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What do you really want? Change in goals and life satisfaction during Emerging Adulthood in Brazil

Susana Núñez Rodriguez [a],*, Luciana Dutra-Thomé [b], Silvia Helena Koller [c]

[a] *Universidade Salgado de Oliveira, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*
[b] *Universidade Federal da Bahía, Brazil*
[c] *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil*

Abstract: Aim and Introduction: The aim of this study was to investigate how different types of goals may affect the satisfaction in life of Brazilian emerging adults in different developmental stages and, what characteristics they associate with adulthood. **Method:** Participants were 970 Brazilian youth aged from 18 to 30 years old (M = 22.8; SD = 3.4). The instruments we used were a socio-demographic questionnaire, the Aspiration Index and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. We performed a descriptive statistical analysis to elicit the characteristics related with becoming an adult, as well as ANOVAs to test if there was a difference between the endorsement of intrinsic or extrinsic goals based on sociodemographic characteristics; and if there was a difference, did it affect their satisfaction with life. **Results:** Results showed that the most important characteristic to be considered an adult was to be financially independent and to be responsible for oneself, while the least important were to be married and to have children. There was a significant difference in the importance participants gave to intrinsic goals based on sex and age. Consistently with previous research, we found that giving greater importance to intrinsic goals had a positive and significant effect on life satisfaction. However, different sets of goals were deemed important according to the developmental stage youth were in, and these changes had in turn a significant effect on life satisfaction. **Conclusions:** Finally, we found that prioritizing intrinsic goals contributes to greater life satisfaction in general. This study acknowledges that there are individual and contextual factors that may propel youth to choose their goals in order to attend these demands, regardless of their impact on life satisfaction.
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¿Tienes ganas de qué? Cambios en las metas y en la satisfacción de vida en adultos emergentes en Brasil

Resumen: Objetivo e introducción: El objetivo de este artículo fue investigar como diferentes tipos de metas pueden afectar la satisfacción con la vida de adultos emergentes brasileños en diferentes etapas de su desarrollo, y definir qué características ellos asocian con la edad adulta. **Método:** Participaron 970 jóvenes brasileños con edades entre 18 y 30 años (M = 22.8; DE = 3.4). Los instrumentos utilizados fueron un cuestionario sociodemográfico, el Índice de Aspiraciones y la Escala de Satisfacción con la Vida. Ejecutamos un análisis descriptivo para

elucidar cuáles fueron las características asociadas con volverse adultos. Luego, ANOVAs para verificar si había diferencia en su endoso de metas intrínsecas o extrínsecas basada en sus características sociodemográficas; y en caso de que la hubiese, si esta afectaba su nivel de satisfacción con la vida. **Resultados:** Los resultados mostraron que la característica más importante para ser considerado un adulto es ser financieramente independiente y ser responsable de sí mismo, mientras que las menos importantes fueron estar casados y tener hijos. Hubo una diferencia significativa en la importancia que los participantes dieron a las metas intrínsecas, con base en el sexo y la edad. Consistentemente con investigaciones previas, encontramos que dar mayor importancia a metas intrínsecas está positiva y significativamente relacionado con la satisfacción con la vida. Sin embargo, diferentes grupos de metas fueron encontradas como más importantes en diferentes etapas del desarrollo de los jóvenes, y esos cambios, a su vez, tuvieron un efecto significativo en la satisfacción con la vida. **Conclusiones:** Finalmente, aunque dar importancia a las metas intrínsecas está asociada con una mayor satisfacción con la vida en general. Este estudio contribuyó a reconocer que existen factores individuales y contextuales que impulsan a los jóvenes hacia la elección de dichas metas para atender estas demandas, independientemente de su impacto en la satisfacción con la vida.

The study of how goals, aims, life projects and similar constructs have taken an important plateau on the psychological research in recent years (Bundick, 2011; Sheldon et al., 2019; Werner et al., 2016). These studies have used different theoretical bases to approach the main subject; that is: how, why, when, and for how long do humans actively plan their actions? According to a recent critical review (Ramos et al., 2013), previous studies have elaborated on mainly three aspects regarding goals: (1) the temporality aspects of the goals, considering the cognitive processes involved in planning and engaging in new goals (Ko et al., 2014); (2) the intrinsic or extrinsic components of the motivation to engage in a goal, the causes and its costs or benefits in the well-being of the person (Dittmar et al., 2014); and (3) the cognitive and neurologic aspects related to the establishment of goals in a near or a distant future (D'Argembeau et al., 2010).

