



Mediterranean Diet and Happiness in Generation Z: Implications for Well-Being Management

Dieta Mediterránea y Felicidad en la Generación Z: Implicaciones para la Gestión del Bienestar

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how adherence to the Mediterranean diet, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, and physical activity jointly influence self-perceived happiness among Generation Z consumers. Using survey data collected from young adults in Andalusia, Spain, and applying fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, the research uncovers three distinct and sufficient configurations associated with high levels of happiness. The first pathway highlights the combination of physical activity with strong eudaimonic well-being, indicating that purposeful engagement and active lifestyles form a robust pathway to flourishing. The second pathway links Mediterranean diet adherence, physical activity, and hedonic well-being, suggesting that balanced eating, movement, and positive affect can work together to enhance subjective happiness. The third configuration shows that diet adherence, when paired with both hedonic pleasure and eudaimonic meaning, can foster happiness even in the absence of high physical activity. Importantly, no single factor emerged as a necessary condition, reinforcing the idea that happiness among Generation Z arises from multiple, equally valid lifestyle and psychological combinations. By integrating nutrition, positive psychology, and lifestyle behaviour within a configurational model, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of youth happiness and offers implications for well-being management, practical insights for public health initiatives and policy strategies aimed at promoting well-being in younger populations.

Keywords: Mediterranean diet; Hedonic well-being; Eudaimonic well-being; Physical activity; Happiness; Generation Z.

R E S U M E N

Este estudio examina cómo la adherencia a la dieta mediterránea, el bienestar hedónico y eudaimónico y la práctica de ejercicio físico influyen conjuntamente en la felicidad autopercebida de la Generación Z. Basado en una encuesta realizada a jóvenes adultos en Andalucía y utilizando análisis comparativo cualitativo con conjuntos difusos, el estudio identifica configuraciones que explican niveles elevados de felicidad. La primera combina ejercicio físico con bienestar eudaimónico, mostrando que un estilo de vida activo unido a un sentido claro de desarrollo personal constituye una vía sólida hacia el bienestar. La segunda integra adherencia a la dieta mediterránea, actividad física y bienestar hedónico, indicando que una alimentación equilibrada junto con movimiento regular y emociones positivas pueden favorecer la felicidad subjetiva. La tercera muestra que seguir la dieta mediterránea, cuando se combina con placer hedónico y propósito eudaimónico, también puede generar felicidad incluso sin altos niveles de ejercicio. Ningún factor individual aparece como condición necesaria, lo que confirma que la felicidad en la Generación Z surge de diferentes combinaciones de hábitos y recursos psicológicos. Al integrar nutrición, psicología positiva y comportamientos saludables en un modelo configuracional, este trabajo ofrece una visión más completa del bienestar juvenil y aporta orientaciones para la gestión del bienestar, el diseño de intervenciones y políticas centradas en promover estilos de vida que apoyen la salud, el equilibrio emocional y la felicidad de los jóvenes. Este enfoque aporta claridad adicional para comprender mejor sus necesidades actuales y orientar acciones efectivas en contextos educativos diversos.

Palabras clave: Dieta mediterránea; Bienestar hedónico; Bienestar eudaimónico; Ejercicio físico; Felicidad; Generación Z.

1. INTRODUCTION

Promoting physical and psychological well-being in younger generations has become a central concern in contemporary public health and social policy, particularly considering the growing prevalence of mental health challenges and unhealthy lifestyle behaviours. Recent evidence shows that Generation Z reports higher levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional vulnerability compared to previous cohorts, while also exhibiting increasingly sedentary lifestyles and suboptimal dietary patterns (Saini *et al.*, 2026; World Health Organization, 2025). In parallel, adherence to the Mediterranean diet, traditionally associated with both physical and psychological health benefits, has been declining among younger populations, raising concerns about long-term well-being outcomes (Tomás-Gallego *et al.*, 2025). These trends highlight the urgency of understanding how lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations jointly shape happiness in this generation.

Against this backdrop, Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Bermúdez *et al.*, 2021), represents a particularly relevant cohort for examining the formation of subjective well-being. This generation has grown up in a context characterised by digital hyper-connectivity, economic uncertainty, and increased awareness of mental health issues, all of which may influence how happiness is constructed and experienced. From a theoretical perspective, well-being research has traditionally distinguished between two complementary dimensions: hedonic well-being, associated with pleasure, positive affect, and life satisfaction, and eudaimonic well-being, linked to meaning, self-development, and optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2017). At the same time, lifestyle behaviours such as adherence to the Mediterranean diet and engagement in physical activity have been identified as key determinants of both physical and psychological health (Martínez-González *et al.*, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2025). However, existing research has largely examined these factors in isolation, overlooking the possibility that their combined effects may be critical in explaining happiness among younger populations. In this study, a clear conceptual distinction is established between well-being and happiness. Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are treated as distinct antecedent dimensions of subjective experience. The former captures the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment, while the latter reflects meaning, purpose, and self-realisation (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2017). Happiness, by contrast, is conceptualised as the global outcome that arises when these dimensions, together with lifestyle factors such as diet and physical activity, converge to shape young people's overall self-perception of flourishing. In line with Diener *et al.* (2018), we therefore regard well-being orientations as inputs that configure the conditions for happiness, rather than confusing happiness itself with its underlying components.

