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Relationship between Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-Being among First-Year Counseling Psychology Students at Selected Private Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya

Caroline Nthenya Okumu[1], Henry Tucholski Ph.D[2], Phyllis Muraya Ph.D[3]

Tangaza University

ABSTRACT

Previous studies have examined factors that affect the mental well-being of college students, specifically in regards to their academic achievements and overall university experience. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research regarding the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students. The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students. The study was grounded on logo therapy theory and Ryff's six-factor model.The study employed a correlational research design. Through Cluster sampling, the study utilized a sample size of 102 participants from five private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The data was collected using Meaning in Life Questionnaire and the Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale.The data collected was analyzed using, descriptive statistics,Pearson correlational analysis and regression analysis with SPSS.The results showed positive relationship between the presence of meaning in life and psychological wellbeing (r=.266, p<0.0007). The study recommended targeted support programs to foster meaning; tailored support for employed and unemployed students; holistic mental health interventions; and regular monitoring and evaluation of students' well-being.

Key Words: Meaning in life, Psychological well-being, First year counseling psychology students, Private Universities

INTRODUCTION

Meaning in life is inherently intricate, consisting of a convoluted web of associations, interpretations, and comprehension and therefore important in helping students understand their experiences and formulate plans to attain their future objectives (Steger, 2013). According to Frankl (1984), meaning in life can be found through various means. Firstly, by engaging in meaningful work or deeds; secondly, by deriving experience from nature, culture, or by forming deep connections with others. Thirdly, by navigating through hopeless situations and transforming personal tragedy into personal achievement. Assessing meaning in life for counseling psychology students is valuable in understanding the motivation levels of these future therapists in their quest to become people helpers.

Psychological well-being plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's transition experience, encompassing both affective and cognitive components. Ryff (1998) suggests that psychological well-being involves six dimensions, including independence, mastery of one's surroundings, personal development, healthy relationships, a sense of purpose, and self-acceptance. Measuring PWB among first-year counseling psychology students is crucial because of the significant psychological changes they undergo when transitioning to university and the course content. First-year counseling psychology students may find the course to be intense, as it explores personal existential concerns through theories, experiential groups, and mandatory personal therapy.

To gain a greater comprehension of students' first-year experiences, Thompson et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study on 10 psychology undergraduates at a university in the south-west region of England. Respondents in the focus group had a mean age of 22.1, whereas those in the interviews had a mean age of 19.8. The study aimed to comprehend the diverse origins of anxiety that students may experience during the transition period. According to the study, students faced challenges in adapting to independent living, including feelings of being inadequately equipped for self-directed learning, struggles with social networks, and the influence of their peers. This means that undergraduate students undergo psychological stress as they endeavor to adjust to their new academic environment and establish a sense of belonging.

Kohútová et al. (2021) carried out a study to investigate the relationship between the attributes of emerging adulthood, satisfaction with life, and a sense of MiL. The researchers examined features that led to further variation beyond the Big Five factors. The sample consisted of 244 Slovak university students, with the majority of 86.9% being women and the remaining 13.1% being men. The participants had a mean age of 21.36. This study found specific personality qualities such as negative emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, and open-mindedness to be important predictors of meaning in

life. These characteristics accounted for 26.2% of the additional variability in the existence of meaning in life. The results suggest that psychological factors significantly influence the search for and presence of MiL as individuals go through developmental transitions.

In a study by Conley et al. (2023), researchers tracked the psychological well-being and psychological anguish of 5,537 undergraduates in the United States over time. The participants had an average age of 18.5. The study examined self-esteem as a measure of psychological well-being, along with indicators of depression, anxiety, and stress as measures of distress. The findings showed that during transition, a significant proportion of women (43.4%) and men (62.4%) exhibited high self-esteem, which experienced a slight decline before stabilizing over time. In terms of psychological distress, approximately 77.5% of women in the sample experienced low levels of distress. Over time, these levels showed a slight worsening at first and a slight improvement later. Among men, 77.8% reported low distress, which exhibited a curvilinear pattern of worsening followed by a plateau. Overall, the study reveals that the level of psychological well-being is initially high for both men and women but levels of distress increase during the transition period.

