


The Existential Vacuum and Its Relationship to Pessimism and Optimism among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

University students may confront an existential vacuum, characterized by a loss of life's meaning resulting from personal crises, socio-political shifts, and health transformations. These challenges, which some young individuals may struggle to adapt to, contribute to an existential vacuum, fostering feelings of pessimism and despair. The current study investigated the prevalence of existential vacuum, pessimism, and optimism among undergraduate students, assessing their interrelations and exploring potential differences based on gender. The research sample consisted of 466 students, both male and female, during the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. A correlational method was employed in this study. Utilizing validated scales to measure existential vacuum ($\alpha = .90$, $r = .87$), pessimism, and optimism ($\alpha = .88$), the findings indicated that while existential vacuum presented at low level ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .96$), optimism was high ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .89$), and pessimism was moderate ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .73$). Gender-specific analyses revealed statistically significant differences; males showed higher levels of existential vacuum ($F = 40.136$, $p < .00$) and optimism ($F = 196.548$, $p < .00$), whereas females exhibited greater pessimism ($F = 379.674$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the study found a negative and statistically significant correlation between existential vacuum and optimism ($r = -.09$, $P < .00$), and a positive and statistically significant correlation between existential vacuum and pessimism ($r = .19$, $P < .00$). The study concluded that enhancing individuals' levels of optimism is crucial due to its role in providing meaning to life and reducing existential vacuum.

INTRODUCTION

Presently, individuals are witnessing rapid and continuous advancements across various facets of life, a consequence of the ongoing technological and information revolution (Yamin, 2019). This transformative era has augmented their life demands, rendering them susceptible to distress and the onset of diverse disorders. Some individuals find themselves devoid of a meaningful life, experiencing an existential vacuum that is accompanied by a sense of helplessness to effect positive changes in their lives (Frankl, 1970). Those grappling with an existential vacuum may manifest symptoms such as incapacity, boredom, despair, apathy, and pessimism, indicative of a crisis of frustration that could culminate in suicidal tendencies (Kurt, 1997; Orbach et al., 2003). This state is associated with an inability to ascribe worth and value to one's endeavors.

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Considering the aforementioned, the existential vacuum is recognized as a challenge impacting individuals' lives, resulting in poor psychological and social adaptation characterized by stress, anxiety, and depression (Andrews, 2016; Yang et al., 2010). Furthermore, it can contribute to higher divorce rates and disturbance in social relationships (Andrews, 2016). It correlates with an individual's flexibility in coping with stressors (El-Kashky et al., 2020) and serves as a significant contributor to various mental disorders, including anxiety, addiction, and aggression (Dodds, 1993). These conditions, in turn, lead to outcomes such as depression, self-harm, and harm to others (Al-Wa'eli, 2012).

Existential vacuum and the loss of meaning are intertwined with several variables, including values (Frankl, 1970), religion (Soponaru & Petriciac, 2012), boredom and violence (Gallant, 2001), personal disorders (Mustafa, 2013). Molasso (2006) demonstrated a robust connection between a students' activities in college and their sense of life's meaning or purpose, highlighting an association between the student's residence and their conceptualization of life's meaning. However, there is a paucity of studies investigating the relationship between existential vacuum and optimism and pessimism.

Existential Vacuum

Existential vacuum, according to Horton (1983), is characterized as a state wherein individuals experience indifference, pessimism, and uncertainty regarding the significance and value of various aspects in their lives. This condition also denotes a disconnection of the self from both internal and external factors, resulting in feelings of isolation and introversion. The absence of meaning and the lack of defined goals or aspirations contribute to the manifestation of existential vacuum (Moran, 2001).

Existential Vacuum induces psychological tension in individuals, creating a divergence from the equilibrium essential for the pursuit of their aspirations (Peterson, 1966). Abunnour (2000) demonstrated a positive correlation between the loss of meaning and emotions of despair, as well as a relationship between the crisis of values and anxiety about the future. Rezai et al. (2023) also suggested that there is a negative correlation between existential thinking and existential loneliness and there is indirect association of existential thinking with existential loneliness through affecting on the meaning of life. Importantly, there were no statistically significant gender-based differences in the experience of the loss of meaning. Mustafa (2013) furthermore identified a correlation between existential vacuum and personality disorders.

