



Exploring Irrational Beliefs Related to Happiness Among Adolescent Girls: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: This study was conducted to identify and analyze irrational beliefs related to happiness among Iranian adolescent girls.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a thematic analysis approach. Data were collected through the review of two domestic and nine international documents, as well as unstructured interviews with 13 adolescent girls in Ahvaz during the 2023–2024 academic year. Sampling was conducted in two stages: an initial screening using Yildirim's (2019) Irrational Happiness Beliefs Scale (IHBS), followed by purposive sampling until data saturation was reached. The interviews were conducted over a six-month period and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Data credibility was ensured through peer checking and participant feedback.

Results: The analysis resulted in the identification of seven main categories and seven subcategories: fear of happiness, fragile happiness (including transience and the perception of happiness as an immature emotion), external sources of happiness, essentialist views of happiness, perfectionistic expectations (from self, others, and life), contingencies of self-worth (based on others and achievement), and attention to the present moment (including rumination on the past and experiential avoidance).

Conclusion: The findings of this study, by identifying seven main categories of irrational beliefs related to happiness among Iranian adolescent girls, offer deeper insight into the impact of cultural and gender factors on their psychological well-being. We recommend that school counselors and clinical psychologists implement individual and group interventions, along with mindfulness workshops, to address beliefs such as fear of happiness and perfectionistic expectations, thereby promoting mental health and sustainable happiness in this population.

Keywords: Irrational beliefs, Happiness, Adolescent girls, Thematic analysis, Iranian culture.

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Introduction

Happiness, as a foundational concept in positive psychology, occupies a significant place in human life and is recognized as both a desirable goal and a driver of psychological well-being¹. However, recent research suggests that happiness is a complex, multidimensional construct influenced by cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural factors². Among these, irrational beliefs about happiness play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' experiences and perceptions of happiness. These beliefs, which often stem from

past experiences, cultural norms, or social interactions, are inconsistent with logic or reality and can adversely affect mental health, especially during adolescence³.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by emotional, cognitive, and social changes, rendering adolescents particularly vulnerable to irrational thought patterns that can affect their well-being⁴.

Happiness is generally defined as a positive psychological state that includes life satisfaction, the presence of positive emotions, and the absence of negative ones⁵. In positive psychology, it is regarded as a core component of subjective well-being⁶. However, the perception of happiness varies across cultures. In Western societies, happiness is often considered an attainable personal goal, whereas in some Asian cultures, including Iran, it may be approached with caution or even avoidance⁷. These cultural variations are frequently linked to collectivist values, fear of envy, or superstitious beliefs about negative consequences following happiness².

Girls in adolescence are especially influenced by gender expectations, familial pressures, and cultural norms, all of which can shape their understanding of happiness in irrational ways⁸. In Iranian society, for instance, social expectations often discourage overt expressions of joy among girls, potentially causing happiness to be viewed as secondary or even undesirable.

Irrational beliefs, first introduced by Albert Ellis in his Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), refer to illogical, unrealistic thoughts that contribute to negative emotions and maladaptive behavior⁹. When applied to the context of happiness, such beliefs may include notions like "happiness always leads to misfortune" or "I don't deserve to be happy"¹⁰. These beliefs may stem from childhood experiences where expressing happiness was met with guilt, punishment, or disapproval¹¹.

Research has identified a phenomenon known as "fear of happiness," which refers to the conscious or unconscious avoidance of experiencing or expressing joy due to anticipated negative outcomes⁷. For instance, some individuals believe that happiness is fleeting and followed by unfortunate events, or that visible joy may provoke envy and misfortune¹². Such beliefs are particularly prevalent in collectivist cultures, such as Iran, where maintaining social harmony and avoiding excessive attention are highly valued¹³.



Fear of happiness is positively associated with various negative mental health indicators, including depression, anxiety, and alexithymia^{10, 14}. For example, Belen et al.¹⁵ found that fear of happiness is linked to lower psychological well-being and life satisfaction, while Jordan et al.¹⁶ reported its association with depressive symptoms in adults—a relationship that remains underexplored among adolescents.

