

# Understanding Meaning in Life Among University Students: The Role of Perfectionism and Rumination

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between university students' meaning in life, perfectionism, and rumination. The participants were 254 university students from different universities in Türkiye. The data were obtained through a demographic information form, Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Brief State Rumination Inventory, Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether university students' meaning in life was predicted by rumination and perfectionism.

As a result it was found that perfectionism and rumination were positive and significant predictors of meaning in life among university students.

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## INTRODUCTION

University life is characterized as an important period of change, including academic, personal, and social changes, and for many students, this period is associated with changing levels of stress and uncertainty as they progress from their teenage years to adulthood, and which also offers an opportunity for development and exploration. (Ghrouz et al., 2019; Erdoğan et al., 2005; Şimşek et al., 2012). Increased personal responsibility, challenges of university life can also bring about psychological distress (Stallman, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2012), and this may not always be transitory, and can affect students' future well-being as adults (Scott et al., 2016).

These findings propose early intervention and prevention and point to the importance of facilitating adjustment for university students. From an educa-

tional and psychological perspective, this has led to increased interest in internal psychological resources that help students cope with academic demands, sustain motivation, and maintain well-being. Within this context, meaning in life has been emphasized as a central construct that enables students interpret their experiences, cope with challenges, and maintain a sense of direction (Steger, 2009). For university students, these issues may be particularly important, because this is a period characterized by reflection on identity, values, and long-term goals, and by attempts to make sense of academic and personal experiences. Relatedly, students who see their efforts and experiences as meaningful may be more likely to persist with their academic tasks.

The present study is grounded in a positive psychology perspective, which views meaning in life as a key component of well-being and optimal

functioning, as well as in motivational approaches such as self-determination theory, which emphasize goal-directed behavior, personal values, and autonomous engagement (Steger, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017). From these perspectives, meaning in life is not treated as a static trait but as a dynamic process shaped by how individuals think about their experiences and pursue personally valued goals.

### Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is a process influenced by cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors (Steger, 2009; Park et al., 2010), and is very much related to life satisfaction in which both include individuals' overall evaluation of their lives and the importance they attach to their experiences (Kaya & Çenesiz, 2020). How students make sense of their experiences, how they recall their past experiences, and consider their future goals appears to be important for the development of meaning in life during the university years (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). From an educational point of view, the evidence that conscious awareness and self-efficacy operate as internal psychological resources to help students adjust, also supports the idea that meaning-related processes are influenced by individuals' ways of engaging with and making sense of their experiences (Ayyıldız & Gulu, 2023). Recent studies also emphasize that meaning in life is associated with student engagement, persistence, and psychological adjustment in higher education contexts (Martela & Steger, 2020).

### Perfectionism and Rumination

From this point of view, rumination and perfectionism also appear to be two important psychological processes. Rumination is generally defined as a cognitive process in which an individual repetitively thinks about past experiences and emotions, often in an attempt to understand why those events happened and also to give meaning to these particular experiences (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). While much of the literature on rumination has pointed to its association with emotional problems, recent research also indicates its potential to be a cognitive process involved in making meaning, particularly during periods in which an individual is engaged in self-exploration and developing their identity. During

the university years, individuals often reflect on their past, and they also look to the future in an attempt to understand their academic and personal journey, and in this process rumination can serve as a cognitive process involved in making meaning (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016).

Perfectionism is accepted as another process which is related to making meaning in life during the university years, and which is generally defined as striving to achieve personal standards, and is often characterized by concerns about making mistakes (Bieling et al., 2004). In an academic environment, striving to achieve perfection can give direction, help students in forming and achieving goals, and can also help in making meaning in life. However, research states that perfectionism can be adaptive as well as maladaptive, and in addition, the link between perfectionism and meaning in life may be moderated by the way in which individuals seek and achieve their goals (Park et al., 2010; Suh et al., 2017).

### Purpose of the Study

Previous research on rumination and perfectionism points to the importance of cognitive and motivational processes in shaping meaning in life, particularly during the university years. How students reflect on their experiences and pursue personal goals appears to influence how they interpret their lives and develop a sense of meaning during this transitional period. Considering rumination and perfectionism together may therefore provide useful insight into students' meaning-making processes.

In line with this perspective, the purpose of the present study was to examine whether rumination and perfectionism predict meaning in life among university students. By focusing on these processes, the study aimed to better understand how students make sense of their academic and personal experiences during the university years, as well as to explore factors that may be related to students' engagement, adjustment, and sense of direction within the university context.

### METHOD

In the current study, a cross-sectional correlational design was employed to investigate the predictive

role of rumination and perfectionism in meaning in life among university students.

### Sample

The participants were 254 university students from different universities in Türkiye. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling. Of the total sample size, the number of females was 156 (61.4%), and the number of males was 98 (38.6%). The sample included students from different levels, from the preparatory year to the fifth year. The majority of the sample belonged to the 18-22 years age group.

