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## Seeking Significance: A Comparative Study on Understanding Purpose and Meaning in Life Among the Elderly

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the purpose and meaning in life among the older adults in the different municipalities of Kayapa, Solano, Mallig, and Natonin. Circumstances like social isolation and feelings of loneliness, especially if they reside alone, face mobility challenges, or have suffered the loss of close friends and family members can significantly impact their perception of purpose and meaning in life. Hence, this study also aims to help foster psychological resilience, providing older adults with greater emotional stability and life satisfaction. A descriptive-comparative approach was employed to investigate the sense of purpose and meaning in life among the respondents. A survey questionnaire, the Purpose in Life Test, and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire were used to gather data among the respondents. The study revealed that the older adults had a high level of purpose in life ( $M=122.25$ ,  $sd=14.22$ ). Furthermore, significant differences in the level of purpose in life were found on source of income, marital status, residence, religion, and number of children, indicating that these variables play a meaningful role in shaping the older adults' sense of purpose. Moreover, the older adults also had a very high presence of meaning in life ( $M=30.27$ ,  $sd=4.75$ ) and a moderate search for meaning in life ( $M=24.50$ ,  $sd=8.65$ ). Significant differences were also found on residence, religion, children, and grandchildren. This indicates that even though older adults had a high sense of meaning in life they still seek for meaning in their lives.

*Keywords:* older adults, senior citizens, well-being, mental well-being, life satisfaction, quality of life

### INTRODUCTION

As people age, they face challenges such as declining health, social isolation, and financial hardship, which can threaten their sense of meaning and purpose (World Health Organization, 2024; NCOA, 2024; Kaplan, 2025). In the Philippines, many older adults, especially in rural communities, experience loneliness, poverty, and limited access to support systems, making them vulnerable to existential struggles (HelpAge International, 2023; Cherry, 2023). Despite the presence of laws like the Expanded Senior Citizens Act (RA 9994) and other support programs, implementation remains inconsistent (Rodriguez, 2023).

Purpose and meaning in life are crucial to the emotional and psychological well-being of older adults, contributing to positive aging, resilience, and overall life satisfaction (Asharani et al., 2022). Meaning in life involves recognizing one's significance, experiencing personal growth, and contributing beyond oneself (Ackerman, 2018), while purpose refers to having meaningful goals and a sense of direction in life (Adluru, 2023; Cemental, 2024). These two concepts are deeply interconnected—when individuals believe their life has meaning, they are more likely to pursue purposeful goals (Hicks & King, 2021; Steger, 2024).

#### *Existential Theory*

Frankl (1959) developed existential theory, emphasizing the individual's responsibility to find unique meaning in life rather than viewing humans as mechanistic beings. He believed that the search for meaning is the primary motivation in life, not secondary to instincts (Bushkin et al., 2021). Meaning can be found through work, love, or the attitude one adopts toward unavoidable suffering. Frankl asserted that even in the most painful situations, individuals retain

the freedom to choose their response. His theory aligns with the study by highlighting how people overcome existential challenges, such as those experienced during aging, to create purpose and psychological well-being.

### *Purpose in Life*

In Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl (1959) emphasized the centrality of purpose to human well-being and introduced the concept of the "will to meaning"—the innate drive to discover life's purpose. He noted that the absence of purpose leads to existential frustration, often resulting in depression, boredom, or risky behaviors. Frankl (1984) stated that meaning can be found through work, cultural or natural experiences, and loving others in their uniqueness. This theory provides a foundation for understanding how older adults find significance despite losses or challenges, which is vital in promoting resilience and psychological health.

This study aims to unveil significant differences among older adult members. Specifically, it sought to achieve this goal by determining the profile of the participants in terms of sex, civil status, residence, living arrangement, number of children, source of income, number of grandchildren, religion, and highest educational attainment. It also determined the respondents' level of purpose in life, the difference in purpose in life by profile, their level of meaning in life, the difference in meaning in life by profile, and the relationship between purpose in life and meaning in life.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a quantitative research design utilizing descriptive-comparative and correlational designs to explore purpose and meaning in life among Filipino older adults. The descriptive-comparative research design helped to describe the characteristics of the population and the phenomena of the study, as well as compare the differences in the level of purpose in life by profile and meaning in life among older adults. The correlational design examined the relationship between participants' purpose and meaning in life. On the other hand, the quantitative research design assisted in generating and analyzing numerical data to test the hypotheses related to the variables.