The individual's experience of emptiness, void, and a loss of meaning can potentially lead to suicidal thoughts and actual abuse. Research has shown that a life marked by depression, devoid of meaning, serves as a predictor of suicide and substance addiction, accompanied by feelings of frustration and depression (Cherepanova et al., 2023; Frankl, 1978; Kinnier, 1994). Gallant (2001) for instance, identified a correlation between the loss of meaning and contemplation of suicide. Frankl suggests that the existential vacuum may emerge from a pessimistic outlook on the future, neglect of personal development, and a lack of life planning (Gallant, 2001).

Religious emptiness also contributes to the existential vacuum, driving individuals to pursue gratification without a comprehensive understanding of the purpose underlying their existence. This predisposes them to feelings of boredom, monotony, doubt, pessimism, and a sense of life's insignificance and worthlessness (Gallant, 2001). Skrabski et al. (2005) demonstrated the significance of religious beliefs and engagement in religious activities in attaining existential meaning and enhancing individuals' mental health. On the other hand, (Arfasha, 2018) concluded that there exists a direct relationship between the meaning of life, ritual, and utilitarian religiosity. Moreover, there was a direct correlation between irrational thinking and intellectual, ritual, and utilitarian cognitive religiosity, but a negative relationship between the meaning of life and the rigidification of vision as a dimension of irrational thinking.

Providing meaning and purpose to life, religion serves as a vital source of energy essential for endurance, the achievement of aspirations, and confronting life's challenges and tribulations. Ultimately, it brings inner peace and tranquility to the soul (Soponaru & Petriciac, 2012), so it is not surprising that de Medeiros et al. (2024) found that religious beliefs were used to fight diseases such as cancer.

The erosion of values and traditions is identified as a significant factor contributing to the sense of existential vacuum (Tsai et al., 2020). Traditions embody the essence of societies and play a crucial role in the governance of life's affairs. They contribute to the formation of norms and behaviors that sustain social cohesion. The disintegration of these systems results in an existential vacuum, as they constitute a governing framework that steers individuals' lives and guides their existence (Frankl, 1970).

Existentialism, as a philosophical perspective, is dedicated to aiding individuals in discovering a personally resonant meaning of life. It posits that meaning is omnipresent and ubiquitous, even in the face of suffering. The only form of suffering deemed intolerable is that which appears devoid of meaning, such as diseases when COVID-19 outbreak (Yang, 2020). Meaning of life mediates the relationship between suffering and the sense of meaning, it relieves the suffering (Edwards & Van Tongeren, 2019). This underscores the idea that overcoming existential vacuum and uncovering meaning in life endows individuals with the capacity to contribute, transcend the self, and embrace vitality and generosity (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964).

Optimism and Pessimism

Optimism and pessimism constitute fundamental dimensions of personality, exerting notable influences on life activities and future expectations by reflecting an individual's proclivity toward positive or negative anticipations regarding the future (Seligman, 1995). The development of optimism and pessimism is shaped by the experiences encountered from early life onward (Yates, 2002).

Scheier & Carver (1985) characterize optimism as a favorable perspective and enthusiasm for life, involving a belief in the potential fulfillment of future desires and an expectation of positive outcomes rather than negative ones. It serves as a primary driving force in life. Peterson & Bossio (1991) posit that optimism positively impacts individual motivation, personal adaptability, and both psychological and physical well-being. Additionally, the trait of optimism is associated with extroversion, perseverance, and achievement (Peterson, 2000).

Optimism manifests as a trait linked to positive expectations across various domains. Optimistic individuals perceive failures as opportunities for success and personal development, responding effectively and joyfully while continually striving for improvement (Seligman, 1995). Optimists maintain high positive expectations across diverse life domains (Williams et al., 2010). Studies indicate that optimists employ healthy habits and coping strategies to resist negative stimuli in the external environment, and confront difficult situations, exhibiting a reduced tendency to adopt avoidance or denial strategies in confrontation (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Song et al., 2022). Psychological research underscores the close relationship between optimism and life satisfaction, as well as positive outcomes such as increased life expectancy, overall health, sound mental well-being, enhanced success in sports and work, and improved recovery rates in cardiac processes (Chang et al., 1997).

