

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING AND EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the intricate dynamic between spiritual well-being and the crisis of existence among university students. Correlational and cross-sectional research design was used for the present study. The current study was conducted on (N=292) public university students both male (n=146) and female (n=146) with an age range of 18-27, selected through convenience sampling technique. Data was collected using Existential Meaninglessness Scale by Li et al (2022), Spiritual Well-Being Scale by Ellison, C.W. (1983) and demographic information sheet. For statistical analysis Descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation Coefficient, and mediation Analysis using Hay's Process were computed to analyze the nature of relationship between study variables. Descriptive analysis of study variables revealed that data of all variable was normally distributed. The present study empirically validates the hypothesis that participants with high spiritual well-being reported lower levels of existential crisis and hence had a significant negative correlation with existential crisis ($r = -.53, p < .01$). Mediation analysis revealed the significant interaction effect and the relationship between religious well-being was fully mediated by existential well-being. This study offers pioneering perspective on how students navigate their existential conundrums in the light of spirituality and highlights the need for further investigation into the crisis of existence faced by university students.

Key Words: Existential crisis, Spiritual Well-being, Existential Well-being

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the exhaustive routine of academic pursuits, university students often find themselves facing the void of existential crisis. As students go deeper into intellectual research, they are confronted with the inherent complexity and ambiguities of human life. The ambition for academic performance along with the passage of time forces pupils to confront the fleeting aspect of their existence and the terrifying prospect of death. Existential crisis is defined as something like a "limit situation", where merely survival is at risk and hence coming to terms with such a situation might eventually lead to an existential crisis (Yang et al., 2010). Viktor Frankl refers to it as a state of "existential vacuum" (Frankl, 2011) but on the

other hand Maddi refers to this phenomenon as "existential neurosis" (Maddi, 1967). Keeping in track of these multiple definitions by various authors, it is apparent how the mere notion and conceptualization of existential crisis is obscure in nature.

The existential crisis is particularly evident among university students as they navigate the challenging transition from adolescence to adulthood. This time span is marked by intense academic pressures, uncertainty about future career paths and a profound search for personal identity, often leading to deep existential reflection and a period of intense questioning. With globalization and technological advancements and abundance of choices can lead

to what Schwartz (2005) terms “*the paradox of choice*.” While having options is generally perceived as positive, too many choices can result in decision paralysis, where the fear of making the wrong choice generates significant anxiety and stress. Schwartz (2005) posits that the anxiety generated by these choices can lead to a significant existential crisis. The burden of making the “*right*” decision can weigh heavily on individuals, leading to feelings of doubt, confusion, and even despair. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of mass culture and media often imposes standardized norms and values, making it challenging for individuals to forge their own unique identities and uphold personal values amidst societal pressures for conformity (Milovanova & Kadyrova, 2023). To distinctly understand the concept of existential crisis one should try to acknowledge the pivotal role of spirituality. Parsian and Dunning (2009) defined spirituality as the quest of purpose in life, self-actualization, and the building of connections with one's inner self, other individuals, and the larger universal entity. They said that this concept was inclusive and applied to everyone, regardless of religious or non-religious ties and affiliations. Multiple existential crises are experienced by university students such as existential anxiety, death anxiety and perceived stress may have an impact on their academic performance. Career anxiety frequently involves existential worries as well (Pisarik et al., 2017). As evidenced by a research, individuals in the course of an existential crisis may experience sufficient anxiety levels (Bugental, 1965). The anxiety will persist until it is not recognized, resolved or made conscious. It is worth bringing attention to the research on university students which established the role of perceived stress and how it caused a significant decline in not only responsibility but also meaningfulness in life (Besharat et al., 2020). Amongst other concerns COVID-19 also had an intense impact on ultimate concerns. As indicated by Gultom, people significantly experienced existential isolation during the pandemic (Gultom et al., 2022). Furthermore, worries concerned with being isolated, death anxiety and meaninglessness were present among a greater number of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gupta, 2020) where students sense of meaning in life was diminished by a severe level of depression (Parra, 2020). Over the past few years existential

therapists have reported a marked increase in clients and existential pain (Hill, 2019). Hence with the rise in such it is important to consider and understand the phenomenon of existential crisis in the light of spiritual dimensions.

