



Exploring the Impact of Consumerism on Happiness among Gen Z: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract

In a world of growing technological accessibility, limitless options and unprecedented digital convenience, staggering paradigm shifts in consumerism can be observed in comparison to prior generations. Consumerism, the core objective, driving online markets, businesses and conglomerates target an emerging cohort, i.e: Generation Z and the aforementioned demographic as revealed by the study is currently experiencing the impact of consumerism, specifically on their short-term and long-term happiness. The study follows a quantitative approach by employing an online survey to examine the relationship between consumerism and happiness among Gen Z and underlying nuances. The study presents a critical analysis of 27 Gen Z respondents, between the 18 – 25 years of age, show-casing that buying consumer goods brings short-term gratification to Gen Z. However, it also posits an underlying consumer guilt among Gen Z for spending, underscoring a level of awareness to consumption habits. The study also further explores the willingness of the Gen Z demographic to recalibrate their spending routines and how despite such radial awareness; there exists a discrepancy in Gen Z belief and behavior when it comes to consumerism and capitalistic trends.

Keywords: Consumerism, Capitalism, Gen Z, Marketing, Business, Digital Media, Happiness, Mental Health, Well-being, Spending Habits, Quantitative Study

Introduction

The pursuit of happiness has long been a topic of discussion for philosophers, as other scientist's disciplines rarely concerned themselves with it. However, the state of emotional well-being or happiness is now a huge concern and more than, just a sentiment. Happiness is deeply rooted in human aspiration and is said to dictate many of our everyday decisions. Happiness is defined as, 'the degree to which a person positively evaluates the quality of his or her own life as a whole. (Veethoven, 2014). In other words, how much he or she likes the life, he or she leads.' Another profound definition of happiness is the 'right emotion' in these words: 'to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is the mark of the virtue'. (Aristotle, 2009, Book II). Additionally, 'an individual's happiness over a period of time as the sum of momentary utilities over that period of time; that is, the time

integral of momentary utility' (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). In all of these cases above, it can be said that 'happiness' is often used as an umbrella term and can subjectively be viewed from various social, psychological, biological concepts. Happiness and consumerism might seem like unrelated concepts, however, research shows that in the current digital landscape, both are quite interlinked. By definition, consumerism is a socioeconomic phenomenon that is closely related to the development of capitalist societies, consisting in overconsumption to meet the needs raised by psychological, social, and political demands, and encouraged by the belief that consuming is good for economic growth and personal well-being. (Lage, Lins, & de Aquino, 2022). It is essential to understand the contrast between historic and modern day consumption patterns to analyze the generational shift. Humans, as a civilization, have surpassed the act for consumption on a necessity basis and now, consume for novelty reasons. This concept underscores the significance of an item's monetary worth over its utility, which effectively masks the societal labour invested in its creation. (Baudrillard, 2017). Take for instance, a pursue that is priced well over \$40,000, which is unjustifiably high is fiscal value, however, it is still highly desirable and valued, this shows the rampant stage of consumerism amongst our society. It is said that this shows that material objects are consumed not solely for their functionality; but as a symbol of status. (Gdula and Beilharz, 2017). Some studies suggest on happiness and consumption suggest that people who take on hefty mortgages to buy a large scale often believe that they will be happier in a larger house as compared to a small one. Therefore, it is important to understand whether spending an exorbitant amount actually contributes to one's happiness, especially that of the younger generation or is it the placebo effect? Through this research, we will consider which factors spike consumption pattern and levels of happiness and which do not.

