



The Relationship Between Developmental Crisis and Meaning in Life in Emerging Adulthood: An Analysis of Data from Eight Countries

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Abstract

Developmental crisis episodes are common during emerging adulthood. Evidence from existing research suggests that existential concerns about life's meaning are prominent during crisis episodes in emerging adulthood, but little quantitative research exists on this topic. The current cross-cultural study investigated the relationships between components of developmental crisis (measured using the 3-factor Developmental Crisis Questionnaire), and meaning in life (measured using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, which has two factors: search for and presence of meaning in life). The sample comprised 1967 emerging adults across eight countries (Brazil, Czechia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom). Two components of developmental crisis – being in transition/turning point and feeling disconnected/distressed – were positively associated with a search for meaning in life. Feeling disconnected/distress and lacking clarity/control were negatively associated with a presence of meaning in life. The findings emphasize the need for organizations and services that focus on supporting young adults in crisis, and that these should provide help with the often-hidden existential sense that life may be lacking meaning, and the corresponding endeavour to search for meaning.

Keywords Developmental crisis · Meaning in life · Emerging adulthood · Quarter-life crisis · Presence of meaning · Search for meaning

Introduction

After adolescence, many young people experience an ambiguous adult status despite being legally recognized as an adult, during which they remain free of long-term commitments across key life domains such as work and relationships. This phase of life, frequently referred to as emerging adulthood, is characterized by delayed social milestones, such as entry into marriage, parenthood and careers (Nelson, 2021), as well as distinct psychological challenges, including instability and ambiguity in adult status, which, in turn, can lead to identity exploration and a focus on the self along with consideration of future possibilities (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014). While there has been discussion over the heterogeneity of paths through this period of life and the status of the concept as a stage, emerging adulthood theory

has been a key stimulus for exploring and making sense of the challenges of the first decade of adult life. While the theory was developed initially in relation to the United States and then European cultures, there is now growing evidence of this life stage in other countries, including Turkey (Çok & Atak, 2015), India (Mitra & Arnett, 2021), Indonesia (Alfaruqy & Indrawati, 2023), Brazil (Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2019), Pakistan (Numan et al., 2024) and Argentina (Facio et al., 2007).

In Western societies (e.g., US, Northern Europe), emerging adulthood is typically characterized by a challenging search for an autonomous identity and financial independence, with marriage and parenthood delayed until near age 30 (Butterbaugh et al., 2020). In more collectivist cultures, such as those in Asia, while emerging adulthood explorations occur, they are often constrained by a strong sense

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of family obligation (Nelson et al., 2004). Furthermore, achieving adult status often involves criteria like the capacity to support parents financially rather than just achieving personal financial independence (Nelson et al., 2004).

Related research has explored the presence of developmental crisis episodes for some individuals in the emerging adulthood life stage, referred to as *quarter-life* crisis or early adult crisis (Herawati & Hidayat, 2020; Millová & Svárovská, 2020; Riyanto & Arini, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017; Yeler et al., 2021). Aligned with the seminal lifespan theory of Erikson (1968), who conceived of crisis as a normative and functional process in adult development, such crises are conceived of as periods of accelerated and disruptive change, typically lasting about a year, during which a young adult undergoes major changes to life circumstances and identity. Research on the nature and structure of these crisis episodes has found that they feature transitional events pertaining to studying, work and relationships, and that levels of stress and anxiety are elevated during the episodes (Agarwal et al., 2020; Duara et al., 2021; Suyono et al., 2021; Zibrinyiová & Ráczová, 2016). Common features of early adult crisis include unemployment, job dissatisfaction, relationship breakdowns, high work or study stress, bereavement, financial struggles, and family conflicts (Herawati & Hidayat, 2020; Robinson & Wright, 2013). Career-related phenomena are also common to quarter-life crisis, such as intractable problems with career choice or stressful career transitions, and these bring concomitant challenges to identity, purpose and meaning (e.g., Robinson, 2019). Quarter-life crisis episodes progress through the loss of old patterns and coping strategies, into a liminal space of confusion and identity loss, before consolidating a new life structure and new coping strategies that meet the challenges of life (Robinson, 2015, 2019).