Van der Walt (2019) conducted quantitative research at the Vaal University of Technology in Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, to analyze the relationships between first-year students' sense of purpose, meaning in life, academic achievement, and mental health. The study included 269 first-year students, with 150 females (55.80%) and 119 males (44.20%). The study found male students had M = 110.36, (SD = 20.11), while male students had a M = 107.85, (SD = 22.22) indicating a strong link between the respondents' purpose and meaning in life and their mental health. The study by Van der Walt (2019) is significant because the results are critical to evaluating the correlation between MiL and PWB within the framework of an academic program.

Aloka (2023) examined the influence of gender on the stress levels of first-year students at a public university in Kenya. The study involved 198 first-year students who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education undergraduate degree program. From the sample, there were 128 male participants (64.6%) and 70 female participants (35.4%). Female students had slightly higher stress levels in academic demands M = 3.71, (SD = 0.74) compared to male students M = 3.40, (SD = 0.88). Female students experienced higher levels of stress due to financial difficulties M = 2.94, (SD = 0.93) compared to male students M = 2.54, (SD = 0.80). Aloka's study uncovered a significant disparity in stress levels between female and male students. This position emphasizes the need to carry out the proposed research in Kenya amidst difficult economic conditions and among a population that undertakes a course with a bidirectional nature.

Nyaundi and Chebet (2023) highlight that government assistance, including scholarships, would cease to be accessible for private universities. Kigotho (2023) observed that the revised funding model places a greater financial responsibility on students who are financially capable, while simultaneously limiting the educational choices available to financially disadvantaged students who wish to enroll in private universities. In addition, during June 2023, the Kenyan shilling (KES) saw a depreciation of 13.5% in comparison to the start of the year, resulting in a value of more than 140 units against the US dollar (Ndung'u, 2023). The depreciation of the shilling resulted in a decrease in the affordability of essential goods and services for individuals, including education. First-year students in 2024 may experience worry and anxiety due to the country's prevailing economic conditions, which might have a link to their psychological well-being.

The aim of this current study was to measure the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students at selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.Aloka's (2023) research, which examined the influence of gender on stress levels among first-year university students at a public university, served as a source of inspiration for this study. In the current study, the researcher aimed to address the lack of empirical research in Kenya in relation to levels of MiL and PWB among students charged with the responsibility of ensuring individuals overall well-being but more importantly psychological well-being.

METHODOLODY

The research utilized a correlational survey design to analyze the relationship and differences among the study population. The design was selected for its capacity to enable a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between study variables. Five private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya, namely Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA), International Leadership University (ILU), Kenya Methodist University (KEMU), KCA University (KCAU), and Tangaza University (TU), accepted the research. The study focused on a population of 163 first-year students enrolled in counseling psychology programs at selected universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study selected a sample size of 102 participants from private universities in Nairobi using cluster sampling. The data collection involved the Meaning in Life Questionnaire and Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale. In 2005, Michael Steger created the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) to assess the search for or presence of meaning in a person's life. In 1989, Carol Ryff created the 42-item Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWBS) to assess the psychological well-being of individuals. After obtaining the research authorizations from the universities and NACOSTI, the researcher gathered data from first-year counseling psychology students in the private universities. The participants had thirty minutes to complete the questionnaire, and the researcher was available for any necessary clarifications. The collected data underwent analysis through descriptive and inferential statistics, specifically employing Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis using SPSS.

RESULTS

The study sought to examine the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students. The section begins by presenting the demographic characteristics of the participants followed by the findings of the objective of the study.

