

Meta-analysis of the Relationship between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-being: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This study utilized meta-analysis in research employing common measurement tools to more accurately understand the relationship between the two constructs and their potential moderators. In a meta-analysis including 51 empirical studies with a total of 35,351 participants, a significant correlation between meaning in life and subjective well-being was found. Moderation analysis revealed that the country/region significantly influenced the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being. This study supports the widely recognized positive relationship hypothesis between the two constructs and indicates that this relationship is moderated by culture, age, and gender. The confirmation of this relationship through meta-analysis allows future researchers to further explore the mechanisms underlying this relationship.

Keywords: Meta-Analysis, Meaning in Life, Subjective Well-Being, Life Satisfaction, Cultural Differences

Introduction

In recent years, due to a sense of life's meaninglessness, there have been frequent occurrences of suicide among Chinese adolescents, which has attracted high attention from the state and educational authorities. Over the past two decades, the meaning of life has been widely studied by psychologists (Newman et al., 2018). It is a core theme of positive psychology, regarded as a cornerstone of "happiness" and the "good life" (Heintzelman et al., 2014). Life meaning seems to be related to individuals' lifelong health and happiness. Many studies link life meaning with broad indicators of happiness; for instance, a high sense of life meaning encourages adolescents to engage in health-promoting behaviors and avoid risky behaviors such as obesity and eating disorders. Life meaning is also associated with delaying cognitive decline and promoting cognitive abilities in older adults, including a lower risk of Alzheimer's disease. Moreover, life meaning can mitigate the negative impact of stress on health. Individuals with higher levels of life meaning are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies under stress, whereas those with lower levels are less likely to do so (Park et al., 2017). Even in severe circumstances, life meaning can promote psychological

resilience and personal growth (Triplet et al., 2012). In various social and interactive domains, life meaning can improve interpersonal relationships. Those who perceive life as meaningful also find greater meaning in their work, thereby fostering greater feelings of happiness, engagement, and commitment. Hence, there is ample evidence to suggest that life meaning is closely associated with individuals' sense of happiness (Shoshani et al., 2017).

(一) Life Meaning and Subjective Well-Being

Life meaning refers to: (a) how individuals understand their lives, (b) how they identify and pursue goals, and (c) how they find intrinsic value or significance in life (Martela et al., 2016). Generally, life meaning comprises two dimensions: (a) presence of life meaning and (b) search for life meaning. The former involves the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as meaningful and significant, while the latter reflects the extent to which people engage in searching for life goals (Steger et al., 2006). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire is the most widely used tool for assessing these two dimensions.

Subjective well-being is "an individual's cognitive and affective evaluations of their entire life." Diener's model consists of three distinct components: (a) life satisfaction, (b) positive affect, and (c) negative affect (Diener et al., 2009). Life satisfaction is typically assessed using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), while positive and negative affect are usually evaluated using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988).

Many cross-cultural and age-group empirical studies have found a positive association between life meaning and subjective well-being. For instance, among North American adults, individuals with higher levels of life meaning are often healthier, happier, less distressed, and have longer lifespans (Hill et al., 2014). Research involving American college students and Hong Kong adolescents indicates a significant positive correlation between individuals' life meaning and subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2009). Two studies on Turkish university students found a positive correlation between the presence of life meaning and subjective well-being, while the pursuit of life meaning was negatively correlated with subjective well-being (Sahin et al., 2012). Studies involving Australian samples have confirmed this association. However, there are also some contradictory results. For example, some studies show a positive correlation between the pursuit of life meaning and life satisfaction and positive affect (Ching et al., 2015). One possible explanation is that the exact relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being depends on how individuals understand these concepts, and different measurement methods may subtly or significantly influence the results, making the nature of this relationship somewhat ambiguous. The focus of this study is to determine the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being through meta-analysis, focusing on commonly used measurement tools for life meaning and subjective well-being, and exploring whether cultural differences may act as potential moderating factors in their relationship.

