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A meaning construction pathway from search for meaning to presence of meaning

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Abstract

Introduction: Previous research has found inconsistent associations between search for meaning and presence of meaning across cultural contexts, but how search for meaning develops into presence of meaning remains unclear.
Methods: Study 1 (N = 779) was cross-sectional and Study 2 (N = 500) was a two-wave longitudinal study, with path analyses conducted separately in each. In Study 3 (N = 298), participants self-selected one of four conditions (self-development, social commitment, experiences in life, or daily-life), and one-way ANOVAs compared these conditions on coherence, purpose, mattering, and presence of meaning.
Results: Path analyses in Study 1 revealed a sequential pathway from search for meaning to presence of meaning through specific sources of meaning (self-development, social commitment, and experiences in life) and the three dimensions (coherence, purpose, and mattering). Study 2 provided longitudinal support for the proposed pathway. In Study 3, participants who chose the self-development, experiences in life, and social commitment conditions reported higher presence of meaning than those in the daily-life condition, with effects differing across coherence, purpose, and mattering.
Conclusion: The findings suggest that search for meaning may gradually develop into presence of meaning through pathways linking specific sources of meaning with coherence, purpose, and mattering. This pathway provides a framework for understanding how search for meaning may develop into presence of meaning and offers a basis for translating this process into practical approaches to meaning-oriented life education.

Keywords
Meaning in life; Meaning construction pathway; Sources of meaning; College students; Longitudinal study

Introduction

Meaning in life is fundamental to psychological health and correlates with well-being, positive affect, and adaptive adjustment (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Fischer et al., 2021). Steger and his colleagues (2006) broke the meaning in life construct down into two related but distinguishable aspects: search for meaning, defined as the extent to which individuals seek meaning in life, and presence of meaning, defined as the perception that one's life is meaningful. These two facets are conceptually connected, yet they show different relationships with mental health outcomes, suggesting that each may reflect distinct psychological processes.

Existing research shows that the presence of meaning is positively correlated with higher levels of well-being across studies, whereas the relationship between the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, and that between the search for meaning and well-being, have been inconsistent (Chu & Fung, 2021; Li et al., 2021). In Western cultures, searching for meaning is often associated with lower presence of meaning and well-being, as it may represent an existential frustration or psychological distress (Chasson et al., 2021; Cohen & Cairns, 2012). In Eastern cultures such as China, however, search for meaning is positively correlated with presence of meaning and represents engagement in a continuous self-improvement process (Lin et al., 2021). Even those who already find life meaningful may still search for meaning (Huo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2016). These findings suggest that the psychological impact of searching for meaning may depend on specific contexts and it is not merely a sign of meaninglessness.

Cultural frameworks helped us understand why the link between search for meaning and presence of meaning varies across countries (Chu & Fung, 2021; Li et al., 2018). However, little is known about how the search for meaning translates into the presence of meaning. People generally possess the motivation to search for meaning (Lin et al., 2021), but motivation alone is seldom sufficient to give people a lasting sense of meaningfulness (Park, 2010). A critical question is how the pathway from searching for meaning to presence of meaning actually operates.

According to the Hierarchic Model of Meaning, individuals derive meaning from concrete life experiences and from different sources of significance, such as self-actualization (Schnell & Becker, 2006; Schnell & Tatjana, 2009). From this perspective, individuals build meaning by actively participating in valued domains of life and by investing their personal significance in everyday experiences. Sources of meaning may thus be viewed as key contexts in which meaning develops. Engagement in self-development and personally meaningful activities, for example, has been linked to clearer goals, greater coherence, and enhanced well-being (Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Baburaj & Marathe, 2023). Yet individuals differ in which sources they prioritize—some are more oriented toward social relationships, whereas others place greater weight on self-development (Heintzelman et al., 2020). These differences may suggest that not all sources of meaning contribute equally to presence of meaning.

Another influential framework is the Tripartite Model, which distinguishes three interrelated dimensions of meaning in life: coherence, purpose, and mattering (Martela & Steger, 2016; George & Park, 2016). Coherence refers to perceiving one's life as comprehensible and integrated across past, present, and future; purpose concerns the pursuit of valued goals and life direction; and mattering reflects the perception that one's existence is significant and worthwhile. Studies have yielded mixed findings regarding how these dimensions shape presence of meaning. Cross-sectional work shows that purpose and mattering both predict meaning in life, with coherence playing a comparatively smaller role (George & Park, 2017). Longitudinal research, in contrast, finds that mattering is the most stable predictor (Costin & Vignoles, 2020). Moreover, the predictive effects of these dimensions differ across populations, cultural contexts, and domains of meaning sources (Dewitte et al., 2021; Boring et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2023). These inconsistencies indicate that coherence, purpose, and mattering may represent distinct psychological processes through which meaning is constructed. If different sources of meaning provide different opportunities for developing coherence, purpose, and mattering, then these dimensions may help explain how engagement with meaningful life domains is translated into presence of meaning.

