

A Study on the Relationship Between Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the relationship between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning among Chinese university students. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with 820 university students using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. **Results:** Correlation analysis revealed that 36.1% of students reported a high level of presence of meaning, while 64.6% reported a high level of search for meaning. **Conclusion:** Presence of meaning and search for meaning showed a significant positive correlation. Most university students are in a state of uncertainty but generally demonstrate an awareness of exploring meaning in life.

KEYWORDS

University students; Presence of meaning; Search for meaning; Cross-sectional study

1 Introduction

In recent years, under the combined influence of factors such as intense employment pressure, academic competition ("involution"), exposure to diverse cultures, digital lifestyles, and consumerist trends, some university students have shown signs of "meaninglessness." This manifests as behaviors like giving up, emptiness, withdrawal, self-deprecation, academic burnout, and social avoidance, leading to nihilistic tendencies and skepticism toward activities others find meaningful. Therefore, investigating the current state of meaning in life among university students and the relationship between its core dimensions has become an important task to address contemporary issues.

The question "What is the meaning of life?" originally emerged from philosophy. Psychologist Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, shifted the study of meaning from philosophy to psychology. He argued that meaning varies by situation and individual: life poses questions to each person, and one must answer them through one's own understanding of life^[1]. This study adopts Steger's two-dimensional model of meaning, which addresses life's questions through the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. Presence of meaning (also referred to as "having meaning") refers to individuals understanding themselves, recognizing their life purposes and missions, and striving to fulfill them. Search for meaning refers to the process through which people strive to find and understand the meaning and purpose of life, reflecting the effort, intensity, and activity involved^[2].

Existing research has not reached a consensus on the relationship between presence of meaning and search for meaning, showing notable cultural and group differences. Most studies focus on high school students, adults, or specific trauma groups, with relatively few focusing specifically on university students. University students are in a critical transition from adolescence to adulthood, a stage where their cognitive development and values are not yet fully stable, and they are significantly affected by contemporary pressures. The relationship between presence of meaning and search for meaning may thus be unique in this group, warranting targeted investigation. This cross-sectional study aims to explore the relationship between presence of meaning and search for meaning among university students, while providing a comprehensive description of the characteristics of meaning in life in this population, offering empirical evidence for developing life education programs in higher education.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is a core concept spanning philosophy and psychology, and its definition has evolved. In psychology, Frankl (1962) first systematically proposed the theory of meaning, stating that "the search for meaning is the primary motivation in human life," where meaning involves recognizing and pursuing purposes and goals in one's life. As research advanced, scholars shifted from one-dimensional to multidimensional constructs. Steger (2009) integrated previous research and divided meaning into the search for meaning and the presence of meaning from motivational and

cognitive dimensions^[3]. Search for meaning refers to the active effort to understand life's meaning and purpose, representing motivational drive and emphasizing process. Presence of meaning refers to the extent to which individuals feel their lives are meaningful, often termed "sense of meaning" or "meaning experience," representing cognitive appraisal and emphasizing outcome^[4].

In summary, the widely accepted concept of meaning in life refers to an individual's subjective experience of life^[5], the feeling that one's life is comprehensible, guided by valuable goals, and worthwhile^[6]. Zhang Rongwei (2024) stated that meaning in life is extracted from an individual's experiences, mainly involving life goals and a sense of significance^[4].

2.2 Characteristics of Meaning in Life

Meaning in life among university students exhibits developmental traits. Zhang Rongwei's longitudinal study of early adulthood found that, overall, individuals in early adulthood show a moderately high level of search for meaning, while presence of meaning tends to increase over a year, with search remaining relatively stable^[7]. A cross-temporal meta-analysis by Tian Yidi et al. (2023) further confirmed that between 2010 and 2020, Chinese university students' sense of meaning showed an overall upward trend, with presence increasing by 0.35 standard deviations and search by 0.05 standard deviations. Both dimensions positively correlated with time, reflecting the positive influence of social development on students' sense of meaning^[8].

Meaning in life among university students also shows individual and cultural differences. In terms of individual differences, family socioeconomic status is an important factor. Students from lower SES backgrounds face higher psychological risks, while those from middle SES backgrounds show stronger motivation to search for meaning^[9]. Culturally, Liu Sisi and Gan Yiqun cited Steger et al.'s 2008 cross-cultural study: American participants reported higher presence of meaning but lower search for meaning compared to Japanese participants. Presence and search were negatively correlated among Americans but positively correlated among Japanese, indicating that the relationship between search and presence varies across cultures.

2.3 Relationship Between Search for Meaning and Presence of Meaning

The relationship between search for meaning and presence of meaning is complex and moderated by factors such as psychological strength, intrinsic motivation, cognitive style, coping strategies, and culture^[10-11].

