

Employees' Attitudes toward Life and their Happiness at Work: Examining Government Organizations in the UAE

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Abstract

Although there is a wealth of happiness literature from both Western and Eastern experiences and perspectives, research on happiness in the workplace especially within the Arab region and high-context cultures—is limited. This study is an attempt to encourage happiness research in workplaces in the Middle East. Focusing on government organizations in the United Arab Emirates, this study aims to influence government organizations' strategy planning and implementation regarding long-term impact on happiness levels. In particular, this study investigates how government organization employees' personal attitudes toward life affect their feelings toward work. The research employed a quantitative analysis (questionnaire), thereby providing a detailed analysis of questionnaire responses across four government organizations at the functional level. Data were collected from 140 employees in four government organizations in the UAE over a period of four months. By performing data analysis using a quantitative tool to recognize the gaps between attitudes toward life and happiness levels at work in a high-context culture, this study makes recommendations to increase happiness levels across organizations in the long run. The study results reveal that participant employees largely exhibited a positive life outlook, which can be attributed to the UAE's HC culture. Social life in the UAE is always active, with numerous family gatherings and social occasions, which can be considered a source of happiness. This study's findings emphasize the necessity of correlating how individuals' life attitudes positively or negatively influence their happiness levels at work.

Keywords: *Employee attitudes; workplace happiness; United Arab Emirates; life outlooks; happiness levels.*

Introduction

The positive outcomes of the happiest organizations worldwide confirm that happy employees are highly productive, healthier, and loyal to the work place, that high happiness levels benefit both individuals and organizations in the short and long term, and ensure the organizations' competitiveness and sustainability (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Moreover, numerous organizations pay attention to employee turnover and its impact on productivity. According to Gustafson (2002), turnover costs an organization around \$3,000 to \$10,000 per hour, per employee. Thus, raising loyalty and happiness levels at the workplace is essential in reducing employee turnover (Firth et al., 2007; Smith, 2000). The literature highlights several factors and reasons for employees' happiness at work. In particular, a strong correlation is reported between employee happiness and performance, indicating that employees' happiness and job satisfaction levels are directly linked to how well they perform at their jobs (Khan et al., 2014; 2019). Additionally, the literature highlights the influence of general life happiness (Harter et al., 2002; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Oswald et al., 2015).

Notably, social culture is an important issue not covered in the literature on happiness in general and at work. The UAE's culture has been built on communication and vital social events. Nishimura et al. (2008) have classified it as high-context culture; in fact, all Arab countries have been categorized as high-context cultures. As such, this study aims to address the under-researched issue of the link between employees' happiness in general, and their feelings toward work. Research on this topic with a focus on the UAE and the Middle East is lacking. Furthermore, most research has focused on private sector companies, while this study aims to examine this issue in government organizations.

Literature Review

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the study of happiness, focusing on aspects such as its effects on wellbeing (Griffin and Ward, 2016), health (Sabatini, 2014), re-employment (Krause, 2013), and consumption and brand loyalty (Šeinauskienė et al., 2015). The reason for this interest is that an individual's happiness level is a substantial indicator of their subjective welfare, which can potentially affect both psychological and physical health (Agbo and Ngwu, 2017; Velasco Matus et al., 2016).

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While happiness means different things to different people, studies have unanimously acknowledged that irrespective of its source, happiness is a key element of daily human life (Heizomi et al., 2015). Considering that happiness is characterized by relative permanence, scholars have focused on individuals' overall happiness, especially in psychological research (Oishi and Gilbert, 2016). According to Griffin and Ward (2016), happiness is a subjective evaluation of one's emotional state and satisfaction covering several aspects; indeed, it represents the manner in which different individuals consider diverse aspects of life (Velasco Matus et al., 2016). One's evaluation of life can be negative or positive in terms of general life satisfaction. Positivity allows people to cope with difficult circumstances by focusing on the positive side of different situations (Achor, 2010). According to Alessandri et al. (2015), "viewing oneself, life, and the future under a positive outlook attests to a basic predisposition that exerts an important biological function in making people prone to cope with life, despite adversities, failures, and loss" (p. 4).

