

**In Pursuit of Happiness**

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## Introduction

Here we present early findings from a critical investigation of the burgeoning “happiness industry”. The happiness industry is an area where science – notably psychology – and the market meet. With ‘Positive Psychology’ as its foundation, its aims are to increase individual and collective happiness through self-management depicted in “how to” manuals, websites, apps, courses, exhibitions, films and media coverage (e.g. [www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)). In doing so the industry represents the monetizing of mainstream psychological theory. In line with the development of this market, interest in the study of happiness is growing with Ahmed (2010) speaking of the happiness turn and Burnett (2011) referring to the happiness agenda. This interest in happiness is evident across a variety of different contexts, from micro to macro. Burnett (2012) outlines three ideological shocks driving the cultural circuits of happiness: first, happiness is embraced as a macro-political issue in line with a focus on utilitarianism; second, happiness is embraced at the meso-organisations level as a conduit to productivity and third, happiness is embraced at the micro-sociological level under the guise of positive psychology. Our interest in happiness began at a micro level with the “100 Happy Days” project.

### 100 Happy Days and the Art of Happiness

Using the framework of “100 Happy Days” ([www.100happydays.com](http://www.100happydays.com)) we conducted introspection and visual analysis of both researcher-generated and public photographic material (Holbrook, 2006). The concept of “100 Happy Days”, like many similar social media trends, frames the individual as ethnographer of their own lives, mining for meaning around the concept of happiness. Participants are asked to take a single photograph of something that has made them happy each day, for 100 days. Pictures can be shared on social media or remain private. The assumption is that this structured introspection is a therapeutic process of self-discovery and that the 100 pictures have a life beyond the 100 days, serving as a transformative repository to be dipped into to relive happy moments.

We suggest that subjective, visual contexts such as “100 Happy Days” offer much potential for studying happiness by providing an alternative to the subdiscipline commonly known as “the science of happiness.” This field focuses on measuring happiness by identifying the social indicators associated with individual well-being. For example, material published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* is “devoted to scientific understanding of subjective well-being.” Richard Layard (2011), one of the key contributors to this perspective, suggests that happiness is a feeling that is easily measured through self-reporting, most often in the form of surveys. This form of measurement tells us how happiness is distributed within and across cultures but fails to offer any depth of understanding of the strategies and approaches to happiness employed by individuals. Discourse surrounding the positive psychology movement adopts a similar scientific vocabulary in relation to measuring and assessing happiness, for example, the authentic happiness website, hosted by the University of Pennsylvania where positive psychology guru Martin Seligman is based, refers to positive psychology as “the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive” (<https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/home>). However, some have critiqued the science of happiness perspective as being too narrowly focused. Cultural and psychoanalytic approaches highlight the difficulty with self-reporting methodologies (Ahmed, 2010) while sociological approaches highlight the need for a deeper understanding of happiness (Cieslik 2014; Hyman, 2014).

The remainder of the paper is guided by three themes: we first consider the meaning of happiness, second, we explore the position of consumer culture to the happiness agenda and finally, we consider happiness as therapeutic care of self.

### The Meaning of Happiness

*“Happiness is a choice. Choose to be happy and you will be.”*

Domonique Bertolucci, *100 Days Happier*, Hardies Grant Books, London. p10

Despite its pervasiveness, reaching a definitive understanding of happiness is not an easy task. Some scholars define happiness as individual responsibility (Cieslik, 2014), whilst others recognise that happiness is linked to both internal and external resources (Burnett, 2011, Ahuvia et al. 2015). Others have deliberately avoided offering a definition. For example, Thin (2012, p. 33) argues that the meaning of happiness is context specific and it should be approached as “an evaluative kind of ‘conversation’” rather than a “definable entry.” Further, in place of a definition, Hyman (2014, p. 18) instead suggests that happiness can be conceptualised in two ways: “as an aspect of a person’s identity and selfhood, and as an emotion.” One of the most straightforward definitions is put forward by Layard (2011) who suggests that happiness is “feeling good – enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained.” He refers to “the big seven” factors affecting happiness; family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and personal values.

