

Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction among University Students

Noor ul Huda^{1*}, Bazil Lala², Ivan Suneel³**Abstract**

Previous research indicates that young adults experience an increase in life satisfaction when they have a meaning in life. The current study examined the association between meaning in life and satisfaction with life as well as the relationship between the search for meaning in life and life satisfaction. University undergraduates ($N= 302$) from Forman Christian College (A Chartered University-FCCU) filled out self-report measures. The analysis was conducted using demographical information, scores from Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient indicated that Satisfaction with life increased when there was presence of meaning in life. Additionally, search for meaning increased when satisfaction with life decreased. Lastly, an independent samples t -test indicated no significant gender differences in meaning in life. The research helps to understand the variables in a Pakistani context since the prevalence of meaning in life significantly differs across cultures. Future research may look into the sources of meaning in life, reasons for absence of meaning and other factors that affect life satisfaction in young adults.

Keywords: Correlational Study, Cross-cultural Differences, Meaning in Life, Satisfaction with Life, University Undergraduates

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Introduction

The term “meaning” was initially found to be used in philosophical works only where philosophers were unable to agree upon a single definition for meaning in life. It gained popularity in the dimension of psychology a lot later stemming from existential

psychology and positive psychology. Existential psychology proposed that each human has an instinctive drive to find meaning in life. There can be no singular meaning in life, rather each individual must find their own meaning through the daily tasks they perform which will be different for everyone. Once they found meaning in their work, they were highly satisfied in life (Unal & Turgut, 2017).

On the other hand, positive psychology is of the view that to live a good life or to make life worth living, it is important for one to have meaning. It states that the importance of meaning is such that it is a construct completely separate and individual from happiness and purpose. They identify meaning as a wellbeing indicator and a contributor of overall wellness (Kashdan et al., 2021).

The current research uses positive psychology as the theoretical framework

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since there is sizeable literature available to verify theories presented by it.

Steger et al. (2006) approaches meaning in life as an individual's subjective evaluation of their "purpose, significance and fulfillment in life". An individual holds meaning in life if they experience alignment between what they do and what they want to do. Furthermore, it is evidenced by their sense of direction in life and valuing it. It is possible to break down meaning in life in terms of personal beliefs, values, short term goals and long term goals, all of which provide an individual with purpose in life. Steger et al. (2006) note that individuals who experience meaning in life feel deeply connected to something which is beyond their existence. Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years (Steger, 2012).

Steger et al. (2006) conceptualized the construct of meaning in life by breaking it down into presence of meaning in life and search for meaning in life.

Presence of meaning has been referred to as "The sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence" (Steger et al., 2006). Research has shown presence of meaning in life to be strongly associated with psychological well-being. Life satisfaction is one of the main well-being indicators (Karataş et al., 2021) for presence of meaning in life. The other component is search for meaning in life and that has been referred to as "The strength, intensity, and activity of people's desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives" (Steger et al., 2008). Search for meaning in life is associated with individuals looking for

meaning in activities like unpaid charity services and environment friendly behavior due to the dissatisfaction in life (van Tilburg & Igou, 2017). Search for meaning in life often leads to questionings which is driven by personal experiences and cultural factors.

Life satisfaction is one of the most important elements of subjective well-being. It can be defined as an assessment of the overall domains and moments of one's own life. This assessment is subjective for each individual. It reflects a person's level of overall happiness with reference to several aspects of life (Diener, 1984).

There is little to no research that can be found on presence of meaning and search for meaning in life relation to life satisfaction of young adults in a Pakistani context. Therefore, the current research intended to fill this gap and identify the relationship of meaning in life with life satisfaction among Pakistani young adults.

Literature Review

Current literature on meaning in life and life satisfaction was extensively reviewed to pick out studies that resembled the purpose of the present paper. The focus of the review was meaning in life in different cultures and samples where various methodologies and research questions were applied.

