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# Emotional Awareness, Social Support, and Meaning in Life Among Jordanian University Students: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine the independent and interactive effects of emotional awareness and perceived social support on the presence of meaning in life among Jordanian university students.

**Methods and Materials:** An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used. In the quantitative phase, 428 undergraduates completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Presence subscale only), the Emotional Awareness subscale (DERS-EA), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). Hierarchical regression tested main effects and the EA×SS interaction. In the qualitative phase, 20 participants were purposefully selected from the quantitative sample and interviewed, with data analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

**Findings:** Both EA and SS significantly predicted the presence of MIL, with EA emerging as the stronger predictor. A significant positive interaction showed that the EA-MIL relationship was stronger at higher SS levels. Thematic analysis revealed three themes contextualizing this interaction: (1) EA as an internal compass for value-congruent choices; (2) SS as a relational context providing validation, meaning modeling, and burden-sharing; and (3) a dynamic interaction where SS provides safety for emotional exploration, while EA enhances relationship quality.

**Conclusion:** EA and SS showed a significant interaction in predicting the presence of MIL among Jordanian university students. Findings support an integrative, practice-informed counseling model that strengthens both internal emotional clarity and external relational resources to enhance existential well-being in collectivist academic settings.

**Keywords:** Meaning In Life, Emotional Awareness, Social Support, University Students, Jordan.



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## Introduction

The search for meaning in life (MIL) is one of the most widely accepted human motivations which is directly connected to well-being or to psychological health, resilience, and the achievement of optimal functional capabilities (Martela & Steger, 2016; Steger, 2012). Although tradition (e.g., existential and positive psychology) suggests that meaning in life (MIL) is a central component of the good life, current literature aims to demarcate what modifiable routes it follows to be cultivated. Rather than viewing MIL as a fixed characteristic, contemporary frameworks conceptualize it as a dynamic construct influenced by continuous intrapersonal and interpersonal variables (Park, 2010). This study is informed by an integrative perspective on counseling, which describes two key, mutually integrated pathways to MIL: intrapersonal emotional awareness (EA) and interpersonal perceived social support (SS). Emotional awareness, a meta-cognitive ability to recognize, distinguish and contemplate one's own emotions (Gohm & Clore, 2002; Goleman, 1995), provides the raw material for internal meaning-making internally. It allows people to see what is actually important to themselves, to align and relate their behaviors with the way their personal values are felt and to weave lived experiences together in a personal story. Conversely, perceived social support, the belief that one is cared for, valued and can depend on significant others provides an external, relational context for meaning (Zimet et al., 1988). Through validation, shared experiences and opportunities for generative contribution, relationships affirm the sense of a person's worthiness and anchor his or her personal story in a wider social context (Hicks & Routledge, 2013).

Importantly, integrative models suggest that these pathways are not just additive, but synergistic. It is hypothesized that the context in which meaning most likely emerges is the interplay between the inner world of processed emotion and the outer world of nurturing relationships. Counseling approaches that simultaneously enhance clients' emotional literacy and foster authentic connectedness are thus poised to catalyze a stronger and more resilient sense of purpose.

Despite the theoretical plausibility of the synergistic model, empirical evidence integrating quantitative interaction with qualitative depth remains scarce,

particularly within Arab collectivist contexts. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing statistical moderation with experiential narratives to inform culturally sensitive counseling. Though quantitative analysis of EA and SS has separated the two from qualitative inquiries into meaning-making subjectively, very few studies have integrated both perspectives statistically to test and then experientially explain their interaction. This inadequacy constrains the generation of culturally sensitive, evidence-based counseling practice.

**The Jordanian Context as a Critical Case.** The significance and analysis of this integrative model are so heavily amplified in certain cultural contexts. This investigation targets Jordanian university students as an appealing and important group. Jordan represents a society with strong collectivist characteristics where identity, well-being, and life decisions are deeply intertwined with family and group obligations (Dwairy et al., 2006).

The developmental stage in late adolescence/early adulthood generally corresponds to the transition to academic life, the exploration of self, and the apprehension of the future. These common concerns are compounded in Jordan by a unique socio-cultural tension: youth, coming from an evolving, modernized society, are exposed to the global, individualistic values of the university culture and yet they maintain an anchor of longstanding, family-centric collectivist values. This tension can seem to make the negotiation of personal emotional experience and relational expectations (the "internal compass" of EA) and relational expectations/resources (the "relational context" of SS) a central, daily, and frequently stressful process. Therefore, understanding how EA and SS jointly and interactively contribute to MIL in this population is not only of interest in terms of theory but also critical for crafting successful and culturally responsive counseling interventions in Jordanian higher education and similar collectivist contexts. Although interest has continued to grow in meaning-making processes, empirical studies of the interactive role of emotional awareness and social support with mixed-methods designs have been scarce, especially within Arab cultural contexts.