Positivity increases employees' motivation, productivity, and creativity (Barsade and Gibson, 2007; Schein, 1992). Additionally, it helps them solve problems in a clearer and more efficient way when testing novel and innovative ideas. Discussing how positivity and happiness fuel success, Achor (2010, p.17) notes that "positive brains have a biological advantage over brains that are neutral or negative," and "the brain works well when people are positive." In sum, positive feelings toward life in general are extremely crucial; hence, an important research question is how positivity and happiness can influence employees' feelings toward work.

While positivity has been linked to increased motivation, productivity, and creativity, negativity can have the opposite effect. Studies have shown that negative emotions, such as fear and anger, can lead to decreased motivation and cognitive flexibility (Fredrickson, 2004; Ashkanasy, 2003). Negativity can also lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover intention (Schaufeli et al. 2002).

Furthermore, negativity can spread quickly in the workplace, leading to a negative work environment and decreased collaboration (Kanter, 1977). This is known as the "spillover effect," where negative emotions in one area spill over into other areas, affecting the overall mood and productivity of the workplace. Therefore, it is important for organizations to not only promote positivity but also address negativity in the workplace. This can be done through training programs that teach employees how to manage negative emotions and conflicts in a constructive manner, as well as creating a positive and supportive work environment.

In summary, while positivity can have many benefits in the workplace, it is important to also acknowledge the negative effects of negativity and address them to create a balanced and productive work environment.

Influence of Individuals' Attitudes Toward Life on their Work

Individuals' attitudes toward life affect their attitudes toward work (Hobfoll, 2011). Their positivity as a personal resource affects their happiness in general, which transfers into happiness at work (Hobfoll, 2011; Orkibi and Brandt, 2015). Simultaneously, negativity also influences individuals' happiness at work; according to Topchik (2000), negativity is a virus that spreads within the organization. Negativity may be brought in by an individual employee and instill a negative attitude where none existed before; the spread of this attitude potentially lowers productivity and increases staff turnover. Moreover, negativity in the workplace can be a reaction to job dissatisfaction owing to factors such as insecurity, a lack of recognition, and stress (Hundley, 2001; Landy, 1989; Topchik, 2000). It can lead to an assessment of negative aspects of individuals' life and job, with one affecting the other.

Dugguh and Dennis (2014) emphasized the reciprocal relationship between employees' attitudes toward life in general and toward work, and that general life satisfaction reflects positively on satisfaction in the workplace; however, the context of their study was Nigeria, where more than job satisfaction, finding a job is a significant concern by itself. Moreover, individuals in Nigeria work several jobs simultaneously, owing to their difficult circumstances; in this case, their priority is not a job that makes them happy, but a job that "pays a decent wage" that is "just enough to "take them home" (Dugguh and Dennis, 2014, p. 17). The situation in the UAE, however, is extremely different, as people do not have to work in various jobs to secure a living, and they have access to free education and healthcare. Therefore, job satisfaction and happiness at work is an important concern for them. Considering the lack of data regarding how positive or negative attitudes influence employees' happiness in government organizations in the UAE, studying this topic is important.

Individuals' Attitude toward Life in a High-Context Culture

Societal cultures can be divided into two main types—namely, high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) cultures—with both having different needs. According to Nishimura et al. (2008, p. 785), HC cultures are “Very stable, unified, cohesive and slow to change,” and “rely on their history, their status, their relationships, and a plethora of other information, including religion, to assign meaning to an event,” which highly applies to the UAE. Meanwhile, LC cultures “value individualism over collectivism and group harmony. Individualism is characterised by members prioritising individual needs and goals over the needs of the group” (Nishimura et al., 2008, p. 785; Abaida et al., 2023).

HC cultures typically include an active social life, characterized by numerous family gatherings and occasions. While this could be considered a source of happiness, it could also be considered a source of pressure affecting people’s life and job satisfaction. Arguably, when people meet each other frequently, they make comparisons, which affect happiness levels and can lead people to prioritize money as a marker of success and happiness (Brown et al., 2008; Card et al., 2012; Abraham, 2023). In this way, HC culture could be considered a source of pressure to constantly seek more money and material goods, including designer clothes and jewelry. Instead of considering this phenomenon as merely being related to HC culture, it could be viewed as a contemporary global attitude. However, this study posits that HC culture, especially in GCC countries, is largely focused on material goods because of social comparisons and on the role that money plays in ensuring an expensive lifestyle, as people are expected to act in a certain way—such as regularly wearing new clothes and buying expensive gifts for different social occasions. This argument does not suggest that HC culture should be replaced with LC culture, but rather encourages people in HC cultures to stop comparing themselves with others and engaging in rivalry. Based on the aforementioned arguments, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Alternative Hypothesis: A positive outlook toward life significantly impacts employee happiness.