Putting this research paper into context, happiness is now becoming a concern that is widely linked to the digital revolution of today's world, affecting majorly on the newer generations, specifically Gen Z and their relationship with consuming media and its products. A contemporary scholar, explained the word 'generation' as 'a group of contemporaries who share a history and a set of experiences that have shaped their formative years rather than just a cohort clustered by a bounded year of birth.' (Manheim, 1952). Generation Z or Gen Z is the generation born between the years 1997 and 2012. The chosen target audience for this research Gen Z places great emphasis on consumerism in various forms as it is a generation marked my technological advancements in areas of smartphones, online shopping accessibility and emergence of AI. According to The Happy Planet Index (HPI), which calculates resource consumption and how it converts onto happiness for individuals from country-to-country, showcases that Costa Rica has the highest HPI. This is alarming as it underscores that the countries with the highest GDP, incomes or consumptions pattern do not correlate to a holistically happier population. In contrast to this, researches and communication theories such as the Uses and Gratification Theory highlight how members of a society consume segments of media, in order to gain short-term gratification, loosely put as happiness in this context, to gain social identification and curb social alienation from groups. An economic point-of-view shows that Gen Z holds \$360 billion dollars in disposable income, which is expected to grow exponentially in the coming years. (Bloomberg News Report, 2021). Moreover, to measure the trends in happiness correlating to various factors, internationally recognized forums such as the World Database of Happiness break-down the results region-by-region, including the geographical demographic of Pakistan.

This exploratory study examines the formative experiences of Gen Z contributing to consumerism to understand how this generation approaches capitalistic consumption to fulfill their needs and

thus, it's impact on their emotional well-being. It can be observed that the consumption patterns, e.g.: shopping behaviors, of Gen Z are quite different than those of preceding generations. This can be attributed to the widespread penetration of internet, accessibility to smartphones, emergence of E-commerce and online businesses. Where previous generations, could afford necessities and luxuries easily due to lower inflation rates and stability in global economy; the experience of Gen Z is highly crucial as the global recession and economic instability has coerced the generation to look for creative and unconventional ways of consumption in order to afford the necessities, luxuries and leisure of life.

This study aims to study the consumer-happiness paradox among the Gen Z demographic, through a quantitative approach to analyze factors taken into consideration by aforementioned sample of population, and the short-term and long-term impacts on youth. It also posits that consumerism itself is no evil, however, ethical consumption must be considered. Another interesting factor which distinguishes this study is the discrepancy in behavior and belief of Gen Z when it comes to consumption. This is supported by studies that show consumers' attitudes towards ethical products are not consistent with their buying behaviors. (Bray et al. 2011; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). Due to the early advent of internet in young lifestyles, Gen Z is said to be one of the most aware generations to exist, however, this self-awareness does not correlate to behavioral restraint in indulging in capitalistic desires. Furthermore, as more and more responsibility is placed upon Gen Z, the future of the economic landscape now rests in their hands, serving as another key point that elucidates the importance of this study. While plenty research studies exist studying the consumer behavior, spending patterns and their correlation to a cohort's happiness, in regards to Boomers and Millennials. This study is especially quintessential as it highlights Gen Z as the emerging consumer segment of society in the coming years and how it's consumption of media products and services, in various forms shapes its own perception of the world, thus, also affecting the global economy on a larger scale. This study also aims to deduce conclusive findings that aid policy makers, entrepreneurs and marketers in formulating data-driven strategies for the future. Therefore, the objective of this study is to quantitatively analyze the relationship between consumerism and happiness among Gen Z, its potential for growth and far-reaching impacts.

Literature Review

Historically, many key concepts have been tied to the studies surrounding consumerism, including terminologies like, impulse buying, ethical consumption and maximalism; all of which still ring true in modern consumption patterns and are directly linked to an individual's happiness. Connecting these concepts, prior studies have shown that consumers who are prone to impulse buying are less happy. (Podoshen et al., 2014). While, it is said to eliminate negative psychological states and increase short-term happiness. (Silvera et al. 2008; Verplanken et al. 2005). The long-term implications of increasing, unregulated consumption patterns among populations have been noted to be unsustainable. Furthermore, studies also posit the reasoning behind such monetary spending. The consumer tendency is assumed to be induced by the belief that such buying is usually accompanied by a positive emotional change (Amos et al., 2014) and may alleviate distress (Sneath et al. 2009). Therefore, the logical reasoning behind such an indulgence is primarily to incite an internal positive response, i.e: happiness. According to renowned philosopher, Adam Smith a Scottish Professor of Moral Philosophy, Consumerism is defined as, 'the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that

it would be absurd to attempt to prove it. But in the mercantile system, the interest of the consumer is almost constantly sacrificed to that of the producer; and it seems to consider production, and not consumption, as the ultimate end and object of all industry and commerce.’ (Smith, 1776). The question of why modern consumer consume, primarily points to necessity, as also, indicated by this study. However, in-depth studies suggest that due to the penetration of technology, the consumerism trends are shifting, right from childhood and strongly impact a consumer’s satisfaction. In correlation with the above definition, consumption desires are created by producers and relinquishing each desire of the consumer, generate revenue for the producers, which in turn, invested to drive a perpetual cycle of supply and demand. (Busch, 2008).

