**RESEARCH**

# Meaning in life among emerging adults: An examination of gender, relationship status, and social media use

**Cebrail Karayigit**[1] 🔵 | **Michaela Ozier**[2] | **Amber Bloom**[1] |
**Mark Weaver**[2] | **Samantha Wiltz**[2]

[1]Counseling, Societal Change, and Inquiry (CSIN), Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, USA

[2]Department of Psychology & Counseling, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, USA

**Correspondence**
Cebrail Karayigit, Counseling, Societal Change, and Inquiry (CSIN), Texas Christian University, 3000 Bellaire Drive North, Fort Worth, TX 76109, USA.
Email: c.karayigit@tcu.edu

**Abstract**

Using a sample of 450 emerging adult university students, this study examined the effects of relationship status and gender on meaning in life (MIL) dimensions and the relationship between social media use and MIL dimensions among participants. The MIL Questionnaire (MLQ) and a subscale of the Sources of Meaning and MLQ (SoMe) were used to measure three different life meaning dimensions (presence of meaning, search for meaning, and crises of meaning). Findings suggested that being in a romantic relationship is positively associated with the presence of MIL. Findings also revealed that the time spent on social media and social media satisfaction affects MIL dimensions. Implications for counselors and other mental health professionals are presented and have the potential to impact college students' MIL issues.

**KEYWORDS**
crises of meaning in life, emerging adulthood, presence of meaning in life, relationship status, social media

## INTRODUCTION

Meaning in life (MIL), also called purpose in life, is a complex topic defined in various ways by various disciplines (Steger et al., 2006; Trevisan et al., 2017). In counseling and psychology, according to Steger et al. (2006), MIL is most often "one of a set of growth-related variables that are thought to provide the conditions from which happiness arises" (p. 81). MIL, therefore, has been used in research

that has studied: the creation and pursuit of goals (Frankl, 2006; Steger et al., 2006), individuals' sense of their existence (Yu et al., 2016), sense of self-concept (Shin et al., 2016), and purposefulness (Reker & Wong, 1988). MIL research has shown that there is a strong correlation between high levels of MIL and greater emotional well-being (Brassai et al., 2011), motivation and job satisfaction (Hu & Hirsh, 2017), self-esteem (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010), psychosocial function (Dezutter et al., 2014), and physical health (Czekierda et al., 2017), which means people with a high sense of MIL experience better overall well-being. Well-being is a high level of subjective emotional, social, and psychological functioning (Dezutter et al., 2014; Steger et al., 2006). For this study, MIL is defined as the belief that life is valuable, which is critical to the development of well-being (Baumeister, 1991).

## MEANING IN LIFE

There has been an increasing amount of literature on MIL among emerging adults (Czyżowska, 2021; Dameron & Goeke-Morey, 2023; Hill et al., 2016; Karayigit & Wood, 2021; Steger et al., 2009). MIL is considered a critical developmental task in emerging adulthood (García-Alandete et al., 2018; Mayseless & Keren, 2014), representing a relatively new developmental stage at ages 18–29 (Arnett, 2014). Many studies on MIL in emerging adulthood have found that it is a predictor of well-being (Dezutter et al., 2015; García-Alandete et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2016; Hong et al., 2018; Kress et al., 2015; Steger et al., 2009; Trevisan et al., 2017; Wilt et al., 2016). Specifically, MIL in college students has been linked to a lower risk of suicidal ideation and self-harm (Hong et al., 2018; Kress et al., 2015). It is clear based on this research that MIL plays an essential role in the well-being of emerging adults.

MIL can provide much in the way of well-being for emerging adults. However, little is known about the implications of factors like gender, relationship status, and social media use on MIL. For example, gender, as it relates to MIL, has shown mixed results. Yu et al. (2016) found a stronger association between MIL and depressive symptoms in women. In another study, Pezirkianidis et al. (2016) reported that women tend to engage in a higher degree of searching for meaning. However, Schnell (2020) found minimal variation between gender and reports of MIL. Additionally, relationship status has been associated with well-being, but these studies have overlooked MIL (Bulloch et al., 2017; Grundström et al., 2021). For example, involvement in a romantic relationship has been shown to exert a substantial influence on well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019) and an individual's developmental trajectory (Gala & Kapadia, 2013). Another study found that MIL predicted relationship quality (Hadden & Knee, 2018). Pfund et al. (2020) identified a positive association between the sense of purpose and relationship satisfaction, contributing to a limited body of research on this connection.

