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Examining the Effects of Happiness and Religious Faith on the Life Effectiveness of Sabahan Youths

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Abstract: *The recent COVID-19 pandemic has conceivably reduced the life effectiveness (i.e., "generic life skills which facilitate surviving and thriving across a variety of situations" [Neill, 2008]) of many individuals, not least among Sabahan youths. Nevertheless, life effectiveness can be promoted and improved through the use of certain psychosocial factors, not least happiness and religious faith. To investigate the impact of these factors on life effectiveness, a survey involving 522 university students (mean age=21.72; SD=4.59) in Sabah, Malaysia, was conducted. In the survey, life effectiveness was measured across its eight domains, i.e., achievement motivation, active initiative, emotional control, intellectual flexibility, self-confidence, social competence, task leadership, and time management. The study found that each variable – happiness and religious faith – demonstrated a positive contribution to youth life effectiveness. Moreover, religious faith was found to enhance the effect of happiness on life effectiveness. These findings highlight the role of religious faith and happiness as important psychological resources for youths, especially during times of crisis. Therefore, it is recommended that psychological interventions incorporate elements of religious faith and happiness to enhance youths' life effectiveness, particularly in areas such as achievement motivation, active initiative, emotional control, intellectual flexibility, self-confidence, social competence, task leadership, and time management.*

Keywords: *happiness; life effectiveness; Malaysia; religious faith; university students; youth.*

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Introduction

According to Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2014, p. 228 [1099a.25]), happiness "is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing." Indeed, a happy life is a more rewarding and productive life. It is unsurprising then that people naturally yearn for happiness in their lives, particularly when facing adversities. Without a doubt, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant source of hardship, prompting a surge in negative emotions, such as fear, worry, and anxiety. Benjamin et al. (2022) note that the sudden emergence of COVID-19 and the ensuing worldwide pandemic has greatly altered the lives of many individuals, not least for young people. In fact, the pandemic has led to a rise in youth anxiety, with young people feeling increasingly isolated, disconnected, and confused (Waters, 2020).

As a result, young people are struggling to restore and maintain their happiness, including countless students who have experienced unexpected challenges during their studies. To be sure, various sources of support – both internal and external – may help to foster happiness among students. Internal sources include personality, attitude, behavior, religious faith, and resiliency, while external sources comprise significant personal relationships, the quality of one's living environment, work practices, as well as participation in physical and recreational activities (Haji et al., 2011).

Happiness can promote and enhance life effectiveness, that is, "generic life skills which facilitate surviving and thriving across a variety of situations" (Neill, 2008). In terms of students, happiness can help boost academic performance and motivation to excel. Indeed, happy students are likely to better manage the demands of university life, including being more competent in accomplishing their academic tasks and fulfilling their social responsibilities.

When making the transition to university, students commonly encounter many new interpersonal, social, and academic demands (Benn et al., 2005). This is particularly case for first-time university students. According to Sapp (2017), students are often challenged by various novel experiences as they acclimatize to their fresh surroundings and learn to balance their social lives with their new academic responsibilities. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, such challenges only got tougher because students had to adapt to new learning and social norms. Nevertheless, many students managed to elevate their positive emotions by using various psychological strengths that helped to boost their resilience (Ah Gang, 2022; Cosmas, 2020, 2022; Cosmas et al., 2021).

The declaration of the first Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia was a major cause for concern among students. Many became anxious regarding their academic future, leading to a rise in negative emotions, including fear, worry, and uncertainty. To cope with these negative emotions, many students tried enhancing their inner (psychological) strengths to boost their happiness. For instance, a Malaysian study conducted during the first COVID-19 lockdown revealed that resiliency and religious faith contributed to happiness in university students (Cosmas, 2020). Similarly, Bajaj et al. (2022) found that mindfulness contributes to happiness through the mediating effects of resilience and stress, to wit, mindfulness is positively associated with resilience and happiness, whereas negatively associated with stress.

