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The meaning in life in European university students: a systematic literature review

Celia Ortega-Gómez , Alba García-Barrera , Isabel Martínez-Álvarez  and Enrique Baca-García 

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ABSTRACT

The meaning in life is a psychological construct linked to subjective well-being and life satisfaction, both essential for the holistic development of university students—a population facing increasing mental health concerns. This systematic literature review, conducted in line with PRISMA guidelines, examines the meaning in life in university students and its relationship with personal factors and well-being. The search was carried out in Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, and PsycInfo between July 2024 and April 2025. After applying the selection criteria, the final sample included 22 empirical studies conducted in various European countries, published between 2011 and 2024, involving a total of 7,732 university students with diverse methodological approaches. Results were organized around three themes: in life as a protective factor for psychological well-being, psychological factors associated with meaning in life, and values and motivation. The findings show that a higher sense of meaning in life is linked to lower levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and to greater self-esteem, resilience, and life satisfaction. Moreover, variables such as intrinsic motivation, self-concept clarity, gratitude, and social integration are positively associated with a stronger sense of life purpose.

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Introduction

Meaning in life has been regarded as a core concept to connect and further explain variables like well-being, motivation, and human needs (Frankl, 1946, 2015; Heintzleman & King, 2019; Hill, 2018), providing individuals with a more meaningful, pleasurable, and fulfilling life—one that is worth living (García & Padhila, 2021). The perception of meaning in life is considered as a psychological construct linked to the sense of having a purpose and a life direction. From a tripartite theoretical perspective, it is composed

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of three interdependent dimensions: coherence, purpose, and mattering (George & Park, 2016, 2017) that can be accordingly described as follows:

- **Coherence:** Refers to the perception that life and the world are understandable and consistent. It involves the ability to find meaning and order in experiences, enabling individuals to interpret and organize events in a meaningful way.
- **Purpose:** Denotes the feeling of having valuable and meaningful goals towards which life is directed. This dimension provides direction and motivation, helping individuals to align their actions with personally important objectives.
- **Mattering:** Involves the perception that one's life has value and significance in the world. It is the belief that one's existence matters and has a meaningful impact on the environment or on others.

Consequently, the perception of meaning in life is closely linked to subjective well-being and life satisfaction, both of which are essential for the holistic development of university students (Czyżowska & Gurba, 2021). For this reason, meaning in life has gained particular importance in educational research, especially in the university context. This stage of life involves a transition from academic life to the labor market, introducing significant personal and professional challenges for students.

In Europe, several studies have addressed this topic and have emphasized the importance of understanding how university students perceive and construct their sense of meaning in life, and how this, in turn, affects their academic performance and overall well-being.

Given that meaning in life is a construct strongly influenced by culture, this review focused exclusively on university students in European countries. This choice ensures cultural homogeneity and allows for more consistent comparisons across studies, considering that cultural values significantly shape individuals' understanding of life purpose and well-being (Steger et al., 2008; Vignoles et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2016).

This concern is also reflected in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, signed by 193 countries in September 2015, which identifies citizens' well-being as one of the key Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, an individual's perception concerning the meaning is an important factor to be considered throughout a lifetime and, hence, it is not only subjected to particular moments.

In line with this goal, one of the main challenges within the educational field is to promote freedom, values, well-being, and the search for meaning in life. Therefore, it is essential for education to provide spaces where students can reflect on and become aware about the importance of building their sense of meaning in life, as a core foundation for achieving holistic personal success (Chan, 2021; Martínez et al., 2018).

Having a sense of meaning in life, in addition to providing a reason for existence, allows individuals to enjoy the activities they engage in and feel satisfied with them. In this way, it gives students a sense of meaning in carrying out their academic tasks and also enables them to pursue broader goals and engage actively in their personal, professional, and social lives. Given the fact that the university education is a moment of important changes for students (from the adaptation to the entry courses to the last courses in which students will shortly start their professional activities), we find in this context the ideal setting to prepare critical citizens with a strong sense of life purpose, capable of facing challenges and functioning effectively in society and professional labor while embracing their freedom, responsibilities, and ethical values.

