

Meaning in Life and Life Orientation as Predictors of Self-Esteem Among First-Year Undergraduate Students of a Nigerian University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine meaning in life and life orientation as predictors of self-esteem among first-year undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used in conducting the study. 192 students comprising 104 males and 88 females whose ages ranged between 17 and 27 years ($M = 17.75$, $SD = 3.01$) participated. Participants responded to items of a structured questionnaire containing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the Life Orientation Test-Revised, and demographic information. The results showed significant correlations between self-esteem, presence of meaning, optimism, and pessimism. Presence of meaning, search for meaning, optimism, and pessimism significantly predicted self-esteem ($R^2 = .24$; $F(4, 185) = 13.10$; $p < .01$). The results also revealed that female students reported higher self-esteem than male students ($t(184) = -3.03$, $p < .01$). The mental well-being of students can be enhanced if procedures like counselling and orientation programs address issues on life meaning and if general future outcome expectations are incorporated into the standard procedure for students in their freshman year.

Introduction

This study investigated the relationship between self-esteem and variables associated with the experience of meaning in life. This introduction analyzes the concepts that are central to this study, including self-esteem, meaning in life, search for meaning, life orientation, optimism, and pessimism. The hypotheses for the study are formulated at the end of this introductory section, followed by accounts of the research method, results, and discussion of the broader meaning of the results and implications for further research.

Self-Esteem

A person's self-esteem influences the way they feel about themselves, how they relate with others, and their disposition towards tasks, challenges, success, and failure. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to be happier, more emotionally stable, more confident, and better at handling difficult tasks and situations. Conversely, however, due to the unfavorable attitude in terms of the low value placed on the self, individuals with low self-esteem tend to become timid and fragile in challenging situations, are more susceptible to peer-pressure, and are poorer at interpersonal and social relationships.

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Self-esteem has attracted the interest of many researchers in the past and remains one of the most studied constructs in the domain of social psychology. It has been defined and described in various ways, converging in a definition of self-esteem as an attitude (favorable or unfavorable) an individual holds towards the self, based on the evaluation of one's worth (Agberotimi, 2010).

According to Kohn (1994), self-esteem refers to the self-evaluation of worthiness that can be inferred from the attitude a person holds toward him/herself. Self-esteem is also described as an attitude towards the self which is connected to personal beliefs about skills, abilities, social relationships, and future outcomes (Farid & Akhtar, 2013). This suggests that rather than the actual or real and objective judgment of one's ability and worth, self-esteem is a belief and attitude one holds towards the self in terms of personal characteristics and abilities. Meanwhile, Woolfolk (2004) has described self-esteem as the value placed on one's characteristics, abilities, and behaviors.

Olea, Bernal, and Hernandez (2012) posited that high self-esteem students were more positive, less anxious, more independent, less likely to engage in drugs and alcohol use, more confident and persistent at handling difficult tasks, happier and more sociable, and ultimately tend to do better in academics than their peers with lower levels of self-esteem. On the other hand, students with low self-esteem reported feeling inferior, are more likely to avoid difficult situations and challenges, are more submissive, and possess little or no self-respect or confidence.

In describing the identity of an individual, self-concept and self-esteem are often used interchangeably. However, Woolfolk (2004) differentiated the two distinct concepts by noting that self-concept is a cognitive structure while self-esteem is an affective reaction about the self. According to Erikson (1968), self-esteem is related to identity formation and is developed through our interaction with the environment. Each time the individual successfully masters a developmental task, there is a corresponding upward appraisal of one's feeling of worth.

One important variable affecting self-esteem is gender difference (Rathi & Rastogi, 2007). According to Malik and Sadia (2013), male university students were found to express higher overall self-esteem when compared with their female counterparts. Similarly, a meta-analysis of global self-esteem revealed that males possessed slightly higher self-esteem than females (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999).

