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Finding Urban Happiness: Residents' Happiness and the Socio-Spatial Landscape of Naga City, Philippines

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Abstract

Understanding the relationship between urban landscapes and well-being is increasingly important in rapidly urbanizing cities to reassure urban planners and policymakers of effective strategies. This study examines urban happiness in Naga City, Philippines, through a survey of 312 residents. The demographic characteristics, including age and employment status, access to open and recreational spaces, walking behavior, and socio-spatial environments, all have positive effects on residents' happiness and well-being. The study emphasizes that people-centered planning and accessible public spaces are the core of building livable, happy cities.

Keywords: Urban Happiness; Socio-spatial Landscape; Well-being; Naga City

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1.0 Introduction

Urbanization is one of the most radical and defining trends in the 21st century. Statistics show that more than half of the global population lives in urban areas (UN DESA, 2018), and this share is expected to continue to increase over the next few decades. People tend to go to cities because they are said to promise economic mobility, variety in cultural life, and technical progress. However, with all these promises come some daunting challenges, including environmental destruction, spatial disparity, traffic jams, housing shortages, and social dislocation. Not only do these challenges condition urban life materially, but they also have major implications for people's psychological and emotional health (Srivastava, 2009).

In the Philippines, like any other country, rapid urbanization has already significantly reshaped the spatial layout and patterns of social behavior of most cities. That is why many studies and policies on urbanization exist, but they have focused on national or regional conditions, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as Manila, Cebu, and Davao. Studies on medium-sized cities like Naga remain limited despite their socio-economic importance. Previous studies also show that residents' well-being in these secondary cities has a clear gap. Although most of these cities enjoy positive reputations for their development, there still lack systematic evidence about how socio-spatial characteristics influence residents' happiness. Past studies have rarely integrated six core dimensions: demographic characteristics, mobility, leisure spaces, environmental quality, community participation, and perceived safety.

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Thus, this study addresses this gap by examining Naga City, an independent component city situated in Camarines Sur, Bicol Region, in the southern part of Luzon, located at 13°37'28"N 123°11'11"E, about 435 km (270 mi) from Manila. Naga City was proclaimed as a highly urbanized city (HUC) through Presidential Proclamation No. 1267 (PCO, 2026). Naga is also one of the centers for commerce, education, governance, health care, and religion in the Bicol Region (City Government of Naga, n.d.), with approximately 209,170 residents across 27 barangays (CPDO, 2021), which provides a compelling setting for examining urban happiness.

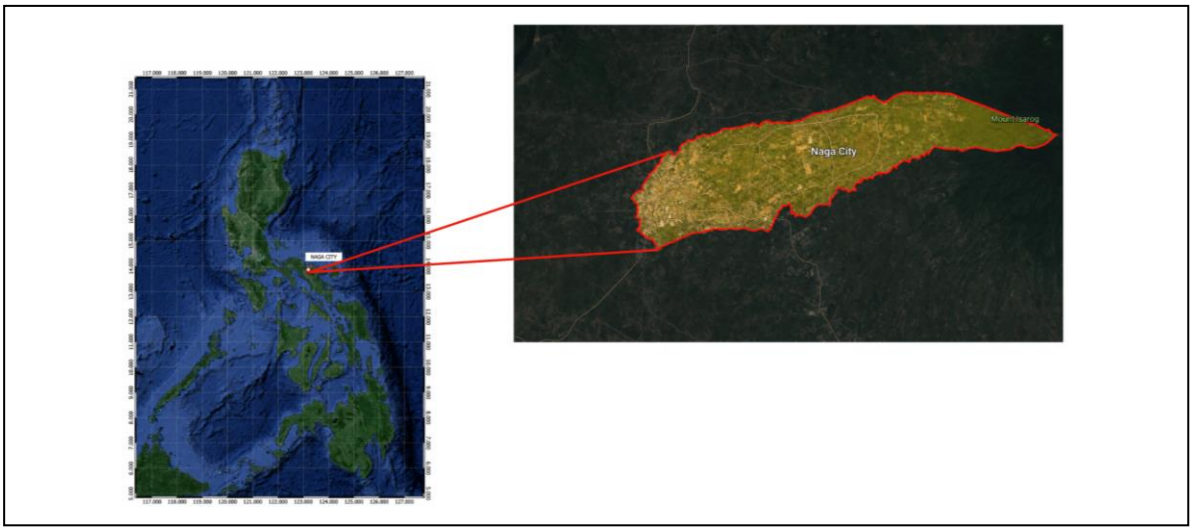


Fig. 1: Philippines and the study site, Naga City
(Source: Google Maps)

The scope of this study covers Naga City. Its core tasks include measuring the impacts of various factors on well-being, analyzing the links between attributes such as walkability and residents' welfare, identifying core influencing factors, and proposing planning interventions. The study's findings can serve planners, local governments, and community organizations. This study has three main limitations: cross-sectional research design, sampling bias, and limited generalizability.

