



Research Article

Searching for Meaning While Battling Loneliness: Moderating role of Personality in Young adults

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Abstract

Loneliness negatively affects the mental health of University students. Feelings of loneliness are associated with a lack of meaning in life. However, this relationship can vary due to individual personality differences. Therefore, the main aim of the present study was to assess the relationship between meaning in life and loneliness among University students and the moderating influence of personality dimensions. The sample of the present study consisted of 201 University students, and a multistage random sampling technique was utilized to select the sample from the Bathinda district of Punjab, India, while JASP was used to examine the structural equation model analysis. The result showed a negative and significant moderating impact of neuroticism subtypes of personality on the search for meaning in life and loneliness ($b = -.047$, $t = -2.634$, $p = .008$). The present research highlights the importance of addressing the high rates of loneliness and the need for a proper support system among students to make sure that they are not feeling lonely and reach out for help if needed. Neuroticism plays an important role in moderating the relationship between meaning in life and loneliness; stress and anxiety management techniques should be taught to all students that help them manage these emotions.

Keywords: Loneliness; Meaning in Life; Neuroticism; Personality; University Students; Young Adults



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In the recent decade, there has been an increase in the subjective feeling of loneliness ([Snell, 2017](#)), which is the desire for fewer social relationships than desired. The reasons associated can be recent digitalization, changes in family structure and workplace dynamics, and urban lifestyle, which have affected how an individual interacts at a social level. The quality and quantity of social interaction have both degraded within the recent decade ([Snell, 2017](#)). As there is a sense of belongingness in an individual, and as a need, it is thus vital for recognizing life as important and worthwhile ([Lamber et al., 2013](#)). Nonetheless, this increasing rate of loneliness in young adults is now becoming an existential issue, challenging researchers to identify the causal factors and their consequences. Loneliness is the subjective experience of a difference between wanted and real social interactions in a relationship with intimacy, friendship, or connection ([Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010](#)). However, such investigations have been lacking to date. Therefore, in an attempt to fill this gap, the present study is inspired by the research and theories suggesting that Meaning in Life (MIL) can decrease subjective feelings of loneliness.

There are several ways to define MIL, such as being goal-oriented or living with purpose, as well as the coherence of an individual's subjective experiences ([Ryff & Singer, 1998](#)). MIL is the ability to assign importance and worth to one's own existence. An individual perceives life as meaningful,

which depends upon different factors such as when they feel purpose and significance in their life ([Martela & Steger, 2016](#)). Recent research has adopted a three-aspect definition of MIL, namely: a cognitive aspect, a motivational aspect, and an affective aspect of meaning in life. The cognitive aspect is the ability to identify the coherence of one's life and to understand one's existence in relation to the external world ([Antonovsky, 1993](#)). The motivational aspect of MIL points to the long-term goals, ambitions, and aspirations that a person has, which motivates his behaviors ([Ryff, 1995](#)). The affective aspect of MIL refers to the emotions a person experiences in life that provide him with satisfaction and fulfilment. Social support, primarily family support, plays a vital role in the development of MIL ([Lambert et al., 2010](#)). The satisfaction delved through belongingness shows a deeper sense of meaning in the long run ([Martela et al., 2017](#)). On the other hand, failure to satisfy the need for belongingness affects the meaning in life negatively. For instance, a study by [Twenge et al. \(2003\)](#) showed that being socially excluded affects the cognitive state of the individual, which includes impaired meaningful thought. People who feel that their life lacks meaning can often isolate themselves, which can lead to feelings of loneliness. Researchers have identified MIL as one of the major predictors of loneliness ([Macia et al., 2021](#)), even suggesting that there is an inverse association with loneliness ([Yildirim et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, the present study aims to explore the relationship between MIL and loneliness as MIL dimensions, namely, affect, motivational, and cognitive aspects, may have a protective role towards loneliness.