A meta-analysis to examine gender differences on domain-specific self-esteem also showed that men had significantly higher scores in the following self-esteem domains compared to women: physical appearance, athletics, and personal self-satisfaction (Gentile, Grabe, Dolan-Pascoe, Wells, & Maitino, 2009). Women displayed superiority over men on behavioral conduct and moral-ethical self-esteem. No significant gender differences appeared in self-esteem related to the domains of academic performance, social acceptance, family, and affect. Ahmad, Imran, Khanam, and Riaz (2013) also investigated gender differences in domain-specific self-esteem of adolescents and they found that males had significantly higher personal and social self-esteem, while females had higher academic self-esteem. Both genders did not differ significantly on overall self-esteem.

Studies of the relationship between self-esteem and performance have shown that performance can be predicted by self-esteem, based on the positive relationship established between the two. For instance, Covington (1989) purported that when the self-esteem of students was increased, there was a corresponding improvement in their academic performance. Similarly, it has been claimed that self-esteem is associated with job success, interpersonal

compatibility, happiness, health, and quality of life (Evans, 1997; Malik & Sadia, 2013; Redenbach, 1991).

Many studies of factors that influence and predict the self-esteem of students have largely been tilted towards issues like demographic factors, the economic well-being of the students and parents, and other factors such as social class. Self-esteem has also been studied from the direction of predicting positive constructs like happiness, hope, optimism, health, and life satisfaction. The present study, however, aims to evaluate if self-esteem is predicted by meaning and life orientation among first-year undergraduate students in Nigeria.

Meaning-in-Life

There has been a steady growth in research on meaning in life that is richly established in positive psychology. Positive psychology has been defined as “the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 630).

Meaning in life has been generally described as having a goal or living a purposeful life (Baumeister, 1991). According to Reker, Peacock, and Wong (1987), meaning is defined as making sense, order, and coherence out of one’s life, and having purposes and goals which drive one in life. Wong (1998) also defined meaning as an “individually constructed, culturally based cognitive system that influences an individual’s choice of activities and goals, and endows life with a sense of purpose, personal worth, and fulfillment” (p. 407). This suggests that the presence of meaning in life is important in well-being and the eventual translation to self-worth and fulfillment. According to Frankl (1959), one of the means by which people find meaning in life is through what they do—what they contribute to life, which in turn contributes to their general well-being.

Research into the essence of meaning in life in the past decades has indicated that possessing a sense of meaning in life is one of the core components of an individual’s overall mental health and a strong indicator of psychological well-being (Debats, 1996). On the other hand, lack of meaning in life has been associated with psychopathology, including depression, substance abuse, and suicidality (Heisal & Flett, 2004; Mascaro & Rosen, 2008). Self-esteem, which is an affective component of the value one places on the self, is also one indicator of mental health and invariably tends to be influenced by one’s sense of meaning in life.

Recent studies have suggested that, during adolescence, females tend to score higher than males on the construct of personal meaning and purpose-driven activities (Beutel & Marini, 1995). Furthermore, Wong (1998) also reported that females scored higher than males on personal meaning profiles.

Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, and Otake (2008) investigated cultural differences and the relationship between search for meaning and presence of meaning among Japanese and American young adults. They found a significant positive relationship between presence of meaning and search for meaning in life among a population of young Japanese, as contrasted to the negative relationship found among the American population. The authors also concluded that the search for meaning is likely to be influenced by culture.

Life Orientation: Optimism vs. Pessimism

Life orientation is the study of the self in relation to others and society. It is the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, and physical growth and development of an individual and the way in which these dimensions relate to each other and express themselves in everyday life. Life orientation focuses on how an individual views the society and their expectations or outcomes expected from the society or their environment. Life orientation can be looked at in terms of how optimistic or pessimistic an individual can be.

The most accepted description of optimism-pessimism comes from researchers Scheier and Carver (1985), whose definition of optimism-pessimism specifically targeted outcome expectancies. According to the authors, optimism and pessimism are the opposite ends of the same construct, optimism. However, later research concluded that optimism and pessimism are separate constructs, and the life orientation measure consists of independent factors as optimism and pessimism (e.g., Kubzansky, Kubzansky, & Maselko, 2004; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). Optimism corresponds to an attitude of expecting positive consequences and more good events to occur than bad ones. Various studies have established a positive correlation between optimism and positive psychological outcomes, whereas pessimism has been found to relate to greater negative psychological outcomes (Andersson, 1996; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001).