The study's respondents were 400 Filipino adults aged 60 years and above. The participants were recruited from 4 municipalities namely Solano and Kayapa, Nueva Vizcaya, Natonin, Mountain Province and Maling, Isabela, with 50 male and 50 female per municipality. In selecting participants, stratified and purposive sampling method ensured representation by relevant characteristics and to select participants who met the inclusion criteria.

The research utilized a survey questionnaire and the two standardized tools: Purpose in Life Test, and Meaning in Life Questionnaire, translated from English into local dialects of the Philippines: Tagalog, Balangao, and Kalanguya by certified translators of the respective dialects.

The study started when the researchers' secured clearances from the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) and the University Research Center (URC). Data gathering was administered through face-to-face surveys using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, and if necessary, the researchers read the questionnaire in the preferred dialect of the participants. The researchers reached out to the participants through house-to-house operations, with or without the assistance of social workers from the municipality or barangay. Alternatively, they engaged participants during municipal activities and assemblies with senior citizens, providing simple snacks to the participants. After gathering the necessary responses for the study, the researcher proceeded with data analysis. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 16.0.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Section 1. Purpose in Life

Overall, the respondents demonstrated a high sense of purpose in life (PIL), reflecting strong direction, fulfillment, and clear life goals. Several key factors influenced these scores. Elders who were still working reported significantly higher PIL than those who were not, suggesting that continued engagement in work fosters a greater sense of meaning, while reliance on pensions or family support may diminish it. According to a study from the University of Michigan (2025), working after age 50 generally improves physical health, mental health, and overall well-being for many older adults. Working provides a sense of purpose, keeps the brain sharp, and fosters social connections, contributing to enhanced health and satisfaction.

Marital status also played a role, with married individuals showing the highest purpose, followed by widowed and separated elders. In contrast, singles and those in non-marital relationships had lower PIL, indicating that marriage may provide more social and emotional stability. Place of residence also influenced purpose, with elders from rural areas such as Natonin scoring highest, likely due to stronger cultural and social involvement, compared to lower scores in urban areas like Solano. Religion was another contributing factor; participants from Anglican and Tribal Christian Ministries of the Kalanguya reported the highest PIL, reflecting the positive impact of faith communities that actively involve elders. Meanwhile, those from Iglesia ni Cristo and Born Again groups had lower scores, possibly due to less elder-focused engagement. For many older adults, religion plays a central role in providing structure, meaning, and support in their daily lives (Dadswell & Malone, 2018).

Finally, the number of children affected PIL, with those having four children scoring highest, highlighting the role of family and generative responsibilities in enhancing life purpose, while childless elders reported the lowest scores.

### Section 2. Meaning in Life

The respondents had a high presence of meaning and moderate search for meaning in life. This suggests that while most elders felt that their lives were meaningful, some continued to seek deeper significance and purpose. Several demographic factors influenced these perceptions. Elders from rural areas like Natonin had the highest sense of meaning, followed by those in Kayapa and Mallig, while those in urbanized Solano scored the lowest. This suggests that rural environments with strong cultural traditions and communal roles enhance meaning, whereas urban settings may lead to role loss and a sense of disconnection. Studies show that communities with strong social networks greatly improve one's perceptions of life's meaning by providing emotional support during challenging times (Senior Navigator, 2024).

Religion also played a significant role; members of the Tribal Christian Ministries of the Kalanguya reported the highest level of meaning, followed by Anglicans, while Evangelicals had the lowest. According to Dadswell and Malone (2018), religion and spirituality can bring a sense of structure, meaning, and clarity to everyday life. These findings point to the importance of religious communities that provide active roles for elders and promote cultural continuity.

Family structure further contributed to meaning in life. Participants with three to five children reported the highest scores, emphasizing the emotional and symbolic value of parenting. Similarly, elders with six to fifteen grandchildren experienced the highest presence of meaning, while those without grandchildren experienced the lowest presence of meaning, while those without grandchildren had the lowest. Grandchildren offer companionship, a sense of identity, and opportunities for intergenerational exchange, all of which reinforce a deep and enduring sense of life purpose in older adulthood. This dynamic interaction within families is crucial in shaping one's perceived meaning in life (Vu & Phung, 2021).