Conversely, pessimism represents the antithesis of optimism, embodying a negative perspective on life associated with feelings of lethargy, illness, and fatigue (Al-Hakak, 2001). Seligman (1995) posits that pessimism involves a negative perception of one's surroundings and circumstances, with pessimists viewing events as inherently destined for failure as an unavoidable aspect of all life domains. Consequently, pessimists experience negative emotions and a perceived lack of control over situations (del Valle & Mateos, 2008). Pessimism is also

strongly correlated with depressive symptoms (Chang et al., 1997). Individuals grappling with an existential void and a lack of meaning in their lives often experience malaise, boredom, frustration, and pessimism, impeding their ability to realize goals and aspirations (Aglozo et al., 2021; Frankl, 1986; Ismail & Shehata, 2010; Oriol et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

University students may confront an existential vacuum, characterized by a loss of life's meaning resulting from personal crises, broader socio-political shifts, and health transformations (Rezai et al., 2023; Russo-Netzer, 2022). These challenges, which some young individuals may struggle to adapt to, contribute to an existential vacuum, fostering feelings of frustration, pessimism, boredom, and despair. This existential void can impede students' capacity to fulfill their life roles and responsibilities. Frankl (1970) posits that the quest for meaning becomes particularly pronounced during the youthful stage. Individuals who find meaning in their lives tend to exhibit optimism, perceiving positive outcomes in their actions, life events, and future expectations. This sense of purpose provides them with the energy and motivation to appreciate life's value and endure challenges. Consequently, the current study tried to examine the extent of existential vacuum, optimism, and pessimism among undergraduate students; if there statistically significant differences in existential vacuum, optimism, and pessimism among university students due to gender; and if there is a statistically significant correlation between existential vacuum and the levels of optimism and pessimism among university students.

METHODS

Participants

The study engaged a convenience sample comprising 466 university students, with 217 (46.1 males and 249 (53.9%) females. Among the participants, 219 (47%) were enrolled in scientific colleges, while 247 (53%) were associated with humanistic colleges. The participants were drawn from diverse colleges from different universities in Jordan. All individuals included in the study were pursuing bachelor's programs during the first semester of the academic 2021-2022.

Measures

Existential Vacuum Scale

Reker (1992) introduced the existential vacuum scale, consisting of 7 items aimed at measuring the diminishing sense of life's meaning and the lack of objectives. Respondents express their perspectives on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (indicating the utmost loss of meaning in life) to 7 (signifying the highest degree of meaning). Total scores on the scale range from 7 to 49 points. After translation and examination by experts in counseling and educational psychology, empirical verification established the scale's apparent validity. Despite some paragraph rephrasing, the scale maintained its original seven-item structure.

The initial version of the scale, developed by Reker in 1992, showed a Cronbach's alpha of .81, indicating its internal consistency. Additionally, the correlation coefficient for test-retest reliability was found to be .87. In the current study, the researcher assessed the scale's reliability using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a value of .90. Furthermore, the test-retest method exhibited a coefficient of .87. To evaluate the level of items based on the corrected scale, adhere to the following ranges: 1 to 2.99 indicates a low level, 3 to 4.99 represents a moderate level, and 5 to 7 signifies a high level.

Optimism and Pessimism Scale

The Optimism and Pessimism Scale developed by Dember et al. (1989) was utilized in this study. The original scale consists of 56 items, including 18 items for measuring optimism and 18 items for measuring pessimism, along with 20 additional disguised items to obscure the scale's purpose. The scale exhibited acceptable reliability and validity in its original form, with a retest reliability coefficient of .73 and Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was .77. To assess the psychometric properties in the current study, the content validity of the scale was confirmed by presenting it in its original form to a panel of seven experts. Some items were subsequently deleted or modified, leading to a final scale comprising 32 statements, evenly split between optimism and pessimism measures. The reliability coefficient was calculated, Cronbach's alpha for the internal consistency was .95 for the optimism dimension, .92 for the pessimism dimension, and .88 for the overall scale. Responses were weighted as follows: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The total score for each subscale was computed separately, with a minimum score of 32 and a maximum score of 128. To evaluate the level of items based on the corrected scale, adhere to the following ranges: 1 to 1.99 indicates a low level, 2 to 2.99 represents a moderate level, and 3 to 4 signifies a high level.

Procedures

In the pursuit of the study objectives, a comprehensive examination of pertinent variables within educational literature was undertaken. Following this, the study problem was systematically elucidated by drawing upon theoretical insights. The measures were subsequently formulated in their initial constructs and underwent validation through rigorous examination by experts possessing significant experience and specialization in the relevant field. Following the random selection of participants, ethical approval was sought and obtained, ensuring adherence to established research ethics. After securing consent from the participants, approval from the universities administrations was obtained to administer the scaled to the study cohort. Participants were then instructed to respond to the instruments, a process requiring approximately 30 minutes. The collected data underwent analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to derive conclusive results.