Happiness predisposes people to have a positive outlook, which in turn may affect their coping style during difficult times. Past research has demonstrated that happy vis-à-vis unhappy individuals perceive life events – even day-to-day situations – differently. For instance, a study found that although happy students reported experiencing similar types of life events – both positive and negative – as their less happy peers, those who were happy tended to reflect on such events more favorably and more adaptively. This was observed, for example, when the students perceived humor and didactic value in adversity as well as when emphasizing recent improvements in their lives (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). Hence, as the American scholar and literary critic William Lyon Phelps (1865-1943) once stated, "The happiest people are those who think the most interesting thoughts" (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has been a trying time for many, there is a growing focus on how people can increase their happiness. Indeed, various creative activities were devised to contribute to the happiness of individuals, families, and communities. In Australia, for instance, some individuals sought recourse in artistic activities as a means to manage their mental health and well-being during the pandemic (Kiernan et al., 2021). While in Malaysia, many self-care programs centered on physical and psychological health in order to help reduce negative emotions caused by the pandemic. One such program was conducted in Tamparuli, Sabah, and focused on various physical and psychological aspects that can assist youths in better adapting to life difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ah Gang & Lambun, 2021). This, in turn, may contribute to increased happiness.

Thus, to better adapt to challenges during times of crisis, attention ought to be given to fostering and maintaining happy emotions. This is because happy individuals tend to exhibit more effort in sustaining their

happiness when dealing with negative life events. In contrast, unhappy individuals might lack effort when facing negative life events and thereby show less coping in such circumstances (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). Accordingly, it can be said that happy people view the world through rose-tinted glasses (Ryff & Essex, 1992; Myers & Diener, 1995) rather than through blue-colored spectacles (Eysenck, 1990).

In addition to happiness, other personal strengths, including one's religious faith, can help promote happiness, leading to a better life. For this reason, it was not uncommon for people during the recent pandemic to increase their involvement in religious activities to reduce negative feelings by strengthening their faith. For instance, recent research by Cosmas et al. (2022) revealed that a strong religious faith enhanced the resiliency of students, thereby contributing to better well-being. Indeed, as Ciarrocchi et al. (2008) note, religious faith, particularly of salvation religions (i.e., religions with a soteriological context, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), is positively associated with hope and optimism. Similarly, various studies have observed a positive correlation between happiness and religious faith (Delbridge et al., 1994; Stark & Maier, 2008; Steiner et al., 2010).

Therefore, religious faith can offer hope, optimism, and happiness. This, in turn, may assist people in building and maintaining inner strengths, even as they face obstacles in life. To account for this, Delbridge et al. (1994) note two complementary explanations. First, religious faith provides meaning, reason, and purpose as well as a sense of integration and direction. Second, faith communities are a key source of social support. In fact, the social connections formed from participating in a faith community seem important for happiness. Research by Steiner et al. (2010), for instance, has found that church attendance is correlated with increased happiness.

To the above explanations, a couple of additional reasons can be put forward as to why religious faith may boost positive emotions and fortify inner strength. First, religious faith provides an avenue for reflection amidst uncertainty and difficulties. Second, faith can offer solace, particularly during times of crisis and suffering, through belief in a God (or higher power) that cares, can give guidance, and is capable of intervening to help – that is, by placing one's confidence and trust that God is not ineffective against evil (Torres, 2021). For example, in Christianity, numerous biblical passages can be seen as sources of consolation and offer emotional uplift. One such passage is Proverbs 3:5-6 (NRSV): "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, … and he will make straight your paths."

Since research is lacking on the role that religious faith has in increasing the effect of happiness on life effectiveness, particularly among youth, a study was conducted involving university students. In this study, life effectiveness was measured based on generic life effectiveness comprising eight domains, i.e., emotional control, intellectual flexibility, achievement motivation, time management, social competence, leadership, self-confidence, and active initiative (Neill et al., 2003; Neill, 2008).

Literature review

Several past studies have examined the contribution of happiness to human life, including success. For instance, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) found that happiness is related to and precedes numerous successful outcomes in many areas of life, namely work, relationships, and health. Similarly, research by Walsh et al. (2018) suggests that happiness is positively correlated with career success. Conversely, happiness has been proposed as a by-product of pursuing and experiencing success (Uusiautti, 2013). In sum, the literature demonstrates a clear link between happiness and success.

