Historical Perspectives on the Meaning of Life: How College Students' Perceived Lack Reflects Broader Societal Trends

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This research paper examines both historical and contemporary perspectives on the concept of life's meaning and explores how these viewpoints contribute to the perceived lack of meaning among university students. Through an analysis of classical, religious, and modern philosophical frameworks, the paper establishes connections between historical insights and contemporary psychological and sociological theories. It identifies several factors that contribute to the perceived absence of meaning, including academic pressure, social media, and cultural transformations. The paper concludes by considering the wider societal implications of this issue and proposes potential strategies to foster a greater sense of purpose and meaning among students.

Keywords: Meaning of Life, College Students, Perceived Lack

Introduction

The "meaning of life" has long been a central question in human thought, explored across cultures and throughout history. This quest for meaning has evolved, influenced by ancient philosophies and subsequently shaped by modern theories, which have in turn affected human behaviour, societal structures, and cultural norms. Various theories regarding the purpose or meaning of life have emerged throughout history, with figures such as Socrates and Aristotle linking it to virtue, divinity, or the pursuit of happiness (Leach & Tartaglia, 2018). In contrast, existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert

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Camus challenged this tradition, asserting that life inherently lacks meaning, and that meaning is, in fact, created by individuals (Flynn, 2006). This historical development highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of the quest for meaning, set against the broader dynamics of society and culture.

In the context of the modern era, particularly among university students, the pursuit of meaning has assumed different dimensions. As individuals grow older and face increasing expectations regarding education and future careers, the profound questions of life come to the forefront for many students. The search for meaning within this demographic is not merely a personal struggle; it also serves as a reflection of broader societal trends (Smith & Snell, 2009). Economic instability, the rapid pace of technological advancements, and shifting cultural values have all contributed to the evolving perceptions of life's meaning. Understanding how university students perceive and navigate these challenges provides valuable insight into the collective psyche of this generation, shedding light on the societal shifts that shape their experiences and perspectives.

Recent studies suggest that university students often experience a perceived lack of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2008). These students may encounter feelings of inner emptiness or anxiety about their future, often feeling disconnected from traditional sources of meaning such as religion or community (Dogra et al., 2011). These underlying factors are multifaceted, influenced by a complex interplay of personal, cultural, and economic considerations. Such trends are not merely individual phenomena; they reflect broader societal issues, including the decline of religious affiliation, the rise of individualism, and the pervasive influence of social media. (Twenge & L.Terrell, 2017) argues that these social changes have transformed the construction of meaning and the nature of meaning experiences, particularly among young adults navigating the demands and uncertainties of modern life. This research paper is based on the following questions:

1. What historical and philosophical perspectives contemporary college students search for meaning in life?
2. How do various social trends contribute to the perceived lack of meaning among college students today?
3. How do various social trends, such as academic pressure, social media, and cultural shifts, shape the perceived lack of meaning among college students today?
4. How do college students perceive societal trends such as social media and economic pressures in relation to their sense of purpose?

Background and Significance

The search for meaning in life is increasingly pertinent in the current era of human development, characterised by rapid change and uncertainty. Recent studies have highlighted a growing sense of meaninglessness among young adults, driven by factors such as academic pressure, economic instability, and the pervasive influence of social media (Bhattacharya, 2011). These pressures are embedded within broader societal trends that diminish traditional religious and communal frameworks, which have historically provided individuals with a sense of identity and purpose. Given the critical developmental stage of college years, it is essential to explore the factors contributing to young adults' existential struggles. Research in this area not only sheds light on the psychological and sociological challenges faced by college students but also offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers on how to better support students in constructing a meaningful life. Such research is fundamental in fostering a more resilient, engaged, and purposeful generation, with far-reaching implications for both individual well-being and societal cohesion.

Literature Review

Classical Antiquity

In classical antiquity, the meaning of life was a central concern in the philosophical works of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Although each philosopher approached this question from different perspectives, their inquiries were united by the pursuit of the good life and virtue (Wilt et al., 2016). Socrates is famously known for his assertion that "the unexamined life is not worth living," emphasising the importance of self-reflection and the quest for wisdom as the highest human pursuit (Brown, 2002). For Socrates, the meaning of life was closely tied to the cultivation of the soul and the pursuit of moral excellence. Aristotle, in contrast, introduced the concept of eudaimonia, often translated as "flourishing" or "well-being." He argued that the ultimate purpose of life is to achieve eudaimonia through the practice of virtue in accordance with reason (Heinze, 2010). Aristotle's view of the good life was more holistic than Socrates', as he believed that both intellectual and practical virtues were essential for living a fulfilling life. For Aristotle, a life of virtue, guided by reason, was the key to achieving true happiness and fulfilment.

