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*Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article*

## The Relationship Between Meaning in Life, Exercise Beliefs, and Happiness in University Students

### Üniversite Öğrencilerinde Yaşamın Anlamı, Egzersiz İnançları ve Mutluluk Arasındaki İlişki

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between meaning in life, exercise beliefs, and levels of bliss among university students. The research was carried out in descriptive and cross-sectional type. Approval for the research was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Muş Alparslan University (date and number: 30.12.2020-15709). The research was carried out between 05.01.2021 and 05.03.2021 with 490 students who were actively attending in the health services vocational school of a state university in Turkey. The data were collected by administering a personal information form, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Exercise Health Belief Model Scale, and the Oxford Happiness Scale. For analysing the data, number, mean, percentile distribution, Cronbach alpha coefficient, and Pearson Correlation analyses were used. The sense of life, happiness, and exercise of student belief levels were determined to be above average value. A statistically significant positive relationship between sense of life and happiness, sense of life and exercise beliefs, and happiness and exercise beliefs was found. It was found that as the students' sense of life increased, their belief in exercise and their level of happiness also increased. In addition, it was determined that as the exercise belief scores increased, the happiness scores also increased. It is recommended to carry out activities related to artistic, cultural, and sportive activities in order to increase the meaning of life, exercise belief, and happiness levels in university students.

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**Öz:** Bu araştırmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinde yaşamın anlamı, egzersiz inançları ve mutluluk düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektir. Araştırma tanımlayıcı ve kesitsel tipte gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma için Muş alparslan Üniversitesi Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Kurulu'ndan onaylanmıştır (tarih ve sayı: 30.12.2020-15709). Araştırma, 05.01.2021-05.03.2021 tarihleri arasında Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinin sağlık hizmetleri meslek yüksekokulunda aktif olarak öğrenim gören 490 öğrenci ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler kişisel bilgi formu, Yaşamın Anlamı Anketi, Egzersiz Sağlık İnanç Modeli Ölçeği ve Oxford Mutluluk Ölçeği uygulanarak toplanmıştır. Verilerin analizinde sayı, ortalama, yüzdelik dağılım, Cronbach alfa katsayısı ve Pearson Korelasyon analizleri kullanılmıştır. Öğrencilerin hayatın anlamı, mutluluk ve egzersiz inanç düzeylerinin orta değerinde olduğu belirlendi. Yaşamın anlamı ile mutluluk arasında, yaşamın anlamı ile egzersiz inançları arasında ve mutluluk ile egzersiz inançları arasında istatistiksel olarak pozitif yönde anlamlı bir ilişki olduğu bulunmuştur. Öğrencilerin yaşamı anlamlandırma düzeyleri arttıkça egzersiz inançlarının ve mutluluk düzeylerinin de arttığı belirlendi. Ayrıca egzersiz inanç puanları arttıkça mutluluk puanlarının da arttığı saptanmıştır. Üniversite öğrencilerde yaşamın anlamı, egzersiz inanç ve mutluluk düzeylerini arttırmak amacıyla sanatsal, kültürel ve sportif faaliyetler ile ilgili etkinliklerin yapılması önerilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Üniversite öğrencileri, Mutluluk, Egzersiz inancı, Yaşamın anlamı

## Introduction

The years spent in college can be seen as a period of transition from adolescence to adulthood during which people can fulfil their self-integrity, work to establish themselves, and deal with the challenges that come with being a student. Due to the necessity for societal cohesion, this transition period typically passes swiftly. University students may feel helpless and face physical and psychological issues if they are unable to deal with the issues that arise during this transition (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Since thinking and questioning are fundamental to who we are as people, they drive us to look for solutions to problems throughout our lives. The individual looks for meaning in his life as a result of questioning things like the worth of life, the meaning of existence, his expectations, and how they are met (Topuz, 2016).

One of the most significant factors influencing people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours is the search for meaning, which is an effort to obtain accurate and consistent information. It is a force that creates new possibilities for people, encourages them to look for employment, and supports their drive to comprehend and categorize their unique experiences (Steger et al., 2008). Every person's significance in life is special and different since everyone has a responsibility to uphold (Frankl, 2013). The definition of the purpose of life, in its simplest and most direct form, is everything that makes people happy (Sarıçam & Biçer, 2015). According to several studies, there is a link between goal in life and physical activity which is favourable (Hooker & Masters, 2016; Hooker et al., 2018).

People's attitudes and actions regarding their health or illness are referred to as health beliefs. Health-related actions are reinforced by an individual's health beliefs, so whether their health status improves or deteriorates depends on their health beliefs (Ünsal, 2017). In contrast, exercise is defined as "constant actions aimed at improving one or more components of planned, structured, and repetitive fitness." (Özer, 2020). One of the most crucial times for establishing a physical activity routine or giving it up completely is during college (Irwin, 2004). If exercise and physical activity become a habit, they can improve young people's health and have a long-lasting impact on their lives (Korkmaz, 2010).