The relationship between self-esteem and optimism has also been recently studied. A positive correlation between the two constructs has been consistently reported by some authors (Pacico, Zanon, Bastianello, & Hutz, 2013; Wong & Lim, 2009). Heinonen, Rääkkönen, and Keltikangas-Järvinen (2005) argued that the relationship between self-esteem and optimism is a result of the potential role of optimism in raising the possibility of successful experiences. They further opined that high self-esteem individuals tend to get better deals in life probably because of the way they see themselves and the positive expectations they usually hold.

Hypotheses of the Current Study

Many studies on factors that influence and predict self-esteem have focused on demographic factors such as social-economic status, gender, and ethnic background (e.g., Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978). However, the focus of the present study was to investigate meaning in life and life orientation as predictors of self-esteem among first-year students in a Nigerian university. Specifically, the following hypotheses were examined: (1) There will be positive correlations between self-esteem and presence of meaning in life, search for meaning, and optimism and a negative correlation between self-esteem and pessimism; (2) levels of self-esteem can be predicted based on measures of meaning in life, search for meaning, optimism, and pessimism; (3) there will be significant gender differences in the self-esteem of first-year undergraduate students; (4) there will be a significant gender difference in presence of meaning in life of first-year undergraduate students; and (5) there will be a significant gender difference in the optimism of first-year undergraduate students.

Method

Design

The study followed a descriptive design. The dependent variable was self-esteem, while presence of meaning in life, search for meaning in life, optimism, pessimism, and gender constituted the independent variables.

Setting

The study was conducted in one of Nigeria's foremost federal universities, The University of Ibadan, attended by students from different parts of the country. Nigeria is a federal republic with the largest number of citizens in Western Africa. The geographical area of the country covers 923,768 sq. km/356,669 sq. mi. The country's official name is Federal Republic of Nigeria with Abuja as the Federal Capital Territory, and includes 36 states across different parts of the country. According to the National Population Commission (2008) estimate, Nigeria has a population of 138,283,240. Over 250 different ethnic groups occupy the country with Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbos as the majority (71%) and the other groups being 29% of the total population. According to the estimate, 50% of the population are Muslims, 40% are Christians, while the remaining 10% are of indigenous beliefs. The country's official language is English with different indigenous languages like Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo.

Participants

192 first-year undergraduate students in the faculty of social sciences at the University of Ibadan participated in the study. They were selected using a simple random sampling approach. The participants comprised 104 (54.2%) males and 88 (45.8%) females with ages ranging between 16 and 27 years and a mean age of 17.75 years ($SD = 3.01$). 140 (72.9%) were Christians and 52 (27.1%) were Muslims.

Instruments

A structured questionnaire format was used to collect data in the present study. The questionnaire was made up of four sections.

Section one contained information on demographic variables, including the gender, age, and religion of respondents.

Section two consisted of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This is a 10-item Likert scale with items answered on a four-point scale—from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale is comprised of statements dealing with general feelings and evaluations individuals hold about themselves. Items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Scores could range from 10 to 40, with higher score reflecting higher self-esteem.

Section three consists of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. This is a 10-item questionnaire developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006), designed to measure two dimensions of meaning in life: (1) presence of meaning (how much respondents feel their lives have meaning), and (2) search for meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and

understanding in their lives). Items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true); thus, scores could range from 7 to 35 on each subscale. Both subscales (search and presence) have been found to be internally consistent, with the alpha coefficient ranging between 0.82 and 0.88 (Steger et al., 2006).

Section four includes the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R). The LOT-R was designed by Scheier et al. (1994) to assess individual differences in generalized optimism versus pessimism. The revised scale was constructed to eliminate two items from the original scale, which dealt more with coping style than with positive expectations for future outcomes. The LOT-R is a 10-item measure of optimism versus pessimism. Of the 10 items, 3 items (1, 4 and 10) measure optimism, 3 items (3, 7, and 9) measure pessimism, and 4 items (2, 5, 6, and 8) serve as fillers. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = "I disagree a lot", 4 = "I agree a lot"). Scheier et al. (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .78. Test-retest reliability correlations ranged from .56 to .79. The correlation between the revised and original scale is .95.