Adolescent girls may be particularly prone to fear of happiness due to sociocultural and gender-based pressures. In Iranian culture, girls are often expected to conform to traditional norms, which may discourage overt expressions of joy for fear of being judged or violating gender expectations¹⁷. These pressures may reinforce irrational beliefs such as “my happiness makes others uncomfortable” or “happiness is an immature emotion”¹⁸.

Cultural factors play a crucial role in the formation of irrational beliefs about happiness. In many East Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, including Iran, happiness is sometimes viewed as a tempting but fragile state that could lead to misfortune¹⁷. Joshanloo and Weijers¹⁹ found that individuals in collectivist societies are more likely to avoid happiness due to fears of envy, moral judgment, or bad luck—beliefs often reinforced by concepts such as the “evil eye” or divine destiny in Iran¹³.

Despite progress in positive psychology, significant gaps remain in understanding irrational beliefs about happiness in non-Western contexts. Most studies, such as Joshanloo³² and Gilbert et al.¹⁰, focus on Western cultures, and tools like Yıldırım’s²² Irrational Happiness Beliefs Scale (IHBS) are based on individualistic models, often overlooking collectivist factors like fear of the evil eye or traditional gender expectations in Iranian society. These tools are inadequate for capturing the cultural and emotional experiences of Iranian adolescent girls, necessitating a qualitative approach like Braun and Clarke’s²³ thematic analysis to explore unique cultural beliefs. Identifying these beliefs is vital, as notions like “happiness causes envy” may lead to happiness avoidance, increasing risks of emotional disorders¹⁶. This study addresses the lack of culturally sensitive tools for assessing irrational beliefs in Iran, aiming to inform Ellis’s⁹ REBT-based interventions and support educational policymakers in promoting sustainable happiness among adolescent girls.

Cultural and personal experiences, particularly from childhood, shape irrational beliefs. For example, Iranian adolescent girls, facing familial and societal pressures to conform, may internalize beliefs that discourage happiness^{8, 10}. This study explores the dimensions of these beliefs, addressing the research question: “What are the dimensions of irrational beliefs about happiness among Iranian adolescent girls?”

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis to identify irrational beliefs related to happiness

among adolescent girls in Ahvaz. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and ability to extract semantic patterns from qualitative data. The research is fundamental in purpose with applied implications and qualitative in nature. Data were collected and analyzed from two primary sources: document review and unstructured interviews.

For the document review, a literature search was conducted in domestic databases including Noormags, IranDoc, Civilica, the Jihad Daneshgahi Scientific Information Center, and the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities using the keywords “happiness,” “irrational beliefs of happiness,” and “happiness and adolescence.” Initially, 29 documents were retrieved. Additionally, international databases including ScienceDirect, PubMed, ERIC, Elsevier, and Google Scholar were searched using the English keywords “Happiness,” “Irrational beliefs of happiness,” and “Happiness and adolescence,” along with search operators (AND, OR), retrieving 32 documents. Inclusion criteria required the presence of keywords in the title, keywords, or text to ensure relevance. Using the PRISMA checklist, 26 studies were excluded after title screening and 24 after abstract screening due to low relevance. The documents were analyzed using Althed’s qualitative content analysis method²⁰, which is suitable for systematic concept extraction²¹. Relevant sections were coded; codes were summarized, duplicates removed, and similar codes merged to extract subcategories and main categories of irrational beliefs related to happiness.

Regarding the interviews, the population included all adolescent girls in Ahvaz during the 2023–2024 academic year ($n=27,053$). Due to access limitations, the study was conducted in girls’ schools. Sampling was conducted in two stages: (a) an initial screening using Yıldırım’s²² IHBS, followed by (b) purposive sampling until data saturation was reached. This questionnaire was chosen for its validity and reliability in similar studies to identify irrational beliefs related to happiness. Cluster random sampling was applied in this phase. After obtaining the university introduction letter and authorization from the Ahvaz Department of Education, seven adolescent girls were randomly selected. One class from each school was randomly chosen, and 205 students completed the IHBS. In the second stage, theoretical sampling with progressive selection was used until data saturation was reached—the point where new data no longer contribute to the development or change of categorization. Ultimately, 13 students scoring above the mean on the IHBS were selected for interviews. The research objectives were explained to parents in person or by phone, and since the adolescents were under 18 years old, written consent was obtained from parents for their child’s participation in the study. Inclusion criteria included being female and scoring above the mean on the IHBS, while exclusion criteria included scoring below the mean. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

Participant type	Participant ID	Age	Major/Field	GPA	Number of children	Mother’s education	Father’s education
Pilot interview	1	17	Humanities	14.38	1	B.S.	Diploma
	2	15	Humanities	15	1	A.S.	B.S.