Steger et al. proposed two possible dynamic relationships: the presence-to-search relationship (negative correlation) and the search-to-presence relationship (positive correlation)^[11]. The former suggests that when individuals feel their lives lack meaning or lose meaning, they engage in search. Conversely, if individuals experience meaning, their search diminishes or stops. The latter suggests that searching for meaning leads to greater presence, or that absence of search reduces presence^[12]. The presence-to-search relationship has received more support, with negative correlations found in simultaneous and longitudinal measurements^[13].

Studies also show that the correlation between search and presence is not stable across cultures. In individualistic cultures like the United States, presence and search are negatively correlated; in collectivist cultures like Japan, they are positively correlated^[1]; and in cultures with mixed orientations like Spain, no correlation is found^[14]. Therefore, the relationship requires further validation.

Zhang Shuyue's longitudinal study of Chinese high school students found positive correlations between search and presence across three measurements. Later presence was influenced only by earlier presence, not by earlier search, and later search was influenced only by earlier search, not by earlier presence^[10]. This suggests that during specific developmental stages like adolescence, search and presence may operate independently.

For university students, Zhang Rongwei's research found that presence of meaning is at a moderate level and shows a slight upward trend, while search for meaning is moderately high, with most students showing strong search motivation^[15]. This aligns with developmental characteristics of early adulthood, particularly the university stage.

2.4 Current Research Status

Existing theoretical frameworks largely originate from Western cultural contexts and may not fully adapt to local contexts. Liu Sisi et al. (2010) found in their scale localization study that while Steger's two-dimensional model is generally applicable to Chinese university students, it lacks dimensions such as "meaning derived from collectivist values," requiring supplementary indicators like family responsibility and social contribution^[9]. Ni Xudong also noted that Chinese culture emphasizes "relational meaning," while Western theories focus on "individual meaning." Current research has not sufficiently explored the impact of cultural differences on the relationship between presence and search, limiting the generalizability of findings across cultures^[16]. Therefore, this study focuses on Chinese university students, using a cross-sectional design to explore the relationship between presence and search while describing the

characteristics of meaning in life in this group, providing empirical evidence and practical guidance for life education in universities.

3 Methods

3.1 Participants

Using random cluster sampling, 860 university students from various institutions in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces were selected for a questionnaire survey. The sample included students from different academic years and majors to ensure representativeness. A total of 820 valid responses were collected. Participants included 256 males (31.2%) and 564 females (68.7%), with an average age of 20.16 ± 1.39 years. The distribution by year was: 11 freshmen (1.3%), 179 sophomores (21.8%), 211 juniors (25.7%), and 419 seniors (51.0%). Majors included liberal arts (302, 36.8%), science (108, 13.1%), engineering (102, 12.4%), arts (53, 6.4%), and teacher education (255, 31.0%). In terms of hometown location, 378 were from urban areas (46.0%), 272 from towns (33.1%), and 170 from rural areas (20.7%). Nineteen participants reported having religious beliefs, accounting for 2.3% of the sample.

3.2 Measures

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), developed by Steger et al., consists of 10 items measuring two factors: presence of meaning and search for meaning, using a 7-point scale. The presence subscale (MLQ-P) assesses the degree to which individuals perceive and have meaning in life, with higher scores indicating stronger presence. The search subscale (MLQ-S) assesses individuals' willingness and behavior in actively exploring meaning, with higher scores indicating stronger search motivation. In this study, internal consistency reliability was 0.875 for the presence subscale and 0.884 for the search subscale.

3.3 Procedure

This cross-sectional study collected all data within one month. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from class advisors and all participating students regarding the purpose, process, and confidentiality of the study. Surveys were administered collectively by class at the end of evening self-study sessions, with each session lasting no more than 10 minutes. Small gifts were provided to participants as tokens of appreciation.

3.4 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0.1. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the distribution of variables, and Pearson correlation analysis was employed to explore the relationship between the two dimensions.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics for Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning

As shown in Table 1, the average score for presence of meaning was 4.503 ± 1.1325 . Among participants, 36.1% scored in the high range (5–7), 36.3% in the ambiguous range (4–4.99), and 27.6% in the low range (1–3.99). The average score for search for meaning was 5.095 ± 1.0739 , with 64.6% in the high range, 24.5% in the ambiguous range, and only 10.9% in the low range.

