

Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-Being in Reference to Gender and Age Groups: Comparative Analysis

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Publication Date: 2026/10/28

Abstract: The experience of adulthood is shaped by evolving responsibilities and aspirations that influence psychological functioning. Meaning in life reflects an individual's sense of purpose, significance, and direction in life, whereas psychological well-being represents positive psychological functioning and the ability to manage life effectively while maintaining personal growth and fulfilling relationships. Both constructs are important for understanding how individuals experience and maintain positive functioning across different stages of adulthood. Within this context, meaning in life and psychological well-being are central dimensions reflecting individuals' sense of purpose and positive mental health. The present study compares meaning in life and psychological well-being among young and middle-aged adults in reference to gender. Using simple random sampling, 140 participants were selected from Nainital, Almora, and Champawat districts of the Kumaon division of Uttarakhand, comprising equal numbers of males and females (70 each), further divided into young and middle-aged adults with 35 participants in each group. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire by Steger et al. (2005), comprising two dimensions—Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning—and the Psychological Well-Being Scale by Ryff et al. (2010), comprising six dimensions—Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance—were used. For statistical analysis, two-way ANOVA was employed. The results reveal that gender shows a significant difference in Presence of Meaning, whereas no significant gender difference is found in Search for Meaning. Age does not show a significant difference in either dimension at the 0.05 level. The interaction between gender and age is also not significant for either dimension. For psychological well-being, gender shows a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level only in Autonomy, while no significant gender differences are observed in the other dimensions. In contrast, age demonstrates significant differences across all dimensions of psychological well-being at the 0.05 level. The interaction between gender and age is not significant for Autonomy and Self-Acceptance but is significant at the 0.05 level for the other dimensions of psychological well-being.

Keywords: Psychological Well-Being, Autonomy, Meaning in Life.

How to Cite: Dr. Rekha Joshi; Rakshita Joshi (2026) Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-Being in Reference to Gender and Age Groups: Comparative Analysis. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(10), 1981-1986. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26oct1079>

I. INTRODUCTION

Human life is often guided by an underlying search for direction, value, and understanding. Rather than merely experiencing events, individuals naturally try to make sense of their circumstances and connect them to a broader sense of purpose. This inner process of seeking coherence and significance gradually shapes an individual's sense of meaning in life, as it helps them integrate their experiences into a unified and purposeful whole. Meaning in Life (MIL) refers to an individual's understanding of life experiences and the perception of life as purposeful, significant, and coherent. It includes cognitive (self-understanding), motivational (goal pursuit), and affective (sense-making) components (Reker & Wong, 1988). From a psychological perspective, meaning

also supports health, as individuals who perceive their lives as meaningful are more likely to engage in self-care and adaptive functioning (Steger et al., 2015). Michael F. Steger et al. (2006, 2008) distinguished two dimensions of meaning: Presence of Meaning, referring to the extent to which life is perceived as significant and valuable, and Search for Meaning, referring to active efforts to establish or enhance purpose. Presence involves clarity of goals and understanding one's place in the world (King et al., 2006) and is considered a desirable psychological quality. Empirical findings indicate that higher meaning is associated with greater self-esteem, self-acceptance, and positive self-image (Debats, 1996; Ryff, 1989; Steger et al., 2008c). Meaning is positively related to an internal locus of control and negatively associated with external or chance orientations (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986;

Thompson et al., 2003), reflecting stronger personal agency and adaptive coping. Furthermore, a strong sense of meaning promotes autonomy, ambition, and environmental mastery, thereby enhancing psychological well-being (Debats et al., 1993; Reid, 1996; Ryff, 1989; Shek, 2001; Steger et al., 2008).