The unified model of meaning in life (MIL) defines it as a construct comprising a sense of coherence (a cognitive sense that one's life is comprehensible, makes sense, and has an intelligible pattern), purpose (the presence of core goals, aims, and overarching sense of direction for the future), and significance (reflecting the judgment that one's existence has inherent value, and is non-trivial / worthwhile). A balance of these three dimensions contributes to well-being and flourishing (Steger, 2021).

Meaning in life is measurable as two factors; the search for and the presence of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006). Steger et al. (2009) examined the presence of meaning and search for meaning across adult life stages, from emerging adulthood to older adulthood. They found that presence of meaning generally increased with age. Search for meaning was highest in emerging and young adulthood and decreased with age. Presence of meaning was consistently linked to higher well-being across all life stages.

Cross-cultural studies have found that across various countries, presence of meaning in life is negatively related to distress and positively related to wellbeing (Fischer et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2008). Qualitative research points to a link between developmental crisis and search for meaning in life. For example, Robinson (2010) found that, during periods of crisis, existing sense-making frameworks for conferring meaning in life are often found to be no longer sufficient, thus a new or improved meaning-making structure must be explored and consolidated. Relatedly, a questionnaire study found that three measurable components of crisis (1. Being in a turning point or life transition, 2. Feeling distressingly disconnected from self/others, and 3. Lacking clarity or control over choosing life's direction) were found to be negatively correlated with presence of meaning in life and positively associated with search for meaning in life. However, there were some discrepancies at the level of the three factors of crisis; *lack of clarity and control* was not a significant correlate of search for meaning, while being in a *transition or turning point* was only a marginal negative correlate of presence of meaning in life (Petrov et al., 2022).

Another line of research that links crisis and meaning is a study of curiosity and crisis. Curiosity is the tendency to seek new information, therefore being generally curious relates conceptually and behaviorally to seeking meaning (Litman, 2005). An investigation into crisis and curiosity found that, in comparison with same-aged individuals who reported not being in a developmental crisis, individuals who did report being in such a crisis showed elevated curiosity towards self (intrapersonal curiosity), others (interpersonal curiosity) and knowledge more generally (epistemic curiosity) (Robinson et al., 2017).

Current Study: Rationale, Aims and Hypotheses

The rationale of the current study was to enhance cross-cultural knowledge about developmental crisis and meaning in life in emerging adulthood. This is an important direction for research, given that only two prior single-culture studies have explicitly looked at the relationship between these constructs (Petrov et al., 2022; Sholichatun & Rahayu, 2023), just a few other qualitative studies of developmental crisis have discussed how meaning in life is affected (Duara et al., 2021; Robinson, 2010), and there are no existing cross-cultural studies on the topic. There is also an absence of literature that operationalizes developmental crisis as a construct composed of multiple factors. A further rationale for conducting the study across multiple cultures is emerging evidence for both commonalities and differences in features of quarter-life crisis across different countries. For example, in Robinson et al. (2025), all countries referred to career

transition, financial difficulties, studying-based stress and struggle, and family difficulties, while only some referred to wider socio-political or economic factors.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the extent to which the components of developmental crisis predict search for / presence of meaning in life in each of eight countries separately. The countries are Brazil, Czechia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected for two reasons; firstly, they have existing literature on emerging adulthood and quarter-life crisis, and secondly, they cover a range of socio-economic environments and cultures across three continents. Based principally on the aforementioned findings from Petrov et al. (2022), we predicted that the components of developmental crisis would have the following associations with the search for and presence of meaning in life, for individual countries and for the total sample:

H1 *Being at a turning point or life transition, and feeling distressingly disconnected from self/others, will have a positive association with search for meaning, while lacking clarity or control will not predict search for meaning.*

H2 *Being at a turning point or life transition, feeling distressingly disconnected from self/others, and lacking clarity*

or control will all show negative associations with presence of meaning.