However, there is growing concern about the mental health of university students. The transition to university life can be a stressful and challenging period, and the absence of a clear sense of meaning in life can intensify these difficulties. In this regard, it has been shown that meaning in life acts as a protective factor and contributes to a better quality of life, reflected in both good physical and mental health, as well as greater enjoyment of life (Hooker et al., 2018; Saleme & Coronado, 2024).

Recent studies have also demonstrated that students with a well-defined sense of meaning in life are more resilient, manage academic stress more effectively (Au et al., 2023), and show higher levels of emotional well-being and life satisfaction (Moreno et al., 2017).

Other research highlights that factors such as self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and social support are relevant for shaping meaning in life (Wu et al., 2024), which is undoubtedly influenced by three fundamental elements: family, education, and society (Saleme & Coronado, 2024).

In addition, evidence shows that specific interventions, such as practicing gratitude and participating in service-learning activities, can enhance psychological well-being and meaning in life among young people, especially in the university context (Czyżowska & Gurba, 2021; Kirca et al., 2023; Skrzelinska et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2022).

All these findings highlight the importance of studying the perception of meaning in life construct within the university context, as it can provide information for improving the quality of life of European university students. Consequently, this study aims to contribute to existing knowledge through a systematic literature review, with the goal of identifying the factors that influence the perception of meaning in life and, ultimately, to connect with strategies that promote the well-being of European university students. The relevance of this study lies in the need to promote the holistic development of university students. Eventually, this study contributes to the enhancement of the student's quality of life particularly linked with their sense of meaning in life.

On a practical level, understanding how meaning in life develops and is maintained among university students can be highly useful for designing educational and psychological support interventions. This study, through an extensive review, can be of help in identifying the factors that contribute to the perception of meaning in life among European university students.

Method

This systematic review of the scientific literature on the in life in European university students followed the guidelines of the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), to ensure the reliability and replicability of the results.

Only empirical studies conducted with university students in European countries were included. This methodological choice was based on the need to reduce the cultural heterogeneity associated with the meaning in life construct, which is known to vary significantly across cultural contexts. As highlighted by Vignoles et al. (2018), models of selfhood differ across cultures, influencing how individuals experience purpose, agency, and self-realization. Steger et al. (2008) demonstrated substantial cultural differences in levels and correlates of meaning in life between American and Japanese students. Similarly, Yu et al. (2016) found that cultural values such as humility or self-expression predict meaning in life differently depending on cultural background. Therefore, focusing the review on European university students ensured greater epistemological consistency among the included studies.

The search also focused exclusively on university students because, as mentioned in the introduction, they represent a population with particular psychological and developmental characteristics linked to their life stage. This period is often marked by identity exploration, the search for autonomy, and existential questioning, which makes this group especially relevant for the study of meaning in life. Limiting the sample to university students also allowed for greater consistency and caution when interpreting the findings.

The PRISMA methodology was followed systematically throughout the review process. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Articles were selected using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The PRISMA flow diagram presented in [Figure 1](#) summarizes the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases of the review process.

The final selection includes articles published between 2012 and 2024. This period was determined by the search results obtained in the selected databases, as no eligible articles on this topic were published before 2012.

The search process began in July 2024. A database was then constructed based on the searching protocols and analyzed accordingly. The writing was completed in April 2025, including the interpretation of the results.

The Boolean operators used in the search were: 'meaning in life' (title) AND students (title), 'meaning of life' (title) AND students (title), 'purpose in life' AND students (title), 'life purpose' AND students (title), 'sense of life' AND students (title), and 'search for meaning' AND students (title).

