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The impact of self-affirmation on senior students' happiness: An online-based experimental study

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Abstract

This research aims to prove the effect of the form of the self-affirmation intervention, a form of positive psychology intervention, on the happiness of senior-level students. An online-based experimental design of pre-test and post-test with self-affirmation intervention in the form of writing. The 180 participants were dividing into treatment and control

groups with the final 154 participants joining the study. the *analysis of variance* (ANOVA) with ONE-WAY ANOVA testing was carried out. The results showed the *self-affirmation intervention* statistically significantly affected the happiness of senior students.

Keywords: Self-Affirmation, Happiness, Experimental Study

1. Introduction

One of the developmental stages in a person's life is early adulthood when the change from adolescence to adulthood begins. Then in this early adulthood, including the period when a person enters the process of setting a big step in life, particularly in continuing education to college level and becoming a student. When undergoing higher education, such as at university, Stallman (2010)^[9] stated that students tend to experience higher psychological stress than the general population. One of the causes of psychological pressure and stress for students is some pressure to achieve high academic achievement. Because of the increased psychological pressure that comes from the pressure to achieve academic success, a student's state can be affected by these pressures. One of the essential conditions is the happiness that students can obtain.

Happiness is mainly used to connect with pleasurable emotional experiences and assess life success or quality of life achievements. In this life success assessment, a student's *happiness is influenced by various things*. Bum and Joen (2016)^[3] found that social support from parents, lecturers, and peers is one factor affecting a student's happiness. However, Bum and Joen also stated that support was not always available to a student at a university, such as counseling facilities for students. Thus, there is a possibility that a student needs help to find happiness in his life in college. This situation is especially true for senior level students – who are in their third year of college, when the pressure to achieve academic success begins to be accompanied by pressure to complete studies. Happiness becomes expected and desired, but it may be that someone does not know how to be happy. Thus, achieving happiness for a senior student is also important and can contribute to his success.

Baranov, Haushover, and Jang's (2020)^[1] experimental study found that *light-touch positive psychology interventions* in the form of *light-touch* and *low-cost positive psychology interventions* can improve *psychological well-being*. First, Baranov *et al.* carry out three light-touch positive psychology interventions: count your blessings, self-affirmation, and *aspiration priming*. Then in a study conducted by Baranov *et al.*, happiness or happiness is an aspect of *psychological well-being*. On this basis, this experimental research uses the intervention applied in the study of Baranov *et al.*, *self-affirmation*, as an action that can affect the happiness of senior students. The research was conducted for senior-level students at an Accounting Study Program in one of the biggest private universities in Central Java, Indonesia.

The problem in this study is the importance of happiness for students, especially at the senior level, given the high psychological pressure they face. The SWCU FEB Accounting Study Program students also faced this pressure. Based on the research of Baratov *et al.* (2020) research applies a *self-affirmation intervention*, a form of *light touch positive psychology intervention*, which is expected to affect happiness. Based on this problem, the research question proposed is, is the *self-affirmation* intervention affecting senior-level students' *happiness*?

Happiness is a concept that Feldman (2010)^[4] describes as *joy - or pleasure - experienced by someone*. In addition, happiness can also be understood in achievement and success in life. Rahardjo (2007)^[8] states that happiness is subjective depending on

one's view and being passive, which makes people tend to wait to be happy. Further, *Self-affirmation* is an action that shows a person has the ability to face threats to their integrity. The form of intervention given as a form of *self-affirmation* is carried out by writing down the main personal values used by someone to evaluate themselves. Providing information about what should be achieved in relation to one's experience. Thus, this intervention can be carried out by someone independently. The aspects of *self-affirmation* carried out through the protocol are carried out once. All participants completed two writing exercises. Subjects in the *treatment group* were first instructed to take 3 to 5 minutes to write about a personal experience when they felt very successful or proud. After that, the same participants were then required to take 3 to 5 minutes to write about the achievement value that was important to them and explain why it was so important. Options include athletic ability, music, religious values, and a sense of humor. While the subjects in the control group were first instructed to write about their daily routine on a typical day, then instructed to write about what they ate or drank in the last 48 hours. This protocol is derived from McQueen and Klein (2006) and Cohen *et al.* (2009). This study uses a *self-affirmation intervention technique* in the form of writing together the important achievements obtained by students and the values that participants consider important about the achievements written previously.