Methods

Participants

The participants were recruited in the eight participating countries by local research teams. Recruitment was achieved via student lists, the researchers' social media accounts, university campuses, snowball sampling with non-students, personal networks and alumni networks. The inclusion criteria were to be (1) aged 18 to 29 years of age and (2) living in the country in question (Brazil, Czechia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom). The age range was selected to fit with a commonly used age range for sampling emerging adults (Arnett et al., 2014). In the analyses presented below, we included all participants who provided responses on all items of both the DCQ-12 and the MLQ scales, which amounts to $N=1967$. We excluded 297 responses for providing only partial data. Table 1 provides an in-depth breakdown of demographic frequencies in the final dataset for each country.

Table 1 Demographic Information about Participants for each Country

Variable	Category	Brazil	Czechia	Greece	India	Indonesia	Pakistan	Turkey	UK
Sample Size		202	389	223	235	332	286	300	280
Age	Mean (SD)	23.57 (3.26)	22.57 (2.50)	21.63 (2.65)	19.64 (1.95)	22.14 (2.74)	20.82 (2.10)	23.78 (3.56)	20.92 (2.83)
	Range	18–29	18–29	18–29	18–29	18–29	18–28	18–29	18–29
Gender	Female	119 (63%)	243 (77%)	119 (58%)	125 (60%)	171 (62%)	182 (76%)	174 (66%)	172 (65%)
	Male	59 (31%)	63 (20%)	81 (39%)	69 (33%)	96 (35%)	39 (16%)	81 (31%)	87 (33%)
	Other	4 (2%)	3 (1%)		2 (1%)		4 (2%)		2 (1%)
	No response	7 (4%)	7 (2%)	6 (3%)	13 (6%)	11 (4%)	16 (7%)	7 (3%)	5 (2%)
Study status	Full-time	49 (26%)	239 (76%)	148 (72%)	91 (44%)	174 (63%)	187 (78%)	150 (57%)	228 (86%)
	Not a student	41 (22%)	55 (17%)	36 (17%)	7 (3%)	60 (22%)	6 (2%)	84 (32%)	19 (7%)
	Part-time	92 (49%)	15 (5%)	16 (8%)	95 (45%)	33 (12%)	33 (14%)	21 (8%)	14 (5%)
	No response	7 (4%)	7 (2%)	6 (3%)	16 (8%)	11 (4%)	15 (6%)	7 (3%)	5 (2%)
Work status	Full-time	53 (28%)	56 (18%)	44 (21%)	16 (8%)	57 (21%)	24 (10%)	97 (37%)	29 (11%)
	Not working	79 (42%)	120 (38%)	108 (52%)	145 (69%)	158 (57%)	181 (75%)	136 (52%)	109 (41%)
	Part-time	50 (26%)	133 (42%)	48 (23%)	30 (14%)	52 (19%)	21 (9%)	21 (8%)	123 (46%)
	No response	7 (4%)	7 (2%)	6 (3%)	18 (9%)	11 (4%)	15 (6%)	8 (3%)	5 (2%)

Measures

The 12-item *Developmental Crisis Questionnaire* (DCQ-12) was used to measure the presence and extent of developmental crisis. The measure has been shown to have good predictive validity, construct validity and test–retest reliability (Petrov et al., 2022). There are three subscales with 4 items per subscale: *Transition and Turning Point (TT)*, *Disconnection and Distress (DD)* and *Lack of Clarity and Control (CC)*. The scale can be scored to give one overall score, or to give scores for the individual subscales. Participants are asked how much they agree that items describe their life in general over the past 6 months. Example items include “I am experiencing a time of transition in my life” (TT), “I have been questioning myself and my life more than I normally do” (DD), “I have been feeling in control of my life” (reversed item for CC). The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). In the current study, the total scale had a Coefficient Alpha value of $\alpha = .76$, with each subscale also demonstrating good or acceptable internal reliability; Disconnection and Distress $\alpha = .81$, Lack of Clarity and Control $\alpha = .73$ and Transition and Turning Point $\alpha = .68$.

To measure meaning in life, the 10-item *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ) was used. The MLQ has been shown to have strong internal consistency, test–retest reliability, a coherent factor structure, and convergent / discriminant validity (Steger et al., 2006). The MLQ has two subscales, namely *Presence of Meaning* (e.g., “I understand my life’s meaning”) and *Search for Meaning* (e.g., “I am always looking to find my life’s purpose”), with 5 items tapping into each dimension. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*Absolutely true*). In the current study, both subscales showed high Coefficient Alpha internal consistency values; Search for Meaning $\alpha = .82$ and Presence of Meaning $\alpha = .86$.