Table 1 Means (Standard Deviations) and Score Distribution of Variables

N=820				
Means (Standard Deviations) and Score Distribution of Variables (N=820)				
Variable	M(SD)	Score Range		
		7~5	4.99~4	3.99~1
Presence of Meaning	4.503 (1.1325)	296 (36.1)	298 (36.3)	226 (27.6)
Search for Meaning	5.095 (1.0739)	530 (64.6)	201 (24.5)	89 (10.9)

Note: Numbers in the score range columns indicate frequency and percentage (%). For both presence and search, scores of 5–7 are considered high, 4–4.99 ambiguous, and 3.99–1 low.

4.2 Correlation Between Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning

As shown in Table 2, the total average score for presence of meaning was 22.51 ± 5.663 , and for search for meaning was 25.48 ± 5.370 .

Presence of meaning and search for meaning showed a significant positive correlation ($r=0.432$, $p<0.01$), indicating a moderate to strong positive association. Higher presence was associated with stronger search tendencies. All correlations were significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 2 Correlation Between Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning in the Cross-Sectional Study

		M±SD
Correlation Between Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning in the Cross-Sectional Study (M±SD)		
Presence of Meaning		22.51±5.663
Search for Meaning		25.48±5.370
Correlation (Presence–Search)		0.432**
$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).		

5 Discussion

5.1 Overall State of Meaning in Life Among University Students

This study shows that university students' presence of meaning is at a moderate level, while search for meaning is moderately high^[15]. These findings are consistent with Zhang Rongwei's (2024) longitudinal study of early adulthood^[7].

Specifically, search for meaning is significantly higher than presence of meaning, indicating that university students generally experience uncertainty while also having a strong willingness to explore meaning. This aligns with Steger et al.'s (2009) conclusion that "search is higher than presence in early adulthood"^[3] and Frankl's view that "the search for meaning is an innate human tendency"^[1]. It also fits with Erikson's (1963) concept of identity formation during this stage^[17]. Erikson suggested that identity provides individuals with a sense of consistency and continuity, rooted in both personal and sociocultural contexts. This stage involves clarifying life goals, leading individuals to actively engage in meaning exploration and demonstrate strong search motivation.

5.2 Analysis of the Relationship Between Search for Meaning and Presence of Meaning

In this study, presence and search showed a significant positive correlation ($r=0.432$, $p<0.01$), indicating a moderate association. This aligns with Zhang Rongwei's (2024) finding of a positive correlation among Chinese university students^[7] and Zhang Shuyue et al.'s (2012) results with high school students^[10]. Wang Xinqiang et al. (2016) also reported a positive correlation between search and presence among university students ($r=0.307$)^[18]. This positive correlation suggests that encouraging university students to actively explore life values and clarify goals may help enhance their sense of meaning.

However, this finding differs from Steger et al.'s conclusions in Western cultural contexts. Their research found a weak negative correlation between search and presence among American participants^[19]. This difference is largely due to the moderating role of cultural background. Steger et al. proposed that the relationship between search and presence, as well as their impact on mental health, varies between Eastern and Western cultures. In Eastern cultures like China and Japan, search and presence are compatible and both positively influence mental health, while in Western cultures like the United States, they are opposed and negatively correlated. This may stem from differences in self-concept (independent vs. interdependent) across cultures^[3]. Wang Xinqiang et al. (2016) suggested that Confucian cultural values, which emphasize active engagement in society, may explain why presence and search are not conflicting but mutually reinforcing in Chinese contexts^[20]. In contrast, Western perspectives often view search as arising from a lack of meaning^[1]. Overall, the positive correlation found in this study highlights cultural differences in the relationship between search and presence.

5.3 Implications

This cross-sectional study, based on survey data and analysis, offers clear implications for mental health and life education in universities. The widespread need for meaning search among university students should be acknowledged and accepted as a motivational force rather than a problem. In daily teaching, students should be guided to reflect on what they want and what kind of life they wish to lead, helping them manage uncertainty and anxiety during their search. This can channel spontaneous and vague searching into more systematic and clear exploration, transforming search into tangible experience.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This cross-sectional design can only reveal correlations, not causal relationships. Additionally, the sample was limited to universities in specific regions, which may limit generalizability. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs, as seen in studies by Zhang Shuyue and Zhang Rongwei, to examine changes and predictive relationships between presence and search over time. Expanding the sample range and comparing different groups or developmental stages would also be valuable.

In summary, presence of meaning is a key factor influencing individuals' psychological well-being. For contemporary university students, higher presence of meaning is often associated with more positive emotions, greater psychological resilience, and higher life satisfaction. Conversely, a lack of deep perception and internal recognition of life value can lead to uncertainty and anxiety. Therefore, presence of meaning should be emphasized in life education for university students, and search for meaning should be appropriately guided. This will help students face growth challenges with a positive and healthy mindset, achieving both personal and social development through clarified life values.

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