Relationship between Meaning and Satisfaction

Steger et al. (2009) addresses a relationship that can be found amongst meaning in life and life satisfaction which was later confirmed by Hallford et al. (2016). Taş and İskender (2017) build onto this by establishing that meaning in life has a positive relationship with life satisfaction. Meaning in life can also predict life satisfaction or life dissatisfaction. A study conducted on Turkey with a group of 1186 participants with a mean age of 41 found that even during a pandemic it was hope and meaning in life that resulted in satisfaction with life (Karataş et al., 2021). Steger et al.

(2011) performed a study in two parts; 'a' and 'b'. In study 1a they had 122 undergraduate men and women students who were Caucasians, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Asians, Native Americans and Hispanics. In study 1b they were working with a sample of 151 undergraduate men and women students who were Asian-Americans, Caucasians and Asians. Participants filled out the MLQ and the SWLS in both studies as a self-report measure. They found that the presence of meaning had a very close association to life satisfaction for participants in a search of meaning in life compared to the ones were not actively searching.

This is consistent with additional studies conducted by Steger et al. (2011) where they explored a positive relationship between presence of meaning and life satisfaction. They also found that presence of meaning had a relationship with well-being indicators like positive affect and happiness while it was negatively related to negative affect and depression. Search for meaning in life is associated with undesirable psychological outcomes like depression (Steger et al., 2006, 2009).

This is better explained when stated that presence of meaning in life is positively correlated with satisfaction with life while search for meaning in life has a negative correlation to satisfaction with life. This was followed by the finding that participants who are engaged in a search for meaning are those who base their life satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the presence or absence of meaning in life. While those who are not engaged in an active search may base their lives on other variables that effect their life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2011).

Preliminary studies confirm a relationship of meaning and satisfaction with one another along with plenty of other variables studied separately and individually.

Meaning, Satisfaction and Age

Meaning and satisfaction may differ across lifespan. In adolescents the presence of

meaning is lowest which rises till the age of 35 where it remains very stable till 45. Till the age of 60 it starts to rise again after which an optimum will be reached and maintained (Schnell, 2009). This is confirmed in another study as well where they found that older adults display a higher and stable presence of meaning with a reduced level of search for meaning (Park et al., 2020). Younger individuals normally tend to have many positive relationships to surround themselves with and to interact with hence they do not have to feel isolated. This increases their overall levels of life satisfaction (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Meaning, Satisfaction and Gender

Meaning in life, search for meaning in life and satisfaction with life are found to be unrelated to sex and racial groups (Deb et al., 2019). The level of experiencing meaning alone is not significantly different in men and women (Taş & İskender, 2017). Similarly, between life satisfaction and gender, an insignificant correlation can be found. Gender has no effect on presence of meaning and its prediction of life satisfaction in adults (Karataş et al., 2021). Overall research suggests that the items on the SWLS scale are interpreted by both genders in the same way. In addition, levels of life satisfaction also do not differ among gender significantly (Emerson et al., 2017; Jovanovic, 2016).

A prominent trend of the review is a positive relationship between presence of meaning and satisfaction along with a negative relationship between search and satisfaction. Gender did not display any mean differences for the MLQ nor the SWLS. Research also found that increasing age showed signs of a stable presence of meaning and lower scores of search for meaning.

Hypotheses

- There is a relationship between presence of meaning in life and satisfaction with life.

- There is a relationship between search for meaning in life and satisfaction with life.
- Age is associated with presence of meaning.
- There is a relationship between search for meaning and age.
- There is a significant difference between scores of gender with meaning in life.

Methods

Research Design

For this study, a correlational research design was used.

Participants

The sample of 302 university undergraduates with men and women both was selected from the Forman Christian College University through purposive sampling.

Measures

A Questionnaire including demographical information, Meaning in Life Questionnaire and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was used in this research to collect data.