However, this relationship between MIL and loneliness is affected by individual differences, particularly the widely recognized and reliable Big Five Personality Traits, a measure of the personality of the individual. Personality is an individual's generally lasting patterns of thought, feeling, and conduct that set them apart from others. The "Big Five" categorisation is one of the most important ways to describe how people differ in their personalities. Personality psychologists have reduced the number of personality traits to five main dimensions ([McCrae & Costa, 1987](#)), namely: "Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience" ([McCrae & Costa, 2008](#)). [Soto and Jackson \(2013\)](#) claim that extraverted people are outgoing in nature, agreeable people are polite in nature, conscientious people are task-focused and orderly, people with neuroticism are more likely to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, etc., and open people have a diverse range of interests and novelty is preferred over routine. These traits are also associated with both loneliness and MIL. For instance, high neuroticism ([Neff et al., 2006](#)) is associated with lower levels of MIL and loneliness ([Lund et al.,](#)



[2016](#)). Big five dimensions such as openness to experience and Agreeableness are associated with a search for MIL, whereas other dimensions, such as Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and a comparatively lower level of Neuroticism, are linked with the presence of MIL, which is a sense of purpose in life.

[Wieczorek et al. \(2021\)](#) have researched two distinct groups of samples of adolescents to understand who is at risk of experiencing feelings of loneliness and what personality traits contribute to this feeling. It was found that teenagers who felt more alone than other teens had less extroversion and more neuroticism. People high in neuroticism may avoid social interactions for fear of being judged and avoided. It is also related to a heightened reactivity to social stressors ([Zautra et al., 2005](#)). People with high neuroticism are sensitive toward social rejection ([Denissen & Penke, 2008](#)), which causes feelings of loneliness. Moreover, neuroticism leads to toxic social behavior which results in impaired relationship satisfaction ([Vater & Schröder-Abé, 2015](#)).

[Szczesniak et al. \(2022\)](#) discovered that the presence of meaning and the pursuit of meaning have a negative relationship with neuroticism and are positively associated with extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Therefore, a Neurotic personality dimension is analogous to a feeling of loneliness and impaired MIL ([Abdellaoui et al., 2018](#); [Buecker et al., 2020](#)). Through the aforementioned theoretical insights, it can be inferred that personality traits play an influential role in loneliness and meaning in life. In this study, the moderating effect of individual personality differences on the relationship that exists between meaning in life and loneliness will be explored, along with highlighting the gender differences in research variables.

In the literature, it has been highlighted that personality traits have been found to have an influential association with both MIL and loneliness. As mentioned before, the higher the neuroticism level in the individual, the more likely they are to feel lonely ([Ikizer et al., 2022](#)). In the literature, it has been highlighted that personality can influence loneliness ([Freilich et al., 2022](#)), and moreover, individuals with a higher level of neuroticism trait are more vulnerable to suffer mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and loneliness ([Lund et al., 2016](#)). While different researchers have explored MIL, loneliness and personality traits, a very limited number of studies have been conducted to understand the moderating role of personality dimensions on the relationship between MIL and loneliness among university students. In accordance with the literature review and aims of the study, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H₁: The MIL-Presence is significantly correlated with loneliness.

H₂: The MIL-Search is significantly correlated with loneliness.

H₃: Personality dimensions moderate the relationship between MIL and loneliness.

Method

Design

The study employed a cross-sectional research design. Further, moderation analysis has been undertaken to assess the moderating influence of personality dimensions on the relationship between MIL and loneliness.

Participants

A total of 201 University students, 101 females and 100 males (mean age = 22.4 years, SD=5.3) were randomly selected from four different Universities of Bathinda district in the state of Punjab, India. The respondents willingly participated in this study, and none of the respondents was given any financial compensation or any reward for their participation. A detailed demographic of the respondents has been illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Showing the Socio-demographic profile of University students

Socio-demographic variables	Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	101	50
Male	100	50
Age Category		
18-20 years	53	26
21-23 years	114	57
24-26 years	34	17
University		
CUPB	68	34
GKU	56	28
Akal	46	23
MRSPTU	31	15
Hostellers / Day Scholars		
Hostellers	115	57
Day Scholars	86	43

Community		
UR	93	47
OBC	70	35
SC	18	9
ST	18	9
Minority	2	1
Area of Living		
Rural	141	70
Urban	60	30

Instruments

NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO – FFI-3; [Costa & McCrae, 2003](#)). Personality dimensions are measured by NEO-FFI-3, a variation of the NEO-PI-3, which measures the five personality domains of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The sample items are “I am not a worrier” and “I laugh easily”. The scale has an excellent history of validity and reliability and has been used in several studies.

Revised University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA; [Russell et al., 1980](#)). Loneliness is measured by a 20-item scale. Each item is rated by participants on a scale of 1 (Never) to 4 (Often). The sample items are “I do not feel alone” and “I lack companionship” The measurement shows a test-retest correlation of .73 over a two-month period and strong internal consistency (coefficient alpha =.96).