To explain the interaction between lifestyle factors and psychological orientations, this study adopts the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its theoretical framework. SDT posits that happiness emerges from the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) whose satisfaction nurtures optimal functioning and subjective flourishing (Huta, & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Within

this framework, adherence to the Mediterranean Diet (MD) and engagement in physical activity (PA) are interpreted as need-supportive behaviours that facilitate the satisfaction of these core needs. Once these needs are fulfilled, individuals experience both hedonic well-being, reflected in pleasure and enjoyment, and eudaimonic well-being, reflected in meaning and personal growth. Happiness, in turn, represents the global evaluative outcome that emerges from these integrated processes. SDT therefore provides a coherent lens through which lifestyle behaviours, psychological orientations, and subjective happiness can be conceptually linked within a unified explanatory model.

Despite the growing body of research on well-being, two important limitations remain. First, most studies rely on linear and additive approaches that estimate the net effect of individual predictors, thereby overlooking the possibility that different combinations of conditions may lead to similar well-being outcomes. Second, there is limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on Generation Z that integrates lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations within a unified framework. This gap is not only empirical but also theoretical, as it restricts our ability to understand happiness as a complex and configurational phenomenon. Addressing this limitation is essential to advance both well-being theory and its practical application in contexts such as public health, education, and youth policy.

Accordingly, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: Are adherence to the Mediterranean Diet, physical activity, eudaimonic well-being, or hedonic well-being necessary conditions for happiness among Gen Z?

RQ2: What combinations of Mediterranean Diet, physical activity, eudaimonic well-being and hedonic well-being are sufficient to explain happiness among Gen Z?

To address these research questions, this study adopts a configurational approach based on survey data collected from Generation Z individuals in Andalusia, Spain, and analysed using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). This methodological approach allows capturing causal complexity, equifinality, and non-linear relationships between lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations (Fiss, 2011). More specifically, the theoretical contribution of the study lies in showing that happiness among Generation Z is not explained by the isolated presence of Mediterranean diet adherence, physical activity, hedonic well-being, or eudaimonic well-being, but by the way these behavioural and psychological conditions are configured. This shifts the interpretation of happiness from an additive outcome to a configurational process in which lifestyle behaviours operate as need-supportive conditions whose relevance depends on their connection with hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic meaning. In doing so, the study extends SDT by demonstrating that the satisfaction of psychological needs may be expressed through alternative lifestyle-based pathways rather than through a single dominant route. The introduction therefore closes by positioning the article around a precise theoretical claim: youth happiness is better understood as the outcome of alternative need-supportive configurations than as the direct result of any universal predictor.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Self-determination theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a well-established framework for understanding human motivation and well-being through the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are fulfilled, individuals experience higher levels of vitality, self-regulation, and psychological functioning, whereas their frustration is associated with diminished well-being and maladaptive outcomes (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020).

Rather than conceptualising happiness as an isolated outcome, SDT interprets it as the result of underlying motivational processes driven by need satisfaction. In this sense, happiness reflects a global evaluative state emerging from the interaction between behavioural engagement and internal psychological orientations (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how different lifestyle choices contribute to well-being.

Within this framework, lifestyle behaviours can be understood as need-supportive contexts that facilitate or hinder the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Activities such as maintaining a healthy diet or engaging in regular physical activity may foster autonomy through self-regulated choices, competence through mastery and health-related efficacy, and relatedness through shared practices and social interaction (Ng *et al.*, 2012). These processes, in turn, give rise to two complementary dimensions of well-being: hedonic well-being, associated with pleasure and positive affect, and eudaimonic well-being, associated with meaning and personal growth (Huta & Ryan, 2010).

In the context of this study, SDT serves as an integrative framework linking lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations to happiness. Adherence to the Mediterranean diet (MD) and physical activity (PA) are conceptualised as need-supportive behaviours, while hedonic (HED) and eudaimonic (EUD) well-being represent the psychological processes arising from need satisfaction. Happiness (HAP) is thus modelled as the global outcome emerging from these interactions. This conceptualisation allows positioning SDT not as a descriptive theory, but as a mechanism explaining how different combinations of behavioural and psychological conditions may lead to similar levels of subjective well-being.

2.2. Need-supportive behaviour

A. THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

The Mediterranean Diet (MD) represents a long-standing, plant-centered way of eating in which fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, whole grains, and extra-virgin olive oil play a central role. Fish and seafood appear regularly, while white meat, eggs, and fermented dairy products like yogurt and cheese are eaten in moderate amounts. Wine is included sparingly and only alongside meals. Overall, this dietary pattern places olive oil at the heart of its culinary practices and favours foods that are sea-

sonal, lightly processed, and deeply embedded in local traditions (Hernández & Estruch, 2019; Hu *et al.*, 2025; Martínez-González *et al.*, 2017). The MD is broadly acknowledged for its positive impact on health, its sustainable character, and its deep cultural roots (Carfora *et al.*, 2022). The Mediterranean diet has long been recognized for its protective effects against chronic diseases, particularly cardiovascular and metabolic conditions. More recently, attention has shifted toward its psychological and mental health benefits. Young people's adherence to the MD has been associated with lower depressive symptoms, reduced stress, and higher life satisfaction (Tomás-Gallego *et al.*, 2025). Scholars argue that the MD is not only a dietary pattern but also a cultural lifestyle that encompasses conviviality, physical activity, and social integration (Martínez-González *et al.*, 2017). These lifestyle elements may contribute to both hedonic well-being, by generating immediate pleasure and positive affect, and eudaimonic well-being, by supporting long-term goals and a sense of meaning. However, most studies examine these relationships in isolation, often relying on linear models that fail to capture the complex ways in which diet interacts with other lifestyle and psychological dimensions. This gap underscores the need for a more holistic understanding of how MD adherence integrates into broader pathways to happiness.

B. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity (PA) is widely recognized as a determinant of both physical and psychological health. Beyond its preventive role against disease, exercise promotes positive affect, enhances self-esteem, and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression. Recent evidence suggests that exercise also supports eudaimonic well-being by fostering feelings of competence, autonomy, and purpose (Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

Physical activity and leisure-time exercise are strongly linked to better health. Cohort studies and meta-analyses show a clear dose-response pattern: benefits appear even at low levels, grow with increased activity, peak at very high levels, and then level off, regardless of how the activity is accumulated (Andrade, 2023).

Within the Mediterranean lifestyle framework, exercise is not merely a functional activity but an embedded practice that complements diet and social interaction. For young people, engaging in regular exercise can contribute to both hedonic enjoyments, through immediate pleasure and stress relief, and eudaimonic growth, by cultivating long-term resilience and goal pursuit. These dual contributions position exercise as a critical component in pathways toward happiness. Young people involved in sports show stronger values than non-participants, with their engagement driven by both hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic growth, linking sports to pleasure, achievement, and personal development (Daukilas *et al.*, 2017).

2.3. Psychological and motivational processes

A. EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING

Eudaimonic well-being reflects the pursuit of meaning, purpose, and personal growth, emphasizing optimal func-

tioning and self-realisation rather than mere pleasure (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryff, 2014). Within the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), it represents a higher-order manifestation of psychological need satisfaction, particularly autonomy and competence, which enable individuals to engage in self-congruent and value-driven actions (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Eudaimonia therefore encompasses processes of self-discovery, realization of potential, and engagement in meaningful life activities (Waterman *et al.*, 2008). Eudaimonic well-being constitutes an essential intangible resource for increasing people's purchase intention, as it provides lasting experiences that benefit individuals' life purpose and personal growth (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024).

Empirical research consistently shows that eudaimonic orientations predict durable increases in well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Fave *et al.*, 2011; Steger *et al.*, 2008). Unlike hedonic pursuits, which provide transient pleasure, eudaimonic engagement contributes to a sustained sense of fulfilment and coherence in life (Huta & Waterman, 2014). Longitudinal studies further demonstrate that eudaimonic motives exert stronger and more stable effects on happiness among young adults than hedonic motives, as they foster internalized goals, purpose, and self-determined behaviour (Jia *et al.*, 2022).

Cross-cultural evidence also supports the universality of eudaimonic constructs. Large-scale studies across different societies indicate that meaning, growth, and self-realisation constitute central components of psychological well-being regardless of cultural context (Disabato *et al.*, 2016). Within the present model, eudaimonic well-being (EUD) is conceptualized as a psychological process reflecting the internalisation of need satisfaction and the realization of one's potential, acting as a key pathway through which lifestyle behaviours such as Mediterranean Diet adherence and physical activity contribute to happiness.

B. HEDONIC WELL-BEING

Hedonic well-being refers to the experience of pleasure, enjoyment, and positive affect, capturing the emotional dimension of subjective well-being (Diener *et al.*, 2018). It is often operationalized through indicators such as life satisfaction, happiness, and the balance between positive and negative emotions (Kahneman *et al.*, 1999). From the SDT perspective, hedonic outcomes arise when basic psychological needs are satisfied, leading to feelings of vitality, contentment, and enjoyment of life (Ryan *et al.*, 2008).

Whereas eudaimonia is oriented toward long-term fulfilment and personal growth, hedonia concerns the immediate experience of happiness derived from pleasurable activities or satisfying circumstances. Empirical studies show that hedonic well-being is more strongly associated with affective states and short-term satisfaction, whereas eudaimonic well-being relates to cognitive evaluation and meaning-making processes (Fave *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, both components are positively correlated and jointly contribute to overall happiness (Disabato *et al.*, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

In the context of younger generations, hedonic well-being plays a particularly salient role in shaping emotional balance

and perceived life quality. However, without the complementary influence of eudaimonic motives, hedonic pursuits may lead to instability or superficial satisfaction (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Thus, hedonic well-being (HED) in this study is conceptualized as a psychological process reflecting the affective and experiential dimension of need satisfaction, mediating the link between supportive behaviours (diet, physical activity) and the evaluative outcome of happiness.

2.4. Conceptual Model and Research Propositions

Taken together, the reviewed literature and the assumptions of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggest that happiness should not be understood as the linear result of isolated antecedents, but rather as the outcome of interacting behavioural and psychological conditions. SDT posits that well-being and flourishing emerge when individuals experience satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the present study, adherence to the Mediterranean diet (MD) and physical activity (PA) are conceptualised as need-supportive behaviours, whereas hedonic well-being (HED) and eudaimonic well-being (EUD) represent distinct psychological expressions of need satisfaction. Because these needs may be supported through different combinations of behaviours and internal experiences, high self-perceived happiness is theoretically expected to arise through more than one possible route.

This perspective also suggests that the role of individual conditions should not be assumed in advance. From an SDT standpoint, neither a specific behaviour nor a specific psychological orientation is necessarily expected to operate in the same way across all individuals. Some conditions may prove especially salient, and one or more may even display the characteristics of necessity, but this remains an empirical question. What is theoretically more consistent with the literature is the idea that happiness in Generation Z is likely to reflect causal complexity, in which different elements contribute in different ways depending on how they are combined.