Procedure

To complete the survey, participants clicked on a link to the online survey platform. Participants provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaires. The survey ended with a series of demographic questions. See supplementary materials for the full questionnaires and demographic questions. In the United Kingdom, participants were offered a £5 shopping voucher for participation. In other countries, participation was not financially incentivized. This was due to funding being available for participant incentives in the United Kingdom only. Email addresses for voucher distribution were collected separately to the main questionnaire.

Existing translations of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire were used for the Urdu, Turkish, Hindi, Brazilian, Czech and Greek translations (see www.michaelfsteger.com). For the DCQ-12 in all countries other than the United Kingdom, and for the MLQ in Indonesia (where an existing translation was not available), English questions and response scales were translated into the relevant languages. This was done in two stages for accuracy checking (Tsang et al., 2017). First, a forward translation was done by two independent individuals who were native to the target language and fluent in English, followed by a consensus meeting. Then, two new individuals independently translated the forward translation back to English to check for the reliability of the translation. Then they met to discuss and reach consensus. Translations were reviewed by all four individuals involved in the translations, as well as 1–2 additional collaborators.

Ethical approval for the study was received in the United Kingdom from the University of Greenwich Ethics Board. This approval was deemed sufficient by the host universities in Greece, India and Czechia. In Turkey, additional ethical approval was gained from the Scientific Research and Ethical Review Board of Başkent University. In Brazil, additional ethical approval was gained from the Psychology Institute Ethics Committee, Federal University of Bahia/Brazil. In Pakistan, approval was gained from the Institutional Review Board of GIFT University. In Indonesia, approval was gained from the Institutional Ethical Committee University of Surabaya.

Data Analysis

All statistical analysis was conducted using *R* (version 4.3.0). To test the associations between developmental crisis and meaning in life as stated in the hypotheses, we ran a set of multiple linear regressions: for each country separately, we ran two regressions with MLQ subscales (Search for Meaning and Presence of Meaning) as dependent variables, and the three DCQ subscales (1. transition and turning point, 2. disconnection and distress, 3. lack of clarity and control) as independent variables, resulting in a total of 18 multiple regressions (eight countries + one for all countries x two regressions each for each dependent variable). We also ran these same regression models for the total sample. Bivariate correlations were computed to provide the reader with additional information on zero-order associations.

We ran assumption checks for all regression models. Residuals for IVs and DVs were within accepted tolerance of normal distribution. Multicollinearity was within acceptable parameters (maximum VIFs < 1.88 across all models). Residuals were appropriately normally distributed, with Shapiro–Wilk tests showing $p > .05$ in 7 of 18 models; Q-Q

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations for DCQ-12 Developmental Crisis Questionnaire Subscales and MLQ Subscales *Presence of Meaning in Life* and *Search for Meaning in Life* by Country

	Disconnection and Distress	Lack of Clarity and Control	Transition and Turning Point	Presence of Meaning in Life	Search for Meaning in Life
Brazil	0.60 (0.18)	0.67 (0.16)	0.79 (0.12)	0.64 (0.20)	0.70 (0.20)
Czechia	0.62 (0.21)	0.64 (0.17)	0.73 (0.14)	0.58 (0.21)	0.73 (0.17)
Greece	0.49 (0.17)	0.55 (0.14)	0.73 (0.15)	0.67 (0.15)	0.70 (0.14)
India	0.60 (0.21)	0.54 (0.15)	0.74 (0.14)	0.67 (0.18)	0.71 (0.16)
Indonesia	0.58 (0.17)	0.49 (0.13)	0.79 (0.11)	0.68 (0.18)	0.78 (0.14)
Pakistan	0.58 (0.17)	0.56 (0.15)	0.72 (0.16)	0.68 (0.16)	0.70 (0.16)
Turkey	0.61 (0.18)	0.58 (0.15)	0.77 (0.15)	0.67 (0.19)	0.70 (0.18)
UK	0.62 (0.18)	0.61 (0.14)	0.76 (0.14)	0.62 (0.19)	0.71 (0.17)
All countries	0.59 (0.19)	0.58 (0.16)	0.75 (0.14)	0.65 (0.19)	0.72 (0.17)