However, these studies have not yet addressed how contextual factors interfere with defining or re-defining youth goals. It would be important to consider some of these factors, such as socioeconomic and education levels of the individual, their parents' educational level, employment status, sex, and age in order to further understand how youth engage and disengage in certain goals as they grow up. In the present study, we aim to analyse the variation of goals at different stages during emerging adulthood, and how the contextual factors work as moderators in the relationship between goals and life satisfaction in different developmental stages.

To address this issue, we will use the theoretical approach of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and its differentiation of intrinsic and extrinsic goals (Luyckx et al., 2017). As it is well established in the SDT literature, not all types of goals are beneficial for a positive development in life; some goals may contribute to increasing well-being, while others may diminish it. We intend to shed light on how the choice of different types of goals could affect the life satisfaction during emerging adulthood in different developmental stages.

Intrinsic and extrinsic goals during emerging adulthood

Among recent studies based on the SDT, goals are defined as different things that a person intends to achieve in order to have a better life or build a better world, with benefits for themselves and/or for others (Kasser, 2011). This theory refers to two basic types of goals, defined based on what drives the impulse to fulfil it. Some are more directly driven to fulfil basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness), and are named "intrinsic goals"; whereas others are more distant, and driven to satisfy these needs only indirectly, known as extrinsic goals.

Thus, the intrinsic goals are defined as those which are valuable or satisfactory in themselves, and which satisfaction does not depend on the evaluation or approval of others (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). The four types of intrinsic goals evaluated here are: (1) Self-acceptance: goals referring to personal growth and a better knowledge and acceptance of oneself. (2) Affiliation: goals directed to relationships and social support. (3) Sense of community: goals with a purpose to help others and be an active member of a community. And (4) Health: goals to maintain physical and mental fitness.

On the other hand, the "extrinsic goals" are those in which value is associated with receiving some reward or gaining recognition from others. These types of goals do not provide satisfaction by themselves, but it is assumed that if the goal is achieved it would generate admiration, a sense of power, or boost self-esteem (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). As extrinsic goals, we consider: (1) Financial success, or the search for money, possessions, or a high economic status. (2) Popularity, goals related to social recognition or fame. (3) Appearance, goals associated with the search to have an attractive image according to societal parameters.

However, further studies on motivation theory led to the inclusion of four other factors to the initial Aspirational Index (AI) structure (Grouzet et al., 2005). These factors include compliance goals (referring to fitting in and following

the societal established values); security goals (suggesting that people are motivated to feel safe and secure); hedonic goals (that is, to guide behaviour based on sensory pleasures), and, finally, spirituality goals (which evoke the search for something greater than oneself). The items that make up these factors include both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects, but reflect a second dimension of the instrument, reflecting self-transcendence goals on the one side (such as spirituality and conformity), and physical pursuits (such as security goals and hedonic) on the other. Nonetheless, these 4 factors were removed from our final analysis since their evaluation exceeds the purpose of this study.

Several studies, using different measures of well-being, have shown how placing higher importance on extrinsic goals leads to negative consequences such as engagement in risky activities (e.g., smoking or drinking alcohol; Black, 2007), negative impact on self-appraisal and self-esteem (Kasser et al., 2014); higher rates of anxiety and depression with physical symptoms (i.e., stomach aches and headaches), as well as lower vitality, happiness, and self-actualization (Bronk, et al., 2009; Niemiec et al, 2009). A recent meta-analysis study gathered the results of 753 studies and showed that materialism is significantly associated with lower well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014). This association only gets stronger when the assessment included a broader concept of materialism, with materialistic goals and values, rather than just the desire for money, e.g., giving more importance to extrinsic goals compared with intrinsic ones.

However, to a certain degree, we all sustain both intrinsic and extrinsic goals as important aims in life, but the order of priorities tends to vary throughout one's life span. While some of them may seem very important in the early twenties, others may have the same importance by the early thirties, and this variability could lead to changes in life satisfaction. This shift in goal importance could reflect role transitions (i.e., having the first child), new life situations (e.g., getting into College.), or contextual factors (e.g., economic crises in the country) (Salmela-Aro et al., 2007). And, as some researchers have pointed out, the third decade in life is the period where there are more changes and decisions than in any other period in life (Luyckx et al., 2017).