This further points to the tactics identified in prior literature which accelerate consumer patterns, from a young age, thus, making this study on Gen Z, highly relevant. The primary driver of consumption patterns today is advertising, whether digital or electronic. One report points out that many children’s commercials are designed to undermine the child-parent relationship in that they encourage children to convince their parents to purchase products for them. (American Psychological Association, 2004). Linking consumerism to the demographic of this study, it is said that consumerism is found the highest among teenagers because since, most of their needs are primary needs are met by their guardians or parents, their consumption is more easily influenced than an average consumers.’ (Spring, 2003). Another interesting aspect, is how ‘consumerism’ and ‘happiness’ often spike one another’s levels in attainment of one goal, i.e: social status. In olden ways, where aristocracy was recognized through noble titles, in today’s world, governments have fewer resources to award individual members of society, therefore, people invent such accolades through material possessions. This suggests that ‘society sets great store by ability to produce a high living standard, it evaluates people by the products they possess.’ (Galbraith, 1984).

This means, that although, the primary reason for consumption, should be necessity; however, it is evolving as the measure for economic prosperity and affluence of an individual is judged upon by their peers through these pre-determined ‘status symbols’. Short-term gratification through consumption does not only come through necessity-based purchases or status symbol procurement, but also through the construction of consumer’s self-identity. Some brands, such as Harley Davidson and Starbucks allow the consumer to live out a fantasy identity through the brand. (Thompson, 2000). For Harley Davidson, the identity sold is that of a macho motorcycle jockey, often idealized by youth. Similarly, for Starbucks, the idea of a laid-back, self-indulgence, coffee-house intellectualism is perpetuated among the youth, appealing even to those who don’t consumer coffee. Like Starbucks, such indulgence, although high revered and associated with ‘moments of joy’ contributes to unjustifiable levels of monetary expenditure and only offers, short-term happiness.

Furthermore, consumption isn’t just purchasing goods and services, it is a lifestyle choice. Leisure activities, prior to 20th century were dedicated to weekends, family outings and community engagement. However, starting from early 20th century, these socially-engaging activities have been replaced with leisure activities based on consumption, such as viewing a film, (Spring, 2003), virtual reality, gaming zones etc. It must be noted that many of these consumption-supported leisure activities often target younger demographic to profit off of. Where one generation indulges in a momentary adrenaline rush, another monetarily profits. It is said that ‘The whole object of research is to keep everyone reasonably dissatisfied with what he has in order to keep the factory

busy making new things.’ (Kettring, 1929). In the above quotation, the Director of Motors Research Laboratories poses the problem with consumerism which is that, it makes the pursuit of long-term happiness more difficult. While each product provides momentary satisfaction, it kick-starts the goal of consumerism which is to keep the consumer wanting to purchase more goods. This research paper is an attempt to establish the agents of increasing consumption patterns as mentioned above and also, if the ultimate goal of seeking satisfaction, in the form of happiness, is a metric that is being met, for Generation Z.

Objectives

O1: To find out whether consumerism exhibited by Gen Z induce short-term happiness among them.

O2: To determine the impact of Gen Z consumerism on long-term happiness.

Research Questions

RQ1: Does consumerism exhibited by Gen Z induce short-term happiness among them?

RQ2: What impact does Gen Z’s consumerism patterns or shopping habits have on their long-term happiness?