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; [Steger et al., 2008](#)). 10 items scored on a seven-point scale, the MIL Questionnaire evaluates two aspects of meaning in life. In this scale, the sample items are “I understand my life’s meaning” and “My life has no clear purpose”. The scale showed excellent test-retest stability and stable factor structure).

Procedure

For the collection of data, permission from the competent authorities of the Universities was taken. A tentative time schedule was developed for the collection of data. Before beginning the research, rapport was established with the participants, and they were made comfortable. The consent form was then obtained from them. The research did not include subjects who were unwilling to take part in the study. Data was gathered from the individuals in a group using a survey approach (self-administered method), and it underwent both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The proper statistical techniques will be used to analyse the data quantitatively and interpret the results.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique uses JASP and IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 applications. Hayes's Model 1 (simple moderation analysis) is used to test the role of personality as a moderator of the relationship between MIL and Loneliness (H_3). The normality test in this study was not conducted, and in order to verify the validity of the assumptions, the SEM was employed.

Ethical Considerations

The present study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Central University of Punjab, India (Certificate no CUP/SSS/PSY/EC-03/2022-23/054) issued before the data collection process. Additionally, written permission was obtained from the competent authority of the four participating universities. Informed consent was taken from all the participants before data collection.

Results

This section begins with the measurement model where the convergent validity (CV) and discriminant validity (DV) were assessed using SEM, then the other measures, such as mean, SD, correlation between variables and hypothesis testing.

Measurement model assessment

In order to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs, the measurement model is examined initially using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Reliability analysis

Table 2 showcases the internal consistency for the study variables, such as Loneliness ($\alpha = .782$; $\omega = .783$) and MIL- Search ($\alpha = .789$; $\omega = .790$), demonstrating an acceptable reliability exceeding the threshold of .70 recommended by [Hair et al. \(2011\)](#). However, the neuroticism subscale showed lower internal consistency ($\alpha = .516$; $\omega = .411$), falling behind the predetermined standards, while the coefficient omega value of .40 implies minimal acceptable internal consistency for the exploratory moderation analysis ([Flora, 2020](#)). Notwithstanding, the moderating role of neuroticism is interpreted with caution, and future investigations should consider employing the robust personality inventory to increase the measurement precision.

Validity Assessment



The discriminant validity was examined by comparing the correlations among constructs using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) method with values below .90 (Henseler et al., 2014). Table 3 illustrates satisfactory discriminant validity as all HTMT ratios are less than this predetermined threshold, as Loneliness-MIL Search (HTMT = .209), Loneliness-Neuroticism (HTMT = .370) and MIL Search- Neuroticism (HTMT = .187) respectively.

Table 2
Showing Internal Reliability

Construct	Items	Coefficient α	Coefficient ω
Loneliness	20	0.782	0.783
MILSearch	5	0.789	0.790
Neuroticism	12	0.516	0.411

Table 3
Showing Heterotrait-monotrait ratio

Constructs	1	2
Loneliness		
MILSearch	0.209	
Neuroticism	0.370	0.187

Table 4
Correlation between MIL and Loneliness among University Students

Variables	M	SD	N	1.	2.	3.
MIL- Presence	23.45	6.55	201			
MIL- Search	25.78	6.009	201	0.273**		
Loneliness	43.209	8.16	201	-0.102	-0.027	

Table 4 presents the mean, SD and correlations between the study variables. University students reported a moderate level of loneliness (M = 43.20; SD = 8.16), MIL-Presence (M = 23.45; SD = 6.55) and MIL-Search (M = 25.78; SD = 6.009) respectively. Further, neither dimension of MIL has a significant relationship with loneliness. The MIL-Presence was not significantly correlated with loneliness ($r = -0.102$, $p > .05$), failing to support H₁. Similarly, there is no relationship between the MIL-Search and loneliness ($r = -0.027$, $p > .05$), thereby rejecting H₂. The present findings can be exemplified through several contextual factors that might explain this divergence. For instance, the positive correlation between the MIL- Search and MIL-Presence ($r = .273$, $p < .01$)