Procedure

Permission was taken from the relevant authority of the faculty to conduct the study among first-year students. 50 students were randomly selected from each of the five departments of Economics, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Geography. With the help of the departmental secretary, the matriculation number of the students were balloted and students whose numbers were randomly selected were identified in their various classrooms. 250 students were invited for participation in the survey, though 37 declined. Of the 213 questionnaires that were administered, 192 were found usable for data entry and analysis. Data was collected over a period of four weeks. The researchers also assured confidentiality of the responses provided. The data collected was subjected to the Statistical Package for Social Scientist version 20. Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and independent sample t-test analyses were used to analyze the hypotheses.

Results

Hypothesis one stated that there would be significant relationships between the predictor variables and the dependent variable. The hypothesis was tested with Pearson correlation analysis. The obtained result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Correlations Among the Variables of Study (n = 192)

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1	Self-esteem	22.48	4.12	-				
2	Presence of meaning	27.14	6.51	.37**	-			
3	Search for meaning	21.39	8.13	-.06	.20**	-		
4	Optimism	10.21	2.08	.31**	.20**	.00	-	
5	Pessimism	8.74	3.02	-.24**	-.08	-.05	-.19**	-

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

The results presented in Table 1 show the correlations between predictor variables and the dependent variable. A significant positive relationship exists between presence of meaning in life and self-esteem ($r = .37; p < .01$), implying that students with presence of meaning in life will also report high self-esteem. There was also a significant positive relationship between optimism and self-esteem ($r = .31; p < .01$), suggesting that students who have general positive disposition towards life therefore expect that positive things will happen to them in the future and also reported higher levels of self-esteem. Results further revealed a significant negative relationship between pessimism and self-esteem ($r = -.24; p < .01$). This implies that students who are high in general expectation of negative events happening in the future also expressed low self-esteem. However, there was no significant relationship between search for meaning in life and self-esteem ($r = -.06; p > .05$), indicating that self-esteem of students is not significantly related to their search for meaning in life. The correlational analysis also revealed a significant positive relationship between presence of meaning in life and search for meaning ($r = .20; p < .01$) among Nigerian first-year university students.

The second hypothesis stated that presence of meaning, search for meaning, optimism, and pessimism would significantly predict the self-esteem of first-year undergraduate students. This was tested with a simple multiple regression analysis. The result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Simple Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, Optimism, and Pessimism as Predictors of Self-Esteem

Variables	R^2	F	p	β	t	p
Presence of meaning				.32	4.68	<.01
Search for meaning	.24	13.10	<.01	-.12	-1.76	>.05
Optimism				.23	3.27	<.01
Pessimism				-.19	-2.74	<.01

The results presented in Table 2 reveal a significant joint influence of presence of meaning, search for meaning, optimism, and pessimism on self-esteem ($R^2 = .24; F(4, 185) = 13.10; p < .01$). This implies that presence of meaning, search for meaning, optimism, and pessimism jointly account for about 24% of variance observed in the self-esteem of the students. The independent contributions further revealed that presence of meaning contributed significantly to self-esteem ($\beta = .32; t = 4.68; p < .01$), meaning that the more meaningful students found their lives to be, the higher their self-esteem. Optimism also significantly independently contributed to the prediction of self-esteem ($\beta = .23; t = 3.27; p < .01$), indicating that students who hold a positive expectation about the future will also hold a favorable evaluation of their self-worth. The results also showed that pessimism significantly predicts self-esteem ($\beta = -.19; t = -2.74; p < .01$); it however also implies that individuals who are pessimistic about the future will have low self-esteem. Finally, search for meaning was not found to be a significant predictor of self-esteem among the first-year students ($\beta = -.12; t = -1.76; p > .05$). Therefore, hypothesis two is partially supported.

Hypothesis three stated that there would be a gender difference in the self-esteem of first-year undergraduate students. The hypothesis was tested with t-test of independent samples. The result obtained is presented in Table 3.