The idea of happiness has numerous definitions from varieties of perspectives. While happiness is described as the combination of positive emotions that a person experiences, another definition of happiness states that it occurs when positive emotions outweigh negative ones (Doğan, 2012; Eryılmaz, 2016). Happiness is described as a psychological and biological state that every person aspires to have and to attain throughout their life, which results in satisfaction when he or she achieves material and spiritual satisfaction, and which accordingly fosters human relations (Aluş & Selçukkaya, 2015). Two crucial components of human happiness are exercise and health (Richards et al., 2015). This implies that people can find happiness by encouraging their own health through exercise (Cheon & Lim, 2020). Even

ten minutes of physical activity a week or exercising once a week can increase happiness levels (Zhang & Chen, 2019). Byrne and Horgan found that depressive symptoms were significantly associated with low-level exercise beliefs (Byrne & Horgan, 2018).

It is thought that knowing the relationship between the meaning in life, exercise health beliefs, and happiness levels of university students will offer new strategies for individuals to reduce their negative feelings and thoughts. Moreover, no study carried out in Turkey examined the relation between these three concepts. The purpose of this research is to determine the meaning in life, exercise health beliefs, and happiness levels at university students, and to reveal the relationship between these concepts.

In this context, answers to the following research questions were sought.

- What are the levels of meaning in life, exercise health beliefs, and happiness among university students?
- Is there a relationship between university students' meaning in life and exercise beliefs?
- Is there a relationship between the meaning in life and happiness among university students?
- Is there a relationship between university students' exercise beliefs and happiness?

## **Material and Method**

### **Type of Research**

The research was carried out in descriptive and cross-sectional type.

### **Location and Time of the Research**

The research was conducted with students who were actively enrolling the health services department of a state university in Turkey between 05.01.2021 and 05.03.2021.

### **Universe and Sample of the Research**

The population of the research consists of 981 students who continue their education in a health services vocational school of a university in Turkey. The research sample was calculated as 375 students at 95% confidence interval, and it was completed with 490 students (Cohen et al., 2013).

### **Criteria for Participating in the Research**

- Volunteering to participate in the research.
- Do not have a psychiatric diagnosis such as personality disorder, drug abuse, depression.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

The data of the students who did not accept to participate in the research and those who left the study data unfinished and did not fill in the questionnaire and scale questions were excluded from the research.

### **Data Collection Tools**

#### **Personal Information Form**

The personal information form prepared by the researchers (age, gender, family income level, parental attitude, perception of academic success and communication with friends) consists of a total of 6 questions.

#### **The Meaning in Life Questionnaire**

Akin (Akin & Taş, 2015). carried out the Turkish adaptation of the scale developed by Steger et al. (Steger et al., 2006). The scale is a 7-point Likert-type (1 absolutely untrue-7 absolutely true) and consists of 10 items. The 9th item in the scale is reverse scored. The fit index values in confirmatory factor analysis were:  $\chi^2= 110.80$ ,  $sd= 47$ ,  $RMSEA=.051$ ,  $NFI=.95$ ,  $CFI=.97$ ,  $IFI=.97$ ,  $GFI=.97$ ,  $AGFI=.94$  and  $SRMR= .049$  found. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.81. The range of potential scores on the scale varies between 7 and 70. The highest score

on the scale reveals that the person has a lot of significance in their lives (Akin & Taş, 2015). In this study, the Cronbach alpha value was found to be 0.88.

### **The Oxford Happiness Scale**

The scale was developed by Hills and Argyle (Hills & Argyle, 2002), and adapted into Turkish by Doğan and Sapmaz (Doğan & Sapmaz, 2012). The single-factor and six-point Likert scale is answered as 1-strongly disagree 6-strongly agree. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale is 0.91, the reliability coefficient obtained as a result of the split-half method is 0.86, and the composite reliability is found to be 0.91. These values show that the scale is highly reliable and measures what it wants to measure well (Doğan & Sapmaz, 2012). The Turkish version of the scale showed good fit indices for the one-dimensional, and the fit indices for one-dimensionality were calculated for  $\chi^2$  /df. These values are 4.2; RMSEA=.082; SRMR=.069; NFI=.92; NNFI=.93; CFI=.94; IFI=.94 and RFI=.91. Items 1, 6, 10, 13, 14, 19, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29 are coded upside down on the scale. The minimum score that can be achieved from the scale is 29, and the maximum score is 174. A high score on the scale is an indication that the individual's level of happiness is high (Doğan & Sapmaz, 2012). Cronbach's alpha value for this study was 0.91.