Table 3 Correlations for DCQ-12 Developmental Crisis Questionnaire Subscales and MLQ Subscales *Presence of Meaning in Life* and *Search for Meaning in Life* by Country

	Predictor	Brazil	Czechia	Greece	India	Indonesia	Pakistan	Turkey	UK
MLQ Presence	DCQ Disconnection & Distress	-0.57***	-0.67***	-0.50***	-0.43***	-0.59***	-0.31***	-0.49***	-0.55***
	DCQ Lack of Clarity and Control	-0.62***	-0.63***	-0.61***	-0.62***	-0.56***	-0.55***	-0.58***	-0.55***
	DCQ Transition and Turning Point	0.00	-0.21***	-0.10	0.26***	0.06	0.19**	0.09	0.16*
MLQ Search	DCQ Disconnection & Distress	0.35***	0.42***	-0.03	0.16*	0.13*	0.17*	0.39***	0.30***
	DCQ Lack of Clarity and Control	0.17*	0.31***	-0.15*	0.00	0.02	-0.28***	0.14*	0.21***
	DCQ Transition and Turning Point	0.21**	0.35***	0.21**	0.27***	0.13*	0.34***	0.37***	0.21***

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

plots for the rest indicated only minor skew. The heteroscedasticity assumption was met as Breusch-Pagan tests were not statistically significant in 12 of 18 models. Errors were largely uncorrelated as Durbin-Watson statistics ranged from 1.78 to 2.23, while no outlier datapoints needed removal, with less than 10% of cases in each model surpassing the respective Cook’s D threshold of $4/(n-k-1)$.

To minimize the chance of false positives when assessing statistical significance, given the multiple tests we conducted, the Benjamini–Hochberg p value correction method was used (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995). In contrast to the traditionally used Bonferroni correction, which often adjusts the p threshold by dividing by the number of tests conducted, the Benjamini–Hochberg method adjusts the tests’ p values based on (a) the unadjusted p values, (b) the number of tests conducted, and (c) the rank order of the p values across all tests. We applied the correction across all p values derived from the 18 multiple regressions. We set the p threshold at the traditionally used .05.

Results

All variables were standardized to a range of 0 to 1, to create the same numerical range of distribution, which in turn provides for a direct comparison of means across variables. Means and standard deviations for all variables are shown in Table 2 for each country, and correlations between all variables for the full sample are shown in Table 3.

Regressions were run separately for each country, for *Search for Meaning* as the dependent variable, and then for *Presence of Meaning* as the dependent variable, to assess the predictive associations set out in our hypotheses. In all regression models, the three components of developmental crisis were entered as independent variables: *transition and turning point*, *disconnection and distress* and *lack of clarity and control*. All regression models were statistically significant at $p < .001$ (except Indonesia, with *Search for Meaning* as the DV, which was $p = .028$). Higher effect sizes were shown across all countries for the models with *Presence of Meaning* as the DV, compared with the models with *Search for Meaning* as the DV. With MLQ *Presence of Meaning* as the outcome, R^2 values ranged from .39 to .55 (Brazil $R^2 = .45$, Czechia $R^2 = .55$, Greece $R^2 = .41$, India $R^2 = .44$, Indonesia $R^2 = .43$, Pakistan $R^2 = .39$, Turkey $R^2 = .39$, UK $R^2 = .40$, All countries $R^2 = .44$). R^2 values with MLQ *Search for Meaning* as the outcome variable ranged from .03 to .25 (Brazil $R^2 = .16$, Czechia $R^2 = .20$, Greece $R^2 = .09$, India $R^2 = .09$, Indonesia $R^2 = .03$, Pakistan $R^2 = .15$, Turkey $R^2 = .25$, UK $R^2 = .14$, and All countries $R^2 = .12$).

