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Seeking Common Ground Between Quality of Life, Happiness, and Sustainable Development: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Although sustainable development is widely conceived as a pathway to improved human welfare, the mechanisms through which development processes translate into subjective well-being remain poorly theorized. This study aims to map the research situated at the intersection of sustainable development, quality of life, and happiness, through a bibliometric analysis. The keyword co-occurrence analysis, conducted in VOSviewer, reveals four thematic clusters: socio-economic and psychological determinants of life satisfaction; macroeconomic development indicators; tourism and experiential well-being; and urban sustainability and mental health. Findings indicate that happiness, while centrally positioned at this nexus, remains analytically peripheral, approached as an explicit outcome of sustainable development processes, with little theoretical clarity on how improvements in living conditions actually translate into greater well-being. Future research is called upon to develop integrative frameworks capable of bridging systemic development processes and lived experiences of well-being.

Keywords: *sustainable development; quality of life; happiness; bibliometric analysis; subjective well-being; VOSviewer.*

1. Introduction

Despite economic growth and policy frameworks aimed at improving human well-being, increases in material prosperity have not always translated into proportional gains in happiness or perceived quality of life (Matusiewicz, 2025). This paradox raises a fundamental question. To what extent does sustainable development translate into lived experiences of happiness and well-being? Sustainable development promises improved quality of life, yet the mechanisms through which sustainability translates into human happiness remain poorly conceptualized.

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This tension echoes a broader debate within the literature on economic development and well-being (Agrawal et al., 2024; Aksoy & Bayram Arlı, 2020; Sameer et al., 2021). While economic growth has historically been regarded as the primary driver of societal progress, empirical evidence increasingly suggests that improvements in income and material living standards generate diminishing returns in terms of subjective well-being (Jain et al., 2026). The Easterlin paradox highlights that beyond certain income thresholds, increases in national prosperity do not necessarily produce proportional increases in happiness (Easterlin, 1974). As a result, the assumption that development automatically enhances human well-being has gradually been challenged (Opfinger, 2016), prompting scholars and policymakers to reconsider the metrics through which societal progress should be evaluated.

Within this evolving debate, the concept of sustainable development has emerged as an alternative paradigm aimed at reconciling economic progress with social welfare and environmental stability. Sustainable development frameworks emphasize long-term societal resilience and the balanced interaction between economic, social, and ecological systems. However, while sustainable development policies are designed to improve collective welfare, their relationship with individuals' perceived well-being remains less clearly explored. Improvements in environmental quality, resource efficiency, or social equity may contribute to long-term welfare, yet their translation into individuals' lived experiences of well-being may occur through complex and indirect pathways. Research on subjective well-being demonstrates that happiness and life satisfaction depend not only on material conditions but also on psychological, social, and contextual factors (Ramia, 2021). Consequently, improvements in structural indicators may not always produce equivalent improvements in perceived well-being.

This divergence between structural progress and individual perception raises an important question for development policy. Sustainable development strategies are often assessed through macro-level indicators that capture economic performance, environmental outcomes, or social progress (Cook & Davíðsdóttir, 2021). However, such metrics may not fully capture the extent to which individuals actually experience improvements in their daily lives (Veenhoven, 2007). As a result, societies may achieve substantial progress according to conventional development indicators while individuals report relatively modest improvements in life satisfaction. Bridging this gap requires a more integrated analytical perspective capable of connecting systemic development processes with the lived experiences of individuals.

Despite the relevance of this intersection, the literature on sustainable development, quality of life, and happiness remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries and systematic efforts to map the intellectual architecture connecting these streams remain limited. The absence of such mapping makes it difficult to assess how these research streams interact, where convergences and tensions arise, and which directions remain underexplored.

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The aim of this study is therefore to explore how these three concepts have been conceptualized and investigated within the scientific literature, and to map the intellectual structure of research at their intersection. The concepts operate at distinct analytical levels: sustainable development reflects systemic conditions of societal progress; quality of life captures the structural living conditions within which individuals are situated; and happiness represents the subjective evaluations individuals make of those conditions. In this context, bibliometric analysis is employed as the methodological approach, as it enables the quantitative mapping of these bodies of literature in ways that narrative or systematic reviews do not, allowing thematic clusters to be identified. In doing so, the study contributes to the literature with a conceptual linkage analysis between these domains and provides a structured foundation for future inquiry into the pathways through which sustainability translates into human well-being.

2. Materials and Methods

From a methodological perspective, this study employs a bibliometric analysis. Bibliometrics, a quantitative research approach, is widely used to identify research trends, thematic clusters, and the structural dynamics of knowledge fields within large bodies of academic literature (Hood & Wilson, 2001), thus aligning with the objective of this research.

The analysis was conducted using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20), a widely used instrument for bibliometric visualization developed by (van Eck & Waltman, 2019). VOSviewer enables the construction and visualization of bibliographic networks, particularly through keyword co-occurrence analysis, which facilitates the identification of thematic clusters and conceptual linkages within a research field.