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

This section outlines the demographic composition of the participants, detailing the universities the students attend, along with their age, gender, and employment status.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

University	Frequency	Percentage %
CUEA	25	24.5
ILU	20	19.6
TU	15	14.7
KCA	24	23.5
KEMU	18	17.6
Age		
18 - 29 years	82	80.4
30 years and above	20	19.6
Gender		
Male	27	26.5
Female	75	73.5
Employment Status		
Employed	22	21.6
Unemployed	80	78.4

This study involved 102 participants from five distinct universities. The largest percentage of respondents came from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), representing 24.5% (n = 25) of the participants. KCA University accounted for 23.5% (n = 24), and students from the International Leadership University (ILU) represented 19.6% (n = 20) of the sample. Tangaza University College accounted for 14.7% (n = 15) of participants, while Kenya Methodist University (KEMU) represented 17.6% (n = 18). The age distribution indicates that a significant portion of participants, specifically 80.4% (n = 82), fell within the 18 to 29 age range (emerging adults), whereas 19.6% (n = 20) were aged 30 or older (mature students). The participants were primarily female, comprising 73.5% (n = 75), while male participants accounted for 26.5% (n = 27). 78.4% (n = 80) of the sample reported unemployment, while 21.6% (n = 22) reported employment.

Level of Meaning in Life among First-Year Counselling Psychology Students

This section presents statistics on the level of meaning of life among first-year counselling psychology students at the five selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The results are as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Level of meaning in life

Meaning in life	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Low levels of meaning in life	10-30	3	2.9
Moderate levels of meaning in life	31-50	51	50.0
High levels of meaning in life	51-70	48	47.1
Total	**10-70**	**102**	**100.0**

Table 2 presents result that show different levels of meaning in life among participants, categorized into three clear groups: low, moderate, and high levels of meaning in life. A small percentage (n = 3) of the participants indicated low levels of meaning in life. Fifty percent (n = 51) had moderate levels of meaning in life and 47.1% exhibited elevated levels of meaning in life.

Level of Psychological Wellbeing among First-Year Counselling Psychology Students

This section presents statistics on the level of psychological well-being among first-year counselling psychology students at the five selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. Table 3 presents the distribution of participants across these levels, highlighting the overall psychological well-being of the sample population.

Table 3: Level of psychological wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Low	42-95	0	0%
Moderate	96-200	101	99.0%
High	201-252	1	1.0%
Total	**42-252**	**102**	**100%**

The findings in Table 3 show that a majority of first-year counseling psychology students in private universities in Nairobi demonstrate a moderate level of psychological wellbeing n = 101 (99.0%). The analysis indicates that no participants (0%) exhibited low levels of psychological well-being, and that only 1% of the participants (n = 1) indicated high levels of psychological well-being.

Relationship between Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-being among First-Year Counseling Psychology Students

The objective of the study was set to examine the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students at the selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.Figure 1 below shows a scatter plot between meaning in life and psychological wellbeing among first-year counseling psychology private university students.
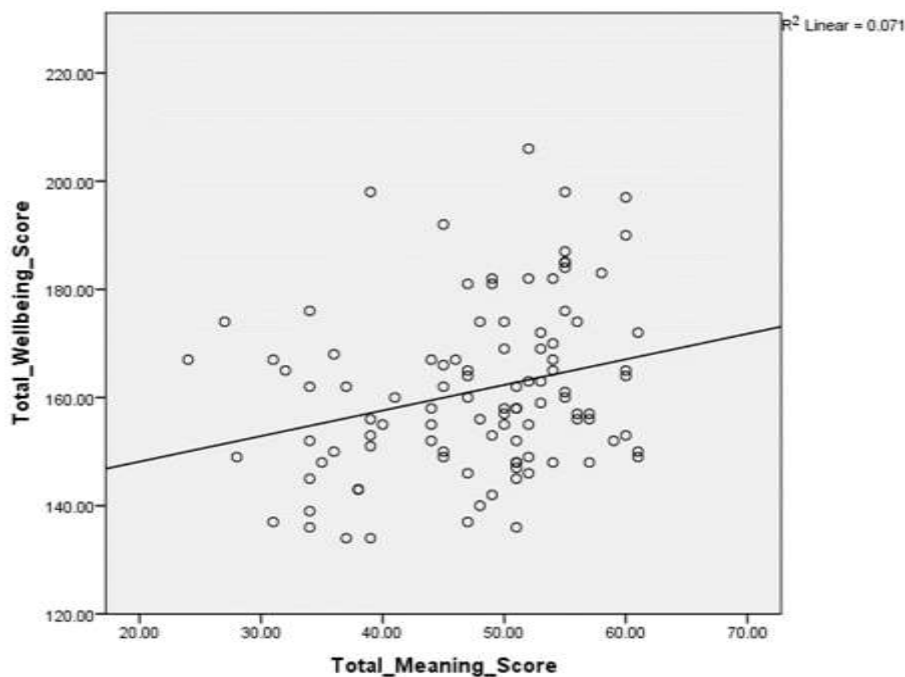

