



# Meaning in life among Korean college students based on emotionality and tolerance of uncertainty



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines different associations between the search for meaning in life (MLQ-S) and the presence of meaning in life (MLQ-P) based on sub-groups of emotionality and tolerance of uncertainty, respectively. Korean college student participants' self-reported survey responses were used in the study ( $N = 348$ ; 64.8% female;  $M_{Age} = 21.6$  years old). The results indicated that MLQ-S is positively correlated with MLQ-P in all levels of emotionality groups (Low, Average, and High emotionality) and the Average uncertainty tolerance group. Findings also suggested that MLQ-S was higher in Low emotionality than High emotionality; and MLQ-S was higher in the High uncertainty tolerance group than Low and Average uncertainty tolerance groups. The High uncertainty tolerance group reported the highest MLQ-P, and the Low uncertainty tolerance group reported the lowest MLQ-P. Findings highlight the importance of emotional stability and moderate levels of uncertainty tolerance in intervening clients' meaning seeking and meaning finding processes.

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## 1. Introduction

A meaningful life is important in constructing one's sense of happiness in conjunction with a pleasant life and an engaged life (Seligman, 2002). Empirical literature involving diverse populations has demonstrated that meaning in life contributes to one's sense of well-being (e.g., Yalçın & Malkoç, 2015; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987). Although meaning in life has had considerable conceptual and empirical evidence, little research has been conducted to better understand meaning in life among Koreans. Investigating meaning in life among Koreans is important for researchers considering the fact that Koreans tend to report lower levels of well-being than other countries despite the rapid improvement of life-conditions in Korea (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995; Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006). Studies also demonstrate that personality is associated with meaning in life (Schnell & Becker, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Schnell and Becker (2006) shows that an individual's meaning in life, such as love, harmony, and spirituality is correlated with emotionality. Specifically, several studies report that emotionality and tolerance of uncertainty are related to Koreans' processes of seeking and finding meaning in life (Jung, 2009; Won, Kim, & Kwon, 2005). Yet, little research investigated the association between these personality and meaning in life. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine relationships between Korean students' will to search for meaning and their sense of presence of meaning in life.

We also aimed to compare the meaning in life scores based on different levels of emotionality and tolerance of uncertainty.

### 1.1. Meaning in life

Meaning in life is defined as “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence” (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81). The concept of meaning in life constitutes two dimensions: the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006; Thompson & Janigian, 1988).

#### 1.1.1. Presence of meaning in life

The *presence of meaning* in life is defined as individuals' perception that they have a sense of purpose by making sense of the significance of their life (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). The presence of meaning is associated with mental well-being variables, such as a sense of happiness (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995); positive emotions (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992); personal growth (Grouden & Jose, 2015; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Weintraub, 2008); and life satisfaction (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). The presence of meaning also serves as a protective factor by promoting one's coping skills (C. Park & Ai, 2006; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Weintraub, 2008; Thompson & Janigian, 1988). Steger et al. (2009) demonstrate that the presence of meaning in life tends to be related to one's well-being consistently across life stages. Taken together, the evidence strongly suggests that the presence of meaning in life plays a functional role in a wide aspect of well-being domains throughout one's life.

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### 1.1.2. Search for meaning in life

The search for meaning refers to the process of striving for one's understanding concerning "the meaning, significance, and purpose" of his or her life (Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008; Steger, Kawabata, et al., 2008, p. 43). The search for meaning is distinguished from meaninglessness—absence of meaning in life, which is often associated with psychological distress variables (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). In contrast to meaninglessness, studies demonstrate that the search for meaning can be both an adaptive indicator (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; King, Hicks, Krull, & Gaiso, 2006; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005) or a maladaptive indicator (Cohen & Cairns, 2012). Frankl (1963) asserts that searching for meaning is a universal human motivation and such motivation is directed toward achieving one's optimal being where presence of meaning in life needs to be followed (Steger et al., 2009). Researchers argue that the search for meaning occurs as a response to a stressful situation (Baumeister, 1991; Klinger, 1998; Thompson & Janigian, 1988).

Research involving Asian participants emphasize that the motivation of the search for meaning can be associated with culturally adaptive and psychologically functional components, such as a desire to learn and grow in life (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008; Yoo & Kim, 2015). A potentially adaptive role of the search for meaning in one's well-being is supported by its positive association to the presence of meaning which accounts for one's mental well-being. Studies involving participants in Western countries reported negative correlations, whereas studies involving Korean college students reported positive correlations between the search for and the presence of meaning (Cho et al., 2012; Joeng & Lee, 2007; Won et al., 2005; Yoo & Kim, 2015). These studies note that motivation to pursue one's personal growth and self-enhancement seem salient in Korean college students' search for meaning in life. Therefore, we hypothesized that the search for meaning and the presence of meaning would be positively correlated among Korean college students.