### **Exercise Health Belief Model Scale**

Esparza-Del Villar, O. A. et al. developed the original scale (Esparza-Del Villar et al., 2017). It was adapted into Turkish by Çiftci and Kadioğlu (Çiftci & Kadioğlu, 2020). The scale consists of 32 items with five-point Likert-type scoring scale. From item 1 to item 26, it is scored as a lot (5), quite a bit (4), more or less (3), a little (2), not at all (1). From item 27 to item 32, it is scored as I believe, I'm sure of it (5), I believe it's very likely (4), I believe it's likely (3), maybe, but it's unlikely (2), I don't believe (1). There is no reverse item in the scale, and it consists of five sub-dimensions (general health, perception of taking it seriously, perception of benefit, perception of motivation and sensitivity). The indices of confirmatory factor analysis results were examined, and it was seen that the five-point Likert form of the exercise health belief model scale was confirmed. The Turkish version of the scale showed good fit indices for the five-dimensional five-point Likert-type inventory, and the fit indices for five-dimensionality were calculated for  $\chi^2$  /df. These values are 5.6; RMSEA=.079; GFI=.82; AGFI=.79; CFI=.93; NNFI=.93; RMR=.058 and SRMR=.066. The scale has a minimum possible score of 32 and a maximum possible value of 160. indicates that the higher the score on the scale, the higher the exercise belief. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale is 0.87. The Cronbach alpha was 0.89 for this investigation.

### **Data Collection**

Between 05.01.2021 and 05.03.2021, 251 students that volunteered to participate in the study using the convenience sampling method were included in the study. A questionnaire has been designed to be completed online using Google Forms. For data collection, the questionnaire for exploring the participants' socio-demographic features, The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Exercise Health Belief Model Scale, and The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire were used.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the study were analysed using the Social Sciences 25.0 statistical package. In the data evaluation, descriptive characteristics such as number, mean, percentage, and standard deviation were used. Data compliance with the normal distribution was assessed through skewness and kurtosis values. The scales used were found to show normal distribution: The meaning in Life Scale (skewness: -.947, kurtosis: .816), The Oxford Happiness Scale (skewness: .226, kurtosis: .346), and Exercise Health Belief Model Scale (skewness: -.817, kurtosis: 1.265) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Using Pearson correlation analysis, the relationship between meaning of life, happiness, and exercise beliefs was examined.

### **Ethical Principles of the Research**

Approval for the research was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Muş Alparslan University (date and number: 30.12.2020-15709). The following information was provided to the participants: the goal of study, its methodology, the amount of time

they would need to devote to it, the fact that taking part would not endanger them, and the fact that participation was entirely optional. Online consent forms for the participants were gathered.

### Results

When the distribution of the introductory features of the participants is analysed (Table 1), the average age of the individuals is  $20.44 \pm 1.92$  years, 53.9 % of them are female students, 50.8% of them perceive their parents' attitude as understanding, 61.4% of them have average income level, 53.9 % of them have average academic success, and 53.9 % were found to have moderate level of communication with their friends.

**Table 1:** Introductory Characteristics of The Students

Variables	(n=490) Number	%
<b>Age</b>		
17-20	320	65.3
21-24	148	30.2
25 and above	22	4.5
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	264	53.9
Male	226	46.1
<b>Parental attitude</b>		
Perfect	71	14.5
Understanding	249	50.8
Overprotective	67	13.7
Overly-controlling	61	12.4
Unconcerned	42	8.6
<b>Family income level</b>		
Above average	16	3.3
Average	301	61.4
Below average	173	35.3
<b>Self-perception in academic success</b>		
Sufficient	91	18.6
Average	264	53.9
Insufficient	135	27.5
<b>Communication status with friends</b>		
Good	135	27.5
Moderate	264	53.9
Bad	91	18.6

As can be seen in Table 2, the average scores for the Meaning in Life, Happiness and Exercise Health Belief model scales are as follows: Meaning in Life is  $51.90 \pm 10.82$ , Happiness is  $104.38 \pm 20.3$ , and Exercise Health Belief is  $124.55 \pm 11.42$ .

**Table 2.** Distribution of The Lowest and Highest Scores and Total Mean Scores Obtained from The Meaning in Life, Happiness, and Exercise Health Belief Scales by The Students

Scale	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean
Meaning in Life	11.00	70.00	$51.90 \pm 10.82$
Happiness	64.00	156.00	$104.38 \pm 20.3$
Exercise Health Belief	64.00	154.00	$124.25 \pm 11.42$

When the relationship between the meaning in life, happiness and exercise health belief mean scores of the participants was examined (Table 3), a significant positive statistical correlation between the meaning in life and happiness ( $r=.320$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), the meaning in life and exercise health beliefs ( $r= .221$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), and happiness and exercise health beliefs ( $r= .215$ ,  $p=0.024$ ) was found.

