



# Impact of Positive Personal Traits on University Student Engagement in Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador

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A large number of determinants influence the academic engagement of university students. However, positive influences that can be encouraged by the university have not been thoroughly studied. Most psychological research has been conducted in developed countries. Given the importance of understanding and encouraging university students in Latin America, it is essential to increase the quantity of research focused on personal traits and their association with better performance by university students. Two positive traits that have been shown to improve performance in a variety of areas are emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness. However, little is known about the relationship between these two positive aspects and university student engagement. The aim of this study was to determine the impact of emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness on university student engagement in three Latin American countries: Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador. A total of 621 students answered a quantitative instrument that evaluates the three variables of interest. A model of structural equations was carried out in order to verify the direct impact that emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness have on university student engagement. The model explained 38% of the variance of university student engagement, indicating that these two positive personal traits can enhance interest and performance in scholarly activities by university students. Higher education in Latin America often focuses on increasing the knowledge of their students; however, these results indicate that promoting personal development, such as greater orientation toward happiness and emotional intelligence, can produce better results.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, happiness, engagement, university student, Latin America

## INTRODUCTION

University student engagement has become a construct of interest in research (Kahn, 2014). Previous studies have shown that it is directly linked to academic success (Jelas et al., 2016). Hence, it is essential to understand what leads students to engage in their academic activities. Although countless aspects intervene (Durón-Ramos et al., 2018a), positive personal features have a

direct impact (Salanova et al., 2005). Therefore, the present study focused on two traits: emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness. Do these positive personal traits have an impact on university student engagement?

The majority of knowledge about university student engagement has been conducted with people living in developed countries, also referred to as Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). This leaves out a large number of people (i.e., non-WEIRD societies), such as Latin Americans. Given this, the present study examines two positive drivers of university student engagement in three different Latin American countries: Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research done on the impact that emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness have on the engagement of university students in these three countries.

## University Student Engagement, Emotional Intelligence, and Orientation to Happiness

University student engagement has been described as a critical factor in achieving excellence in school (Maroco et al., 2016). It has also been considered to be a mediating factor between students and academic achievement (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). University student engagement is defined as the disposition of students toward participation in school activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Three main components must be considered when studying student engagement: (1) cognitive processes in learning; (2) positive and negative emotions that derive from academic situations; and (3) student actions (Maroco et al., 2016).

Students with a higher level of positive emotions have better academic performance (Salanova et al., 2005). Emotional intelligence can be a predictor of academic success in higher educational levels (Libbrecht et al., 2014). Orientation to happiness can benefit students' adaptability and, hence, their performance (Sattar et al., 2017).

The first trait of interest is emotional intelligence, which has been described as the ability to regulate emotions (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). The theory suggests that it is first necessary to pay attention to emotions in order to clearly identify them, which enables people to then repair emotions (Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal, 2004). The theory posits three dimensions: attention, clarity, and reparation (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004; Carpio et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence is related to student engagement (Urquijo and Extremera, 2017).

The second trait of interest is orientation to happiness. Orientation refers to what underlies a person's lifestyle (Huta and Waterman, 2014). Peterson et al. (2005) proposed a construct called "orientation to happiness," i.e., people seek positive feelings or emotions in three different ways: pleasure, meaning, and commitment. The first two can be equated with the classic facets of well-being—hedonic and eudaimonic (Ryan and Deci, 2001)—while the third type of happiness comes from the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). The authors emphasize the need to pursue all three types in order to promote more positive events in people's lives. Orientation to

happiness has a direct impact on university students' engagement (Durón-Ramos and García-Vazquez, 2018).

## The Present Study

This research studied sample populations from three countries: Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador. It emphasized two positive personal traits that promote better school performance—emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness—and was designed for two primary reasons: first, to investigate personal aspects that predict better performance in university students, both professionally and personally (Borkar, 2016), and, second, to demonstrate that positive personal characteristics can impact students' engagement in a variety of countries, which would imply a universal need to promote more positive traits (Peterson and Park, 2009), such as emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness.

We hypothesized that all dimensions of student engagement correlate with the components of emotional intelligence (attention, clarification, and reparation) and orientation to happiness (pleasure, meaning, and engagement) (hypothesis 1, H1). We also expected that emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness would produce a direct and positive impact on university students' engagement (hypothesis 2, H2), in accordance with results from previous studies (Durón-Ramos and García-Vazquez, 2018; Boulton et al., 2019).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

Six hundred and eleven pupils from three universities participated in the study. Forty-five percent (283) were from Mexico, 37% (232) from Colombia, and 18% (106) from El Salvador. Ages ranged from 17 to 53 years ( $M = 22$ ,  $SD = 5.41$ ). Sixty-six percent of the total participants were females. A variety of university concentrations were included.