(二) Cultural Differences

Culture refers to a set of values adopted by a group of people, defining the lifestyle of that particular group; cultural values transform into (a) norms, (b) beliefs, and (c) morals, then reflected in the laws or practices of society. Life meaning and culture are mutually constitutive; culture is based on meaning, and meaning exists and is transmitted within

culture (Chao et al., 2013). Life meaning and various forms of happiness may differ significantly across cultures. Hence, further research is necessary to explore how these presumed universal psychological processes are expressed and shaped in different cultural contexts (Wissing et al., 2014).

A theoretical perspective links levels of life meaning and subjective well-being with the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism, based on people's views of the self (Markus et al., 1991). In individualistic cultures, the self is more likely to be perceived as (a) independent, (b) unique, and (c) relatively immutable, leading to stronger motivation or tendencies to express and positively evaluate one's intrinsic attributes or traits (Ching et al., 2015). Consequently, individuals raised in individualistic cultures tend to enhance evaluations of their own attributes to increase positive affect or happiness. Meanwhile, assumptions about individualistic cultures suggest that they have (a) freedom to pursue personal goals and (b) choose their own life paths, hence they may perceive life as more meaningful than individuals in collectivist cultures. In collectivist cultures, self-perception is (a) relatively interdependent, (b) socially embedded, and (c) malleable, leading to stronger motivation or tendencies to express and positively evaluate collective or external attributes (Markus et al., 1991). People living in collectivist cultures are more likely to choose goals that come from important social groups, hence reflecting life trajectories determined by the needs and interests of surrounding significant others. For example, compared to North American culture, Chinese culture emphasizes maintaining internal harmony and responsibility to the group (Heine et al., 2001).

Previous research has explored the extent of variation in levels of life meaning and subjective well-being across different cultures. For instance, despite higher levels of life satisfaction in countries with higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life meaning is lower. This finding suggests that cultures providing material wealth promote subjective well-being but not life meaning, independent of widespread cultural patterns like individualism and collectivism. Individual studies indicate that life meaning levels among American college students are higher than those of Japanese students. Given that both countries have high GDP, such research findings once again draw attention to cultural variables. Despite varying levels of these variables, few studies have explored whether the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being is influenced by culture. Therefore, conducting meta-analysis is a reasonable approach to synthesize empirical studies from different countries to examine the moderating effects of culture.

(三) Current Research

This study examines the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being from a cross-cultural perspective. By expanding the scope of the database and search terms, more relevant studies are included to encompass a larger sample. Furthermore, previous meta-analyses included studies that used different scales to assess life meaning and subjective well-being, which may increase heterogeneity (Eisenberg et al., 1987). To increase reliability, this meta-analysis only includes studies that utilized (a) MLQ, (b) SWLS, and (c) PANAS as assessment tools for life meaning and subjective well-being. These measurement tools are widely used and accepted globally and are considered to have high reliability and validity by researchers from many countries (Temane et al., 2014). Therefore, the objective of this meta-analysis is to clarify the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being

through systematic review of the literature and precise measurement tools. Additionally, we also aim to identify moderating factors of this association, such as gender, age, etc.

Research Methodology

(一) Literature Search

This study utilized the following English databases: (a) Google Scholar, (b) PsycINFO, (c) Web of Science, (d) PsycArticles, and the Baidu Academic database for Chinese studies. We searched from the earliest possible date (2005) until December 2023, focusing on titles, abstracts, and keywords, using the following terms: "meaning in life*" or "life meaning*" or "meaning*" or "quality of life*" and "subjective well-being*" or "well-being*" or "life satisfaction*" or "subjective happiness*". No language or article type restrictions were applied.

1. Inclusion Criteria

The meta-analysis included studies that met the following criteria: 1. Observational studies, including longitudinal or cross-sectional designs, were eligible. 2. Studies reported effect estimates assessing the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being. 3. Consistency in the definition of life meaning and subjective well-being was required. 4. The measurement techniques used in each study should be consistent with (a) the measurement of life meaning using MLQ (Steger et al., 2006), (b) the measurement of life satisfaction using SWLS (Diener et al., 1985), and (c) the measurement of positive and negative affect using PANAS (Watson et al., 1988).

