

# Impact Of Existential Loneliness And Existential Anxiety On Happiness: Moderating Role Of Religiosity And Gender

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## Abstract

The present study explored the moderating role of religiosity in the relationships of existential loneliness and existential anxiety with happiness in a convenient sample of (N = 300) undergraduate students at University of Sargodha, Sargodha. Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Berman 2004), Short Muslim Religiosity and Belief Scale (Tayyiba, Tian & Al-Adawi, 2009), Existential Loneliness Questionnaire (Mayers, Khoo & Svartberg 2002), and Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) were used to measure the focal constructs of the present study. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that religiosity was non-significant whereas existential loneliness and existential anxiety were significant negative predictors of happiness after controlling for gender, family system, and faculty (arts vs sciences). Religiosity weakened the negative relationships of existential anxiety and existential loneliness with happiness. Gender also moderated between existential loneliness and happiness as the negative influence of existential loneliness on happiness was significant in girls only. Implications of the study along with suggestions for future research have been reflected upon in the indigenous cultural milieu.

**Keywords:** existentialism, existential anxiety, existential loneliness, religiosity, happiness.

## Introduction

Existentialism is the philosophical study of states of being or of the conditions of existing as a conscious person within the world (May, 1969). States of being have been defined as fleeting subjective conscious awareness of states of existence (Thorne, 1973). Existential philosophers are concerned with the meaning that people make of their existence; how we choose to live our lives, given the inevitability of death.

Human beings are free to make decisions about life and are responsible for the outcome of these decisions. This creates an intrinsic anxiety or angst about the freedom to make choices (Yalom 1980). three themes are thought to pervade existentialist thinking: (1) a strong emphasis on the individual, (2) passionate commitment to living life to the fullest as opposed to rationality and reason and (3) the belief in freedom of choice and responsibility for one's life (Solomon, 1972). According to Existentialists, most of us, most of

the time, live lives that involve a denial of our full humanity, of our Dasein, with its anxiety and guilt and death. They call this denial inauthenticity. Someone who is living inauthentically is no longer "becoming" but only "being." If life is movement, they have stopped. To live authentically means to be aware of your freedom and your duty to create yourself, of the inevitability of anxiety, guilt, and death. It means to accept these things in an act of self-affirmation. It means involvement, compassion, and commitment. Authenticity is above all a call to integrity, responsibility, and even to heroism. It asks an individual to be true to his/her inner self in the face of adversity no matter what the cost. (Solomon & Higgins 1996). Heidegger (1962), a prominent existential philosopher, focused on the notion of authenticity and in connecting with the self to make suitable choices. He believed that existence is full of possibilities and that an individual can make choices about these options. If we do not live up to our existential options, then we fall into mundane inauthenticity or "fallenness." He believed that death individuates us by helping us to be grateful for our limits and by plunging ourselves into our immediate environment.

### **Loneliness**

Loneliness refers to human being's fundamental separation from others and from the world. The conflict is between absolute loneliness and the desire for protection and belonging (Yalom, 1980). Becoming an individual entails an eternal and insurmountable loneliness (Kaiser, 1965). According to Yalom, isolation can be categorized in three definably different forms: interpersonal loneliness, intrapersonal loneliness, and existential loneliness. "The types of isolation are similar subjectively; that is, they may feel the same as and may masquerade for one another. Frequently therapists mistake them and treat a patient for the wrong type of isolation" (1980, p. 355). The three forms of isolation also share

semi-permeable boundaries; for example, existential isolation may be made manageable through one's interpersonal relationships.