The results for the individual predictors in the 18 regression models are visualized in Fig. 1 (for semi-partial r^2 correlations between each IV and DV for each country, see Supplementary Materials). For all country-specific regression models with *Search for Meaning* as the dependent variable, two of the three subscales – *Transition and Turning Point* and *Disconnection and Distress* – were significantly positively associated with the dependent variable across all countries, as hypothesized. *Lack of clarity and control*

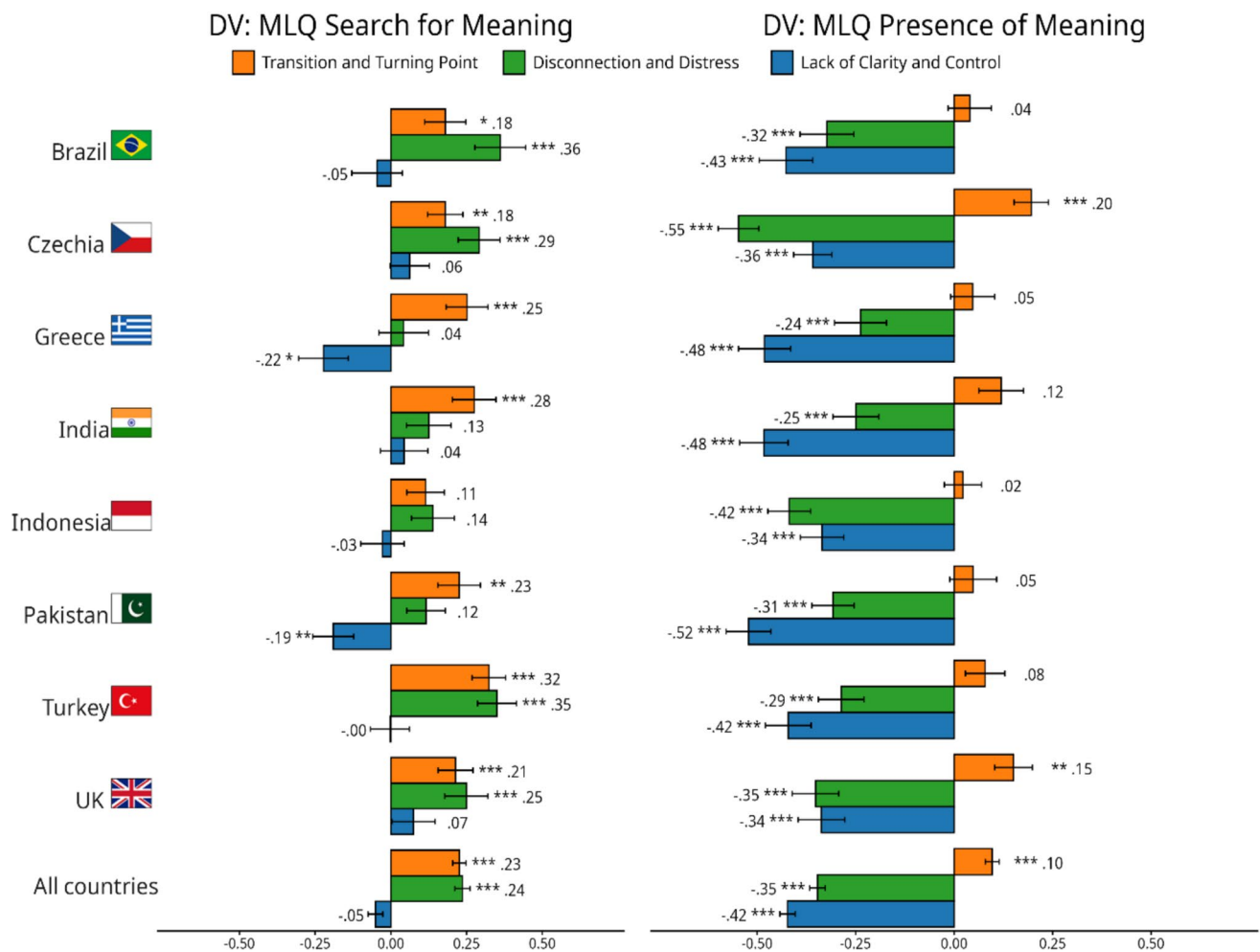


Fig. 1 Regression Co-efficient Beta values for 18 Regression Models, with (1) Disconnection & Distress, (2) Lack of Clarity and Control and (3) Transition and Turning Points (DCQ-12 subscales) as IVs, and

Search for Meaning in Life as the Dependent Variable (left figure) and Presence of Meaning in Life as Dependent Variable (right figure). *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

subscale was not a significant predictor in Turkey, United Kingdom, Brazil, India, Czechia (in line with our prediction), however it was a statistically significant negative predictor in Greece and Pakistan.