Psychological well-being is a vital aspect of human life that enables individuals to lead meaningful and satisfying lives while effectively managing daily challenges. It reflects the ability to experience positive emotions, maintain healthy relationships, achieve personal goals, and find purpose in life. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines psychological well-being as a state in which individuals realize their potential, work productively and creatively, and cope with the normal stresses of life, while Diener et al. (2010) describe it as a subjective evaluation of life characterized by positive emotions, engagement, and meaning. Psychological well-being is especially important during young and middle adulthood, as these stages involve major transitions and responsibilities related to education, career, relationships, and family life. Despite their potential to contribute to society, young adults often experience stress, anxiety, depression, and other life pressures that may affect their well-being (Chen, 2024), with mental health concerns increasing globally among this population (Orygen, 2023; Youth Insight, 2023). Similarly, middle-aged adults face growing occupational, family, and social demands that can influence their mental health. Poor psychological well-being may increase vulnerability to mental health problems, particularly during periods of expanding responsibilities (Gómez-López et al., 2019). Furthermore, psychological well-being is closely associated with physical health, promoting healthy behaviors and better sleep quality (Twenge et al., 2019; Fernández-Portero et al., 2017). As individuals navigate changes in identity, lifestyle, and relationships throughout adulthood (Santrock, 2019; Permana & Astuti, 2021), psychological well-being remains an essential resource for adaptation, overall health, and life satisfaction.

Meaning in life is considered an important contributor to psychological well-being, as it provides individuals with a sense of purpose, direction, and fulfillment. Research suggests that a sense of meaning in life contributes significantly to psychological well-being among both adolescents (Brassai et al., 2011) and adults (Steger et al., 2008). Research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between meaning in life and various indicators of well-being. Individuals who perceive their lives as meaningful tend to report greater life satisfaction (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), better psychological adjustment (Thompson et al., 2003), higher levels of positive emotions (King et al., 2006), and lower levels of negative affect, depression, and anxiety (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Riichiro & Masahiko, 2006). This relationship is particularly important during young and middle adulthood, as individuals face significant educational, career, family, and social responsibilities. A strong sense of meaning in life helps them adapt to these demands and is positively associated with

psychological well-being across adulthood (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009).

➤ *Significance of the Study:*

Despite extensive research on these constructs, there is comparatively little exploration of how their relationship may vary across different stages of adulthood. Investigating the ways in which meaning in life is associated with psychological well-being among young adults and adults may provide nuanced insights into age-related patterns and experiences. Such understanding could contribute to the development of strategies, programs, or interventions aimed at fostering wellbeing and a sense of purpose across diverse adult populations.

➤ *Based on the Literature Review, the Research Objectives were:*

To assess the effect of gender and age on the presence of meaning in life and psychological well – being among young and middle aged adults. To study gender differences in meaning in life and psychological well being among young and middle age adults. To examine the effect of age on meaning in life and psychological well being among young and middle age adults. To analyze the interaction effect of gender and age on meaning in life and psychological well being among adults.

➤ *Hypotheses*

- There would be a significance difference of gender on the presence of meaning in life and psychological well – being among young adults and middle aged adults.
- There would be significance difference of age on meaning in life and psychological well being among young and middle age adults.
- Gender and age would interact significantly on meaning in life and psychological well being among young and middle aged adults.

II. MATERIALS AND METHOD

A random simple random sampling method was employed to select, 140 participants from the, Nainital, Almora, Champawat districts of the Kumaon division of Uttarakhand. The data was randomly selected and comprise of 140 participants, comprising equal numbers of males and females (70 each), further divided into young and middle-aged adults with 35 participants in each group. Data were collected using a personal data schedule, Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB). For statistical analysis Anova was employed to analyse significant differences between the groups.

➤ *Tools:*

- **Personal Data Schedule (PDS):** It was a self-developed tool for gathering preliminary information about the subjects including name, age, gender, Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.
- **Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ):** The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, developed by Steger, consists of 10

items assessing two dimensions: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “completely false” to “completely true.” Total scores range from 10 to 70, with higher scores indicating greater meaning in life and search for meaning. The scale has demonstrated good validity, including convergent and discriminant validity. Steger et al. reported internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) ranging from 0.82 to 0.87, and test–retest reliability over one month of 0.70 and 0.73 for the two subscales. In Iran, reliability coefficients ranged from 0.86 to 0.87, and construct validity was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.74.

- Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB): The Psychological Well-Being Scale, developed by Ryff and

Singer, includes 18 items measuring six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Scores range from 18 to 108, with higher scores indicating greater psychological well-being. Ryff and Singer reported correlations of 0.70–0.89 with the 84-item version and an internal consistency of 0.56. In Iran, subscale reliabilities ranged from 0.51 to 0.76, with an overall alpha of 0.71. Confirmatory factor analysis supported both three- and six-factor models. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.82.