Previous research has examined sources of meaning and the three dimensions of meaning separately (King & Hicks, 2021). Existing work has largely investigated sources of meaning and the three meaning dimensions independently, without integrating them into a unified sequential process model. Few studies have examined whether engagement with specific sources of meaning contributes to the development of coherence, purpose, and mattering, and whether these dimensions represent psychological processes linking search for meaning with presence of meaning. The present research examined a meaning construction pathway from search for meaning to presence of meaning using three complementary studies integrating cross-sectional, longitudinal, and quasi-experimental approaches. Study 1 employed a cross-sectional design to examine the associations among search for meaning, sources of meaning, coherence, purpose, mattering, and presence of meaning. Study 2 used a longitudinal design to examine the pathway. Study 3 used a quasi-experimental manipulation of different sources of meaning to test their effects on coherence, purpose, mattering, and presence of meaning.

Study 1

Study 1 employed a cross-sectional design to examine the associations among search for meaning, sources of meaning, coherence, purpose, mattering, and presence of meaning in a sample of Chinese university students.

Method

Participants

The sample size was determined a priori using the semPower package in R (Moshagen & Bader, 2024). A power analysis for the path model, based on MacCallum et al.'s (1996) RMSEA framework, specified RMSEA = .06, α = .05, and power = .80. With df = 6, this procedure indicated that 631 participants were required. To ensure adequate statistical power and account for potential exclusions, we recruited 785 undergraduate students from a university in Hainan Province, China, via an online survey. After excluding 6 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample consisted of 291 male (37.4%) and 488 female (62.6%), ranging in age from 16 to 24 years (M = 18.37, SD = 0.83).

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Northwest Normal University (Approval No. 2023087). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Measures

Meaning in life (MIL): The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) comprises 10 items assessing two subscales: Search for Meaning (SMIL), which measures the extent to which individuals are actively engaged in seeking meaning in their lives (e.g., “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful”), and Presence of Meaning(PMIL), which assesses the subjective sense that one's life is meaningful (e.g., “My life has a clear sense of purpose”). The PMIL has been widely used as an indicator of global meaning in life in prior research (Brandstätter et al., 2012), and we adopted the same practice in the present study. All items are rated on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). In this study, the Cronbach’s α values for the the total scale, PMIL and SMIL were 0.80, 0.86 and 0.86, respectively.

Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS): The Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS) comprises 15 items and 3 subscales (George & Park, 2017): Coherence, Purpose, and Mattering. Representative items include “My life makes sense” for the Coherence subscale, “I have aims in my life that are worth striving for” for the Purpose subscale, and “Even a thousand years from now, it would still matter whether I existed or not” for the Mattering subscale. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In this study, the Cronbach’s α values for the total scale, Coherence, Purpose, and Mattering subscales were 0.91, 0.84, 0.86, and 0.85, respectively.

Chinese Sources of Meaning Scale (CSMS): The Chinese Sources of Meaning Scale (Zhang et al., 2016) consists of 52 items assessing seven subscales: Self-development, Social commitment, Interpersonal relationships, Secular pursuits, Experiencing in life, Civilization, and Autonomy. A sample item is “To strive toward

my dreams and aspirations" (self-development). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In this study, the Cronbach's α for the total scale was 0.97, and the subscale alphas ranged from 0.84 to 0.93.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 20.0 and AMOS 23.0. Correlation analyses were conducted to examine associations among demographic characteristics and study variables. Path analysis was then performed to test the meaning construction model, including the pathways from search for meaning through sources of meaning and the three dimensions (coherence, purpose, and mattering) to presence of meaning.

Results

Descriptive analyses indicated that participants reported relatively high levels of both PMIL (M = 4.81, SD = 1.11) and SMIL (M = 5.06, SD = 1.15), with both means exceeding the scale midpoint of 4, consistent with prior research in student populations (Heintzelman & King, 2014; see Table1).