Moving beyond interpersonal factors, the influence of social media on the well-being of emerging adults presents a complex narrative. Despite being an integral part of people's lives, especially for this demographic (Perrin & Anderson, 2019), social media's impact on well-being exhibits diverse and sometimes contradictory results. Understanding these variations is crucial for contextualizing the role of MIL within the broader landscape of emerging adults' experiences. Social media is negatively associated with self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014), well-being (Kross et al., 2013; Pantic, 2014; Shakya & Christakis, 2017), and life satisfaction (Stieger, 2019; Tromholt, 2016). However, Bekalu et al. (2019) linked the routine use of social media with increased mental health and well-being. Similarly, Jelenchick et al. (2013) found that frequent use of social media is not necessarily associated with adverse outcomes. The complex relationship between social media use and well-being adds another layer of intricacy, with contrasting findings that indicate both negative and positive associations. Shifting the focus to the evolving landscape of social media, the study acknowledges its pervasive influence on the emerging adult population.

Despite the extensive research on the correlation between social media and mental health, there is limited exploration into the connections between social media use (specifically the time spent and satisfaction) and MIL. For example, individuals lacking purpose or MIL are more inclined to invest

their time and energy in social media, as indicated by the findings of Schippers and Ziegler (2019). Moreover, Karayigit and Wood (2021) suggest a potential positive correlation between frequent social media use and the search for MIL. The diverse perspectives on MIL outlined here underscore the multifaceted nature of this concept.

Additionally, little research has investigated the relationship between social media use (the time spent and satisfaction) and MIL. Therefore, the present study focuses on the relationships between gender, relationship status, and social media use on three specific dimensions of MIL, the presence of MIL, the search for MIL, and the crisis of MIL as experienced by emerging adults. As the following section explores in depth the specific dimensions proposed by Steger et al. (2006), it becomes apparent that understanding the dimensions of MIL is essential for comprehending their impact on psychological well-being.

## MEANING IN LIFE DIMENSIONS

The presence of MIL and the search for MIL were first proposed by Steger et al. (2006) subscales of the MIL questionnaire (MLQ). The presence of MIL refers to the extent to which a person currently finds their life significant, valuable, and purposeful. The presence of MIL has been positively linked to well-being in emerging adults. Dezutter et al. (2014) found that emerging adults who scored high on the presence of MIL had more adaptive psychosocial functioning than those who lacked MIL. Trevisan et al. (2017) found similar results in college students. Those who scored high on the presence of meaning scale had a positive relationship to psychosocial functioning. There is a clear positive link between MIL and well-being in emerging adults. However, research has not investigated how gender, relationship status, and social media impact the presence of MIL. The relationship between the search for MIL and well-being is more complicated as it can be either positively or negatively associated with well-being, depending on how it presents itself.

Search for MIL is viewed as both a natural component of life (Frankl, 2006) and a dysfunctional one (Baumeister, 1991). Reker (2000) synthesized these seemingly opposed positions by suggesting that the motivations behind one's search for MIL may determine whether it has a positive or negative correlation with psychological functioning. For example, Reker (2000) found that a search for MIL motivated by curiosity and open-mindedness will positively impact well-being. Contrastingly, if it is motivated by depression and rumination, it will negatively impact well-being. Steger et al. (2009) conducted a study demonstrating that results were above the midpoint across all age groups on a search for MIL subscale, suggesting that the search for meaning is a prevalent factor across the lifespan. But whether this factor is positive or negative seems to hinge, at least partially, on the particular life stage at which an individual is. In particular, among older adults, search for meaning has been associated with lower levels of well-being, possibly due to the expectation that they have less time to develop MIL. However, in emerging adults, search for meaning is associated with higher levels of well-being (Steger et al., 2009). This difference makes sense when viewed developmentally, as searching for MIL is critical to developing and establishing emerging adults' social functions, careers, and identities (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Older adults reported a greater presence of MIL, and younger adults reported a greater search for meaning (Steger et al., 2009). However, both these factors must be present in an individual's life. A lack of either dimension can quickly lead to a crisis of MIL.

