THE CHIEF HAPPINESS OFFICER IN ACADEMIA: NEW PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES?

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Abstract: Several organisations have recently started to pay more attention to their employees' happiness since they have realized the tight relationship between employees' well-being and productivity. In fact, research studies (Adams 2019; Kossek *et al.* 2014) have demonstrated how staff job satisfaction can be influenced by work-life balance and consequently help increase the profits of organisations. Since the growth of job stress among academics has been endangering their well-being (Bhatia and Mohsin 2020), a few scholars (Bailey and Phillips 2016; Bell *et al.* 2012; Heiden *et al.* 2021) have analysed the link between job pressure stress and health and the negative implications for both the performances of academics and the outcomes of students. In order to fight against the feeling of living in a threatening work context, some universities have begun to promote some initiatives and stress management practices to help their members to cope with increased symptoms of ill-being and psychological distress. As it is becoming increasingly usual that non-academic organisations include in their organigrams a new professional profile, the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO), in order to monitor their employees' well-being, the present paper is intended to be the starting point of a debate on the potential role of the CHO in academia to promote a new academic culture based on happiness, satisfaction and sustainable positivity. In particular, the interest in this new profession raises the question of whether a CHO can actually contribute to improving well-being in academia or whether it can be more beneficial to focus on a "chief happiness officer mentality", rather than a chief happiness officer person.

Keywords: Chief Happiness Officer; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; sustainable happiness at work; well-being in academia.

1. Introduction

1.1. Well-being and happiness at work

In 2015 Oswald *et al.* conducted some research to answer the question "Does happiness make human beings more productive at work?". Through a number of laboratory experiments with more than 700 participants the scholars provided evidence that happy employees work harder. Specifically, by testing young men and women who attended an elite English university, they demonstrated that happiness makes people about 12% more productive.

Until a few years ago companies were more concerned about their employees' safety in the workplace than their well-being. Recently they have started to adopt policies to develop employees' happiness since it has been widely demonstrated (Bell *et al.* 2012; Hoffmann-Burdzińskaa and Rutkowskab 2015) that people's professional well-being is strictly connected to productivity. Adams (2019: 583) underlines that "healthy and happy employees have a better quality of life, a lower risk of disease and injury, increased work productivity, and a greater likelihood of contributing to their communities than employees with poorer well-being". Other scholars (Adams 2019; Kossek *et al.* 2014) have investigated the importance of physical and psychological health at work and how work-life balance can affect people's accomplishments and job satisfaction. These studies have, in fact, demonstrated that building a stronger connection between work-life balance, well-being and sustainability can enhance people's performance at work and companies' profits.

In the last decade work-life balance in academia has also been increasingly studied (Bell *et al.* 2012; Kinman 2014), given that job stress increases physical symptoms of ill-being and it has relevant implications for the performances of academics and the outcomes of students. Since the growth of job stress among university members has been endangering their well-being, a few scholars (Bailey and Phillips 2016; Bell *et al.* 2012; Heiden *et al.* 2021) have analysed the link between job pressure stress and health and the negative implications for both academics and students. In order to reduce the sensation of living in a threatening work environment, some universities have begun to promote specific initiatives and stress management practices to help their members to cope with increased symptoms of ill-being and psychological distress.

Organizational strategies for long-term workforce effectiveness such as "promoting sustainable careers, increasing workplace social support, and safeguarding against work intensification" (Kossek *et al.* 2014: 296) seem necessary to help employees to overcome work-life conflict, increase the level of subjective well-being and nurture social benefits.

1.2. The changing academic profession in the Western world

In the past academics were considered privileged people since their job was seen as less stressful compared to other jobs thanks to its stability, flexibility and autonomy. It seemed that these highly respected professionals were protected from stress caused by job insecurity and unpleasant working conditions (Karasek

and Theorell 1990; Willie and Stecklein 1982). Unfortunately, over the past few years universities have experienced several organisational and structural changes which have had negative consequences on academics' well-being and job performance.