The proposal of the phase of emerging adulthood recognizes these changes and how it affects the transition to adulthood in individuals between 18 and 29 years of age in industrialized and post-industrialized countries, with socioeconomic, cultural, and contextual specificities (Arnett, 2011; Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2014; Galambos & Martínez, 2007). Young individuals are postponing traditional adult commitments, such as marriage, having kids, having a steady job, and leaving the parental home. They are exploring their identities in different fields (e.g., love relationships, education, professions etc.), and, since they commonly do not have long term commitments (e.g., kids, marriage), they tend to make self-focused decisions. They also face feelings of instability and negativity due to the lack of constant establishments in their transitioning lives. Despite all this, they present an optimistic view of the future. These characteristics are the bases of the main subjective mark of the period, the "feeling in-between" of adolescence and adulthood, meaning they do not feel entirely adolescents nor adults yet (Arnett, 2011). This new way of transitioning brings new adulthood definitions,

which may influence the goals and aspirations of emerging adults. A longitudinal study by Salmela-Aro et al. (2007) showed that age was a significant predictor for changes in goals related to work, family, and friends, with older individuals more interested in the first two and less interested in the last.

However, no study, to our knowledge, has tested the variation of priorities based on the SDT differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Thus, we formulated three hypotheses to guide this study: (H1) the characteristics that young Brazilians associate with being an adult will be more associated with non-traditional roles (e.g., finishing their careers or being financial independent), instead of more traditional ones (e.g., getting married and having kids); (H2) different types of goals will be emphasized for emerging adults based on their age group; (H3) youth who give more importance to intrinsic goals, compared to extrinsic goals, would have higher levels of life satisfaction, accounting for socioeconomic variables considering the contextual factors working as intervening variables on this relationship.

Method

Participants

The sample included 970 Brazilian youth aged from 18 to 30 years old (56.8% women; M_{age} = 22.8; SD = 3.4). This study was previously approved by the Ethical Committee of University Salgado de Oliveira, Rio de Janeiro (CEP n° 246.001), and all participants gave their signed consent before participating.

Table 1   Socio-demographic characteristics for the complete sample

Characteristic	N (970)	Percentage (%)
Age in years		M = 22.8, SD = 3.4
[18 to 21] years old	356	37.2%
[22 to 25] years old	425	46.0%
[26 to 30] years old	189	16.8%
Sex (feminine)	549	56.8%
Family income		
Lower (until R$1000)	87	10.2%
Middle (until R$5000)	536	54%
Higher (more than R$5000)	305	31.5%
Doesn´t know or doesn´t say	42	4.3%
Educational level - Participant		
High School	86	8.9%
Undergraduate education (technical or bachelor degree)	772	80.1%
Graduate education (Master o Doctoral degree)	99	10.3%
Employment status		
Student	886	91.8%
Currently working	600	62.2%
Never worked before	132	13.7%

Instruments

Socio-demographic Questionnaire: 20 questions about the participant's sex, age, educational and socioeconomic level, working status, and future perspectives.

Criteria to define emerging adulthood: it was assessed through the question, *'Did you reach adulthood?'* with the options 'Yes', 'No', or 'In some ways yes, in some ways no', expressing ambivalence, which is the subjective mark of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2011). We also included nine items that participants should place in order of importance to define their perception of adulthood, these included: (a) completing education, (b) getting married, (c) having children, (d) leaving parental home, (e) accepting responsibility for oneself, (f) making independent decisions, (g) becoming financially independent, (h) beginning to have more consideration for others, and (i) being able to take care of one's parents (Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2014).

Satisfaction with life: The Scale of Life Satisfaction (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985) evaluates the subjects' cognitive judgment about their own lives. The instrument consists of five items, rated from one (*strongly disagree*) to seven (*strongly agree*). In Brazil, the instrument was validated by Gouveia et al. (2009) in a sample of 2180 participants. It presented a single factor structure with a satisfactory internal consistency (α = .80) and excellent adjustment fit (c^2[5] = 44.78; GFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.98; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.021).