Accordingly, the primary objectives were to (a) assess the independent and interactive relationships between EA and SS in predicting the presence of MIL,

and (b) explore qualitatively the participant experiences to contextualize these quantitative associations; and (c) synthesize these results to develop an integrative, evidence-based model of counseling practice that addresses the enhancement of existential well-being.

#### *Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses*

##### *Emotional Awareness as an Intrapersonal Pathway to Meaning*

Emotional awareness is a critical aspect of emotional intelligence and key to regulating emotions (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). It is the ability to attend to, describe, and understand the drivers and outcomes of one's emotions. Multiple aspects contribute to meaning-making, and emotional clarity is a crucial component. Firstly, based on the tripartite model of meaning (Martela & Steger, 2016), EA directly leads to understanding the cognitive capacity to make meaning of, and recognize recurrent patterns in, one's life events. People construct coherent life narratives by processing and integrating emotional reactions to events (Park, 2010). Second, emotions are an inherent feedback loop on value congruence (Descartes, 1994). Attending to feelings of authenticity, engagement, or incongruence (e.g., boredom, resentment) helps clarify purpose identifying personally significant goals and directions. Therapeutic methods such as Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) (Greenberg, 2004) and mindfulness-based interventions squarely address this pathway itself, proposing that meaningful emotional processing promotes greater self-knowledge and a more meaningful life.

##### *Social Support as an Interpersonal Pathway to Meaning*

Humans are social creatures by nature, and meaning is often constructed, affirmed, and sustained within relational contexts (Greenberg, 2004). Perceived social support fulfills the mattering component of the tripartite model, the feeling that one's existence is significant and of value to others (Martela & Steger, 2016). SS provides existential security, buffers the impact of stressors, and creates opportunities for altruism and contribution, which are powerful sources of purpose (Hicks & Routledge, 2013). From an attachment theory perspective, secure bonds offer a haven that encourages exploration and growth, and a secure base from which to engage with life's challenges (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Interventions rooted in group counseling, family systems theory, or social skills

training operationalize this pathway by enhancing the quality, availability, and perceived reliability of supportive relationships.

#### *The Integrative Model: Complementarity and Synergy*

The core proposition of this study is that EA and SS function as complementary, mutually reinforcing pathways. This perspective is informed by relational-cultural theory RCT; (Jordan, 2018), which posits that growth-fostering relationships are essential for the development of intrapersonal capacities, including self-awareness. We propose a synergistic cycle:

High social support creates a psychological climate of safety and validation, reducing the threat associated with exploring difficult emotions, thereby facilitating greater emotional awareness. Greater emotional awareness, in turn, improves interpersonal skills such as empathy, emotional expression, and assertive communication, which leads to deeper, more authentic, and more supportive relationships. This dynamic interaction suggests that the beneficial effect of EA on MIL is amplified in the presence of strong SS, and vice-versa.

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Emotional awareness will be positively associated with, and will significantly predict, the presence of meaning in life.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Perceived social support will be positively associated with, and will significantly predict, the presence of meaning in life.

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Social support will significantly moderate the relationship between emotional awareness and the presence of meaning in life, such that the positive association between EA and MIL will be stronger at higher levels of SS.

## **Methods and Materials**

### *Study Design*

In this study, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → qual) was used (Creswell & Clark, 2007). This two-phase design was chosen to first establish generalizable quantitative relationships between EA, SS, and MIL in a large sample, and then to use qualitative inquiry to explain, contextualize, and elaborate on the mechanisms behind those quantitative findings. The sequential integration ensures the qualitative phase is directly informed by and builds upon the initial quantitative results.

## Phase 1: Quantitative Strand

### Participants and Procedure

A cross-sectional survey was administered. The target population was all undergraduate students at public and private universities in Jordan. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across major academic disciplines (Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, Health Sciences) and university types (Public/Private).

### Sample Size

An a priori power analysis using G\*Power 3.1 for a multiple linear regression (with  $\alpha = .05$ , power = .95, 5 predictors, and a conservative small-to-medium

expected effect size  $f^2 = 0.10$  chosen to detect subtle interaction effects typical in psychological research indicated a minimum required sample of 172. To ensure robust analysis, account for potential non-response, and enable subgroup analyses, we targeted a sample of 400-450.