The relevance of ancient insights becomes evident in the ongoing debate about how ethics and morality contribute to personal fulfilment. Modern perspectives on life's meaning, when examined through the lens of classical ideals, suggest that purpose is not primarily derived from

external achievements, but rather from the inner cultivation of virtue and living ethically. (Kraut, 2021) argues that this timeless wisdom remains profoundly significant in today's context, where the role of education, character development, and the importance of self-reflection are key topics in discussions about what constitutes a meaningful life.

Religious Interpretations

Religious traditions have provided profound frameworks for interpreting the meaning of life. In Christianity, the meaning of life is closely associated with the will of God, faith, and the promise of eternal salvation through God's grace. A meaningful life in Christianity involves love, serving others, and establishing a relationship with God (Stump, 2010). These teachings have significantly influenced the development of Western societal norms, with many conceptions of morality, justice, and purpose tracing back to Christian ethics. In Islam, the meaning of life is centred on submission to the will of Allah, living according to the teachings of the Quran, and striving to attain both spiritual and moral perfection. The concept of Tawhid, the oneness of Allah, underpins the belief that life's purpose is to worship Allah and live in strict adherence to His divinely ordained laws. (Naṣr, 2002) notes that this perspective has deeply shaped the social and moral fabric of Muslim-majority societies, where both communal and individual responsibilities are often understood through the lens of religious obligations.

In contrast, Buddhism emphasises the transience of life and views enlightenment as the ultimate goal. The Buddha taught that life is characterised by suffering, which arises from desires and attachments. The path to meaning, therefore, lies in the cessation of suffering, achieved through the Eightfold Path. This path advocates for wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline as essential means to attain enlightenment (Gethin, 1998). Buddhist teachings have profoundly influenced societies where the practice is prevalent, promoting values such as compassion, mindfulness, and the pursuit of spiritual growth.

World religions offer diverse perspectives on the meaning of life; however, they all aim to guide individuals towards a sense of purpose and moral completeness. While differing in doctrine, they share an emphasis on spiritual growth, good conduct, and humanity's quest for self-identity within the universe. Despite their variances, religions provide interpretive frameworks to address life's challenges and experiences, often through concepts such as salvation, enlightenment, or moral virtue. This broader view suggests that religion functions as a role model for cultural patterns and personal identity, thereby shaping both individual and collective attitudes towards life's existential questions.

Enlightenment and Modern Philosophy

The Enlightenment era marked a significant shift in the philosophical debate on the meaning of life, with thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others challenging traditional religious views and emphasising reason, autonomy, and individualism. Kant argued that meaning in life is found through the pursuit of moral duty and the exercise of reason. He introduced the concept of the "categorical imperative," which asserts that individuals should act only according to principles that can be universally applied (Kant, 1909). For Kant, living a moral life in accordance with reason was the highest purpose of human existence.

In contrast, Friedrich Nietzsche decisively broke from both religious and Kantian perspectives when he famously declared, "God is dead." Nietzsche argued that in the absence of religious and moral absolutes, individuals are condemned to create their own meaning through acts of will, embracing the inherent difficulties of life. His concept of the Übermensch (Overman or Superman) portrays an individual who transcends societal norms in the creation of a unique purpose grounded in personal strength and creativity (Nietzsche, 2011). The Enlightenment, by shifting the understanding of life's meaning from religious to secular terms, has left a lasting impact on modern thought. The emphasis on reason, autonomy, and the rejection of absolute truths gave rise to existentialist and humanist visions that continue to shape contemporary debates about purpose and fulfilment. Today, the search for meaning is framed in terms of personal growth, autonomy, and the pursuit of individual goals, reflecting a legacy of the Enlightenment that challenges societal norms and promotes self-determination (Taylor, 1989).