This research aims to prove the effect of the form of the *self-affirmation* intervention on the happiness of senior-level students. Then, this study provides the theoretical benefit of this research is to obtain empirical evidence about the effect of intervention which is a form of applying *positive psychology* to student happiness, especially senior students. Therefore, this research contributes to obtain empirical evidence about the application of the self-affirmation intervention, as a light touch positive psychology that can be used to increase the happiness of senior students. The results are essential considering that students at this level are under high psychological pressure, which can be caused by pressure to achieve high academic achievement, the start of the final project or thesis preparation process, and the possibility of pressure to complete studies on time.

2. Methods

This study implemented an experimental research, pre-test and post-test design with *self-affirmation intervention* given to the participants, which include senior students who are taking the Financial Statement Analysis Course. Based on the experimental research approach, the research design was designed to obtain evidence about the effect of the intervention on participants' happiness.

Research participants

1. The participants in this study were senior students, namely students at the third-year level who were taking the Financial Statement Analysis course. The number of students enrolled in this course is 180 students divided into two classes, but the implementation of lecture activities is carried out *online* together.
2. The Financial Statement Analysis course is a level 4 or final level course in the Study Program curriculum. This course has assessments carried out individually and in groups, with tests and assignments carried out *online*.

3. At the research time, the lectures were carried out in full *online* using various virtual synchronous, collaborative asynchronous, and independent asynchronous methods. However, the implementation of such lectures is not the primary concern in this study, accordingly, in terms of measuring variables, the condition of online lectures is not considered.

Research variables

The variables in this study consisted of the *self-affirmation intervention* as the independent variable, which was thought to affect the dependent variable of happiness. Based on *positive psychology* in light-touch psychological interventions, collectively described as *positive psychology interventions*. Baranov *et al.* (2020) [1] investigated whether *light-touch* and *low-cost positive psychology interventions* can improve *psychological well-being* and change behaviors and decisions that affect poverty. The variable in this study is happiness which will then be influenced by the intervention implemented, namely the *self-affirmation intervention*.

This study uses the *Oxford Happiness Questionnaire* (OHQ), derived from the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI), to measure the variable *happiness*. (Hills & Argyle, 2002) [5]. The OHI consists of 29 items, each involving selecting four options for a different subject, representing different incremental happiness levels. The OHQ instruments were then compiled in a *Google Form* titled *Are you happy?* With links created using *bit.ly*, it is easier to share links with participants. Thus, the OHQ results can be downloaded via *Google Sheet* so that the data processing process can be done in an integrated manner and stored in *Google Drive*.

Self-affirmation (SA) is an action that shows a person has the ability to face threats to his integrity. The form of intervention applied was adopted from the intervention developed by Baranov, namely by writing down the main personal values used by someone to evaluate themselves. The self-affirmation intervention was also implemented using a short-linked *Google Form* from *bit.ly* with the Let's Write activity, which was carried out in a time range of 10 to 15 minutes.

Instruments and analysis techniques

This section describes the data collection instruments that have been carried out in this study.

1. Participants in this study were 180 students enrolled in class AC402 Financial Statement Analysis in Semester 1 of the 2020/2021 Academic Year. The randomization process was divided into an experimental group and a control group. The randomization was carried out using the random feature in Excel. A random arrangement was obtained from the list of Student Identification Numbers (NIM) based on the Excel randomization process. This process placed 90 students each in the experimental and control groups. Since the research was conducted *online*, the involvement of participants on record could not be ascertained, nor was it enforced.
2. After the lecture, the pretest is carried out by sharing the *Google Form OHQ Pretest link* through the Zoom lecture chat column and posting via *Google Classroom* to get a higher participant response. The pretest results obtained a total of 154 responses from both groups. However, because participants did not fill in according

to the questions that were given a response, they could proceed to the experimental stage with 145 responses. At this stage, re-randomization was carried out to redistribute the experimental and control groups. Re-randomization can be done because all participants fill out the OHQ *online* and are in relatively the same situation. The re-randomization process resulted in 70 participants in the experimental group and 71 participants in the control group.