In this context, adherence to the Mediterranean diet may contribute to happiness not only because of its nutritional value, but also because it reflects a broader lifestyle associated with balance, sociality, and everyday enjoyment. Physical activity may also play a relevant role, as previous research has linked it to vitality, self-regulation, competence, and positive affect. Likewise, hedonic well-being captures the pleasurable and affective dimension of experience, whereas eudaimonic well-being reflects meaning, personal growth, and self-realisation. Rather than assuming that each of these factors exerts an independent and additive effect, the present study adopts the view that their contribution to happiness is better understood configurationally.

Accordingly, the conceptual model assumes that high self-perceived happiness among Generation Z may emerge from the interplay of lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations. This view is consistent with the core logic of configurational reasoning, which emphasises that outcomes may result from different combinations of conditions rather than from one dominant antecedent. It is also consistent with SDT, which implies

that flourishing may be achieved through different need-supportive routes depending on how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are experienced and internalised.

On this basis, we advance the following research propositions:

RP1: One or more individual conditions may be necessary for high self-perceived happiness among Generation Z.

RP2: Alternative causal configurations of Mediterranean diet adherence, physical activity, hedonic well-being, and eudaimonic well-being are sufficient for high self-perceived happiness among Generation Z.

Together, these research propositions are represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the possible pathways through which lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations may lead to high self-perceived happiness among Generation Z.

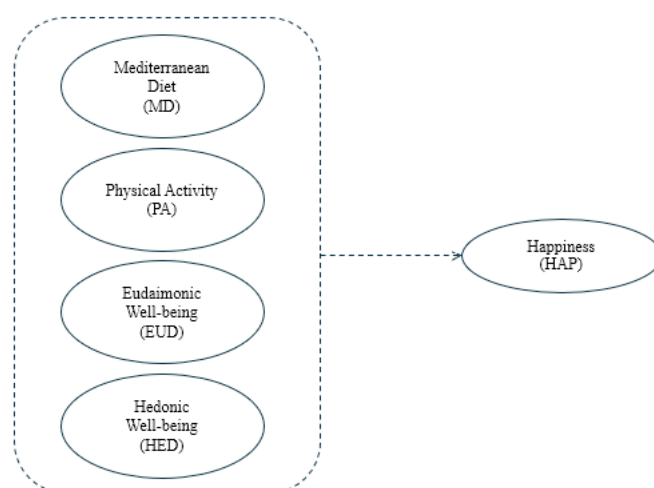


Figure 1

Conceptual model and configurational pathways to happiness

Source: Own elaboration.

To ensure conceptual clarity, Table 1 summarises the definitions of the constructs included in the model and explicitly specifies their role as antecedents or outcome variables.

Table 1
Constructs, definitions, roles and sources

Construct	Definition	Role in the model	Source
Mediterranean Diet (MD)	Degree of adherence to a dietary pattern characterised by plant-based foods, olive oil, and balanced nutrition	Antecedent (behavioural)	Schröder et al. (2011)
Physical Activity (PA)	Frequency and intensity of regular physical exercise	Antecedent (behavioural)	Martínez-González et al. (2005)
Hedonic Well-Being (HED)	Experience of pleasure, enjoyment, and positive affect	Antecedent (psychological)	Huta & Ryan (2010)
Eudaimonic Well-Being (EUD)	Sense of meaning, purpose, and personal growth	Antecedent (psychological)	Huta & Ryan (2010)
Happiness (HAP)	Global evaluative perception of life satisfaction and overall well-being	Outcome	Diener et al. (2018)

Source: Own elaboration.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Configurational Approaches to Well-Being Research

Traditional quantitative studies often adopt additive and symmetric models to explain well-being outcomes, testing isolated effects of diet, exercise, or psychological constructs. Such approaches risk oversimplification by ignoring causal complexity and the possibility that different individuals achieve happiness through distinct pathways. This approach reinforces the idea that the factors related to youth happiness should not be examined in isolation, but rather as interdependent elements within a broader system, as [Cuesta-Valiño et al. \(2024\)](#) point out.

Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) offers a methodological alternative that captures equifinality, the principle that multiple different configurations of conditions can produce the same outcome. Although fsQCA has been increasingly applied in consumer research and management studies, its use in the context of well-being and lifestyle is still limited. By allowing the identification of sufficient but not necessarily necessary conditions, fsQCA enables the exploration of how Mediterranean diet adherence, physical exercise, and hedonic and eudaimonic orientations combine to generate happiness. This configurational approach is particularly relevant for Generation Z, whose diversity in values, habits, and psychological orientations may lead to heterogeneous but equally valid routes to happiness.

3.2. Measurement and data collection

An online survey was conducted between May and July 2025 among Generation Z young adults residing in Andalusia, Spain, yielding 379 valid responses. Age plays a key role in marketing research, and generational patterns often differ markedly, making it essential for marketers to acknowledge these differences and adjust their research approaches accordingly (John *et al.*, 2024). Participants were recruited through online channels targeting Generation Z individuals, including university networks and social media platforms. Participation was voluntary, and no financial incentives were offered.

The questionnaire was developed based on previously validated scales to ensure content validity and comparability with prior research. As the original instruments were in English, a translation and back-translation procedure was applied. Specifically, the questionnaire was first translated into Spanish by a bilingual expert and subsequently back-translated into English by an independent translator. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to ensure semantic equivalence.

