

Correlation between Meaning in Life and Academic Performance in Japanese College Students

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Abstract—This research suggests that meaning in life or Ikigai can be associated with better academic performances in Japanese college students. To measure meaning in life in Japanese college students, the Ikigai questionnaire and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) are both used, and the survey was collected using Microsoft Teams Forms for a total of 80 Japanese college students. The data revealed that students who have a higher than a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) showed the highest score in both the Ikigai and MLQ. The participants with between a 2.0 and a 3.0 GPA reported lower scores in both MLQ and Ikigai than the previous participants. The group of students who have lower than a 2.0 GPA had the lowest scores for MLQ and Ikigai. This result can indicate that implementing meaning in life or Ikigai to early college students can bring about better academic performance, which also can improve students' college life better as well.

Keywords—College students' academic performance, Ikigai, meaning in life, purpose of life.

I. INTRODUCTION

IT is well-known that Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy, experienced a German Nazi concentration camp and survived. His truly experiential knowledge explains that having some meaning in life among the inmates in the concentration camp was the main influence to overcome that brutal time and motivate prisoners to survive [1]. Frankl [2] described "existential vacuum" as a state in which there is no meaning in life and more extreme boredom, distress, and anxiety. It might even lead to suicide. He also explained meaning in life in two different ways. One is universal meaning in all people's lives, and the other is more individual meaning in each person's situation in life [3]. Frankl [2] mentioned that people have inner freedom to choose their way to respond to life's challenges, and it is up to a person to search his or her meaning. Ever since Frankl demonstrated how important it is to have meaning in life even in an extremely hard situation, it has been worth studying in Psychology.

A. Benefits of Having Meaning or Purpose in Life

Meaning or purpose in life shows significant benefits in our lives throughout a growing body of research. According to Kang et al. [4], people having purpose in life did not show increased neural activity when they made health-related decisions, which can reflect that those individuals have less conflicts and more self-regulation when it comes to health-related decision making. Consequently, those people experience better mental health outcomes. Other research showed that having a higher sense of meaning in life among

chronically ill patients is strongly related to higher levels of well-being compared to those patients who experienced low levels of meaning [5]. Feeling more meaningful in life has also shown more positive association with overall psychological well-being [3], [4]. Also, meaning or purpose in life can help overcome stress, depression, anxiety, and other psychological distress [6]. Even some people with higher sense of purpose in life demonstrated their proactive actions to take care of their health, which hinted that those people would use more preventive health care service [6]. Another beneficial evidence of having meaning in life emerged from the research of Hill and Turiano [7]. They suggested older adults with a sense of purpose tend to live longer than their counterparts, which implies that having a purpose can play a role as a buffer against mortality risk [7]. Meaning in life has shown its own benefit in education setting as well. Yuen and Datu [8] posited that strong perception of meaning in life also promotes academic self-efficacy and personal self-efficacy. The researchers explained that meaning in life can boost a sense of belonging for students to help them feel more valued and accepted in their school, which may lead students to get involved more in school life [8].

B. The Two Components of Meaning in Life

Meaning in Life (MIL) in psychology consists of two components, which are Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Steger et al. [9] explained that Presence of MIL is a state in which a person has recognized life has meaning and Search for meaning refers to the state of seeking MIL. Presence of meaning can be interpreted as an individual's perception of how he or she integrates with the world. "Among adults, Presence of meaning has been more strongly associated than Search for meaning with variables that represent positive psychological functioning, and Presence of meaning is related to better life satisfaction, positive emotions, positive self-regulations, healthy eating, physical activities and subjective happiness" [8]. Additional research shows that Presence of meaning is associated with lower levels of depression and state anxiety [8]. Krok [10] said that "presence of meaning in life was a mediator between negative coping and psychological well-being, which suggests that meaning in life is a crucial element of religious coping and psychological well-being that is used by people as a part of their meaning system to cope with life's difficulties and challenges". In addition, Presence of MIL intervenes in the relationships between career indecision and anxiety among university students [11].

Search for Meaning represents the strength and activities of

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individuals' effort to build one's meaning or purpose in life [12], therefore it is a more process-oriented component [5]. However, some research results show Search for meaning is less associated with positive outcomes [5]. There was no correlation between Search for meaning and positive emotions, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being [10]. Furthermore, an individual's strong effort for searching for meaning without success showed greater depression, and negative emotions [8].