In particular, the need to draw upon and display happiness becomes paramount within the social media context. Under this structuring force - and the gaze of the generalised other (Mead, 1934) - happiness moves from felt emotion to a category of visual meaning, alongside a set of recurrent practices. Our immersion in this context reveals several recurrent visual tropes associated with “feeling good” (e.g. family and nature), with photographs suggesting that happiness is found in the mundane as well as the exotic, the novel as well as the constant. Common to many of the photographs is an attempt to depict emotions, most notably, love but also amusement, nostalgia, security and comfort. However, given the subjective and context-specific nature of happiness noted above, challenges relate to the reading and analysis of images without a broader understanding of the context, suggesting that what is visible in the photograph is merely a symbolic indication of something deeper. Thus, we consider the notions of ambivalence or indifference and question what the images represent and whether they make us feel happiness when we revisit them i.e. are the therapeutic aims fulfilled?

### **Consumer Culture and the Pursuit of Happiness**

*“Most of the things you find yourself wanting will have little or no bearing on the happiness in your life”*

Domonique Bertolucci, *100 Days Happier*, Hardies Grant Books, London. p122

Various researchers have established a link between happiness and consumer culture (cf Costley et al 2007; Shankar et al 2006). Bauman (2008, p. 23) in particular highlights the importance of a social comparison element, suggesting that “reaching happiness means the acquisition of things other people have no chance or prospect of acquiring.” Others have noted that positive experiences can create greater happiness than material products with Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014) finding that extraordinary experiences elicit happiness at any stage of life while ordinary experiences bring greater happiness as people age and time is perceived as more limited.

Happiness is often presented as an end goal that guides and drives our behaviour. For example, in her aptly titled book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed (2010, p. 200) suggests happiness as “the object of desire, as the endpoint, the teleos, as being what all human beings are inclined towards.” However, the possibility of achieving an enduring state of happiness within consumer culture has been called into question. As articulated by Bauman (2008, p. 29), “At the threshold of the modern era, ‘the state of happiness’ was replaced in the practice and dreams of happiness-seekers by the *pursuit* of happiness.” Or, in other words, “we are happy as long as we haven’t lost the hope of becoming happy” (Bauman, 2008, p. 15). This is reminiscent of Belk, Ger and Askegaard’s (2003) findings on the centrality of desire and hope within contemporary consumer culture. This means we need to consider the dynamic nature of happiness. This is recognised by Thin (2012) who suggests that the pursuit of happiness involves adjusting to the ups and downs of life; we need to endure adversity in order to enjoy the good times. Drawing on the cliché of “happiness is the journey, not the destination,” Thin (2012, p. 49) critiques happiness theories for being “end-weighted” by focusing on the outcomes rather than the instrumental value of happiness.

## Happiness as Care of self

“Don’t rely on the opinions of others. Only you will know what is right for you.”  
Domonique Bertolucci, *100 Days Happier*, Hardies Grant Books, London. p188

An instrumental approach to happiness brings with it the pressure of positivity. Following Binkley’s (2014, p. 3) view of happiness as an “entrepreneurial project,” the pursuit of happiness becomes a matter of individual agency. Binkley (2014) suggests that the happiness agenda is another form of neoliberal governmentality extending into personal lives. One which cultivates entrepreneurial dispositions, devolving responsibility for well-being to the individual rather than the state. In relation to the shaping of a happiness discourse, we witness the democratisation of happiness. Drawing on qualitative research in the UK, Hyman (2014) demonstrates that the therapeutic discourse of happiness is linked to the infiltration of the culture and language of the self-help industry into everyday life. This discourse implies that happiness can be gained via “working on oneself” in the sense that people have control of their own happiness; it is internal and individual. Such discourses prioritise what should matter, how we should live and conduct our relationships, reinforcing that consumerism and the marketplace should not be seen as sources of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Shankar et al, 2006). Instead, the therapeutic discourse implies that happiness comes from within. Yet our analysis suggests that this self-care emerges, and is depicted, through everyday consumption practices.

## Conclusion

With the aim of behavioural change at its heart, the happiness industry is one where issues of control, representation, and visual reproduction can be explored. It is a context redolent with contradiction: the happiness industry tells us that we are not happy enough and offers products for the management of happiness, all the while advising that happiness can not be found in consumer goods. In many ways it is analogous to an advertising industry which fuels the desire and disappointment cycle of consumerism. Ultimately we aim to use this context to expand the existing conversation around emotion in consumer culture (cf Goulding et al. 2009; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Shankar et al, 2006; St James et al, 2011), focussing particularly on issues of consumption and well-being.

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