Schnell (2009) defined the crisis of MIL as "the evaluation of life as frustratingly empty and lacking in meaning" (p. 483). Schnell and Krampe (2022a) described crisis of MIL as "a state of severe existential dread" (p. 6) which keeps those who experience it from accessing "personal resources such as hope, self-efficacy, or resilience; instead, depression, anxiety, negative mood, and pessimism prevail" (p. 6). Schnell and Krampe (2022a, 2022b) conducted two studies on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals. In both studies, the crisis of MIL was a predictive factor for long-term adverse effects from stress. Those with high crisis levels in MIL recovered far less quickly than those with high levels of MIL.

Additionally, Schnell et al. (2018) found that the presence of crisis of MIL is a "significant predictor of suicidality when controlling for depression" (p. 6). Finally, Schnell and Krampe (2022a) suggested that crises of MIL should be taken very seriously by counseling professionals, communities (such as Universities), and public health agencies. Expanding the scope to crises of meaning, it is evident that this dimension introduces an evaluative perspective on an individual's life. The present study not only seeks to understand crises of meaning but also examines a potential link between this aspect and the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of social media use. Therefore, this study will measure crisis in MIL, because of the potential impact on emerging adults' mental health.

## PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships between gender, relationship status, and social media use on three specific dimensions of MIL, the presence of MIL, the search for MIL, and the crisis of MIL as experienced by emerging adults. To that end, the study asks the following questions.

1. (a) Are there differences between single emerging adults and those who are in a relationship (dating or married) in their levels of MIL (presence of MIL, search for MIL, crises of MIL)? (b) Are there differences between male and female emerging adults in their levels of MIL (presence of MIL, search for MIL, crises of MIL)?
2. (a) Is there a significant difference among emerging adults who spend between 0 and 60 min, those who spend between 1 and 2 h, and those who spend more than 2 h per day on social media in their levels of the search for MIL, the presence of MIL, and crises of MIL? And (b) Among emerging adults, is there a relationship between social media use satisfaction and MIL dimensions (presence of MIL, search for MIL, crises of MIL)?

## METHODS

In this quantitative study, survey design was employed as the main avenue for collecting data from students at a regional public university in the Midwest of the United States. Potential participants were recruited using convenience sampling methods and were all enrolled in counseling and psychology classes. Participants were sent the survey link through their campus email. Demographic data were also collected from participants and will be described below along with, the study measures, and data collection, analytic procedures.

## PARTICIPANTS

The population for this study included students currently enrolled in a university in the US Midwest. During the fall of 2020, invitations to participate in an online survey were extended to both undergraduate and graduate students. As an incentive, participants were offered the opportunity to enter a draw for a $50 gift certificate. The author's university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) chair has approved this study under the rules for expedited review. The present study included a sample of $N = 450$ emerging adult university students currently enrolled in a US university. There were no specific exclusions for participation except participants needed to be between the ages of 18 and 29. Of the 450 participants who completed the survey, only three participants chose to self-describe their gender. They were excluded from the gender part of the analysis. As noted in Table 1, although most participants identified as female (70%), nearly half of the participants were single (48.7%). Lastly, the

**TABLE 1** Demographic data of the study population.

| Value | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Gender[a] | | |
|     Male | 132 | 29.3 |
|     Female | 315 | 70.3 |
| Relationship status | | |
|     Single | 219 | 48.7 |
|     In a romantic relationship | 231 | 51.3 |
| Age | | |
|     18–24 | 417 | 92.7 |
|     25–29 | 33 | 7.3 |
| Total | 450[a] | 100.0 |

[a]Three respondents choose "prefer to self-describe."

mean age of study participants was 20.5 years ($SD = 2.5$, range 18–29), and most participants (92.7%) were between the ages of 18–24.

## MEASURES

The online survey program Qualtrics was used to create an electronic version of the survey, which contained the demographic form, MLQ (Steger et al., 2006), a subscale of Sources of Meaning and MLQ (SoMe, Schnell & Becker, 2007; Schnell, 2009). All responses are measured on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, and 7 = *Strongly Agree*. Participants were also prompted to answer a few basic questions about their demographics, requesting information such as age, gender, and relationship status. SPSS software (version 24) was utilized to analyze the data.