Religious faith and happiness

Research indicates that religious faith contributes positively to happiness. To cite Koenig et al. (2024), "Religiosity has consistently been associated with more positive emotions, satisfaction with life, and overall happiness." For instance, a study by Abdel-Khalek (2013) involving Qatari adolescents found a significant and positive correlation between religiosity and happiness. Furthermore, a multicultural Omani study by Hossain & Rizvi (2016) noted that happiness grew with increasing religiousness. Similarly, an analysis of three waves of a biennial longitudinal Polish household panel study by Pawlikowski et al. (2019) found that attending religious service once weekly or more is a significant predictor of happiness and life satisfaction. It is worth noting that attending religious service has a greater, positive effect on happiness than happiness has on attending religious service (Childs, 2010).

The positive relationship between religious faith and happiness was also observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study by Cosmas et al. (2022) ascertained that, despite the pandemic's evident and indisputable negative impact, maintaining a religious faith (as a moderator) enhanced the effect of happiness on life effectiveness among university students. This indicates that religious faith can increase psychological strength to achieve a better life. Accordingly, this study suggests that students who value and practice their religious faith can better adapt to the challenges of academic

life amid unexpected hardships – such as those presented by the recent pandemic.

Religious faith and subjective well-being

Religious faith is also linked with greater subjective well-being. For instance, a study by Colón-Bacó (2010) found a positive association between religious belief and subjective well-being. According to this study, the stronger a participant's religious belief (measured by prayer frequency), the higher their level of subjective well-being. Similarly, research by Villani et al. (2019) revealed that spirituality has a positive influence on subjective well-being and that this relationship is not influenced by one's personal religious status. Additionally, this research found that cognitive well-being is related to religiosity and spirituality dimensions.

Religious practice and maintaining happiness despite hardship

Furthermore, religious practice can aid in coping and managing happiness. Indeed, a recent study by Wnuk (2023) found that prayer, as a spiritual coping strategy, has an inverse relationship with stress (i.e., the more the participants prayed, the less stress they indicated). Moreover, Wnuk showed that religious faith (expressed through prayer) can decrease the level of stress among a student population and, in turn, lead to greater happiness and subjective well-being. Therefore, through prayer, students can foster a positive, trusting connection with a caring God or divinity. Moreover, a study by Hastings & Roester (2020) revealed that participation in certain religious activities (e.g., attending church services) and sustaining certain religious beliefs (e.g., life after death) can buffer the negative effects of unemployment on happiness. This study, hence, suggests that individuals who hold a religious faith and practice it are better able to maintain happiness despite facing hardships.

Methodology

Data was collected using the Google Survey online platform. This platform was chosen since it was deemed a strategic means for data collection, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were university students from local and private universities in Sabah, Malaysia. Each prospective participant was provided with a survey link and a brief study information sheet before commencing the survey. To indicate their agreement to participate in the study, each participant was required to mark a 'Yes' checkbox on the survey form. The survey itself took approximately

15-20 minutes to complete. Each participant was given a token of appreciation for their agreement to participate in the study.

Participants

This study's inclusion criteria necessitated participants to be current and active university students. Thus, the target participants were local students attending private university in Sabah, Malaysia. The participants came from different universities, programs, and academic year levels. All participants experienced online learning since the initial lockdown in Malaysia – commenced on 18 March 2020 – due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research instrument

To measure each target variable, the survey questionnaire comprised four sections: 1) participants' demographic profile, 2) happiness, 3) life effectiveness, and 4) religious faith. For the demographic profile, data such as gender, academic year level, religion, and student accommodation arrangement were collected. For other the variables (i.e., happiness, life effectiveness, and religious faith), standard measurement instruments – commonly used by past researchers – were utilized.