Additionally, Grant argues that millennials including university students are increasingly seeking purpose suggesting a shift towards an “*economy of purpose*” driven by existential questioning (Grant, 2017). On top of that empirical studies indicate that the millennial generation is probably the most least altruistically motivated (Twenge et al., 2010), and remarkably individualistic (Greenfield, 2013) and narcissistic (Twenge et al., 2008). It's probable that the individualistic culture that peaked between 1980 and 2000 set off this kind of existential crisis, and that's why people are looking for meaning in their lives, just as Viktor Frankl would have suggested. As we progress further into the topic, one cannot significantly ignore the role of spirituality when it comes to uncovering the dilemma of existential crisis. Exploration reveals the intersection of existential crisis with spirituality as debate over the role of spirituality and meaning in the light of existential crisis, declaring that such crises can be essentially viewed as authentic spiritual quests (Yang et al., 2010). Emerging adults (ages 18–24) often go through a transitional period during which there is a noticeable decline in religiosity. Evident from the study the deficiency of religiosity among emerging adults is quite observable (Edwards, 2015). Hence students might be more prone to such crisis. Additionally, spirituality is also significantly associated with higher levels of satisfaction in family and social relationships thus, a sense of spirituality—and accompanying positive relationships which may buffer against existential crisis to some extent (Sawatzky et al., 2009).

It is crucial to emphasize this fact that no significant research to this date especially in the region of Pakistan has investigated the relationship of specific variables of existential crisis and spirituality hence highlighting a gap in the body of research. Therefore, this study aims to examine the dynamic interplay of the stated variables namely: existential crisis and spiritual well-being. The main objectives of the study are mentioned below:

1. To find out the relationship of existential crisis and spiritual well-being among university students.

2. To determine the predictors of existential crisis from religious well-being and existential well-being.
3. To explore the complex relationship between the study variables.

METHOD

Research Design:

The research design opted for this study was correlational and cross-sectional research design.

Sample:

The study recruited a sample of 300 (calculated using G*power) public university students (n=150 male, n=150 female) between the age range of 18-30 from Faisalabad. To ensure the reliability incomplete or irrelevant forms were eliminated creating a sample of 292 participants. For the present study, convenient sampling was employed due to its ease of access to the participants.

Measures

For the collection of data, the current study made use of two specific measures. Existential Meaninglessness Scale (EMS) scale developed by Li et al (2022) was employed to determine the presence of existential crisis among university students. Consisting of 18 statements with each item rated on a 6-point Likert scale, it was divided into 3 subscales which are as follows: (i) Existential Incomprehension (items 1-6), (ii) Existential Purposelessness (items 7-12) (iii) Existential Insignificance (items 13-18). Spiritual Well-being

Scale by Ellison (1983) was used to ascertain university student’s level of spirituality. This scale consisted of 20 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale as well, and was divided into 2 subscales namely, Religious Well-Being Scale (odd numbered items), and Existential Well-Being Scale (Even numbered items).

Procedure:

The procedure of study began with the recruitment of participants. Initially, permission was sought from the target universities present in the city to assure institutional support and ethical compliance with the research project. The next step was to provide potential volunteers with informed consent forms. Participants were clearly informed that they may withdraw from the study at any moment with no penalties, assuring their autonomy and ethical treatment throughout the research procedure. Participants were invited to fill out standardized questionnaires to measure existential crisis and spiritual well-being. The next stage after data collection procedure was data analysis. The study employed SPSS software to organize and analyze the data.

RESULTS:

Participants (292) of the present study were of age between 18-20 years (38.7%), 21-23 years (50.3%), 24-26 years (8.9%), 27-30 (2.1%), with 50% male and 50 % female. 33.6 % participants were living in combined family system and 66.4 % in nuclear family.