Main interview	1	18	Experimental	17	3	Diploma	M.A.
	2	14	Mathematics	20	1	B.S.	B.S.
	3	16	Humanities	18	1	M.A.	Ph.D.
	4	14	Experimental	19	2	Diploma	M.A.
	5	15	Experimental	17	1	B.S.	B.S.
	6	15	Mathematics	19	2	Ph.D.	Ph.D.
	7	16	Humanities	14	2	Diploma	M.A.
	8	18	Humanities	16	1	M.A.	B.S.
	9	16	Humanities	17	1	B.S.	B.S.
	10	17	Mathematics	18	0	M.A.	Ph.D.
	11	17	Experimental	17	1	M.A.	M.A.
	12	14	Experimental	16	2	B.S.	M.A.
	13	16	Mathematics	19	2	A.S.	Diploma

Note: Ph.D.=Doctor of Philosophy, M.A.=Master of Arts, B.S.=Bachelor of Science, A.S.=Associate of Science, GPA=Grade Point Average.

Interviews were conducted over a six-month period (December 2023 to June 2024) in the counseling rooms of adolescent girls in a calm environment. Semi-structured individual interviews were used, starting with the key question, "Please define happiness from your own perspective," and continuing with dynamic follow-up questions. To guide and clarify the interviews, probing questions such as "Could you explain more?", "Could you state your meaning more clearly?", and "Could you give an example?" were asked. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. After two pilot interviews, 15 interviews were carried out until data saturation was reached (no new data emerged and no change occurred in the categorization).

Thematic analysis was conducted based on Braun and Clarke's²³ model to explore irrational beliefs related to happiness among Iranian adolescent girls, following six phases:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and documents (The two domestic and nine international documents), with note-taking of patterns such as fear of happiness;
2. Generating initial codes through line-by-line coding, extracting codes such as "Happiness is temporary" or "Happiness provokes envy" from quotations and documents;
3. Searching for themes by grouping codes to identify broader patterns such as "Fragile happiness" or "External sources of happiness";
4. Reviewing themes by comparing data with the literature (e.g., Joshanloo, 2013) to remove or merge weak themes, such as combining the subcategories "Transient happiness" and "Immature happiness";
5. Defining and naming themes such as "Perfectionistic expectations" with subcategories relating to the self, others, and life, based on Iranian cultural evidence;

6. Producing the report by integrating themes into the findings (Table 3) and discussion, supported with quotations and references, to suggest psychological interventions.

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, four key components—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—Lincoln and Guba were addressed³³. Credibility was ensured through data triangulation, combining two data sources (analysis of 2 domestic and 9 international documents and unstructured interviews with 13 adolescent girls) and participant feedback to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was strengthened by providing a detailed description of the research context (adolescent girls in Ahvaz during the 2023–2024 academic year) and sample diversity (various academic majors, GPAs ranging from 14 to 20, and parental education levels from diploma to Ph.D.), enabling potential generalization to similar contexts, though limited to Ahvaz. Dependability was achieved through peer checking during the coding and thematic analysis process (based on Braun and Clarke's framework), with two independent researchers reviewing the codes. Confirmability was secured by systematically storing interview transcripts, codes, and raw data in digital format and presenting a transparent coding process (encompassing six stages from data familiarization to report production), allowing for review and verification of analyses. These measures collectively bolstered the study's trustworthiness in identifying irrational beliefs related to happiness within the Iranian cultural context.