3. *Self-affirmation* intervention was carried out three weeks after the pretest due to technical problems that occurred within the stipulated timeframe. This intervention was carried out by simultaneously sending an email to each student in the experimental and control groups. Previously, an explanation of the implementation of the intervention was given before the *email* was sent. Information about participants in the experimental and control groups was not provided for time efficiency. A separate *email* containing summary research information and a *Google Form* link for conducting activities for each participant in the experimental and control groups. The following activities were carried out by the participants within a time range of 10 to 15 minutes:
 - a. Experimental Group: Subjects were asked to write two articles within 3-5 minutes (1) write about an experience about success or proud success and (2) write down the essential values in the experience. Responses were received from 58 participants.
 - b. Control Group: Subjects were asked to write two articles within 3-5 minutes (1) write about their daily routines, then (2) write about food and drinks consumed in the last 48 hours. Responses were received from 48 participants.
4. *The post-test* was carried out immediately after the intervention by sending an email containing the OHQ Post-test link to previously registered participants in the re-randomization process. The responses received for the post-test were from a total of 108 participants. After checking the completeness of the data, the final responses obtained in the analysis process were 41 participants in the experimental group and 53

participants in the control group.

5. *The follow-up* test has been carried out via a Google Form with a link sent to participants. All participants from the experimental and control groups in the post-test sent responses. Therefore, the number of participants in point 4 is the participants' response obtained in the analysis.

This study uses a description of the average response data to provide an overview of the responses given both in the pretest and post-test. Then the *analysis of variance* (ANOVA) with ONE-WAY ANOVA testing was carried out to test the hypothesis.

3. Results and discussion

The scoring process is carried out after the response data from the Google Form is converted to a Google Sheet and downloaded for processing. This process was carried out to check the completeness of the participants' responses and determine the score for each response. The results of the data analysis process are presented in the form of the average response score for OHQ given by participants in the experimental and control groups. Table 1 shows a description of the average response scores.

Table 1: Average Score

Group	Pretest	Post-test
Experiment	107.4	126.4
Control	106.7	114.7

Furthermore, the ONE-WAY ANOVA test was carried out using SPSS to test the difference in variance between the results of the pretest and post-test in the experimental group. First, table 2 presents the group statistical results. Then Table 3 shows the results of the ANOVA test.

Table 2: Group Statistics

OHQ	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Pretest	107.4898	14.67324	1.48222
Post-test	126.4286	15.16303	1.15170

Source: Primary data processed

Table 3: ANOVA Test Results

	F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Equal variances assumed	0.077	0.782	-8.885	194	0.000*	-18,937	2,131
Equal variances not assumed			-8.885	193.791	0.000*	-18,938	2,131

Source: Primary data processed, *Significant at 0.05

Based on the results of the ANOVA test, it can be concluded that the test hypothesis is accepted with a significance level of 0.000, which indicates that the *self-affirmation intervention* statistically significantly affects the happiness of senior students who are participants.

The research was carried out through a different test with ANOVA on the participants' responses in the *pretest* and *post-test*. The intervention activity was given to both the experimental and control groups. As explained in the

research method section, the *self-affirmation intervention* was carried out by providing Let's Write activity. The experimental group was asked to write about the experience of success or proud success in Let's Write 1 and write about the important values in the experience in Let's Write 2. Table 4 presents some of the participants' writings in Let's Write 1 and Let's Write 2. Participants' writings in these activities are presented verbatim.