Data Analysis

To determine the validity and reliability of the scales, content validity, test-retest, and internal consistency reliability were assessed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated to determine the levels of existential vacuum. Differences in existential vacuum, optimism, and pessimism based on gender were analyzed using ANOVA. Finally, the Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to examine the relationship between existential vacuum and both optimism and pessimism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The first question was addressed by determining the mean and standard deviation for the existential vacuum, optimism, and pessimism scales, as delineated in Table 1. Table 1 showed a low level of existential vacuum, juxtaposed with high levels of optimism and moderate level of pessimism. Addressing the second question entailed the computation of means, standard deviations, and ANOVA for individual responses, stratified by gender, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 reveals statistically significant differences in the degree of existential vacuum influenced by gender [$F(1, 463) = 40.136, p < .00$]. The results revealed that the males have more existential vacuum ($M = 2.74$) than females ($M = 2.19$). With regards to optimism and pessimism means, standard deviations, and ANOVA were calculated, as delineated in Table 3.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and the level of existential vacuum, optimism, and pessimism scales.

Variable	M	SD	Level
Existential vacuum	2.44	.96	low
Optimism	3.03	.89	high
Pessimism	2.80	.73	moderate

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and ANOVA of the existential vacuum, optimism, and pessimism according to variable of gender and college.

Variable	Source of variance		M	S	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Existential Vacuum	Gender	Male	2.74	1.11	34.158	1	34.158	40.136	.000
		Female	2.19	.71					
	Error				394.036	463	.851		
	Total				428.670	465			

Table 3 elucidates noteworthy dissimilarities in optimism levels attributable to gender, signified by a significantly statistical outcome [$F(1,463)=196.548, p<.00$]. The results revealed that the males were mor optimistic ($M = 3.17$) than female ($M = 2.36$). Furthermore, Table 3 indicates statistically significant differences in pessimism levels based on gender [$F(1, 463) = 379.674, p<.05$]. The results revealed that the females were more pessimistic ($M = 3.68$) than the males ($M = 2.48$).

It is apparent that a negative and statistically significant correlation exists between existential vacuum and optimism [$r = -.09, P<.00$], while a positive and statistically significant correlation is observed between existential vacuum and pessimism [$r = .19, P<.00$].

Discussion

The results of the first question showed that the level of existential vacuum among the students was low. The result can be explained by the level of religious commitment featured by the participants, as religiosity includes a set of ethics that provide individuals with a sense of security (Levin et al., 1998), as well as contributing to and promoting personality (Miller & Thoresen, 2003).

It is notable that the study participants are undergraduates in the late adolescence stage, actively engaging in the search for personal identity through existential thinking. They often undergo prolonged introspection, leading to confusion about their self-concept, potentially resulting in experiences of existential loneliness (Rezai et al., 2023; Russo-Netzer, 2022). This outcome may be attributed to the widespread use of social networking sites, which exposes young individuals to diverse cultures, beliefs, and values, causing a disturbance in their own value systems. As they engage in social comparisons, comparing their values with those of others, they perceive the superiority of their own values, thereby reducing existential vacuum.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and ANOVA for optimism and pessimism according to gender.

Variable	Source of variance		M	SD	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Optimism	Gender	Male	3.17	0.70	74.986	1	74.986	196.548	0.00
		Female	2.36	0.50					
	Error				176.642	463	0.382		
	Total				253.116	465			
Pessimism	Gender	Male	2.48	0.69	167.214	1	167.214	379.674	0.00
		Female	3.68	0.62					
	Error				203.912	463	0.440		
	Total				370.404	465			

The significance of values in the existential vacuum plays a central role in this phenomenon, aligning with (Tsai et al., 2020) emphasis on the importance of values in shaping the meaning of life.

This result is also attributed to the many pressures and challenges that undergraduate students face, represented by transforming the study to online applications because of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, and exposure to infection and enforced quarantine procedures. This situation as Yang (2020) stated created a sense of the meaning among students and value of their lives and their realization of the reality of the goal for which they live. Frankl (1978) noted that the suffering experienced by individuals represents a great opportunity for them to discover themselves and strive to achieve their goals.