Totally, 428 students participated. Data collection was conducted online via a secure platform (Qualtrics) after obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and permissions from participating universities. Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants. Demographics: See Table 1 for full demographic characteristics.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Quantitative Sample (N = 428)*

| Characteristic  | Category             | n     | %     |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------|-------|
| Gender          | Male                 | 191   | 44.6% |
|                 | Female               | 237   | 55.4% |
| Age (Years)     | Mean (SD)            | 20.4  | (1.8) |
|                 | Range                | 18-25 |       |
| Year of Study   | First Year           | 112   | 26.2% |
|                 | Second Year          | 135   | 31.5% |
|                 | Third Year           | 102   | 23.8% |
|                 | Fourth Year & Above  | 79    | 18.5% |
| University Type | Public               | 298   | 69.6% |
|                 | Private              | 130   | 30.4% |
| Residency       | With Family          | 265   | 61.9% |
|                 | University Dormitory | 103   | 24.1% |
|                 | Private Apartment    | 60    | 14.0% |

### Measures

All measures underwent a rigorous forward-backward translation process into Arabic by bilingual experts and were piloted for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

*Demographic Questionnaire:* Collected information on age, gender, year of study, academic major, GPA, residency status, and family socioeconomic indicators.

*The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ):* The meaning in life questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) was employed. This is a 10-item scale comprised of two 5-item subscales: Presence of Meaning (MLQ-P, e.g., "I understand my life's meaning") and Search for Meaning (MLQ-S). Only the MLQ-P subscale was used as the dependent variable for this study, as we focused on the experience of meaning. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Absolutely untrue, 7 = Absolutely true). Cross-cultural data for the MLQ has shown good psychometric properties. and in the current sample, the

MLQ-P demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-SF)*

The Short form of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-SF) (Kaufman et al., 2016) was administered. The DERS-SF contains 18 items that measure the degree of difficulty with emotion regulation across six domains. (For the purposes of this study, the 3-item Clarity subscale (for example, "I struggle to make sense of my emotions") served as its main measure.) All items were reverse scored so that higher total scores indicate increased emotional awareness/clarity. Responses are scored on a 5-point scale (1 = Almost never, 5 = Almost always). While emotional awareness is a broad construct, emotional clarity the ability to identify and make sense of one's emotions was chosen as the focal proxy for this study because it directly theoretically aligns with the cognitive processing required for meaning-making.

For the current sample, the Clarity subscale demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ )

*The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS):* The multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988) was used. This 12-item scale measures perceived support from three sources: Family, Friends, and a Significant Other, using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Very strongly disagree, 7 = Very strongly agree). It yields a total score and three subscale scores. The MSPSS has been widely validated, including in Arab populations. In the current study, the scale demonstrated excellent reliability for the total score ( $\alpha = .91$ ), as well as the Family ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and Friends ( $\alpha = .88$ ) subscales.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) for all scales. Pearson correlation coefficients to examine bivariate relationships. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test H1, H2, and H3. Prior to regression, assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity were confirmed. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no issues, with all Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) well below the threshold of 5. In Step 1, demographic variables (gender, age, residency) were entered as covariates. In Step 2, the centered main effect variables (EA, SS-Total) were entered. In Step 3, the interaction term (EA x SS) was entered. Simple slopes analysis (using the PROCESS macro, Model 1) (Hayes, 2013) was conducted to probe significant interactions, plotting the relationship between EA and MIL at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of SS.

#### *Phase 2: Qualitative Strand*

##### *Participant Selection and Procedure*

Following the quantitative analysis, A sequential explanatory design was implemented, where quantitative profiles (specifically participants reflecting the statistical interaction between EA and SS) directly informed the purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase (n=20). This integration ensured that narratives specifically explained the synergistic cycles identified statistically to ensure it served the explanatory goal of the design:

*Quantitative Profiling:* All 428 participants were profiled based on their standardized (z-) scores on the three key variables: MIL (MLQ-P), EA, and SS-Total. The final qualitative sample (n=20) included profiles

distributed across high (n=6), low (n=5), typical (n=5), and extreme/mixed cases (n=4) based on their quantitative z-scores.

*Purposeful Sampling Strategy:* Using these profiles, participants were selected according to the following pre-defined criteria to ensure diversity and explanatory power.

*Maximum Variation Sampling:* To capture a wide range of experiences, we selected participants with high scores on all three variables (High MIL/High EA/High SS), low scores on all three (Low MIL/Low EA/Low SS), and mixed profiles.