2. Data Extraction

Two graduate students independently used standardized data extraction forms to extract data. Out of the 51 studies, the two graduate students disagreed on 6 of them. Thus, the consistency of data extraction was calculated as $CA = 2 \times (51 - 6) / (51 + 51) = .882$. To ensure consistent data extraction, they discussed the data and reached a consensus. Extracted data included (a) correlation coefficients (r), (b) sample sizes, (c) country of origin (aggregated by continent or geographical region: East Asia vs. Europe vs. North America) (Jin et al., 2017), (d) age, (e) publication year, (f) proportion of females, and (g) measurement techniques. For instance, regarding country of origin, East Asia included (a) South Korea and (b) Japan.

3. Statistical Analysis

Effect size interpretation followed Cohen's standards, including (a) .2 indicating a small effect, (b) .5 indicating a moderate effect, and (c) .8 indicating a large effect. An α level of .05 was chosen to determine statistical significance. We conducted all analyses using Comprehensive Meta-Analysis Version 2.0 (Biostat Inc., USA). A random-effects model was employed to generalize results more broadly to the entire population. Heterogeneity of effect sizes was assessed using the Q statistic, where a significant p -value indicates differences in true effects among studies. The I^2 statistic was used to calculate the ratio of true heterogeneity to total variation, serving as an indicator of signal-to-noise ratio. When the I^2 value was substantial, researchers should consider conducting subgroup analyses or meta-regression.

4. Publication Bias

The analysis also considered the potential impact of publication bias in the study samples on the results. This assumption is based on the notion that studies with non-significant results may be less likely to be published, thus biasing the results of the meta-analysis (Anderson, P. A., 2010). To assess the influence of publication bias on the results, we used (a) funnel plots and (b) Egger's regression test (Egger et al., 1997).

Research Findings

(一) Relationship between Life Meaning and Subjective Well-Being

In this study, we conducted a meta-analysis by pooling data from 51 studies, comprising a total of 35,351 participants, to explore the association between life meaning and subjective well-being. Table 1 presents detailed information, including observed mean r values and p values. The random-effects model demonstrated a significant relationship between the existence of life meaning and sub-dimensions of subjective well-being, including life satisfaction ($r = .426$, 95% CI [.417, .435]), positive affect ($r = .362$, 95% CI [.347, .378]), and negative affect ($r = -.198$, 95% CI [-.216, -.181]), consistent with the majority of previous research findings. Regarding the relationship between the pursuit of life meaning and dimensions of subjective well-being, the results for life satisfaction ($r = -.001$, 95% CI [-.015, -.017]), positive affect ($r = .061$, 95% CI [-.041, .081]), and negative affect ($r = .006$, 95% CI [-.026, .014]) contradicted previous studies. The results of heterogeneity tests between samples were significant, indicating significant differences among individual samples. The I^2 statistic approached 100, indicating that most of the observed variance was genuine rather than spurious. Therefore, meta-regression analysis could help explain this variability.

(二) Moderation Analysis

We conducted moderation analysis to explore potential sources of heterogeneity. We used meta-regression analysis for two continuous moderator variables: (a) age and (b) proportion of females. For categorical moderator variables, we performed subgroup analyses using a continuous random-effects model (i.e., country of origin). Tables 3 and 4 display the results of the moderation analysis. As shown in Table 3, the moderation analysis revealed significant moderation only by country of origin in the relationship between the existence of life meaning and life satisfaction (QB (2) = 12.98, $p < .001$). In Table 4, we observed significant moderation by country of origin in the relationships between the pursuit of life meaning and life satisfaction (QB (2) = 61.03, $p < .001$), positive affect (QB (2) = 20.79, $p < .001$), and negative affect (QB (2) = 40.52, $p < .001$). Particularly, significant differences were found among East Asia, Europe, and North America regarding the correlation between the pursuit of life meaning and life satisfaction. While in East Asia, there was a significant positive correlation between the pursuit of life meaning and positive affect, in Europe and North America, there was a significant positive correlation between the pursuit of life meaning and negative affect.