Figure 1: Scatter plot between meaning in life and psychological wellbeing

The scatter plot shows a positive correlation between meaning in life and psychological well-being. As the Total Meaning Score increases, there is a clear trend for the Total Well-being Score to also increase, suggesting that individuals who experience a greater sense of meaning in life frequently report improved psychological well-being. The fitted straight line indicates a linear relationship, while the arrangement of points around it suggests a positive association that might not be very strong. The Total Meaning Score accounts for approximately 7.1% of the variance in the Total Well-being Score, based on an R-value of 0.071. This indicates that other factors, aside from meaning in life, may also affect psychological wellbeing. While most points fall within the midrange values, a few outliers demonstrate higher meaning in life scores, while having moderate psychological wellbeing.A Pearson correlation analysis was run to examine the correlation and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlation between meaning in life and psychological wellbeing among First-year Counseling psychology students

Correlations

		Total Score	MeaningTotal Wellbeing Score
Total Meaning Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.266**
Total Wellbeing Score	Sig. (2-tailed)		.007

N		102	102
Pearson Correlation		.266**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)		.007	
N		102	102

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations	Total Meaning Score	Total Score	Wellbeing
Total Meaning Score			
Pearson Correlation	1		.266**

The results in table 4 showed that the correlation coefficient between the total Meaning Score and total Wellbeing Score was 0.266. This value indicates a moderately positive correlation between the two variables. This suggests that those who express a greater sense of meaning in life are likely to experience improved psychological well-being. The p-value for the correlation is 0.007, which is below the standard alpha threshold of 0.01.

In addition, regression analysis was conducted to establish further the relationship between the meaning in life and dimensions of psychological well-being and results are presented in table 5.

Table 5: Regression between presence of meaning in life and psychological wellbeing

Coefficients					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	138.693	8.315		16.679	
Total Meaning Score	.473	.172	.266	2.754	

a. Dependent Variable: Total Wellbeing Score

Coefficients

The regression coefficients table offers important insights into the relationship between Total Meaning Score and Total Wellbeing Score. The fixed value of 138.693 signifies the anticipated Total Wellbeing Score when the Total Meaning Score is zero, suggesting that if a participant experienced no "meaning in life," their projected wellbeing score would be around 138.69. Additionally, for every extra point in the Total Meaning Score, there is an increase of 0.473 in the Total Wellbeing Score, indicating that greater meaning in life correlates with enhanced psychological wellbeing. The standard error of 0.172 quantifies the accuracy of this coefficient estimate, suggesting a reasonably accurate estimate for the predictor variable since smaller standard errors indicate higher accuracy. The standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.266) facilitates comparisons among variables by normalizing them to a uniform scale, suggesting that the Total Meaning Score exerts a moderate positive influence on the Total Wellbeing Score. The t-value of 2.754 assesses if the coefficient for Total Meaning Score differs significantly from zero, indicating its significant predictive power for psychological wellbeing. The p-value of 0.007 confirms the statistical significance of the relationship between the Total Meaning Score and Total Wellbeing Score at the 0.01 level, indicating that this predictor is meaningful and not a result of chance.