## Meaning in life questionnaire

One common tool for measuring MIL is the MLQ (Steger et al., 2006). The MLQ is a 10-item measure that focuses on two primary domains: the presence of MIL (the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as significant and meaningful) and the search for MIL (the degree to which people are engaged in a search for MIL). Sample items include "My life has a clear sense of purpose" (the presence of meaning) and "I am always searching for something that makes my life meaningful" (the search for meaning).

Previous research has demonstrated the reliability and validity of the MLQ as a tool for assessing the presence of and search for MIL (Steger et al., 2006; Steger & Kashdan, 2007). Moreover, the MLQ has been successfully translated and employed in non-Western societies, indicating its validity across diverse populations and countries (Chan, 2017; Naghiyaee et al., 2020; Pezirkianidis et al., 2016; Schutte et al., 2016). The internal consistency of the three subscales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Cronbach's alpha indicated that each of the two constructs assessed by the MLQ demonstrated good internal consistency (search for MIL, $\alpha = 0.84$; and presence of MIL, $\alpha = 0.89$).

## Sources of meaning and meaning in life questionnaire: crisis of meaning subscale

The study also utilizes the crisis of meaning subscale within the Sources of Meaning and MLQ (SoMe; Schnell, 2009). The SoMe questionnaire contains two separate scales to measure positive and negative dimensions of MIL. More specifically, the SoMe questionnaire evaluates 26 sources of meaning, meaningfulness, and the crisis of MIL. Meaningfulness refers to a sense of fulfillment based on significance, coherence, and belonging; crises of MIL refer to suffering from a lack of MIL (Schnell, 2009). For this study, we only used the five items of the crisis of MIL subscale. The use of this subscale only was to limit the amount of time needed for participants to complete the survey and to avoid repeat questions from the MLQ. Sample item includes "My life seems empty" (crises of meaning).

Various studies have provided support for the reliability and validity of SoMe (Damásio et al., 2013; Gapp & Schnell, 2008; Schnell, 2009, 2010; Schnell & Becker, 2006). More specifically, the construct, content, discriminant, factorial, and incremental validity of the SoMe have been consistently demonstrated across numerous studies (Gapp & Schnell, 2008; Schnell, 2009, Schnell & Becker, 2006, 2007). Results also showed a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.86$ for crises of MIL subscale, indicating good internal consistency of the items in the scale.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted using frequencies, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), an independent $t$-test, and Pearson Correlations. First, an independent $t$-test was conducted to assess if levels of MIL dimensions (presence of MIL, search for MIL, and crises of MIL) differ between female and male emerging adult university students. Another independent $t$-test was conducted to assess if levels of MIL dimensions differ between single emerging adults and those who were in a romantic relationship (dating or married). To address the third research question, we used participants' responses to the following questions (1) "on average, how much time do you spend on social media per day?" (with response options of "less than 1 h," "1—2 h," and "more than 2 h") (see Karayigit & Wood, 2021) and (2) "overall, how satisfied are you with social media in what it does in providing you with the things you are seeking?" (using a scale from 1—not at all to 10—very satisfied). More specifically, an ANOVA was employed to compare the effect of time spent on social media (e.g., 0–60 min, 1—2 h, and more than 2 h) on different life meaning dimensions (presence of meaning, search for meaning, and the sense of purpose). Lastly, a correlation analysis was used to determine if there was a relationship between social media satisfaction and MIL dimensions among emerging adults.

## RESULTS

Participants were asked about their relationship status (*single vs. in a romantic relationship*). An independent $t$-test was conducted to assess if the level of MIL dimensions (presence of MIL, search for MIL, and crises of MIL) differs between emerging adults who were in a romantic relationship and those who were single. Emerging adults who were in a romantic relationship (dating or married) had significantly higher mean scores on the presence of MIL *(M = 5.13, SD = 1.22)* than those who were single *(M = 4.74, SD = 1.37)*, $t(448) = -3.18$, $p = 0.02$. Although mean scores of single emerging adults and those who were in a romantic relationship slightly differed, no significant differences were found on their levels of search for MIL ($p = 0.53$) and crises of MIL ($p = 0.24$). MIL dimensions were also examined in terms of gender difference. The differences between females *(M = 5.00, SD = 1.15)* and males *(M = 4.66, SD = 1.39)* appeared to be marginally significant in the search for MIL, $p = 0.8$. As shown in Table 2, no significant differences were found between males and females on levels of presence of MIL ($p = 0.93$) and crises of MIL ($p = 0.79$).