Results

In the present study, we selected 2 domestic documents (18.18%) and 9 international documents (81.82%) related to adolescents' irrational beliefs about happiness and analyzed them using Althed's qualitative content analysis strategy. The characteristics of the analyzed documents concerning adolescents' expectations are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of analyzed documents on studies about happiness in adolescents

Code	Authors	Year	Title	Method
1	Ahmadi Alaei and Khorramabadi ²⁴	2021	The effect of life skills training on avoidance, irrational beliefs, and responsibility among Payame Noor University students in Kabudarhang	Quasi-experimental
2	Hoziyari et al. ²⁵	2022	The relationship between moral intelligence and irrational beliefs with addiction propensity in adolescent girls of Agh Ghala city	Correlational



3	Miller et al. ²⁶	2022	Examining the relationship between irrational beliefs, motivation regulation, and anxiety in ultramarathon runners: A mixed-method approach	Mixed-method
4	Yildirim ²⁷	2021	Irrational beliefs about happiness and mental well-being among undergraduate students: A longitudinal study	Longitudinal
5	Elmas and Çevik ²⁸	2024	Fear of happiness: Explanations, causes, and prevention	Descriptive-analytical
6	Choi, Yoo, Lee and Choi ²⁹	2021	The necessity of happiness reduces motivation to be happier	Mixed-method
7	Joshanloo ¹⁹	2019	Concepts of happiness: Associations with reported well-being, personality traits, and materialism	Correlational
8	Joshanloo ³⁰	2023	Predictors of dislike of happiness: New insights from a multinational study	Correlational
9	Yildirim and Maltby ³¹	2022	Irrational happiness beliefs scale: Development and initial validation	Correlational
10	Joshanloo ³²	2017	Mediators of the relationship between external happiness and mental well-being	Correlational
11	Joshanloo et al. ³⁴	2014	Cross-cultural validation of the fear of happiness scale in 14 national groups	Correlational

As shown in Table 2, this analysis identified 25 indicators and seven main categories, including fear of happiness, fragile (unstable) happiness, external sources of happiness, essentialist views of happiness, perfectionistic expectations, contingencies of self-worth, and mindful attention.

Table 3 presents the main categories, subcategories, open codes, and direct evidence (quotes) from interviews and documents, derived from the content analysis of the documents and semi-structured interviews.

Table 3. Components of irrational beliefs related to happiness in adolescents

Main category	Subcategory	Open codes	Evidence (Quotes)
Perfectionist expectations	From self	Belief that: 1. Perfect and logical decision-making 2. Constant success, 3. Perfect control over all matters, 4. Constant happiness, 5. Fulfillment of all personal expectations, 6. High control over emotions and thoughts, 7. Achieving remarkable success, 8. Excessive expectations of oneself, 9. Achieving success without making mistakes, 10. Always being happy, 11. Being happy in every aspect of life.	(P2): "If I make a small progress, I say what's the point, I want something bigger, I'm a bit greedy in these things, which I know is wrong." (P8): "I'm not happy enough as I should be." (P5): "That perfect and extraordinary success makes it difficult, I mean I have to reach a very remarkable position." (D11): "I must achieve success without any mistakes." (D19): "I must be happy in all aspects of life at all times."
	From others	Belief in: Expectations from others being met.	(P2): "For example, a person I consider my close friend doesn't see me as that close, this expectation of mine causes my own distress because I expect them to do things for me based on our closeness, like spending more time with me or agreeing to do a small task when I ask." (P8): "How much satisfaction I feel from them affects my own happiness, both satisfaction with myself and with the people close to me in my life."
	From life	Belief that: 1. Perfect and flawless life issues, 2. Fulfillment of all needs in life, 3. Progress of activities according to my expectations.	(P1): "Life must always go according to my plans, and nothing should be out of control." (P2): "If all my needs in life aren't met, I can't feel happy." (P3): "Everything in life must be flawless for me to be satisfied." (P4): "I expect all events in life to be exactly as I want them to be."

