

# Feeling “up”lifted: Happiness Perceived as Up in United States and India

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## ABSTRACT

Metaphors are used to convey an array of emotions and experiences. However, they are often based on culture and are easily misinterpreted without sufficient context (Yu, 1995). In English, we often associate happiness with something that is ‘up’. For example, we might say “I’m feeling up today.” The present study sought to determine if happiness is commonly associated with up in both the United States and India.

A total of 429 participants completed this study (214 United States, 215 India). Participants were recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. They were asked which adjective describes how people feel when they are happy: up or down. Then they completed a demographics questionnaire that asked them how comfortable they were reading, writing, listening to, and speaking English. Originally, there were 503 participants from India, and 230 from the United States. However, participants were removed if they did not indicate they were very comfortable with English (9 or more out of 10 on all four English comfort items).

To determine if happiness is associated with up in each country, we used a chi-square goodness of fit test. We calculated the proportion of people indicating happiness is associated with up in each country. To determine if these proportions were the same in the United States and India, we used Fisher’s Exact Test.

Our results indicate happiness is associated with up in both countries. In the United States, 213 of 214 participants associated happiness with up; in India, 212 of 215 participants associated happiness with up. In each country, the chi-square test indicated happiness was strongly associated with up. There was no significant difference in the proportions between the two countries. There were some limitations to this study. First, we recruited participants using MTurk. MTurk users are not representative of the general populations in the United States and India. For example, in our study, 82% of United States participants were white. Future research should strive to recruit larger proportions of minority participants. Second, we asked participants to self-report their comfort with English. These self-reports might overestimate or underestimate actual abilities. Future research should use an objective English skills test to ensure adequate familiarity with this language.

## INTRODUCTION

Happiness is a topic often discussed and studied in psychology (Jacobsen, 2007). According to Jacobsen (2007), happiness is a brief state of mind in which all of the individual’s needs and goals are fulfilled; whereas genuine happiness is a durable state of balance between an individuals’ surroundings and their needs, wishes, and goals. Banavathy and Choudry (2013) suggest that happiness is universally acknowledged as the main motivating force in people’s lives. However, happiness is not the same everywhere. Just as people in the West primarily have individualistic world-views while people in the East primarily have socially oriented societies, people in the West and East also have altogether different conceptualizations of happiness (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004).

Metaphors are frequently used to describe emotions. For example, happy people might demonstrate their level of personal well-being and life satisfaction by saying, “I’m feeling up today” (Bochaver & Fenko, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Such metaphors can be interpreted by drawing upon the similarities of the two objects being compared or by attributing properties of one thing to the other (Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999). However, metaphors rely heavily on culture and each individual will interpret a given metaphor in a way that is congruent with their personal schemas (Yu, 1995). This was demonstrated in Littlemore’s study (2003), in which Bangladeshi students completing a course at a British university had difficulty understanding metaphors for which they could not draw from their cultural backgrounds.

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Universal metaphors describe physical experiences, and therefore their interpretation can be understood across cultures (Boers, 2009). Yu (2009) found that conceptual metaphors such as “anger is heat” are understood in Chinese and in English. This metaphor exemplifies a physical experience, which was interpreted the same way in two distinct cultures. Metaphors such as “happiness is up” are also common-

ly understood across cultures, because happiness embodies a positive physical emotion and positivity implies an upward value (Kovescs, 1991). Numerous studies have suggested that abstract knowledge, such as the concept of happiness, is stored with sensory experiences in long-term memory; in U.S. English, for example, good movies are given a “thumbs up” and happy people are said to be “feeling up” (Meier 2005). Previous literature indicates that there may be connotations of this within the Indian language as well. For example, the Mahābhārata says that contentment is the highest form of happiness and therefore contentment can be seen as the highest heaven (Banavathy & Choudry, 2013). Heaven is often imagined as being upwards, which might suggest that Indian culture regards happiness as being up.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether happiness is associated with up in both the United States and India. We hypothesize that 1) both countries will associate happiness with up, and 2) there will be no difference between the proposition of participants in the United States and India associate happiness with up.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 429 people participated in this study (214 from the United States, 215 from India). The participants from the United States included 122 males and 92 females ranging from 18 to 66 years of age ( $M = 31.09$ ,  $SD = 10.10$ ). These participants identified themselves as follows: 82.2% White, 7.9% African-American, 7.9% Asian, and 4.2% as other. The participants from India included 135 males and 80 females ranging from 18 to 64 years ( $M=30.36$ ,  $SD=8.46$ ). Participants identified themselves as follows: 89.8% Asian, 2.3% White, 2.3% American India, and 3.7% as other.

### Measures

#### How do Emotions Feel

The How do Emotions Feel measure was a three part 24-item questionnaire. It included a question that asked participants to indicate whether feeling happiness is associated with up or down.

#### Demographics Survey

The demographic questionnaire asked participants about their sex, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how comfortable they felt speaking, reading, listening, and writing in English. Originally, 503 people from India and 230 people from the United States completed the study. Participants were removed from the database if they did not indicate that they were very comfortable with English (9 or more out of 10 on each of the four items).

### Procedure

Participants completed this 10-minute study online using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is a crowdsourcing website researchers sometimes use to recruit participants for online studies. Participants were paid 35 cents for completing the study.

### Data Analysis

To determine if happiness is associated with up in each country, we used a chi-square goodness of fit test. We calculated the proportion of people indicating happiness is associated with up in each country. To determine if these two proportions were the same in the United States and India, we used Fisher’s Exact Test.