Methodology

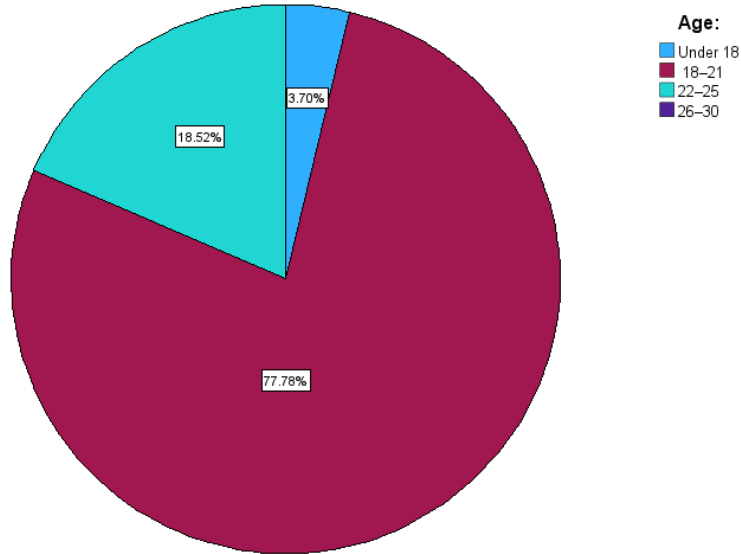
This study used a quantitative methodology to investigate the connection between Gen Z happiness and consumerism. About 1,648 students enrolled in Fatima Jinnah Women University's Communication and Media Studies program made up the target population. Of the 27 students who took part in the study, a random sample was chosen from the fourth semester.

A structured, closed-ended questionnaire that was made and disseminated using Google Forms made it easy for respondents to respond and provided convenient digital access. Important topics covered in the survey included frequency of shopping, emotional reactions to purchases, impulsive buying, and perceived satisfaction with consumer behavior. After the data was gathered, it was examined and examined to find new trends and patterns that provided information about how this particular Gen Z group connects material consumption with emotional well-being.

Data Analysis

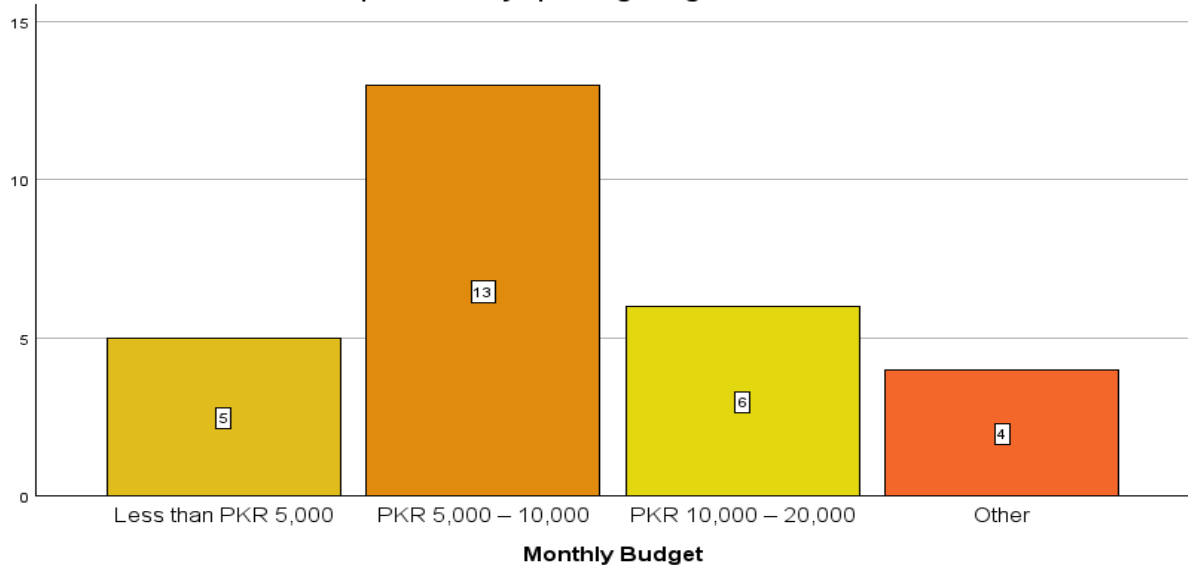
The data collected through the online survey on Google Forms was organized into pie charts and bar charts, offering clarity in data visualization. The data from the survey questions upon analysis, reveal the demographic, consumption patterns, impulse buying, prominent reasons for commercial consumption among Gen Z, and the impact of such practice on their short-term and long-term happiness. The following graphs reveal insightful quantitative findings on the habits and well-being of one of the youngest demographics, globally. The analysis reveals a staggering awareness that while Gen Z believes in spending, whether for necessities or luxuries through commercial outlets to gain temporary pleasure; they often feel long-term dissatisfaction from such decisions.