### Measures

For the data collection, a virtual form with three scales previously validated and used in the Mexican population was used, one for each variable of interest.

### University Student's Engagement

The student's engagement was registered through the university inventory created by Maroco et al. (2016) and translated and adapted for the Mexican population (Durón-Ramos et al., 2018b). This instrument is composed of 15 items divided along three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, each consisting of five items. Responses were rated from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Participants would respond with the frequency of academic-related situations, such as: "I try to use my acquired knowledge to solve new problems" (cognitive), "I feel excited about the work and activities I do in my university" (emotional), and "When I have doubts I ask questions and participate in class discussions" (behavioral). The internal consistency was acceptable for the global scale ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) and for each dimension (cognitive  $\alpha = 0.71$ , emotional  $\alpha = 0.68$ , and behavioral  $\alpha = 0.77$ ). The validity of this

measurement was confirmed with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), goodness of fit: Bentler–Bonett non-normed fit index (BBNFI) = 0.91, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.93, Bollen’s incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.93, and root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.062.

### Emotional Intelligence

The Spanish TMMS-24 (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004), which is a short version of the Trait-Meta Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995), was used. It equally divides 24 items into the three dimensions: attention, clarity, and repair. Responses are on a scale from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement). This instrument measures the perception of people’s emotional regulation through statements such as: “I pay close attention to feelings or emotions” (attention), “I can often define my feelings” (clarity), and “I try to have positive thoughts even if I feel bad” (repair). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.91, and each dimension reflected a high internal consistency (attention  $\alpha = 0.88$ , clarity  $\alpha = 0.88$ , and repair  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). CFA showed good fit indices for this measurement: BBNFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.91, IFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.070.

### Orientation to Happiness

This study used the orientation to happiness scale (Peterson et al., 2005), translated and adapted for the Mexican population (Durón-Ramos et al., 2016). This instrument is composed of 18 items divided into the three types of happiness. Responses were on a scale from 1 (completely opposite to me) to 5 (completely like me). Participants responded to sentences such as: “Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide” (pleasure), “When I have to choose what to do, I always consider whether it will benefit other people” (meaning), and “I look for situations that challenge my skills and abilities” (engagement). The internal consistency was acceptable globally ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) and for each dimension (pleasure  $\alpha = 0.77$ , meaning  $\alpha = 0.74$ , and engagement  $\alpha = 0.66$ ). CFA showed good validity for the scale (goodness of fit): BBNFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.056.

### Procedure

An institutional ethics committee approved the instrument in Mexico. The data were collected through Google Forms in the three countries. All students participated voluntarily, with the assurance of anonymity. Teachers made the invitation to complete the form in classrooms and on social networks (Facebook and WhatsApp). Data collection took 5 months.

### Data Analysis

First, validity and reliability analyses were performed through CFA and Cronbach’s alpha. Secondly, descriptive analyses were conducted by country. Then, a correlation matrix with the total data was performed to obtain the relationship between each component of the three factors analyzed (H1), all of the above using SPSS version 21. Finally, a structural equation model was elaborated using the EQS 6.4 program to determine the impact of emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness on university students’ engagement (H2).

## RESULTS

According to the descriptive statistics (Table 1), university students from three Latin American countries present very similar engagement in their academic activities, with a small difference of mean among the countries (0.33). All students report higher cognitive engagement. Students report medium–high emotional intelligence ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ). The means are higher in the reparation area in all three samples. Orientation to happiness appears to be stronger in the meaning dimension, and scores are also at a medium–high level ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ). Values are similar across the three countries, although Mexican students scored slightly lower in the three aspects measured.

As can be seen in Table 2, all three factors and their components correlate with one another (H1), the three dimensions of orientation to happiness being the highest. The lowest correlations are between emotional attention (from emotional intelligence) and the three components of university student engagement. Emotional engagement does not present a significant correlation with emotional

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics by countries.