Cuts in public funding and an increase in tuition fees have contributed to the transformation of university policies and the marketisation of education discourse (Fairclough 1993). In order to attract more students universities have started to adopt a market-oriented approach elaborating new student recruitment strategies and communication campaigns. In fact, several linguistic marketing devices are borrowed from the business sector in order to get a wider number of students, who are now considered as "consumers" (Morrish and Sauntson 2013). Consequently, the work for academics has become more demanding and complex:

> Market-led policies encourage regular curriculum design and diverse modes of delivery, requiring a high level of technical expertise and an increasingly skilled classroom performance. Academics are now expected to demonstrate excellence in teaching, research, administration and pastoral care, and frequently through external, entrepreneurial activities (Kinman 2014: 220).

This consumer-oriented approach asks for more efficiency and evidence of research and educational quality. University students' satisfaction is constantly monitored and new mechanisms to measure academics' performance have been introduced. This shift from an educational system based on autonomy and collaboration towards a competitive and managerial one is having a negative impact on the physical and psychological health of academics (Erickson *et al.* 2021; Heller 2022; Teelken 2012).

2. Literature review: Happiness at university

Since the time of the Greek philosophers, happiness has always been considered as the highest goal of human beings. It is something that everyone tries to find throughout life even if it differs from person to person. For Bhatia and Mohsin (2020: 7805) "happiness is essentially a state of subjective psychological well-being in an individual". The term can have several definitions such as "the state of feeling or showing pleasure"[1] and "a state of well-being and contentment"[2], but it is usually described as an emotional state characterized by positive feelings and life satisfaction. Since it is a variously defined concept, in order to avoid its ambiguous meaning, in 1984, psychologist Ed Diener introduced the expression "subjective well-being" (SWB) which focuses on an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of their life. SWB "is the personal perception and experience of positive and negative emotional responses and global and (domain) specific cognitive evaluations of satisfaction with life" (Proctor 2014: 6437). It is, thus, a notion which varies considerably across cultures and nations and can have

[1] From https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[2] From https://www.merriam-webster.com/ (visited 08/03/2024).

internal and external sources. Traditional factors such as wealth, spiritual life and health are believed to be sources of happiness and some researchers have also suggested that the different phases of a person's development can determine happiness (Abecia *et al.* 2014). Happiness is also seen as something people can develop, pursue and control (Oishi 2012).

Many scholars (Gröpel and Kuhl 2009; Kinman 2014) have conducted theoretical and empirical research in different countries to examine the stressors[3] experienced by academics as the main obstacle to their happiness. Comparative studies on UK academics' working conditions (Kinman 2014) have shown that many factors affect negatively their well-being. In particular, the most common stressors and constraints identified are long working hours, administrative load, pressure to obtain research funding, lack of administrative and technical support in addition to interpersonal conflict, job insecurity and limited opportunities for career progression.

Bhatia and Mohsin (2020) undertook a study between February and March 2020 to examine how teachers in eight higher educational institutions in Delhi faced the challenges due to the coronavirus outbreak. Teachers, who were already under stress because of the rising expectations of the institutions, had to cope with a new threatening situation which constrained and compromised their abilities at work. Starting from the assumption that "happiness is both a process and an outcome" (p. 7805), the scholars identified five factors ("Overall Life Satisfaction", "Quality of Work Life from Home", "Level of positive feeling from Home", "Engagement and meaningful work", and "sense of control") that negatively impact teachers' happiness and work outcomes. These factors fuel anxiety and stress among university teachers compromising their already fragile work-life balance.

Through semi-structured interviews, Bilal and Kinza (2020) investigated the level of happiness of university staff in Pakistan and, even if they define happiness in the same way as defined by western countries, that is life satisfaction, surprisingly the majority of university employees reported being happy.

Other studies (Chan *et al.* 2005; Otaghi *et al.* 2020) have examined university students' happiness. Chan *et al.* (2005) investigated the roles that economic and social factors play in determining students' satisfaction inviting university policy-makers to use the results of their research to develop strategies that can improve the academic learning environment. By using a systematic review and meta-analysis approach, Otaghi *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that happiness and academic achievement are interrelated. The analysis revealed that happiness is an effective factor for improving university students' performance and obtaining better results.

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[3] "any event, force, or condition that results in physical or emotional stress. Stressors may be internal or external forces that require adjustment or coping strategies on the part of the affected individual." (*APA Dictionary of Psychology* - https://dictionary.apa.org/stressor (visited 08/03/2024).