Happiness

For the purpose of this study, happiness was defined as the frequency at which positive emotions were experienced. It was assessed using the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (SHS) developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999). This scale was selected because it measures global subjective happiness with high internal consistency and reliability (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

The SHS consists of four self-report items, each on a seven-point scale from 1 'not a very happy person' to 7 'a very happy person.' The sample items to measure happiness included: 'In general, I consider myself …….' and 'Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself …….'. Greater happiness was indicated via the obtention of higher scores.

Life effectiveness

Life effectiveness was evaluated using the *Life Effectiveness Questionnaire* (LEQ) developed by Neill et al. (2003). This questionnaire was selected because it measures life effectiveness by assessing "the extent to which a person's actions, behaviour, and feelings are effective in managing and succeeding at life" (Wang et al., 2008).

The LEQ consists of 24 self-report items that measure eight domains: achievement motivation, active initiative, emotional control, intellectual flexibility, self-confidence, social competence, task leadership, and time management. For each item, participants respond from 1 'false not like me' to 8 'True like me'. Sample items included: 'I plan and use my time wisely', 'I can stay calm in stressful situations', and 'I believe I can do it'.

Religious faith

Developed by Plante & Boccaccini (1997), the *Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire* (SCSRFQ) was utilized to measure the religious faith of participants. This questionnaire was selected because it is a brief yet reliable instrument to measure religious faith across most faith traditions and cultures (Plante, 2021). In other words, the SCSRFQ is not religion-specific, and each participant answered the questionnaire in reference to their religious identity or affiliation.

On the SCSRFQ, participants rated their level of religious faith from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. Three self-report items were used: 'I look to my faith as a source of comfort', 'praying daily', and 'I look to my faith as the source of inspiration'. Accordingly, in this study, religious faith – irrespective of religious tradition – pertained to the level of agreement that participants perceived their faith as a source of comfort and inspiration.

Results

The data collected was screened prior to conducting the data analysis. It was found that the skewness and kurtosis for all the research variables in this study are considered normal. (N.B.: Skewness between -2 to +2 and kurtosis between -7 to +7 are deemed acceptable (Byrne, 2010; Hair et al., 2010). A total of 522 participants were involved in this study. A majority were females, 414 (79.3%), with males accounting for approximately one-fifth, 107 (20.5%), and one participant chose to not indicate their gender (0.2%). The mean participant age was 21.72 (SD=4.59) – in keeping with the average age range (i.e., 18 to 24 years) of university students in Malaysia (Abd. Talib et al., 2013). In terms of religious faith, a majority of participants were Muslims, 272 (52.2%), followed by Christians, 237 (45.3%), Buddhists, 10 (1.9%), and Hindus, 2 (0.4%). One participant did not reveal their religion (0.2%). Most participants were staying off-campus (289, 55.4%) while 233 (44.6%) had on-campus accommodation. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the participants' demographic details.

Table 1. The Participants' Demographic Profile (N=522)

Variables	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	107	20.5
Female	414	79.3
Not stated	1	0.2
Religion		
Muslim	272	52.20
Christian	237	45.30
Buddhists	10	1.90
Hindus	2	0.40
Not stated	1	0.20
Accommodation		
Off-campus	289	55.4
On-campus	233	44.6
Accommodation arrangement during the first Movement Control Order (MCO)		
On-campus	65	12.50
Off-campus (with family)	392	75.10
Off-campus (with friends)	32	6.10
Off-campus (alone)	30	5.70
Not stated	3	.60

To examine the moderation effect of religious faith on the relationship between happiness and life effectiveness, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses of the Moderation Effects of Religious Faith on the Relationships between Happiness and Youth's Life Effectiveness