Before the data collection process, the researchers sought approval from the Ethics Committee of Istanbul Kent University. The data collection process was conducted online using Google Forms.

### Measures

The tools used included a demographic information form, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006; Turkish adaptation: Demirbaş, 2010), the Brief State Rumination Inventory (BSRI; Marchetti et al., 2018; Turkish adaptation: Altan et al., 2020), and the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990; Turkish adaptation: Kağan, 2011).

#### Meaning in Life Questionnaire

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006), which was used to assess meaning in life, is a 10-item scale with a 7-point Likert scale, and it has two subscales: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. The higher scores on the Presence subscale reflect a higher sense of meaning in life. The Turkish form of the MLQ was developed by Demirbaş (2010), and the internal consistency coefficient for the MLQ in the current study was  $\alpha = 0.86$ .

#### Brief State Rumination Inventory

Rumination was assessed with the Brief State Rumination Inventory (BSRI; Marchetti et al., 2018). The scale has 8 items that evaluate situational changes in rumination. The study for the Turkish adaptation of the scale was conducted by Altan et al. (2020). In the current study, internal consistency was calculated as  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

#### Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale

Perfectionism was assessed using the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS), developed by Frost et al. (1990). The scale consists of 35 items, and is based on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale measures different dimensions of perfectionism. The Turkish validation study of the scale was carried out by Kağan (2011), and the reliability coefficients were 0.64-0.94.

### Data Analyses

The descriptive statistics were performed on all the variables. Pearson correlation was used to calculate the relationship between variables, while Multiple regression analysis was employed to determine if rumination and perfectionism were predictors of meaning in life.

## RESULTS

This section presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables, followed by correlational analyses, multiple regression results.

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for study variables (N = 254)

Items	Mean	SD
Meaning in life	4.59	1.83
Rumination	56.18	39.76
Perfectionism	3.19	1.34

Pearson correlation coefficients between study variables are shown in Table 2. Meaning in life, rumination and perfectionism were all significantly correlated.

Table 2: Correlations among study variables

Items	Meaning in life	Rumination	Perfectionism	P
1. Meaning in life	..	..	..	< 0.01
2. Rumination	0.167**	..	..	< 0.01
3. Perfectionism	0.170**	0.316**	..	< 0.01

To assess whether rumination and perfectionism predicted meaning in life, a multiple regression analysis was conducted (see Table 3). The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(2, 251) = 5.695$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , and explained 4.3% of the variance in meaning in life ( $R^2 = 0.043$ ). The results indicate that rumination and perfectionism significantly predict meaning in life,  $F(2, 251) = 5.695$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) showed that the relative contribution of the predictor variables to meaning in life was slightly higher for perfectionism ( $\beta = 0.131$ ), followed by rumination ( $\beta = 0.126$ ).

## DISCUSSION

During the university years, students are often required to make sense of past experiences while simultaneously forming expectations about their future, understanding the psychological processes that shape meaning in life is particularly relevant. University students are expected not only to meet academic demands but also to develop a sense of direction, sustain motivation, and adapt to increasing personal responsibility. In this context, meaning in life may function as an important psychological resource that supports students' engagement, adjustment, and persistence in higher education. Also examining cognitive and motivational processes such as rumination and perfectionism can therefore provide insight into how students make sense of their academic and personal experiences within the university setting. This period involves not only academic demands but also broader questions related to identity, direction, and purpose, relatedly, the present study examines whether rumination and perfectionism are meaningfully associated with students' experience of meaning in life. The findings suggest that both processes are relevant, pointing to the ways students think about their experiences and pursue personal standards as important elements in meaning-making during this developmental stage.

Consistent with earlier work, rumination emerged as a significant predictor of meaning in life (Michael & Snyder, 2005; Murphy & Bastian, 2019; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Rumination refers to repetitive thought patterns that typically focus on past experiences and emotional states and involve attempts to understand why events occurred and what they signify (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). During the university years, students encounter novel academic, social, and personal challenges that often prompt increased reflection on both past decisions and future possibilities. Such reflective engagement may contribute to meaning-making by allowing individuals to integrate emotionally salient experiences into a broader life narrative (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016).

Although rumination is frequently associated with negative affect, research has also shown that individuals tend to ruminate about experiences that are emotionally intense, regardless of whether these experiences are positive or negative (Feldman et al., 2008). Moreover, recent studies emphasize that emotionally significant life events, rather than their valence alone, can trigger reflective thought processes that facilitate meaning construction (Murphy & Bastian, 2019). This view is consistent with contemporary models of meaning-making, which propose that engagement with emotionally salient experiences is a key pathway through which individuals derive meaning (Park, 2010; Park & George, 2013).