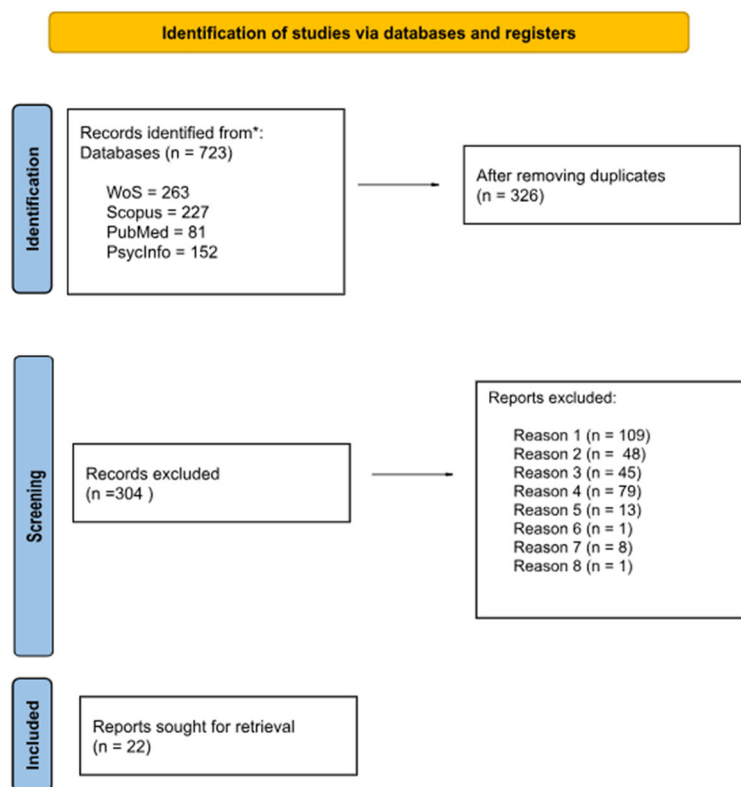


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process.

The search was conducted using English terms only to ensure access to international studies. The databases selected were Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, and PsycInfo, chosen for their capacity to compile rigorous research in the field and their large number of high-impact journals.

Based on the mentioned Boolean operators, the results obtained in a first stage (a total number of $n = 723$ documents) were transferred to a data matrix in an Excel document to allow analysis according to the following categories: keywords, databases used, duplicates, doi, compliance with inclusion and exclusion criteria, authors, population and sample, type of study, a brief summary, conclusions, and discussion.

As mentioned, the initial search yielded 723 results extracted from the considered databases. In this stage, the results were mainly classified in accordance with relevant keywords associated as well with the document titles. After screening for duplicates across the different databases, the number of results was reduced to 358.

A first content analysis was then conducted to verify whether these articles met the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they provided open access to the full text, were written in Spanish or English, and presented scientific content focused on meaning in life among university students. Only articles based on European samples and involving either theoretical or empirical approaches were considered. Studies were excluded if they did not meet these criteria, including those in other languages, involving non-university populations, conducted outside Europe, unrelated to the topic, or identified as duplicates (for more information, see [Table 1](#)). After this final screening, 22 articles were selected and included. All of them were read in full, analyzed, organized according to the predefined categories, and summarized in the data matrix. Refer to [Table 2](#) for a compilation of the final selected articles.

Regarding the chronological distribution of the selected articles, a growing trend in recent years can be observed in the scientific production on the in life among European university students. The first article included was published in 2012, and the most recent one in 2024, covering a 13-year period of academic research on this topic.

Table 1. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

No.	Criteria	
	Inclusion	Exclusion
1	Open access to full text	Restricted and/or limited access
2	Languages: Spanish and English	Other languages
3	Scientific articles	Other types of documents
4	European sample	Sample from other countries
5	University students	Non-university students
6	Theoretical and empirical studies	Other types of studies
7	Topic: Meaning in life and university students	Other topics
8	Single version	Duplicates in different languages

Most of the publications were concentrated in 2022 and 2023, accounting for 18.18% of the total articles included in the review. In contrast, the years with the fewest publications (4.55%) were 2012 and 2016.

Publications from other years are distributed in percentages ranked from highest to lowest production:

- In 2022 and 2023, 4 articles were published each year, accounting for 36.36% of the total published articles and representing the highest production during the period analyzed.
- In 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2024, 2 articles were published each year, representing 54.54% of the total.
- In 2012 and 2016, 1 article was published each year, representing 9.1%.

The distribution shows that most of the publications were concentrated in 2022 and 2023. This percentage may be related to research stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on students, as well as the growing interest in mental health. It is worth noting that in 2020, the year of the pandemic, there were no publications. This upward trend is clearly visible, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

Results

The studies included in this systematic review reveal a consistent association between meaning in life and several psychological factors in university student populations. As previously introduced, the total sample consists of 22 studies that compile the responses of 7732 students at university level.

