

Beyond Money: What Truly Buys Happiness Across the Globe

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Abstract

This report investigates the key drivers of happiness across global regions, using the Gallup World Poll data. Rather than focusing solely on income, we explore whether other dimensions—particularly Healthy Life Expectancy—are stronger predictors of well-being. Happiness is measured via the Ladder Score, which captures life satisfaction. Visual and descriptive analysis reveals significant variation in life expectancy and social support across regions. The report provides new insights into what truly contributes to happiness beyond material wealth.

1. Introduction

The question of what truly drives human happiness has long fascinated social scientists. While many studies have emphasized the role of income in shaping life satisfaction, emerging perspectives challenge the idea that money alone can guarantee well-being. This report draws on data from the Gallup World Poll, which measures happiness scores across countries and ranks them based on individuals' self-reported life evaluations, also known as Ladder Scores. These scores are influenced by six key factors: economic production, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom, absence of corruption, and generosity. Though these components do not directly determine the total happiness score, they help explain differences in happiness across countries by comparing each nation to Dystopia—a hypothetical benchmark representing the lowest global averages across all factors.

In this analysis, we shift the focus from income to healthy life expectancy, asking: Could good health, rather than economic wealth, be the foundation of happiness? While it is often assumed that higher incomes lead to higher life satisfaction, past research, has shown that beyond a certain point, increases in income do not translate into lasting improvements in happiness. This report therefore investigates whether health-related well-being is a more consistent and meaningful driver of happiness across regions than financial wealth.