Existentialism and Absurdism

Existentialism and absurdism are two philosophical movements that have profoundly shaped modern thought on the meaning of life, particularly in relation to existential dilemmas. Jean-Paul Sartre, a leading figure in existentialism, argued that life does not inherently possess meaning. Instead, he proposed that meaning is created by individuals through their personal choices and actions. His famous assertion, "existence precedes essence," suggests that human beings are born without a predefined purpose and must define their existence through freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 2007). Albert Camus, an influential absurdist, shared Sartre's view that life lacks intrinsic meaning. However, Camus focused on the absurdity of the human condition—the tension between the human desire for meaning and the indifferent, uncaring universe. He contended that rather than succumbing to despair, individuals should embrace the absurd and live passionately in revolt against it, thereby creating their own meaning in a purposeless world (Camus, 1955).

These ideas resonate strongly with contemporary college students who grapple with existential questions during a time of significant personal development. The transition to adulthood, often marked by academic pressures and career uncertainties, frequently sparks a search for meaning—one that traditional sources of authority, such as religion or cultural norms, may no longer address effectively. Existentialism and absurdism offer frameworks that validate the anxiety and uncertainty students experience, empowering them to navigate their lives and define their own sense of purpose (Yalom, 1980). The growing interest in existentialist literature and philosophy among young adults reflects a broader cultural shift towards individualism and self-determination, as students confront the complexities of modern life.

Psychological Perspectives

Psychologically, the search for meaning has been extensively researched, with one of the most influential contributions coming from Viktor Frankl. In his book "Man's Search for Meaning", Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, developed the theory of "logotherapy," which posits that the primary drive in life is not pleasure, as suggested by Freud, but the pursuit of meaning (Frankl, 1985). Frankl argued that even in the most challenging circumstances, individuals can find meaning through their attitudes, choices, and the values they uphold. This focus on meaning as a fundamental human need has had a profound impact on psychology, particularly in relation to existential crises and the reported difficulty some individuals experience in finding meaning in life.

Psychological theories on the meaning of life reflect broader societal changes, where traditional communal and religious structures, once key to collective meaning, became less influential. In societies shifting towards individualism and secularism, existentialist theories by Sartre and Frankl address how people create meaning in a purposeless world (Frankl, 1985). This moves from shared belief systems to individual meaning-making mirrors a trend of self-directed paths in the absence of universal frameworks. Absurdism, influenced by Camus, shows how society copes with searching for meaning in an indifferent universe, marking a collective response to the breakdown of unified cultural narratives (Baltzer-Jaray, 2013).

Research shows that in societies where traditional sources of meaning, such as religion and community, are rare, those who find personal meaning experience lower anxiety and depression. This suggests that the erosion of communal structures may have widespread psychological effects (Steger et al., 2006). As personal autonomy gains precedence over collective identity, social interventions and cultural practices are increasingly necessary to foster shared meaning within communities.

Creating environments for collective goal-setting, reflective deliberation, and value alignment could help preserve psychological health amid the decline of traditional social cohesion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Understanding these psychological perspectives is essential to address the challenges posed by the fragmentation of communal values and growing individualism.

Sociological Perspectives

Sociologically, meaning is shaped by societal structures and cultural changes, which help individuals understand their place in the world. Traditionally, meaning was derived from communal relationships, religious beliefs, and defined social roles (Griswold, 2012). However, modern societies, marked by technological advancement, globalization, and individualism, have changed how meaning is constructed and experienced (Giddens, 2023). This has led to a fragmentation of meaning, leaving individuals to navigate a complex and often contradictory set of values and expectations as religion and the nuclear family decline.

In modern societies, however, the concept of meaningfulness in life is often intrinsically linked to personal achievement and career success, as well as consumerism—pursuits that can create a sense of meaninglessness when they fail to meet deeper existential needs (Bauman, 2013). Additionally, with the rise of social media and the pervasive influence of digital culture, idealised images of success and fulfilment are constantly presented, often being unattainable or inauthentic. Research suggests that the curated, sometimes exaggerated portrayals of success on social media contribute to feelings of inadequacy and can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, particularly among young adults (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). This cultural shift has significantly heightened feelings of meaninglessness among young people, many of whom find themselves caught between societal pressures and their desires for authenticity and self-growth.

Modern societies differ from their traditional counterparts due to the strong emphasis on individualism and the plurality of choices available to each person. This, in turn, creates the challenge of finding a coherent sense of purpose within such freedom. According to sociological theories such as Existentialism and Absurdism, the fragmentation of meaning in modern life results from the breakdown of commonly shared narratives, coupled with the increasing complexity of social life (Elshtain, 2009). As a result, the modern search for meaning becomes more individualized and subjective, with each person tasked with constructing their own narrative of purpose and fulfilment.