Table 1. *Intercorrelations Among Meaning Variables (N*=785)

Vars.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
PMIL	-											
SMIL	.122**	-										
Coh	.699***	.239***	-									
Pur	.735***	.308***	.738***	-								
Mat	.502***	.262***	.589***	.547***	-							
SD	.442***	.297***	.526***	.574***	.382***	-						
SC	.408***	.335***	.502***	.528***	.495***	.658***	-					
IR	.246***	.267***	.364***	.363***	.309***	.463***	.532***	-				
SP	.214***	.270***	.282***	.342***	.243***	.445***	.522***	.505***	-			
EL	.429**	.320***	.514***	.496***	.459***	.574***	.683***	.507***	.556***	-		
CI	.384***	.270***	.460***	.470***	.338***	.565***	.617***	.409***	.419***	.688***	-	
AU	.341***	.261***	.395***	.453***	.302***	.544***	.492***	.588***	.506***	.597***	.585***	-

Notes: PMIL, Presence of meaning; SMIL, Search for meaning; Coh, Coherence; Pur, Purpose; Mat, Mattering; SD, Self-development; SC, Social commitment; IR, Interpersonal relationships; EL, Experiences in life; SP, Secular pursuits; CI, civilization; AU, autonomy; *, **, and *** denote $p < .05$, $p < .01$, and $p < .001$, respectively.

A path analysis was conducted in AMOS 23.0 to examine the proposed meaning

construction model, specifying pathways from SMIL through sources of meaning and the three dimensions to PMIL. The revised model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data, $\chi^2(6)= 9.918$, RMSEA = .029 90% CI [.000, .006] , GFI = .997, AGFI =.981, CFI = .998 and TLI =.994.

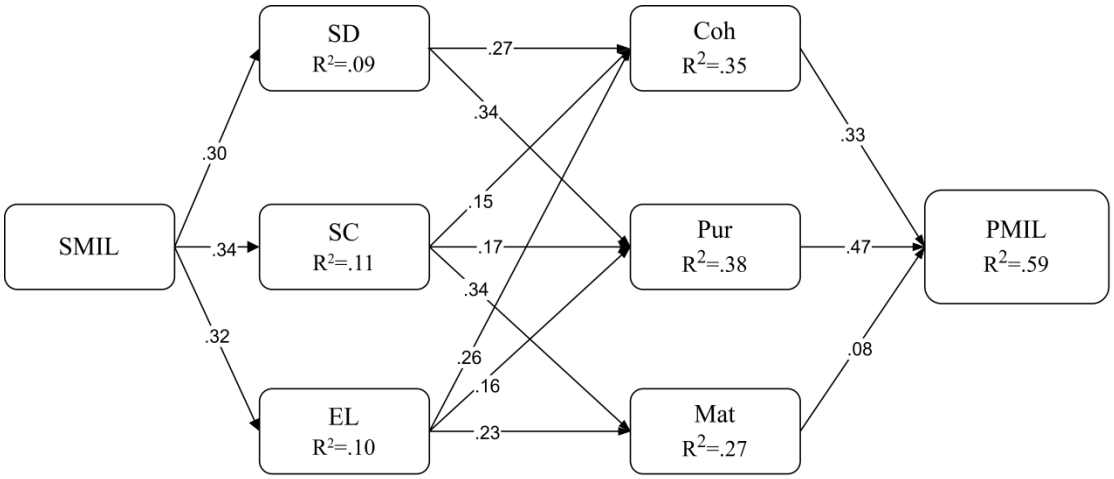


Fig. 1 *Structural model linking Sources of Meaning, the Three Dimensions, and Presence of Meaning* Notes: SMIL, Search for meaning; PMIL, Presence of meaning; Coh, Coherence; Pur, Purpose; Mat, Mattering; SD, Self-development; SC, Social commitment; EL, Experiences in life; Standardized path coefficients are presented. R^2 values are shown for endogenous variables. This figure was created using Drawio.

In the final model, SMIL was positively associated with self-development, social commitment, and experiences in life (all *p*s < .001). As shown in the figure, self-development showed its strongest associations with purpose and mattering, with the path to purpose being the strongest. Social commitment and experiences in life were both associated with all three dimensions; social commitment showed its strongest association with mattering, whereas experiences in life showed its strongest association with coherence among the three dimensions (see Fig.1).