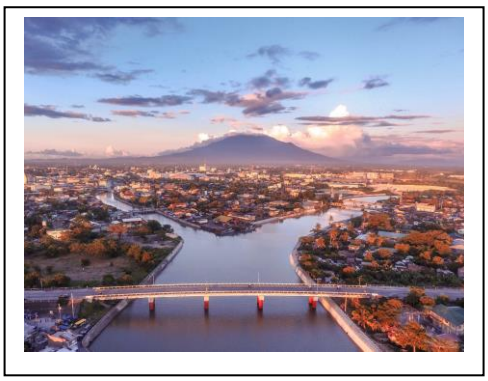


Fig. 2: Naga City's Aerial view.
(Source: Rhoem Daduya)

2.0 Literature Review

At present, urban happiness has become a core field of urban studies. Urban evaluation has shifted from prioritizing economic growth and efficiency as its primary standards to adopting a people-oriented orientation that supports residents' emotional and social needs as well as their daily well-being. Amid the global expansion of urbanization, clarifying the core elements of happiness is a prerequisite for building inclusive, livable, and resilient cities. This literature review will focus on urban well-being in Naga City, the Philippines, and is organized into five main sections.

2.1 Understanding Urban Happiness

Numerous academic studies have established a link between happiness and life satisfaction. Urban happiness is further referred to as the capacity of urban space to stimulate positive emotions and attract people to revisit the area (Sepe, 2017). It is stated that the core dimensions of urban well-being include walkability, safety, and accessibility, among others. Previous studies have also confirmed that this indicator is influenced by civic engagement (Leyden, 2003) as well as urban green spaces and infrastructure (Florida, 2008), while the impacts of factors such as income and education show heterogeneity. Income, education, employment, commuting, and housing density also affect happiness differently across contexts. In 2011, Florida, Mellander, and Rentfrow proposed that social support, meaningful work, and lifestyle compatibility are core predictive variables of life satisfaction.

In 2021, Toger et al. further supplemented the related domains of urban well-being, including health behaviors, social connections, and daily physical activity. This series of studies ultimately points to the interdisciplinary "happy city" approach that integrates urban planning, public health, and psychology. The supporting basis of this approach can be traced back to the WHO Ottawa Charter of 1986, and its relevant elaborations were sorted out by Zhang in 2016.

2.22 Socio-Spatial Landscapes and Well-Being

The socio-spatial landscape refers to an interactive assemblage of built environments and social activities. Its spatial elements across different dimensions act in sequential layers to shape residents' behaviors and well-being, while well-being itself has multiple dimensions and group-level heterogeneity. Elements including street form, land use, building form, and public space, walkable streets, mixed-use parcels, active public spaces, and accessible gathering areas can foster positive feelings such as social interaction and a sense of belonging. Studies by Gehl (2011) and Montgomery (2013) both confirm this finding, and Frey and Stutzer (2010) further supplement the role that urban socio-spatial dynamics play in shaping well-being satisfaction. Landscape elements also influence well-being across multiple dimensions. It is also noted that natural environments can reduce stress. Walkable streets and parks can promote behavioral interaction (Abraham et al., 2010), and Kytta et al. (2016) find that urban diversity, accessibility, and legibility strengthen people's sense of place engagement. Oh-hyun Kwon et al. (2021) also verify that greener environments, water features, lower temperatures, and fewer impermeable surfaces are linked to positive emotions. Well-designed environments can support active lifestyles, positive social relationships, and inclusive spaces. Meanwhile, happiness varies across life stages and demographic groups (Helliwell et al., 2024), and Huppert (2009) defines well-being as a comprehensive concept that includes positive emotions, resilience, a sense of purpose, social relationships, and a sense of belonging.