For the empirical analysis, the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database was queried in March 2026. No restrictions were applied in terms of publication year or document type. The search strategy targeted publications addressing the intersection of sustainable development, quality of life, and happiness, with these terms appearing in the title, abstract, or keywords. The query string used was *"quality of life" AND "sustainable development" AND happiness*. Quotation marks were used to retrieve the expressions "quality of life" and "sustainable development" as exact phrases, thereby avoiding results where the individual words appear separately or in unrelated contexts.

This approach ensured that the retrieved publications explicitly engage with the conceptual nexus investigated in this study. The resulting dataset forms the empirical basis for the bibliometric analysis, enabling keyword co-occurrence mapping and thematic network analysis to identify the main research clusters and conceptual linkages within the literature.

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3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the principal methodological parameters of the study, including the database selection, search strategy, and analytical procedures applied. The keyword co-occurrence network illustrating the relationships between quality of life, happiness, and sustainable development is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Methodological aspects of the bibliometric analysis. Source: Authors' elaboration based on Web of Science metadata (2026)

Bibliometric analysis criteria	Results
Number of publications retrieved	284 publications corresponding to the keywords
Total number of keywords	1,472 keywords associated to the publications
Required minimum occurrences of a keyword	3 occurrences
Number of keywords that meet the threshold	165 keywords met the occurrence threshold

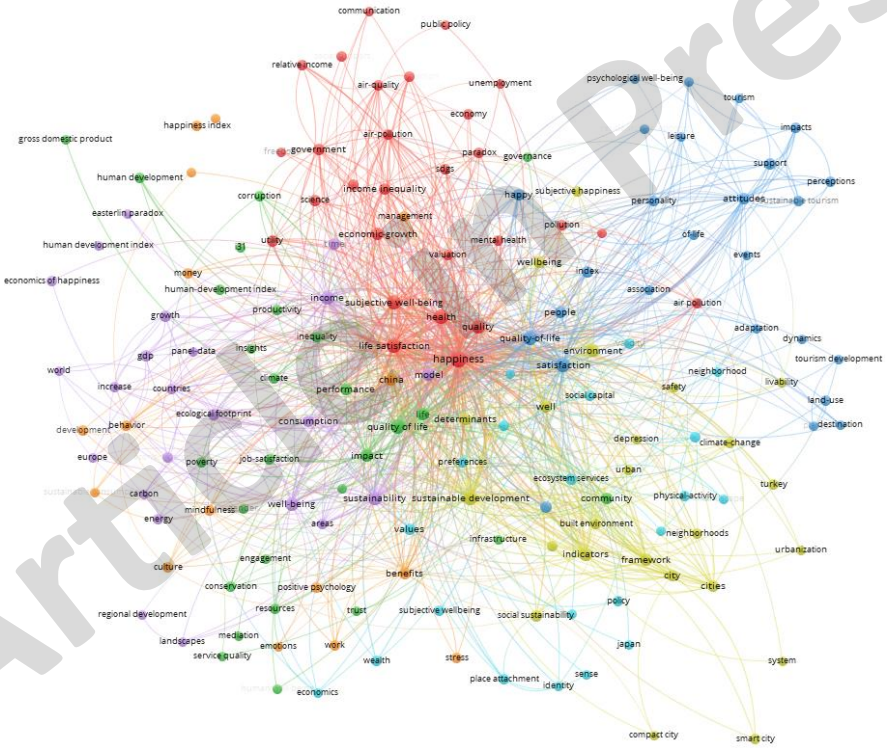


Figure 1. Mapping quality of life, happiness, and sustainable development. Source: Authors' design in VOSviewer 1.6.20, based on Web of Science metadata (2026)

The red cluster reflects a substantial body of literature centered on the determinants of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, emphasizing the role of socio-economic structures and

institutional conditions in shaping individual perceptions of well-being. Keywords such as life *satisfaction*, *income inequality*, *relative income*, *government*, *social support*, and *mental health* suggest a strong engagement with research exploring how economic and social environments influence subjective evaluations of quality of life. Within this cluster, the literature frequently builds on the foundations of happiness economics and subjective well-being research, where life satisfaction is treated as a central indicator of human welfare. A recurring theme in this cluster is the importance of relative income and income inequality in shaping perceived well-being (Jansen et al., 2024). Studies (Delsignore et al., 2021; Veenhoven, 2017) emphasize the relational dimension of economic prosperity, arguing that individuals evaluate their well-being relative to the economic standing of others. The presence of keywords such as *government* and *social support* indicates the relevance of institutional and social frameworks in mediating these relationships. Public policies, welfare systems, and social safety nets play an important role in shaping citizens' perceptions of fairness, security, and life satisfaction (Karataş, 2026).

