

Exploration of the Relationship Between Goal Engagement Capability, Meaning in Life, and Well-being among College Students

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Abstract: *With the changes in the higher education environment, the relationship between college students' meaning in life, goal engagement capability, and meaning in life has gradually attracted widespread academic attention. As an individual's deep understanding of life's purpose and value, the meaning in life significantly affects college students' goal engagement capability, which in turn impacts their well-being. This paper analyzes the theoretical connection between life meaning, goal engagement capability, and meaning in life, exploring the mechanism by which life meaning influences students' goal engagement capability and its role in their meaning in life. The research shows that a strong meaning in life can enhance students' intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, improving their goal engagement capability, thereby promoting psychological adaptation and positive emotions in the pursuit of academic and career goals, and ultimately enhancing their well-being. This paper provides theoretical support for psychological education and student development in higher education and offers practical suggestions to promote college students' mental health and academic success.*

Keywords: *meaning in life; goal engagement capability; well-being ; College students; Self-efficacy*

Introduction

In today's society, college students face various psychological pressures and academic challenges. How to improve their mental health and enhance their well-being has become a hot topic in educational research. In recent years, researchers have gradually realized the important impact of the meaning in life on college students' psychological states, particularly in terms of goal pursuit and well-being. The meaning in life not only helps students clarify their life direction but also promotes their commitment to goals and self-realization by stimulating intrinsic motivation and enhancing self-efficacy. Therefore, exploring how the meaning in life affects students' goal engagement capability, and how this mechanism plays a mediating role in their meaning in life, has significant theoretical and practical implications. This paper aims to further explore this relationship and provide effective psychological intervention strategies for higher education.

1. Theoretical Foundation of the Relationship Between meaning in life, Goal Engagement Capability, and Meaning in life

1.1 Definition and Components of Meaning in Life

The meaning in life refers to an individual's perception and understanding of the value and purpose of their existence, which is often closely linked to self-identity, life goals, and the interpretation of the external world. Frankl (1946), in his existential psychology theory, proposed that the meaning in life is not only one of the core motivations for humans to pursue happiness, but also an important resource for maintaining psychological health when facing difficulties and challenges. In college students, the meaning in life is typically expressed as an intrinsic drive towards academic, career, and personal life. It involves how individuals understand the meaning of their own life, how they view the manifestation of their self-worth in society, and how they find a sense of purpose in everyday life.

From a compositional perspective, the meaning in life can be analyzed in terms of cognitive and emotional dimensions. In the cognitive dimension, the meaning in life refers to an individual's cognitive structure regarding life's purpose, meaning, and self-actualization. In the emotional

dimension, it manifests as positive emotional experiences related to the life process, such as a sense of fulfillment, hope, and achievement. The meaning in life not only plays a protective role in an individual's mental health but also enhances their sense of hope and pursuit of goals, thereby improving their meaning in life and life satisfaction. Therefore, understanding the multidimensional composition of the meaning in life helps us better grasp its potential impact on college students' goal engagement capability and meaning in life ^[1].

1.2 Concept of goal Engagement Capability and Its Influencing Factors

Goal engagement capability refers to an individual's persistence, focus, and effort in the pursuit of goals, reflecting their ability to maintain motivation when facing challenges. It is not only an indicator of an individual's ability to execute plans and cope with difficulties but also relates to how they sustain the pursuit of goals and self-regulate in a constantly changing environment. According to Locke and Latham (2002) in their goal-setting theory, goal engagement capability is closely related to the specificity, challenge, and an individual's self-efficacy. In the context of college students, goal engagement capability is often influenced by multiple factors, including academic pressure, career planning, and personal growth.

Among the factors influencing goal engagement capability, intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy are core elements. Studies have shown that individuals with strong intrinsic motivation typically exhibit higher goal engagement capability. Additionally, social support, psychological capital (such as confidence, resilience, etc.), and external environments (such as educational resources, family background, etc.) significantly affect the formation of goal engagement capability. For example, when college students receive ample support from their surrounding environment in the pursuit of academic goals, they are more likely to mobilize their positivity and persistence, thus enhancing the likelihood of achieving their goals. Therefore, goal engagement capability is a crucial psychological resource in the pursuit of long-term goals and an essential condition for personal growth and well-being.

1.3 Psychological Perspective on Happiness and Related Theories

Happiness refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their life, typically reflected through personal emotional experiences and cognitive judgments. In psychology, happiness is widely regarded as part of subjective well-being (SWB), which includes emotional happiness (such as pleasure and satisfaction) and cognitive happiness (such as life satisfaction). In the college student population, happiness is not only related to academic achievements but also influenced by factors such as self-identity, social interactions, mental health, and social adaptation. Diener (1984) proposed the SWB theory, which suggests that an individual's emotional experiences and cognitive evaluations jointly determine their overall level of happiness.