2.3 Cultural Context of Urban Happiness in the Philippines

Culture and history are core elements that shape urban well-being in the Philippines. Filipino happiness is rooted in relational and collective connotations rather than purely individual ones (Alampay & Jocano, 2014). It draws on indigenous values including kapwa (the shared self) and bayanihan (collective mutual aid). It uses sari-sari neighborhood family-run stores and barangay community administrative centers as its spatial carriers. Studies by David in 2018 and Villanueva in 2020 both confirm that these types of spaces can deepen people's connection to their community. The parade and fair held during the Peñafrancia Festival in Naga City provide evidence of the hybrid urbanization process in the Philippines, which blends tradition and modernity, where modern shopping malls and traditional public spaces coexist in a mutually complementary way.

2.4 Methodologies for Measuring Urban Happiness

To measure urban happiness, a multi-dimensional measurement framework that integrates subjective, objective, and geographic indicators is required (Samavati & Desmet,2022). One method for measuring happiness is the Objective Well-Being Scale, which provides a baseline measurement for happiness and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Another methodology that examines how commuting, leisure, and public space influence emotional experience is the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman et al., 2004).

The Urban Happiness Index integrates subjective well-being with environmental quality, accessibility, mobility, green space, and social interaction (Choi et al., 2020). Walk Score and Space Syntax Analysis connect urban form with movement, behavior, and well-being (Hillier & Hanson, 1984).

2.5 Research Gaps and Studies on Naga City

Naga City has long been understudied despite its economic, religious, and cultural importance in the country. Studies on urban well-being across the country's medium-sized cities are broadly scarce overall, and existing research only focuses on major cities.

Existing literature states that urban well-being stems from the interaction of multiple factors. Porio & See (2017) noted that factors such as social ties in areas outside large metropolises can support well-being. However, no empirical evidence of the relevant operating mechanisms has been recorded for Naga City. To fill this gap, this study examines six core dimensions: mobility, leisure, environmental quality, community participation, safety, and cultural practices.

3.0 Methodology 11AN Bold

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive correlational research design to investigate the links between happiness, well-being, and urban environment among residents of Naga City, the Philippines. This approach enabled the collection of measurable data, description of respondents' satisfaction and happiness levels, and analysis of relationships among socio-demographic characteristics, everyday urban experiences, and perceptions of socio-spatial conditions. This study includes several categories of potential influencing determinants, such as financial stability, housing quality, social relationships, work-life balance, personal fulfilment, accessibility, mobility, recreational and open spaces, infrastructure, public service, environmental quality, and perceived safety. It adopts single-time-point cross-sectional data, and its conclusions reflect respondents' perceptions only during the survey period. The study proactively discloses this research limitation.

3.2 Study Area and Respondents

The study was conducted in Naga City, Philippines, one of the major centers of education, commerce, culture, religion, and public services in the Bicol Region. Its diverse mix of residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, institutions, transport routes, recreational facilities, and open spaces makes it a suitable setting for understanding how the urban environment shapes residents' happiness.

A total of 312 residents participated in the survey. The respondents represented different age groups, employment categories, household income, and residential locations. Eligible participants were those who could understand and complete the questionnaire and voluntarily consented to participate. The diversity of this sample allowed the study to describe the variations in urban happiness across different population groups and residential contexts within the city more clearly.

3.3 Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was administered to 312 Naga City residents to obtain information about their well-being and experiences within the urban environment, covering socio-demographic characteristics, happiness, satisfaction with the urban environment, perceptions of recreational spaces, walking experiences, and determinants of urban happiness. Items assessed satisfaction with living arrangements, leisure opportunities, and transportation, as well as the contribution of open spaces to physical fitness, social interaction, mental well-being, and overall happiness.

The questionnaire also examined happiness associated with walking with family and friends, in natural environments, within neighborhoods, in commercial areas, and to work or school. Likert-type scales were used for selected items, with higher scores representing more favorable assessments.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

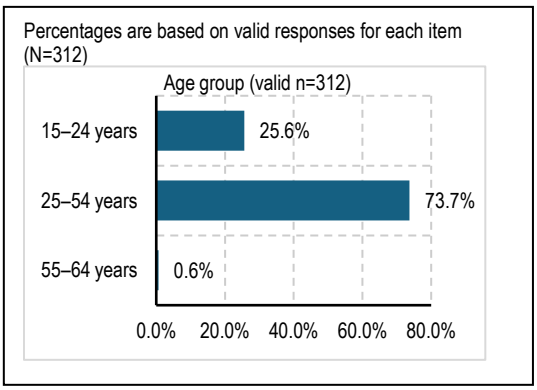
Necessary permits and authorization were secured before the data collection. Permission was obtained from the City Mayor and the head of the Barangays (the smallest unit of governance in the Philippines) before proceeding to data collection. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose, data requirements, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. The questionnaire was administered online with clear instructions and sufficient completion time. Responses were then encoded, organized, cleaned, and prepared for analysis.