**TABLE 2** Independent samples *t*-test: meaning in life dimensions by gender and relationship status.

| | Major | N | M | SD | SEM | t | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Presence | Male | 132 | 4.96 | 1.42 | 0.12 | 0.77 | 445 | 0.939 |
| | Female | 315 | 4.95 | 1.25 | 0.07 | | | |
| | Single | 219 | 4.74 | 1.37 | 0.09 | −3.18 | 448 | 0.002 |
| | In relationship | 231 | 5.13 | 1.22 | 0.08 | | | |
| Search | Male | 132 | 4.66 | 1.39 | 0.12 | −2.67 | 445 | 0.008 |
| | Female | 315 | 5.00 | 1.15 | 0.06 | | | |
| | Single | 219 | 4.94 | 1.26 | 0.08 | 0.62 | 448 | 0.536 |
| | In relationship | 231 | 4.87 | 1.21 | 0.08 | | | |
| Crises | Male | 132 | 4.70 | 1.29 | 0.11 | −0.25 | 445 | 0.798 |
| | Female | 315 | 4.74 | 1.23 | 0.06 | | | |
| | Single | 219 | 2.87 | 1.37 | 0.09 | 2.26 | 448 | 0.024 |
| | In relationship | 231 | 2.60 | 1.11 | 0.07 | | | |

*Note*: Presence = Presence of Meaning in Life, Search = Search for Meaning in Life, Crises = Crises of Meaning in Life.

**TABLE 3** One-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) using the time spent on social media.

| | | SS | df | MS | F | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Presence | Between groups | 23.942 | 2 | 11.971 | 7.155 | 0.001 |
| | Within groups | 747.909 | 447 | 1.673 | | |
| | Total | 771.851 | 449 | | | |
| Search | Between groups | 8.760 | 2 | 4.380 | 2.869 | 0.058 |
| | Within groups | 682.417 | 447 | 1.527 | | |
| | Total | 691.177 | 449 | | | |
| Crises | Between groups | 16.707 | 2 | 8.353 | 5.415 | 0.005 |
| | Within groups | 689.545 | 447 | 1.543 | | |
| | Total | 706.251 | 449 | | | |

*Note*: Presence = Presence of Meaning in Life, Search = Search for Meaning in Life, Crises = Crises of Meaning in Life.

As shown in Table 3, results from one-way ANOVA showed that the group means were statistically significantly different in their levels of presence of MIL ($F(2, 447) = 7.155$, $p = 0.01$) and crises of MIL ($F(2, 447) = 5.415$, $p = 0.05$). However, the group means were not statistically different in their levels of search for MIL, $F(2, 447) = 2.869$, $p = 0.58$. Tukey's post hoc tests were conducted to test for group mean differences in each pairwise comparison in their level of presence of meaning and crises of MIL. These analyses revealed a significant mean difference for presence of MIL ($p = 0.01$) between emerging adults who spend 1—2 h ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.26$) and students who spend more than 2 h per day ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.29$), as well as a significant mean difference for crises of MIL ($p = 0.03$) between emerging adults who spend 1—2 h ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.08$) and those who spend more than 2 h per day ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.28$). However, no other group differences were statistically significant.

Lastly, the relationship between MIL dimensions (presence of MIL, search for MIL, and crises of MIL) and the level of overall social media satisfaction was analyzed using the Pearson correlation (two-tailed). Participants were asked to rate their social media use satisfaction (from 1—not at all *to* 10—very satisfied) (Table 4). The results of (two-tailed Pearson) correlation showed a weak positive correlation between the level of social media satisfaction and the presence of MIL, $r(450) = 0.149$,

**TABLE 4** Pearson correlation between social media satisfaction and meaning in life dimensions.

|  |  | Social media satisfaction |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Presence | Pearson correlation | 0.149* |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 |
|  | N | 450 |
| Search | Pearson correlation | −0.119 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.011 |
|  | N | 450 |
| Crises | Pearson correlation | −0.157* |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 |
|  | N | 450 |

*Note*: Presence = Presence of Meaning in Life, Search = Search for Meaning in Life, Crises = Crises of Meaning in Life.
*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

$p = 0.001$, and a weak negative correlation between the level of social media satisfaction and crises of MIL among emerging adults, $r(450) = 0.157$, $p = 0.001$. However, participants' overall social media satisfaction was not significantly correlated to the search for MIL.

## DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to gain more insight into the relationships between MIL dimensions (presence of MIL, search for MIL, crises of MIL) and social media use (e.g., the time spent and overall satisfaction) and the impact of gender and relationship status on MIL dimensions among emerging adults. MIL plays a vital role in emerging adults' lives, and the present study is an extension of earlier studies on MIL during emerging adulthood (Karayigit & Wood, 2021; Steger et al., 2009) and provides a preliminary basis for future research on the possible association between social media use and MIL dimensions. The results also show the impact of relationship status on MIL among emerging adults. The main contribution of this study is to show that being in a romantic relationship is associated with a higher rate of presence of MIL and a positive relationship between the time spent on social media and the presence of MIL and crises of MIL dimensions. Social media has been an integral part of emerging adults' lives; therefore, the present finding might prove an important area for future research.

Findings from this study suggest that being in a romantic relationship is associated with higher levels of presence of MIL. Although this finding is in line with a report by Pew Research Center (2018) documenting that married people are more likely to find meaning in different things (e.g., family and religion) than unmarried people, it is also important to note that the sense of purpose was positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Pfund et al., 2020). One possible explanation for this finding might be that involvement in a romantic relationship can significantly impact well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019) and an individual's development (Gala & Kapadia, 2013). When emerging adults are in a romantic relationship—whether it is a marriage or dating—they appear to draw more MIL than those who were single.

This association between relationship status and MIL raises intriguing questions about the mechanisms underlying this link. For instance, does the presence of a romantic partner offer emotional support and companionship that enhances one's sense of purpose and MIL? Alternatively, could it be that individuals in relationships are more likely to engage in activities that promote introspection and self-discovery, thus fostering a greater sense of meaning? Further exploration could examine the quality and dynamics of romantic relationships to understand how they influence the search for MIL.

Factors such as relationship satisfaction, communication patterns, and shared goals may play crucial roles in shaping individuals' existential journeys within the context of romantic partnerships.

Regarding gender differences, findings from this study suggest that females are more likely to experience a search for meaning than males. This finding is consistent with Pezirkianidis et al.'s (2016) study reporting that women appear more likely to search for MIL. Steger et al. (2009), in contrast, found no significant difference between men and women in the presence of MIL and search for MIL dimensions. Further research could shed light on this finding by focusing on different factors (e.g., unemployment, working conditions; Pezirkianidis et al., 2016) that might trigger a higher search for MIL. It may also be worth noting that search for MIL can have positive (well-being, curiosity, open-mindedness, identity exploration) or negative outcomes (depression) (Steger et al., 2006, 2009; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008) and can be negatively or positively related to well-being in different cultures (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, et al., 2008). However, previous studies have not fully addressed the reasons for a higher search for MIL in emerging adult women; therefore, it is unclear whether a higher search for MIL has positive or negative outcomes. For Example, understanding whether the higher search for MIL among women correlates with positive outcomes like enhanced well-being, identity exploration, and openness, or negative outcomes like depression, is essential. Exploring these nuances can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender intersects with existential concerns.

The findings contribute to existing literature by shedding light on the interplay among gender, relationship status, and the search for MIL. They underscore the importance of considering these multifaceted factors when examining existential concerns and well-being outcomes. By elucidating gender differences and the role of romantic relationships in shaping individuals' search for meaning, the study attempts to provide valuable insights into how existential themes intersect with the dynamics of gender differences and relationship status.

It is also important to discuss the statistically significant differences in the time spent on social media to provide insight into the relationship between social media use and MIL dimensions among emerging adults. The findings obtained in the current study suggested that emerging adults who spend more than 2 h are more likely to experience crises of MIL than those who spend between 1 and 2 h. The findings of this study also revealed that emerging adults who spend more than 2 h on social media are also less likely to experience the presence of MIL than those who spend between 1 and 2 h on social media. These findings are not consistent with Karayigit and Wood's (2021) study documenting that the time spent on social media is not related to the presence of MIL. One possible explanation for this finding might be that people without the presence of MIL are more likely to spend time and energy on social media (see Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Although frequent use of social media might be associated with higher levels of crises of MIL and lower levels of presence of MIL among emerging adults, further research is needed to determine more specifically why/how they are associated. However, it is important to note that these findings might be influenced by the temporal context in which the studies were conducted. Karayigit and Wood's (2021) research gathered data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the current study's findings reflect the period during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered daily routines, social interactions, and mental health dynamics worldwide. During the pandemic, individuals might have turned to social media platforms as a means of connection, entertainment, and distraction from stressors, potentially leading to different patterns of social media use compared to pre-pandemic times.