2. Data Description

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## [2] "C:/Users/sukol/Documents/Masters first semester/Data Science Exam/Data-Science-Exam/mock
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## [10] "C:/Users/sukol/Documents/Masters first semester/Data Science Exam/Data-Science-Exam/mock
```

Table 2.1: Data summary

Name	combined_happy_data
Number of rows	149
Number of columns	20
Column type frequency:	
character	2
numeric	18
Group variables	None

Variable type: character

skim_variable	n_missing	complete_rate	min	max	empty	n_unique	whitespace
Country name	0	1	4	25	0	149	0
Regional indicator	0	1	9	34	0	10	0

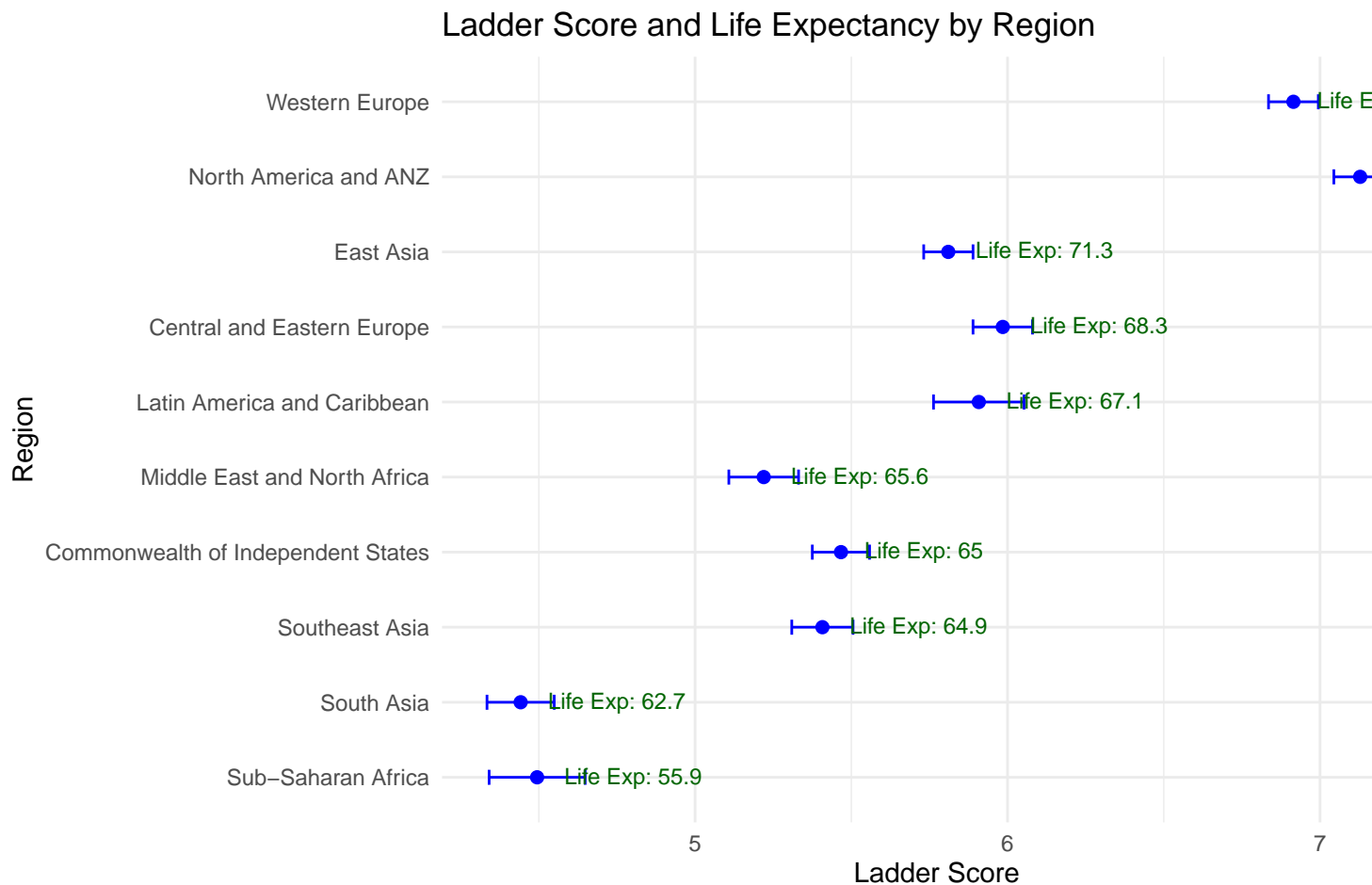
Variable type: numeric

skim_variable	n_missing	complete_rate	mean	sd	p0	p25	p50	p75	p100	hist
Ladder score	0	1	5.53	1.07	2.52	4.85	5.53	6.26	7.84	

skim_variable	n_missing	complete_rate	mean	sd	p0	p25	p50	p75	p100	hist
Standard error of ladder score	0	1	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.17	
upperwhisker	0	1	5.65	1.05	2.60	4.99	5.62	6.34	7.90	
lowerwhisker	0	1	5.42	1.09	2.45	4.71	5.41	6.13	7.78	
Logged GDP per capita	0	1	9.43	1.16	6.64	8.54	9.57	10.42	11.65	
Social support	0	1	0.81	0.11	0.46	0.75	0.83	0.90	0.98	
Healthy life expectancy	0	1	64.99	6.76	48.48	59.80	66.60	69.60	76.95	
Freedom to make life choices	0	1	0.79	0.11	0.38	0.72	0.80	0.88	0.97	
Generosity	0	1	-	0.15	-	-	-	0.08	0.54	
			0.02		0.29	0.13	0.04			
Perceptions of corruption	0	1	0.73	0.18	0.08	0.67	0.78	0.84	0.94	
Ladder score in Dystopia	0	1	2.43	0.00	2.43	2.43	2.43	2.43	2.43	
Explained by: Log GDP per capita	0	1	0.98	0.40	0.00	0.67	1.02	1.32	1.75	
Explained by: Social support	0	1	0.79	0.26	0.00	0.65	0.83	1.00	1.17	
Explained by: Healthy life expectancy	0	1	0.52	0.21	0.00	0.36	0.57	0.66	0.90	
Explained by: Freedom to make life choices	0	1	0.50	0.14	0.00	0.41	0.51	0.60	0.72	
Explained by: Generosity	0	1	0.18	0.10	0.00	0.10	0.16	0.24	0.54	
Explained by: Perceptions of corruption	0	1	0.14	0.11	0.00	0.06	0.10	0.17	0.55	
Dystopia + residual	0	1	2.43	0.54	0.65	2.14	2.51	2.79	3.48	

To better understand the characteristics of the happiness data, we present a descriptive statistics table summarizing the key variables. The average ladder score, a proxy for life satisfaction, is approximately 5.53, with a standard deviation of 1.07, indicating moderate variation across regions. The average healthy life expectancy stands at nearly 65 years, suggesting relatively good health outcomes globally, though some variation is evident. Variables such as social support, freedom to make life choices, and perceptions of corruption exhibit diverse levels across observations. Overall, the data is complete with no missing values for the main variables analyzed, making it suitable for robust further modeling.

1a)



The graph displays average Ladder Scores (a proxy for life satisfaction) across world regions, with horizontal error bars showing upper and lower confidence intervals. Regions like Western Europe, North America & ANZ, and East Asia report the highest Ladder Scores, suggesting greater average happiness levels. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia rank lowest. Above each region, the corresponding Healthy Life Expectancy is labeled — regions with higher life expectancy tend to also report higher happiness scores. This visual supports the notion that health outcomes are closely associated with subjective well-being. The ordering of regions by life expectancy helps highlight this pattern clearly.

1b)



The plot shows the composition of the Ladder Score across global regions, broken down into components like social support, generosity, and residuals. Western Europe and North America lead with the highest scores, driven by strong contributions from GDP and social support. South Africa’s bar (added manually) appears prominently, with a high contribution from “Dystopia + residual,” indicating significant unexplained happiness. In contrast, regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia show lower scores, largely due to smaller contributions from economic and institutional factors. The comparison reveals wide disparities in the structural sources of well-being across the globe.

3. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that Healthy Life Expectancy strongly correlates with higher life satisfaction scores across regions. Regions like Western Europe and North America show both high ladder scores and long life expectancies, while Sub-Saharan Africa lags in both. South Africa stands out with a relatively high Ladder Score compared to its region, largely driven by residuals and social support. The stacked barplot breakdown emphasizes that non-economic factors such as freedom and social trust play a vital role. This suggests that money alone does not guarantee happiness. Investments in health and well-being infrastructure may yield better outcomes for life satisfaction. Overall, happiness is multifaceted and context-dependent.