Frequency and percentages summarize socio-demographic characteristics and categorical responses. Means and standard deviations described satisfaction levels and variations in Likert-scale ratings. Where appropriate, inferential statistical tests were applied to examine differences and relationships among the study variables.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Respondents' Profile

There was a total of 312 respondents who participated in the survey. The respondents represented various age groups, employment categories, household income levels, and residential locations within Naga City.



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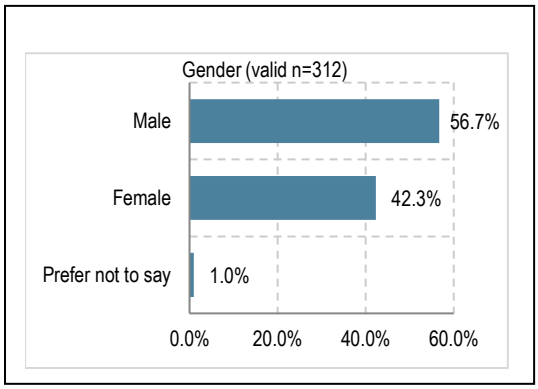

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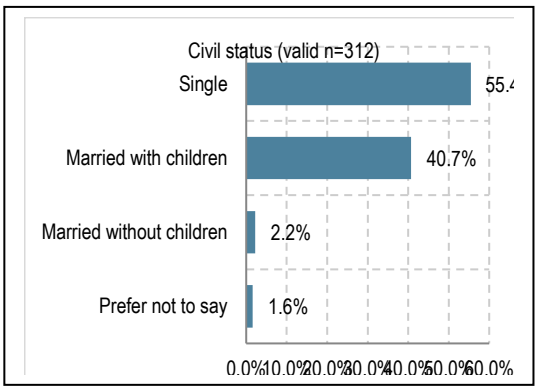

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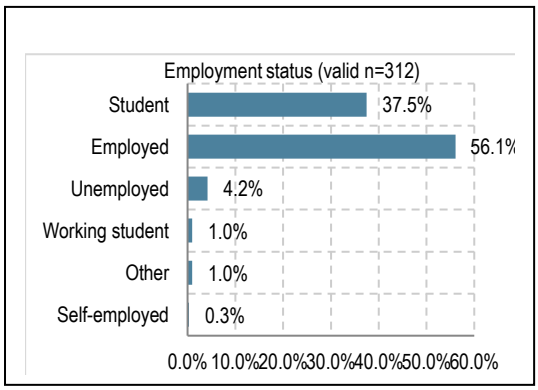

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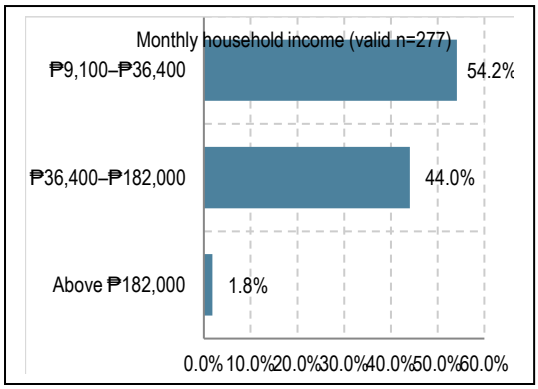

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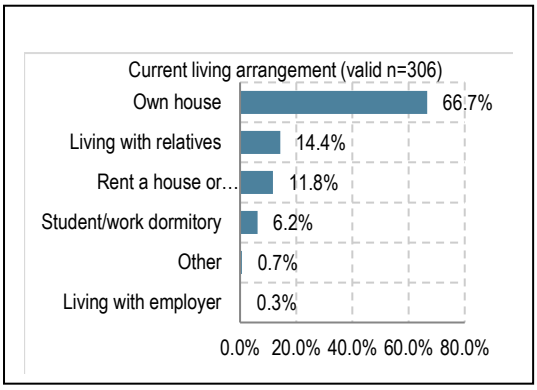