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of respondents ($n \approx 30$) to assess clarity, wording, and overall comprehension of the questionnaire. Minor adjustments were made based on participant feedback.

To mitigate common method bias, several procedural remedies were implemented. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to reduce evaluation apprehension, and items measuring different constructs were psychologically separated within the questionnaire. Clear instructions emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers. Given the self-reported nature of lifestyle variables, particular attention was paid to reducing social desirability bias.

The questionnaire included well-established and validated scales to capture the key constructs of the study. Adherence to the Mediterranean Diet (MD) was measured using a 14-item scale adapted from Schröder *et al.* (2011), reflecting both dietary frequency and alignment with traditional Mediterranean eating patterns. Physical Activity (PA) was assessed following the validated measure by Martínez-González *et al.* (2005), capturing both frequency and intensity of weekly activity. Eudaimonic (EUD) and Hedonic (HED) well-being were adapted from Huta and Ryan (2010), representing the two motivational orientations that underpin subjective well-being. Happiness (HAP) was measured through a single self-perceived indicator of life satisfaction, derived from the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS, 2024) and validated for adolescent populations (Lukoševičiūtė, 2022).

Several procedures were implemented to ensure data quality. Responses were screened to identify incomplete questionnaires and inconsistent response patterns. Cases with excessive missing data or evident lack of engagement were excluded from the final sample.

Andalusia represents a particularly appropriate context for this study due to its strong cultural connection to the Mediterranean diet and its relevance as a setting where traditional dietary patterns coexist with contemporary lifestyle changes among younger populations. This makes it a suitable context for examining how lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations interact to shape happiness in Generation Z.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Calibration

Each variable was calibrated into fuzzy-set membership scores ranging from 0 (full non-membership) to 1 (full membership), following both empirical percentiles and theoretical anchors from prior research. The fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) approach (Ragin, 2008) was employed to identify combinations of causal conditions leading to high levels of happiness. In the configurational model, adherence to the Mediterranean diet (MD), physical activity (PA), hedonic well-being (HED), and eudaimonic well-being (EUD) were treated as causal conditions, while happiness (HAP) was defined as the outcome. Following standard fsQCA procedures, the analysis involved: (1) testing necessary conditions, (2) constructing a truth table to derive sufficient configurations, and (3) interpreting the resulting causal pathways associated with elevated happiness among Generation Z respondents.

Prior to conducting the configurational analysis, all variables were calibrated into fuzzy sets following Ragin's (2008) direct method. Because the variables represented continuous behavioural or attitudinal measures rather than latent constructs, calibration was based on empirical percentiles rather than distributional assumptions. Full membership (0.95), crossover (0.50), and full non-membership (0.05) thresholds were anchored at the 90th, 50th, and 10th percentiles, respectively. This approach ensures that the calibration reflects the observed dispersion of responses within the sample while avoiding arbitrary cut-off points.

The 10-50-90 percentile anchors were selected to capture meaningful variation in adherence to the Mediterranean diet (MD), physical activity (PA), hedonic well-being (HED), and eudaimonic well-being (EUD) without assuming a normal distribution. This calibration method, widely applied in consumer and lifestyle research using fsQCA (e.g., Fiss, 2011; Pappas & Woodside, 2021), combines theoretical anchors with empirically derived percentiles to achieve a balanced representation of full and partial set memberships. After calibration, all variables were expressed as fuzzy-set scores ranging from 0 (full non-membership) to 1 (full membership), allowing for subsequent testing of necessary and sufficient conditions for high happiness (HAP). To assess the sensitivity of the results to calibration choices, an additional analysis was conducted using alternative anchor points (20th, 50th, and 80th percentiles). The results for the analysis of necessary conditions remained unchanged across both calibrations, as no single condition reached the conventional consistency threshold required to be considered necessary for high happiness. In the sufficiency analysis, the alternative specification produced some variation in the exact composition of the configurations. However, the $PA \wedge EUD$ pathway remained stable across both calibrations, and physical activity continued to appear as a recurrent element in the solutions. These findings suggest that, although some configurational details are sensitive to calibration thresholds, the main substantive interpretation remains consistent.

4.2. Analysis of necessary conditions

Following the calibration process, the fsQCA was used to assess whether any single condition was necessary for achieving high happiness (HAP). As shown in Table 2, none of the indi-

vidual antecedents Mediterranean diet adherence (MD), physical activity (PA), hedonic well-being (HED), or eudaimonic well-being (EUD) reached the conventional consistency threshold (≥ 0.90) or coverage (≥ 0.50) typically required to be considered necessary (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). Consistency values ranged between 0.597 and 0.745, while coverage values remained below 0.65 across all conditions.

These results indicate that high happiness among Generation Z is not driven by any single factor in isolation. Instead, it emerges from specific configurations of lifestyle practices, well-being orientations, and dietary adherence. This finding aligns with the configurational logic of fsQCA, suggesting that equifinal combinations of behavioural and psychological conditions jointly explain elevated levels of subjective happiness.

Table 2
Analysis of necessary conditions

Conditions	Consistency	Coverage
MD	0.646	0.621
~MD	0.612	0.588
PA	0.692	0.640
~PA	0.590	0.590
EUD	0.745	0.649
~EUD	0.538	0.576
HED	0.684	0.658
~HED	0.597	0.574
Outcome variable: HAP		

Note: MD = Mediterranean diet adherence; PA = physical activity; EUD = Eudaimonic well-being; HED = Hedonic well-being; HAP = Happiness.