Self-worth dependencies	Others	Belief in:	
		1. Always be the center of others' attention,	
		2. Be approved by others,	
		3. Self-worth dependent on making others happy,	
Mindfulness	Success	4. Self-worth dependent on helping others,	
		5. Others feel satisfied with me,	
		6. Be in the center of others' attention,	
		7. Others approve of me,	
Mindfulness	Living in the past	8. I am valuable only if I can help others,	(P6): "Since I'm not important to my family, I'm not important to anyone." (P9): "Failing to help people, all of this makes me not have that sense of happiness and satisfaction with myself." (P4): "Others' judgments about my appearance matter to me in a way." (P10): "I said maybe others don't care about others' opinions, but for me, it's very important; if someone criticizes me, it really upsets me, it greatly affects my mood." (D11): "I must earn others' love." (D13): "What others will think of me has made me continue the competition."
		9. Since I'm not important to my family, I'm not important to anyone,	
		10. I feel upset when I think others don't find me beautiful,	
		11. I am valuable because I can make others happy,	
Mindfulness	Experiential avoidance	12. I must earn the love of others.	
		Belief that:	
		I feel upset when I face failure, I feel upset when others criticize me	(P4): "Being under pressure, things not going my way, obstacles getting in the way, and pressure from outside, even if I don't have high spirits or that motivation, if my inner feelings aren't strong, I give up quickly and no longer feel that happiness." (P10): "I said maybe others don't care about others' opinions, but for me, it's very important; if someone criticizes me, it really upsets me, it greatly affects my mood."
			(P9): "Those failures one has experienced in life, the lack of success, or thinking about a loved one who was lost, even if three or five years have passed, a memory or something small comes to mind, it can make me not feel happy for two days, I feel upset." (P3): "The failures I've had and those lack of successes in life or a loved one who was lost, even if two years have passed, a memory can make me very upset for two days and I can't feel happiness." (D11): "Past events cause my problems, and they still affect my emotions and behaviors."
External source of happiness	Fear of happiness	Belief that:	
		Avoiding negative emotions.	(P6): "When something out of my control happens, my anxiety really spikes, in that state, I sleep because I don't want to believe that event happened."
		Belief in:	
		1. External attribution of happiness,	
Fear of happiness		2. Happiness being a matter of chance,	
		3. Happiness being dependent on individuals' fate,	
		4. Happiness being contingent on each person's life circumstances.	(P3): "I feel like most people cause me to fail, meaning people might make me feel upset, and I get hurt more by people than by myself." (P7): "That childlike part and irrational side of me is sitting and waiting for happiness to fall from the sky like luck, so this creates interference for me." (D10): "Happiness depends on luck." (D15): "Happiness depends on external reasons." (D20): "Happiness depends on each person's fate."
		Belief that:	
		1. Happiness is a sign of bad events in the future,	
		2. Happiness is a sign of irresponsibility,	(D15): "Laughing and being happy are characteristics of irresponsible people." (D18): "Happiness indicates bad events that will happen in the future." (D21): "If I am happy, it will cause me to be envied by others."
		3. Happiness causes harm	

Fragile happiness	Transience of happiness	Belief that: 1. Happiness is short-lived, 2. Happiness is uncontrollable.	(D15): "Happiness is a short-term feeling." (D17): "An individual's level of happiness is beyond their control." (D18): "Experiencing and/or expressing happiness may cause bad events."
	Happiness as an immature emotion	Belief that: Happiness is exclusive to children.	(D15): "Only children who are unaware of life's problems can experience happiness." (P5): "Happiness is for kids who haven't yet seen the big problems of life." (P6): "Adults can't be happy because they're always dealing with life's problems."
Essentialist view of happiness		Belief that: Happiness is genetic The level of happiness is unchangeable.	(D16): "Happiness is genetic." (D16): "The amount of happiness each person has is unchangeable." (D17): "Some people are very happy, and some are not. People really can't change their level of happiness."

Note: P=Participant, D=Document.

As shown by the results in Table 3, the data analysis led to the identification of seven main categories, each with corresponding subcategories: fear of happiness; fragile happiness, which includes transient happiness and happiness viewed as an immature emotion; external sources of happiness; an essentialist view of happiness; perfectionistic expectations directed at oneself, others, and life; contingencies of self-worth related to others and achievement; and mindful attention, encompassing living in the past and experiential avoidance.