*Extreme Case Sampling:* To explore boundary conditions and potential disconnects in the model, we deliberately selected theoretically informative outliers, such as participants with high MIL but low SS (to explore resilience without strong support) and low MIL with high EA (to explore potential barriers to translating self-awareness into meaning).

*Typical Case Sampling:* To understand the most common experiences, we selected participants whose scores were close to the sample mean on all variables.

*Recruitment & Consent:* Using email invitations, a select group of people were invited. Explicit consent was once again obtained for the interview phase. The interviews were individually semi-structured, conducted in Arabic by the first author, lasted 60-90 minutes, and were audio-recorded. The interview protocol was designed to probe and explain Phase 1 findings. Prior to the main qualitative phase, the interview guide was piloted with two undergraduate students (who were not included in the final sample) to evaluate the clarity, cultural appropriateness, and flow of the questions. Minor adjustments were made to the phrasing of some prompts based on this pilot feedback to ensure the questions elicited rich, reflective responses rather than brief answers. (e.g., "Your survey showed you a strong sense of meaning. Can you describe a recent experience where life felt particularly meaningful, and what role, if any, did your understanding of your own emotions play in that?").

##### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Arabic. Analysis followed (Braun, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis. Data management and coding were facilitated using NVivo 14 software to systematically organize the data and track the development of themes.

The six phases were: 1. *Familiarization*: Repeated reading of transcripts and listening to recordings. 2. *Generating Initial Codes*: Systematic, data-driven semantic and latent coding of features relevant to the research question across the entire dataset. 3. *Searching for Themes*: Collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. 4. *Reviewing Themes*: Checking themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness; generating a thematic map. 5. *Defining and Naming Themes*: Refining the essence of each theme and selecting vivid, illustrative extracts. 6. *Producing the Report*: Weaving the analytic narrative.

Analysis was conducted primarily in Arabic to preserve linguistic and cultural nuance. Key extracts were translated into English for reporting by a bilingual researcher, following a protocol of forward-translation, comparison, and back-translation for accuracy.

#### *Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Analysis*

To ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative findings, several validation strategies were employed:

*Researcher Reflexivity*: Both authors maintained reflexive journals to bracket preconceptions and document analytical decisions.

*Peer Debriefing*: The second author, experienced in qualitative research, acted as a peer debriefer. Regular meetings were held to review coding frameworks, challenge interpretations, and explore alternative explanations, thereby reducing investigator bias.

*Member Checking*: A summary of the preliminary thematic analysis was shared with a subset of five interview participants. Participant feedback confirmed the accuracy of the themes, resulting in minor refinements to the phrasing of Theme 2 to better reflect the concept of 'burden-sharing'.

#### *Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands*

Integration occurred at two primary points in the study:

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations for Main Study Variables (N = 428)*

| Variable (Scale)            | M    | SD   | $\alpha$ | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     |
|-----------------------------|------|------|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Meaning in Life (MLQ-P)  | 4.65 | 1.21 | .88      | —     |       |       |       |
| 2. Emotional Awareness (EA) | 3.02 | 0.89 | .86      | .51** | —     |       |       |
| 3. Social Support – Total   | 5.40 | 1.05 | .91      | .43** | .32** | —     |       |
| 4. Social Support – Family  | 5.85 | 1.18 | .89      | .38** | .25** | .87** | —     |
| 5. Social Support – Friends | 5.10 | 1.30 | .88      | .39** | .30** | .88** | .62** |

Note: \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed). M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's Alpha.

*Connecting*: Quantitative results (e.g., the interaction effect, correlation strengths) directly informed the purposeful sampling strategy for the qualitative phase and the development of the interview guide, ensuring the qualitative data collection was explicitly aimed at explaining the quantitative patterns.

*Interpreting and Explaining*: During the reporting phase, the qualitative themes are used not as standalone findings, but to provide a mechanistic explanation and contextual depth for the quantitative relationships (e.g., how SS moderates the EA-MIL link), fulfilling the core explanatory purpose of the design.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

The study received ethical approval from the Jadara University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #IRB/EDU/2025/354-48). All participants provided informed consent for each phase. Anonymity was protected in surveys, and confidentiality was maintained for interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were provided with contact information for psychological support services.

## Findings and Results

### *Phase 1: Quantitative Findings*

#### *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations for the main study variables are presented in Table 2. All scales demonstrated good to excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha > .85$ ). As hypothesized, both Emotional Awareness (EA) and Total Social Support (SS) were positively and significantly correlated with the Presence of Meaning in Life (MIL). EA showed a slightly stronger bivariate correlation with MIL ( $r = .51$ ) than total SS ( $r = .43$ ). The Family and Friends subscales of the MSPSS also correlated significantly with MIL.

### Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting MIL are presented in Table 3. The control variables (Step 1) accounted for a small but significant portion of variance (3%,  $p < .05$ ). The addition of EA and SS in Step 2 resulted in a large and significant increase in explained variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both EA ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and SS ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant unique predictors, supporting H1 and H2. EA emerged as the stronger predictor. Consistent with interaction

effects in psychosocial research, the incremental variance explained by the interaction term was modest yet theoretically meaningful.

Crucially, adding the interaction term (EA x SS) in Step 3 yielded a significant incremental change ( $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The positive  $\beta$  for the interaction term (.14,  $p < .01$ ) indicates a synergistic effect, supporting H3. The final model explained 36% of the variance in Meaning in Life.

**Table 3**

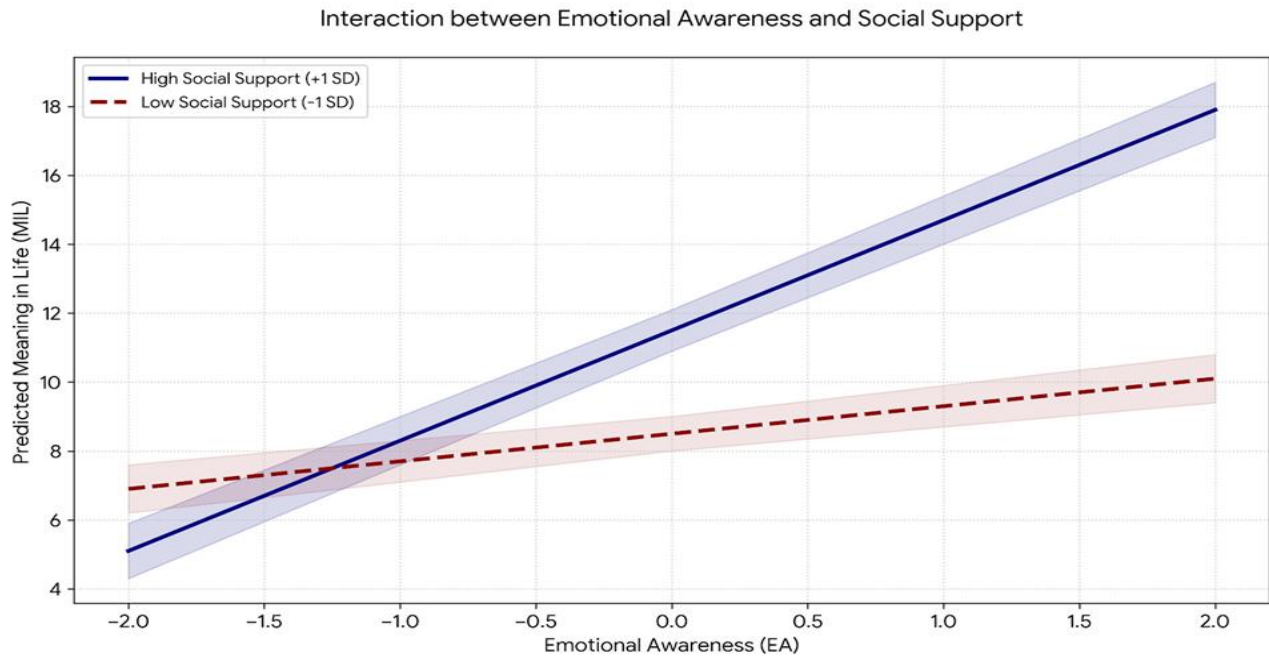
*Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Meaning in Life (Presence)*