Source: Own elaboration.

4.3. Analysis of sufficient conditions

After confirming the absence of necessary conditions, the analysis proceeded to identify sufficient configurations leading to high happiness (HAP). A truth table was generated considering all 16 possible combinations of the four causal conditions (MD, PA, HED, and EUD). To ensure analytical rigor and parsimony, a frequency threshold of three cases and a consistency cut-off of 0.7588 were applied, following best practices for medium-sized samples in fsQCA (Ragin, 2008; Fiss, 2011; Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). The intermediate solution revealed three sufficient configurations associated with high levels of happiness among Generation Z respondents. Table 3 presents the configurations, along with their respective coverage and consistency values. It should be noted that the consistency threshold used to simplify the truth table does not necessarily coincide with the consistency values of the minimized intermediate configurations. While a cut-off of 0.7588 was applied to retain empirically relevant truth table rows, the consistency values of the final pathways are slightly lower after logical minimization. In the present case, the three configurations show moderate consistency levels (0.736, 0.748, and 0.731), all close to the commonly used 0.75 benchmark. Although these values do not indicate highly consistent pathways, they can still be considered acceptable in applied fsQCA studies when combined with meaningful coverage and theoretical interpretability (e.g., Woodside, 2013). Accordingly, the configura-

tions identified here should be interpreted as informative but moderate-strength pathways leading to high happiness.

The first configuration, $PA \wedge EUD$, exhibited a raw coverage of 0.586 and a consistency of 0.736. This pathway indicates that a substantial share of cases achieved high levels of happiness by combining regular physical activity with strong eudaimonic well-being. The combination of an active lifestyle and a sense of purpose or meaning should therefore be interpreted as a theoretically meaningful but moderate-strength pathway to subjective happiness among young adults, rather than as a deterministic or universally valid route.

The second configuration, $MD \wedge PA \wedge HED$, yielded a raw coverage of 0.446 and a consistency of 0.748. This result suggests a possible synergistic role of diet, exercise, and pleasurable experiences in promoting happiness. Adherence to the Mediterranean diet appears to complement the pursuit of hedonic enjoyment, although this association should be understood as conditional on its combination with physical activity and positive affect rather than as an independent effect of diet alone.

The third configuration, $MD \wedge EUD \wedge HED$, achieved a raw coverage of 0.488 and a consistency of 0.731. This pathway indicates that dietary adherence may contribute to happiness even in the absence of high physical activity, provided that individuals also report both hedonic pleasure and eudaimonic meaning. In this case, the Mediterranean diet is better understood as one element within a broader psychological configuration, rather than as a self-sufficient driver of happiness.

It should also be noted that the unique coverage values of the configurations are relatively low, indicating a degree of empirical overlap between the identified pathways. This suggests that the configurations explain partly the same cases of high happiness rather than completely distinct subsets of observations. Such overlap is relatively common in fsQCA analyses when different combinations of conditions lead to similar empirical outcomes. Therefore, the identified pathways should be interpreted as partially overlapping routes rather than mutually exclusive explanatory patterns.

The overall solution achieved a coverage of 0.658 and a consistency of 0.700, indicating that the three configurations collectively explain a substantial proportion of the cases while maintaining acceptable internal consistency. These findings demonstrate the principle of equifinality, whereby multiple distinct combinations of lifestyle, diet, and well-being orientations can lead to high levels of happiness in Generation Z consumers.

Table 3
Sufficient configurations of conditions for HAP

Pathways	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
$PA \wedge EUD$	0.586	0.155	0.736
$MD \wedge PA \wedge HED$	0.446	0.015	0.748
$MD \wedge EUD \wedge HED$	0.488	0.057	0.731
Solution coverage: 0.658			
Solution consistency: 0.700			

Note: Note: MD = Mediterranean diet adherence; PA = physical activity; EUD = Eudaimonic well-being; HED = Hedonic well-being; HAP = Happiness.

Source: Own elaboration.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Discussion

The findings refine, rather than simply confirm, existing explanations of youth happiness. They show that well-being among Generation Z emerges from the interplay of diet, exercise, and psychological orientation, rather than from isolated predictors. The PA $\wedge$ EUD configuration is particularly informative because it suggests that behavioural engagement may become happiness-relevant when it is connected with meaning, purpose, and personal growth. However, given the moderate consistency of this solution, it should not be interpreted as a universal core profile, but as a relevant pathway for a substantial subset of respondents. The MD-related configurations similarly suggest that Mediterranean diet adherence acts less as an independent predictor of happiness and more as a contextual lifestyle condition that gains explanatory value when combined with hedonic or eudaimonic orientations. This interpretation reinforces the theoretical premise of causal complexity and shows the value of fsQCA for identifying asymmetric and non-linear combinations that linear models may overlook (Fiss, 2011).

The findings also extend prior research on lifestyle behaviours and well-being by challenging the assumption that healthy behaviours exert stable and independent effects on happiness. Previous research has associated the Mediterranean diet with better emotional and mental well-being among young people (Tomás-Gallego *et al.*, 2025), while physical activity has been linked to psychological functioning and eudaimonic well-being (Zhang *et al.*, 2025). Our findings refine this literature by showing that neither MD nor PA appears as a necessary condition and that their relevance depends on the psychological conditions with which they are combined. This helps explain why previous empirical results may appear inconsistent: the same behaviour can be happiness-relevant in one configuration and less explanatory in another, depending on whether it is embedded in hedonic enjoyment, eudaimonic meaning, or both.