### **Existential Loneliness**

Yalom's (1980) central focus, however, is on the phenomena of existential isolation, which he describes as an unbridgeable gap between oneself and any other being, and even more fundamental, a separation between oneself and the world. Existential isolation cuts beneath all other isolation:

"No matter how close each of us becomes to another there remains a final unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone. The existential conflict is thus, the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish to be part of a larger whole" (p.9). Existential isolation impregnates the "paste of things" and hides within our lived experience, and we experience only a world of everydayness and routine activities. "We are lulled into a sense of cozy, familiar belongingness; the primordial world of vast emptiness and isolation is buried and silenced, only to speak in brief bursts, during nightmares and mythic visions" (p. 358). He said the phenomenon is experienced the most by those facing death; the time that one realizes that one was born alone and must exit from the world alone. "We may want others to be with us at death, we may die for another, or for a cause but no one can, in the slightest degree, have one's solitary death taken from him or her" (Yalom, 2000, p. 1). According to Yalom (1980), there is no solution to isolation, it is part of existence; we must face it and find a way to take it into ourselves.

### **Existential Anxiety**

The experience of meaninglessness and the creation of meaning are closely related to the

experience of Angst or existential anxiety. This occurs against the backdrop of the personal realization that I am ultimately alone in the world and that I must contend with my mortality and other limitations, taking responsibility for myself in the face of endless challenges and confusions (Kierkegaard, 1844). Tillich (2000) noted that “the anxiety of fate and death is the most basic, most universal, and inescapable” of human anxieties (p. 42).

Anxiety emanates from an individual’s confrontation with the ultimate concerns of existence. He suggested that this fear was omnipresent, latent, and reinforced by the recognition of our mortality and the experience of watching others die (p. 35). Moreover, he argued that assuaging this anxiety, and finding meaning in life, was central to man’s existence (Tillich, 2000, p. 42). This same theme can be found in the writings of early existential psychologist Frankl, who wrote that “man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life” (Lasch, 2006, p. 99). Frankl went on to argue that human happiness was contingent not merely upon discovery of some meaning-giving construct, but upon participation in meaning-giving activities. He held that man could not be happy in some bucolic, tension-free utopia, and that what man actually needed was “the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task” (Frankl, 2006, p. 105). Similar attention has been given to the question of where people search for this meaning and how people mitigate this anxiety.

According to Tillich (1952), there are three types of existential anxiety. First, Anxiety about fate and death concerns the absolute threat to one’s being in death and the relative threat to the self in our personal fate. The anxiety of fate or death in its pathological expression drives individuals to an unrealistic need for security. This anxiety is compounded to the degree that a person individuates. Unconscious pathological

manifestations of the need for security include obsessive, compulsive, and dependent behavior as well as the narcissistic preoccupation with acquiring power and wealth that underlies modern Western society.

Second, anxiety of emptiness and meaningless is created by doubt based on separation and isolation. Anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness concerns the fear that there is no “ultimate concern”, no ultimate importance in life that gives meaning to one’s existence. In its pathological expression, this anxiety drives individuals toward an unrealistic need for certainty or fanaticism. Problems with separation underlie the dynamics of all insecure attachment disorders.

Third, human beings experience an anxiety of guilt and condemnation. Its pathological expression this anxiety drives individuals toward an unrealistic need for perfection. The need for perfection can be observed in patients who are obsessed about side effects of medication and are trying to find a ‘perfect’ cure. People with eating disorders try to find a perfect body and the drive for perfection may be part of people’s character structure (Tillich 1952). If these three types of anxieties are not managed successfully then person reaches the state of hopelessness (Tillich 1952).

## Religion

Definitions of religion have ranged from “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1961, p. 42), to “a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power” (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975, p. 1), to “whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die” (Batson, Schoenrade & Yentis, 1993,

p. 8). Definitions of religion may depend on the type of religious practices and the culture that an individual lives. Moreover, the diversity of religious experiences would be expected to have an impact on an individual's own perceptions about the meanings of the word's religion and spirituality. Religion has also been known to take different views for each tradition and culture whereas spirituality goes beyond them all (Benjamin & Looby, 1998).