Goal importance: The Aspiration Index (AI, Grouzet et al., 2005) is composed of 47 items and divided into 11 subscales: self-acceptance, affiliation, sense of community, health, financial success, popularity, appearance, compliance, spirituality, security, and hedonism. It assesses the importance of different goals in people's lives, ranging from one (*no importance*) to nine (*extremely important*). This instrument was validated to the Brazilian context by Núñez-Rodríguez et al. (2016) and showed adequate adjustment rates ($c2$ (979, N = 1,854) = 4,643.93, p < .001; CFI = .87; SRMR = .050; RMSEA = .045 (90% CI = .044, .046).

Data analysis

To respond to our first hypothesis, we carried out a descriptive statistical analysis to elicit which characteristics Brazilian youth relate to becoming an adult. For the second hypothesis, we performed a correlation analysis between all types of goals (VI) and life satisfaction (VD). Then, we split the sample into three age groups: from 18 to 22, from 22 to 26 and from 26 to 30 years old, and performed a new correlation analysis within each group, using the same variables, to verify any possible changes in the importance of goals across the emerging adulthood years.

However, although the Aspiration Index (AI) offers two different ratings for each item: (1) the importance of each aspiration, and (2) the belief about their ability to achieve it, we only use the former to generate the factor scores. This is because, in our sample, the second part of each item presented more than 40% missing values, and the ones that were answered showed an identical score for the first part, suggesting that the individuals were a little too tired to an-

swer the complete questionnaire or did not understand the difference between the ratings. Final scores for each factor were calculated using the mean of all items´ scores that composed that factor.

Finally, to address the third hypothesis, we carried out a series of *Student T-test* and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to evaluate if there were any significant differences (p > .05) in the importance ratings of the goals, based on the participant's demographic characteristics (sex, age, educational and socioeconomic status). Then, we conducted a correlation analysis between age, sex, income, aspirations and SWLS, and carried out two hierarchical regression analyses to test: (1) age, sex, income and intrinsic or extrinsic goals predicting the levels of life satisfaction (DV), and (2) age, sex, income, and self-acceptance, affiliation, sense of community, health, financial success, popularity, appearance aspirations predicting SWLS. We control for effect of sex and age on both analyses.

Results

As a response to the first hypotheses, we obtained that the most important characteristic to be consider an adult for the Brazilian youth was to be financially independent (34.8%), and to be responsible for oneself (34.3%), while the least important were to be married (0.6%) and to have children (0.3%) (see Figure 1). Furthermore, from the total sample, 32% of the participants perceived themselves as adults, 22% did not, and 46% considered that they were "in-between" adolescence and adulthood.
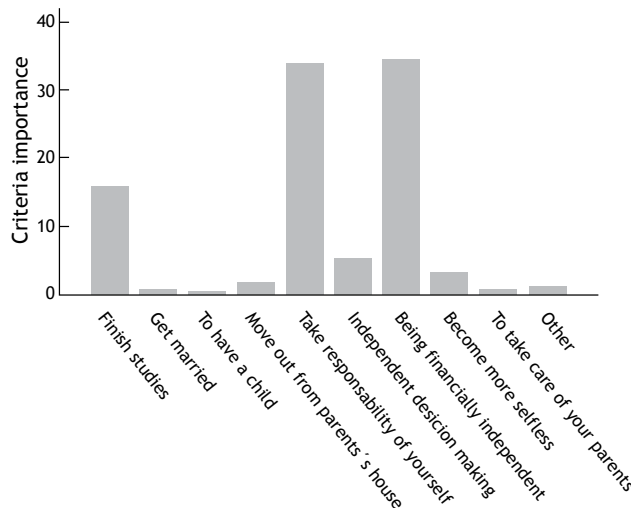

Figure 1. Criteria listed as important to achieve adulthood according to Brazilian youth.

Next, we obtained the descriptive statistics, including media, standard deviation, and internal consistency (*Cronbach alpha*) measures for all variables. To verify the second hypothesis, we performed a correlation analysis between different types of goals (IV) and the life satisfaction (DV) for all sample and for the three different age groups (Table 2). Results of the whole sample showed that all intrinsic goals were significantly correlated with life satisfaction (r = .197, p = .001), while only the extrinsic goals of financial success showed a negative significant correlation (r = -.073).