C. Ikigai

Ikigai was coined by Japanese psychiatrist Dr. Mieko Kamiya in the late 1950s [13]. During her practice on patients with leprosy, she realized that some patients were more resilient than others with the same disease. She found that patients with an experiential sense showed more resilience and went through the hardship with hope and meaning, and later she captured the sense in the word Ikigai [13]. She was aware that Ikigai was only fully understood in Japanese due to its uniqueness of the word [13]. Her definition of Ikigai was more experiential rather than logical or philosophical, and she emphasized that everyday life was full of meaningful experiences related to one's reason for living [13].

As Ikigai has drawn more attention from the western psychology, the term has been translated as "life worth living", "reason for being" [10], [11] or "having a reason for living" [11]. Also, Sano and Kyougoku [11], [13] defined Ikigai as "a spirit of challenge with purpose and motivation toward everyday life, along with a sense of responsibility for helping others".

Mathew [14] said that, Ikigai is a foundational component of Japanese identity and explains why they live the way they do, from the beginning of their lives. He also examined the close relation between Ikigai and Japanese education and created the outline of the Ikigai age and educational process. According to his theory, "Until 17 years old, Ikigai is routinely informed by one's parents, communities, schools, and community leaders. In short, Ikigai is in a formative stage of creation and thought" [12]. From 18 to 30 years old, Ikigai has been formed but it is not yet fully constructed. However, people in that time period can seek their goals and plans throughout their education [12]. In mid-adulthood, mostly adults' Ikigai has fully formed, and their Ikigai will affect career, family, education, and other life choices [12]. According to the Mathew, many Japanese will go back to further professional or personal education to study harder in their senior year [12]. Those who have a stronger sense of Ikigai tend to have a higher education compared to those who do not have any sense of Ikigai [12]. The link between Ikigai and education may imply that Ikigai can help students have a purpose for their education and guide them toward completion of their pursuit of education [12]. People with Ikigai tend to have a higher level of education compared to those who do not have any Ikigai [15].

D. Benefits of Ikigai

There has been a growing amount of literature review concerning the benefits of Ikigai. Roepke et al. [16] showed that

higher levels of meaning/Ikigai were associated with better physical health as well as behavioral factors bringing positive health outcomes. In addition, people who have meaning or experience MIL tend to recover faster, and have better immune functioning, or refrain from smoking, and overall show better healthier choices [13], [17], [18]. Zilioli et al. [19] also suggested that people with greater sense of meaning showed their strong belief in controlling their health, and those people had lower levels of allostatic load and physiological burden of the body in response to adjusting to external challenges [13], [19]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people with a higher level of MIL were associated with lower levels of anxiety and distress, which may imply that there is a protective effect of Ikigai/MIL [20].

Turning to a four-year longitudinal research, having a sense of Ikigai played the role of buffer to increase strong social ties for the elderly in Japan [12]. Kotera et al. [13] explained that the concept of Ikigai and psychotherapy shares a common ground in which psychological well-being is a main state to pursue and acknowledge some difficulties while also pursuing personal well-being. Eller [14] added that Ikigai can also be helpful to measure one's hopes, dreams, and aspirations in all aspects of life.

Currently, Ikigai is being applied in many fields in Japan, such as career guidance, wellbeing training and clinical practice [11], [13]. In education, Ikigai and MIL also can be worth looking into closely for students' overall well-being and performance in school. If any correlation exists in students' school performance and the score of MIL and Ikigai, it would be meaningful to understand and implement MIL and Ikigai to students. The goal of this paper is to investigate if there is any correlation among Japanese college students.

II. METHOD

To measure college students' MIL and Ikigai, Microsoft Forms and Teams were used. The MIL questionnaire (MLQ) was made by using Forms. The questionnaire has a total of 10 items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Absolutely True) to 7 (Absolutely untrue) [15]. However, the Japanese version of the MLQ contains a total of 14 items, which was likely caused by language differences. Ikigai questionnaire consists of nine items with 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (not at all agree).

