

# Exploring Relationships Between Meaning in Life and Emotional Health among Young Adults of Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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## Abstract

Emotions are one of the vital aspects in ensuring healthy human functioning and psychological well-being. Thus, this study aims to explore another important psychological element, meaning in life and emotional health among Malaysian university students. This study was carried out using the explorative research design using the quantitative approach. Questionnaires consisted of questions relating to respondents' personal background, meaning in life and emotional health. Trained enumerators distributed questionnaire booklets to undergraduates who were currently residing in Klang Valley. Results showed that there were relationships between meaning in life (*presence of meaning* and *search for meaning*) and emotional health (*depression*  $r = -0.59^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; *anxiety*  $r = -0.29^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; and *stress*  $r = -0.36^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, further analyses found meaning in life, specifically, *presence of meaning*, predicted emotional health for *depression*,  $F(2, 137) = 37.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.34$ ; *anxiety*  $F(2, 137) = 0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$  and *stress*  $F(2, 137) = 11.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.14$ . Findings indicate the importance to further investigate the role of meaning in life and emotional health with other specific psychological variables such as emotional regulation, coping and personality.

**Keywords:** Meaning of Life, Emotional Health, Depression, Anxiety, Stress

## Introduction

Emotions are important psychological element because how it influences individuals overall human functioning and well-being (Liu et al., 2019; Murthy, 2020; Sanchez-Nunez et al., 2020). Hence, many studies have explored and focused on emotional health with other crucial factors that contributes to overall individuals' well-being. For example, there are studies exploring on emotional health and resilience (Lenzo, et. al., 2020), physical well-being

(Fernandez-Ozcorta et al., 2019), homelessness (Barnes et al., 2018), suicide (Kakunje et al., 2020; Arrivillaga et al., 2020), mental health (Browning et al., & LaValle, 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019; Langsi, 2021), negative emotional eating (Sze, Lee, Chan, & Kim, 2021), emotional intelligence and academic success (Suleman et al., 2019), daily stress, anxiety, empathy and coping (Montero & Morales-Rodriguez, 2021), posttraumatic growth (Thomas et al., 2020), cognitive engagement and learning (Venn, Park, Andersen, & Hejmadi, 2020), social competencies (Kaur et al., 2021) and coping styles (Song, 2020). These studies demonstrated that human emotional experience has a great impact on individuals' overall life and well-being.

Hence, many studies also explored emotional health specifically among early adults undergoing undergraduate studies. Individuals in this stage are not just undergoing an important chapter in life as undergraduate students but also life challenges in everyday life. Early adulthood is a crucial transition where an individual move from an equilibrium state during late adolescence life span stage to early adulthood. Santrock (2022) mentioned that early adulthood development involves active psychological changes within an individual which involves the dynamic interaction between three important domains of human development namely, physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional aspects psychological. Simultaneously, dynamic interaction also happens and create new daily life crisis adjusting to the new roles of early adulthood and new environment in a university.

Many researchers and life span theorists have shown concern about the possible stressors that occur within the period and indirectly may affect individuals' mental health and well-being. As a result, there are many studies that studies that focussed on undergraduate students. For instance, studies focussed on university students and crucial psychological aspects such as stress and coping patterns (Boke et al., 2019), stress management among university students (Morey & Taylor, 2019), coping with study challenges (Steiner-Hofbauer, & Holzinger, 2020), negative psychological well-being (Barnhart et al., 2021), effectiveness of online positive psychology intervention on psychological well-being (Yurayat, & Seechaliao, 2021), burnout, psychological well-being and academic achievement (Wei et al., 2021), perceived social support, social-emotional experiences, and psychological well-being (Brunsting et al., 2021), psychological distress, well-being and academic satisfaction (Franzen et al., 2021), academic motivation, social connection, and psychological well-being (Marler et al., 2021), emotional stability, mental health and household resources (Moeller, 2022), emotional health disorders (Al Marzouqi et al., 2022), emotional vulnerability (Huerta, 2022), coping and self-regulation skills (Apgar, & Cadmus, 2022), , emotion-based pedagogical intervention (Mills et al., 2022), emotional and social competencies (Yu et al., 2022) and emotional eating (Salsabiela & Putra, 2022). However, despite the important findings and concern over mental health and psychological well-being of undergraduates, more research is needed to explore specifically psychological variables namely, meaning in life, among undergraduate students in the early adulthood stage of life.

*Meaning in life* is one of the important psychological aspects from the sub field of positive psychology that aims to understand and empower individuals live at their optimum level. Generally, meaning in life is defined as having a purpose of life and understanding existence of life. Specifically, Baumeister (1991) suggested that meaning in life consists of four major aspects of basic needs. 1) having a sense purpose in live, 2) perceiving that one is able to overcome life challenges and to meet goals, 3) believing that one is a valuable person and 4) believing that one's action is good and justified. Achieving the sense of meaning in life helps

individuals be more emotionally positive (Ho et al., 2010; Martela & Steger, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016) and were less prone to experience psychiatric symptoms (Galek et al., 2020).