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Fig. 3: (a) Age group; (b) Gende; (c) Civil Status; (d) Employment status; (e) Monthly household income; (f) Current living arrangements

4.2 Satisfaction with Urban Environment

Respondents reported positive satisfaction levels regarding:
Living arrangements (Mean = 3.89)
Leisure opportunities (Mean = 3.63)
Transportation options (Mean = 3.50)

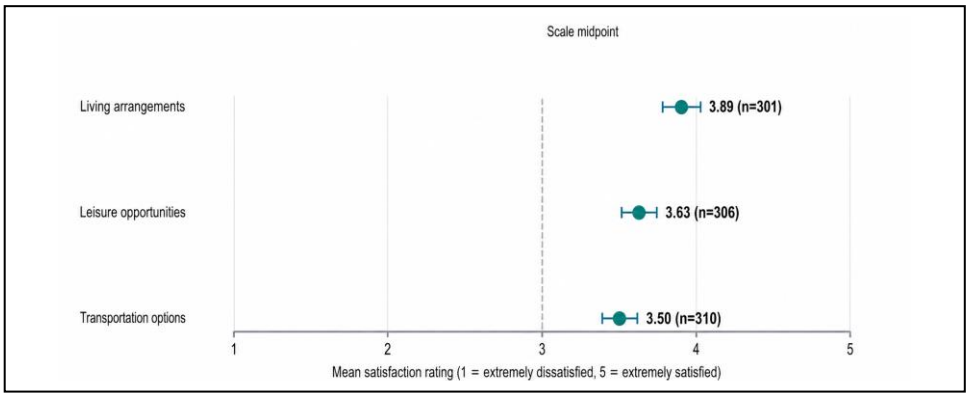

Fig. 4. Satisfaction with selected aspects of urban environment.

4.3 Recreational Spaces

Open spaces were highly valued:
Mental well-being- (88.6%)
Physical Fitness- (87.9%)
Close to nature- (87.0%)
Social interaction- (86.6%)
Overall happiness- (84.7%)

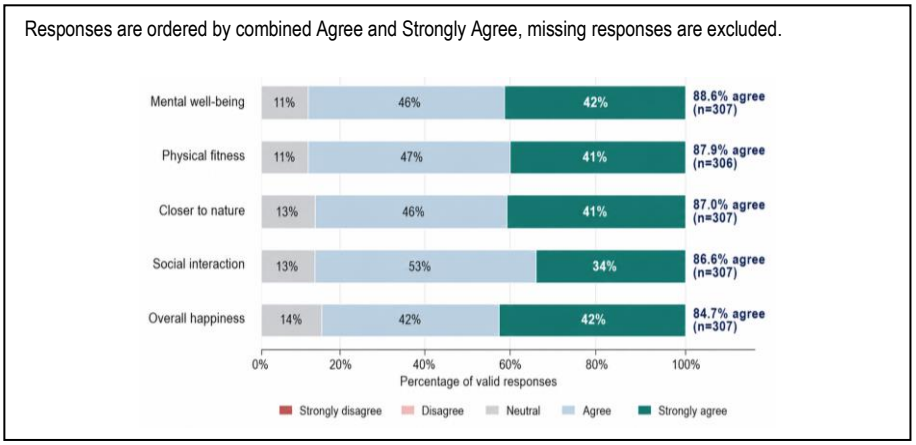

Fig. 5. Perceived benefits of accessible open and recreational spaces.

4.4 Walking and Happiness

Walking significantly contributed to happiness:
Walking with family/friends (90.2%)
Walking in natural environments (89.5%)
Walking in malls/commercial areas (69.7%)
Neighborhood walking (68.0%)
Walking to work/school (67.0%)