For the country-specific regression models run with *presence of meaning* as the dependent variable, two of the three subscales – *disconnection and distress* and *lack of clarity and control* – were robust negative predictors across all countries, in support of our hypothesis. Contrary to our hypothesis, the *transition and turning point* subscale was a significant positive predictor in two countries (Czechia, United Kingdom) and non-significant but marginally positive in all the other countries.

Discussion

Based on the findings from Petrov et al. (2022), we predicted that within a regression model two components of crisis (being in a life transition or turning point and being disconnected or distressed) would positively predict search for meaning, while the other component (experiencing a lack of clarity and control in life) would not predict a search for meaning. The predictive relationships between search for meaning and the three components of crisis across all countries shown by the regression models suggests that those who report heightened levels of developmental crisis are likely to also engage in a search for existential meaning. We found that a search for life's meaning was indeed positively associated in all countries with (a) being in transition/ at a turning point, and (b) feeling disconnected or distressed. This fits with past research showing elevated existential questioning and curiosity in young adults who report a crisis

episode (Duara et al., 2021; Robinson & Smith, 2009; Robinson et al., 2017). The connection with feeling distressed and disconnected also fits with data showing a negative association between search for meaning and wellbeing (Li et al., 2021).

Within the resulting model, lacking clarity and control was a non-significant predictor for search for meaning in six out of eight countries studied, and was a negative predictor in Greece and Pakistan. A possible interpretation of this is that if a young adult does not feel in control, they also don't trust that a search for meaning will be impactful, so they don't feel empowered to engage in what is ultimately an active and effortful process (Swann et al., 1981). While in most countries this is reflected in a null association, in Greece and Pakistan the negative association points to lacking clarity and control mitigating against search for meaning. This could be a function of relatively high presence of meaning levels in these countries, as shown in Table 3. Where presence of meaning is higher, the motivation for search for meaning under conditions of low perceived control may be lower.

In sum, being in a developmental crisis may involve a search for meaning, *unless* the crisis means that the person going through it feels they lack sufficient control to engage in a search. This theoretical interpretation will need to be followed up with cross-lagged designs or longitudinal designs to explore whether there is a temporal or causal relation between these variables.

Our second hypothesis pertained to *presence* of meaning in life. As predicted, within the regression models, being disconnected/distressed and lacking clarity/control were robustly associated with having a lower sense of presence of meaning in life, in all countries. The negative association with feeling distressed and disconnected is coherent with studies showing a positive association between presence of meaning and wellbeing (Li et al., 2021). We predicted that being in transition / turning point would also predict having low meaning, but in fact, being in transition / turning point was a significant *positive* predictor of feeling a presence of meaning in two countries (Czechia, United Kingdom) and non-significant but marginally positive in the other countries. Our interpretation of this general finding is as follows: When a person is distressed, disconnected and lacking control, they tend to have a sense that life lacks meaning. However, when a person is going through a life transition or turning point, the sense of progress and being on a journey that comes with such change may boost a sense of meaning in life for some, given that a life transition can bring a sense of a new possible future and new potential purpose in life (Robinson & Smith, 2009). Change and transition may boost an individual's sense of meaning through the realization of the need to work toward a possible new future, while

also embracing a renewed sense of purpose this provides. This process may serve as a process of self-actualization that buffers against feelings of helplessness or loss of control. The two countries where being in transition / turning point was a positive predictor of presence of meaning were the countries with the lowest means for presence of meaning (Czechia and the United Kingdom). As an interpretation, we propose that in countries where meaning of life is generally lower, being in transition may bring a sense of meaning in a way that is less the case where a sense of meaning is generally higher. This interpretation could be the subject of additional research.

Although not hypothesized in this study, we found that higher effect sizes were shown within each country for the regression with presence of meaning as the dependent variable, compared with the regression with search for meaning as the dependent variable, so it may be that developmental crisis is a stronger predictor of presence of meaning than of search for meaning. This could be explored in future studies.