Moreover, the construction of happiness is closely related to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory emphasizes that an individual's happiness is not merely the result of external environmental influences but is also related to the fulfillment of their intrinsic motivations. When college students' autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging are satisfied, they are more likely to experience high levels of happiness. In this process, the roles of goal engagement capability and meaning in life are particularly prominent, as both enhance an individual's intrinsic motivation, which in turn promotes positive emotional experiences and an increase in life satisfaction. Therefore, happiness is not simply a basic evaluation of life conditions; it also involves an individual's profound insight into life meaning and goal pursuit, influencing the overall psychological state and quality of life of college students ^[2].

2. Mechanisms of the Impact of Meaning in Life on College Students' Goal Engagement Capability

2.1 The Role of Meaning in Life in Motivation Activation

The meaning in life, as an individual's deep perception of life's value and goals, has a significant motivational activation effect. In the college student population, a strong meaning in life can stimulate intrinsic motivation, driving students to engage more actively in the pursuit of academic and future career goals. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), an individual's motivation can be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the meaning in life is often closely related to the enhancement of intrinsic motivation. When college students clarify the meaning and goals of their lives,

they are more likely to actively engage in learning and work, experiencing a sense of fulfillment in self-actualization. This enhancement of intrinsic motivation not only helps them overcome difficulties and challenges during the learning process but also improves their ability to remain committed over the long term.

The motivating effect of the meaning in life is primarily reflected in the clarity and attainability of goals. When students have a clear meaning in life, they are able to set clearer and more meaningful goals for themselves, which in turn enhances their motivation to act. For example, students who have a clear sense of academic mission will be more proactive in deepening their knowledge and improving academic abilities, rather than merely aiming to earn credits or a degree certificate. This motivational activation mechanism promotes the enhancement of goal engagement capability, enabling students to maintain motivation and overcome short-term setbacks and challenges in the pursuit of long-term goals [3].

2.2 The Role of Meaning in Life in Enhancing Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to complete specific tasks or achieve goals. The meaning in life promotes the enhancement of self-efficacy by strengthening college students' recognition of their own capabilities. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is closely related to an individual's motivation, emotional regulation, and goal achievement ability. The meaning in life helps students maintain confidence in their abilities when facing academic pressure and challenges, believing they can overcome difficulties and achieve their goals. Specifically, when students feel a clear sense of purpose and meaning in their studies and life, they are more likely to generate positive self-evaluations when encountering challenges, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy.

The promotion of self-efficacy by the meaning in life manifests in two aspects. First, the meaning in life helps students establish an intrinsic motivation framework, enabling them to confidently face challenges related to academic and career goals. Second, the meaning in life enhances an individual's sense of control over the future, encouraging students to maintain self-regulation throughout the process and adopt positive coping strategies, thus improving self-efficacy. This enhancement of confidence not only boosts students' learning motivation but also helps them persevere in the face of difficulties, thereby effectively increasing goal engagement capability.

2.3 The Link Between Goal Engagement Capability and Meaning in Life

The improvement of goal engagement capability is an indispensable psychological resource for college students in the pursuit of long-term goals, and the meaning in life plays an important role in this process. Research indicates that an individual's goal engagement capability is not solely dependent on the specificity and challenge of the goals but is also deeply influenced by their meaning in life. For college students, the meaning in life provides an intrinsic source of motivation, enabling them to maintain sustained focus and perseverance in the pursuit of academic and life goals. Specifically, when students perceive deep meaning in life and academics, they are more likely to link their academic goals with broader goals such as self-actualization and social contribution, thus enhancing the continuity and depth of their Goal Engagement .

The meaning in life enhances students' motivation and self-efficacy, further promoting the improvement of their goal engagement capability. In the higher education environment, students face numerous academic tasks and career planning choices. The meaning in life helps them connect these tasks with their personal life goals, making the achievement of these goals not merely an external requirement but a reflection of intrinsic needs. For instance, a student who perceives a connection between academic goals and future social responsibility may demonstrate stronger commitment and perseverance when faced with heavy coursework. This sense of commitment is the core manifestation of goal engagement capability. Therefore, the meaning in life, as a key factor driving college students' goal engagement capability, not only influences their learning behavior but also plays a long-term role in promoting their life planning and career development [4].

3. The Promoting Effect of Goal Engagement Capability on College Students' Well-being

3.1 The Relationship Between goal Engagement Capability and Positive Emotions

Goal engagement capability is closely related to college students' positive emotions. The setting and pursuit of goals often become significant drivers of emotional fluctuations. Positive psychology theory suggests that an individual's emotional experience is not only influenced by external environments but also by intrinsic motivation, goal setting, and the degree of commitment to goals, all of which play a decisive role. When college students invest substantial time and effort in pursuing self-set goals, they experience a series of emotional feedbacks. These feedbacks not only enhance their emotional experience but also improve their overall well-being.

3.1.1 The Internal Link Between Achievement and Positive Emotions

In the process of pursuing and achieving academic goals, students gradually accumulate a sense of achievement. This sense of accomplishment, as a positive emotion, can effectively enhance an individual's well-being. When a goal is achieved, students typically feel a boost in their abilities and self-worth. This emotional satisfaction directly transforms into a positive emotional experience. Studies have shown that the process of achieving a goal activates the brain's reward system, producing feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. These pleasurable emotions enhance their investment in future goals, creating a positive feedback loop that further boosts students' well-being [5].