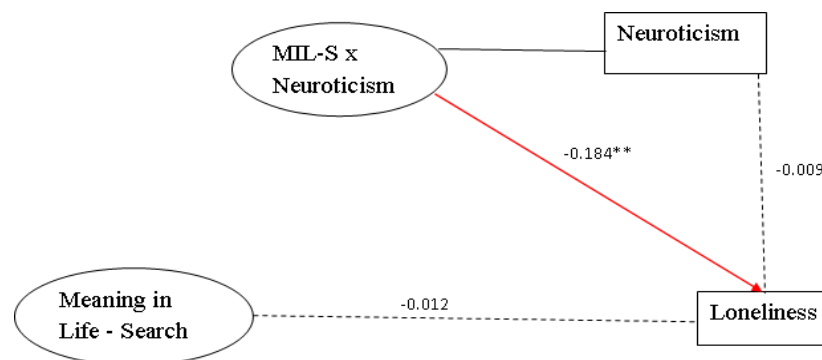
suggests that university students are engaged in an active meaning-making process, which then weakens the relationship with the feelings of loneliness. Further, the collectivist cultural context of South Asian cultures, like India, where social connectedness is deeply rooted in family and peers, might act as a buffer towards the feelings of loneliness and its relationship with MIL.

Table 5

Moderation Role of Personality on the relationship between Meaning in Life and Loneliness

Relationship	Beta	C.R (t value)	P-value
Loneliness <---Neuroticism	-.014	-.133	.894
Loneliness---MILSeach	-.016	-.16	.867
Loneliness <---MILSearch_Neuroticism	-.047	2.634	.008

The study assessed the moderating role of personality dimensions on the relationship between meaning in life (MIL) and loneliness using the Hayes PROCESS Model 1 (simple moderation). As shown in Table 5, the direct effect of MIL-Search on loneliness remained non-significant ($b = -.014$, $t = -.133$, $p = .894$), consistent with correlation results. Similarly, the main effects of Neuroticism on Loneliness were non-significant ($b = -.016$, $t = -.16$, $p = .867$). However, a significant interaction emerged between MIL-Search and Neuroticism ($b = -.047$, $t = -2.634$, $p = .008$), supporting H₃. The moderation analysis indicates that neuroticism weakens or buffers the relationship between MIL-Search and Loneliness, which is a protective effect of meaning in life on loneliness, diminishes as neuroticism increases.



Note: Standardized regression values are mentioned in the figure. ** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1

The Structural Model showcasing neuroticism as a moderator on the relationship between Meaning in Life and Loneliness

The structural model examining the moderation analysis has been presented in Fig 1. Standardised regression values have been mentioned. Solid lines represent significant relationships while dashed lines represent non-significant relationships. The red line represents a significant negative relationship. The variable MIL – S x Neuroticism represents the interaction between the neuroticism and the MIL-Search.

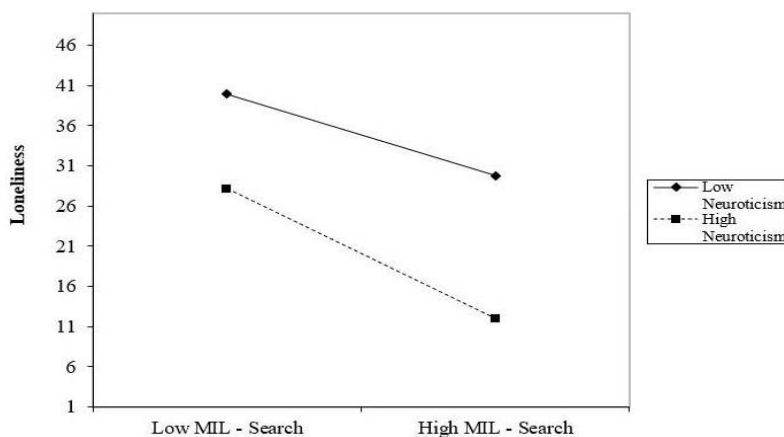


Figure 2
Showing the Simple Slope Analysis

In order to interpret this interaction between neuroticism and the MIL-Search, simple slope analysis was undertaken at high and low levels of neuroticism (as shown in Fig 2). It's revealed that, at low levels of neuroticism, university students who engage in high MIL Search reported lower loneliness, while at a flat slope, which is high levels of neuroticism, suggesting that students with high levels of neuroticism do not benefit from the search for meaning, and their loneliness increases even further.