Table 4.1:

Descriptive analysis of Existential Crisis, and Spiritual Well-Being among university students (N=292)

Variables	M	SD	α	Range		Skew
				Potential	Actual	
Existential Crisis	48.03	17.72	.91	18-108	18-107	.812
Existential Incomprehension	17.27	6.74	.84	6-36	6-36	.550
Existential Purposelessness	14.78	7.22	.89	6-36	6-36	.790
Existential Insignificance	15.98	7.44	.88	6-36	6-36	.825
Spiritual Well-Being	93.93	13.25	.83	20-120	56-120	-.277
Religious well Being	51.08	7.16	.76	10-60	31-60	-.850
Existential Well Being	42.85	8.42	.79	10-60	14-60	-.314

The results in table 4.1 illustrate that Existential crisis had a Cronbach’s alpha of .91, mean and standard deviation scores were 48.03 and 17.72. Its three subscales Existential incomprehension,

existential purposelessness and existential insignificance had α = .84, .89, .88, mean was 17.27, 14.78, 15.98, and standard deviation was 6.74, 7.22, 7.44 respectively. Similarly, Spiritual

Well-being had a Cronbach’s alpha of .83 with the mean and standard deviation score of 93.93 and 13.25, and its two subscales religious well-being and existential well-being had $\alpha = .76, .79$, mean was 51.08, 42.85 and standard deviation was 7.16, 8.42 respectively. Normality distribution of the

data was checked by examining the skewness coefficients. Skewness values between -1 and +1 indicate a normal distribution (Hair et al., 2014). The skewness values of the data were found to be normally distributed (between -1 and +1 values).

Table 4.2.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation indicates Correlation among Existential Crisis & its subscales and Spiritual Well-Being & its subscales among university students (N=292).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Spiritual Well-Being	-	.821**	.875**	-.539*	-.412**	-.419**	-.505**
2. Religious Well-Being		-	.411**	-.309*	-.222**	-.242**	-.301**
3. Existential Well-Being			-	-.585**	-.460**	-.453**	-.539**
4. Existential Crises				-	.813**	.834**	.837**
5. Existential Incomprehension					-	.526**	.520**
6. Existential Purposelessness						-	.539**
7. Existential Insignificance							-

** $p < 0.01$ level

The results presented in the table 4.2 illustrated that spiritual well-being had significant negative correlation with existential crisis $r = -.539, p < .01$ which indicates that those who have a higher spiritual well-being are likely to be less prone to an existential crisis and vice versa. Spiritual well-being also had significant negative relationship with three subscales of existential crises, indicating that those who have higher spiritual well-being are likely to be less prone to be existential incomprehension, purposelessness and insignificance.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis using study variables, Spiritual Well-being, Existential Well-being, and Existential Crises.

Figure 1

Mediating Role of Existential Well-being between Spiritual Well-Being and Existential Crises Through Process by Hayes (N=292)

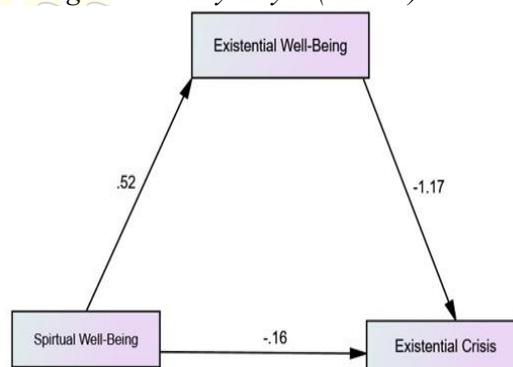


Table 4.3

Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of Mediation Analysis

	B	SE	t	p	95%CL
Total Effect					
Religious Well-Being → Existential Crisis (c)	-.76	.138	-5.53	< .001	-1.04 - -.492
Direct Effect					
Religious Well-Being → Existential Crisis (c')	-.16	.131	-1.18	.236	-.414 - -.102
Religious Well-Being → Existential Well-Being (a)	.52	.062	8.38	<.001	.397 - .641
Existential Well-Being → Existential Crisis (b)	-1.17	.112	-10.52	<.001	-1.392 - -.953
Indirect Effect					
Religious Well-Being → Existential Crisis	-.609	.096			-.815 - -.432