DISCUSSION

This research evaluated the meaning in life among first-year counseling psychology students at five private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya, utilizing the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) created by Michael F. Steger. The results showed a varied range of meaning levels among participants. Only 3 (2.9%) of respondents indicated low levels of meaning in life, demonstrating a minimal occurrence of significant life dissatisfaction or purposelessness within this sample. According to Steger (2005), people who score low in the meaning and purpose sub-scales have a deficiency in life values, purpose, and curiosity. A substantial number of participants exhibited moderate levels (n = 51, 50.0%) and high n = 48 (47.1%) levels of meaning, with almost all respondents (97.1%) categorized as having either moderate or high meaning in life.

The findings on the psychological well-being of first-year counseling psychology students in Nairobi County revealed a notable distribution of well-being levels among participants. No respondents (0%) reported low psychological well-being, indicating the absence of significant psychological distress according to Ryff (1989). A substantial majority, n = 101, (99.0%) of participants, exhibited implied moderate levels psychological well-being, suggesting they maintained a reasonable degree of well-being amid potential stressors during the transition to university. Only 1.0% (n = 1) reported high psychological well-being, reflecting exceptional resilience, self-awareness, and coping skills.

The main objective of the study was set to examine the relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students at the selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.Findings of the current study showed a positive correlation (r = 0.266, p = 0.007) between meaning in life and psychological well-being among first-year counseling psychology students. This statistically significant relationship suggests that students who report higher levels of meaning in life tend to experience greater psychological well-being. The regression analysis further supports this, indicating that for every additional point in meaning, well-being increases by 0.473, although other factors also likely contribute to well-being. The R² value of 0.071 shows that meaning in life explains about 7.1% of the variance in psychological well-being.

The current study's findings align with those of Demir et al. (2023), both emphasizing the positive correlationbetween meaning in life and psychological well-being in university students. While the current study indicated that meaning in life accounted for roughly 7.1% of the variance in well-being, Demir et al. (2023) observed a significantly greater effect, with meaning in life contributing to about 30% of the variance in psychological well-being and 23% in happiness. This indicates that the impact of meaning in life might vary significantly across different cultural or educational settings, as Demir et al.'s research centered on Turkish students, whereas the present study examined Kenyan students.

Moreover, the findings were supported by findings of Chan et al. (2022) who examined 536 university undergraduate students from Hong Kong, China, to determine the correlation between compassion, meaning in life, and different psychological factors. The study revealed significant correlations between meaning in life, flourishing, compassion, and resilience (PS < 0.001). The variables exhibited significant negative correlations with psychological distress (PS < 0.001). There was a positive correlation between being male and resilience (p < 0.05). Additionally, family income showed a positive correlation with flourishing and meaning in life (PS < 0.05) and a negative correlation with psychological distress (p < 0.01). Chan et al.'s (2022) findings suggest that psychological well-being is a complex concept, as previously noted. To achieve high levels of psychological well-being, an individual must experience qualities such as resilience and flourishing, along with family income rather than just personal income, as well as a reduction in psychological distress.

Both Demir et al. (2023) and Can et al. (2022) reveal significant correlations between meaning in life and psychological well-being. However, Chan et al. introduce additional variables such as resilience, compassion, and family income, which are absent from the current study. Their research reveals that a variety of factors, beyond just meaning in life, shape well-being, a finding that aligns with the current study's low R-value of 0.071on the influence of meaning in life and psychological well-being. This suggests that elements like resilience or flourishing may also significantly impact psychological well-being.