Pargament (1997) defines religion as "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (p. 32). This definition rests on a proactive, goal-oriented view of human nature: People actively seek what they consider to be significant and of ultimate concern to them. Two dimensions of this search are particularly salient: the pathways taken by individuals in their search for various significant goals, and the destinations or significant goals themselves. For the religious individual, a variety of pathways may be chosen to pursue a given goal. As one path proves unsuccessful, it may be modified or replaced with another. Likewise, as circumstances change and certain goals and values are challenged, individuals may choose to protect and conserve their goals, or they may elect to transform and replace them with newer and more compelling ones (Pargament, 1997).

### **Existentialist's Perspective on Religion**

Szasz (1994) writes, "religion is the denial of the human foundations of meaning and of the finitude of life; this authenticated denial lets those who yearn for a theo-mythological foundation of meaning reject the reality of death to theologize life" (p. 35). Frankl (1977) also challenges the concept of religion as panacea to the existential challenges that face mankind. He says:

"Although religion may have a very positive psychotherapeutic effect on the patient, its intention is in no way a therapeutic one. Religion is not an insurance policy for a tranquil life, for

maximum freedom from conflicts, or for any other hygienic goal." (p. 72)

Yalom (1980) refers to another view of cosmic meaning, which "stresses that life be dedicated to emulating God. God represents perfection, and thus the purpose of life is to strive for perfection" (p. 425).

### **Religion, Happiness, and Existential Issues**

French and Joseph (1999) found an association between religiosity and happiness, unless purpose in life was partial out, making the association no longer evident. Ellison (1991) found that religious people report higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and fewer harmful psychosocial consequences of traumatic life events. Another study also reported a positive relationship between religiosity and mental health (Larson et al., 1992). In meta-analysis of 24 studies, Bergin (1983) found that 47% displayed a positive association between religion and mental health, 23% showed a negative correlation, and 30% had no correlation.

Religious ideas and institutions are particularly powerful constructs in the struggle to assuage existential anxiety. Becker argues, for example, that religion is the best construct for ameliorating existential anxiety because it solves the problem of death (Becker, 1997). This emphasis on religion's capacity to mitigate existential anxiety is also salient in contemporary psychological research. Modern researchers note the efficacy of religion in meeting a variety of psychological needs and write, "No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity. Consequently, religion often is at the core of individual and group identity" (Jeffery, 1999, p. 558).

### **Objectives**

1. To find the relationship between existential loneliness, existential anxiety, religiosity, and happiness.

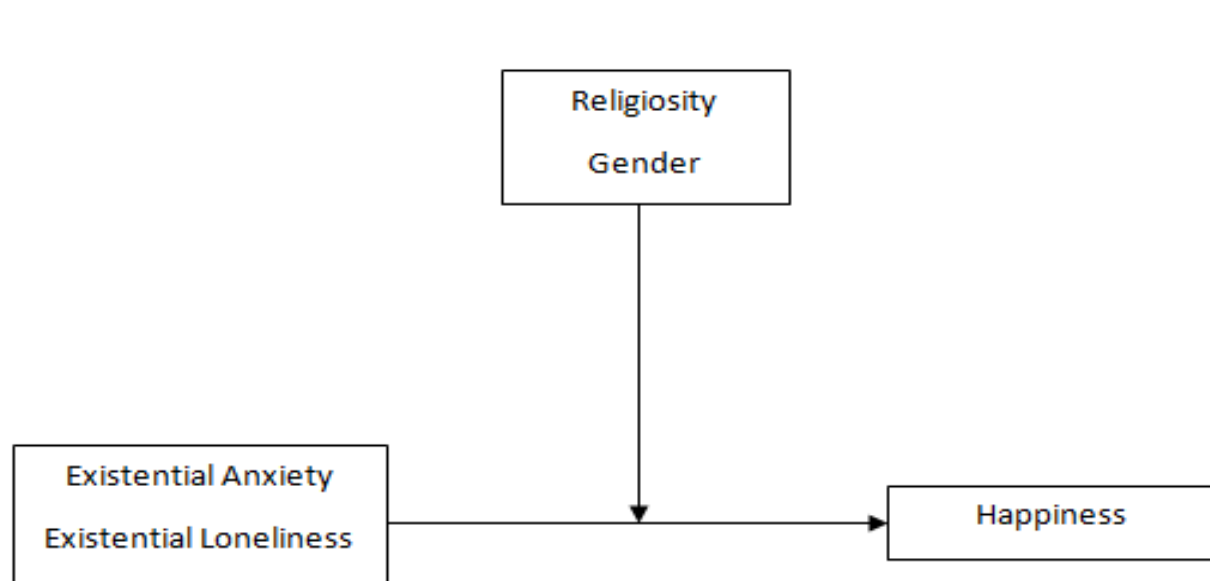
2. To investigate the role of religiosity in the relationships among existential issues (loneliness and anxiety) and happiness.
3. To examine the role of gender in existential issues (anxiety and loneliness), happiness, and religiosity.