3. Data and scope of the study

In order to engage employees, motivate them and raise performance levels, it is becoming increasingly usual that organisations include in their organigrams a new professional profile, the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO), with the goal to encourage employees' well-being, thereby fostering a healthy, safe, and productive work environment. Given the educational policy trend which encourages universities to compete against one another and act more like private businesses rather than institutions and given the impact of this process of marketisation on academics' well-being, the present paper is intended to be the starting point of a debate on the potential role of the CHO in academia to promote a new academic culture based on happiness, satisfaction and sustainable positivity.

By comparing a small sample of companies' and universities' webpages devoted to this new professional figure, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- – what are the linguistic and visual choices of the organisations to promote this new profession and encourage sustainability?
- – Given the commodification of educational discourse, is this new figure already present in the university sector? Has a positive approach to work already entered academia?

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, I decided to investigate three international organisations' websites which promote the Chief Happiness Officer and three American university websites mentioning this new profession. In particular, for the organisations I took into account the British *The Chief Happiness Officer*[4], which is a consultant firm run by Mandy Baker, a qualified coach and NLP practitioner[5], and her collaborators to help companies master their employees' well-being and reach their potential; the *Chief Happiness Officer Association Limited* (*CHOA*)[6], a non-profitable organisation founded in 2021 with the aim to create a platform which can help companies in Hong Kong to build a happy work environment; and, finally, the *World happiness summit* (*WOHASU*)[7], which is a networking platform with the mission to raise awareness on the benefits of the science of happiness and well-being.

Concerning the university webpages, in October 2023 the study identified the webpages featuring the literal expression *chief happiness officer,* limiting the results to those from university websites, via Google through the search query *"chief happiness officer" site:edu.* Three US universities were taken into consideration: Stetson University (SU)[8], established in 1883, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa)[9] founded in 1907, and the Texas Christian

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[4] The website is available at https://www.thechiefhappinessofficer.co.uk/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[5] The NLP Practitioner is a highly trained professional who uses Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques to help others.
[6] The website is available at https://choassociation.org/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[7] The website is available at https://worldhappinesssummit.com/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[8] The website is available at https://www.stetson.edu/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[9] The website is available at https://manoa.hawaii.edu/ (visited 08/03/2024).

University (TCU)[10] founded in 1873. Since the present research is a small-scale preliminary study, the first 80 Google results out of 466 were explored. Then, only three US universities' links were taken into account, because I focused on the multimodal webpages which presented the CHO as part of the universities' organigram, excluding all the university pages which only mentioned this profession in articles, reports, comments and brochures.

4. Theoretical framework: Multimodal Discourse Analysis

In this era, more and more often means of communication merge together and intermingle, producing new and sometimes hybrid multimodal texts. It has become obvious that the analysis of verbal language alone is not sufficient anymore (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Jewitt 2002; Lemke 2002). With the spread of new media and the advancement of technology, discourse analysts have started to focus on the semiotic interrelation of modes in contemporary media texts and their peculiar features (Adami 2013, 2015; Burn 2009).

The methodological framework of social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988) has been developing for some decades, starting from Visual Grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2021) and given definite shape by Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Since then, several researchers have been exploring this research field in various contexts, including workplaces, museum exhibitions, online environments, and across a range of genres and technologies (Ravelli 2006; Ravelli and McMurtrie 2016; Zammit and Downes 2002). By drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1973), they demonstrate that a multimodal approach to texts allows new views on the interpretative process of language and communication, since different modes enable different ways of meaning making. As Kress (2000: 157) puts it: "Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they afford different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world". Therefore, the analysis from a multimodal angle is embedded in a broader semiotic frame. Since it is part of a multimodal ensemble, early works have focused on the interplay between words and images (Lemke 1998; Martinec and Salaway 2005). For example, Martinec and van Leeuwen (2008) have focused on the intersemiotic relation in new media texts suggesting that the word-image relations are remade through their reconfiguration in digital media, even though these relations are not completely established. Moreover, the investigation of the interaction between verbal and visual language has confirmed that technological developments have increasingly led images to take center stage (Jewitt 2002, 2008).