A total of 80 Japanese college students participated by answering MLQ and Ikigai questionnaires through online Microsoft Forms. The participants were all in the university in the western region of Japan, humanity department students.

The MLQ was the first part of the survey and the Ikigai-9 questionnaire was followed. Mostly freshmen, sophomore, and junior year of college students responded by Forms and senior year students did not participate in the survey. All the participants in the survey agreed to the informed consent before beginning the survey, and they answered the questionnaires in a self-responding manner without any certain time limit. The average time to complete the total of 23 questions was less than 10 minutes. The data were then collected and analyzed. The MLQ score was divided by Presence of Meaning and Search for

Meaning, each with a total score of 35, which comes in total 70. The Ikigai score was summed separately out of a maximum of 45. All the answered figures on the questionnaires were rounded to the nearest whole number for a succinct explanation. The participants were divided into three groups based on their GPA for the comparison between their academic performance and MIL and Ikigai. The first group of students had higher than a 3.0 GPA and the second group of students were higher than a 2.0 but less than a 3.0 GPA. The students with less than a 2.0 GPA were in the third group.

III. RESULTS

The first group of students with higher than a 3.0 GPA showed an average score of 44 out of the maximum of 70 in MLQ. The average score of Presence of Meaning was 20 and Search for Meaning was 24 out of 35, respectively. These students' scores fall in the category of below 24 on Presence of Meaning and above 24 on Search for meaning in the MLQ scoring sheet. The scoring sheet explains that people in this scoring range "are probably not always satisfied with their life. They might not experience emotions like love and joy that often. People who know you would probably describe you as liking to play things by ear, or go with the low when it comes to plans and not particularly socially active" [21]. The second

group of students with more than a 2.0 but less than a 3.0 GPA reported that their average of Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were 18 and 22 each, which came to a total of 40 in MLQ score. The MLQ scoring sheet gives the explanation to those participants as follows; "You probably do not feel your life has a valued meaning and purpose and are not actively exploring that meaning or seeking meaning in your life. Overall, you probably don't find the idea of thinking about your life's meaning very interesting or important. Occasionally, you might feel anxious, nervous, or sad and depressed. You are probably do not hold traditional values, and may be more likely to value stimulating, exciting experiences, although you are not necessarily open-minded about everything. People who know you would probably describe you as sometimes" [21]. The last group of students with lower than a 2.0 GPA scored 19 on both of the Presence of Meaning and Search for meaning, and it came to 38 out of 70 MLQ. The same MLQ scoring explanation is applied to the students in the last group. The average Ikigai score for the students with a higher than 3.0 GPA was 31 from the maximum score of 45, and the second group of students scored 30 out of 45. The last group of the average Ikigai score showed 27 from the maximum of 45. Figs. 1-3 demonstrate the comparison with GPA and scores in MLQ (Presence of Meaning & Search for Meaning) and Ikigai.