Empirical Evidence

The cautionary tale of the pervasiveness of meaninglessness among many of today's college students can be seen as an offshoot of the broader historical evolution of perspectives on life's meaning. Throughout history, the quest for meaning has been a timeless preoccupation of humanity, with philosophers, from Socrates to Nietzsche, consistently grappling with questions about the fundamental nature of life. However, in the contemporary context, this search has become increasingly fragmented due to societal changes such as secularisation, individualism, and the influence of technology.

The sense of meaninglessness among college students has been a growing issue over the past few decades, with numerous studies documenting this trend (Pinjarkar & Mehrotra, 2014). Research indicates that a significant proportion of college students experience a lack of purpose, often manifesting through anxiety, feelings of depression, or apathy towards academics and social engagement (Pawar, 2018). For example, (Steger et al., 2006) found that nearly 40% of undergraduate students reported high levels of "meaninglessness," highlighting the extent of this issue within the student population. This lack of meaning is often attributed to various factors, including academic pressure, the influence of social media, and the challenges associated with the transition into adulthood. These factors mirror the heightened emphasis on self-determination and autonomy that characterised the Enlightenment era.

One of the major sources contributing to the meaninglessness experienced by college students is academic pressure. The heavy emphasis on grades, performance, and subsequent career prospects fosters a narrow, focus-oriented attitude toward education, where the intrinsic value of learning and personal growth is overshadowed by the pursuit of external validation (Lindholm, 2006). The resulting pressure from such expectations often exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and stress, further hindering students' ability to find meaningful purpose in their studies, which might otherwise provide them with a sense of direction (Kadison, 2004). This dynamic not only reflects the Enlightenment era's emphasis on rationality and personal success but also aligns with contemporary critiques of consumerism and materialism, as seen in modern philosophical analyses. Moreover, the competitive environment that characterises most learning institutions isolates students, reducing opportunities for valuable social connections and collaborative learning that could foster a stronger sense of purpose.

Social media also plays a significant role in shaping students' sense of meaning and purpose. The pervasive influence of social media platforms provokes feelings of inadequacy and comparison, as students are bombarded with idealised images of success and happiness (Perloff, 2014). A study by (Twenge & Campbell, 2018) demonstrated that social

media use is linked to high levels of anxiety and depression in young adults. They argue that this is partly due to the constant pressure to project a curated, perfect version of oneself online. Students may struggle to develop a genuine sense of meaning in their lives when the "comparison culture" promoted by social media undermines self-esteem. This situation parallels the existential and absurdist perspectives of the 20th century, where the absence of a unifying narrative or absolute truths leaves individuals grappling with the complexities of an ever-changing world.

Comparison with Broader Societal Trends

The perceived lack of meaning experienced by college students reflects broader societal trends, most notably the rise of individualism and the secularisation of contemporary society. Many of the challenges students face today mirror those confronting society as a whole, where traditional sources of meaning—such as religion, community, and family—have become less central in people's lives (Carr & Hayes, 2015). As society shifts towards a more individualistic and consumer-driven culture, the collective narratives that once provided purpose and a sense of belonging have become fragmented, leaving individuals to independently construct meaning in their lives (Bauman, 2013).

These societal changes are directly linked to the historical perspectives discussed earlier, where traditional frameworks for understanding meaning gradually gave way to more secular, individualistic approaches. In this context, the existentialist and absurdist emphasis on the individual's responsibility for creating meaning in an indifferent universe resonates strongly with the experiences of modern college students (Flynn, 2006). This responsibility can feel overwhelming, particularly in a society that presents endless options yet offers little guidance on how to navigate them. A common outcome is paralysis or disorientation, as students struggle to find a stable foundation upon which to base their identity and purpose (Elshtain, 2009). This modern emphasis on individualistic achievement and self-determination, when compared to more communal and spiritually oriented approaches to meaning in historical contexts, can lead to feelings of isolation and meaninglessness. This is especially true when external achievements fail to provide lasting fulfilment (Deb, 2017). While this issue is particularly relevant to college students, it carries broader societal implications, as traditional sources of meaning continue to weaken, while new and often fragile sources take their place.