### Hypotheses

1. Existential anxiety and Existential loneliness would be negative predictors of happiness.

2. Religiosity will moderate the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness.
3. Religiosity will moderate the relationship between existential anxiety and happiness.
4. Gender will moderate the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness.
5. Gender will moderate the relationship between existential anxiety and happiness.

### Conceptual Model



### Method

#### Research Design

The study was co-relational research, and a cross-sectional survey research design was adapted. The research was conducted in two parts. First part was pilot study and the other was the main study. Purposed hypotheses were tested in the second part which was the main part of the study.

#### Instruments

The SHS scale of global subjective happiness by Lyubomirsky & Lepper (1999) was used to

measure happiness. Religiosity was measured by Short Muslim religiosity and belief scale by (Tayyiba, AlMarri, Tian, and Samir Al-Adawi 2009). Existential Loneliness Questionnaire (ELQ) by Mayers, Khoo and Svartberg 2002) and Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ) developed by Weems, Costa, Dehon, and Berman (2004) were used to measure the constructs of existential loneliness and anxiety.

#### Sample

The data was collected through convenient sampling technique. The convenient random

sampling is a technique that involves the selection of those subjects that are most easily accessible. It is least costly to the researcher in terms of time and money (Marshall, 1996). The sample of the study was collected from the students at University of Sargodha. The data was collected from the undergraduate students at University of Sargodha with almost equal representation of girls (n=158) and boys (n=142).

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The students of bachelors were only included in this study age ranging from 18-25 years. The bachelor program is a program which consists of four-year education, which is further divided into eight semesters. Only those students were included in the study who had passed the first two years of their graduation.

### Results

**Table 1** Descriptive and Psychometric Properties of Scales of Present Study

Variables	N	M	SD	A	Range		
					Actual	Potential	Sk
REL	300	32.99	6.05	.75	9-45	9-45	-.79
EL	300	46.04	15.20	.93	29-99	29-203	.77
EA	300	23.58	9.09	.88	13-52	13-65	.87
HAPP	04	18.64	3.96	.71	7-28	4-28	-.16

Note: REL =Religiosity; EL = Existential loneliness; Happ =Happiness

Table 1 shows the psychometric properties of the present study. It also depicts the internal consistency index (alpha coefficient) for all scales used in this study. The results showed that all the scales of the present study are internally

consistent as alpha coefficients of all scales. None of the values of skewness were aberrantly high, which shows that the distributions of all scales were normally distributed.