When considered holistically, our findings provide an insight into developmental crisis in emerging adulthood. Firstly, there is much commonality across cultures, which aligns with the qualitative analysis conducted by Robinson et al. (2025), that also showed substantial cross-cultural commonalities in the form of developmental crisis in emerging adulthood. This cross-cultural uniformity points towards the theoretical proposition that developmental commonalities that pertain to the challenges of emerging adulthood predominate over cultural difference. Overall, our data point towards quarter-life crisis as a period of potential existential crisis (Buténaité et al., 2016). What makes life meaningful, both in terms of the provision of meaning-making frameworks such as religion and culture, and also participation in meaningful relationships and careers, may be disrupted during quarter-life crisis episodes, as individuals question their cultural conventions, break from past decisions and commitments, and seek a more autonomous and personally authentic way of living (Robinson & Smith, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017). However, crisis is a complex construct that has a range of components, and for the three components that are operationalized as the subscales of the DCQ-12, we find differential relationships with both presence of and search for meaning. Some components of crisis relate to having a lower sense of meaning, while others do not. The same applies to searching for a sense of meaning. Future research needs to explore further on the nature of the existential concerns that occur in crisis episodes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this study design concern the cross-sectional design, the sample composition, and the challenges

associated with multi-language cross-cultural research. Firstly, the cross-sectional study means that any inferences about potential causal linkages between crisis and meaning in life that we made above are viewed as interpretative and in need of longitudinal or experimental verification. Secondly, a key limitation lies in the demographic characteristics of the study participants. The samples from each participating country predominantly consisted of students, largely recruited through university contacts, alumni networks, and other similar channels. While this sampling strategy offered the advantage of increased demographic comparability across the different country samples, it simultaneously limits the generalisability of the study's findings. The conclusions drawn are primarily relevant to the experiences of individuals within a specific socio-economic situation and age group, namely young adults in higher education, even though non-students were present as a minority in each sample. To address this limitation, a future study with only non-student emerging adults would be beneficial to explore if these relationships manifest in the same way for them too. Further research on adults in midlife and later life is also warranted to explore the relationship between crisis and meaning in life for them too.

Our samples differ to some degree in demographic make-up; all were a mix of students/non-students and male/female, yet the ratio of the composition varied, and mean age varied. This heterogeneity may be a source of error difference between the samples, however it may add to the external validity of commonalities found, by providing additional evidence that commonalities between crisis and meaning in life manifest in emerging adulthood across cultures and also across demographic differences.

We recognize that offering a financial incentive to United Kingdom participants only in the study, which was a function of funding differentials across countries, created possible bias. However, we are confident that the small financial incentive for the United Kingdom participants provided little potential for bias given that anonymity was assured; therefore there was no potential for social desirability bias that comes with non-anonymous data collection.

Finally, conducting research across multiple languages introduces the limitation of potential variations in the meanings of words following translation. For instance, if key terms within the crisis assessment measure differ in implied intensity across languages, this could influence the likelihood of individuals endorsing certain items, consequently affecting the levels reported. However, we argue that while this challenge is inherent in cross-cultural research, its benefits justify the effort, and the risk is mitigated by employing rigorous translation and back-translation processes, which were implemented in this study.

Implications

There are a range of support organizations for young adults who are going through a quarter-life crisis, for example Quarter-life (www.quarter-life.co.uk) and Milestone Coaching (www.milestone-coaching.co.uk). There is also a considerable self-help literature on this topic (e.g., Bird, 2018; Hamilton, 2019; Poswolsky, 2016; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). The findings of this study emphasize the need for such organizations and publications, and show that understanding young adults in crisis not only involves helping them with the visible typical features of such crises, such as developing a stable career, gaining financial independence and maintaining satisfying relationships, but also with the often-hidden sense that life may be lacking meaning, and the corresponding endeavour to search for meaning. Future research could focus on evaluating meaning-focused coaching programmes, interventions or therapies with individuals in the life stage of emerging adulthood who report being in crisis, to explore if they facilitate the resolution of the crisis.

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Data Availability Data is publicly available and can be gained by contacting the corresponding author.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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