The results also sharpen the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Prior studies have argued that hedonic orientations are more closely connected with pleasure and short-term satisfaction, whereas eudaimonic orientations are linked to meaning, resilience, and long-term flourishing (Diener *et al.*, 2018; Huta & Waterman, 2014). The present findings extend this distinction by showing that these orientations do not operate as isolated psychological predictors. Instead, they acquire different explanatory roles depending on the lifestyle context. The MD $\wedge$ HED $\wedge$ EUD pathway suggests that pleasure and meaning may reinforce each other when embedded in a culturally grounded dietary pattern. Conversely, the PA $\wedge$ EUD pathway indicates that eudaimonic meaning can support happiness without the simultaneous presence of strong hedonic orientation. This refines previous literature by suggesting that hedonia and eudaimonia are not merely parallel dimensions of well-being, but configurational resources whose effects depend on their behavioural embedding.

Furthermore, the findings contribute to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by specifying how need-supportive behaviours may be translated into happiness through different psychological configurations. SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and

relatedness support hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2024), but empirical applications often examine these mechanisms through direct or additive associations. The present configurational analysis suggests that SDT mechanisms are not activated uniformly. Healthy eating and physical activity appear to contribute to happiness only when they are connected with specific forms of enjoyment, meaning, or personal growth. In this sense, the study extends SDT by positioning culturally grounded lifestyle practices as need-supportive contexts that interact with psychological orientations, rather than as peripheral lifestyle variables.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature in three more precise ways. First, it reframes happiness among Generation Z as a configurational outcome, thereby challenging additive explanations based on universal predictors. Second, it refines the interpretation of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being by showing that their effects depend on the lifestyle conditions with which they are combined. Third, it extends SDT by demonstrating that need-supportive processes can be expressed through alternative behavioural-psychological constellations involving diet, physical activity, pleasure, and meaning.

Taken together, these insights situate the present study at the intersection of lifestyle medicine, motivational psychology, and consumer well-being. They underscore the importance of moving beyond universal prescriptions of healthy behaviour toward an understanding of how young individuals combine meaning, pleasure, and lifestyle choices to achieve flourishing. Importantly, the configurational findings illustrate why interventions based solely on promoting diet or exercise often yield inconsistent results: these elements contribute to well-being only when supported by the psychological orientations through which young people interpret and internalise their behaviours. These findings highlight the need for a more context-sensitive understanding of well-being, where lifestyle behaviours acquire meaning within broader psychological configurations rather than acting as universal drivers of happiness.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The consistency values of the sufficient configurations are moderate and the unique coverage values indicate overlap between pathways. Therefore, the configurations should not be read as mutually exclusive profiles, deterministic recipes, or definitive causal sequences. Rather, they identify theoretically meaningful patterns under which high happiness is more likely to occur in the present sample. This caution is important for both theory and practice: the results support a configurational understanding of happiness, but they do not imply that any pathway can be generalised without further validation in other samples and cultural contexts.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study advances current knowledge by demonstrating that the determinants of youth happiness cannot be understood through additive or linear models alone. Instead, the findings support a shift toward a configurational logic that recognises equifinality and causal asymmetry as fundamental features of subjective well-being among Generation Z. By identifying multiple sufficient pathways to happiness, the study shows

that well-being emerges from distinct combinations of lifestyle and psychological resources rather than from the isolated influence of any single factor.

This configurational evidence contributes directly to the refinement of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT conceptualises need-supportive behaviours and psychological processes as complementary mechanisms that jointly enable flourishing. However, existing empirical research has typically examined these components separately or through linear associations, overlooking the possibility that they may operate synergistically and in non-linear ways. Our results extend SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by showing that need-supportive behaviours, operationalised here as adherence to the Mediterranean diet and engagement in physical activity, do not exert uniform effects. Instead, their influence becomes meaningful only when paired with specific psychological processes such as hedonic or eudaimonic well-being considered in this research.

The study therefore clarifies the conditions under which SDT's pillars reinforce each other. First, the pathway combining physical activity with eudaimonic well-being illustrates that meaning-oriented psychological processes can amplify the motivational value of behavioural engagement. Second, the configurations involving the Mediterranean diet reveal that dietary adherence can function as a lifestyle-based need-supportive context capable of strengthening both hedonic and eudaimonic orientations. This insight broadens SDT beyond its traditional focus on social and interpersonal contexts by demonstrating that culturally grounded lifestyle patterns also contribute to need satisfaction and, ultimately, to happiness.

Moreover, the simultaneous inclusion of dietary habits, physical activity, and dual components of well-being addresses a conceptual gap in SDT-based research. Previous studies have tended to isolate hedonic and eudaimonic constructs or treat lifestyle variables as peripheral. By integrating these elements within a unified configurational model, the present study offers a more holistic representation of how young individuals negotiate autonomy, competence, and relatedness through both behavioural choices and psychological orientations. This multidimensional perspective enhances SDT's explanatory power and aligns the theory more closely with contemporary understandings of youth well-being, which emphasise diversity, plural pathways to flourishing, and the coexistence of pleasure and meaning.