Three main thematic areas were identified to organize the findings related to meaning in life among university students:

1. meaning in life as a protective factor for psychological well-being,
2. meaning in life and associated psychological factors, and
3. values and motivation.

For a more detailed overview, see [Table 3](#): Thematic classification of the 22 articles

Meaning in life as a protective factor for psychological well-being

The studies analyzed in this review highlight that meaning in life acts as a protective factor against psychological distress in university students. Several investigations agree that students with a clear life purpose report fewer depressive symptoms, lower anxiety, greater resilience, and higher levels of life satisfaction (Kuk & Guskowska, 2019; Smedema Malonda & Barahona Esteban, 2018). A recent study by Pérez Rodríguez et al. (2024), based on a sample of 714 university students, found that meaning in life mediates the relationship between depressive symptoms and the future frequency of suicidal ideation. This suggests that having a life purpose may buffer the risk of suicidal thoughts in individuals experiencing depressive symptoms.

Table 2. Compilation of considered studies for the literature review.

Number	Title	Country of sample	Sample (n)	Journal	Publication year	Main conclusions
1	Sense of the Meaning of Life among Students Demonstrating Different Self-Education Activity Levels	Poland	130	New Educational Review	2015	A higher level of self-education is associated with a stronger sense of meaning in life. Self-education appears to be linked to the perception of life's value and purpose.
2	Subjective well-being and social-emotional loneliness of university students: The mediating effect of the meaning of life	Turkey	477	Journal of pedagogical research	2021	Meaning in life is a significant positive predictor of subjective well-being and also shows a significant negative relationship with loneliness.
3	Manifestations of purpose in life among Finnish student teachers	Finland	224	Journal of Moral Education	2024	Finnish teacher education students tend to have a life purpose focused on family and benevolence, but show limited engagement in actions related to justice or social change.
4	Physical activity and purpose in life of college students in confinement	Spain	360	Retos	2023	A significant correlation was identified between meaning in life and physical activity.
5	Purpose in Life and Character Strengths as Predictors of Health Sciences Students' Psychopathology During the COVID-19 Pandemic	Spain	122	Frontiers in Psychiatry	2022	A high sense of purpose in life serves as a protective factor against the development of anxiety, depression, and general psychopathology.
6	Life purposes: Comparing higher education students in four institutions in the Netherlands and Finland	Finland and the Netherlands	1509	Journal of Moral Education	2023	Dutch students show a stronger orientation toward purposes beyond themselves, while Finnish students tend to focus more on self-centered goals.
7	Values manifested in life purposes of higher education students in the Netherlands and Finland	Finland and the Netherlands	1509	Journal of beliefs & values	2023	The educational context may have a greater influence on the development of purpose than nationality. Moral education learned at university could foster a more community-oriented and ethical outlook.
8	Resilience, anxiety and sense of life in university students; [Resiliencia, ansiedad y sentido de vida en estudiantes universitarios]	Spain	215	Cauriensia	2018	Meaning in life and resilience are protective factors against anxiety.
9	Self-esteem and sense of life in university students; [Autoestima y sentido de vida en estudiantes universitarios]	Spain	106	Cauriensia	2018	Healthy self-esteem supports the perception of life purpose regardless of gender. Both factors contribute to improved well-being in students.
10	The Lack of Academic Social Interactions and Students' Learning Difficulties during COVID-19 Faculty Lockdowns in Croatia: The Mediating Role of the Perceived Sense of Life Disruption Caused by the Pandemic and the Adjustment to Online Studying	Croatia	464	Social Sciences	2022	Lack of social interaction negatively affected self-regulation, learning, and meaning in life.
11	How do Curiosity, Meaning in Life, and Search for Meaning Predict College Students' Daily Emotional Exhaustion and Engagement?	Spain	209	Journal of happiness studies	2011	Curiosity reduces emotional exhaustion and influences student engagement, motivation, and well-being.
12	A Path Model of Meaning in Life among University Students: The Roles of Gratitude, Self-Concept Clarity and Self-Construct	Turkey	825	Applied Research in Quality of Life	2022	Self-concept clarity, social integration, and gratitude have a positive influence on students' meaning in life and well-being.