In addition, the findings of this study were consistent with the findings of Bano (2014) who conducted a study to evaluate the influence of meaning in life on psychological well-being and stress levels among 560 university students from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. The age range was 19 to 38 years M = 22.81, (SD = 2.71). The findings revealed a substantial impact of the level of meaning in life on both stress levels and psychological well-being. It accounted for 17% of the variation in positive psychological well-being and 19% of the variation in stress levels. According to the study, there was a correlation between the perception of meaning in life and reduced stress levels, as well as improved PWB among the students.The findings in Bano's study align with the current study's results (7.1%), highlighting a significant influence of MiL on PWB, albeit not strong enough.

Also, the findings of this study are in agreement with findings ofGarcía-Alandete (2014), who found the connection between meaning in life and psychological well-being among 180 undergraduates in Spain, with 138 women (76.7%) and 42 men (23.3%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 55, with a mean age of 22.91 and an SD of 6.71. The study found that meaning in life was a strong predictor of psychological well-being, explaining a significant amount of the variance in various aspects of well-being. It accounted for over 50% of the variance in general psychological well-being; over 40% of the variance in purpose in life, self-acceptance, and environmental mastery; over 20% of the variance in positive relationships and personal growth; and slightly less than 20% of the variance in autonomy. García-Alandete's study highlighted the significance of MiL in predicting PWB among undergraduates. This finding underscores the necessity of incorporating psychological concepts into academic curricula to facilitate students' self-discovery and enhance their sense of meaning and psychological well-being during their higher education experience.

On the other hand, the findings of this study were in disagreement with findings of Olasupo et al. (2017)who reported negative correlations between psychological well-being and factors of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression. The results revealed that psychological adjustment in female participants was strongly associated with depression (β = -.58, p<.01) and social dysfunction (β = -.21, p<.01). Psychological adjustment had a significant impact on anxiety (β = -.60, p<.01) and depression (β = -.60, p<.01) in male participants and also had a smaller effect on social dysfunction (β = -.11, p<.01). The study found that psychological well-being was negatively associated with anxiety (β = -.24, p<.01), depression (β = -.20, p<.01), and social dysfunction (β = -.10, p<.01). The study highlighted the significance of embracing change or life transitions to engage in meaningful experiences and ensure psychological well-being. The evaluation revealed that psychological adjustment played a crucial role in determining the mental well-being of both male and female students. The current study did not explicitly address psychological distress; however, MiL and PWB play a significant role in contributing to overall well-being. Olasupo and colleagues underscore the importance of psychological adjustment during life transitions, potentially explaining the current study's limited variance.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between meaning in life and psychological well-being was examined through correlation and regression analysis. The results indicated a clear and significant positive correlation, suggesting that students who experienced a greater sense of meaning in life generally exhibited improved psychological well-being. The regression analysis indicated that meaning in life served as a predictor of well-being. Provided the strength of the influence,

the analysis indicates that meaning in life alone is insufficient for enhancing well-being, and those additional elements, including coping strategies and social support, are also significant contributors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Targeted support programs are necessary for university students, particularly those who lack a clear sense of purpose, leading to emotional challenges such as dissatisfaction and anxiety. Universities could establish support programs that assist students in discovering their life purpose and values. These may consist of workshops centered on self-awareness, personal development, meaning, and mindful existence. Moreover, mentorship programs connect students with older peers or professionals to assist them in navigating personal and academic challenges.

Holistic mental health interventions are imperative in higher education institutions. Various factors, not just meaning in life, influence psychological well-being. Universities could implement a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the values and significance of life for their students. Encouraging the development of character and living a harmonious lifestyle that encompasses physical health, academic achievement, and social wellness. Another strategy is promoting extracurricular activities that enable students to discover new interests, build friendships, and improve their overall experience of university life. This includes incorporating elements of well-being into the curriculum by teaching students coping strategies, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness practices. As a result, students may find the university environment supportive and a positive environment for self-discovery.

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