Table 1 Descriptive Table

		YOUNG ADULTS		MIDDLE ADULTS	
		Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd
Presence of life	MALE	14.29	4.890	16.60	4.584
	FEMALE	17.06	3.933	17.46	4.705
Search for meaning	MALE	24.80	5.373	21.54	6.284
	FEMALE	24.94	5.482	25.17	6.066
Autonomy	MALE	16.49	2.594	18.37	6.212
	FEMALE	14.46	3.193	15.40	3.041
Environmental mastery	MALE	14.43	3.137	17.69	5.389
	FEMALE	14.71	2.906	18.77	18.738
Personal growth	MALE	16.69	3.188	20.40	6.463
	FEMALE	17.09	2.215	17.94	3.985
Positive relations	MALE	14.40	4.001	18.26	7.433
	FEMALE	14.51	3.166	15.29	2.966
Purpose in life	MALE	14.91	3.203	18.97	7.069
	FEMALE	15.57	3.165	16.03	3.063
Self Acceptance	MALE	15.66	3.190	18.83	6.373
	FEMALE	15.94	3.386	16.97	2.955

Table 2 ANOVA for Presence of life

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	115.207	115.21	5.58	.020	.039
Age	1	64.46	64.46	3.124	.079	.022
Gender * Age	1	32.06	32.06	1.554	.215	.011
Error	136	2806.11	20.63			

Table 3 ANOVA for Search for Meaning

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	124.457	124.46	3.682	.057	.026
Age	1	80.257	80.26	2.374	.126	.017
Gender * Age	1	106.314	106.31	3.145	.078	.023
Error	136	4597.143	33.80			

Table 3 ANOVA for Autonomy

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	218.750	218.750	13.510	.000	.090
Age	1	70.007	70.007	4.324	.039	.031
Gender * Age	1	7.779	7.779	.480	.489	.004
Error	136	2202.000	16.191			

Table 4 ANOVA for Environmental Mastery

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	16.457	16.457	.165	.685	.001
Age	1	468.114	468.114	4.699	.032	.033
Gender * Age	1	5.600	5.600	.056	.813	.000
Error	136	13547.429	99.613			

Table 5 ANOVA for Personal Growth

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	37.029	37.029	2.037	.156	.015
Age	1	182.857	182.857	10.058	.002	.069
Gender * Age	1	71.429	71.429	3.929	.049	.028
Error	136	2472.571	18.181			

Table 6 ANOVA for Positive Relations

	Df	Type III Sum Of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	71.429	71.429	3.172	.077	.023
Age	1	187.457	187.457	8.323	.005	.058
Gender * Age	1	83.314	83.314	3.699	.057	.026
Error	136	3062.971	22.522			

Table 7 ANOVA for Purpose in life

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	45.714	45.714	2.296	.132	.017
Age	1	178.314	178.314	8.958	.003	.062
Gender * Age	1	113.400	113.400	5.697	.018	.040
Error	136	2707.257	19.906			

Table 8 ANOVA for Self - Acceptance

	df	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	1	21.607	21.607	1.217	.272	.009
Age	1	154.350	154.350	8.697	.004	.060
Gender * Age	1	40.179	40.179	2.264	.135	.016
Error	136	2413.714	17.748			

III. RESULTS

The results reveal that gender has a significant difference on Presence of Meaning in Life and a non-significant difference for Search for Meaning, whereas age does not have a significant difference at the 0.05 level. The interaction between gender and age is also not found to be significant at the 0.05 level. For psychological well-being, gender shows a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level on autonomy, while it does not differ significantly on all other dimensions. In contrast, age demonstrates significant differences in all the dimensions of psychological well-being at the 0.05 level. The interaction between gender and age is not significant for autonomy, positive relations, and self-acceptance but is significant at the 0.05 level for the other dimensions of psychological well-being.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicate that gender significantly influences Presence of Meaning in Life, whereas Search for Meaning and age do not significantly differ between young adults (20–30 years) and middle-aged adults (30–40 years). Descriptive statistics showed that females reported higher mean scores than males on Presence of

Meaning in Life, suggesting a greater sense of meaning. The reason for this could be women's greater emotional expressiveness, relationship orientation, and reflective nature, whereas men tend to emphasize independence and problem-focused coping. The absence of age differences suggests that meaning in life remains relatively stable across these developmental stages. These findings are consistent with Steger, Oishi, and Kashdan (2009), who reported stability in meaning across adulthood, and Steger et al. (2006), who suggested that meaning is shaped more by individual differences and life experiences than by demographic characteristics. The non-significant interaction indicates that the differences in Presence of Meaning in Life and Search for Meaning remained consistent across both age groups.