Coherence, purpose, and mattering were each positively associated with PMIL, with purpose showing the strongest association, followed by coherence and mattering. Bootstrap analyses with 5,000 resamples showed a significant standardized total effect of SMIL on PMIL (β = .185, 95% BC CI [.144, .231], p < .001), and the model explained 59.4% of the variance in PMIL. Significant specific standardized indirect effects were found for SMIL through self-development via purpose (indirect effect = .046, 95% BC CI [.030, .068], p < .001), social commitment via purpose (indirect effect = .026, 95% BC CI [.012, .045], p < .001), experiences in life via coherence (indirect effect = .026, 95% BC CI [.015, .044], p < .001), and self-development via coherence (indirect effect = .025, 95% BC CI [.016, .040], p < .001).

Discussion

Study 1 provided evidence for the proposed meaning construction pathway. Search for meaning was associated with presence of meaning through engagement with specific sources of meaning and the development of coherence, purpose, and mattering. The distinct patterns across sources were particularly informative: self-development showed its strongest link with purpose, social commitment with mattering, and experiences in life with coherence. These findings suggested that different sources of meaning may engage different aspects of meaning construction and contribute to presence of meaning in different ways.

The findings also fit with the Hierarchic Model of Meaning (Schnell & Becker, 2006), which proposes that meaning is constructed not through abstract reflection alone but through sustained engagement with meaningful life domains and the ongoing interpretation and integration of lived experience. From this perspective, engagement with specific sources of meaning may represent an important process through which search for meaning develops into presence of meaning.

Study 2

To extend the findings of Study 1, Study 2 adopted a longitudinal design to examine the proposed meaning construction pathway over time. The study examined whether the associations among search for meaning, sources of meaning, coherence, purpose, mattering, and presence of meaning persisted across measurement occasions.

Method

Participants

The sample size was determined a priori using the semPower package in R (Moshagen & Bader, 2024). A power analysis for the path model, based on MacCallum et al.'s (1996) RMSEA framework, specified RMSEA = .05 to test the null hypothesis of close fit, with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80. With $df = 49$, the analysis indicated that 249 participants were required.

Consistent with the procedure used by Costin and Vignoles (2020), a one-month interval was used between the two assessments. After providing informed consent, 630 participants completed the baseline survey (Time 1, T1). One month later, participants were invited to complete a follow-up survey (Time 2, T2). To ensure data quality, attention-check items (e.g., “Please select ‘strongly disagree’ for this item.”) were embedded in both survey waves. Participants who failed the attention checks or did not complete both assessments were excluded from subsequent analyses. The final longitudinal sample comprised 500 participants, representing a retention rate of 64.1%. The sample included 141 males (28.2%) and 359 females (71.8%), ranging in age from 17 to 24 years ($M = 18.52$, $SD = 0.71$). Participants received a small monetary incentive (approximately RMB 1) after completing each survey wave. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Northwest Normal University (Approval No.

2023087). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Measures

***Meaning in life (MIL)*:** In line with Study 1, the MIL was administered at T1 and T2. The Cronbach's α for the MIL scale was 0.81 at T1 and 0.84 at T2; for the PMIL, 0.87 and 0.78; and for the SMIL, 0.84 and 0.90, respectively.

***Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS)*:** Consistent with Study 1, the MEMS was administered at both T1 and T2. Cronbach's α for the total scale was 0.92 and 0.93 at T1 and T2, respectively; for the Coherence subscale, 0.84 and 0.89; for the Purpose subscale, 0.87 and 0.90; and for the Mattering subscale, 0.86 and 0.80.

***Chinese Sources of Meaning Scale (CSMS)*:** Consistent with Study 1, Cronbach's α for the total scale was 0.97 at T1 and 0.98 at T2, and subscale alphas ranged from 0.84 to 0.95.

Results

A longitudinal serial mediation model was estimated to examine whether SMIL predicted subsequent PMIL through sources of meaning and the three meaning dimensions. The model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data, $\chi^2(49)= 115.51$, $p < .01$, TLI = .973, CFI = .985, AGFI = .933, BIC = 463.531, RMSEA(90% CI[0.040, 0.065]) = .052.