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Number	Title	Country of sample	Sample (n)	Journal	Publication year	Main conclusions
13	Changes and Predictors of the Sense of Meaning in Life in Polish University Students Participating in Psychological Workshops Communication-Forgiveness-Love	Poland	33	Journal of Religion & Health	2019	Students who participated in psychological workshops focused on communication, forgiveness, and love improved their perception of meaning in life.
14	Counseling as a calling: Meaning in life and perceived self-competence in counselling students	England	292	Counselling & Psychotherapy Research	2022	Students who perceive a greater sense of meaning in life have more confidence in their abilities, experience less burnout, and report higher levels of well-being.
15	Inspiration, meaning in life and gratitude as predictors of subjective well-being in the case of a group of students	Romania	325	Journal of Educational Sciences & Psychology	2021	Meaning in life and gratitude have a positive influence on subjective well-being. However, lack of inspiration and the ongoing search for meaning may have negative effects on life satisfaction.
16	Investigation of the relationship between physical activity level and meaning in life of university students	Turkey	376	Physical Education of Students	2023	Low levels of physical activity are associated with a lower search for meaning in life.
17	Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being among Turkish University Students	Turkey	232	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	2012	The presence of meaning in life is associated with subjective well-being; however, the search for meaning may generate negative emotions.
18	Meaning in life mediates the association between depressive symptoms and future frequency of suicidal ideation in Spanish university students: A longitudinal study	Spain	718	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	2024	A high sense of meaning in life is a protective factor against suicidal ideation, even in the presence of depressive symptoms.
19	Satisfaction with Life, Meaning in Life, Sad Childhood Experiences, and Psychological Symptoms among Turkish Students	Turkey	2016	Psychological Reports	400	A high sense of meaning in life is positively related to greater subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and more positive emotions.
20	The Importance of the Experience of God's Absence, and of Meaning in Life, in the Development of Sensitivity of Conscience among Polish University Students	Poland	2015	Religions	205	The belief in the absence of God strengthens the search for meaning in life and moral sensitivity.
21	The Relationship of Forgiveness and Values with Meaning in Life of Polish Students	Poland	2019	Journal of Religion and Health	368	Terminal values and forgiveness are positively associated with a higher sense of meaning in life.
22	Values Realized in Personal Strivings and Motivation, and Meaning in Life in Polish University Students	Poland	2017	Journal of Happiness Studies	353	Intrinsic motivation and values have a positive influence on meaning in life.

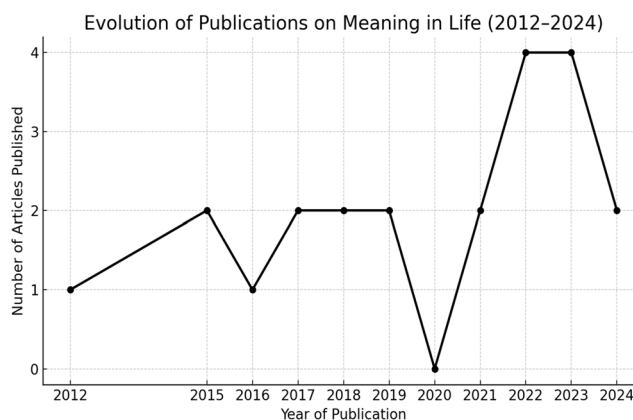


Figure 2. Evolution of publications on meaning in life (2012–2024). The figure shows the number of articles published each year on meaning in life in European university students over a 13-year period.

Table 3. Thematic classification of the 22 articles.

Thematic area	Included articles
Meaning in life as a protective factor for mental health and well-being	Pérez Rodríguez et al. (2024); Özdoğan (2021); Romero Ramos et al. (2023); Kuk and Guskowska (2019); Doğan et al. (2012); Cömert et al. (2016); Balgiu et al. (2021)
Psychological variables associated with meaning in life	Çebi and Demir (2022); Wu et al. (2024); Hurst and Prescott (2022); Smedema Malonda and Barahona Esteban (2018); Smedema Malonda and Franco Módenes (2018)
Values and motivation in the construction of life meaning	Siwek et al. (2017); Glaz (2015); Kuusisto et al. (2023); Kuusisto et al. (2025); Moberg and Kuusisto (2024); Rodek (2015); Garroa et al. (2017); Echeverria et al. (2022)

In addition, the analyses conducted by Özdoğan (2021) revealed significant relationships between meaning in life, subjective well-being, and social and emotional loneliness. The results showed that both social and emotional loneliness significantly predicted subjective well-being through the mediating role of meaning in life. On the other hand, Romero Ramos et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between life purpose and physical activity, emphasizing that, although causality could not be established, this relationship highlights the importance of promoting active lifestyles to enhance both physical and emotional well-being.