Autonomy showed a significant difference with respect to both gender and age, whereas the interaction between gender and age was not significant. Descriptive statistics revealed that males scored higher than females, and middle-aged adults reported higher autonomy than young adults. The higher autonomy among males may reflect greater confidence in making independent decisions and personal choice, as men are often encouraged to exercise self-direction and independence. A similar finding was reported by Matud,

López-Curbelo, and Fortes (2019), who found that men scored significantly higher than women on the autonomy dimension. Likewise, the higher autonomy among middle-aged adults may be due to greater life experience, financial stability, and confidence in decision-making. Ryff and Keyes (1995) and Sheldon and Kasser (2006) also reported that autonomy tends to increase from young adulthood to midlife. The non-significant interaction indicates that the gender difference in autonomy remained consistent across both age groups.

The present study found a significant difference in environmental mastery with respect to age, whereas no significant difference was observed for gender or the interaction between gender and age. Descriptive statistics showed that middle-aged adults scored higher than young adults, while males and females reported similar levels of environmental mastery. The higher scores among middle-aged adults may reflect greater life experience and an improved ability to manage daily responsibilities and life situations effectively. This finding is supported by Ryff and Keyes (1995), who observed that environmental mastery tends to increase from young adulthood to midlife. The non-significant interaction indicates that the age difference remained consistent across both genders.

A significant difference in personal growth was observed with respect to age and the interaction between gender and age, whereas no significant gender difference was found. Descriptive statistics showed that middle-aged adults reported higher personal growth than young adults, with a greater increase among males than females across age groups. The higher personal growth among middle-aged adults may reflect greater life experience and engagement in meaningful personal and professional roles. This interpretation is supported by Toyama, Fuller, and Hektner (2020), who found that psychosocial factors such as positive relationships, generativity, work, and spirituality were associated with higher levels of personal growth across adulthood. The significant interaction indicates that the increase in personal growth with age was greater among males than females.

For positive relations, a significant difference was observed with respect to age, whereas no significant difference was found for gender or the interaction between gender and age. Descriptive statistics showed that middle-aged adults reported higher positive relations than young adults, while males and females reported similar levels. The higher positive relations among middle-aged adults may reflect stronger interpersonal relationships and greater emotional maturity developed through life experiences. This finding is consistent with Springer, Pudrovskaya, and Hauser (2011), who reported that positive relations tend to increase across adulthood. The non-significant interaction indicates that the age difference in positive relations remained consistent across both genders.

Significant differences in purpose in life were observed with respect to age and the interaction between gender and age, whereas gender alone did not show a significant difference. Descriptive statistics showed that middle-aged

adults reported higher purpose in life than young adults, with a greater increase among males than females. The higher purpose in life among middle-aged adults may reflect greater life experience, clearer life goals, and increased commitment to personal and family responsibilities. This finding is consistent with Macleod et al. (2025), who reported a positive association between age and purpose in life across adulthood. The significant interaction indicates that the age-related increase in purpose in life was greater among males than females.

In the present study, a significant difference was observed in self-acceptance with respect to age, whereas no significant difference was found for gender or the interaction between gender and age. Descriptive statistics showed that middle-aged adults reported higher self-acceptance than young adults, while males and females reported similar levels. The higher self-acceptance among middle-aged adults may reflect greater self-understanding and acceptance of personal strengths and limitations gained through life experience. This interpretation is consistent with Ryff (1991), who suggested that psychological well-being continues to develop across adulthood through ongoing self-evaluation and personal development. The non-significant interaction indicates that the age difference in self-acceptance remained consistent across both genders.

V. IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Promoting a sense of meaning in life may play an important role in supporting psychological well-being, particularly during young adulthood. Counsellors, educators, and mental health professionals can use this understanding to develop approaches that encourage self-awareness, resilience, positive relationships, and a clear sense of purpose. The study also adds to the existing literature and may provide a useful foundation for future research on meaning in life and psychological well-being across different populations.

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