Discussion

The study examined the nature of the relationship between MIL and loneliness among university students and how personality moderated this relationship. The results indicated that there is no correlation between MIL and loneliness among University students, which rejects H_1 . The results are consistent with the past literature; for instance, [Tomsik \(2015\)](#) reported that there is no significant correlation between MIL and loneliness in the sample of 267 students. The reason may be associated with the instability of MIL during early adulthood ([Paradise & Kernis, 2002](#)), as the

early years' university students are figuring out their career and exploring themselves, which is even more evident in an Asian collectivist and conservative culture of Southern Asia ([Moss et al., 2007](#)), which is India in this case. The university students are still in the search phase, and MIL is largely unstable and not fully developed. Moreover, the majority of university students left their homes for the first time to get a quality education, which fosters feelings of loneliness. Thus, these aforementioned factors increase loneliness and impair the relationship of loneliness with MIL in university students in South Asian collectivist countries. On the contrary, in the literature, most studies have been done in WEIRD countries reporting a relationship between the two constructs. Research on young adults has found that when they feel lonely, their MIL can be left shaken ([Stillman et al., 2009](#); [Lambert et al., 2013](#)). The consequences of loneliness may lead students to perceive their world as threatening ([Jefferson et al., 2023](#)). However, the damaging effects of loneliness are hindered by a good social network system. Even when they have a low level of MIL, they can be devoid of a lonely state because of this social network and social support ([O'Day & Heimberg, 2021](#)). In addition to social support, which acts as an external shield, students may lack meaning in their life, but they may possess stronger personal resources such as self- efficacy, optimism or social skills that may help them to navigate through the feelings of loneliness better in social settings ([Greco et al., 2022](#)).

This research has revealed the moderating effect of neuroticism dimensions of personality on the relationship between search for MIL and loneliness. The moderation effect is negative, which means that neuroticism will weaken the relationship between the search for MIL and loneliness. Thus, the higher the level of neuroticism, the lesser the impact of the search for MIL on loneliness. Neuroticism as a negative trait can hinder this process of exploration, thus making the person lonelier. A highly neurotic person can be more self-critical, be more anxious in general and be more reluctant to engage in social interactions ([Widiger & Oltmann, 2017](#)). Past studies have demonstrated that university students with a high level of neuroticism are more likely to feel lonely, and neuroticism has been shown to play an essential role in shaping the subjective feeling of loneliness ([Mourelatos, 2021](#)). So, it can be postulated by past studies as well as from the present study that neuroticism easily influences the feelings of loneliness ([Weiczorek et al., 2021](#)). Thus, even though they might feel that they need more meaning in life, the neurotic trait will not easily allow them to explore life and its possibilities further, thereby hindering the process of social interaction, making them more vulnerable to loneliness.



Limitations and future research suggestions

Some limitations need to be discussed, for instance, the cross-sectional nature of the study hinders the causal inference of the study constructs. The study was conducted only among the 201 university students aged 18 – 26 years living in the Bathinda district of Punjab. Therefore, proper care is needed in generalizing the present findings to a larger sample size, and one can consider those students who were living in other districts. Additionally, the data was collected from university students, which may raise concerns regarding same-source bias, and there is also a chance that respondents have provided socially desirable responses and self-report bias due to the administration of self-report scales. Moreover, the study could not introduce interventions to those university students who have higher levels of loneliness, neuroticism and a low sense of MIL.

Future investigations should employ longitudinal designs to examine the interplay of study variables over time. Further, employing a mixed-method design including triangulation of data will provide a better robust assessment of the studied constructs. Moreover, intervention research is needed to exemplify the role of MIL-centered interventions on loneliness among university students and to examine whether such interventions should be modified as per the personality profiles of the university students.

Conclusion

The present study contributes to the understanding of the interplay between the MIL, loneliness and personality among university students. By integrating the existential psychology frameworks, such as MIL, with personality psychology, the study examined the moderating role of personality dimensions on the relationship between MIL and loneliness. The findings of the present study indicate that MIL does not predict loneliness in the present sample. However, neuroticism significantly moderates the relationship between MIL and loneliness. These findings highlight the importance of individual differences in personality dimensions and showcase the need for the development of personality tailored intervention for student well-being. As loneliness is highly prevalent among university students, understanding and addressing the intersection of existential meaning-making, social connection and personality traits represents an urgent need for research, practice and policy.

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