulation for Western participants. Valuing happiness is positively associated with adaptive emotion regulation for Western participants. However, the correlation between valuing happiness and adaptive emotion regulation is not significant for Chinese participants. All reported significant results survived the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons (correcting for the nine correlations).

We also conducted independent t-tests to compare the responses for blocked and unblocked versions of the socially engaged definition of happiness scales (See Table 4). In the Chinese sample, people got a significantly higher score of the socially engaged definition of happiness in the blocked version than in the unblocked version, $t(614)=6.21$, $p < .001$, meaning that they associate the blocked (i.e., in-person) activities with happiness more comparing to non-blocked (i.e., virtual) activities. In the Western sample, the scores people got from both scales are not significantly different, $t(368)=1.43$, $p > .05$. To remind the reader, Chinese participants were out of lockdowns at this point.

Analyses could not be performed for the CERQ-short due to poor internal consistency for subscales in both Chinese and Western samples. Thus, we decided not to include it in further analyses.

Primary analyses

We used Mplus 8.4 to conduct mediation analyses on the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being. Similar to study 1, we created a latent variable for well-being, which consists of PANAS, Psychological well-being, satisfaction with life and BDI (See Fig. 2). To generate a final score for the socially engaged definition of happiness scale, the scores for two versions were averaged, which was justified by their high overlap (China: $\alpha=0.78$; Western countries: $\alpha=0.89$). We did not analyse the emotion regulation scales as extensively as planned due to problems with the CERQ-short (see above) and because model fit was not sufficient when including the DERS in the model of the Western sample. However, including the reverse coded score for DERS in the latent variable for Chinese participants did not change the results; please see the supplementary material for these analyses and more information.

The model for the Chinese sample indicated a decent model fit, $\chi^2(8)=20.943, p<.05, CFI=0.97, RMSEA=0.07, SRMR=0.04$. We built the same model for the Western

sample, the model fit was also good, $\chi^2(8)=17.21, p<.05, CFI=0.97, RMSEA=0.08, SRMR=0.04$.

In the Chinese sample, the socially engaged definition of happiness mediated the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being. The direct relationship between valuing happiness and well-being was initially significant ($b=-0.27, p<.005$), and remained significant with the addition of the mediator ($b=-0.20, 95\% CI [-0.29, -0.10], p<.001$). Analysis of the indirect pathway indicated that social engagement ($b=0.07, 95\% CI [0.04, 0.11], p<.005$), partially mediated the effects of valuing happiness on wellbeing.

In the Western sample, the socially engaged definition of happiness mediates the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being. The direct relationship between valuing happiness and well-being was initially significant ($b=-0.56, p<.001$), and remained significant with the addition of the mediator ($b=-0.43, 95\% CI [-0.51, -0.32], p<.001$). Analysis of the indirect pathway indicated that social engagement ($b=0.13, 95\% CI [0.08, 0.21], p<.005$), partially mediated the effects of valuing happiness on wellbeing. The results are consistent with what was found in Study 1, which states that the socially engaged way of pursuing happiness still protects well-being during the pandemic.