Cultural and Economic Influences

The emerging cultural shifts, particularly consumerism, have played a significant role in changing how college students approach the question of

meaning in their lives. In a consumer society, high material achievement and consumption are often portrayed as paths to happiness and fulfilment. However, focusing on material goods can lead to a sense of emptiness, as satisfaction from such goods is often fleeting. (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) found that individuals who prioritise extrinsic goals—such as material and social success—over intrinsic goals, like personal growth and relationships, experience lower levels of life satisfaction and meaning. For many college students, constantly bombarded by the message that success equals material wealth, this narrative can contribute to feelings of disillusionment and purposelessness.

Economic factors also influence students' perception of meaning. The insecurity of employment and rising education costs have raised concerns about the future, further amplifying questions of life's meaning. Many incoming freshmen expect higher education to lead to secure, high-paying jobs, but the reality is often more complex and uncertain. With volatile and competitive job markets, the need for economic survival can cause students to narrow their focus to career-driven objectives, often at the expense of broader, more holistic goals. This narrow focus on financial stability can rob students of the time and energy needed for personal reflection and growth, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and a deeper sense of meaninglessness (Arnett, 2014).

Additionally, the burden of student debt compounds these pressures. The need to repay student loans may limit career choices after graduation, forcing students into jobs that may not align with their passions or values. This disconnects between career paths and personal purpose can lead to long-term dissatisfaction and a continuous struggle to find meaning throughout life. The literature review shows that the search for meaning among college students is profoundly shaped by historical philosophical views and modern social trends. The weakening of traditional frameworks, such as religion and close-knit communities, in favour of secular and individualistic societies, contributes to the void of meaning felt by students. Academic pressure, social media influence, and economic insecurity exacerbate this sense of meaninglessness. The literature gap highlights the need for further research to develop effective interventions that help students cultivate a coherent sense of purpose, addressing the challenges of modern society and reducing feelings of existential void.

Methodology

Systematic Literature Review

The present study reviewed the literature on meaning in life among college students using a systematic literature review (SLR). An SLR is a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method of reviewing existing

literature, providing a comprehensive overview of current evidence. This approach helps identify gaps in the literature and suggests directions for future research (Tranfield et al., 2003). By employing a structured research strategy, defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, and utilising the PRISMA framework, the review ensures a thorough and rigorous analysis of the relevant literature.

Research Strategy

The research design involves identifying and reviewing relevant literature on several key factors that contribute to the perceived lack of meaning among college students (See Table 1). These factors include the meaning of life, existential crises, the effects of social media, academic stressors, and the influence of cultural and economic conditions. This comprehensive literature review is crucial for gathering data on how these elements affect college students' sense of purpose. It also explores how historical and contemporary perspectives, including philosophical and societal trends, shape students' search for meaning in the modern world.

Table 1

Keywords.

Keywords	Description
Meaning of Life	Concepts and theories related to the meaning or purpose of life across historical and modern contexts.
College Students	Population focus on university or college students.
Existentialism	Philosophical movement emphasizing individual existence, freedom, and choice.
Societal Trends	Current social dynamics such as social media, economic pressures, and cultural shifts.
Historical Perspectives	Classical and ancient philosophical views, including those from Enlightenment thinkers.
Modern Perspectives	Contemporary philosophical approaches, including existentialist and absurdist views.

The data sources for the research included electronic databases and journals such as JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar (See Table 2). To ensure the credibility and reliability of the data, only peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and books were included in the review. This approach guarantees that the information gathered is both authoritative and relevant, providing a solid foundation for understanding the search for meaning among college students.

Table 2

Electronic Data and Journals Selection.

Data Source	Types of Data Considered	Criteria for Inclusion

JSTOR	Peer-Reviewed Articles, Books	Scholarly Credibility, Relevance to Topic
PubMed	Peer-Reviewed Articles, Conference paper	Scholarly Credibility, Relevance to Topic
Scopus	Peer-Reviewed Articles, Books	Indexed in Scopus, Scholarly Credibility
Google Scholar	Peer-Reviewed Articles, Books, Conference Papers	Broad Coverage, Relevance to Topic

The Table 3 below demonstrates the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Criteria Type	Details
Inclusion	Studies published in peer-reviewed journals
	Articles and papers related to the meaning of life, existential crises, social influences, and college students
	Publications in English
	Studies from 2000 to the present
Exclusion	Non-peer-reviewed articles
	Publications not related to the research topic
	Articles without full text available
	Studies published before 2000 (unless historically significant)

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was used to ensure a structured and transparent review process. The stages are outlined in Table 4, which presents a clear depiction of the steps taken during the literature review, from identification of relevant studies to the final selection and analysis. The use of PRISMA ensures that the review adheres to high standards of rigor and reproducibility, providing a reliable and comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature on the search for meaning among college students.