Nowadays, technologies allow modes to be configured in different ways and new technologies play a crucial role in how modes are made available and accessed (Jewitt 2008). They can impact on design and text production and on interpretative practices. Several multimodal discourse analysts have, in fact, focused on how different modes are organized on the page or screen of textbooks,

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[10] The website is available at https://www.tcu.edu/ (visited 08/03/2024).

websites and other digital learning resources (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Jones 2005; Norris 2004; O'Halloran and Smith 2011) as well as films, adverts and other new media texts (Baldry 2004; Burn 2009; O'Halloran 2004). Other researchers have investigated more in general the technologization of literacy practices and interaction (Marsh 2005; Unsworth *et al.* 2005). Much of this research examines the dynamics of the interaction between image and writing in narratives, relations between book and computer-based versions of texts, and the role of on-line communities, including hypertexts, which enmesh writing, image and other modes in digital technologies (Lemke 2002; Luke 2003).

Multimodality has gained importance as a methodological approach, since verbal language is not sufficient to understand all the nuances of contemporary communication, in particular the online communicative landscape. A web page cannot create meaning through the use of linguistic features alone, but relies on a combination of verbal, visual, graphic and spatial meaning-making resources. The interdependence of semiotic resources in text is becoming the norm and the shape of discourse communities is changing with the changing shape of texts.

5. Analysis and discussion: Campaigning for the Chief Happiness Officer

It is becoming common that big organisations, such as Apple, Google, and Amazon, include in their organigrams the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) in order to promote their employees' well-being. Jenn Lim (Delivering Happiness, an offshoot of Zappos), Chade-Meng Tan (Google, actual title: Jolly Good Fellow), Alexander Kjerulf (WooHoo, a Denmark-based consulting company) and Christine Jutard (Kiabi, a French clothing company) are some of the most famous CHOs (*The Guardian*, 26/08/2015)[11].

The role of happiness officer is becoming increasingly high-profile: the first formal position that Prince Harry accepted after stepping down from the royal family was that of chief impact officer at BetterUp, a Silicon Valley startup, to help clients with their "personal development". Then this profession has spread around the world and in France different creative terms are used to name it. "Littéralement, il s'agit d'un 'directeur général du bonheur' parfois renommé feel good manager, 'gardien du bonheur', 'directeur well-being' (Les Echos 2017), 'facilitateur', 'Monsieur Sourire', 'Madame Bonheur', 'créateur de convivialité' ou encore Captain happiness"[12] (Tanquerel and Condor 2020: 8).

The CHO often has skills in psychology, sociology, or human resources and their main function is to improve employees' commitment and ensure a pleasant working atmosphere. It is an innovative profession and a challenge for organisations as it aims at enhancing people's productivity. The CHO, a mixture of communication and human resource manager, has several missions such as

[11]   The full article is available at https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/aug/26/chief-happiness-officer-cho-employee-workplace-woohoo-google (visited 08/03/2024).
[12] "Literally, it is a 'directeur général du bonheur' sometimes renamed feel good manager, 'gardien du bonheur', 'directeur well-being' (Les Echos, 2017), 'facilitateur', 'Monsieur Sourire', 'Madame Bonheur', 'créateur de convivialité' or even Captain happiness" (author's translation).

developing a pleasant working environment, identifying employees' problems and finding solutions, organizing events, offering in-company leisure activities, ensuring new employees' integration, encouraging interpersonal relationships and communication among the employees (Najeh 2019).

More and more organisations offer virtual and in-person courses/workshops, one to one and group training, well-being audits and other services to develop corporate happiness culture focusing on this new professional figure. The three websites under investigation were founded by three women who, in the section "about us", introduce themselves by promoting positive psychology.

Mandy Baker is the founder and CHO of the consultant firm *The Chief Happiness Officer*. In her presentation, as can be seen in extract 1, she uses the persuasive strategy of ethos to appeal to the readership. She conveys her credibility and authority by underling her competences and experience.

Extract 1

> After 20 years running a company with family, I have a comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of business […] as a qualified Coach & NLP Practitioner, I bring a wealth of knowledge & experience to the table.

Moreover, in order to legitimize her job, she explains that she puts into practice the concept of positive corporate culture resulting in better outcomes and profits. Interestingly, even if in the presentation she keeps mentioning her family business to emphasise her competence face (see extract 2), then she infers that the end of her marriage was not a traumatic experience but sharing a 'scrap' of her private life becomes a discursive strategy to convey an image of an independent woman (extract 3).