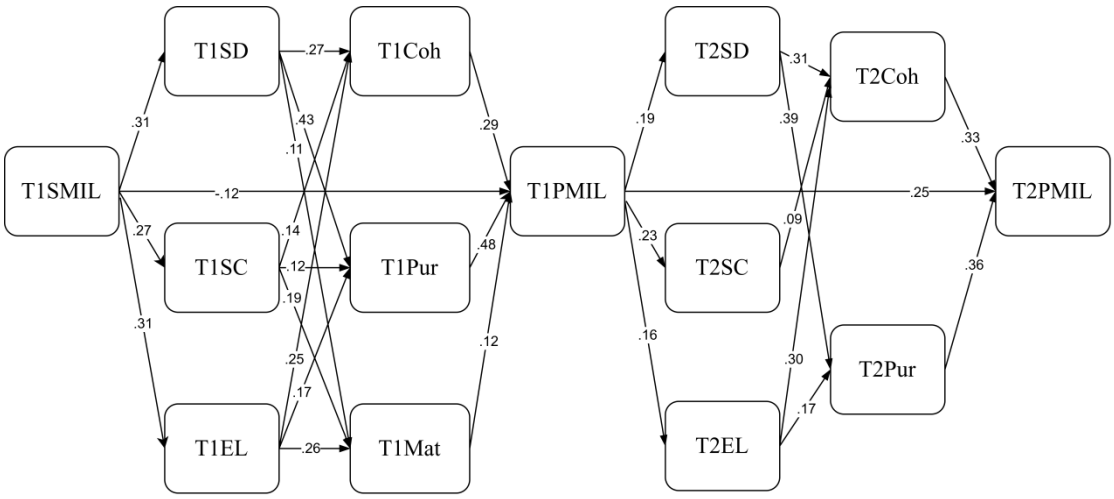


Fig.2 *Serial Mediation Linking T1SMIL and T2PMIL.* Notes: Variable abbreviations are defined in Fig.1. This figure was created using Drawio.

At T1, self-development, social commitment, and experiences in life were positively associated with T1 PMIL through the three dimensions. Self-development showed the strongest association with purpose, whereas experiences in life and social commitment were more strongly associated with mattering and coherence, respectively.

Longitudinally, T1 PMIL positively predicted all three T2 sources of meaning (*β*s = .16–.23). At T2, coherence and purpose significantly predicted PMIL, whereas mattering did not. The pattern of source–dimension associations was broadly consistent across the two time points, with self-development showing the strongest association with purpose (see Fig. 2).

Table2. *Mediation Effects Between Search for Meaning (T1) and Presence of Meaning (T2)(N=500)*

Effect Type	Path	*β*(Std.)	95% BC CI	*p*
Indirect Effects	T1SMIL→T1SD→T1Coh→T1PMIL→ T2SD→T2Coh→T2PMIL	0.00044	[0.0002, 0.0012]	<.001***
	T1SMIL→T1SD→T1Pur→T1PMIL→ T2SD→T2Pur→T2PMIL	0.00160	[0.0007, 0.0037]	<.001***
	T1SMIL→T1SC→T1Coh→T1PMIL→ T2SC→T2Coh→T2PMIL	0.00006	[0.000009, 0.0003]	.019*
	T1SMIL→T1EL→T1Coh→T1PMIL→ T2EL→T2Coh→T2PMIL	0.00035	[0.0001, 0.0010]	<.001***
	T1SMIL→T1EL→T1Pur→T1PMIL→ T2EL→T2Coh→T2PMIL	0.00046	[0.0001, 0.0013]	<.001***
Total Effect	T1SMIL→T2PMIL	0.092	[0.044, 0.140]	<.001***
Direct Effects	T1PMIL→T2PMIL	0.249	[0.182, 0.318]	<.001***
	T2Coh→T2PMIL	0.326	[0.202, 0.451]	<.001***
	T2Pur→T2PMIL	0.358	[0.218, 0.482]	<.001***

Notes: Variable abbreviations are defined in Table 1. *, **, and *** denote $p < .05$, $p < .01$, and $p < .001$, respectively.

Bootstrap analyses (5,000 resamples) indicated that the association between T1 SMIL and T2 PMIL was primarily transmitted through the pathway involving T1 self-development and T1 purpose. Additional indirect effects through T1 coherence were also significant, although smaller in magnitude (see Table 2). The longitudinal pattern closely paralleled the cross-sectional findings, indicating that the meaning construction pathway identified in Study 1 remained stable over time.

Discussion

The findings of Study 2 replicated those of Study 1 and further indicated that the pathway from search for meaning to presence of meaning was not immediate but developed gradually over time. Search for meaning became associated with presence of meaning through continued engagement with specific sources of meaning, together with gradual increases in coherence and purpose. Presence of meaning therefore

appeared to depend on sustained engagement with meaningful life domains, through which individuals progressively integrated life experiences and clarified valued goals.

Viewed longitudinally, the present findings supported the view that meaning construction was a cumulative developmental process rather than a discrete psychological event (Newman et al., 2018). The longitudinal findings also provided support for the proposed meaning construction pathway, indicating that the association between search for meaning and presence of meaning reflected an evolving process of meaning construction rather than an immediate consequence of searching for meaning.