Null Hypothesis: A positive outlook toward life exhibits no significant impact on employee happiness.

The research framework is depicted in Figure 1.

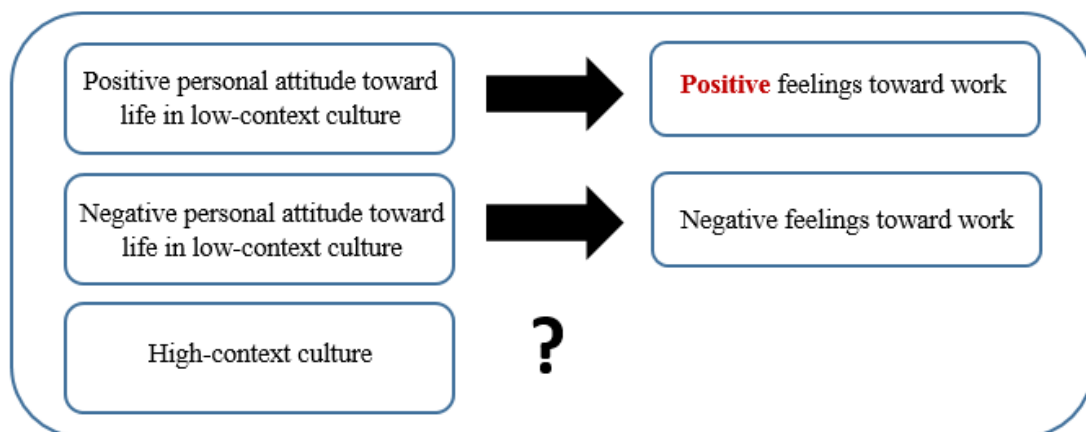


Figure 1. Research framework.

Methodology

To collect data pertaining to the research question, this study used quantitative analysis (questionnaire), thereby providing a detailed analysis of questionnaire responses across four government organizations at the functional level; hence, this answers the research question: How does an employee’s personal attitude affect them—that is, whether a positive or negative personal attitude influences their happiness at work in the context of the UAE.

This study aims to focus on organizations with a high percentage of “Emiratization”—that is, the leadership attitude of reducing dependence on foreign workers, and employing UAE citizens in both public and private sectors (Abu Mazen, 2013). Selecting organizations with a prominent level of Emiratization ensures that

employees' cultural and religious backgrounds are similar. Data were collected from 140 employees in four government organizations in the UAE over a period of four months. The names of the organizations and participants have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1. Respondents' profile according to organizations and departments.

Organization	Number of respondents	Departments surveyed
A	50	- Human Resource Department - Financial and Administrative Affairs Department - Strategy & Future Department - Department of Information Technology - Government Communication Department - Customer Care Department - Department of Housing Studies - Project Execution Management - Corporate Services Management
B	30	- Business Support and Human Resource Department - Power & Water Planning - Innovation & The Future - Technical Advisors - Strategy & Business Development - Marketing & Corp Communication - Financial Department
C	30	- Human Resource Department - Finance and Budget - Quality and Excellence - Information Technology - Infection Control Office - Laboratory Department - Medical Records
D	30	- Teachers from different disciplines

Research Design

The process of collecting data proceeded through several stages, as presented in the following table:

Table 2. Research Design.

Target group	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Employees from functional levels inside the organization	Quantitative method (questionnaire)	Questionnaire analysis using ANOVA, post hoc, and t-test	Conclusion

To achieve the research goals, the sample fulfilled the following criteria: local employees, both male and female, and from the functional level. The questionnaire adopts the Likert scale, which is considered among the most common methods for collecting data pertaining to job satisfaction. The number of completed questionnaires used in this research were 140 of 170.

To achieve the research goals, the sample of this study was limited to local employees from the functional level. Both male and female employees were included in this study. The questionnaire adopted the Likert scale, which is considered one of the most common methods for collecting data on job satisfaction. Out of the 170 questionnaires distributed, 140 completed questionnaires were received and used for analysis. "Functional level" refers to employees who hold positions in functional areas such as marketing, finance, human resources, operations, and others.