**Table 3.** The Relationship Between the Meaning in Life, Happiness, and Exercise Health Belief Mean Scores of the Students

Scales	Meaning in Life	Happiness	Exercise Health Belief
Meaning in Life	1	$r= .320^*$ <b><math>p=0.000</math></b>	$r= .221^*$ <b><math>p=0.001</math></b>
Happiness	$r= .320^*$ <b><math>p=0.000</math></b>	1	$r= .215^*$ <b><math>p=0.024</math></b>
Exercise Health Belief	$r= .221^*$ <b><math>p=0.001</math></b>	$r= .215^*$ <b><math>p=0.024</math></b>	1

### Discussion

It is believed that this research will provide information about the meaning of life, the beliefs of exercise, and the levels of happiness of university students and the relationship between them. It was determined in this study that university students' meaning in life total score mean was slightly above the average value. The meaning in life score levels in Yaran's study on adolescent university students are similar to the present study (Yaran, 2020). In some studies, conducted with university students, it is stated that the meaning in life scores is at moderate level (Çelik, 2016; Taşdibi Ünlü, 2019)

Getting enough physical activity plays an important role in well-being and quality of life. Increase in physical inactivity paves the way for many health problems (WHO, 2018). It was found in this study that the mean scores of exercise health beliefs of university students were above the moderate level. Increased physical activity is associated with stronger physical activity beliefs, such as self-reliance for recovery, action and coping planning, and self-reliance for maintenance (Hsu et al., 2021). Kasırğa et al. conducted a study with university students, and it was found that male students are more physically active than females, and that the physical activity level of all students in general is low (Kasırğa et al., 2021). Some other studies also reported that university students are not physically active enough (Demirtürk et al., 2017; Ölçücü et al., 2015).

The present study investigated that university students' average happiness scores were slightly above the moderate level. While the happiness score levels in the study conducted by Yaran (Yaran, 2020), were similar to this study, happiness levels were found to be higher in the study conducted by Bal and Gülcan with university students than in the present study (Bal & Gülcan, 2014).

The results of this article showed that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between student happiness levels and the meaning of life. Demirci Seyrek and Eranlı (2017) conducted a study with university students and reported that the meaning in life levels were found to be statistically significant according to the level of happiness perceived by the students, and students with the lowest meaning in life scores defined themselves as unhappy, while students with the highest meaning in life scores defined themselves as happy (Demirci Seyrek & Eranlı, 2017). Yaran (2020) stressed that when students' levels of happiness rise, so does their sense of purpose in life (Yaran, 2020). University students were the subjects of a study by Deb et al. that revealed a statistically significant link between students' subjective pleasure and their sense of purpose in life (Deb et al., 2020). According to these data, it can be concluded that happiness levels and life meaning positively influence one another.

It was established in this study that there was a statistically meaningful positive relationship between meaning in life and exercise beliefs. Like the findings of this study, Rush et al. reported that there is a significant relationship between the meaning in life and physical activity, and that physical

activity supports positive self-efficacy for the meaning in life (Rush et al., 2019). The results of this study are also consistent with some previous studies (Hooker & Masters, 2016; Hooker et al., 2018).

This study found a positive and significant association between exercise beliefs and happiness. In a systematic review by Zhang and Chen in which they examined the relationship between physical activity and happiness, evidence showed a consistent positive relationship between physical activity and happiness (Zhang & Chen, 2019). Cheon found that exercise frequency has a direct effect on perceived happiness (Cheon, 2021). When the findings of Lathia et al.'s study were examined, it was reported that individuals who were more physically active were happier, and it has also been reported that individuals feel happier when they are physically more active (Lathia et al., 2017). In the short term, exercise triggers positive psychological mood, and in the long term, regular exercise leads to greater happiness (Sran et al., 2021).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It was determined that the meaning in life, happiness, and exercise belief levels of university students were above the average value. In addition, it has been determined that there is a significant relationship between the meaning of life, exercise beliefs and happiness levels. The present study revealed that as the meaning in life levels of the students increased, their exercise beliefs and happiness levels also increased.

In line with these results, it is recommended to organize artistic, cultural, and sports activities to increase the meaning in life, exercise beliefs, and happiness levels among students, and to work with different people and samples regarding the meaning in life, exercise beliefs, and happiness.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of the study is that it was conducted online and only in one university. Another limitation is that this study can only be generalized to the group in which the study was conducted.

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