Table 4: Participant Writing in Let’s Write Activity

Let’s Write 1	Let’s Write 2
Please write a proud experience of success or success.	Please write down the important values in the experience.
A proud experience for me is getting a college scholarship for the results of my own hard work. Through the scholarship I was able to buy a laptop for college and also help my parents with tuition fees.	Originality, honesty, and don’t say “can’t” before trying
Passed the selection of scholarship recipients, very happy and helped ease the burden on parents	Feeling happy because it can lighten the burden of parents a little
Participate in the provincial level cultural festival and study at SWCU.	Mingle with various cultures and get a new atmosphere and experience that has never been experienced before.
Became the chairman of the Christmas youth committee with 3 combined churches with success and going very well.	I became a responsible person, had a lot of influence and was able to handle many people with every decision I made. Able to work together and close to everyone, help each other for shortcomings.
Have you ever sold online?	Can get to know more people’s traits from good to bad
I managed to lose 10KG in weight	From this experience I have learned important values such as hard work, never giving up, respect for money, and optimism.
During this college period, in 2020 to be exact, I ventured to register as a gojek driver and buy my own motorbike on credit. Until this month, it has reached the 17th installment of 35 installments. Sometimes I feel tired because I have to work on installments, but I am very grateful that I was able to make it this far.	Everyone has their own character and we must be good at adapting, achieving something must be followed by persistent effort.

Some of the participants' writings in Table 4 show the various experiences of success or success that each participant was proud of and the essential values for participants from those experiences. For example, two participants stated that success or success that they are proud of is receiving a scholarship to study and lightening the burden of their parents. Then two participants wrote that they were proud of participating in activities on campus and completing them.

One participant wrote that selling *online* is something to be proud of with the vital value of knowing the nature of people. What is also interesting is the success of losing weight with the important values of hard work, never giving up, respect for money, and optimism. Participants' writings, also presented in Table 4, are articles about the decision to become a Gojek *driver* and buy their own motorbike on credit and have succeeded in paying the installments. Although the participant stated that he was tired, he saw the ability to adapt and persistence as important values of success as a Gojek driver.

This study shows the analysis results that the *self-affirmation intervention* has a statistically significant effect on student happiness. As presented in Table 2, the average pretest score is 107.4, and the average post-test score is 126.4. Then, the results of the ANOVA test showed a statistically significant value of 0.000 which means that the data support the test hypothesis. These results align with Baranov, although the effect was expressed at a moderate level in their study. Furthermore, Binkley (2011) [2] found that *positive psychology* affects one's happiness. Therefore, because the *self-affirmation intervention* is a form of *positive psychology*, the results of this study are in line with Binkley's. Then the results of this study are also in line with Kurtz and Lyomormisky (2013) [6] and Nelson and Lyobomirsky (2014) [7]. They state that *self-affirmation* in the form of writing as a form of personal appreciation can increase happiness. Thus, the study results prove the impact of the *self-affirmation intervention* in the form of writing activities that make participants proud of their happiness.

4. Conclusions

This study aims to obtain empirical evidence about the effect of the *self-affirmation intervention*, which is part of *light touch positive psychology*, on the happiness of senior students. The analysis results showed that the intervention had a significant effect on the senior students in this study. Furthermore, various things that are proud written by the participants in a short time can increase happiness achieved by the participants.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the participants' determination, even though it has gone through the randomization process, the implementation of *pretest*, experimental intervention, and *post-test* is carried out *online*. Accordingly, it could not be appropriately controlled. The results are because there is a possibility that participants are doing other things or with other people when participating in the study. Second, there was a relatively long lag between *pretest* and *post-test* which allowed many events to happen to the participants and affect their happiness. Third, the implementation of the intervention could not be monitored in person because when doing the writing activity, none of the participants turned on the camera. However, based on the results obtained, online experimental research could be implemented properly.

Future research can be carried out *offline* if possible to be carried out with better supervision. Then the implementation of the *pretest*, intervention, and *the post-test* should be done in the same period to increase the validity of the experiment. Finally, future research can distinguish senior students and examine the happiness of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

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