With regard to the levels of optimism and pessimism the results revealed that the optimism was high but the pessimism was moderate. This result is explained by the students being exposed to difficult circumstances from which they derived strength and self-confidence, which reflected positively on their outlook towards life; they became more willing to face challenges and work to develop their capabilities, making them feel comfortable, this goes align with the findings of Song et al. (2022) that optimism is a means in the face of difficult situations. In addition to the fact that the participants live in an environment that is considered religiously committed, this contributes to a sense of comfort and helps provide reasons for wellbeing, happiness, compatibility, interaction, and productivity. It is also considered a path to happiness because it reflects on the behavior of the individual and helps to achieve psychological reassurance and keeps him/her away from the causes of unhappiness and misery (Wuthnow, 2005). Several studies assured that religious beliefs influence optimism (Fastame et al., 2021; Vitorino et al., 2021). Thus, the individual becomes more optimistic and embraces life. This is consistent with the result of Banimustafa & Makaldi (2014) but differs from that of Koizumi (2016) who indicated a decrease in the average grades of students on the trait of optimism and their rise over the trait of pessimism. Regarding the moderate level of pessimism, it may be attributed to environmental challenges caused by pollution, which lead to increased pessimism (Pivovarova et al., 2021), as well as the economic difficulties faced by young people (Chambers et al., 2015; Mitrea et al., 2020). These two factors are prevalent among most young people in the Islamic world and are sufficient to elevate their level of pessimism.

The results also revealed that there are statistically significant differences in the level of existential vacuum due to gender, that males are more optimist than females. This result is in agreement with that of Al-Obaidi (2015), which indicated significant differences by gender in favor of males, because males have a greater level of freedom in Eastern societies compared to females; activities, hobbies and some luxury make them more aware of the existential vacuum, within this context, men are depicted as possessive and dominant, while women are portrayed as objects of male desire, requiring protection and care (Bromberg & O'Donohue, 2013). as Frankl asserts that people who follow their whims become frustrated, with symptoms including loss of motivation and a sense of vacuum, and weakened meaning (Längle et al., 2003).

It is also indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the optimism dimension in favor of males, perhaps because they enjoy higher confidence and support from parents and society by virtue of the culture that gives males many more privileges than females such as jobs, salaries, and leisure time, this makes them more independent in making decisions and drawing the future according to their preferences, consequently make them more optimistic (Bjuggren & Elert, 2019; Briel et al., 2021). This is reflected in their outlook on life and optimism.

The findings indicate a negative and statistically significant correlation between the existential vacuum and optimism, coupled with a positive and statistically significant correlation between the existential vacuum and pessimism. This suggests that an individual's perception of the value and meaning of life plays a crucial role in shaping their outlook. Those

who perceive their lives as meaningful and purposeful tend to exhibit a positive perspective, feeling more optimistic and anticipating future happiness. Such individuals, driven by a sense of purpose and goals, find the energy and motivation to believe in the meaningfulness of life, adopting optimistic and hopeful viewpoints (Aglozo et al., 2021; Frankl, 1986; Oriol et al., 2020).

Conversely, experiencing the existential vacuum and a loss of life meaning may lead to increased suffering, causing the individual to become a victim of despair and frustration. This outlook involves a belief that life is devoid of meaning or value, resulting in a prevailing sense of pessimism. The existential vacuum also contributes to psychological tension in the individual, disrupting their balance and hindering their ability to achieve their aspirations (Peterson, 1966; Piper, 2022; Yang et al., 2021).

Limitation and Future Research

The generalizability of the findings from the current study is contingent upon several factors, including the timing of the research, which was conducted during the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year; the characteristics and location of the sample, consisting of students enrolled in traditional undergraduate programs across various colleges from different universities in Jordan. Additionally, the generalization of the results is influenced by the nature of the measurement instruments utilized, which were self-report scales. Consequently, the validity of the study's outcomes hinges on the accuracy and reliability of the participants' responses.

Despite the limitations of the study, it has some benefits related to the future implications and researches such as encouraging students to participate in university activities to increase their sense of the value of life and set their goals, providing counseling services and programs at individual and collective levels for university students, through which they receive support and assistance and raise their level of optimism, preparing advisory programs intended to raise the level of optimism among university students, and conducting studies dealing with the existential vacuum, optimism and pessimism, investigating different samples and variables.

CONCLUSIONS

It was necessary to investigate the relationship between optimism and pessimism on one hand and existential vacuum on the other, due to the limited studies in this field, particularly in the Middle East. After selecting an appropriate sample and applying suitable measures, it was revealed that it is essential to enhance individuals' levels of optimism due to its role in giving meaning to life and reducing existential vacuum.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

MA is responsible for conceptual, writing and analysis. TG is responsible for interpreting research and design results and discussion.

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