| Step and Predictor             | B     | SE B | 95% CI for B  | $\beta$ | t     | p     | $\Delta R^2$ | F $\Delta$ (p) |
|--------------------------------|-------|------|---------------|---------|-------|-------|--------------|----------------|
| <b>Step 1: Covariates</b>      |       |      |               |         |       |       | .03          | 4.12 (.003)    |
| Gender (Female=1)              | 0.18  | 0.11 | [-0.04, 0.40] | .08     | 1.67  | .096  |              |                |
| Age                            | 0.05  | 0.03 | [-0.01, 0.11] | .07     | 1.53  | .126  |              |                |
| <b>Residency (Ref: Family)</b> |       |      |               |         |       |       |              |                |
| - Dormitory                    | -0.22 | 0.14 | [-0.49, 0.05] | -.09    | -1.60 | .111  |              |                |
| - Apartment                    | 0.10  | 0.17 | [-0.23, 0.43] | .03     | 0.58  | .565  |              |                |
| <b>Step 2: Main Effects</b>    |       |      |               |         |       |       | .31          | 95.67 (<.001)  |
| Emotional Awareness (EA)       | 0.58  | 0.06 | [0.46, 0.70]  | .43     | 9.93  | <.001 |              |                |
| Social Support (SS)            | 0.31  | 0.06 | [0.19, 0.43]  | .27     | 5.40  | <.001 |              |                |
| <b>Step 3: Interaction</b>     |       |      |               |         |       |       | .02          | 10.34 (.001)   |
| EA x SS                        | 0.11  | 0.03 | [0.05, 0.17]  | .14     | 3.22  | .001  |              |                |
| Total $R^2$                    |       |      |               |         |       |       | .36          |                |
| Adjusted $R^2$                 |       |      |               |         |       |       | .35          |                |

Probing the Interaction: Simple slopes analysis revealed that the positive relationship between EA and MIL was significant at both high and low levels of SS, but was significantly stronger for students with high social support ( $\beta = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.48, .76]) compared to those with low social support ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.24, .52]). This suggests that social support

moderates the association, amplifying the positive relationship between EA and MIL.

**Figure 1.** The interaction between Emotional Awareness (EA) and Social Support (SS) in predicting Meaning in Life (MIL). The slope representing the EA-MIL relationship is steeper for participants with high SS (+1 SD) compared to those with low SS (-1 SD).

**Figure 1**

*The interaction between Emotional Awareness (EA) and Social Support (SS) in predicting Meaning in Life (MIL).*

### *Phase 2: Qualitative Findings*

Thematic analysis of the interview data generated three overarching themes that provide rich, explanatory depth to the quantitative model, supported by diverse participant accounts.

#### **Theme 1: Emotional Awareness as the Internal Compass for Authentic Choice**

Participants consistently described EA as foundational for making authentic, value-congruent choices. This theme was not uniform; for some, it led to transformative decisions, while for others, it involved daily micro-adjustments.

*Transformative Alignment:* "I spent two years in engineering because it was 'the respected path.' I felt constant, dull anxiety. When I finally paused and named it wasn't just 'stress,' it was a deep grief for my lost passion for literature that clarity was like a key. It gave me the courage to change my major. That choice, though scary, felt meaningful because it came from my own truth." (Female, 21, Private University, High EA/High MIL profile)

*Navigational Micro-Adjustments:* "I get overwhelmed easily. Now, I check in: 'Is this anxiety or excitement?' If it's anxiety about a social event, I might go for just an hour instead of forcing myself all night. Honoring that small feeling preserves my energy for what truly matters

to me, like my studies." (Male, 19, Public University, Average EA/Average MIL profile)

*Conflict with Relational Expectations:* A participant with high EA but lower MIL revealed the compass could point to difficult realizations: "My awareness made me see the gap between my dream of working abroad and my family's expectation to stay close. The clarity doesn't make the choice easier; it just makes the conflict painfully clear." (Female, 22, Public University, High EA/Low MIL profile)

#### **Theme 2: Social Support as the Relational Context: Tripartite Functions**

Social support contributed to meaning through three distinct functions, with the source and emphasis varying among participants.

##### *Existential Validation:*

*From Family:* "My father told me, 'Your struggle to find your path is a sign you care, not a sign you're lost.' That reframed my entire crisis." (Male, 23, Public University)

*From Peers:* "When I failed and my friends didn't judge me but just said, 'We've got you,' I felt I mattered beyond my achievements." (Female, 20, Private University)

##### *Meaning Modeling*

*Familial Models:* "Seeing my mother's dedication to her teaching, despite the low pay, showed me meaning is in impact, not status." (Female, 20, Public University)

*Peer Models:* "My friend who balances a job, studies, and volunteering without burning out... she models how to build a meaningful life, not just a successful one." (Male, 21, Dormitory Resident)

#### *Burden-Sharing*

*Emotional:* "Just vocalizing my stress to my roommate halved its weight. The burden was shared the moment it was heard." (Female, 19, Dormitory Resident)

*Practical:* "During exam season, my cousin will bring meals. That simple act freed my mind from survival worries and let me focus on my purpose here." (Male, 24, Living with Family)

#### **Theme 3: The Synergistic Cycle: Pathways in Dynamic Dialogue**

This theme directly explains the significant quantitative interaction, showcasing the recursive reinforcement between EA and SS.