Lastly, findings from this study also suggested that emerging adults' social media satisfaction was positively correlated with the presence of MIL and negatively correlated with crises of MIL. In the previous research, social media use was associated with negative and positive outcomes (see Stieger, 2019; Bekalu et al., 2019). These findings suggest a possible association between emerging adults' social media satisfaction and MIL dimensions, especially the presence of MIL and crises of MIL. Although this is an important finding in understanding the association between social media use and MIL among emerging adults, the present study represents a starting point in this promising line of inquiry.

# LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Two important implications can be derived from this study. First, the present findings indicated that the experience of social media is associated with the experience of MIL. Although this finding cannot provide a conclusive result for why there is a relationship between these experiences, college counselors or mental health professionals who provide services to emerging adults should pay close attention to the potential association between social media satisfaction and the experience of MIL. This relationship is important because social media has been an integral part of emerging adults' lives. For clients who experience crises of MIL, exploring the role of social media use and understanding the possible effects of their daily social media use on the experience of MIL can be an important step toward a meaningful life. Schnell and Krampe's (2022a, 2022b) recommendation to monitor the prevalence of crises of meaning within the population, given its association with heightened levels of depression and anxiety, highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing existential challenges for promoting mental well-being on a broader societal level. Therefore, counselors or mental health professionals should be attuned to signs of crises of meaning in their clients and actively explore existential concerns during therapy sessions. Understanding the possible links between crises of meaning and social media use can help counselors provide tailored interventions that address both existential and digital influences on mental well-being. By acknowledging and addressing existential challenges, counselors or mental health providers can support clients in developing coping strategies and finding deeper sources of meaning beyond their online interactions.

Moreover, the present findings should encourage counselors or mental health workers to consider the role of relationship status in the experience of MIL. To enhance the sense of MIL for emerging adult university students, counselors or mental health workers can play a pivotal role by assisting them in increasing awareness of their current relationships and working toward strengthening these connections. For example, counselors or mental health providers can facilitate discussions with emerging adults about the role of relationships in their sense of meaning and life satisfaction. This proactive approach may contribute significantly to the overall well-being and life satisfaction of young adults navigating the challenges of emerging adulthood.

The study has various limitations. First, the results are solely based on data collected from a single university located in the Midwest of the United States, thereby potentially limiting their generalizability to populations in diverse geographical locations. Replicating the current findings with emerging adults outside of the college or university setting and incorporating more diverse samples is crucial for comprehensive insights. Another significant limitation pertains to gender bias. The disproportionate representation of female participants in the analysis introduces a notable risk of bias, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to a broader gender context. Furthermore, the homogeneity of participants in factors such as sexual identity and race limits the variability of available data for analysis and inclusion in this study. Future research can aim to incorporate more representation from diverse sexual orientations and racial backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of findings. The self-report nature of instruments introduces an additional limitation, as participants' subjective ratings of daily social media use may be susceptible to response bias. For instance, emerging adult students' inclination to present more favorable responses could indicate the presence of potential social desirability bias. Therefore, future research can aim to supplement self-report data with objective measures of social media use, such as digital tracking or app usage data, to provide a more accurate and reliable assessment of participants' social media use.

Despite the limitations mentioned before, the present study provided insight into the relationship between social media use and MIL dimensions (particularly the presence of meaning and crises of meaning) and the impact of relationship status and gender on MIL dimensions among emerging adults. Further examination of the association between social media use and MIL dimensions is warranted within the domain of MIL research as the presence of meaning, and social media uses play a vital role in emerging adults' lives. Therefore, the present finding might prove an important area for future research.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report that there are no conflicts of interest to declare. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise research participant privacy/consent.

## ORCID

*Cebrail Karayigit* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9920-9642

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