Hence, more recent studies have included meaning in life to understand individuals' psychological well-being of individuals. For instance, meaning in life, was investigated with other dominant psychological variables for instance suicidal ideation (Tan et al., 2018), well-being (Krok, 2018; Li, 2018; Russo-Netzer, 2019), mental health (Mohammadi et al., 2018), gratitude and suicidal ideation (Lin, 2021), cross-cultural relationships and psychological well-being (Fischer et al., 2021) and prosocial tendency (Lin, Hong, Xiao, & Lian, 2020), resilience and life satisfaction (Karaman et al., 2020), depressive symptoms and positive affect (Park, Knott, Williams, Clark, Williams, & Schulz, 2020) and eating disorders (Marco et al., 2020), interpersonal stress (Lee et al., 2022), psychological maltreatment and emotions (Arslan et al., 2022), anxiety and depression (Szczeniak et al., 2022), hope and well-being (Guse, & Shaw, 2018), self-efficacy and identity exploration (Sagiv et al., 2022), resilience, affective balance, and psychological health problems (Yıldırım et al., 2021), loneliness and neuroscience (Mwilambwe-Tshilobo et al., 2019), financial well-being (Rea et al., 2019), sexuality (Kashdan et al., 2018), spirituality (Barton, Tate, Lau, Taliesin, Waldman, & Rosenberg, 2018) and depression and suicide ideation (Jose & Angelina, 2019).

Although there are growing evidence on the importance of *meaning in life*, studies on meaning in life and emotional well-being are still at its infancy. Thus, this study aims to investigate relationships between emotional well-being and *meaning in life* among young adults who are pursuing bachelor's degree in the university.

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

This study applied the exploratory research design using questionnaires to investigate relationships between meaning of life and mental health of undergraduate students residing in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.

### ***Sampling and Procedures***

This study is a subset of a larger study exploring death anxiety among Malaysian residing in the Klang Valley. Sample for this study focussed on undergraduate students which consisted of 140 males (20%) and 112 females (80%) undergraduate students who voluntarily participated in this study with 20.73 years mean of age. Generally, inclusive criteria for this study included individuals who are free from chronic illnesses, literate and residing in the Klang Valley. This study carried out cluster sampling within Lembah Klang that comprised of 10 municipal districts namely Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Klang, Kajang, Subang Jaya, Selayang, Ampang Jaya, Sepang, Shah Alam and Petaling Jaya. Trained enumerators distributed and later collected completed questionnaires to be analysed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23.

### ***Questionnaires***

There are three main sections in the questionnaire booklet distributed to participants. Specifically, section A: Personal background, section B: Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and section C: Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21).

**Section A: Personal background**

Questions regarding personal background were presented to the participants. Namely questions relating to sex, age, ethnic, religion, marital status, bachelor's degree, and work status.

**Section B: Meaning of life**

Questions relating meaning of life were accessed using Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006). MLQ comprised of 10 items that measure how individuals give meaning to their life. Generally, this scale contained two main sub-dimensions specifically *presence of meaning* and *search for meaning*. Sub dimension *presence of meaning* consisted of five items on measuring how much respondents feel that their life has meaning. Whereas sub dimension *search for meaning* contained five items on how an individual seek to find meaning and understanding. Respondents gave feedback in a 7- Likert scale ranging from "1" as "absolutely untrue" to 7 as "absolutely true". The greater the score for each sub dimensions reflected the higher scores for the specific meaning of life dimensions. Conversely, the lower the scores indicated the lesser specified meaning of life. The reliability for MLQ for sub dimension *presence of meaning* was  $\alpha = .78$  and *search for meaning* was  $\alpha = .73$ .

**Section C: DASS-21**

Emotional states in this study was measured using the Malay version of Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) which was translated by (Musa et al., 2007). This scale consisted of 21 items relating to questions from sub dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress. Each sub dimension consisted of seven items. Each item was provided with 4 Likert scale responses specifically, "0" = Did not apply to me at all, "1"=Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time, "2"= Applied to me to a considerable degree or a good part of time, "3"= Applied to me very much or most of the time. BM DASS-21 was also reported reliable and valid (Musa et al., 2011). Alpha Cronbach analysis was carried out for this scale in this study. Results showed good reliability for depression ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), anxiety ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and stress ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

**Analysis**

Collected questionnaires were then coded and analysed using the IBM SPSS version 28 software. Descriptive analyses such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were run to describe the data in this study. In addition, inferential analyses were applied to inspect the relationships between meaning of life and emotional states.

**Results**

Results in this study were divided into two categories which were the descriptive and inferential statistical results.