We employed meta-regression analysis to examine whether continuous variables (i.e., age and proportion of females) moderated the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being. Table 5 shows that age had a significant moderating effect in the relationships between the existence of life meaning and life satisfaction (slope = .0082, $Q_{\text{model}} = 134.8$, $p < .001$) and between the existence of life meaning and positive affect (slope = .0037, $Q_{\text{model}} = 20.62$, $p < .001$). There was no significant moderating effect in the relationship between the existence of life meaning and negative affect (slope = -.001, $Q_{\text{model}} = 2.36$, p

= .124). The proportion of females had a significant moderating effect in the relationships between the existence of life meaning and life satisfaction (slope = .3108, $Q_{model} = 55.63$, $p < .001$) and between the existence of life meaning and negative affect (slope = -.342, $Q_{model} = 6.2$, $p < .013$). There was no significant moderating effect in the relationship between the existence of life meaning and positive affect (slope = .2655, $Q_{model} = 3.8$, $p < .051$). Table 6 displays significant moderating effects of age in the relationships between the pursuit of life meaning and life satisfaction (slope = -.01, $Q_{model} = 69.86$, $p < .001$), between the pursuit of life meaning and positive affect (slope = -.01, $Q_{model} = 11.13$, $p < .001$), and between the pursuit of life meaning and negative affect (slope = .028, $Q_{model} = 93.88$, $p < .001$). The proportion of females also had significant moderating effects in the relationships between the pursuit of life meaning and life satisfaction (slope = -1.09, $Q_{model} = 344$, $p < .001$), between the pursuit of life meaning and positive affect (slope = -.999, $Q_{model} = 45.62$, $p < .001$), and between the pursuit of life meaning and negative affect (slope = 1.15, $Q_{model} = 60.91$, $p < .001$).

(三) Publication Bias

We utilized (a) funnel plots, (b) Egger's regression test, and (c) the trim-and-fill method to assess potential publication bias. The funnel plots (Figure 1-6) indicated an asymmetric distribution of the combined effect sizes, suggesting potential publication bias in our meta-analysis. Egger's regression test revealed significant publication bias (Table 2). According to Egger et al., this study exhibited publication bias except for the relationship between the existence of life meaning and positive affect and negative affect. In conclusion, the results of the publication bias tests indicate that our meta-analysis may be influenced by publication bias. Therefore, we recommend interpreting our study results with caution.

Discussion

This meta-analysis utilized the most commonly used tools for measuring life meaning and subjective well-being to investigate the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being effect estimates. The results indicate a significant moderate positive correlation between the existence of life meaning and variables of subjective well-being. There are cultural differences in the relationship between life meaning and happiness.

The results of the meta-analysis suggest that life meaning is an important influencing factor of subjective well-being. Consistent with most previous research findings, we found a significant relationship between the existence of life meaning and life satisfaction and positive affect, with a negative correlation with negative affect. However, there are differences in the relationship between the pursuit of life meaning and positive and negative affect, which may be influenced by cultural differences. Steger et al. found that in the United States and Japan, there is a significant positive correlation between the existence of life meaning and subjective well-being, while there is a negative correlation between the pursuit of life meaning and subjective well-being (Steger et al., 2008). Similarly, two studies on Chinese samples reported either a positive or non-significant correlation between the pursuit of life meaning and subjective well-being. We obtained similar results in this meta-analysis. For example, the moderation analysis on the relationship between the existence of life meaning and subjective well-being showed significant differences in effect sizes between East Asia, Europe, and North America, with effect sizes higher in Europe (Fisher's $Z = .476$, $p < .001$) and North America (Fisher's $Z = .501$, $p < .001$) than in East Asia (Fisher's $Z = .375$, p

< .001) (including China, South Korea, and Japan). Possible reasons are that cultural differences in different regions lead to different understandings of the pursuit of life meaning, as individuals construct life meaning through dialogue with their culture (Chao et al., 2013). It is widely believed that East Asians have a higher tolerance for contradictions and a holistic thinking style (Peng et al., 1999). Europeans and Americans may view the pursuit of meaning as a painful process, while East Asians often equate seeking life meaning with pursuing happiness. Meanwhile, cross-cultural studies focus on comparing cultures of different countries from the perspectives of individualism and collectivism (Steger et al., 2008).