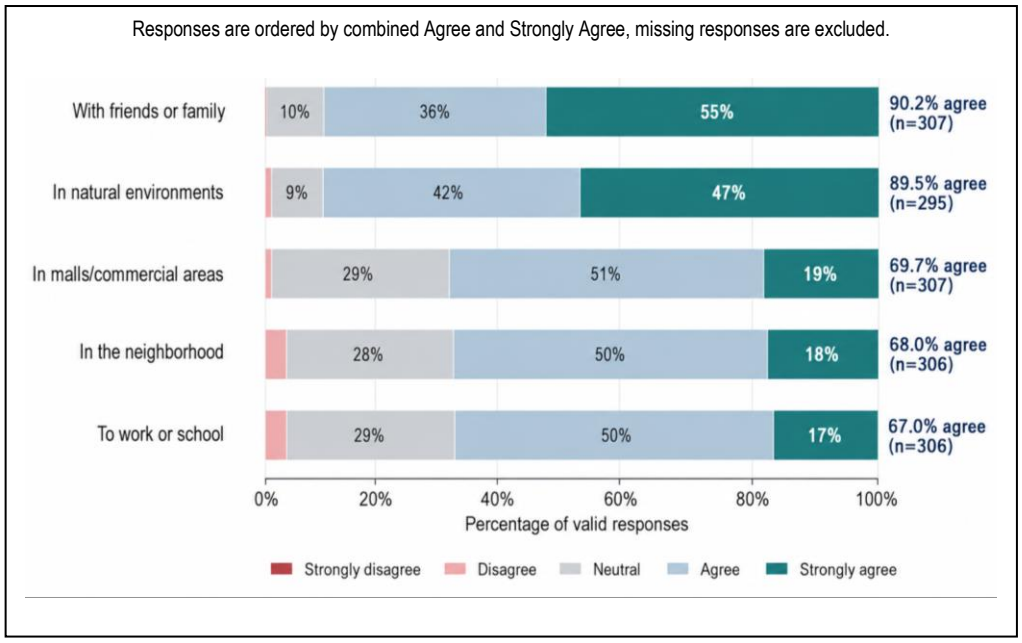

Fig. 6. Contribution of walking to happiness.

4.5 Determinants of Urban Happiness

Table 1. Determinants of Urban Happiness

Rank	Urban happiness determinants	Weighted mean	Valid N	Interpretation
1	Happiness with environmental conditions	3.49	300	High
2	Strength and quality of social relationships	3.49	303	High
3	Quality of living conditions and home environment	3.43	304	High
4	Personal fulfillment and satisfaction in daily activities	3.39	303	Moderate
5	Overall work-life balance	3.24	299	Moderate
6	Ownership of or access to properties	3.23	301	Moderate
7	Availability and quality of open/recreational spaces	3.21	301	Moderate
8	Current salary and financial stability	3.11	295	Moderate

Interpretation bands: 1.00–1.80 Very low; 1.81–2.60 Low; 2.61–3.40 Moderate; 3.41–4.20 High; 4.21–5.00 Very high. Rankings compare weighted mean ratings; valid N varies because some respondents skipped individual items.

5.0 Discussions

The findings show that urban happiness among Naga City residents is shaped by interconnected factors, including individual, social, economic, environmental, and spatial conditions. The 312 valid survey responses shown in Figure 3, have reflected varied experiences across different demographics and residential groups. Results show that housing, mobility, leisure, and resources were influenced by employment and income, while access to work, transport, services, and recreation was influenced by location. However, a follow-up inferential study is still needed to further verify the conclusion on these group-level differences.

Positive satisfaction in Figure 4 was reported regarding respondents' urban environment. Living arrangements obtained the highest means of 3.89, followed by leisure opportunities at 3.63 and transportation options at 3.50. These ratings indicate favorable perceptions but also areas for improvement. The high score suggests that many residents view their homes and neighborhoods as supportive of comfort, security, and family life. However, the average may conceal inequalities among homeowners and renters, income groups, and residents of central and upland barangays.

The mean of 3.63 for leisure opportunities indicates access to places and activities for relaxation, recreation, and social interaction, including parks, plazas, sports facilities, commercial venues, religious spaces, and neighborhood gathering areas. Access may nevertheless vary according to income, time, transportation, physical ability, and residential location. Recreational opportunities should therefore be treated as a component of urban well-being rather than optional amenities.

Transportation received the lowest means of 3.50 but remained positively evaluated. Residents may remain concerned about congestion, cost, waiting time, limited routes, discomfort, and safety. Since transport determines access to work, schools, healthcare,

services, and recreation, improvements in public transportation, sidewalks, crossings, lighting, drainage, shade, and accessibility could reduce travel stress and expand urban participation.