## RESULTS

In the United States, significantly more than 50% of participants (213 of 214) associated happiness with up ( $\chi^2(1) = 210.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, in India, most participants (212 of 215) associated happiness with up ( $\chi^2(1) = 203.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference in the proportion of people who indicated that happiness was associated with up in the United States and India (Fisher’s Exact Test  $p = .62$ ).

### Figure 1

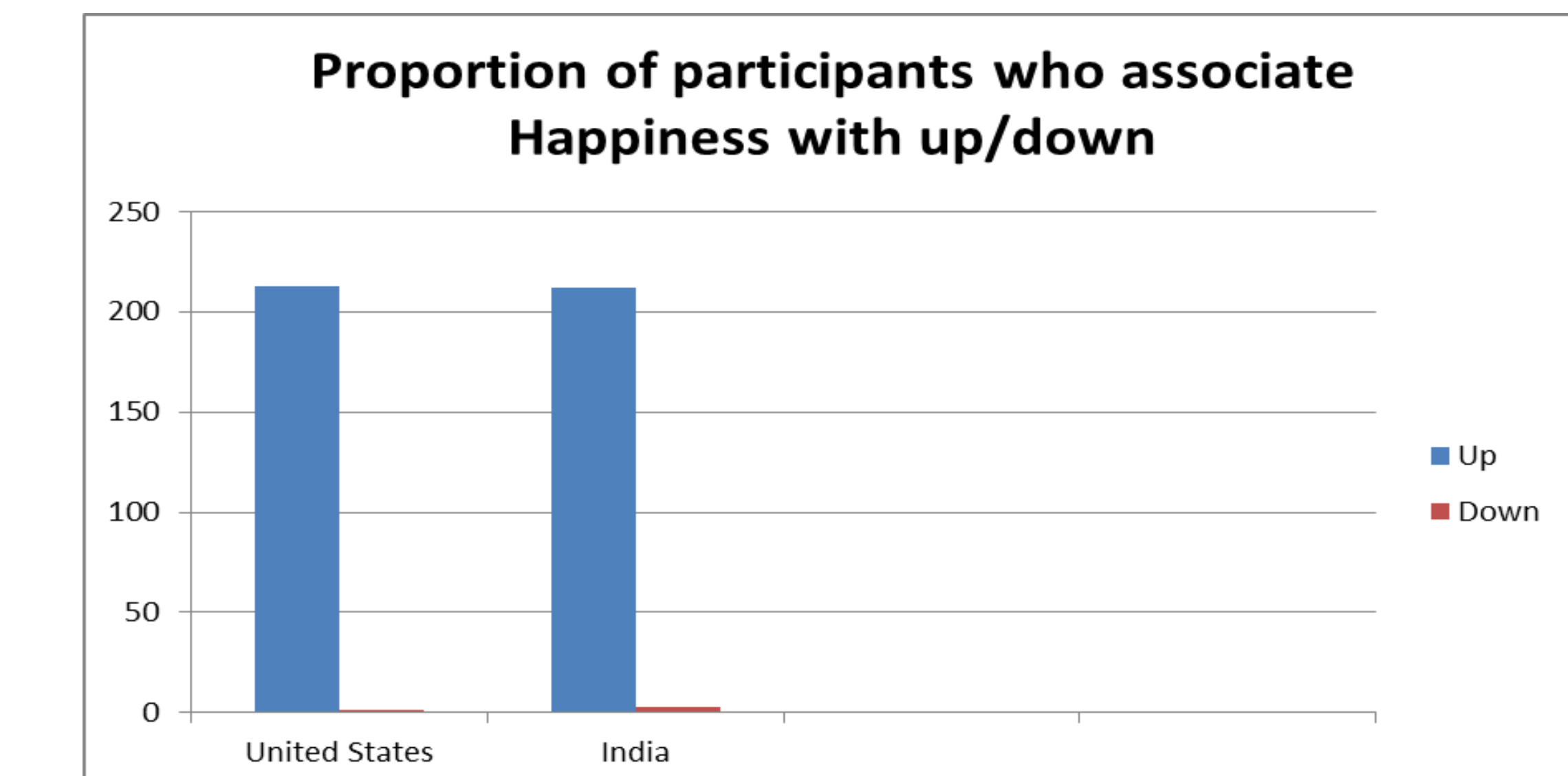
Proportion of Participants who Associate Happiness with Up/Down

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was twofold: to determine if feeling happiness is commonly associated with up in both the United States and India and to determine if there is a difference in the proportion of people who associate happiness with up in the two countries. Our results showed that the vast majority of participants in both countries associated happiness with up and there was no significant difference be-

tween the proportions in the two countries.

One limitation of this study is that we used a self-report measure of comfort with



English to determine eligibility for this study. There are pros and cons to using self-report measures. Self-reports are quick and inexpensive, but inaccurate results can be caused by recall bias, socially desirable responding, and errors in self-observation (Hawkshead, 2007). Future research should use an objective test of English skills to ensure that all participants are adequately knowledgeable about the language in which the study is being conducted. Future research should also expand this research to include other countries and languages.

Globalization of commerce and media have led to increased communication around the globe. More than ever before, people are communicating with others who are from different countries and cultures. When they do so, they often use metaphors to convey their emotions, whether they are talking about personal relationships or the significance of meeting a deadline for an important client. Understanding how people from different cultures conceptualize emotions will therefore allow us to communicate more effectively with one another.

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