**Table 2** Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 300)

Sr. No.	Variables	Categories	F	%
1	Gender	Male	142	46.9
		Female	158	52.1

2	Age	19 -22	127	41.9
		23-26	135	44.6
		27-31	38	12.5
3	Family System	Joint	135	30.3
		Nuclear	165	69.7
4	Birth order	First Born	98	32.3
		Last Born	29	9.6
		In Between	172	56.8
		Only Child	1	.3

Table 2 demonstrates the demographic characteristics of the sample of study. The male students ( $f = 142$ , 46.9%) were lesser in number as compared to the female students ( $f = 158$ , 52.1%). The sample included students with age ranging from 19-22 years of age, 41.9%, 44.6% of 23-26 years of age and 12.5% of 27-31 years

of age. The sample belonging to nuclear family system ( $f = 165$ , 69.7%) were greater in number as compared to joint family system ( $f = 135$ , 30.3%). The sample belonging to in between birth order ( $f = 172$ , 56.8%) were higher in number as compared to other which includes first born ( $f = 98$ , 32.3%), last born ( $f = 29$ , 9.6%) and only child ( $f = 1$ , .3%).

**Table 3** Pearson Correlations among Variables of the Present Study (N= 300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Religiosity	-	-.07	-.05	.04
2. Existential Loneliness	-	-	.79**	-.30**
3. Existential Anxiety	-	-	-	-.15**
4. Happiness	-	-	-	-

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 4** Religiosity as Moderator between Existential Loneliness and Happiness (N= 300).

Predictors	B	SE	R <sup>2</sup>
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Existential loneliness	-.10***	.02	
Religiosity	.03	.05	.10***
EL× Rel	.01**	.003	

Note: EL= Existential Loneliness; Rel= Relegiosity

\*p< .05. \*\*p< .01. \*\*\*p < .001

Table 4 presents findings of moderation analysis through PROCESS macro for SPSS whereby model 1 was specified. Existential loneliness had significant negative influence on happiness (B = -.10, t =4.92, p< .001); religiosity had not significant influence on happiness (B = .03, t =

.71, p> .05); and the interactive effect of existential loneliness and religiosity was significant (B = .01, t = 2.16, p< .01). This suggested that religiosity moderated the positive relationship between existential loneliness and happiness.

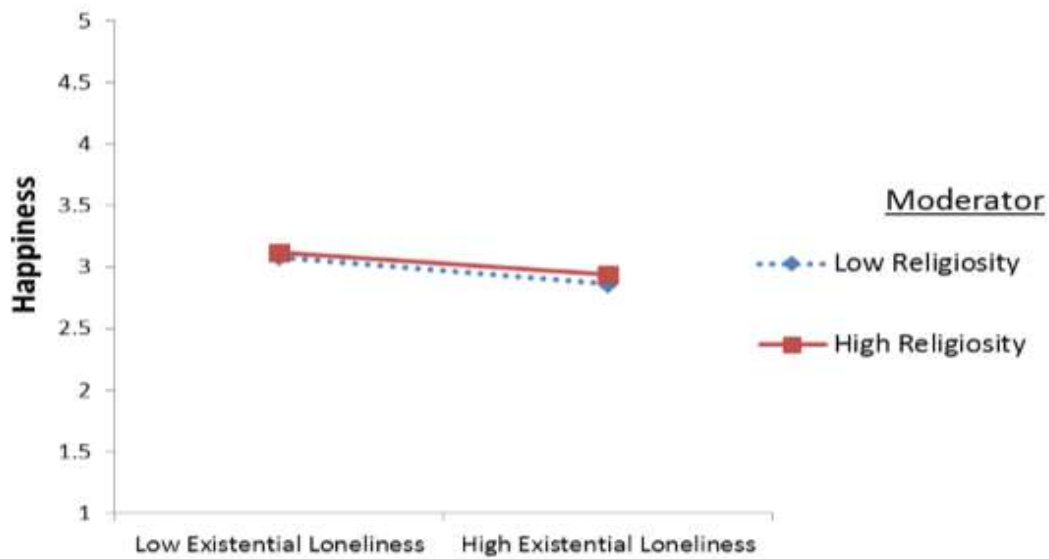


Figure 2. Moderating role of religiosity between existential loneliness and happiness

Table 5 Religiosity as Moderator between Existential Anxiety and Happiness (N= 300).