The study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it demonstrates that SDT's mechanisms operate not additively but configurationally, supporting a shift toward a more dynamic understanding of well-being. Second, it shows that lifestyle behaviours such as diet and physical activity can be theoretically recognised as meaningful components of need-supportive environments. Third, it opens new avenues for theorising how young people construct happiness through complex, interactional patterns of behaviour and psychological experience.

In theoretical terms, the main novelty is therefore not the separate consideration of diet, physical activity, hedonia, and eudaimonia, but the demonstration that SDT-based explanations of happiness can be specified configurationally. This changes how the role of eudaimonic well-being is understood: it is not merely another antecedent of happiness, but a condition that can amplify the meaning of lifestyle behaviours when combined with

physical activity or Mediterranean diet adherence. Likewise, hedonic well-being is not reduced to short-term pleasure, but becomes part of a broader constellation through which young people translate everyday lifestyle choices into perceived happiness.

5.3. Managerial Implications

The findings provide actionable guidance for organisations, educational institutions, and policymakers seeking to promote happiness and well-being among Generation Z. Because the results reveal multiple configurational pathways rather than a single determinant, interventions must be tailored to the distinct combinations of behavioural and psychological factors identified.

For organisations employing Generation Z, the evidence suggests that well-being initiatives should differentiate between employees whose happiness is driven by purposeful engagement and those who benefit from a combination of balanced nutrition, physical activity, and positive affect. Companies can operationalise this insight through concrete measures such as offering subsidised gym memberships, corporate agreements with fitness centres, rental schemes for bicycles or electric scooters, and access to workplace nutritionists who guide employees in adopting dietary patterns aligned with the Mediterranean diet. For employees who flourish through eudaimonic-oriented pathways, firms may benefit from creating development programmes that emphasise meaningful work, mentoring systems that reinforce autonomy and competence, or volunteering activities that strengthen purpose and social contribution. These initiatives align workplace resources with the motivational configurations observed in Generation Z, improving internalisation and engagement.

Educational institutions can also translate these findings into specific actions that reinforce both lifestyle habits and psychological skills. Schools and universities could incorporate Mediterranean diet focused cooking workshops, redesign cafeteria menus to include healthier meals consistent with traditional dietary patterns or develop campus-wide physical activity initiatives such as open-access exercise classes, running clubs, or structured sports challenges. To support hedonic and eudaimonic orientations simultaneously, institutions may introduce programmes on emotional well-being, mindfulness, and purpose development, or integrate reflective practices into curricula to strengthen students' sense of meaning. Given that different students follow different routes to happiness, institutions should offer modular or optional well-being tracks rather than one-size-fits-all programmes.

For policymakers, the configurational nature of youth happiness indicates the need for holistic public health strategies that integrate diet, movement, and psychological well-being. Policy actions could include designing public advertising campaigns that revitalise and promote the Mediterranean diet as part of cultural identity; funding community cooking initiatives in collaboration with local markets; or supporting the development of urban environments that facilitate physical activity, such as safe cycling lanes, accessible sports facilities, and walkable neighbourhoods. Psychological well-being could be reinforced through national programmes that train young people in emotional regulation, resilience, and purpose cultivation. Importantly, policies should recognise that these interventions are most effective when combined. For example, a campaign promoting Mediterranean dietary habits

could be paired with subsidised community exercise programmes and youth-oriented workshops on meaning and wellbeing.

These implications advocate for multi-component, flexible interventions that reflect the diverse pathways through which Generation Z achieves happiness. By adopting evidence-based strategies tailored to distinct motivational and behavioural profiles, organisations, educational institutions, and policymakers can design more effective and context-sensitive well-being initiatives.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

The study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture causal dynamics or assess changes in the identified configurations over time. Second, the use of self-reported data may introduce potential biases, particularly in the measurement of lifestyle behaviours such as diet and physical activity, which can be affected by recall errors or social desirability, despite the procedural remedies applied.

The configurational analysis is also influenced by calibration choices which, even when theoretically and empirically grounded, may affect the resulting solutions. In addition, the study does not include cross-validation of the identified configurations using independent samples or alternative techniques, which may limit the robustness of the findings.

Finally, the focus on the Andalusian context, where the Mediterranean diet is culturally embedded, may shape the observed relationships and limit the external validity of the results in other geographical or cultural settings.

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to examine the stability of configurational pathways over time, incorporating objective measures of diet and physical activity, and conducting cross-validation analyses across different samples or contexts. Extending the analysis to non-Mediterranean settings and combining fsQCA with qualitative approaches may also provide deeper insights into how individuals interpret and integrate lifestyle behaviours and psychological orientations in their daily lives.

5.5. Conclusions

This research shows that, within Generation Z, self-perceived happiness is not determined by any single factor but by partially overlapping configurations that integrate dietary adherence, physical activity, and psychological well-being. The three identified pathways, physical activity with eudaimonic well-being, Mediterranean diet with physical activity and hedonic well-being, and Mediterranean diet with both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, support the equifinal nature of happiness. However, the moderate consistency levels and the overlap between configurations require a cautious conclusion: these pathways should be understood as plausible and theoretically meaningful patterns rather than as definitive or universally generalisable profiles. The results nevertheless highlight the relevance of eudaimonic orientation, while showing that hedonic experience, diet, and exercise can also contribute to happiness when they are combined within broader need-supportive constellations. By adopting a configurational perspective, this study offers a more precise framework for understanding youth well-being and for de-

signing flexible initiatives aimed at promoting health and happiness among younger generations.

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7. AUTHORSHIP

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