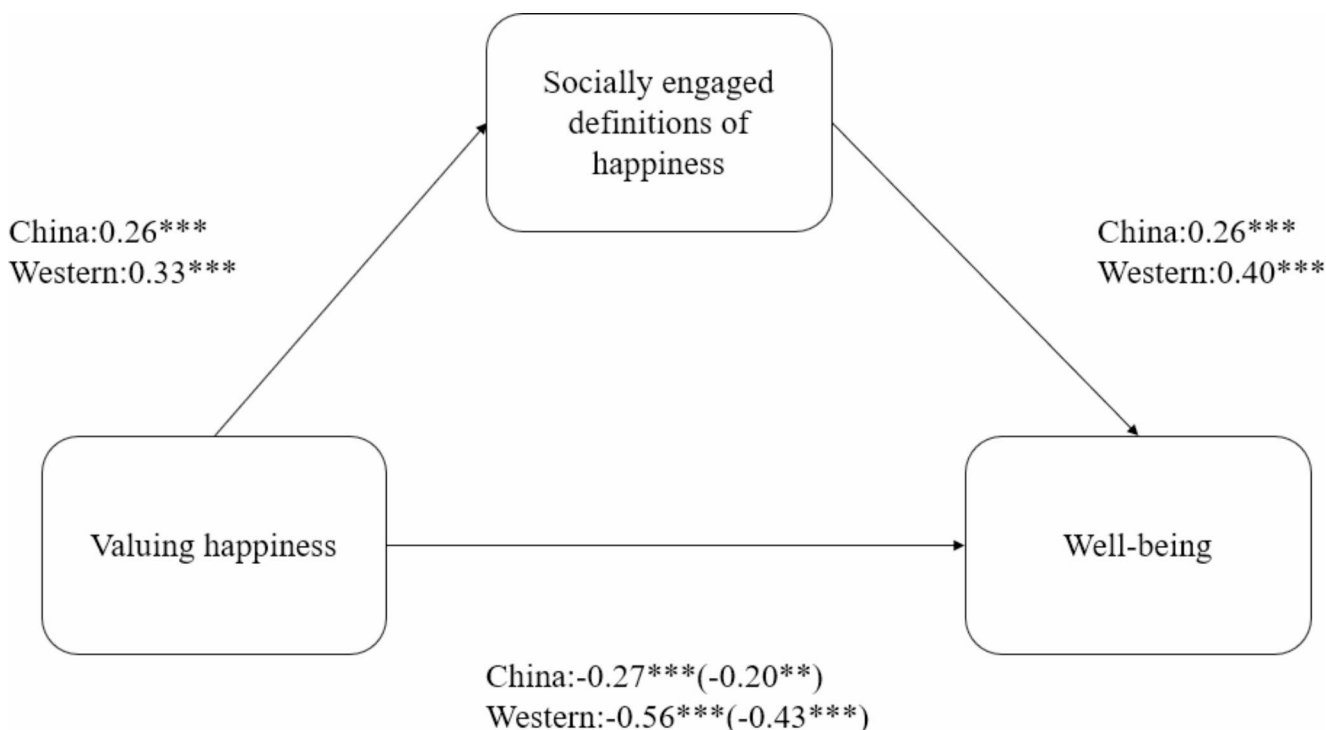


Fig. 2 Mediation model based on previous study (Ford et al., 2015a): socially engaged definition of happiness mediates the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being; * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$, ***

$p<.001$. Numbers represent B coefficients, numbers in parentheses represent B coefficients controlling for the mediator

General discussion

This study tested how valuing happiness predicts well-being in different cultural backgrounds with samples from both East Asian and European-American countries. We aimed to replicate the findings from previous work (Ford et al., 2015a). Specifically, we expected that valuing happiness would be associated with higher well-being in mainland China and lower well-being in Western countries. Our results indicated that valuing happiness indeed predicted lower-well-being in Western countries in line with Ford and colleagues' findings (Ford et al. 2015a). However, our results also suggested that valuing happiness is linked with lower well-being in mainland China in contrast to the positive association in East Asian samples reported by Ford et al. (2015a). We nevertheless replicated the protective effect of a socially engaged way of defining happiness on well-being (Ford et al., 2015a) in both studies and also in the Western sample, highlighting the importance of engaging in social activities to pursue and attain happiness both in Chinese and Western samples. In the responses to the open question responses, our predictions were partially supported. In general, Chinese participants reported more feasible and a larger number of items to pursue happiness than Western participants in line with our predictions. However, the rating of social engagement of the reported items did not differ between Chinese and Western samples. In study 2, we used two versions of the socially engaged definition of happiness scales to examine whether people can pursue happiness flexibly when the traditional ways of social engagements (i.e., face-to-face social interactions) were limited. These versions were highly correlated suggesting that people who endorse socially engaged activities were able to flexibly switch to unblocked activities (i.e., online social interactions) during the Covid-19 pandemic to pursue happiness. These results demonstrate the important role of flexibility in the pursuit of happiness. Altogether, our findings illustrate the protective role of a flexible socially engaged way to pursue happiness in the link between valuing happiness and well-being, also or especially in challenging times.

Why did we find that valuing happiness showed a negative association with well-being in mainland China? Although considered a highly collectivistic culture (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2002), in the past years, the level of individualism has indeed increased in China (e.g., Steele & Lynch, 2013). If Chinese people are becoming more individualistic, they might be less happy as their way of pursuing happiness might conflict with their collectivistic cultural background. For instance, a recent study in Pakistan revealed that individualism has a negative impact on well-being in a collectivistic culture (Farah & Siddiqui, 2019). Also, there are even within-culture differences regarding how valuing happiness

predicts well-being. For instance, Wu (2013) induced valuing happiness in Chinese undergraduate participants and found a negative association between valuing happiness and actual happiness among Chinese undergraduate students in line with Mauss and colleagues (Mauss et al., 2011). Further, Wong et al. (2020) suggested that the impact of valuing happiness on well-being may differ among age groups in China, with older (but not younger) age groups showing a positive association between valuing happiness and subjective well-being. The positive association between valuing happiness and well-being might thus not be unconditional in East Asia, and future studies should consider more factors beyond the individualism/collectivism dimension to explain the association.