3.1.2 Emotional Regulation Mechanism of Goal Engagement

In addition to the sense of achievement gained from goal achievement, goal engagement capability also enhances college students' positive emotions by promoting emotional regulation mechanisms. During the pursuit of goals, students often encounter stress, setbacks, and even failure. However, students with strong goal engagement capability are generally better at emotional regulation. These students use strategies such as positive self-talk, problem-solving, and emotional release to effectively mitigate the impact of negative emotions, preventing emotional downturns from interfering with goal pursuit. As a result, they maintain a high level of positive emotions, which further enhances their well-being.

3.2 Goal Engagement and the Enhancement of College Students' Psychological Adaptability

Goal engagement capability not only influences students' emotional states but also plays an important role in enhancing their psychological adaptability. Psychological adaptability refers to an individual's psychological resilience and regulatory ability when coping with stress, challenges, and environmental changes. College students are in a stage of growth and transformation, facing pressures and challenges from various aspects of life, including academics, social relationships, and careers. Therefore, psychological adaptability is crucial for maintaining well-being. Students with strong goal engagement capability typically exhibit higher psychological adaptability, enabling them to effectively cope with complex and uncertain environments while maintaining mental health.

3.2.1 Goal Engagement and the Cultivation of Psychological Resilience

When facing academic pressure or life challenges, college students with strong goal engagement capability typically exhibit higher psychological resilience. They continuously adjust their goals, strategies, and expectations, seeking adaptive coping mechanisms. In this process, students gain experience from challenges and face difficulties with a positive attitude. Psychological resilience not only helps students cope with immediate academic pressure but also strengthens their ability to handle future challenges. Long-term goal pursuit and commitment provide students with opportunities to enhance their psychological adaptability, thus laying the foundation for their well-being.

3.2.2 Goal Engagement Promotes Emotional Stability and Self-regulation

Students with strong goal engagement capability are capable of maintaining emotional stability through appropriate emotional regulation techniques during goal pursuit. They are often able to remain calm and rational when facing failure or setbacks, analyze problems, and adjust goals or methods in a timely manner to avoid excessive emotional fluctuations. The commitment to academic and career goals promotes their emotional regulation ability, helping them calmly cope with external challenges such as academic pressure and interpersonal conflicts, reducing the interference of negative emotions, improving psychological health, and ultimately enhancing their well-being [6].

3.3 The Long-term Impact Pathways of Goal Engagement Capability on Well-being

The long-term impact of goal engagement capability on college students' well-being continues to unfold through multiple pathways. This impact is not only reflected in the immediate sense of satisfaction upon achieving goals but also in the sustained psychological growth and emotional accumulation during the goal pursuit process. Long-term goal engagement not only promotes students' self-actualization but also provides them with a lasting source of intrinsic well-being.

3.3.1 Continuous Goal Pursuit and the Enhancement of Self-actualization

The continuity of goal engagement is one of the key factors in achieving long-term well-being. In the process of continuously pursuing personal goals, college students can experience a sustained sense of self-actualization, which deepens as goals are progressively achieved. When students make progress in areas such as academics, careers, or interpersonal relationships, their self-identity and sense of worth are strengthened. This sense of self-actualization is an important source of long-term well-being for college students. Continuous commitment to goals allows students to break through their own limitations and improve their self-efficacy, thus promoting long-term well-being enhancement.

3.3.2 The Bidirectional Effect of Goal Pursuit and Emotional Accumulation

Long-term goal engagement not only promotes students' sense of self-actualization but also enhances their well-being through the accumulation of emotions. Research has shown that individuals who persist in pursuing a particular goal over time accumulate a substantial amount of positive emotional experiences through small successes and achievements. These positive emotional feedbacks not only enhance students' well-being but also improve their emotional regulation and coping abilities. Over time, these emotional accumulations can be transformed into lasting well-being, providing students with stable psychological support and emotional satisfaction.

3.3.3 Goal Engagement and Its Impact on Social Support Networks

Students with strong goal engagement capability are often better at establishing and maintaining positive social support networks. Through the pursuit of goals, they can share their achievements, receive feedback, and seek support from others. During the goal pursuit process, college students' interactions with others not only enhance their social skills but also strengthen the quality of their interpersonal relationships. This healthy social support system further enhances students' emotional security and sense of belonging, providing important support for maintaining their long-term well-being. Therefore, goal engagement capability plays a positive role in the long-term pathways of well-being promotion.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of this study, it can be concluded that the sense of meaning in life has a significant impact on college students' goal engagement capability and well-being. Future research can further explore the differences in the role of life meaning in different cultural contexts and investigate how educational interventions can enhance college students' sense of meaning in life to promote academic success and mental health. Moreover, future practices should focus on creating a supportive educational environment in universities, helping students develop a strong sense of meaning in life, and enhancing their goal engagement capability to provide long-term support for the improvement of their well-being.

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