Results

Statistical analysis was performed to understand whether a relationship exists between personal attitudes toward life in general, and employee happiness at work in the UAE.

According to the literature, personal attitudes influence an employee's feelings at work—with their negative or positive vision toward life making them visualize their job in different ways (Barsade and Gibson, 2007; Calaguas, 2017). This section of the paper focuses on the correlation between attitudes toward life and feelings toward work, by first providing a general idea of the sample responses on two components of the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale—with 5= “strongly agree” and 1= “strongly disagree.” First, the sample responses pertaining to respondents’ “attitude toward life in general” are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics (Responses pertaining to personal attitudes; N= 140).

Employees' attitude toward life in general	Likert scale					Means	Std. deviation
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
1. I feel happy in my life in general.	41.4%	52.9%	4.3%	1.4%	0%	4.34	.632
2. I feel happy compared with most other people I know in my life.	30.7%	62.1%	6.4%	0%	0.7%	4.24	.598
3. In general, I am extremely positive about myself.	32.85%	62.85%	4.3%	0%	0%	4.29	.569
4. I enjoy my life in general—irrespective of the challenging circumstances I encounter.	34.28%	54.28%	9.28%	0.7%	1.4%	4.21	.757
5. Earning a higher salary than the people around me is important to me.	21.4%	36.4%	25%	15.7%	1.4%	3.61	1.050
6. My life is as good as I wish.	25.7%	67.85%	4.3%	1.4%	0.7%	4.18	.638
						4.1476	.47229

Overall, employees claimed to be extremely satisfied with their life in general, with a mean score of 4.14, and standard deviation of .47; this was expected, namely because of the UAE culture. Responses to the section of the questionnaire that deals with employees’ ‘feelings toward work’ are reported in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics (Responses pertaining to feelings toward work; N= 140).

Feelings toward work	Likert Scale					Means	Std. deviation
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
28. I like my current job.	25%	57.1%	15%	7%	2.1%	4.02	.791
29. I enjoy what I am doing.	26.4%	55%	14.3%	3.6%	.7%	4.03	.786
30. My job affects my health positively.	20.7%	35.7%	19.3%	19.3%	5.0%	3.48	1.166
31. My current job fits with my career plan.	20.7%	38.6%	22.1%	12.1%	6.4%	3.55	1.140

32. My values and the values of the organization are similar.	20.7%	57.1%	17.1%	2.9%	0%	3.99	.730
33. I feel motivated to contribute more in my job.	25.7%	52.1%	16.4%	4.3%	1.4%	3.96	.852
34. This job is worthwhile.	26.4%	56.4%	15.7%	.7%	0%	4.09	.669
35. I feel full of energy at work.	25%	50.7%	18.6%	5%	0%	3.96	.802
36. My organization is a good organization to work for.	32.1%	49.3%	8.6%	8.6%	1.4%	4.02	.940
37. I would recommend my organization to my friends.	24.3%	41.4%	19.3%	10.7%	4.3%	3.71	1.083
38. I am proud of my organization.	35.0%	45.7%	14.3%	4.3%	.7%	4.10	.851
39. I feel happy at work in general.	26.4%	52.9%	12.9%	5.7%	2.1%	3.96	.905
						3.9640	.61132

Table 4 reveals that people are generally less satisfied with their work, for which few respondents answered “strongly disagree,” indicating a greater inclination toward the negative end of the scale.

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to find the extent to which personal attitudes regarding life influence workplace happiness levels (Table 5). The Pearson correlation analysis results must be between zero and one. When the result is higher than zero a positive relationship is reflected, while if the result is less than zero an inverse relationship is reflected; when one variable increases, the other decreases.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics (correlation between personal attitudes toward life in general and feelings toward work).

Correlations		Feelings toward work	Attitude
Feeling Toward Work	Pearson Correlation	1	0.406**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	140	140
Personal Attitude Toward Life in General	Pearson Correlation	0.406**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	140	140

The correlation between personal attitude and feelings toward work is $r = .406$, which represents a positive relationship. Correlation in this case does not necessarily mean causation; when employees were asked regarding their feelings toward life in general, they exhibited a high level of satisfaction with a high mean score; however, when they were asked regarding their feelings toward work, they displayed less satisfaction, and the answers varied from both ends of the scale. Meanwhile, not all those describing themselves as happy toward life in general exhibited high feelings toward work, but all those with a negative attitude toward life expressed less satisfaction and low feelings toward work.