Extract 2

> Business runs through my blood, my father had his own successful business and I married into an equally successful label printing company.

Extract 3

> After 27 years of marriage - and business partnership! - I decided to go it alone... both in life and business - and here is the result of that decision.

The mixture of formal and informal register ("trust me, we had to check the figures more than once to be sure!") is a way to shorten the distance with the readership, which is visually reinforced by the use of a "demand" and close-up image (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mandy Baker

The founders of the other two websites (*WOHASU* and *CHO Association*), respectively Karen Guggenheim and Mary Suen, are also depicted smilingly in "demand" images, but in long shots (see Figures 2 and 3), suggesting a less intimate relationship.

Figure 2. Karen Guggenheim

Figure 3. Mary Suen

The letter of presentation of Karen Guggenheim is interesting because, even if it contains both exclusive and inclusive "we" pronouns to underline the platform's success thanks to the collaboration of all members, at the end (extract 4) there is a direct address to the audience through the imperative mood and the personal pronoun "you" ("Become an active participant…", "We invite you…"). Such statements are intended to engage readers by simulating informality in the rather formal context of an institutional website. This simulation of intimacy, defined by Fairclough (1989) "synthetic personalization", often appears in promotional texts. The only first person pronoun "I" is in the unusual closing "I choose happiness", which resonates with a product-based advertising slogan. We can therefore say that this text has a double function: the main function of presenting Karen and the more implicit function of promoting the WOHASU happiness movement.

Extract 4

> *Become an active participant of your life. Instead of letting life happen to you,*
> *show up to your life. We invite you to join the WOHASU® happiness movement.*
> *I choose happiness.*
> – KAREN GUGGENHEIM
> WOHASU® Founder & CEO

On the contrary, Mary Suen's presentation is in third person making the text more impersonal as it aims at underlining her extensive experiences and beliefs. This more institutionalized text is then followed by Mary Suen's short message (extract 5) which helps make the whole message more personal and informal.

Extract 5

> *These two years have been very challenging. It is uneasy to talk about happiness.*
> *The world is constantly changing. We hope the changes can create a new and*
> *happier situation for future generations. The establishment of the Chief Happiness*
> *Officer Association platform implies innovative methods in the business operation*
> *model, with "design happiness" as the value, allowing "people" to release*
> *happiness.*
> *Having a happy mindset encourages us to embrace new ideas, appreciate things*
> *from different angles, broaden our horizons, and be open to unlimited business*
> *opportunities. I am very pleased to see a number of like-minded strategic partners*
> *who care about society together while building the "Happy Journey" platform;*
> *ultimately everyone can become their own "Chief Happiness Officer".*
> Message From Mary Suen
> Founder and Executive Chairman of the Chief Happiness Officer Association

By examining the academic webpages under investigation it can be noticed that this profession is starting to appear in academia too.

Stetson University (SU) is a college located in central Florida, USA. By browsing the *admissions* section webpage[13], we understand that this university has a peculiar CHO among its staff members. Among the list of undergraduate recruiters, there is Alexis Glenn, director of recruitment, who introduces herself and the CHO (Figures 4 and 5). Surprisingly, the CHO is her dog, Athens-George Glenn, who has been 'hired' to support students during the admissions process.

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[13] https://www.stetson.edu/administration/admissions/recruiters/athens-george.php   (visited 08/03/2024).
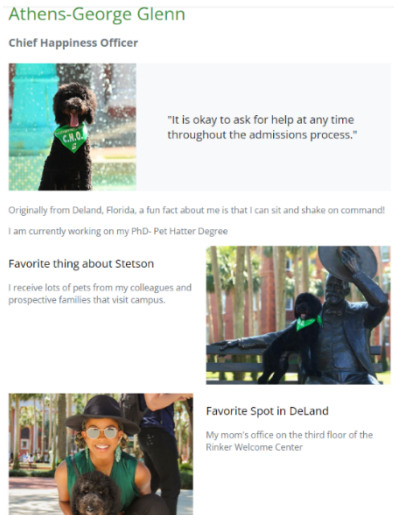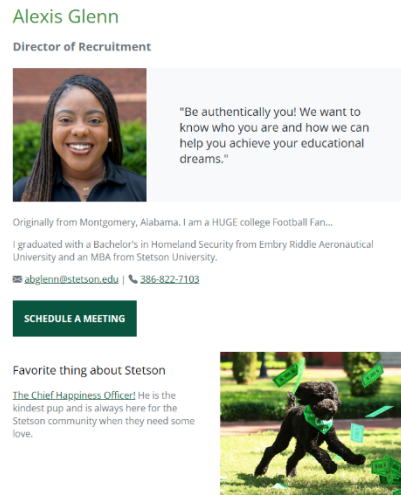
Figure 4. Alexis Glenn's page