Importantly, our study also confirmed the protective role of a socially engaged way of defining happiness on the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being (cf. Ford et al., 2015a). Specifically, valuing happiness is associated with a socially engaged way of pursuing happiness in both the Chinese samples and also in the Western sample in study 2. In Ford et al.'s (2015a) study, this positive association was not found in their Western (US and Germany) samples. Importantly, we collected data for study 2 during the Covid-19 pandemic which might have influenced Western people's views on happiness. For instance, because in-person activities were limited at the time, Western people who highly value happiness might have become more aware of the importance of socially engaged activities (e.g., spending time with friends) in order to attain happiness.

Overall, we found that the socially engaged definition of happiness mediates the association between valuing happiness and well-being. People who associate happiness with socially engaged activities appear to be protected from lower well-being caused by a high level of valuing happiness, even in emotionally challenging times such as during the pandemic and lockdowns. This highlights the importance and versatility of this approach to happiness for people from both Asian and Western cultures. For instance, these results suggest that interventions could promote simple forms of social interaction, such as a text or call via the internet or phone (cf. Naidu et al., 2022), or even as simple as featuring more information about positive social interactions (i.e., kindness) on social media (Buchanan et al., 2021), which is both feasible and socially engaged.

We also added open questions asking participants to spontaneously recall what generally makes them happy and what could improve their emotional status, and the results were rated regarding their level of social engagement and feasibility. First, we noticed there is a difference between participants' social tendency in their responses to open questions (relatively low) and their score on the socially engaged definition scale (relatively high). This highlighted

the difference between answering (potentially leading) questions and generating their own ideas or recognising opportunities to pursue happiness. In other words, people may not be aware of adaptive ways to pursue happiness. On the dimension of social engagement, the Chinese and Western samples did not show significant differences in the activities that they reported in both questions. There are two possible explanations for this finding. Firstly, the question was worded as asking about their personal experiences. It is therefore likely that people would tend to associate it with solo activities. Because of this, people from both samples might have reported relatively low socially engaged activities. Secondly, people may not be aware of the importance of social engagement, but they would still take part in socially engaged activities (e.g., attending gatherings) due to social influence from friends and family, or cultural influence from a collectivistic environment.

On the dimension of feasibility, Chinese participants reported more feasible activities that generally make them happy and cheer them up when in a bad mood. This supports our hypothesis that the successful pursuit of happiness might require a feasible approach (cf. Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). It could also map onto findings (Lee et al., 2013) showing that people in North American countries relate happiness with high arousal positive affect (e.g., enthusiasm) and people in East Asian countries relate happiness with low arousal positive affect (e.g., peacefulness). Achieving high arousal positive emotions is arguably less feasible (e.g., having a major success at work) whereas achieving low emotional arousal is mostly highly feasible (e.g., having a chat with a friend via text or in person). Further supporting this reasoning, Chinese participants would report more items indicating what generally makes them happy. This implies that the Chinese are relatively more flexible when finding ways to feel happy. However, Chinese participants had fewer ideas of what could cheer them up; thus, they might be less flexible when needing to improve their emotional status. It is, however, important to note that while it is adaptive to know several means to pursue happiness (e.g., Krasko et al., 2020), this is less clear when it comes to emotion regulation. Importantly, future studies on the pursuit of happiness should investigate this difference in pursuing happiness versus upregulating ‘unhappiness’ in these two cultural contexts. Additionally, considering the low average number of items reported in both samples and for both questions, people generally might have limited ideas of how to pursue happiness.

There are limitations to our work which need to be considered in future studies. Firstly, most of our findings were based on questionnaire data. We therefore hope that these

associations will be tested in future studies in experimental or longitudinal designs. Related to this issue, longitudinal designs will also allow researchers to investigate whether participants’ responses, for instance, to the open questions, relate to their actual behaviour and success in the pursuit of happiness (i.e., their level of happiness and well-being). It is also important to consider that in cross-cultural contexts, participants might understand questions differentially and psychological concepts might be represented differently depending on culture (e.g., Karl, 2023; Lacko et al., 2022). It would also be interesting to conduct research assessing what people would do to pursue happiness in general and when in a negative mood separately.

Overall, our data suggest that the positive association between valuing happiness and well-being is not unconditional in East Asia, at least in mainland China. However, our research also confirmed the positive effect of social engagement on the relationship between valuing happiness and well-being in both Western and (mainland) Chinese cultures and replicated this effect in times of social isolation (i.e., during the Covid-19 pandemic). This suggests that pursuing happiness in a social and flexible, feasible way is associated with positive effects of valuing happiness on well-being in Western and (mainland) Chinese participants.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-07007-z>.

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Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available on OSF via osf.io/d56q8.

Declarations

Ethical approval The studies in this paper were approved by the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences Research Ethics Committee for research involving human participants at the University of Reading, UK.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the studies.

Conflicts of interest The authors have no potential conflict of interest to declare. The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work and have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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