Predictors	B	SE	R <sup>2</sup>
Existential Anxiety	-.09***	.03	
Religiosity	.04	.05	.04***



EA× Rel .01\*\* .006

Note: EL= Existential Loneliness; Rel= Religiosity

\*p< .05. \*\*p< .01. \*\*\*p < .001

Table 5 presents findings of moderation analysis through PROCESS macro for SPSS whereby model 1 was specified. Existential anxiety had significant negative influence on happiness (B = -.09, t = 2.59, p< .001); religiosity had not significant influence on happiness (B = .04, t =

.83, p> .05); and the interactive effect of existential anxiety and religiosity was significant (B = .01, t = 2.10, p< .01). This suggested that religiosity moderated the positive relationship between existential anxiety and happiness.

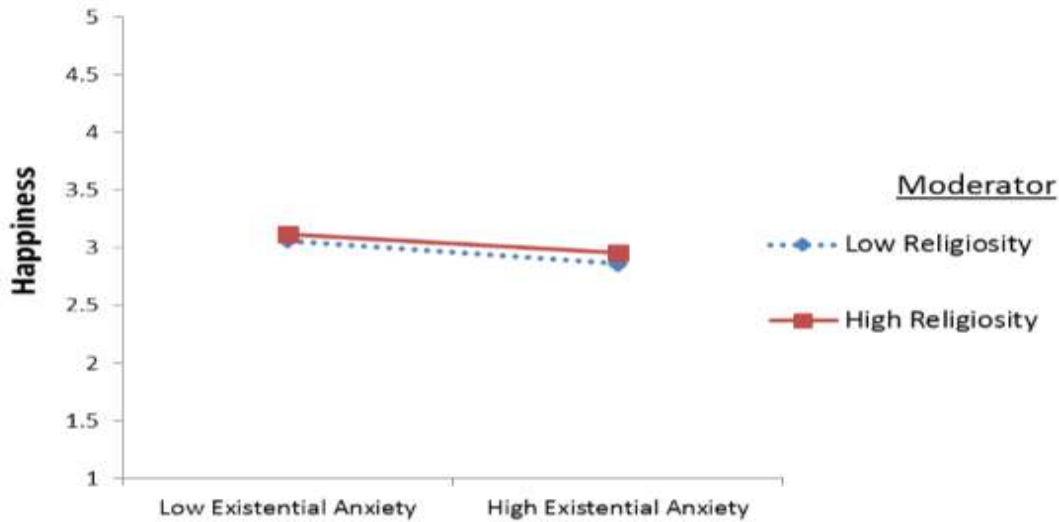
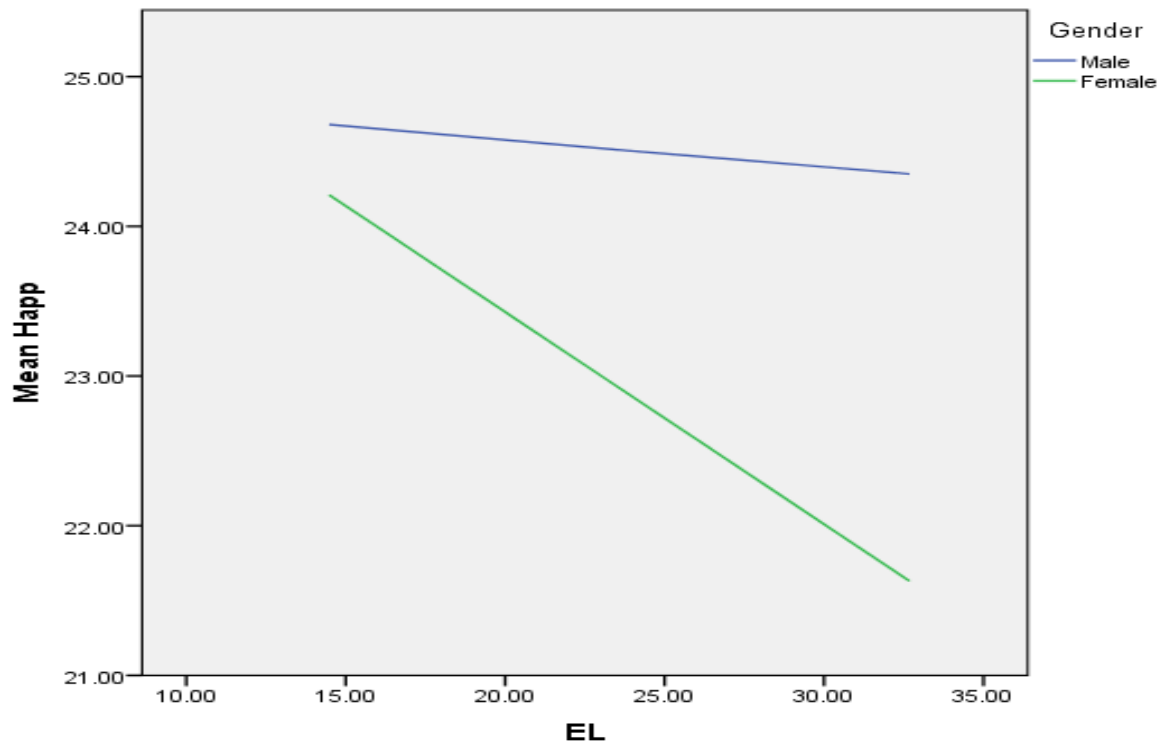