Pie Chart 1.0: Age of Respondents

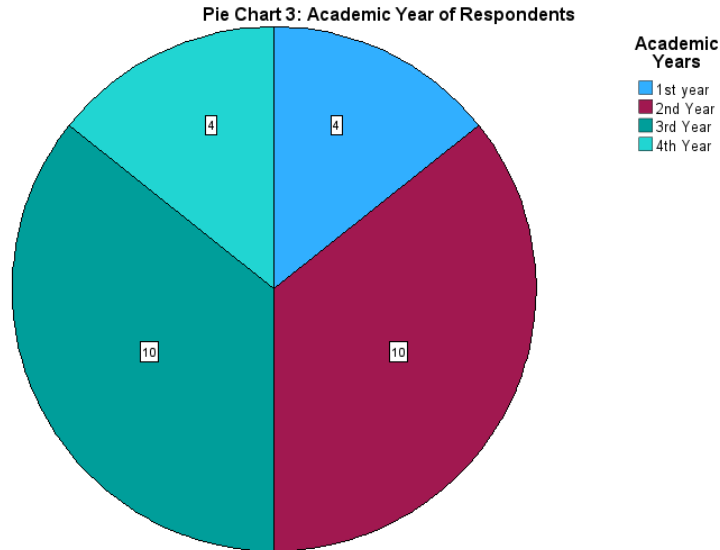


The above pie chart demonstrates that 77% of the respondents are between the ages of 18-21, whereas, 18% are within the age bracket 22-25. Furthermore, 3.70% are under 18 years of age; all of which are within the considered Gen Z age demographic.

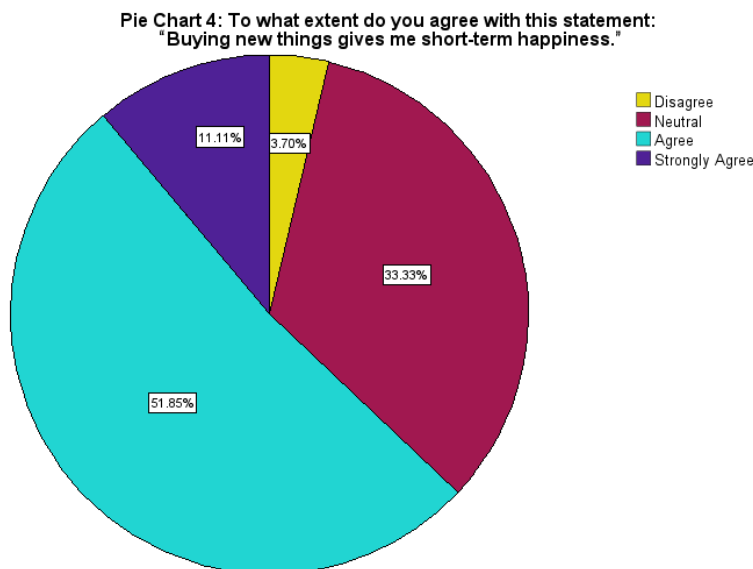
Graph 2: Monthly Spending Budget Of Gen Z