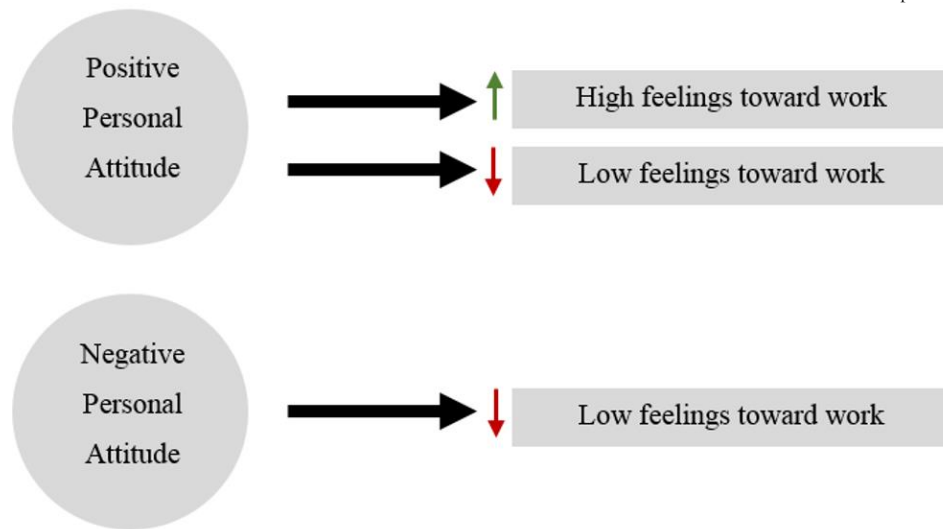


Figure 2. Positive and negative personal attitudes toward life in general and feelings toward work.

Discussion

This study aimed to answer the following research question: To what extent do employees' personal attitudes toward life in general influence their feelings toward work? The study results reveal that participant employees largely exhibited a positive life outlook, which can be attributed to the UAE's HC culture. Social life in the UAE is always active, with numerous family gatherings and social occasions, which can be considered a source of happiness. Research has found that those who interact with people and have an active social life are healthier and happier than people with high loneliness levels. In this way, a high-context culture offers social support for both good and bad occasions in life.

Another direct source of people's happiness in the UAE is religion and spirituality. Islam significantly impacts UAE citizens' values and their feelings toward life in general. McFaul (2006) and Abuznaid (2006) recognized the vital role that religion plays in different societies and how it influences several facets of human life, such as culture, education, and policy.

Another reason explaining employees' positive attitude and feelings toward life in general is the UAE government's efforts in improving people's well-being. The World Economic Forum's (WEF) networked readiness index measures the extent to which an economy is prepared to use information and communications technology (ICT) to accelerate competitiveness and well-being. In 2021, the UAE ranked 34th of 130 economies, owing to government efforts in facilitating economic diversification and finding new resources—such as tourism and renewable energy—rather than depending only on oil. Additionally, ICT's use is now active in all sectors and segments of UAE society (<https://networkreadinessindex.org> 2021).

Moreover, the United Arab Emirates demonstrates its interest in raising people's happiness levels through several initiatives to improve their well-being. Consequently, the UAE ranked 24th of 150 countries in the 2022 World Happiness Report.

The Minister of Happiness role was developed in the UAE in 2016. According to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, the "Minister of State for Happiness" will have the responsibility to align and drive government policy to create social good and satisfaction" (thenational.ae 2016). Additionally, the Minister of Happiness, Ohood Al Roumi, announced that the role of the ministry is "to create an environment where people can flourish – can reach their potential – and choose to be happy" (thenational.ae, 2016). This seems clear evidence highlighting the efforts and long-term vision to ensure UAE citizens' happiness.

Additionally, the results indicated a positive correlation between employees' positive attitude toward life and their feelings toward work. However, analyzing the responses for workplace happiness revealed that employees were generally less satisfied with work compared to their life attitude responses. In other words,

having a positive attitude toward life may positively affect various aspects including work, relationships, and health, but it does not necessarily suggest that this person is happy at work. Positivity in life may cause an employee to be a positive person at work, but will not necessarily raise their level of workplace happiness, especially when other external factors influence their feelings, such as the organization's leadership style or its rules and conditions "physical working conditions, schedule and work-life balance, compensation and benefits, and management and organizational culture".