Discussion

The present study aimed to identify irrational beliefs related to happiness among Iranian adolescent girls. Data analysis using thematic analysis and Altade qualitative content analysis revealed 25 indicators and seven main categories: fear of happiness, fragile happiness (including instability), external sources of happiness, essentialist views of happiness, perfectionistic expectations, contingencies of self-worth, and mindful attention. These findings highlight the profound impact of cognitive, cultural, and social factors on the perception of happiness within this group.

The results align with prior research on irrational beliefs associated with happiness, while also revealing key differences attributable to Iran's cultural context and the focus on adolescent girls. Fear of happiness, a primary category identified, corresponds with findings by Joshanloo⁷ and Gilbert et al.¹⁰ who noted that fear of happiness is more prevalent in collectivist cultures such as Iran due to beliefs related to the "evil eye" or negative consequences of happiness^{7, 8, 9}. However, the current study specifies this fear in the context of adolescent girls with expressions such as "If I am happy, I will be targeted by the evil eye" (Document 21), underscoring the influence of gendered and social norms.

Fragile happiness, another extracted category, is consistent with Joshanloo's description of happiness in Asian cultures as transient and uncontrollable³⁴. Participants confirmed this belief with statements like "Happiness is a short-lived feeling" (Document 15). Moreover, this study uniquely highlights "happiness as an immature emotion" (e.g., Document 15: "Only children who are unaware of life's problems can experience happiness"), a facet less emphasized in previous research, particularly among Iranian adolescent girls.

External sources of happiness, characterized by beliefs such as "Happiness depends on luck" (Document 10), align with Joshanloo³² and Kim and Maglio³⁵, who demonstrated that Shahrour Journal of Medical Sciences 2026;12(3) | 6

dependence on external factors may reduce psychological well-being^{11, 12}. This study further highlights the role of others as sources of happiness or frustration, as noted by a participant: "I feel like most people cause me to fail" (Participant 3), emphasizing peer pressures and social relations among adolescent girls.

The essentialist view of happiness, evidenced by beliefs like "Happiness is genetic" (Document 16), aligns with findings by Choi et al.²⁹ showing that essentialist beliefs can diminish motivation to improve happiness¹³. Within Iran's cultural milieu, where traditional norms prevail, happiness may be perceived as a fixed trait beyond personal control. This perception can have a dual effect—while it may provide psychological stability in adversity, it may simultaneously hinder efforts to enhance well-being. Statements such as "Even if I have small progress, I want something bigger" (Participant 2) reflect how these beliefs impact happiness among adolescent girls. Such expectations may be amplified by social and gender-related pressures, leading to diminished life satisfaction.

Contingencies of self-worth, particularly the reliance on others' approval, concur with Crocker et al. and Karasar and Baytemir, who found that social approval dependence undermines self-esteem and happiness^{36, 37}. This study corroborates this through quotes like "If someone criticizes me, it really upsets me" (Participant 10), revealing heightened sensitivity among Iranian adolescent girls.

Mindful attention, encompassing living in the past and experiential avoidance, aligns with Campos et al. and Valdivia-Salas, who associated experiential avoidance and rumination with reduced happiness^{38, 39}. For instance, Participant 9 noted, "A memory comes to mind... and I can't feel happy for two days," highlighting the deep impact of past experiences on well-being in this group.

Fear of happiness, or cherophobia, emerged as a core category reflecting conscious or unconscious avoidance of happiness due to perceived negative outcomes. Participants expressed beliefs such as "Happiness signals bad things to come" (Document 18) and "If I'm happy, I will be targeted by the evil eye" (Document 21). These align with Joshanloo's theory that fear of happiness is prevalent in collectivist cultures owing to beliefs about envy or misfortune⁷. In the Iranian context, cultural constructs like the evil eye amplify this fear, particularly among girls facing social pressures to exhibit



modesty, potentially leading to decreased psychological well-being.

Fragile happiness refers to beliefs that happiness is fleeting and uncontrollable, supported by quotes such as “Happiness is a short-term feeling” and “Only children unaware of life’s hardships can experience happiness” (Document 15). These may be intensified by social and gender expectations that frame happiness as immature or unrealistic. Joshanloo³² reported similar findings across Asian cultures, where happiness is considered fragile and externally dependent, which may decrease motivation to pursue happiness and reduce life satisfaction.