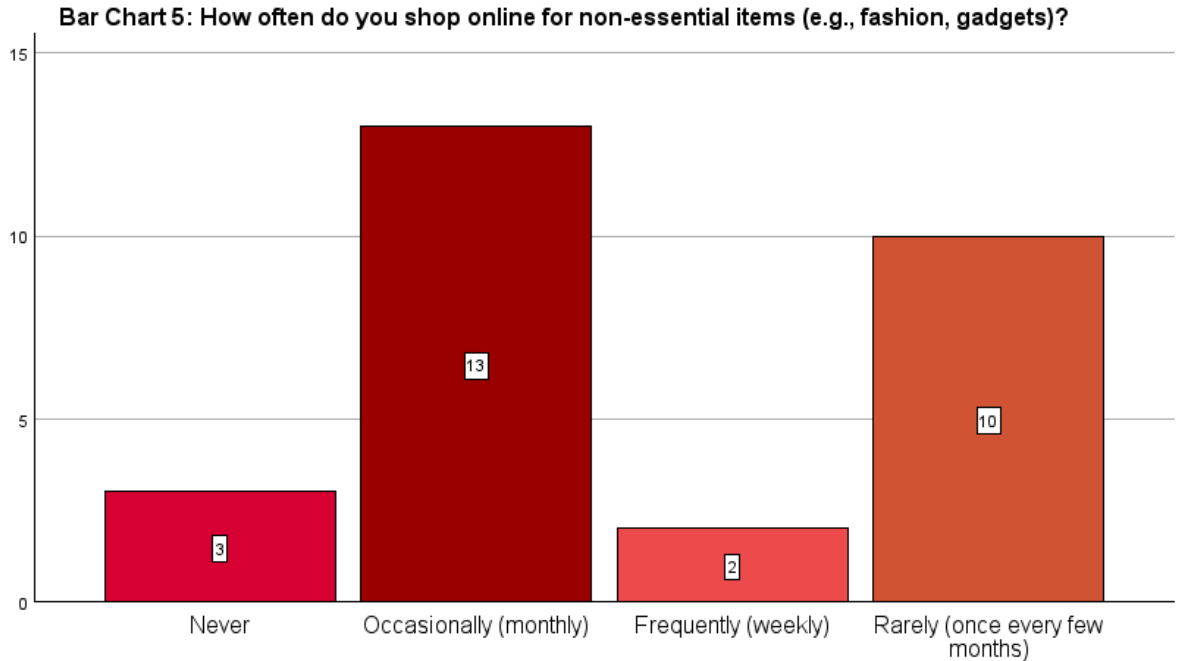
The above bar chart showcases that the monthly budget of the Gen Z sample taken consists of 5 respondents who have less than PKR 5,000, monthly. Whereas, 13 responded as their monthly budget being in the bracket, PKR 5,000 – PKR 10,000. 6 respondents have PKR 10,000 – PKR 20,000 as their budget, whereas 4 responded with other. This shows a great majority of respondents having an allocated expenditure limit of PKR 5,000 – PKR 10,000.



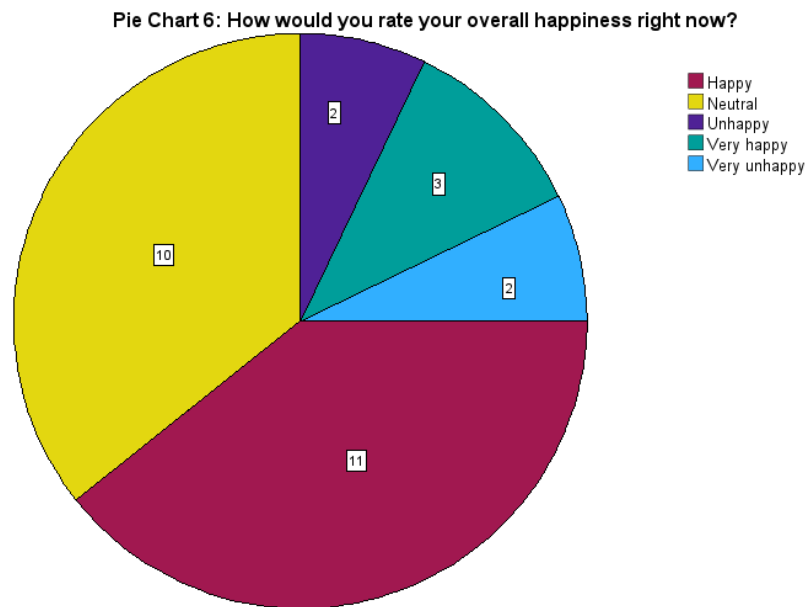
The data above indicates the academic year of the respondents, with over 10 each in 2nd and 3rd year of university, whereas 4 each in their 1st and 4th year of university.