There are significant differences in cultural orientation between individualism and collectivism in East Asian and Western countries. East Asian culture typically emphasizes collectivism and interdependent self-construction, while Western culture advocates individualism and independent self-construction. However, the search for life meaning occurs within the cultural context. Therefore, activating the life meaning network in China or the United States may lead individuals with a Chinese-American cultural background to interpret situations differently and respond according to the corresponding behavioral scripts (Chao et al., 2013). In conclusion, our results indicate cultural differences in individual construction of life meaning.

(—) Moderating Effects of Gender and Age

We also investigated how a set of demographic characteristics influences the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being; the results revealed the influences of gender and age. As evident from Tables 5 and 6, the female proportion significantly moderated the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being. The meta-analysis results supported the previous assumption of gender moderating the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being, with this relationship being more pronounced among females. The analysis results demonstrated gender differences in levels of life meaning and subjective well-being, with females reporting significantly higher overall levels of life meaning compared to males, consistent with previous research findings (Morgan et al., 2013). When assessing levels of life meaning, females typically score higher than males in subjective well-being aspects such as personal growth and positive relationships. Additionally, Reker et al. found that females exhibit a stronger willingness to seek life meaning than males (Reker et al., 1987). With rapid social development, females may have enhanced awareness and become more independent as they juggle dual roles of career and family.

This study also found that age significantly moderates the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being. Table 5 shows that as the age of the sample increases, the moderating effect between the presence of life meaning and life satisfaction and positive emotions strengthens. One explanation is that older individuals have a more integrated, coherent, holistic, and consolidated concept of life meaning. Some studies (Reker et al., 2003) indicate that compared to younger individuals, older adults derive more life meaning from goals that transcend the self. Therefore, the life meaning of older adults tends to accumulate throughout the lifespan. For younger individuals, they derive more life meaning from satisfying basic needs and personal achievements. For example, they must face new situations and events during this developmental stage, and seeking life meaning contributes to the formation of adolescent identity, as young adults (a) strive to understand their lives

more comprehensively and (b) establish overarching goals distinct from previous developmental stages. They gradually begin to establish a more coherent worldview and are able to reflect on future goals (Reker et al., 2003). In comparison to older adults, young adults have not yet fully constructed their life meaning; instead, they are more inclined to focus more on the search for meaning in life.

(二) Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations to the meta-analysis in this study:

1. The meta-analysis primarily relies on cross-sectional studies, thus it cannot determine the longitudinal relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being.
2. Most studies reported the average age of the samples, with some reporting a wide age range. When considering the average age as the age for conducting moderation analysis, it becomes difficult to test for true age effects.
3. Although our meta-analysis results suggest that cultural differences play an important role in moderation analysis, due to the relatively small sample sizes, we had to aggregate by continent and broad geographic regions. Therefore, there is a possibility of losing important cultural and national differences in the aggregation. As research evidence accumulates, it will be possible to conduct more focused meta-analytic studies on country of origin.
4. This meta-analysis only focuses on the main measurement tools for life meaning and subjective well-being. While this approach increases clarity of the results, it does not allow for testing variations in these relationships due to measurement selection. Future research should consider using other measurement tools.