Regarding factors related to subjective well-being, Balgiu and Sfeatcu (2021) identified gratitude, along with meaning in life and inspiration, as key predictors of psychological well-being in university students. Gratitude was the factor with the strongest positive impact on positive emotions and life satisfaction. However, their findings also indicated that while the presence of a clear life purpose significantly improves subjective well-being, the active search for meaning may be associated with negative emotions. This pattern was confirmed by Cömert et al. (2016), who concluded that individuals with a defined life purpose experience greater life satisfaction and more positive emotions, whereas those actively searching for meaning tend to experience more negative emotions.

Finally, Doğan et al. (2012) found that meaning in life explains up to 34% of the variability in subjective well-being among Turkish university students. These results support the idea that having a clear life purpose not only protects against psychological distress but also promotes greater life satisfaction.

Overall, the reviewed studies emphasize how meaning in life can serve as a buffer against stress and negative emotional experiences in university students. This finding highlights its relevance as a key target for psychological interventions aimed at promoting emotional well-being in this population.

Meaning in life and associated psychological factors

The studies included in this aspect of the systematic review highlight several psychological factors associated with meaning in life for university students. In particular, variables such as self-concept,

self-esteem, and gratitude (this variable appears again under the scope of psychological factors) emerge as important personal resources that help shape life purpose in this population.

Self-esteem has been identified as a variable positively associated with meaning in life. Smedema Malonda and Barahona Esteban (2018) found that healthy self-esteem supports the perception of life purpose, although it does not necessarily guarantee its presence. The absence of significant gender differences suggests that this relationship remains consistent across university students.

Self-concept, understood as the clarity with which students define their identity, also emerges as a relevant factor. Çebi and Demir (2022) showed that self-concept clarity and social integration directly influence the presence of meaning in life. This clarity functions as a key mediator, as it allows students to articulate a more defined personal purpose. In addition, findings by Hurst and Prescott (2022) indicated that students who find meaning in their academic training tend to have higher perceived self-competence, which is associated with greater well-being and lower emotional exhaustion.

Gratitude has been identified as one of the psychological factors with the greatest positive impact on meaning in life. According to Çebi and Demir (2022), it directly contributes to meaning-making and also acts through social integration. This highlights the value of interpersonal relationships as facilitators of life purpose in educational contexts. Similarly, the study by Balgiu and Sfeatcu (2021) found that gratitude, along with inspiration and meaning in life, are significant predictors of subjective well-being. Among these variables, gratitude showed the strongest positive effect, as it was linked to more frequent positive emotions and greater life satisfaction. In contrast, the active search for meaning, without having yet found it, was associated with negative emotional states such as anxiety and sadness.

These findings suggest that promoting gratitude and identity clarity may be an effective strategy to strengthen both meaning in life and the psychological well-being of university students. In this regard, the development of educational interventions focused on self-concept, social integration, and the expression of gratitude is proposed, as these are relevant psychological factors associated with the promotion of meaning in life (Balgiu & Sfeatcu, 2021; Çebi & Demir, 2022).

Values and motivation

According to Siwek et al. (2017), meaning in life among university students is strongly influenced by personal values that are achieved through everyday efforts, as well as by the types of motivation that guide their behavior. Based on Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory and Frankl's Logotherapy, these authors explored how certain value orientations and motivational types are related to a life perceived as meaningful. The results of their study showed that meaning in life is positively associated with values that are reached through personal commitment.

They also found that intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interest and internal satisfaction, was positively associated with a higher sense of meaning in life. In contrast, external motivation, which is guided by rewards or external pressure, showed a negative relationship. Participants with a strong sense of life purpose were more likely to value intrinsic motivation and to find meaning in their daily activities, integrating both intrinsic and extrinsic values. This combination appears to strengthen the perception of life purpose and personal well-being. In this regard, the study highlights the importance of aligning life goals with personal values in order to promote a more meaningful existence.