The findings also emphasize the value of recreational and open spaces. Mental well-being received the highest response at 88.6%, followed by physical fitness at 87.9%, close to nature at 87.0% followed by social interaction at 86.6%, and overall happiness at 84.7%. Residents therefore regard open spaces as essential well-being infrastructure rather than decorative features. Parks, plazas, and green areas support relaxation, exercise, play, conversation, and community activities while providing relief from noise, heat, congestion, and stress.

Open spaces encourage active lifestyles and social relationships. Their contribution to physical fitness points to the need for walking paths, exercise areas, play spaces, seating, shade, lighting, and accessible facilities. Their social value lies in bringing together families, friends, neighbors, and groups. However, these benefits depend on quality, safety, maintenance, inclusiveness, and accessibility. Distant, poorly maintained, unsafe, or inaccessible spaces are less likely to generate the benefits of welcoming, connected public environments.

Walking was associated with happiness (See Figure 6), although its contribution varied by setting. Walking with family and friends received the highest percentage at 90.2%, showing that companionship transforms walking into a social activity. Walking in natural environments followed at 89.5%, reflecting the restorative value of greenery, shade, fresh air, and scenery. These findings support integrating pedestrian and green-space planning through landscaped routes, connected parks, shaded sidewalks, and accessible nature corridors.

Walking in malls and commercial areas was selected by 69.7% while neighborhood walking was associated with happiness by 68.0% of respondents. Neighborhood walking supports activity, local access, and social contact. Malls provide sheltered, secure, and climate-controlled environments, especially during hot or rainy weather. However, private commercial spaces should be complemented rather than replace inclusive public places where people can walk and socialize without purchasing goods or services.

Walking to work or school received the lowest percentage at 67.0%. Although valued, these trips may involve traffic, heat, rain, time pressure, and safety risks. This shows that walking frequency alone does not indicate a positive pedestrian experience; comfort, safety, convenience, and choice also matter. Continuous sidewalks, safer crossings, traffic calming, shade, lighting, drainage, and links to public transport could improve necessary trips.

The eight identified determinants in Table 1 confirm the multi-dimensional character of urban happiness. Financial stability reduces uncertainty, quality housing provides security, and work-life balance allows time for rest, relationships, and personal interests. Social relationships offer companionship and emotional support, while personal fulfillment develops through meaningful goals and valued activities.

Public services, environmental quality, and safety demonstrate the importance of governance and planning. Reliable healthcare, education, sanitation, drainage, waste management, transportation, and emergency services reduce daily burdens. Clean surroundings, greenery, thermal comfort, and flood protection support health and outdoor activity. Safety from crime, traffic, harassment, and environmental hazards affects residents' willingness to use streets, parks, and public facilities.

Generally, happiness emerges from the interaction between personal circumstances and Naga City's socio-spatial qualities. Integrated, barangay-sensitive planning should improve walkability, protect green spaces, strengthen services, support affordable housing, and create safe, inclusive places for social life. Further correlational, qualitative, and spatial analyses are needed to identify predictors, examine group differences, and locate underserved communities.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that both social dynamics and physical environments significantly influence the happiness and well-being of urban residents. The findings emphasize the importance of strong community relationships, social inclusion, access to green and open spaces, quality public infrastructure, and safe neighborhoods in promoting a sense of belonging and improving the quality of life.

To enhance urban happiness, the city government should invest not just in public transportation, community centers, and other accessible public services, but also in parks and open spaces and recreational facilities. Programs that promote social inclusion, such as community events, cultural activities, and support for neighborhood associations, should also be strengthened. Socio-economic inequalities should be addressed through affordable housing, livelihood programs, economic opportunities, and job training.

Residents should likewise be encouraged to actively participate in urban planning and decision-making processes that affect their communities. Placemaking projects, public art, heritage conservation, and community-led revitalization can further strengthen place attachment, local identity, and civic pride. Through the combined efforts of local governments, urban planners, and community organizations, cities can become more inclusive, vibrant, sustainable, and supportive of residents' happiness and well-being.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to the fields of urban planning, architecture, and quality-of-life studies by providing localized evidence on the relationship between residents' happiness and the socio-spatial characteristics of Naga City. It identifies how access to open spaces, mobility, public services, safety, and social interaction influence urban well-being. The findings may assist planners, designers, and local government officials in developing more inclusive, accessible, and people-centered urban policies and environments. The study also provides a foundation for developing a localized Urban Happiness Framework applicable to Naga City and other comparable Philippine cities.

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