This crucial data indicates that 51.85% of the participants of the study believe that buying new things contributes to their short-term happiness. Whereas, 33% remained neutral. 11.11% showed strong agreement with the posed question and 3.70% disagreed with the statement. This clearly demonstrates that a considerable portion of Gen Z seeks short-term gratification and satisfaction through buying or consumption.



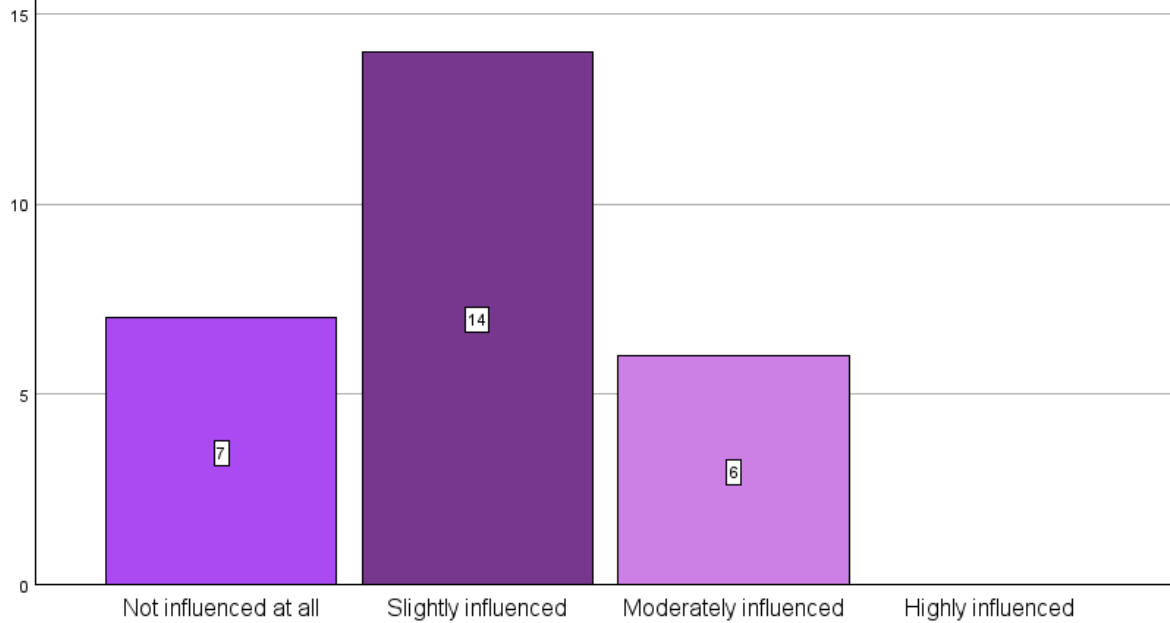
Bar Chart 6 demonstrates the responses of participants when asked about how often they shop for non-essential items. About 13 responded with occasionally, i.e: monthly, in this case. 10 responded with rarely, i.e: once every few months. 3 responded with never and 2 responded, frequently, i.e: weekly. This shows a majority of Gen Z respondents spending on non-essential items on a monthly basis, further supporting prior studies.



Following the questions of consumption, when asked about the overall emotional satisfaction or happiness of individuals, about 11 responded with happy, 10 with neutral, 2 chose unhappy as their answer. Whereas, 3 chose very happy and 2 chose very unhappy as their answer. It must be noted