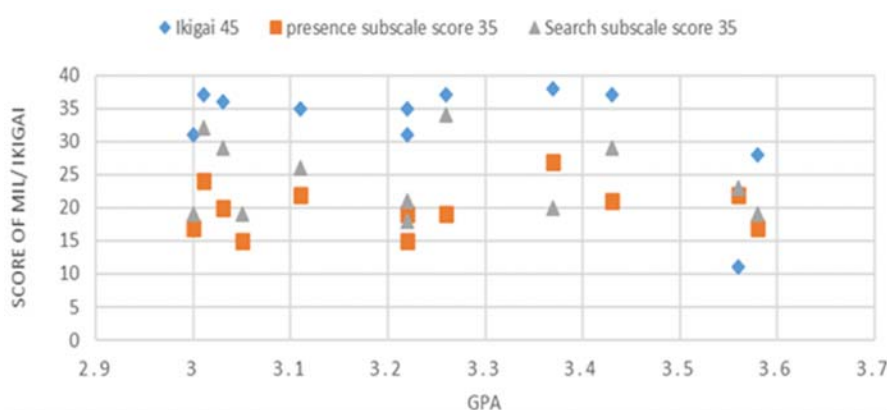


Fig. 1 The score of MIL and Ikigai of participants with higher than 3.0 GPA

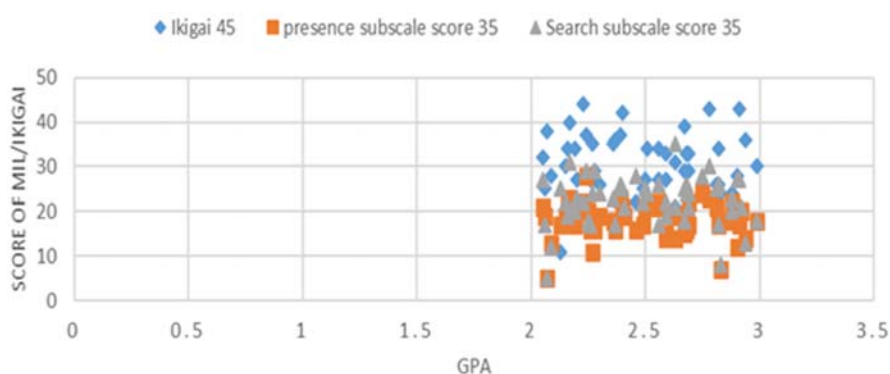


Fig. 2 The score of MIL and Ikigai of participants with higher than 2.0 GPA

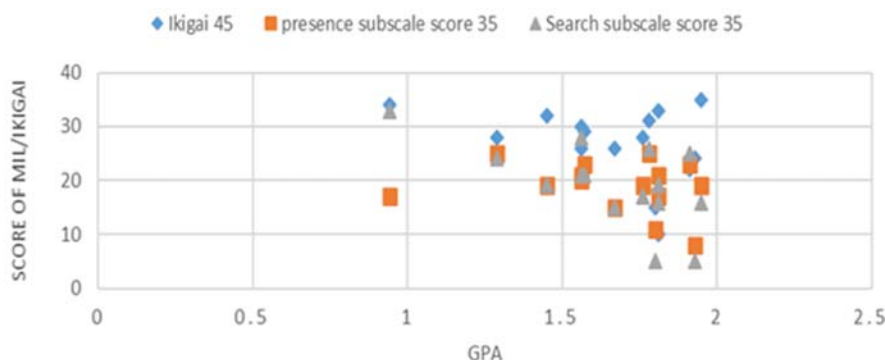


Fig. 3 The score of MIL and Ikigai of participants with lower than 2.0 GPA

IV. CONCLUSION

The students with higher than a 3.0 GPA students showed the highest numbers in MIL and Ikigai. This result is congruent with the findings of other researches. Ji [16] revealed that students with higher presence of meaning experienced better academic adjustment and well-being than other students. Henry [17] reported that having meaning can be an important factor for students' academic performance. Also, another researcher found that MIL score is positively correlated with social connectedness and academic self-efficacy [8]. It hints that students having meaning can guide themselves to beneficial behavior for better outcomes. The students between a 2.0 GPA and a 3.0 GPA revealed that their Presence of Meaning was the lowest number, however their Search for Meaning was not especially low compared to the first group of students. The third group of students with less than a 2.0 GPA showed low scores on Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning and also the lowest score on Ikigai and MLQ in total. It implies that students with a low GPA have less meaning or purpose in their academic lives but still try to find their meaning in their lives in general. The students with less than a 2.0 GPA had the lowest score of Ikigai and MIL, which may suggest their absence of meaning or purpose in life. This finding suggests that having meaning or purpose in life is positively associated with better academic performance for college students. In addition, it may indicate that implementing some education for students to find their meaning or purpose in life could be beneficial.

V. DISCUSSION

This research includes its own limitations. First, not many participants were involved. The participants in this study were selected from the university located in a small city in western Japan. To see a clear comparison with GPA and scores of MIL and Ikigai, there should have been more participants for the study. Second, the sincerity of the participants was not guaranteed. Some of participants completed the survey in less than 3 minutes, which might have hinted that the answers of those students may not be reliable for the survey. There was insufficient correlation between Ikigai scores and the GPA of the participants due to the lack of published research on Ikigai scores.

Further research is needed to compensate the weaknesses and

have well-founded results. Cultural differences may also be a good variable for this study; therefore, a cross-cultural replica study may be informative.

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