Conclusion

This meta-analysis assessed the relationship between life meaning and subjective well-being across different countries and regions. The results indicate that a high level of life meaning existence is consistently and significantly positively correlated with a high level of subjective well-being, while the pursuit of life meaning is associated with different responses in subjective well-being across different cultures. In East Asia, a high level of pursuit of life meaning is correlated with a high level of subjective well-being, whereas in Europe and North America, a high level of pursuit of life meaning is associated with a lower level of subjective well-being. Gender and age significantly influence these relationships, with older samples showing a more significant relationship between life meaning existence and life satisfaction.

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Table 1

Meta-analysis Results of the Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-being

	Subjective being	Well-	K	r	95%CI	Z	Q	I ²
Existence of Meaning in Life	Life Satisfaction		62	.426	[.417, .435]	82.60***	573.75***	89.37
	Positive Emotions		21	.362	[.347, .378]	41.875***	208.331***	90.40
	Negative Emotions		20	- .198	[-.216, .181]	- 21.586***	- 480.554***	- 96.05
Search for Meaning in Life	Life Satisfaction		40	- .001	[-.015, .017]	- 0.14	626.178***	93.77
	Positive Emotions		16	.061	[-.041, .081]	5.956***	130.012***	88.46
	Negative Emotions		16	- .006	[-.026, .014]	- .547	184.782***	91.88

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Publication Bias Test

	Egger's test	
Existence of Meaning in Life & Life Satisfaction	1.88	$p < .01$
Existence of Meaning in Life & Positive Emotions	-.18	$p = .91$
Existence of Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions	-2.33	$p = .35$
Search for Meaning in Life & Life Satisfaction	-4.34	$p < .001$
Search for Meaning in Life & Positive Emotions	-2.93	$p < .06$
Search for Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions	3.93	$p < .05$

Table 3
Moderation Analysis of the Relationship Between Existence of Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-being: By Country of Origin

Country of Origin	Existence of Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions				Existence of Meaning in Life & Positive Emotions				Existence of Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions			
	K	Fisher's Z	p	Q _B (df)	K	Fisher's Z	p	Q _B (df)	K	Fisher's Z	p	Q _B (df)
East Asia	15	.375	.001	12.98(2)***	11	.346	.001	0.804(2)	11	-.271	.001	2.798(2)
Europe	8	.476	.001		3	.241	.361		3	-.310	.001	
North America	25	.501	.001		4	.395	.001		3	-.209	.001	

Note. CI=confidence interval. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Moderation Analysis of the Relationship Between Search for Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-being: By Country of Origin

country of origin	Search for Meaning in Life & Life Satisfaction				Search for Meaning in Life & Positive Emotions				Search for Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions			
	K	Fisher's Z	p	Q _B (df)	K	Fisher's Z	p	Q _B (df)	K	Fisher's Z	p	Q _B (df)
East Asia	10	.170	.001	61.03(2)**	9	.083	.013	20.79(2)**	9	-.061	.011	40.52(2)**
Europe	6	-.217	.001		2	-.150	.003		2	.326	.003	
North America	17	-.171	.001		3	-.124	.010		3	.260	.001	

Note. CI=confidence interval. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

Table 5

Moderation Analysis of the Relationship between Existential Meaning of Life and Subjective Well-being: Age and Gender

	Existence of Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions			Existence of Meaning in Life & Positive Emotions			Existence of Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions		
	K	slope	Q _{model}	K	slope	Q _{model}	K	slope	Q _{model}
Age	45	.0082	134.8***	17	.0037	20.62***	16	.001	2.36
Gender	50	.3108	55.63***	20	.2655	3.80*	19	-.342	6.20**

Note. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

Table 6

Moderation Analysis of the Relationship between the Search for Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-being: Age and Gender

	Search for Meaning in Life & Life Satisfaction			Search for Meaning in Life & Positive Emotions			Search for Meaning in Life & Negative Emotions		
	K	slope	Q _{model}	K	slope	Q _{model}	K	slope	Q _{model}
Age	32	-.010	69.86***	13	-.010	11.13***	13	.028	93.88***
Gender	33	-1.09	344***	15	-.999	45.62***	15	1.15	60.91***

Note. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.