On the contrary, negativity invariably casts a shadow on other aspects of life, such as work, suggesting that people who are complainers see pessimist aspects in their job even if their workplace is good and pleasant. Employees' answers pertaining to feelings toward their job reveal that those who think that their job influences their health negatively are not happy at work. Overall, 25% respondents claimed that their health was negatively affected, whereas 20% were neutral when asked whether their job influenced their health positively.

Noteworthy, while the number of employees with a negative life attitude is extremely small in this study, compared to the number of those reflecting positive attitudes, presenting both sides in a balanced manner is difficult. Moreover, judging a human trait, such as happiness or wellbeing, is not straight forward, and is subject to historical, social, and environmental factors, several of which are beyond this study's scope (Schwarz and Strack, 1999). The responses affected by personal mood at the time of taking the survey should also be considered (Mueller et al., 2009).

Having positive employees is generally considered an added value for an organization, especially when the organization's leaders care about culture and values, and seek to make the workplace satisfactory for all employees. Therefore, successful organizations, such as Google, particularly select employees who are a good fit with their positive culture. Similarly, Zappos is willing to pay its employees to quit if they cannot proceed (Hsieh, 2012).

Organizations like Google and Zappos understand the importance of having employees who fit in with their workplace culture and values. They take steps to ensure that there is a good match between the culture of the organization and the attitudes and values of the employees they hire. Here are some ways they do this:

- **Employee selection:** these organizations carefully screen job applicants to ensure that they align with the company culture. At Zappos for example, culture fit interview carries half the weight of whether the candidate is hired. They follow different methods during the interview to assess the candidate's attitudes and values.
- **Employee training:** once an employee has been hired, these organizations provide them with extensive training on the company culture, values, and mission. This helps to reinforce the culture and ensure that employees understand what is expected of them.
- **Employee feedback and performance reviews:** regular feedback and performance reviews can help organizations to monitor employee performance and ensure that they are aligned with the company culture. If an employee's attitudes or behaviors are not in line with the company culture, they may be provided with additional training or coaching.
- **Employee recognition and rewards:** organizations like Google and Zappos also recognize and reward employees who align with their culture and values. This can help to reinforce the desired attitudes and behaviors and motivate employees to continue to align with the culture.
- **Open communication:** Finally, these organizations foster open and transparent communication between employees and management. This helps to build trust and ensure that employees feel heard and valued. When employees feel that they are part of a positive and supportive workplace culture, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their work.

By taking these steps, organizations can ensure that there is a good fit between their workplace culture and employee attitudes, which can contribute to a more positive, productive, and satisfying work environment for all employees.

Thus, organizations in the UAE must understand the power of attitude in influencing employees' feelings toward work, and the benefit of positivity in improving employees' performance and lifestyle. Moreover, organizations must invest in developing positive employee attitudes toward life and work through methods such as individual and team coaching, as well as recruiting employees with a positive attitude, who can enhance and strengthen the culture of positivity within the organization. Additionally, organizations should investigate other factors related to their culture that can negatively affect employee' happiness. Finally, organizations must focus on recruiting people with similar values and attitudes to strengthen their organizational culture.

Conclusion

The following two important variables were considered in this study: employees' feelings toward life and their workplace happiness levels. While most participants exhibited positive feelings toward life, this did not translate to their feelings toward work. This could be related to external factors related to the workplace that employees cannot control. Meanwhile, those with negative life attitudes exhibited negative attitudes toward work. In other words, general negativity in life significantly impacts employees' workplace happiness levels. Thus, organizations intending to enhance employees' happiness must focus on improving their general life attitudes, as well as streamlining their recruitment process to select individuals who can strengthen the organizational culture with their positivity.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present research has a few limitations. Firstly, the theoretical framework only covers certain external factors, so in the future, other external factors that address the same issue can be included. Secondly, the sample is restricted to employees from various government departments, and the research does not consider gender differences among them. Hence, forthcoming research may examine individual differences among employees. As this study only examined government organization employees, further investigating private sector employees in the UAE is needed. Furthermore, focusing on non-UAE citizens, their feelings toward work, and the effects of working abroad on their general attitudes is also important.

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