Figure 5. Athens-George Glenn's page

The University of Hawai'i (UH Mānoa) and the Texas Christian University (TCU) include a female CHO in their organigram visually represented in a smiling and welcoming portrait (Figures 6 and 7).

Alice Inoue is a faculty member of the Mini-Medical School on Healthy Aging at the UH Mānoa. She is a CHO and founder of U Happiness, an educational establishment that helps individuals and organisations to develop a positive approach to life. Similarly to the organisations' webpages illustrated above, also on this university website we find a photo of a smiling Alice in medium close shot with a frontal angle looking directly at the viewer. This is an "anchorage" (Barthes 1977) to the text below which briefly describes her job (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Alice Inoue

Figure 7. Jenn Lim

Jenn Lim is one of the speakers of the Center for Connection Culture. The informative text, which is next to the photo, contains several direct and indirect quotations from Lim to make the text more personal. For example, there is her definition of CHO (see extract 6).

Extract 6

> *A CHO is doing what any CEO does in an organization — putting the people/resources/financing in place to create a sustainable company. The difference between a CEO and a CHO is that a CHO is doing it through the lens of happiness as a business model.*

The attribution brings in another dimension. The whole text acquires a particular tone, which could be described as personal. In addition, the text is full of evaluative expressions ('fearless leader' or 'she focuses so much energy on her speaking engagements today') which emphasise her competence. In order to develop an engagement with readers we also find contracted forms ('What's more', 'she's dedicated') and a very last part titled 'fun facts' (extract 7), which is a list of some of Jenn Lim's humorous statements and acts. This makes the text a clear example of conversationalisation of institutional discourse (Fairclough 1989).

Extract 7

> Fun Facts
> Has a self-proclaimed PhD in parallel parking.
> She cooks once a year (average calculated since birth).
> Summited Mt. Kilimanjaro, and the first thing she did afterwards was drink
> a bottle of Mt. Kilimanjaro beer. Actually, several bottles.

6. Conclusions

The Chief Happiness Officer is a novel specialized profile which aligns with the *Sustainable Developments Goals Report 2023: Special Edition*[14] and, since new generations long for more responsible and sustainable companies able to implement actions of corporate happiness and positively transform their employees' work culture, it may have consequences for businesses' promotion policies and be relevant for managers and human resources specialists. If happiness in a workplace carries with it a return on productivity, some organisations have started to promote this new hybrid professional figure, by offering courses and services to increase well-being at the individual, community, corporate and civic levels.

The three organisations' webpages under investigation (*The Chief Happiness Officer*, the *CHOA* and the *WHOASU*) show that some verbal and visual discursive features, such as the mixture of formal and informal registers and 'demand' images of smiling people, are recurrent.

Some US universities have started to include this profession in their organigram probably due to the transformation of university policies and the

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[14] *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition* is the only UN official report that monitors global progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf (visited 08/03/2024).

commodification of educational discourse. The analysis of the university webpages (SU, UH Mānoa and TCH) reveals that this new figure is described by a combination of multimodal strategies similar to those adopted by the organisations.

Given that universities' market-led policies are having damaging consequences on the well-being of the academic community, the present preliminary study hopes to encourage discussion around the potential of the CHO in academia to foster an academic culture geared towards sustainable happiness. Moreover, further studies, both theoretical and empirical, are required to verify whether this figure can really help manage the new challenges of academia. In particular, the interest in this new profession raises the question of whether a CHO can actually contribute to improving well-being in academia and fight a toxic culture or whether it might be more beneficial to focus on a "chief happiness officer mentality", rather than a chief happiness officer person.

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