Discussion

The present study examined meaning in life and life orientation as predictors of self-esteem of first-year students in a Nigerian university. The correlation analysis showed significant relationships between the students' meaning in life, life orientation, and self-esteem. Presence of meaning in life positively correlated with self-esteem, which implies that the more meaningful the students perceive their lives to be, the higher they hold positive regard and worth of themselves. On the other hand, search for meaning in life apparently showed no bearing with self-esteem.

An interesting relationship between presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning was found in the present study. Contrary to many postulations of the negative relationship between the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning (e.g., Steger et al., 2006), a positive relation between the two constructs was found among Nigerian first-year university students. In a similar finding, Steger et al. (2008) reported a positive association between presence of meaning and search for meaning in life among Japanese young adults. This shows that individuals who report their lives as meaningful also report search for meaning in life, and as the former increases so does the latter. This finding is also in congruent with Frankl's (1959) assertion that the search for meaning in life is continuous. A possible explanation for the positive relationship found among this specific population may be as a result of the transition period in their lives being new university students, which may give them a sense of purpose in life as well as search for meaning in their new identity and prospective tasks.

Many researchers such as Wong and Lim (2009) and Pacico et al. (2013) have previously established the positive relationship between optimism and self-esteem. Our study provides further evidence for this direction of relationship as optimism was found to significantly positively correlate with self-esteem, while a negative relationship was found between pessimism and self-esteem. Heinonen et al. (2005) also suggested that the positive disposition towards one's self and future can be one of the reasons why individuals develop good self-esteem.

Self-esteem was significantly predicted by presence of meaning, search for meaning, optimism, and pessimism. The predicting variable jointly account for about 24% of variance observed in self-esteem of the students. From our findings, the three best predictors of self-esteem are presence of meaning in life, optimism, and pessimism respectively. Search for meaning was not a significant predictor of self-esteem. This is not surprising because in the recent time, the process of gaining admission in Nigeria is one of the rigorous challenges that adolescents and young adults are faced with. It can then be inferred that gaining admission into the university which is the beginning of career building is a significant factor that makes the lives of young people meaningful and helps them hold a positive disposition towards the future, which could translate to an increase in their self-esteem. This is in line with the assertion by Frankl (1959) that people find meaning in life through what they do—what they contribute to life. In our study, the good feeling of securing admission into a university comes with a feeling of achievement and a pathway to making significant contribution in life. Our finding is consistent with previous studies that showed a strong association between meaning in life and overall mental health (Debats, 1996; Heisal & Flett, 2004; Mascaro & Rosen, 2008).

Our finding also showed that female and male students differ significantly in their self-esteem. That is, female students' reported self-esteem was significantly higher than that of their male counterparts. The direction of this finding is surprising as it contradicts most previous findings on gender difference on self-esteem that have shown that where males and females

differ on self-esteem, the males usually display higher self-esteem than their female counterparts. For instance, Malik and Sadia (2013) reported that male university students have higher self-esteem than female students. On domain specific self-esteem, however, females have been found to possess higher self-esteem on academic self-esteem (Ahmad et al., 2013), which offers a probable explanation why in our study conducted among university students we found female students higher on overall self-esteem than males. The females may have displayed superior academic performance than the males, which may likely have boosted their self-esteem. This assertion is in accordance to previous findings that have indicated that an average female student performs better academically than her male contemporary (e.g. Tinklin, 2003).

Finally, further analysis on gender difference revealed a significant difference between male and female students on meaning in life as well as optimism. It was found that female students showed significant higher sense of life meaning and optimistic disposition towards life than their male counterparts. Our finding is in consonance with Wong (1998), who reported a similar gender difference on personal meaning in life by stating that females had a higher score than males on the personal meaning profile.

We conclude that meaning in life and life orientation significantly correlate with self-esteem among in-school adolescents and young adults. Findings from the study also imply that self-esteem and general mental well-being of students can be enhanced if procedures like counseling and orientation programs address issues related to life meaning and if general future outcome expectations are incorporated into the standard procedure for students. More study to further validate the findings of the present study is therefore recommended.

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