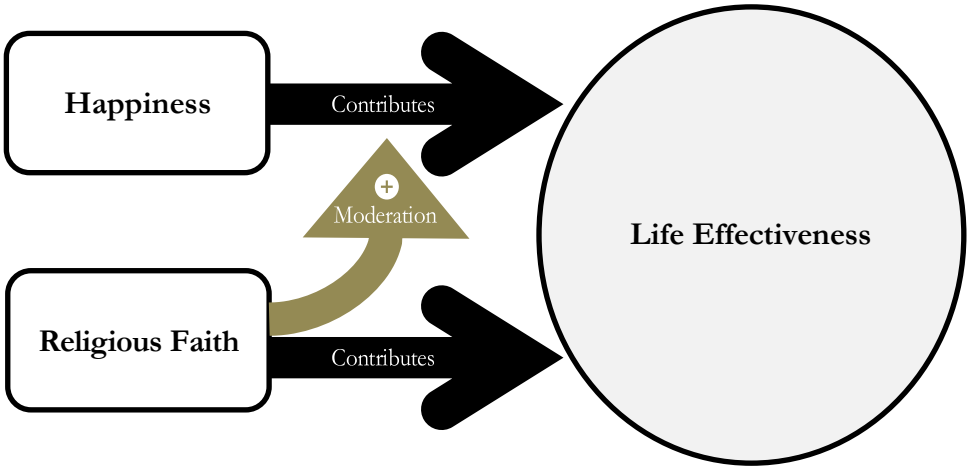
Variables	B	R square	R square change	t	Sig.
Step 1					
Happiness	.560	.313	.313	15.38	<.001
Step 2					
Religious faith	.169	.34	.027	4.61	<.002
Step 3					
Happiness x religious faith	.677	.35	.010	2.82	.005
Total R square			.35		

Table 2 shows the interaction between happiness and religious faith in relation to life effectiveness. The interaction effects of happiness and religious faith on life effectiveness were significant. It accounted for an extra 1.0% to the variance in life effectiveness. In Step 1, happiness alone contributed 3.1% to the variance of life effectiveness (β=.56,t(520)=15.38, p=<.001), while in Step 2, religious faith contributed 3% to the variance of life effectiveness (β=.16,t(520)=4.61, p=<.002). In Step 3, both factors – happiness and religious faith – contributed 1.0% to the variance of life effectiveness. These results shows that participants who indicated high levels of happiness and religious faith had greater life effectiveness across all eight domains (i.e., achievement motivation, active initiative, emotional control, intellectual flexibility, self-confidence, social competence, task leadership, and time management).

In sum, the findings demonstrate that happiness and religious faith contribute positively to life effectiveness among youth. Moreover, it was observed that religious faith functions as a moderator enhancing the effect of happiness on life effectiveness. See Figure 1 for a graphical representation modelling the relationship between happiness, religious faith, and life effectiveness.

Limits and discussion

Figure 1. Each variable (i.e., happiness and religious faith) contributes positively to life effectiveness. Additionally, religious faith functions as a moderator, enhancing the effect of happiness on life effectiveness.



The study presented in this paper was conducted via voluntary participation in an anonymous online survey. While such an online survey can be convenient, it might inadvertently create a sampling bias since the investigators cannot fully control the distribution of the survey participation link (Andrade, 2020). In the case of the study presented here, there is the possibility that the survey participation link was distributed more readily among happier and more religious individuals. Furthermore, the sample size in this study is relatively small and only consists of university students in Sabah, Malaysia, of which most were female. Additionally, given that this study utilized self-report measurement instruments, it is conceivable that the collected data might be subject to self-response bias or response-shift bias across measurement questionnaires/scales (Rosenman et al., 2011).

Given the lack of research on the relationship between happiness, religious faith, and life effectiveness, this study examines the correlation connecting these factors. Specifically, this research study found that religious faith can boost and bolster the effect of happiness on life effectiveness. It showed that youths who have greater happiness and stronger religious faith are more effective in their lives, as indicated by the eight measured domains of life effectiveness. This might be because when students are happy, they tend to generate more positive minds and, in turn, are able to think better. As the English poet John Masefield (1878-1967) remarked, "the days that make us happy make us wise" (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In this vein, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) note that people experiencing positive moods or emotions are encountering circumstances that they interpret as desirable. Accordingly, the empirical evidence suggests that individuals high in trait positive affect, happiness, or satisfaction tend to be more social, active, and energetic. Similarly, a positive mood is correlated with increased participation in activities and social interactions in addition to ample and heightened feelings of energy.