Study 3

Study 1 and Study 2 both pointed to the same pathway, yet they could not determine whether involvement with specific meaning sources actually helps build coherence, purpose, mattering, or presence of meaning. Study 3 addressed this question using a quasi-experimental design in which participants self-selected one of four conditions: self-development, experiences in life, social commitment, or a daily-life condition.

Method

Participants

Sample size was estimated using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) for a one-way ANOVA. Assuming an effect size of $f = 0.25$, $\alpha = 0.05$, and statistical power $(1–\beta) = 0.95$, the required minimum sample size was 280 participants, with at least 70 participants per condition. Anticipating participant exclusions, 300 healthy undergraduate students were recruited through Credamo (Data and Model Creator). After providing informed consent, participants selected one of four available experimental projects on Credamo. Each project corresponded to one condition: self-development, social commitment, experiences in life, or a daily-life condition. Participants could choose only one project, and assignment to condition was therefore self-selected rather than randomized. Each condition aimed to recruit approximately 75 participants. Each participant received a small monetary incentive (approximately ¥3) upon completing the study.

Two participants were excluded because they failed the task compliance check, resulting in a final sample of 298 participants. The sample comprised 84 males (28.2%) and 214 females (71.8%), ranging in age from 17 to 26 years ($M = 20.77$, $SD = 1.57$). Final group sizes were 75 in the self-development condition, 74 in the social commitment condition, 75 in the experiences in life condition, and 74 in the daily-life condition. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Northwest Normal University (Approval No. 2023087). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Procedures and Measures

***Presence of Meaning (PMIL)*:** Presence of meaning was assessed using the same measure described in Study 1.

***Multidimensional Meaning in Life Scale (MMIL)*:** To reduce participant burden, coherence, purpose, and mattering were assessed using the corresponding subscales of the Multidimensional Meaning in Life Scale (Costin & Vignoles, 2020). The three subscales comprise 12 items (four per dimension), rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Table 3. *Study conditions and scenario-based writing instructions*

Condition	Instruction summary (abbreviated)
Self-development	Participants were asked to recall and describe a recent experience of personal growth or improvement (e.g., achievement, learning a new skill, completing a difficult task).
Social commitment	Participants were asked to recall and describe a recent prosocial or helping experience (e.g., volunteering, donation, assisting others or organizing activities).
Experiences in Life	Participants were asked to recall and describe a recent experience of appreciating life or emotional engagement (e.g., perceiving natural beauty, immersion in activities, or interpersonal connectedness).
Daily-life	Participants were asked to recall and describe a routine daily activity from the past week (e.g., going to the library, classroom, or supermarket).

Participants chose one of four conditions: three specific sources of meaning (self-development, social commitment, and experiences in life) and a daily-life condition. A scenario-based writing task adapted from Kim et al. (2022) was used to activate the chosen meaning source (see Table 3). Participants first read condition-specific instructions, imagined themselves in the corresponding scenario, and then completed the writing task about a personal experience related to that source. Subsequently, they completed the demographic questionnaire, the PMIL, and the MMIL.

Results

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare the four conditions (self-development, social commitment, experiences in life, and daily-life) on coherence, purpose, mattering, and PMIL. Homogeneity of variance was satisfied for coherence, mattering, and PMIL; these variables were analyzed using standard ANOVAs with Tukey post hoc tests. Because the homogeneity assumption was violated for purpose, Welch's ANOVA and Tamhane's T2 post hoc tests were applied.

Significant effects of condition were observed for coherence, purpose, mattering,

and PMIL (all *p*s < .001; see Table 4). Compared with the daily-life condition, participants in the self-development, experiences in life, and social commitment conditions reported higher levels of purpose (all *p*s ≤ .001), mattering and PMIL (all *p*s ≤ .024). Coherence showed a different pattern: only participants in the self-development ($p = .001$) and experiences in life ($p < .001$) conditions scored higher than those in the daily-life condition, whereas coherence did not differ between the social commitment and daily-life conditions ($p = .471$).