An important methodological aspect of the present study is the assessment of rumination as a state rather than a stable trait. Measuring rumination at the state level makes it possible to capture situational fluctuations in reflective thinking that arise in response to current emotional experiences (Altan Atalay et al., 2020; Puterman et al., 2010). When individuals experience difficulty finding meaning in their present circumstances—particularly during periods characterized by limited opportunities or uncertainty—they may turn to past experiences and engage in rumination as a way of accessing

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis predicting meaning in life

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t	P
1. Rumination	0.004	0.002	0.126	1.940	0.054
2. Perfectionism	0.154	0.077	0.131	2.008	0.046

meaning. In this sense, rumination may operate as a compensatory process that supports meaning-making when immediate sources of meaning are not readily available (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Supporting this interpretation, previous research has demonstrated that reflecting on past experiences, including adverse ones, can positively predict meaning in life (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

The literature also indicates that the relationship between rumination and meaning in life is not uniformly positive, while meaning in life has been shown to buffer the impact of emotional distress and support psychological well-being (Silver et al., 1983), excessive or maladaptive forms of rumination may intensify negative emotional states and undermine meaning-making processes (McLaughlin et al., 2007). Several studies have reported negative associations, particularly when rumination is accompanied by sustained negative affect and emotional distress (Robert et al., 2006; Updegraff et al., 2009). In contexts such as prolonged grief, where meaning resources are severely disrupted, rumination has been found to predict lower levels of meaning in life (Milman et al., 2019). These findings suggest that the function of rumination in meaning-making depends on the broader emotional context and the availability of psychological resources (Park et al., 2004; Genet & Siemer, 2012).

In addition to rumination, perfectionism was identified as another significant predictor of meaning in life. Perfectionism is commonly described as striving toward high personal standards, often accompanied by heightened concern about mistakes and self-evaluation (Bieling et al., 2004). The university years involve substantial academic and personal transitions that can challenge students' sense of stability and increase emotional strain (Trevisan et al., 2017). Within this context, meaning in life may play an important role in helping students maintain psychological balance and cope with increasing demands (Steger, 2009).

The present findings suggest that perfectionism is meaningfully involved in students' meaning-making processes. Previous research has shown that meaning in life is closely related to students' adjustment to university life (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt,

1994). Moreover, recent studies emphasize that goal engagement, personal striving, and efforts to make optimal choices are central mechanisms through which individuals experience their lives as meaningful (Park et al., 2010; Kokkoris, 2019). From this perspective, striving toward personally valued standards may provide structure and direction, thereby supporting meaning in life during periods of transition (Hill et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the literature also points to potentially negative aspects of perfectionism. Some studies have reported that excessively high standards combined with persistent feelings of inadequacy may undermine meaning in life (Graham et al., 2010). Recent models distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism, suggesting that the impact of perfectionistic strivings on well-being and meaning depends on how individuals relate to their standards (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Smith et al., 2016). Taken together, these findings indicate that perfectionism may support meaning-making when expressed in flexible and goal-oriented ways, but may hinder it when accompanied by rigid self-criticism.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the roles of rumination and perfectionism in meaning in life among university students. The findings indicate that both rumination and perfectionism are positively associated with meaning in life, suggesting that students' meaning-making processes are closely linked to how they reflect on their experiences and how they orient themselves toward personal goals and standards. Although the proportion of explained variance was modest, the results highlight the relevance of cognitive and motivational processes in understanding meaning in life during the university years.

With respect to rumination, the findings suggest that repetitive thinking about past experiences may play a role in meaning-making, particularly during periods in which students perceive limited sources of meaning in their present or future lives. In such situations, reflecting on past experiences may provide a way to reconnect with or reconstruct a sense of meaning.

Perfectionism also emerged as a significant predictor of meaning in life. Striving toward high

personal standards may offer structure, direction, and engagement with valued goals, which can support students' experiences of meaning. At the same time, previous research indicates that perfectionism can take both adaptive and maladaptive forms. Whether perfectionistic strivings enhance or undermine meaning in life may depend on how standards are pursued and how individuals respond to perceived shortcomings.

Overall, the findings suggest that meaning in life among university students is a dynamic construct shaped less by demographic characteristics and more by internal psychological processes. From an educational perspective, the results point to the potential value of supporting students' reflective thinking, goal engagement, and adaptive striving during the university years. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs and from examining adaptive and maladaptive forms of rumination and perfectionism in greater detail to better understand their roles in students' meaning-making processes.

### Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the current sample of university students. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for causal interpretations regarding the relationships among rumination, perfectionism, and meaning in life. In addition, although the regression model yielded statistically significant results, the proportion of explained variance was relatively low ( $R^2 = 4.3\%$ ), suggesting that meaning in life is likely influenced by a range of additional psychological, social, and contextual factors not captured in the present study.

Finally, future research may benefit from longitudinal designs and more comprehensive sampling strategies to better examine the dynamic nature of meaning-making processes over time.

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