



Unfolding Happiness Through Flow: A Study Of Flow Activities

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Abstract: The present study titled “Unfolding Happiness Through Flow: A Study of Flow Activities” aimed to examine the relationship between different types of flow activities and happiness among college students. The sample consisted of 200 adult participants from diverse academic streams. Using a correlational research design, the study explored how engagement in active flow activities—including romantic interaction, prayer or yoga, artistic pursuits, sports, and social engagement—and passive flow activities—such as listening to music, watching television, using social media, resting, and spending time alone—relate to overall happiness. Data were analyzed using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. Results indicated a strong positive correlation between active flow activities and happiness ($r = 0.728, p < .001$), and a significant negative correlation between passive flow activities and happiness ($r = -0.548, p < .001$). The findings highlight the importance of cultivating active flow experiences as pathways to happiness and psychological flourishing among young adults.

Keywords: Flow, Active Flow Activities, Passive Flow Activities, Happiness, Well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Happiness has long been regarded as the ultimate goal of human existence and a key marker of psychological well-being. Within the domain of positive psychology, happiness is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotions, life satisfaction, and meaning in life (Diener, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Among various psychological processes that contribute to happiness, the concept of ‘flow’—proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—has received widespread recognition as a vital condition for optimal experience and personal fulfillment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow refers to a state of deep involvement and intrinsic enjoyment in an activity that balances skill with challenge. During flow, individuals experience intense concentration, a merging of action and awareness, and a sense of control over the task. Time appears to pass effortlessly, and the activity becomes its own reward. Such moments are often described as peak experiences that generate enduring satisfaction and meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

However, not all activities are equally capable of inducing flow. The distinction between active and passive forms of engagement has become increasingly relevant in contemporary psychology. Active flow activities—such as sports, arts, meditation, and social interaction—require focused effort, creativity, and personal agency, leading to sustained psychological benefits. Passive flow activities—such as watching television or scrolling through social media—may provide temporary pleasure but lack the challenge-skill balance necessary for deep engagement. Recent studies indicate that while both can elicit moments of enjoyment, only active forms consistently predict long-term happiness and life satisfaction (Holder et al., 2009; Rodríguez-Bravo et al., 2020; Abuhamdeh, 2020). In the context of young adults, particularly college students, understanding how different types of activities relate to happiness is vital. This population faces increasing academic, social, and digital demands, making the management of time and engagement crucial for their mental health. The present study investigates how active and passive flow activities correlate with happiness among college students, thereby contributing to contemporary discourse on well-being and engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: Empirical research consistently supports the positive association between flow and happiness. Abuhamdeh (2020) emphasized conceptual clarity in defining flow as a distinct experiential state characterized by deep enjoyment and optimal functioning. Meta-analyses suggest that frequent flow experiences



contribute to higher levels of subjective well-being, academic engagement, and creativity (da Silva de Matos et al., 2021). Active engagement, such as physical activity, artistic creation, and mindfulness, enhances well-being by fulfilling basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—proposed by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Rodríguez-Bravo et al. (2020) found that sports and physical leisure significantly improve psychological well-being among youth. Similarly, Dingle et al. (2021) observed that participation in music-based activities promotes emotional regulation and connectedness, especially when it involves active participation rather than passive listening. Hagen et al. (2024) reported that yoga and mindful movement improve vitality and reduce stress by fostering attentional focus and challenge-skill balance, core components of the flow experience.

Conversely, studies have shown that excessive engagement in passive activities—such as prolonged social media use or binge-watching—correlates with lower happiness and increased anxiety (Zheng et al., 2023; Marciano et al., 2024). Passive leisure lacks the depth of engagement and goal-directed structure necessary to elicit true flow. These findings collectively indicate that the quality and intensity of engagement, rather than the type of activity alone, determine its contribution to happiness.

OBJECTIVES:

- To examine the relationship between active flow activities and happiness among college students.
- To examine the relationship between passive flow activities and happiness among college students.