*From Support to Awareness (Safety enabling Exploration):* "I can only dare to look honestly at my jealousy towards my cousin when I know my best friend won't judge me. The support gives me the security to face that ugly feeling." (Female, 22, Private University)

*From Awareness to Support (Clarity fostering Connection):* "Learning to say 'I feel lonely' instead of acting angry transformed my friendships. My awareness created the support I needed by changing how I communicated." (Male, 21, Public University)

*Breakdown in the Cycle:* An extreme case (Low SS/High EA) illustrated the cycle's fragility: "I understand my emotions very well, but with no one to share them with, it feels like shouting into a void. The awareness becomes isolating, not empowering." (Male, 23, Private Apartment Resident, High EA/Low SS profile). This case underscores why the statistical interaction showed a weaker EA-MIL link under low SS.

#### *Integrated Results Summary*

The sequential integration yields a comprehensive understanding:

*Quantitative Confirmation:* EA and SS are significant, independent predictors of MIL for Jordanian students, with a notable synergistic interaction effect statistically confirmed.

*Qualitative Explanation:* The qualitative data reveal the mechanisms: EA operates as an internal compass; SS functions as a multi-faceted relational context (validating, modeling, burden-sharing). Their interaction

is experienced as a synergistic cycle of mutual reinforcement.

*Contextual Nuance:* The data highlight the exceptional salience of familial support in the Jordanian context (evident in its high mean score), while also underscoring the critical, day-to-day role of peer support during the university transition. The central challenge of integrating the "compass" (personal EA) with the "context" (often familial SS) emerges as a defining feature of meaning-making for these students.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings support an interaction-based model where EA and SS are positively associated with MIL, where EA serves as an 'internal compass' for value-congruent choices, while SS provides the essential 'relational safety' to explore these emotions. Crucially, the moderation effect highlights that in the Jordanian context, personal meaning-making is most resilient when individual awareness is anchored in supportive social structures and dynamic processes that shape them. Implications for theory, culturally competent practice and further research are discussed.

#### *Theoretical Integration and Contribution*

The study results are consistent with and extend several theoretical approaches. Support for H1 and H2 confirms findings from the tripartite model of meaning [Martela & Steger \(2016\)](#), which states a connection between EA for comprehension/purpose and SS for mattering. The greater unique effect of EA indicates that, in this developmental and culturally situated environment, the intrapersonal work of emotional processing may be highly capable of acting as a catalyst to meaning in relation to the emotion-focused and existential perspectives ([Frankl, 1985](#); [Greenberg, 2004](#)). The main theoretical contribution is the empirical verification of the synergistic model (H3). The strong interaction effect, extensively interpreted by the qualitative "Synergistic Cycle" theme, shows that EA and SS are not just additive agents on their own. Rather, quality social support enables psychological safety to enable profound emotional exploration and thus develops the relational qualities of better social support. This finding aligns well with Relational-Cultural Theory [Jordan \(2018\)](#), which suggests self-capacities flourish from relationship-based growth.

### *Cross-Cultural Comparison and Contextualization.*

This study contextualizes universal psychological processes within a particular cultural frame for comparison with evidence from individualistic settings. The finding that emotional awareness emerged as the stronger unique predictor contrasts with some Western studies, in which social connectedness or autonomy is more strongly predictive of well-being and meaning. In collectivistic contexts, this might be consistent with the role of having a distinct internal compass in the face of sustained relational demands. More significantly, however, such interpretation does not signal cultural homogeneity but instead emphasizes major social dynamics that coexist with rich individual variability. In contrast, the significant moderation effect of social support on the emotional awareness meaning relation is consistent with data such as those provided by individualistic cultures, which show that the "secure bases" play an important role in psychological exploration. However, in the present context, such function seems culturally grounded, pointing toward the negotiation of genuine connectedness rooted in relation while developing and activating an internally defined identity. Collectively, these findings connect cross-cultural, existential, and positive psychology views, indicating that although pathways to meaning are likely global, their relative importance, manifestation, and points of tension are culturally bound.

### *Practical Implications for University Counseling*

The findings offer a clear, actionable blueprint for enhancing counseling services in Jordanian universities and similar settings. Interventions should be dual-focused, aiming to strengthen both pathways and the synergy between them.

Based on the identified patterns, university counseling centers might consider an exploratory practice-informed framework, such as a 'Meaning in Transition' module. This 6-week intervention specifically bridges the gap between EA (internal exploration) and SS (relational networking), moving from individual value identification to interpersonal assertive communication within the family context integrating weekly modules. For example:

*Week 1-2 (EA Focus):* "Mapping Your Emotional Landscape" using mindfulness and journaling to identify and label emotions linked to values.