**Descriptive Statistical Results**

There were 140 undergraduate students which consisted of 28 males (20%) and 112 females (80%) undergraduate students whom voluntarily participated in this study. Respondents aged from 18 until 35 years old with 20.73 years old mean of age. Most of the respondents were Malays (87.1%) and followed by Chinese (5%) and Indians (5%). Majority of respondents belong to the faith of Islam (90.7%) and followed by Hindu (5%) and Buddha (5%). Almost all respondents are single (95.7%). Table 1 as follows summarizes the descriptive results for this study

Table 1

*Descriptive results for personal background of respondents*

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Min	Max
Sex					
Male	28	20.0			
Female	112	80.0			
Age	140	-	20.73	18years old	35 years old
Ethnic	Malay	122	87.1		
	Chinese	7	5.0		
	Indian	7	5.0		
	Others	4	2.9		
Religion	Islam	127	90.7		
	Buddha	5	3.6		
	Hindu	5	3.6		
	Christian	2	1.4		
	Others	1	.7		
Marital status	Single	134	95.7		
	Married	2	1.4		
	Others	4	2.9		
Bachelor degree	First year	72	51.4		
	Second year	54	38.6		
	Third year	14	10.0		
Work status	Unemployed	140	100		

***Inferential Statistical Results***

Pearson correlation analysis were carried out to investigate meaning of life, specifically the dimensions of MLF (*presence of meaning* and *search for meaning*) and emotional health (*depression*, *anxiety*, and *stress*). Results in Table 2 showed that there were significant negative relationships between *presence of meaning* and *depression* ( $r = -0.59^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), *anxiety* ( $r = -0.29^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and *stress* ( $r = -0.36^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In contrast, results showed that there were positive but not significant relationships between *search of meaning* and *depression* ( $r = 0.10$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ), *anxiety* ( $r = 0.16$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ) and *stress* ( $r = 0.11$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ).

Table 2

*Correlation between Meaning Of life (MLQ) subscales with DASS-21*

	<i>Depression</i>	<i>Anxiety</i>	<i>Stress</i>
<i>Presence MLQ</i>	-.59**	-.29**	-.36**
<i>Searching MLQ</i>	.10	.16	.11

\*\*Note: N=140,  $p < 0.01$ \*\*

A multiple regression was carried out to investigate meaning of life (presence of meaning) factors predict emotional health (depression, anxiety, and stress). Meaning of life, specifically, *presence of meaning* predicted emotional health for *depression*,  $F(2, 137) = 37.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.34$ ; *anxiety*  $F(2, 137) = 0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.11$  and *stress*  $F(2, 137) = 11.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.14$ .

### Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, findings indicate that *meaning in life*, specifically, *presence of meaning*, has significant and negative relationships to three important aspects of negative emotional health (depression, anxiety and stress). In other words, the more one has the presence of meaning in life, the less likely a person will experience depression, anxiety, and stress. In addition, the absence of presence of meaning in life is an important predictor for depression.

Presence of meaning is when an individual understands the meaning of life, having a clear sense of purpose in life, understanding what makes life meaningful and discovering what makes a satisfying life purpose. Individuals who have all the qualities meaning of life, are reached the understanding or a clear purpose of life are predicted to less likely experience negative emotional states.

Findings in this study supports previous studies on the importance of meaning in life and psychological well being and mental health of individuals (Arslan et al., 2022; Barton et al., 2018; Sagiv et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2021; Guse, & Shaw, 2018; Jose, & Angelina, 2019; Karaman et al., 2020; Kashdan et al., 2018; Krok, 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Li, 2018; Russo-Netzer, 2019; Lin, 2021; Lin et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2018; Marco et al., 2020; Mohammadi et al., 2018; Mwilambwe-Tshilobo et. al., 2019; Park et al., 2020; Szczesniak et al., 2022; Yildirim et al., 2021). Findings indicate that it is crucial for an individual to have meaning in life for a positive emotional health.

Therefore, there are two main implications towards the field of psychology specifically focussing on early adulthood, meaning of life and psychological well-being among undergraduates. There is a crucial need to explore specific psychological factors such as emotional regulation, resilience, coping, and gratitude to be further explored with emotional health and meaning in life. Another implication is in providing more information relating to emotional health practice specially to helping professionals such as university counsellors and psychological services, social workers and therapists working with young adults undergraduates. Furthermore, findings may be also included in developing modules that can increase awareness of self-care especially emotional health in everyday life as an undergraduate student.

In conclusion, meaning in life is found to be significant in helping a person achieve psychological well-being and good mental health, more studies should be carried out with other psychological variables to investigate further. In challenging period, specifically, undergraduates of young adults living in a new different environment with different roles and mission in life needs appropriate and sufficient psychological knowledge and skills to overcome daily life challenges.

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