Additionally, the occurrence of keywords such as *communication* and *mental health* highlights an expanding dimension within well-being research that incorporates psychological and social factors alongside economic variables. This body of literature increasingly recognizes that well-being is not determined by material conditions in isolation, but also by the quality of social relationships, public discourse, and psychological resilience (Wang et al., 2025).

As a result, the red cluster reflects an integrated perspective in which economic structures, social institutions, and psychological dimensions jointly contribute to shaping subjective well-being. Within the broader context of sustainable development, this cluster underscores the importance of addressing social inequalities and mental health challenges as part of a comprehensive approach to improving quality of life.

The purple cluster highlights the macroeconomic dimension of the relationship between happiness, quality of life, and sustainable development. Keywords such as *GDP*, *human development index*, *income*, *consumption*, and *sustainability* point to a body of literature that investigates how economic development indicators relate to broader measures of societal well-being. The inclusion of keywords such as *time* and *consumption* further indicates the presence of research exploring how patterns of resource allocation and consumption behavior influence individual well-being. These studies often address the trade-offs between material consumption, time availability, and life satisfaction, emphasizing that higher levels of economic output do not necessarily correspond to improvements in perceived quality of life (Bortolotti et al., 2026).

In this context, the purple cluster reflects a growing scholarly interest in redefining development beyond purely economic metrics and integrating sustainability considerations into measures of human welfare. By linking economic indicators with broader well-being outcomes, this cluster contributes to ongoing debates about how societies should conceptualize progress in the context of sustainable development.

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The blue cluster captures a distinct thematic strand linking quality of life, psychological well-being, and tourism-related experiences. Keywords such as *tourism*, *leisure*, *psychological well-being*, *perceptions*, *events*, and *destination* suggest a body of research examining how tourism activities and leisure experiences influence individuals' well-being and perceptions of quality of life. Within this cluster, tourism is framed as a social and experiential domain capable of contributing to human well-being. Research associated with this cluster frequently explores the relationship between tourism development and residents' quality of life, as well as the psychological benefits experienced by individuals through travel, leisure activities, and participation in cultural or recreational events (Hu et al., 2024). Concepts such as perceptions and destination highlight the importance of subjective evaluations in shaping the perceived value of tourism experiences. In this context, tourism becomes a domain where economic activity intersects with psychological well-being and social experiences. Furthermore, the presence of keywords such as *psychological well-being* and *quality of life* indicates that this cluster connects tourism studies with broader well-being research. Scholars increasingly recognize that leisure activities and tourism experiences can contribute to life satisfaction, emotional well-being, and social connectedness (Bagheri et al., 2024). From a sustainable development perspective, this cluster also raises important questions regarding the balance between tourism-driven economic growth and the long-term well-being of local communities.

The yellow cluster focuses on the relationship between urban development, environmental sustainability, and mental health outcomes, highlighting the role of the built environment in shaping quality of life. Keywords such as *urbanization*, *climate change*, *smart city*, *compact city*, *built environment*, *safety*, and *depression* suggest a body of literature examining how urban planning and environmental conditions influence individual well-being. Within this cluster, urbanization is frequently analyzed as both an opportunity and a challenge for improving quality of life. While cities provide access to economic opportunities, social networks, and public services, rapid urban expansion may generate environmental pressures, social inequalities, and mental health challenges. As a result, scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of designing urban environments that promote both sustainability and human well-being.

Taken together, the four clusters reveal a multidimensional research landscape linking quality of life, happiness, and sustainable development. While the red cluster emphasizes socio-economic and psychological determinants of subjective well-being, the purple cluster focuses on macroeconomic indicators and development metrics. The blue cluster highlights experiential and leisure-based contributions to well-being, particularly within the context of tourism and recreation. Finally, the yellow cluster connects environmental sustainability and urban development with mental health and quality-of-life outcomes. Together, these thematic groupings illustrate the growing recognition within the literature that human well-being cannot be understood through a single disciplinary lens. On the contrary. It emerges from the interaction of economic, social, environmental, and psychological dimensions of development.

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4. Conclusion

The mapping of the literature reveals that the relationship between sustainable development, quality of life, and happiness remains conceptually fragmented. While sustainable development is frequently invoked as a pathway to improving human welfare, the academic discourse rarely articulates how systemic development processes translate into subjective well-being. Instead, the literature approaches this nexus through dispersed analytical lenses: macroeconomic indicators of development, socio-institutional determinants of life satisfaction, environmental and urban contexts, and experiential dimensions of well-being. This dispersion reflects a deeper conceptual ambiguity: sustainable development is primarily framed at the level of structural conditions, quality of life at the level of living environments, and happiness at the level of subjective evaluation, yet the mechanisms linking these levels remain insufficiently theorized. As a result, the promise that sustainable development enhances human well-being often rests on implicit assumptions. By mapping the intellectual architecture of this field, the present exploratory analysis also highlights a clear window of opportunity for future research to develop integrative frameworks capable of explaining how systemic transformations in economic, social, and environmental domains are translated into lived experiences of well-being.

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