*Week 3-4 (SS Focus):* "Building Your Support Context" skills for seeking and offering support, appreciating different support functions (validation, modeling).

*Week 5 (Integration):* "The Authentic Conversation" role-playing assertive communication to negotiate personal needs with family expectations.

*Week 6 (Consolidation):* "Creating Your Synergistic Cycle" action planning to apply both skill sets.

*Brief Emotion-Focused Coaching:* Individual or group sessions specifically targeting the "Internal Compass," using techniques from EFT (e.g., focusing, two-chair dialogue) to help students process unresolved emotions blocking authentic choice.

*Adopt a Systemic, "Bridge-Building" Stance in Individual Counseling:*

Counselors should actively help students navigate the EA-SS interface. Concrete techniques include:

*Genogram and Values Mapping:* Visually plotting family relationships and value systems alongside the student's personal values to identify points of alignment and tension.

*Communication Scripting:* Co-developing specific, respectful phrases for students to use with family (e.g., "I understand why you value X for me. My passion for Y gives me a similar sense of purpose because...").

*Leverage Group-Based Formats as a Microcosm of the Synergy:* Given the power of peer support revealed qualitatively, process-oriented counseling groups are ideal. They provide a live "relational context" where members practice emotional expression, receive validation, give and receive support, and directly experience the synergistic cycle in a safe environment.

*Develop Campus-Wide Outreach:* Partner with student affairs to offer psychoeducational seminars on topics directly from the findings: "Your Emotional Compass: Finding Direction in University Life" or "From Family to Friends: Building Your Support Network."

### *Brief Screening Implication*

For counseling screening and outcome monitoring, brief measures of emotional clarity and perceived social support may offer a practical entry point for identifying students at risk for existential distress.

### *Limitations and Future Research Directions*

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences regarding the development of meaning over time. Furthermore, reliance on self-report measures in a

collectivist culture may introduce social desirability bias. First, the reliance on the 3-item DERS clarity subscale as a proxy represents a significant conceptual narrowing of the broader emotional awareness construct. Second, the dependent variable was limited strictly to the 'presence' of meaning, not encompassing the 'search' for meaning or broader existential functioning. Third, the qualitative phase utilized a small sample designed to yield explanatory narratives rather than statistically representative accounts. Future longitudinal research is recommended to track these synergistic pathways across different developmental stages. Longitudinal investigations are required to follow how EA and SS co-develop and shape MIL trajectories over time. Thus, the results are suggestive of association rather than causal in nature and should therefore be interpreted under the assumption that they indicate correlative and moderating rather than causal relationships.

**Cultural Specificity:** Replicating the current study in other collectivist (such as East Asian) and individualist cultures would allow us to disentangle common mechanisms from culture-specific forms. In addition, a future study may directly investigate if the strength of EA and SS paths varies by cultural orientation.

**Self-report measures and social desirability:** There were validated scales employed in the instrument for the analysis, but the whole data was purely self-reported. This is a challenge in collectivist societies where social desirability bias may translate into over-report of social support and family stability and underreport of emotional distress/intra-family strife. Future work should include multimethod assessments (e.g., peer or family testimonials of support given), and behavioral measures of emotional awareness (e.g., performance-based tasks).

**Intervention Studies:** The outcome-oriented research of intervention may offer the next logical step in developing and empirically testing a counselling intervention, that is, it is explicitly drawn from this model if it is designed to be a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with the aim of effecting both pathways and their synergistic changes.

**Mediators and Moderators:** Future studies should examine the mediators (e.g., psychological flexibility and self-efficacy) and moderators of EA/SS-MIL relationships (e.g., attachment style and gender roles).

*Conclusion*

This research brings empirical evidence to bear in favor of a perspective that life meaning is based in the reciprocal relation between inner clarity and outward connection. Many Jordanian university students, and probably also many who are negotiating developmental transitions within relational cultures, derive meaning from their lives not just through introspection or through reliance on others. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings suggest that meaning may be fostered through an interactive association between internal emotional clarity and the social support derived from a relational context. Counseling psychology, adopting this comprehensive stance, and developing an approach that skillfully promotes both pathways, can be more effective in supporting clients' pursuit of what they ultimately desire: a life that is not merely endured, but experienced as profoundly significant and connected.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

### Ethical Considerations

**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate:** This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association and was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Jadara University (Protocol #IRB/EDU/2025/354-48). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### Transparency of Data

The quantitative dataset and the qualitative interview guide are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy restrictions.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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