The belief in external sources of happiness, exemplified by “Happiness depends on luck” (Document 10) and “I feel like most people cause me to fail” (Participant 3), corresponds to Rotter’s locus of control theory, wherein individuals with an external locus perceive happiness as contingent on outside factors³⁹. Among adolescent girls, peer and family pressures may exacerbate this belief, reducing autonomy and increasing anxiety⁴¹.

The essentialist perspective, expressed in beliefs such as “Happiness is genetic” (Document 16), portrays happiness as a fixed, immutable trait. Choi et al. demonstrated that essentialism diminishes motivation to improve happiness²⁹. Within Iran’s cultural framework, traditional norms and beliefs in divine fate may reinforce this view, which has complex effects: it may offer psychological stability but also hinder efforts toward happiness enhancement.

Perfectionistic expectations, identified across self-, others-, and life-related subcategories, were evidenced by statements like “Even if I make small progress, I want more” (Participant 2) and “I must always be happy in every aspect of life” (Document 19). These maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs are linked to reduced happiness and increased stress. For adolescent girls in Iran, societal and gender pressures to meet high standards may intensify these expectations, negatively affecting life satisfaction.

Contingencies of self-worth, especially dependence on others’ approval and achievement, were reflected in remarks such as “Because my family doesn’t care about me, no one else does” (Participant 6) and “Criticism deeply upsets me” (Participant 10). These align with Crocker et al, indicating that reliance on social validation undermines self-esteem and happiness⁴¹. Among adolescent girls, social pressures to gain approval may exacerbate this dependence.

Mindful attention, including rumination on the past and experiential avoidance, was supported by participant comments like “A memory pops up... and I can’t feel happy for two days” (Participant 9) and “When something beyond my control happens... I just sleep because I don’t want to accept it” (Participant 6). These findings are consistent with Campos et al, who linked experiential avoidance and past-focused attention to diminished happiness³⁸. Cultural and familial pressures in Iran may intensify these avoidance behaviors.

Implications for Practice: The findings of this study indicate that irrational beliefs related to happiness among Iranian adolescent girls encompass a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, directly influencing their

mental health and quality of life. In this study, seven main categories were identified: fear of happiness, fragile happiness, external sources of happiness, essentialist views of happiness, perfectionistic expectations, contingencies of self-worth, and attentional awareness. Each of these categories is rooted in the cultural and social context of Iran and reflects normative pressures, family expectations, and the personal experiences of adolescents.

Accordingly, it can be stated that the findings of this study not only provide a clear picture of the cognitive and cultural barriers to happiness among Iranian adolescent girls, but also highlight the necessity of designing culturally adapted psychological interventions. It is recommended that school and counseling center psychologists employ approaches such as Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), mindfulness workshops, and group interventions to help modify these irrational beliefs. Addressing issues such as fear of happiness, dependence on social approval, and perfectionism, in particular, can contribute to the promotion of mental health and the establishment of sustainable happiness among adolescent girls. Ultimately, such interventions not only reduce negative emotions but also enhance adolescents’ capacity to experience joy, life satisfaction, and resilience in the face of social and cultural pressures.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. First, it focused exclusively on adolescent girls aged 14 to 18 in Ahvaz, limiting generalizability to other age groups or regions in Iran. Second, the use of cluster random sampling for initial screening may have excluded certain subpopulations, affecting the comprehensiveness of the findings. Third, reliance on self-report questionnaires, such as the IHBS, introduces potential response bias, as participants may provide socially desirable answers. Fourth, the study was limited to girls’ schools because access to boys’ schools was not permitted. Finally, conducting the study in a single city may limit cultural representativeness across Iran.

Ethical Considerations

This article is derived from a doctoral dissertation in Psychology at the Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord Branch. Ethical considerations included obtaining the ethics code IR.IAU.SHK.REC.1402.138, securing written informed consent from parents and participants (with an explanation of the study’s objectives and the right to withdraw), ensuring confidentiality (through anonymous coding and secure data storage), and maintaining the anonymity of participants’ identities.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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