4. METHODOLOGY:

The study adopted a correlational design. The sample included 200 college students (aged 18–30 years) from various academic streams, selected through convenience sampling. Equal gender representation was ensured. Tools used included:

1. Flow Activity Inventory (Self-constructed): Categorized into active and passive flow activities.
2. Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002): A 29-item scale measuring happiness on a 6-point Likert scale.

Data were analyzed using Pearson’s correlation through SPSS software.

5. RESULTS:

The results revealed a strong positive correlation between active flow activities and happiness, and a significant negative correlation between passive flow activities and happiness. Both hypotheses were supported.

Variable	n	Pearson’s r	p-value
Active Flow Activities ↔ Happiness	200	0.728***	< .001
Passive Flow Activities ↔ Happiness	200	-0.548***	< .001

***p < .001 Table 1

6. DISCUSSION :

The findings confirm that active engagement promotes happiness through mechanisms of intrinsic motivation, focused attention, and mastery. Active flow activities provide opportunities for self-growth, competence, and social connection, fulfilling essential psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Csikszentmihalyi (2014) highlighted that individuals who frequently experience flow report higher well-being and purpose in life.

Engaging in active-flow activities—those that require deep involvement, focus, and challenge—is strongly associated with increased happiness and life satisfaction. Unlike genetic influences, intentional activities are within an individual’s control and can significantly enhance emotional well-being. Therefore, promoting such activities is essential.

Academics play a key role in educating, motivating, and organizing active-flow activities for both students and adults. By doing so, individuals can understand the connection between flow experiences and happiness, eventually leading them to participate in such activities through intrinsic motivation.



Despite their benefits, people often prefer easily accessible forms of entertainment due to demanding lifestyles. Active-flow activities require effort, initial activation energy, and transition costs, which discourages participation. As a result, individuals tend to adopt a more passive approach to leisure. However, effortful engagement in meaningful activities contributes more effectively to long-term happiness.

Future research should explore how strategies such as preplanning, structured environments, and conscious regulation can help individuals overcome these barriers. This reflects a paradox of happiness—people are aware that deeper engagement leads to greater well-being, yet they struggle to act due to perceived effort and inconvenience (Schiffer & Roberts, 2018).

Passive activities, on the other hand, while providing relaxation, often lack the cognitive challenge and social involvement necessary for long-term satisfaction. Studies show that passive engagement in digital leisure, though pleasurable in the short term, can lead to emotional depletion and reduced subjective vitality (Marciano et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). Passive leisure activities, such as watching television, using social media, or listening to music, provide relaxation and temporary emotional relief. These activities may be particularly beneficial for individuals with higher levels of neuroticism, as they offer an escape from stress and negative emotions.

While passive leisure can support restoration and help maintain psychological balance, excessive indulgence may lead to negative outcomes, including impulsivity, hostility, reduced social support, and increased sadness. As suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), passive activities are useful when used in moderation as restorative, homeostatic practices, but overreliance can result in stagnation and complacency. Although passive leisure offers immediate pleasure, it does not ensure personal growth or sustained happiness. According to eudaimonic perspectives (Ryan & Deci, 2000), activities that provide short-term gratification—such as substance use—may undermine long-term well-being. Therefore, passive leisure should be used strategically, complementing more effortful, growth-oriented activities to achieve overall well-being. The implications of these findings extend to educational and mental health domains. Encouraging students to participate in active, skill-based, and socially interactive activities can enhance their resilience, focus, and overall well-being. Incorporating flow-promoting practices such as mindfulness, arts, sports, and community service in college curricula can help students build lasting sources of happiness.

7. CONCLUSION:

The study concludes that happiness is significantly influenced by the quality of engagement in daily activities. Active flow experiences contribute positively to well-being, while passive forms show a negative relationship. Promoting active engagement and reducing passive leisure could enhance happiness among youth.

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