### Section 3. Relationship of Purpose in Life and Meaning in Life

**Table 1**

*Relationship Between the Purpose and Meaning in Life*

		<i>Presence of Meaning</i>	<i>Search for Meaning</i>
<i>Purpose in Life</i>	<i>r</i>	.510	-.043
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	.000	.387
	<i>N</i>	400	400

$p < 0.01$

The study investigated the relationship between the purpose and meaning in life and its dimension in older adults, focusing on the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. Using Pearson correlation analysis, results revealed a moderate positive correlation ( $r = .150$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) between purpose in life and the presence of meaning, indicating that those with a stronger sense of purpose tend to experience more meaning in their lives. Previous research supports the notion that having a purpose enhances life satisfaction and contributes to a coherent and significant existence. However, the relationship between purpose and the search for meaning was not significant ( $r = -.043$ ,  $p = .387$ ), suggesting that actively searching for meaning is not inherently linked to having a strong purpose. The search for meaning often emerges from life challenges rather than a direct association with purpose. Additionally, cultural factors shape the search for meaning; individuals may seek meaning irrespective of their sense of purpose. While the absence of meaning can drive one's pursuit of it, the findings indicate that those who possess a strong purpose tend to experience meaning more readily, reducing the need for an active search.

Findings from the study on the search for meaning of Steger et al. (2008) show that lacking meaning often motivates the search for it, but searching for meaning does not lead to its presence. Schnell (2009) also found that individuals actively searching for meaning may experience existential concerns, particularly when they struggle to find stable sources of purpose.

### Conclusion

The study reveals that older adults across various municipalities generally possess a strong sense of purpose in life, although responses varied slightly due to factors such as personal experiences, social relationships, cultural backgrounds, and life circumstances. Gender did not significantly influence either the presence or the search for meaning in life, suggesting that purpose and meaning are shaped more by psychosocial factors than by sex differences. Financial independence, particularly through business and employment, was found to contribute positively to both purpose and meaning in life, while dependence on family or pensions showed a lesser impact. Marital status also plays a role; those who are married or have been married (widowed or separated) tend to report a higher sense of purpose, while those in a current relationship showed the highest level of presence and search for meaning. Residence emerged as a significant factor, with elders from rural areas like Natonin and Kayapa reporting a stronger sense of purpose and meaning compared to those from more urbanized areas. While living arrangements had little effect or did not significantly affect purpose, they were associated with differences in meaning, highlighting the need for emotional and social support, particularly for those living alone. Religion also influenced both purpose and meaning, with particular faith communities reporting higher levels, likely due to differences in religious teachings and spiritual engagement. Educational attainment did not significantly affect the presence of meaning, but it did influence the search for meaning. Elementary undergraduates reported the highest levels of search for meaning, possibly reflecting a desire for personal growth and exploration. A weak but significant correlation was found between the number of children and a greater presence of meaning, supporting traditional beliefs in the emotional and social value of family. However, the presence of grandchildren was not linked to meaning, although it did moderately influence the search for it, perhaps due to the joys and stresses associated with caregiving roles.

## Recommendations

Older adults are encouraged to engage in hobbies, volunteer work, and community events to maintain a strong sense of purpose and enhance social connections. Joining support groups that align with their marital status can also foster emotional well-being and provide a space to share common experiences. When facing existential concerns, seeking counseling or mental health services is recommended to support emotional health. Additionally, participating in religious or spiritual activities may offer deeper personal meaning, comfort, and guidance during later life.

For the community, it is encouraged to develop localized programs that cater to the unique needs of older adults based on their place of residence, urban, rural, or suburban, to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Implementing livelihood programs and part-time job opportunities can help older adults maintain financial independence and a continued sense of purpose. Additionally, community-based initiatives that promote social engagement, personal growth, and emotional well-being should be established to enhance their overall sense of meaning and quality of life.

Future researchers can include Indigenous people as respondents to ensure a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the topic. Their participation can offer valuable cultural insights and promote culturally sensitive findings that reflect population diversity. Additionally, exploring the role of religion in shaping individuals' sense of purpose and meaning in life can provide important insights into how spirituality influences identity, decision-making, and psychological well-being. It is also recommended to conduct regression analysis between key variables to determine the strength and nature of their relationships, allowing for a deeper and more statistically robust understanding of how various factors interact and influence outcomes.

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