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire was designed by Steger et al. (2006). The scale consists of 10 items with a 7-point likert scale from “Absolutely Untrue” to “Absolutely True”. The MLQ has two subscales, where 5 items measure presence of Meaning in life (MLQ-P) and another 5 items measure Search for Meaning in life (MLQ-S).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The Satisfaction with Life Scale was formulated by Diener et al. (1985) to assess the constituent for subjective well-being. It is a short 5-item scale that assess life satisfaction on a 7-point likert scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7).

Procedure

Once the Institutional Review Board approved the research, participants were reached out on university’s campus. Written Informed Consent was obtained from each participant. Data was entered into SPSS for

statistical analyses. Participants were informed about the right to withdraw. No identifying information was gathered and confidentiality was maintained.

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analyses

There were two demographic variables relevant to the hypotheses of this research, namely; age and gender. The demographics for the continuous variable age and the categorical variable gender are presented below respectively. Other than assessing the demographical variables, the questionnaires used in the study were analyzed for internal consistency by estimating their Cronbach Alpha values.

The minimum age of the participants was 18 years and maximum age was 25 years ($M=21.3$; $SD=1.49$). Besides, out of 302 participants, there were 139 (46%) male and 163 (54%) female participants in the study.

Table 1

Psychometric Properties of Scales (N=302)

Scales	M	SD	Range	Cronbach Alpha
MLQ	46.60	7.95	26-65	.74
SWLS	21.13	6.20	5-35	.75

Note. MLQ=Meaning in Life Questionnaire; SWLS=Satisfaction with Life Scale

The Cronbach’s Alpha value was used to test for internal consistency. According to the test, both scales had considerable reliability since it was between 0.7 and 0.8 (Pallant, 2020).

Inferential Statistical Analyses

After an assessment of the internal consistency for the two scales, the inferential analysis was obtained. To test our hypotheses, the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and t-test were performed. Results were interpreted using the guidelines given within the SPSS Survival Manual by Pallant (2020).

Table 2
Correlation of Life Satisfaction and Age with MLQ subscales (N=302)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Life Satisfaction	21.3	1.49	-			
2. Presence of Meaning	21.2	4.49	.36*	-		
3. Search for Meaning	25.5	6.47	-.12*	.01	-	
4. Age	21.1	6.20	-.01	.02	.02	-

* $p < .05$

The Pearson product moment correlation indicated a significant direct medium correlation between presence of meaning and life satisfaction ($r = .368^*$, $p < .05$). This means that there is a moderate relationship between the variables. When presence of meaning in life increases, so does life satisfaction and vice versa. The relationship between search for meaning and life satisfaction however was small but

significantly negative illustrating a weak relationship ($r = -.128$, $p < .05$). This means that when search increases, dissatisfaction with life decreases and vice versa. Lastly, correlational relationship between age and presence of meaning was determined to be small and positive but it stood insignificant ($r = .02^*$, $p < .05$) meaning that there is no association between age and presence of meaning in life.

Table 5
Independent Samples t-test for Gender with MLQ

Scale	Men		Women		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
MLQ	47.4	8.34	45.8	7.50	1.71	0.88	0.20

* $p < .05$

The *t*-test presents gender as having a statistically non-significant difference ($p =$

$.88$) in the mean differences of meaning in life for men and women.

Discussion

The correlation scores displayed a significant correlation between presence of meaning and satisfaction with life. The strength of the

correlation lied in a medium range. Both variables were directly proportional to each other which means satisfaction increases as presence increases. This is line with

hypothesis 1. Search for meaning also showed a significant correlation with life satisfaction. The strength of the correlation was small. Both variables were inversely proportional to each other which means satisfaction decreases as search increases. This coincides with hypothesis 2. The correlation of age with presence was non-significant which supports hypothesis 3. The correlation with search was also non-significant which rejects hypothesis 4. Moreover, gender had no statistically significant difference on the MLQ scores, nor on the SWLS scores which is the same as hypothesis 5.