Table4. *Means (SD) and one-way ANOVA results for four quasi-experimental conditions*

Variable	Self-development	Social commitment	Experiences in Life	Daily-life	*F*	*p*
	N=75	*N*=74	*N*=75	*N*=74		
Coherence	5.48[a]	5.15	5.51[a]	4.95[b]	7.634	<.001***
Purpose	5.60[a]	5.56[a]	5.65[a]	5.07[b]	9.270	<.001***
Mattering	5.59[a]	5.52[a]	5.58[a]	5.00[b]	9.213	<.001***
PMIL	5.14[a]	5.05[a]	5.18[a]	4.63[b]	5.810	.001**

Note: Variable abbreviations are defined in Table 1. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 3 extended the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by providing important evidence for the proposed meaning construction pathway. The effects of the conditions differed across the three dimensions. Participants in the self-development and experiences in life conditions showed higher coherence, purpose, mattering, and PMIL, whereas those in the social commitment condition showed increases only in purpose, mattering, and PMIL. Different sources of meaning therefore appeared to contribute to meaning construction through partially distinct psychological processes rather than a common underlying mechanism.

One possible explanation is that activating specific sources of meaning may encourage individuals to reorganize and interpret their experiences from a meaning-oriented perspective, thereby facilitating meaning construction. This interpretation aligns with prior research on autobiographical memory, which has shown that recalling personal experiences can enhance meaning in life (Cho & Jang, 2021; Yin et al., 2025). Unlike interventions that rely on abstract or prolonged reflection on the meaning of life (Trent & King, 2010), the present study guided participants to recall experiences related to self-development, experiences in life, and social commitment. When individuals organize and interpret their life experiences around these meaningful domains, they may develop greater coherence, clarify valued goals and life directions, and strengthen their sense of mattering. These findings provide important evidence for the proposed meaning construction pathway, suggesting that activating concrete sources of meaning

facilitates the process of meaning construction.

General Discussion

The results of Studies 1-3 suggested that search for meaning was linked to the presence of meaning through engagement with specific sources of meaning and the development of coherence, purpose, and mattering, with purpose playing the most prominent roles. These results help clarify how the motivation to search for meaning was translated into the presence of meaning and provide support for the meaning construction pathway.

A Meaning Construction Pathway Linking Search for Meaning and Presence of Meaning

Earlier work showed that search for meaning might promote personal growth and psychological functioning (Vohs et al., 2019), but it was also associated with uncertainty, distress, and existential struggle (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). These seemingly inconsistent findings suggested that search for meaning alone was unlikely to determine whether individuals ultimately experienced their lives as meaningful. Park (2010) similarly suggested that the consequences of search for meaning depended partly on whether individuals already possessed a sense of meaning and direction in their lives.

The present findings offer a possible explanation for these mixed results. Search for meaning was linked to presence of meaning through a meaning construction pathway rather than as a direct association. The association appears to depend on whether individuals acted on this motivation by engaging with concrete sources of meaning. Continued involvement in self-development, social commitment, and experiences in life was associated with greater coherence, purpose, and mattering, which in turn contributed to presence of meaning. Search for meaning therefore appears to mark the starting point of meaning construction, while engagement with concrete sources of meaning provides the contexts in which meaning can develop.

This interpretation further extends the Hierarchic Model of Meaning (Schnell & Becker, 2006; Schnell & Tatjana, 2009), which proposed that meaning is constructed through sustained engagement with concrete sources of meaning and the ongoing interpretation of lived experience. The findings showed that different sources of meaning promoted presence of meaning through distinct combinations of coherence, purpose, and mattering, suggesting that meaning construction followed different pathways depending on the source of meaning. For instance, engagement in self-development helped individuals connect everyday experiences with valued goals, which was associated with greater purpose. This perspective also helps explain why search for meaning had been positively associated with presence of meaning in Chinese cultural contexts. In Chinese cultural contexts, search for meaning has been linked to self-improvement and continued personal development (Huo et al., 2021). For Chinese university students, engagement in self-development, social commitment, and

experiences in life may therefore provide concrete contexts in which search for meaning gradually develops into presence of meaning.

Coherence, Purpose, and Mattering as Distinct Mechanisms of Meaning Construction

According to the Tripartite Model, coherence, purpose, and mattering represent three core dimensions of meaning in life (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). The present findings showed that these three dimensions were not equally associated with presence of meaning. Purpose showed the strongest association, a pattern that was consistent with Costin and Vignoles (2022), who found that purpose was most closely related to meaning in life. Across Studies 1 and 2, different sources of meaning were also more closely linked to particular dimensions: self-development was more closely associated with purpose, experiences in life with coherence, and social commitment with mattering. These findings suggest that different sources of meaning may be linked to distinct dimensions of meaning construction, which may in turn contribute differently to the development of presence of meaning.