Figure 3. Moderating role of religiosity between existential anxiety and happiness

Table 6 Gender as Moderator between Existential Anxiety and Happiness (N= 300)

Predictors	β	SE	R <sup>2</sup>
Existential Anxiety	4.92*	2.09	
Gender	1.30	1.89	.13***
Existential Anxiety * Gender	.13**	.04	

Figure: Moderating role of Gender between Existential loneliness and Happiness



## Discussion

Our first hypothesis was existential anxiety and Existential loneliness would be negative predictors of happiness. Existential anxiety is a state of worry or fear about the meaning of life. It can be triggered by a variety of factors, such as a major life change, a personal crisis, or simply the passage of time. When people experience existential anxiety, they may feel lost, confused, and uncertain about their purpose in life. This can lead to feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and despair, all of which can contribute to a decrease in happiness.

Existential loneliness is a sense of isolation and disconnection from others. It can be caused by a variety of factors, such as social isolation, a lack of meaningful relationships, or a feeling of being misunderstood. When people experience existential loneliness, they may feel like they don't belong, like they're not good enough, or like they're all alone in the world. This can lead to feelings of sadness, emptiness, and

despair, all of which can contribute to a decrease in happiness.

Here is a growing body of research that supports the link between existential anxiety and loneliness and decreased happiness. For example, a study published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that people who scored high on a measure of existential anxiety were more likely to report feeling unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives (Steger, 2006). Similarly, a study published in the journal of *Personality and Social Psychology* found that people who felt lonely were more likely to report feeling unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). It is important to note that not everyone who experiences existential anxiety or loneliness will be unhappy. However, the research suggests that these experiences are more likely to lead to decreased happiness than not experiencing them. If you are struggling with existential anxiety or loneliness, it is important to seek help from a mental health professional. There are a variety of effective treatments available that can help you to manage

these difficult experiences and improve your overall happiness.

Our second hypothesis, religiosity will moderate the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness was supported and it moderates it in a number of ways. First, religiosity can provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life, which can help to reduce existential anxiety. Second, religiosity can provide a sense of community and belonging, which can help to reduce existential loneliness. Third, religiosity can provide a set of beliefs and practices that can help people to cope with difficult life experiences, such as death, illness, and loss.