In addition, meaning in life and conscientious sensitivity were found to be significantly related to students' moral values and social environment. These results suggest that exploring and questioning spiritual and moral beliefs may be linked to a stronger sense of meaning in life and greater ethical awareness among students (Głaz, 2015).

Discussion

We also propose a conceptual model integrating psychological factors such as self-esteem, gratitude, and motivation with meaning in life, grounded in Self-Determination Theory and the tripartite model of meaning (George & Park, 2016). This model may guide future empirical testing.

Additionally, we evaluated the methodological quality of the included studies. Most were cross-sectional, limiting causal inference, but varied in sample size and psychometric instruments. This heterogeneity may influence the consistency of findings and should be considered when interpreting results.

To strengthen the analytical depth, we conducted a comparative synthesis of the reviewed studies, highlighting both convergences and divergences in findings. For instance, while Kuk and Guskowska (2019) reported a positive association between life purpose and emotional well-being, Balgiu and Sfeatcu (2021) noted that the active search for meaning could be linked to negative emotions. These discrepancies may stem from differences in sample characteristics or measurement tools used.

This literature review shows the complexity of meaning in life among higher education students as it is a dynamic construct closely related to both contextual and psychological factors. Its presence has been consistently associated with fewer depressive symptoms, lower levels of anxiety, and reduced suicidal ideation. At the same time, it is linked to strengthening emotional self-regulation, greater resilience, and higher life satisfaction.

Self-esteem emerges as a central variable in the perception of meaning in life (Smedema Malonda & Barahona Esteban, 2018). These findings are in line with Deci and Ryan (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which states that satisfying the basic psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence is essential for the development of life purpose and well-being. In this sense, healthy self-esteem may support the perception of personal worth and competence, thus contributing to a stronger sense of purpose.

Similarly, as demonstrated by Çebi and Demir (2022), self-concept clarity appears as a key mediator in the perception of meaning in life. They suggest that students with a more defined and coherent identity tend to report higher levels of meaning in life, possibly due to greater alignment and consistency between their beliefs, behaviors, and values (Rogers, 1959).

According to Balgiu and Sfeatcu (2021), gratitude is positively related to both meaning in life and well-being. These findings align with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), which proposes that positive emotions—such as gratitude—expand thought-action repertoires and promote the development of social and psychological resources that support long-term well-being.

Moreover, gratitude influences meaning in life through social integration, interpersonal relationships, and social support (Çebi & Demir, 2022). This idea aligns with Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), which suggests that secure and affectionate relationships provide a foundation for personal exploration and development.

Conclusions

This review shows that meaning in life among university students has a dynamic nature, in which it is closely connected to perceived well-being and various psychological variables such as self-esteem, self-concept, social integration, motivation, and especially gratitude.

Future research should address gaps such as the role of spirituality, gender differences, and longitudinal trajectories in the development of meaning in life. These areas remain underexplored in the current literature.

The presence of meaning in life is consistently associated with lower levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation, as well as with higher levels of resilience, life satisfaction, and emotional self-regulation.

As practical implications and future research, the findings from this literature review suggest that interventions aimed at strengthening self-esteem, self-concept, gratitude, social integration, and vocational meaning in academic studies could be effective in promoting meaning in life and psychological well-being among university students. The implementation of programs that encourage reflection on personal values, gratitude practices, social skills development, and vocational exploration is hence recommended based on our findings.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of these interventions in different cultural and academic contexts, as well as examine the influence of other psychological and social factors in the construction of meaning in life among university students.

It is important to note some limitations of this literature review. First, most of the included studies are cross-sectional in nature, which prevents establishing causal relationships between the factors

examined and meaning in life. Second, the sample of studies focuses mainly on university students, which limits the generalizability of the results to other populations.

Despite these limitations, this literature review provides a synthesis of the existing evidence on meaning in life among university students, while it provides information connected with the importance of a multidimensional approach that considers the interaction between psychological and contextual factors in its development and maintenance.

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