The stronger association between purpose and presence of meaning may partly reflect the developmental stage of the participants. University students are often engaged in identity exploration, future planning, and goal formation, making questions about personal direction and future goals particularly salient during emerging adulthood (Rice et al., 2023). A clearer sense of direction may help individuals organize their current experiences around personally valued goals and, in turn, strengthen their sense of meaning (Baburaj & Marathe, 2023). Coherence, by comparison, is more closely concerned with making sense of past experiences. Bringing significant events and everyday experiences into a more coherent life narrative may help individuals understand their own life trajectories and recognize meaning in ordinary experiences (Kim et al., 2022). Purpose and coherence may therefore enter meaning construction in different ways, with purpose providing direction for future action and coherence helping individuals integrate their experiences across time.

The nonsignificant longitudinal indirect effect of mattering should not be taken to mean that mattering was unrelated to meaning in life. Its contribution may have depended more strongly on the psychological context in which meaning was being considered. In the present study, mattering was assessed in terms of one's relationship with a broader existential framework. Such judgments involve considering whether one's existence has value and significance beyond immediate life experiences. Mattering may therefore be less readily activated during everyday meaning construction than coherence or purpose (Prinzing et al., 2023). Its role may become more apparent when individuals confront existential questions or situations that prompt them to reconsider their value and significance.

Differential Functions of Sources of Meaning in Meaning Construction

Among university students, self-development, experiences in life, and social commitment emerged as the three sources of meaning most consistently associated with presence of meaning. This result might have reflected that these domains correspond closely to the developmental priorities of emerging adulthood, during which personal growth, achievement, and meaningful life experiences become increasingly salient as individuals explore identity and establish future goals (Arnett, 2000).

All three sources of meaning were associated with presence of meaning, yet they were linked to coherence, purpose, and mattering in different ways, suggesting that each source may contribute to meaning construction through a distinct psychological pathway. Self-development provided opportunities to pursue competence, autonomy, and personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Experiences in life encouraged individuals to recognize meaning in both significant events and everyday experiences (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Kim et al., 2022). Social commitment involves contribution, responsibility, and interpersonal connectedness. Helping others and assuming social responsibility might strengthen individuals' sense of personal value while reinforcing the meaningfulness of their lives (Prinzing et al., 2022; Dakin et al., 2021).

The findings also point to a practical direction for meaning-oriented life education. Previous studies showed that goal-setting and meaning-focused interventions during adolescence and emerging adulthood could promote positive developmental outcomes (Morisano et al., 2010; Bundick, 2011). Simply encouraging students to search for meaning, however, may not be sufficient to foster presence of meaning. Educational programs can provide opportunities for students to explore personal goals through self-development, recognize meaning in everyday experiences through experiences in life, and develop a sense of personal value through helping others and fulfilling social responsibilities within social commitment. Continued reflection and active involvement in these areas may give students concrete experiences through which meaning can develop.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several limitations. First, Study 2 included only two measurement waves, which limited our ability to examine how the meaning construction pathway unfolded over a longer period. Future studies with more measurement occasions and longer follow-up periods could better capture the temporal dynamics of meaning construction. Second, in Study 3, participants were not randomly assigned to conditions, which may have introduced self-selection bias and affected the comparability of the conditions. Third, Study 3 assessed the immediate effects of a single-session manipulation and therefore could not determine whether these effects were sustained over time. Future studies could use random assignment and longer-term or repeated interventions to examine whether engagement with sources of meaning produces lasting changes in presence of meaning.

Conclusions

Across three studies, the findings supported a meaning construction pathway linking search for meaning with presence of meaning. When individuals engaged with concrete sources of meaning, particularly self-development, experiences in life, and social commitment, and developed greater coherence and purpose through these experiences, search for meaning was more likely to develop into presence of meaning. The findings also suggested that encouraging individuals to reflect on and engage with specific sources of meaning may be more beneficial for fostering presence of meaning than simply maintaining the motivation to search.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

XZ: Designing the experiment, Methodology, Writing and Revising the manuscript, Supervision.

TK: Data Collection, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing.

JY: Data Collection, Methodology.

JJ: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing, Supervision – Review & Editing.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ETHIC APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the College of Psychology, Northwest Normal University, Gansu Province, China (Approval No. 2023087). All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of institutional and/or research committee and with the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki, as revised in 2013.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of institutional and/or research committee and with the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki, as revised in 2013.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not Applicable.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to institutional restrictions on participant confidentiality but may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING

For the cross-sectional and longitudinal observational studies (Studies 1 and 2), we followed the STROBE guidelines. For the quasi-experimental study (Study 3), we followed the CONSORT guidelines.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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