A study published in the journal *Psychological Science* found that religiosity was associated with a lower risk of existential loneliness (Pargament et al., 2000). The study participants were asked to complete a number of questionnaires, including a measure of religiosity and a measure of existential loneliness. The results showed that people who scored higher on the religiosity scale were also less likely to score high on the existential loneliness scale.

Religiosity can provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This can help to reduce existential anxiety by providing people with a framework for understanding the world and their place in it. For example, a study published in the journal *Psychological Science* found that religious people were less likely to experience existential anxiety than non-religious people (Pargament et al., 2000).

Religiosity can provide a sense of community and belonging. This can help to reduce existential loneliness by providing people with a sense of connection to others. For example, a study published in the journal *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that religious people were more likely to report

feeling connected to others than non-religious people (Steger et al., 2006).

Religiosity can provide a set of beliefs and practices that can help people to cope with difficult life experiences. This can help to reduce existential anxiety and loneliness by providing people with a way to make sense of difficult experiences and to find hope for the future. For example, a study published in the journal *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* found that religious people were more likely to report using religious coping strategies to deal with stress than non-religious people (Koenig et al., 2001). Hence, our third hypothesis, religiosity will moderate the relationship between existential anxiety and happiness was supported.

Furthermore, existential loneliness is a type of loneliness that is characterized by a sense of isolation and disconnection from the meaning of life. It can be caused by a variety of factors, including a lack of purpose, a sense of meaninglessness, and a fear of death. Happiness, on the other hand, is a state of well-being and contentment. It is often associated with positive emotions such as joy, satisfaction, and love. There is some evidence to suggest that gender may moderate the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness. For example, one study found that women were more likely to experience existential loneliness than men. Additionally, the study found that women who were more existentially lonely were also less happy. These findings are relevant to the recent crises of COVID-19 pandemic, where people had higher anxiety levels which impacted their wellbeing as well as general health behaviors (Asif et al., 2020; Ghazal et al., 2022; Idrees et al., 2022; Idrees & Malik, 2022; Kazim et al., 2021; Kazim et al., 2022; Tariq et al., 2022).

There are a number of possible explanations for why gender may moderate the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness. One possibility is that women are

more likely to be socialized to focus on relationships and social connection. This may make them more vulnerable to the negative effects of loneliness. Additionally, women may be more likely to experience existential loneliness because they are more likely to be caregivers. This can lead to feelings of isolation and a sense of not being able to find meaning in their lives. Here our fourth hypothesis was supported which was, gender will moderate the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness. It is important to note that the relationship between existential loneliness and happiness is complex and may be influenced by a variety of factors, including gender. More research is needed to better understand this relationship.

Our final hypothesis was gender moderates the relationship between existential anxiety and happiness. Women are more likely to experience existential anxiety than men, and this anxiety is more likely to lead to unhappiness in women than in men. This may be due to the fact that women are more likely to be socialized to focus on relationships and social connection, and a sense of isolation and disconnection from the meaning of life can be particularly distressing for women. Additionally, women may be more likely to experience existential anxiety because they are more likely to be caregivers. This can lead to feelings of isolation and a sense of not being able to find meaning in their lives.

### **Strengths**

- The study focuses on existential issues on the students which have not been studied too much in the past 20 years.
- It can also be generalized to the other institutions of Pakistan.
- It involves almost equal number of males and females considering the gender differences.

- This study goes out of the box and focuses on existential issues and attitude towards death as an ingredient of well-being and happiness.

### **Limitations**

- Population is taken from only a specific area.
- All existential issues have not been studied. Focus was only on the major ones.
- Study did not answers how these existential issues develop in persons.

### **Implications**

- This study is applicable in natural settings.
- In universities to develop the concept of religiosity through which existential issues can be solved.
- In a making a syllabus for the students. Makers should make sure that topics like those are included that has impact on person's wellbeing and happiness.
- In different rehabilitation centers by the psychologists.

### **Suggestions**

- Re-arrange your scales according to the sample if you are going to use these scales for measuring constructs.

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