	Mexico		Colombia		El Salvador		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Student engagement</b>	3.01	0.53	3.26	0.42	3.34	0.45	3.16	0.50
Cognitive	3.09	0.58	3.39	0.45	3.49	0.45	3.27	0.54
Emotional	2.89	0.71	3.16	0.55	3.19	0.66	3.04	0.66
Behavioral	3.05	0.68	3.22	0.58	3.34	0.56	3.16	0.63
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	3.85	0.56	3.89	0.54	3.97	0.54	3.88	0.55
Attention	3.63	0.81	3.74	0.67	3.69	0.80	3.68	0.76
Clarity	3.89	0.71	3.87	0.67	4.02	0.68	3.90	0.69
Reparation	4.01	0.69	4.06	0.64	4.20	0.67	4.06	0.67
<b>Orientation to happiness</b>	3.69	0.52	3.95	0.54	3.93	0.52	3.83	0.54
Pleasure	3.65	0.70	3.80	0.68	3.61	0.83	3.70	0.72
Meaning	3.77	0.63	4.12	0.60	4.15	0.51	3.96	0.63
Engagement	3.64	0.61	3.92	0.57	4.06	0.56	3.82	0.61

All responses range from 1 to 5.

TABLE 2 | Correlation matrix from three countries.

	SCE	SEE	SEB	EA	EC	ER	OHP	OHM	OHE
SCE	1								
SEE	0.51**	1							
SEB	0.55**	0.42**	1						
EA	0.10*	0.07	0.10*	1					
EC	0.30**	0.24**	0.24**	0.34**	1				
ER	0.30**	0.32**	0.28**	0.34**	0.57**	1			
OHP	0.16**	0.20**	0.17**	0.24**	0.22**	0.32**	1		
OHM	0.36**	0.33**	0.33**	0.26**	0.29**	0.41**	0.53**	1	
OHE	0.40**	0.35**	0.36**	0.18**	0.35**	0.39**	0.42**	0.60**	1

Student engagement: SCE cognitive, SEE emotional, SEB behavioral. Emotional intelligence: EA attention, EC clarity, ER reparation. Orientation to happiness: OHP pleasure, OHM meaning, OHE engagement. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

attention, but it is positively correlated with the other two components of emotional intelligence (clarity and reparation = 0.10,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The structural equation model (Figure 1) shows a direct positive impact on university student engagement, from the two positive personal traits studied (H2): emotional intelligence = 0.21 and orientation to happiness = 0.46. More than a third of the students' engagement can be explained by emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness ( $R^2 = 0.38$ ). Both practical and theoretical goodness-of-fit indices [ $\chi^2 = 18.67$  (7 DF),  $p < 0.0005$ ; BBNFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.06] indicate that the data collected support the theoretical model presented.

## DISCUSSION

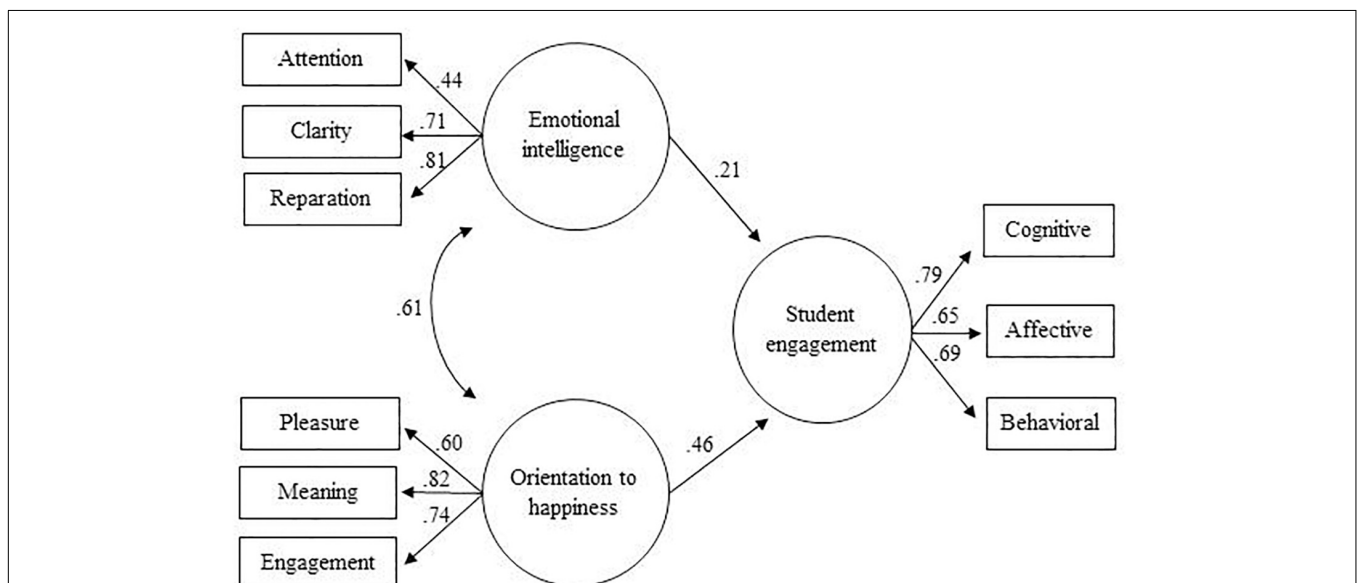
Higher education needs students to have greater engagement with their academic activities (Zaqout and Abbas, 2012; Kashif and Basharat, 2014; Dogan, 2015). Literature studying university student engagement in non-WEIRD countries is scarce. There have been some studies done in México (Durón-Ramos et al., 2018a), in Chile (Oriol-Granado et al., 2017), and in Colombia (Pineda-Báez et al., 2014). However, to the best of our knowledge, there has not been cross-cultural work in this area. To fill this gap, we have evaluated the impact of two positive personal traits, emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness, in three Latin American countries: Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador.