Furthermore, religious faith can encourage people to cultivate positive emotions, such as gratitude and awe, that are beneficial to mental and physical well-being. Studies have shown that the practice of routinely counting one's blessings can help people shift their focus away from the problems they are facing and create a sense of purpose in life (Colón-Bacó, 2010; Robson, 2022). This may account for why participants with a strong religious faith showed higher levels of happiness, thereby leading to greater life effectiveness. Indeed, religion provides a means to cope with stressful situations, particularly for people who have internalized their beliefs (Colón-Bacó, 2010; Wnuk, 2023).

Since almost four-fifths of the participants in this study were female, it is noteworthy to observe that, in most societies, women are more religious than men. A 2016 Pew Research Center report has observed that women are more likely to affiliate with a religious faith and pray daily compared to men. Commonly, it is thought that women tend to be more religious because they are more risk averse than men. However, recent research suggests that the risk aversion theory does not explain why women are usually more religious (Li et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the fact that women are generally more religious and willing to engage in religious behavior, such as prayer, cannot be ignored. Indeed, given that women are more likely to claim that their religious faith is important to them (Trzebiatowska & Bruce 2012), it is not unreasonable to conceive that some of that increased importance also impacts their appreciation of happiness and perception of life effectiveness.

Another reason that might help explain why students with high happiness and strong religious faith – irrespective of religious tradition – indicate having greater life effectiveness is that both happiness and religious faith foster positive emotions. By definition, happy individuals are among those who experience frequent positive emotions (such as joy, interest, and pride) and infrequent – though not absent – negative emotions (such as sadness, anxiety, and anger). Indeed, not only do happy individuals frequently experience more positive emotions but they are also more perceptive about rewards in their environment (Gray, 1994). Moreover, people with strong religious faith tend to report more life satisfaction (Sohn, 2010). It is worth noting that in this present study, happiness was defined as the frequency at which positive emotions were experienced, while religious faith pertained to the level of agreement that participants perceived their faith as a source of comfort and inspiration.

To be sure, there is a clear relationship between happiness and positive perceptions across all domains of life. Indeed, people who are happy and content have been found to be satisfied with their family life, romantic relationships, and friendships, as well as with their health, education, and employment, in addition to their leisure activities, and even their housing and transportation (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Weiss et al., 1999). For instance, a study of high school students found students who reported having the highest positive experiences were relatively more likely to participate in community service activities (e.g., volunteering) along with increased desire to contribute to society and to be of assistance to others (Magen & Aharoni, 1991). Furthermore, people with strong religious faith tend to engage in a greater amount of voluntary work, have deeper care for their community, and do 'more good' in their neighborhoods (Sohn, 2010).

Religious faith may also provide an inclusive framework in which to cope with challenging and unexpected world events, which in turn may offer religious individuals a sense of meaning and purpose (Hastings & Roester, 2020). All these elements may contribute to happiness and help increase life effectiveness – as observed with this study's participants – even amid major challenges (such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic).

Conclusion

This survey-based study found that happiness and religious faith can contribute positively to life effectiveness among youth. Additionally, it was shown that religious faith functions as a moderator enhancing the effect of happiness on youths' life effectiveness. These findings may assist youths in reflecting that despite facing difficulties during times of adversity, they can nonetheless manage and prevail by restoring their happiness and uplifting their religious faith. Indeed, even with the various challenges and demands of university life amidst the many adversities ensuing from COVID-19 pandemic, the participants of this study showed that maintaining a strong religious faith can bolster happiness' effect on life effectiveness, conceivably leading to more productive and successful lives. These research findings underscore the role of religious faith as an important and valuable psychological resource for youths, particularly in times of crisis. Accordingly, young people should be encouraged to deepen their religious faith as a practical means to achieve better life effectiveness.

Suggestions for future research include examining the effect of religious faith per discrete religion as well as investigating other possible factors (e.g., social support, personality traits, or age) that may moderate the effect of happiness on life effectiveness, such as cultural and environmental factors. Furthermore, given that women are generally more religious than their male counterparts, it would be worth investigating how this gender difference impacts the moderation effect of religion on happiness and life effectiveness.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools| *No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during the research process or the writing of this manuscript.*

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