Table 4

PRISMA Framework.

Stage	Description
Identification	All relevant studies were identified through database searches using the specified keywords.
Screening	Titles and abstracts were screened to exclude irrelevant studies.
Eligibility	Full-text articles were assessed for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria.
Inclusion	Studies that met the criteria were included in the final review.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction was carried out alongside study selection, summarising study objectives, research design, sample size, key findings, and limitations. The extracted information was organised using specific criteria: time periods (e.g., studies before and after 2000) and intensity of

findings (e.g., strong, moderate, or weak evidence for particular trends). This categorisation revealed trends, patterns, and relationships in the literature, highlighting gaps and inconsistencies. The specific categories were defined as follows:

1. Time-Based Categories: Studies were grouped by time frames to track shifts in perspectives on the meaning of life among college students, identifying changes or emerging themes over periods.
2. Intensity-Based Categories: Findings were classified by the strength of evidence. Studies with statistically significant or prominent results were labelled as 'strong evidence,' while less conclusive or anecdotal findings were categorised as 'moderate' or 'weak evidence.'

Steps for Handling Material

1. Identification and Selection: Relevant studies were identified through a comprehensive search using keywords and screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria.
2. Data Extraction: Key information (objectives, methods, findings, limitations) was recorded in a standardized form.
3. Categorization: Data was sorted by time, intensity, and thematic relevance to assign each study to its appropriate category.
4. Synthesis: A narrative synthesis was conducted by summarising and comparing findings across categories to answer research questions, identifying gaps and consensus.
5. Validation and Review: Categorised data was reviewed to ensure consistency, comprehensiveness, and to highlight areas with scant or conflicting evidence.

This systematic synthesis approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, clearly identifying gaps and inconsistencies in the existing literature.

Limitations of the Systematic Review

Although the SLR represents one of the most comprehensive and systematic methods for reviewing the literature, several limitations must be acknowledged. By relying on existing studies, the quality and scope of the available research significantly influence the outcomes of the review. Furthermore, the exclusion of studies published in languages other than English, as well as the omission of grey literature, introduces the potential for bias in the findings. These sources of information should be incorporated in future research to provide a more thorough and balanced overview of the topic.

Results and Discussion

Existential Crises and Meaninglessness in College Students

Several studies have highlighted the prevalence of existential crises among college students, where confusion, anxiety, and questioning about the purpose of life often take precedence over the pursuit of meaning. For example, (Steger et al., 2006) found that approximately 40% of undergraduate students reported experiencing existential crises, marked by profound self-doubt and a perceived lack of direction in life. Similarly, research by (Pinjarkar & Mehrotra, 2014) revealed a significant portion of students grappling with existential questions, such as their role in the world and the purpose of their lives. These crises can be understood through the lens of existentialist and absurdist philosophies, which suggest pathways for resolution. Thinkers like Sartre and Camus emphasise that, in an apparently indifferent world, individuals must create their own meaning. These perspectives offer valuable insights for today's students, as they navigate complex issues related to identity and purpose within an increasingly secular and individualistic society.

Impact of Academic Pressure

Research indicates that while a certain level of academic pressure may initially provide students with a sense of purpose or direction, excessive stress often diminishes their overall sense of meaning in life. (Lindholm, 2006) and (Kadison, 2004) suggest that an intense focus on grades and career success frequently eclipses the intrinsic value of learning, leading to heightened stress and a sense of disorientation. This dynamic reflects the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and individual achievement, where external validation becomes prioritised over personal growth and fulfilment. Moreover, the overwhelming pressure to meet high academic expectations can reduce opportunities for authentic social interactions and participation in group activities, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and a lack of meaningful connections.