According to our results, the engagement presented by students in these three countries can be enhanced by emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness. Positive traits are related to students' performance (Merino-Tejedor et al., 2018;

Boulton et al., 2019), which supports hypothesis 1. More importantly, our model supports the idea of a direct impact from emotional intelligence and orientation to happiness on students' engagement (hypothesis 2). These results highlight the importance of developing both the professional and personal areas of students in higher educational institutions (González and Justel, 2015; Borkar, 2016).

Three limitations should be taken into account when interpreting these results. First, this was a cross-sectional study, which implies an abstraction of university students from Mexico, Colombia, and Salvador. However, given that this is a cross-cultural investigation, and that three countries participated, the information presented here is not just for a single particular population. Our results are in line with other studies from Latin America (Oriol-Granado et al., 2017; Durón-Ramos and García-Vazquez, 2018). A second limitation is that our model explains only 38% of the variance for university students' engagement, which indicates that there are other factors involved in more than half of the students' engagement; still, this percentage is considered acceptable, given that it is a multidimensional construct (Appleton et al., 2008) and is highly influenced by aspects both intrinsic and extrinsic (Reschly and Christenson, 2012; Wylie and Hodgen, 2012). A third limitation is that the model presented here does not take into account the final result of the students (such as qualification). Perhaps it will be necessary to investigate whether students' engagement has a mediating role (Medrano et al., 2015) in the impact from positive personal traits and academic outcome.

Limitations aside, there are some practical implications to be drawn from these findings. First, institutions of higher education need to focus on all of their students, but they often just offer programs to help pupils in need, such as tutoring to enhance



**FIGURE 1 |** Model from the impact of two positive personal traits on university students' engagement. Factorial weights and significant structural coefficients ( $p < 0.05$ ). Goodness of fit:  $\chi^2 = 18.67$  (7 DF),  $p < 0.0005$ , BBNFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.058,  $R^2$  university students' engagement = 0.38.



academic performance (Guerra-Martín et al., 2017) or scholars with some illness (Stones and Glazzard, 2019). One action that can help to increase positive personal traits in higher education students is to promote programs of active learning (Freeman et al., 2014) with activities centered on the students.

The new generation of students demands new teaching practices (Vega-Burgos et al., 2011; Herodotou et al., 2019). Our results point out the importance of professor collaboration (Mora-Ruano et al., 2019), implying the need for educators, at least in Latin America, to make certain that the activities in the classrooms increase student emotional intelligence or orientation to happiness. An example would be the Mindfulness and Emotional Intelligence Program (PINEP), which is a virtual program that has been proven to enhance students' positive traits (Salcido-Cibrián et al., 2019).

Finally, there are countless factors implicated in university student engagement. However, our results highlight the importance of focusing on what people can put into action (Haidt, 2006). University students often spend time focusing on the external. These results point out the importance of focusing on students' positive personal traits (Aniæ and Tonèiæ, 2013; Boulton et al., 2019) to improve performance in school.

Better academic performance can be achieved by focusing on more than just knowledge (Millard, 2003; Stones and Glazzard, 2019). Higher education must focus on other aspects. We believe that it is necessary to continue research on positive personal traits related to university student engagement, especially those that can be promoted by institutions, teachers, and students. It is also essential to include more non-WEIRD countries in this research. A cross-cultural study including both developed and developing countries would be even more helpful.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Comité Institucional de Ética (Institutional Ethics Committee) Instituto Tecnológico de Sonora. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MD-R conceived and designed the study, and analyzed the data and wrote an initial draft based on the results. MD-R, PM-G, KV-G, and EC-A collected the data. PM-G, KV-G, and EC-A critically revised the draft manuscript and made important changes in content.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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