The table shows the direct effect (a) of religious well-being on Existential well-being. According to the results, religious well-being appeared to be a significant predictor of Existential well-being. The regression coefficient between religious well-being on Existential well-being was statistically significant with $B=.52$, $t=8.38$, $p^{***} < .001$ which is the direct effect of the predictor on the mediator. The table also shows the direct effect of existential well-being on existential crisis (b). Existential well-being also appeared as the strong the negative predictor of existential crisis. The regression coefficient was statistically significant with $B=-1.17$, $t=-10.52$, $p^{***} < .001$ which is also the direct effect of mediator on outcome variable. Table also represents direct effect of religious well-being on existential crisis which is not statistically significant with $B=-.16$, $t=-1.18$, $p > .05$, as compared to the total effect of religious well-being on existential crisis $B=-.76$, $t=-5.53$, $p^{***} < .001$. This indicated that existential well-being fully mediated the relationship between religious well-being on existential crisis.

The indirect effect was tested using a boot strap estimation approach with 5000 sample. The result indicated a significant indirect effect of religious well-being on existential crisis through existential well-being $B= -.609$, 95%CI $[-.815, -.432]$. Existential well-being was found to be a significant mediator between religious well-being and existential crisis It implies that the person who have religious well-being would not have existential crisis in the presence of existential well-being.

DISCUSSION:

The current study aimed to explore the relationship between the crisis of existence, spiritual well-being and their subscales among university students in Faisalabad. Additionally, it examined the mediating role of existential well-being in the relationship between religious well-being and existential crisis.

The correlation analysis indicated a significant negative relationship between spiritual well-being and existential crisis suggesting that individuals with higher levels of spiritual well-being are less prone to experiencing existential crises is consistent with the theory of existential analysis, proposed by A. Längle, therapeutic approaches to managing existential crises which outlines the

fundamental structure of a fulfilled existence and establishes the criteria for maintaining a healthy psycho-social and spiritual life (Längle, 2003). According to Yang et al. (2010) connection with something beyond the self, such as God, humanity, or nature, help to diminish existential fear and despair, fostering acceptance of "life as it is." Moreover, spiritual well-being was negatively correlated with the subscales of existential crisis, including existential incomprehension, purposelessness, and insignificance. This aligns with previous research indicating that spirituality is significantly associated with higher levels of satisfaction in family and social relationships thus, a sense of spirituality—and accompanying positive relationships which may buffer against existential crisis to some extent (Sawatzky et al., 2009). Stauner et al. (2020) documented o maintain well-being and meaning in life, spirituality and religiosity can help people.

In Pakistan, Religion plays a fundamental role in shaping the cultural and social norms. This religious framework offers a strong foundation for spiritual well-being, as it helps individuals find purpose and meaning in their lives. The concept of Tawakkul (trust in God's plan) is deeply ingrained in Pakistani culture, helping individuals having existential crises in reducing feelings of insignificance and incomprehension. Indigenous studies have also shown that spiritual well-being is positively correlated with life satisfaction and negatively correlated with stress and anxiety. Khan and Watson (2006) found that spirituality significantly contributes to psychological well-being among Pakistani university students, which is supporting the findings of the present research that spiritual well-being can protect against existential crises.

The mediation analysis revealed that existential well-being fully mediated the relationship between religious well-being and existential crisis. The indirect effect of religious well-being on existential crisis through existential well-being was significant ($B = -.609$, 95% CI $[-.815, -.432]$), indicating that religious well-being contributes to existential well-being which in turn reduces existential distress. The lack of a significant direct effect of religious well-being on existential crisis ($B = -.16$, $p > .05$) further suggests that the relationship was fully mediated by existential well-

being. Pargament (2013) highlighted that individuals often turn to their spiritual beliefs during times of stress, which can help them find meaning and maintain stability.

CONCLUSION:

The present study redefines our understanding of the crisis of existence in the light of spiritual well-being faced by university students. Findings of this research highlight that spiritual well-being particularly religious well-being contributes to existential well-being which in turn serves as a protective factor against existential crises. The mediation analysis demonstrated that existential well-being fully mediates the relationship between religious well-being and existential crisis, underscoring the importance of meaning and purpose in life as key factors in reducing existential distress.

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