Social Media and Comparison Culture

Research shows that social media significantly undermines students' sense of meaning by cultivating a culture of constant comparison and self-evaluation. (Twenge & Campbell, 2018) and (Perloff, 2014) demonstrate how students are prone to assess their self-worth by comparing their lives to carefully curated images of success shared on social media, thereby perpetuating a culture of comparison. This behaviour aligns with the logic of traditional sources of meaning, such as religion and community, which, according to contemporary sociologists like (Bauman, 2013) and (Giddens, 2023), have become increasingly fragmented. In the face of this fragmentation, individuals are left with persistent feelings of inadequacy, making it more difficult to maintain a continuous sense of direction and purpose.

On the other hand, educational and psychological interventions can play a crucial role in mitigating these effects. Promoting digital literacy and critical thinking may help students recognise the curated nature of content on social media, which could, in turn, reduce its negative impact on self-esteem. Additionally, encouraging offline connections and activities that foster self-reflection, mindfulness, and community engagement could support students in cultivating a more grounded sense of meaning and purpose, independent of social media comparisons.

Cultural and Economic Influences on Meaning

The studies indicate that cultural and economic factors, such as consumerism and economic uncertainty, significantly contribute to feelings of disillusionment and aimlessness among students in their search for meaning. (Arnett, 2014) and (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) highlight how these factors exacerbate feelings of confusion and lack of direction. Furthermore, students whose personal goals and interests' conflict with the pressures to secure financially rewarding careers often experience lasting frustration due to this internal conflict. As society becomes increasingly individualised and secularised, it also witnesses the erosion of traditional metanarratives of meaning. This tension—between the outward drive for achievement and the inward desire for fulfilment—mirrors a broader cultural conflict.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to promote alternative narratives of success and fulfilment. Encouraging students to pursue intrinsic goals, such as personal growth, creativity, and community engagement, can help counterbalance the overwhelming pressures of consumerism and economic success. Additionally, universities and educators can play a pivotal role by offering support through mentorship programmes, workshops on values-based decision-making, and career services that emphasise alignment between personal values and professional aspirations. Furthermore, creating environments that prioritise well-being, resilience, and purpose-driven education will empower students to navigate the cultural and economic pressures they face more effectively.

This research, conducted through a thorough analysis of the available literature, reveals that the sense of purposelessness experienced by college students is deeply rooted in both historical philosophical perspectives and contemporary social trends. The existential crises that students face today are not entirely new but are rather modern manifestations of age-old philosophical dilemmas. Consequently, it

becomes increasingly crucial to implement targeted interventions to help students develop a strong sense of purpose, particularly in a context that is continually evolving and complicated by academic expectations, social media influences, and financial pressures. These findings underscore the urgent need to revisit societal values and educational methodologies, enabling students to find deeper meaning in their lives.

Limitations

While the SLR provides a comprehensive overview of research on the meaning of life among college students, there are several limitations to consider. This study primarily relies on secondary data from existing literature, meaning the results are contingent on the quality and scope of the studies published on this topic. The reliance on published studies inherently introduces potential bias, as the selected literature may reflect specific perspectives or theoretical frameworks that dominate the field. Additionally, the SLR was limited to studies published in English and indexed in preselected databases such as JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. This restriction means that significant research published in non-English languages or outside of these databases may have been overlooked. Consequently, valuable insights from non-Western contexts or more obscure publications may have been missed. As this is a qualitative review, the findings are interpretive and not directly generalisable to a broader population. The PRISMA framework provides a structured approach to reviewing literature in a transparent and reproducible manner, but data synthesis is still influenced by the subjective interpretation of the reviewer. Therefore, different researchers, using the same evidence base, may arrive at different conclusions. The review predominantly draws from the Western philosophical and cultural traditions, and as such, the findings may not be applicable across all cultural contexts. Experiences and perceptions of college students in non-Western societies may differ significantly, and the conclusions drawn from this review may not fully reflect those diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

This paper explored the meaning of life and its relevance to college students, drawing on both historical and contemporary perspectives. It highlighted how philosophies from Socrates, Aristotle, existentialism, and absurdism shape students' search for meaning today, emphasising individual responsibility and self-reflection. The study identified academic

pressures, social media, and societal trends like individualism and secularization as key factors contributing to students' sense of meaninglessness. These factors undermine traditional sources of meaning, leaving students increasingly disconnected. It suggests that promoting digital literacy, intrinsic goals, and mentorship programs can help counter these effects. Further research is needed to develop intervention strategies that enhance students' sense of purpose, positively impacting both individual well-being and broader societal cohesion.

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