However, when we split the sample into three age groups, we found a more complex picture of these results. For the first group (18 to 22 years old), only two types of goals were significantly correlated with life satisfaction: affiliation goals (r = .25, p = .01) and the sense of community goals (r= .17, p = .01). For the second group (23 to 26 years old), three types of goals were significantly correlated with life satisfaction, two of them showed a positive correlation, again affiliation (r = .12, p = .05), and sense of community (r = .18, p = .01), and financial goals emerged as a negative correlation (r = -.16, p = .05). For the third and last group (27 to 30 years old), affiliation goals remained important (r = .29, p = .01), and, for the first time, self-acceptance goals appeared as a significant correlation with life satisfaction (r= .24, p= .01).

Next, we performed a series of *Student T-test* and ANOVAS with each group of independent variables. The results from the *Student T-test* showed that there are significant differences in the importance people gave to different types of goals based on sex, with females giving significantly higher importance than males to intrinsic goals (M_f = 8.04, SD = .78; M_m = 7.66, SD = .94), t (878) = 6.48, p < .001, and, extrinsic goals as well (M_f = 6.25, SD = 1.38; M_m = 5.59, SD = 1.58), t (878) = 6.61, p < .004. However, it is possible to appreciate that although both are significant; the gap is bigger between males and females when it comes to intrinsic goals.

No significant difference was found based on their socio-economic level, regarding the types of goals. On the other hand, when we look at the educational level, it was possible to observe a significant difference between the groups, with people with higher education placing more importance on intrinsic goals (F = 6.18; p < .001). However, as can be seen in Table 1, there was not enough variability in the sample regarding both variables (with 80% of the sample being comprised of undergraduate students and 54%, from middle class homes), which may have restricted the analysis and contributed to these results.

Finally, results of the regression results of the regression analysis (Table 3) provided confirmation of our third research hypothesis (youth who give more importance to intrinsic goals compared to extrinsic goals, would have higher levels of life satisfaction). When we included the combination of sex and age group as the contextual variables in step 1 of our hierarchical regression models 1 and 2, it did not significantly predict life satisfaction. However, in Model 1, the aggrupation of intrinsic and extrinsic goals predicted life satisfaction. And in Model 2, when we investigated each group of goals, only the affiliation, community and image goals were significantly important to life satisfaction. However, even though the community and affiliation goals contributed positively to the equation, the image (or appearance) goals contributed negatively to the equation predicting life satisfaction.

Discussion

This study had the main goal of understanding what is important to achieve in different developmental levels for emerging adults in Brazil, considering that some contextual variables may interfere in the process. For the first hypothesis, it was possible to observe that Brazilian youth are already postponing traditional commitments, such as getting married (.6%) and having children (.3%), to pursue more non-traditional goals, such as to become financial independent (34.8%) and to finish their studies (15.9%). Similar results appeared in a previous study in Brazil (Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2014) and in Latin-America (Galambos & Martínez, 2007).

Next, when we divided the sample by age groups, we found that the goals of affiliation (e.g., their connections with others, their relationships with family and friends, or with their community), are the types of goals that positively affected their life satisfaction throughout all the age groups. This corroborates the results on how friendships, pairs and social connections are an important aspect of

Table 2   Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations results between different types of goals and life satisfaction (for the whole sample and for different age groups)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	*M*	*SD*	α
Life Satisfaction *(1)*	1										4.78	1.32	.82
Intrinsic Goals *(2)*	.197**	1									7.98	.90	.78
Self-acceptance *(3)*	.089**	.724**	1								8.10	.82	.88
Affiliation *(4)*	.195**	.793**	.459**	1							8.03	1.12	.67
Community *(5)*	.169**	.854**	.439**	.459**	1						7.81	1.45	.82
Health *(6)*	.079*	.728**	.510**	.312**	.318**	1					7.52	1.34	.78
Extrinsic Goals *(7)*	-.045	.361**	.391**	.375**	.168**	.419**	1				5.95	1.51	.78
Financial *(8)*	-.073*	.204**	.351**	.227**	.009	.372**	.811**	1			6.55	1.65	.78
Popularity *(9)*	-.018	.426**	.372**	.410**	.273**	.294**	.836**	.485**	1		6.19	1.85	.74
Image *(10)*	-.063	.277**	.272**	.304**	.132**	.397**	.885**	.605**	.617**	1	5.11	1.88	.82
Life-sat. G1 [18-21]	1	.212**	.078	.250**	.172**	.128*	-.061	-.065	.000	-.086			
Life-sat. G2 [22-25]	1	.157**	.020	.107*	.224**	-.080	-.106	-.131*	-.020	-.125*			
Life-sat. G3 [26-30]	1	.253**	.235**	.291**	.124	.237**	-.057	.004	.079	.058			