### 1.2. Tolerance of uncertainty as a cognitive factor

In the present study, tolerance of uncertainty is conceptualized as a cognitively oriented personality factor that may result in different association between the search for meaning and the presence of meaning in life. *Tolerance for uncertainty* is an operationalized term to describe one's cognitive tendency to tolerate uncertain situations and events (Dugas, Buhr, & Ladouceur, 2004). In clinical setting, low tolerance for uncertainty is commonly used for determining clients' generalized anxiety (Dugas et al., 2005). On the contrary, individuals who have low levels of tolerance of uncertainty are more likely to worry about uncertain situations, whereas individuals with moderate to high levels of tolerance of uncertainty do not necessarily experience worry (Dugas, Buhr, et al., 2004; Dugas, Schwartz, et al., 2004; Dugas et al., 2005).

Meaning-centered psychotherapy researchers assert that humans are "meaning seeking and meaning making" beings (Wong, 2010, p. 87). Due to the human nature as a meaning seeking being, such processes may become life-long and recurrent because finding an ultimate answer to their questions about meaning in life is less likely to happen (Wong, 2010). However, a lack of tolerance of uncertainty can hinder such non-linear meaning seeking and finding processes. Jung (2009) argues that Koreans with low levels of tolerance of uncertainty may continue to struggle despite the presence of meaning in life due to their insecurity dealing with uncertainty. Studies show that low tolerance of uncertainty is correlated with the need for cognitive closure (Berenbaum, Bredemeier, & Thompson, 2008; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). This result may indicate that individuals with low tolerance of uncertainty are less likely to tolerate ambiguous and unpredictable process in searching for meaning in life, while wanting clear answers as quickly as they can. For instance, losing a loved one might trigger a personal crisis, and individuals can make a choice of searching for meaning in their experiences. The individuals with tolerance of uncertainty may

tend to embrace uncertain nature of searching and discovering meaning in life pertaining to their losses when encountering contradictory meanings (e.g., emptiness vs. humanity), or when revising their previous meanings (e.g., realization about the importance of relationships over accomplishment). On the other hand, those who are intolerant of uncertainty may conclude that their life has become meaningless instead of searching for meaning in life. Accordingly, our second hypothesis is that the High uncertainty tolerant group would report higher search for and presence of meaning in life than the Low uncertainty tolerant group.

### 1.3. Emotionality as an emotional factor

Based on the search-to-presence approach (Frankl, 1963), Steger, Kashdan, et al. (2008) and Steger, Kawabata, et al. (2008) demonstrate that meaning seeking often results in the experience of meaning creation or discovery, yet the degree of which individuals obtain meaning can vary depending on their personality. One important personality factor is emotionality, defined as one's tendency to feel easily upset, moody, and anxious as opposed to feeling calm and relaxed (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). Studies report that emotionality is negatively correlated with the search for meaning and the presence of meaning (Steger et al., 2006; Won et al., 2005). Research shows that Koreans who experience positive affects tend to report the presence of meaning in life (Cho et al., 2012). Therefore, we hypothesize that emotional individuals would report low levels of searching for and presence of meaning than non-emotional individuals.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 347 Korean college students in South Korea (64.8% female). Participants were recruited from 14 universities across South Korea, including Seoul, Gyeonggi province, and Gyeongsang province. The mean age of the participants was 21.9 years ( $SD = 2.91$ ). Participants consisted of 61 (17.5%) freshmen, 86 (24.78%) sophomores, 76 (21.90%) juniors, 88 (25.36%) seniors, and 23 fifth year or above (6.34%), and other 13 (3.75%). One participant did not report his or her school year.

### 2.2. Instruments

The demographic questionnaire was used to gather background information on the respondents (e.g., age, sex, school year). Three measures were also included: Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006), Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS; Buhr & Dugas, 2002), and the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999).

#### 2.2.1. Meaning in life

Steger et al. (2006) developed a scale to assess the search for meaning and the presence of meaning in life. Five items comprising the search for meaning subscale (MLQ-S; e.g., "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful") and five items comprising the presence of meaning in life subscale (MLQ-P; e.g., "I understand my life's meaning") were rated from 1 (*Absolutely Untrue*) to 7 (*Absolutely True*). Higher scores indicate a higher level of the search for meaning and the presence of meaning in life. The internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach alpha) were 0.89 for both subscales in the present study.

#### 2.2.2. Tolerance of uncertainty

Twenty seven items from the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS; Buhr & Dugas, 2002) were used to measure response to uncertain situations. All 27 items were included in the study, and examples are as follows: "My uncertainty is difficult to tolerate" and "I want reassurance

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