Dezutter et al. (2013) elaborates on what it means for presence of meaning being positively associated with life satisfaction while search is negatively associated with life satisfaction. He brings to the table that a decreased presence of meaning in life increases stressful experiences. To cope with this stress individuals are driven to look for something they can hold on to and meaning is a substantial predictor of well-being which is why they search for meaning in stressful times. The stressful search can reduce levels of life satisfaction which explains the inverse correlation between the two.

During a search for meaning in life, although life satisfaction levels may be low but it is important to note that search and presence are highly connected. This connectedness depicts that to achieve a higher level of life satisfaction, one must have meaning and to have meaning it is important to search for it. Ultimately, this search is a part of the process so presence, search and satisfaction should be viewed holistically to get a better understanding of the progression. If viewed at separately, search may seem to have negative outcomes but in fact that it is just a cycle that will eventually reach the finish line (Lim et al., 2022).

Moving on to the third finding of the study. Preliminary research confirmed the increase of presence and decrease of search with

increasing age (Blau et al., 2018; Erikson, 1968; Karataş et al., 2021; Park et al., 2020; Piaget, 1952; Schnell, 2009). Contrarily, this research has identified both an increasing presence and increasing search with increasing age while none of the correlations are significant. The results can be explained with the fact that in young adults there is a considerable amount of time that the individuals have spent in their lives so they have certainly been successful in formulating some meaning. However, as discussed previously, this existing presence does not imply that the search is at halt. This in fact means that the individuals are thoughtful enough about their lives and their futures that they continue a search. As per some research, though presence of meaning is dominated by a search by younger adults. This points towards the search for careers, friends and relationships that younger adults are still struggling with. On the other hand, older adults have stable careers and relationships that have developed over a long time, so there is little that they may be in search for (Pappas, 2019). This is why their levels of search decrease while presence increases. Besides this, the correlation which presented age was insignificant to meaning, is unique. The non-significant result implies that whether there is a search or a presence of meaning in life, this has no connection with the age of the individual.

Moving to the last finding of the study. Previous research holds that scores on the MLQ and SWLS have no mean differences for gender (Deb et al., 2019; Karataş et al., 2021; Park et al., 2020; Steger et al. 2011; Taş & İskender, 2017). The present research has carried forward the same result where no statistically significant difference for gender has been found for meaning in life. We understand through the findings of the current study that meaning in life is of equal importance for both men and women given there were no mean differences. This means

he MLQ is a unidimensional scale which is the same for both genders.

Implications

This study was conducted to contribute to the niche in literature where there is a dearth of studies relating to meaning in life and life satisfaction in a Pakistani context.

This study has implications for mental health research as well. For instance, the FCCU counseling centers along with other institutional counselling centers may include meaning-centered counselling for positive psychological well-being for students. Life satisfaction and meaning in life can be targeted by educational and counseling programs providing their expertise in the field. Clinicians should be encouraged to develop meaning making interventions for clients who are clinically ill, and clients who are clinically healthy. The interventions could treat clients who may be ill and act as a preventative measure for clients who are healthy.

Future Research

Future research advancing from the current study can further explore the identified concerns in depth. Researchers may identify factors which support students to find meaning in life and other factors that have a correlation with their satisfaction with life. They could also look into how university students use their sense of meaning in life and life satisfaction to adjust themselves into a new environment of university, or maintaining relationships, or academic achievement. Qualitative studies may also incorporate the presence of meaning in life and its relationship with identity development. Added to this, a longitudinal design may aid in clarifying how the presence of meaning or search for meaning in life may change over a span of time.

Since meaning and life satisfaction are related to psychological well-being, researchers may look into whether the absence of meaning and satisfaction are related to psychological illnesses. They could

look into the effectiveness of meaning as a coping strategy in psychological illnesses.

Contribution of Authors

Noor ul Huda: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft

Bazil Lala: Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis

Ivan Suneel: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by authors.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [N.U.H.] upon the reasonable request.

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