**p <.01   * p < .05

Table 3 Hierarchical Multiple Regression for socioeconomic variables and Goals Predicting Life Satisfaction (*N* = 837)

	Model 1							Model 2					
	B	SE B	β	p	ΔR^2	F		B	SE B	β	p	ΔR^2	F
Step 1							Step 1						
Constant	6.038						Constant	5.713					
Sex	-.195	.093	-.073	.037			Age	-.041	.014	-.107	.002		
Age	-.042	.014	-.107	.002	.013	6.456	Sex	-.195	.093	-.073	.037		8.506
Step 2							Step 2						
Constant	3.168						Constant	3.283					
Sex	-.097	.094	-.036	.304	.013	6.456	Age	-.036	.013	-.090	.008	.010	6.456
Age	-.036	.014	-.090	.008	.016	12.057*	NSE	.172	.062	.095	.006	.009	**13.888***
Intrinsic Goals	.358	.057	.238	.000	.027	**17.557***	Community	.099	.035	.108	.005	.008	**15.325***
Extrinsic Goals	-.128	.033	-.145	.000	.019	**17.350***	Image	-.087	.025	-.124	.001	-.001	**18.099***
NSE	.180	.062	.099	.004	.010	15.252*	Affiliation	.204	.048	.171	.000	.032	**19.985***

a positive development from childhood to old age, providing emotional support, information, company, and a sense of belonging (DeSousa & Cerqueira-Santos, 2012; Glick & Rose, 2011).

We also found that for the age group between 23 to 26 years old, the extrinsic goal for financial success presented a negative correlation with satisfaction in life (*r* = -.16, *p* = .05). It is during this period of life, though, when young people are generally involved in finishing university, searching for their first job, starting their careers, and/or starting a new family; therefore, they would be more likely to be preoccupied with their financial success. However, in addition to these challenges, it is important to note that the Brazilian context has been under political and economic distress since 2012 (Tinoco & Giambiagi, 2018), and between 2005 and 2014 the proportion of young people between 18 and 24 years of age with more than 11 years of schooling increased by 20.4%, and those with complete secondary education increased by 24% (IBGE, 2009). Thus, it is considered these contextual factors may be important to understand this particular result.

On the other hand, it is important to notice that women placed higher importance on both intrinsic and extrinsic goals, when compared to men. The increasing role of women, during the last decade in Brazil, with a broader access to higher education and employment opportunities (IBGE, 2009), could account for this result. However, some studies have suggested that goal selection turns into more extrinsic goals when people experience psychological threats (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). We wonder if the same results could be possible, regarding socioeconomic threats, such as being part on a minority group in society (e.g., being a woman, an LGBTQ, black, etc.). Future and broader studies would be needed to understand these results, particularly regarding the importance given to extrinsic goals for different groups in society (such as to include minority groups).

As for the third group (27 and 30 years old), self-acceptance goals appeared for the first time, with a significant correlation with life satisfaction. This type of goal refers to increasing self-knowledge, feeling competent and being autonomous, which requires a certain level cognitive and emotional maturity, accounting for a higher control of his/her own life and decision-making process, characteristics associated with entering adulthood (Donnellan et al., 2007; Tanner & Arnett, 2009).

Finally, results from the hierarchical regression analysis showed that the third and main hypothesis of the study, was confirmed (F(4,833) = 16.598, *p* < .001). These results are consistent with previous findings, indicating that people's general well-being and life satisfaction improve as they orientate their lives toward more intrinsic goals and values (e.g., improving personal relationships), and decrease as people turn to more materialistic ones (e.g., seeking financial success) (Brown et al., 2009; Kasser, 2002; Kasser et al., 2014; Twenge et al., 2010).

This study contributes to acknowledge that the individual's developmental stage (mostly stated by their age) plays an important role in determining which goals are more important for a person, whether it is for developmental tasks or demands of the environment during that period. However, future studies are still needed to better understand why extrinsic goals are deemed important during the period of time between 22 and 26 years of age, or to women in particular, and how we can improve our approach to help people establish healthier and more positive goals in life.

Acknowledgements

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