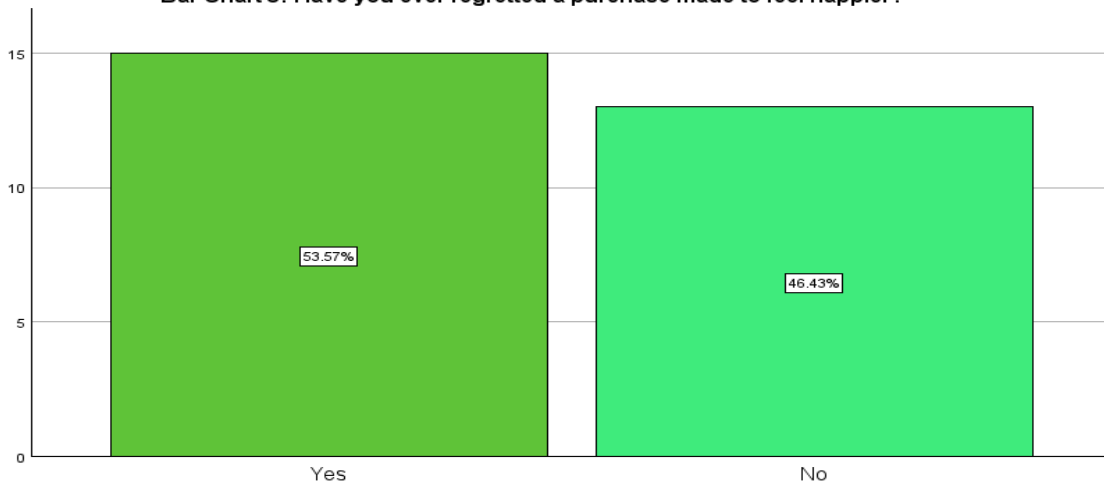
that while these answers can be attributed to other external factors aside from consumption, however, it is important to highlight these happiness levels of individuals with certain consumption habits, as illustrated above.

Bar Chart 7: How influenced are you by influencers/celebrities promoting products on social media?



This bar chart indicates the responses to the question, how influenced are you by influencers/celebrities promoting products on social media, to which an honest majority of 14 responded with slightly influenced, 7 responded with not influenced at all and 6 responded with moderately influenced. Furthermore, no respondents felt highly influenced in their consumption habits by celebrity endorsements, showcasing commercial awareness.

Bar Chart 8: Have you ever regretted a purchase made to feel happier?



The above data shows that about 53.57% have regretted a purchase specifically made to feel happier, which is an alarming percentage admitting that their commercial consumption fails to fulfill their long-term happiness. While, 46.43% disagreed with the statement.

DATA FINDINGS

Consumption & Short-term Happiness			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Disagree	1	6.8	-5.8
Neutral	9	6.8	2.3
Agree	14	6.8	7.3
Strongly Agree	3	6.8	-3.8
Total	27		

Test Statistics	
Consumption & Short Term Happiness	
Chi-Square	15.519 ^a
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.001

- a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 6.8.

Two Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit tests were conducted to explore participants' feelings of happiness related to recent material consumption. The first test examined whether participants agreed with the statement “Buying new things gives me short-term happiness.” Results showed a statistically significant difference in responses, $\chi^2(3) = 15.519$, $p = .001$, indicating that participants did not answer randomly. Most participants selected “Agree”, suggesting that buying new things does bring short-term happiness for many.

Consumption & Long term Happiness			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Yes	6	9.0	-3.0
No	10	9.0	1.0
Somewhat	11	9.0	2.0
Total	27		

Test Statistics	
Consumption & Long term Happiness	
Chi-Square	1.556 ^a
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.459

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.0.

The second test investigated responses to the question “Do you feel long-term happiness from material possessions you bought in the last six months?” The Chi-Square result was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 1.556$, $p = .459$, meaning the responses were fairly evenly distributed. While more participants chose “Somewhat” and “No” compared to “Yes”, the difference was not meaningful enough to conclude a clear pattern.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between consumer behavior and emotional well-being among Gen Z, focusing specifically on the contrast between short-term and long-term happiness derived from material possessions. The findings revealed that while a majority of respondents agreed that buying new things provides a short-term emotional boost, significantly fewer reported experiencing long-term happiness from their purchases.

The findings support the hypothesis that short-term consumption brings happiness, as most participants agreed with feeling short-term joy after buying new items. However, the data does not support the idea that these purchases lead to long-term happiness. Responses were mixed and statistically insignificant when participants reflected on material possessions bought in the last six months. This suggests that while consumption may provide an immediate emotional boost, it does not consistently result in lasting happiness.

Overall, the study underscores a growing consciousness within Gen Z: while material goods can temporarily elevate mood, true and sustained happiness is more deeply rooted in non-material aspects of life, such as relationships, purpose, and personal growth. These insights open up important conversations around mindful consumption and mental health in a digital, hyper-consumerist age.

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