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(IJEPC)<https://gaexcellence.com/ijepe>FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PURPOSE IN LIFE AMONG
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SCOPING REVIEWAhmad Azmi Abdel Hamid Esmail¹, Hon Kai Yee^{2*}, Md. Sayed Uddin³, Tuan Norbalkish
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Abstract:

This scoping review synthesized existing literature on factors associated with purpose in life among university students by systematically searching Scopus and Web of Science databases for empirical studies published between 2000-2025. Following PRISMA-ScR guidelines, 73 studies were included after screening 416 records, with data analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns. Six themes emerged: Individual Psychological Resources, Physical and Mental Health, Identity Development, Religious and Spiritual Factors, Educational Experiences, and Social Support and Relationships. Self-efficacy emerged as the strongest individual predictor, explaining 41% of purpose variance, while mental health challenges consistently undermined purpose development. High-quality mentoring relationships and social support showed significant positive associations, with service-learning demonstrating effects lasting 13 years post-graduation. Religious engagement patterns varied by intrinsic versus extrinsic orientations, and identity exploration showed temporal complexity—current exploration reduced purpose while completed exploration enhanced it. Gender and cultural contexts moderate several relationships. The findings indicate that purpose development among university students is influenced by multiple interconnected factors spanning individual, relational, and institutional levels. Self-efficacy interventions, accessible mental health support, quality mentoring programs, and meaningful engagement opportunities

represent evidence-based approaches for supporting purpose. Substantial methodological limitations—primarily cross-sectional designs and limited cultural diversity—indicate needs for longitudinal research across diverse populations and experimental studies testing intervention effectiveness.

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Keywords:

College Students, Identity Development, Mental Health, Purpose in Life, Scoping Review, Self-Efficacy, University Students



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Introduction

Purpose in life is one of the cornerstones for university students development according to Arnett (2000). Studies suggest that higher levels of purpose in life are associated with higher GPA, more credits earned, fewer dropped courses, and increased odds of persisting through the first three years of university (Alderson et al., 2024). Additionally, higher purpose in life (specifically goal orientation) appears to be associated with superior academic performance, with grit mediating the association between purpose and academic performance (Tan et al., 2023).

While individual studies have examined psychological resources (DeWitz et al., 2009a; Paramio et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2023), relational factors (Cai & Lian, 2022; Huffman et al., 2025; Rojas Zegarra et al., 2025), and educational contexts (Bailey & Kang, 2015; Green et al., 2020; Verhaeghen, 2021). Moreover, previous systematic literature reviews focused on purpose in life conceptualization (AshaRani et al., 2022; Hodges, 2009), the relationship between purpose in life and other variables like physical health (Cohen et al., 2016), or anxiety (Boreham & Schutte, 2023), the role and the determinant of purpose in life for adult and elderly (AshaRani et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2020).

However, limited research has examined the psychological, social, and institutional determinants of purpose in life among university students. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various factors that may influence the development of purpose in life within this population.

Methodology

Study Design

This scoping review was conducted to map the existing literature on factors associated with purpose in life among university students. The review followed the methodological framework for scoping studies proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), along with subsequent refinements by Levac et al. (2010). Reporting of the review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR).

Research Questions

The review addressed the following research question:

RQ1: What psychological, social, cultural, and academic factors predict or influence purpose in life among university students?

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were selected according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	University or college students (undergraduate or postgraduate) as primary population OR mixed samples with $\geq 50\%$ students OR studies providing separate student analysis	Non-student populations OR mixed samples where student data cannot be extracted
Phenomenon of Interest	Studies explicitly measuring "purpose in life" as: • Primary outcome/dependent variable • Component within broader constructs (with extractable purpose-specific data) • Mediator variable (where IV $\rightarrow$ purpose relationship is extractable)	Studies focusing exclusively on related constructions (meaning in life, calling, ikigai, life satisfaction) without explicit purpose in life measurement
Relationship Direction	Studies examining factors that predict, influence, correlate with, determine, or theoretically affect purpose in life	Studies where purpose solely predicts other outcomes (purpose as independent variable only)
Study Design	Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods) published in peer-reviewed journals	Conference abstracts, dissertations, review articles, theoretical papers, editorials
Quality	Studies with sufficient methodological detail	Case studies with < 10 participants or insufficient methodological detail
Language & Access	English language publications with accessible full text	Non-English publications or inaccessible full text

Time Period	Publications from 2000-2025	Publications before 2000 or after 2025
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Information Sources and Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in two electronic databases: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of psychological, educational, and social science literature. The search was limited to publications from 2000 to 2025 to capture contemporary research on purpose in life among university students. The search strategy combined three concept groups using Boolean operators (Table 2).

Table 2. Search for Strategy Components

Concept	Search Terms
Purpose terminology	"Purpose in life" OR "life purpose" OR "sense of purpose"
Population	"university student*" OR "college student*" OR "undergraduate*" OR "higher education" OR "emerging adult"
Relationship terms	"factor*" OR "determinant*" OR "predictor*" OR "antecedent*" OR "correlate*" OR "influence*" OR "outcome*" OR "effect*" OR "impact*" OR "consequence*" OR "mediat*" OR "moderat"

The complete search strings applied in each database are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Database-Specific Search Strings

Database	Search String	Filters Applied
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("purpose in life" OR "life purpose" OR "sense of purpose") AND ("university student*" OR "college student*" OR "undergraduate*" OR "higher education" OR "emerging adult*") AND ("factor*" OR "determinant*" OR "predictor*" OR "antecedent*" OR "correlate*" OR "influence*" OR "outcome*" OR "effect*" OR "impact*" OR "consequence*" OR "mediat*" OR "moderat*"))	PUBYEAR > 1999 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 • EXCLUDE DOCTYPE "bk" (books) and "no" (notes) • LIMIT-TO LANGUAGE "English"
Web of Science	("purpose in life" OR "life purpose" OR "sense of purpose") AND ("university student*" OR "college student*" OR "undergraduate*" OR "higher education" OR "emerging adult*") AND ("factor*" OR "determinant*" OR "predictor*" OR "antecedent*" OR "correlate*" OR "influence*" OR "outcome*" OR "effect*" OR "impact*" OR "consequence*" OR "mediat*" OR "moderat*")	Timespan: 2000-2025 • Language: English

Selection Process

The search yielded 664 records (Scopus: 350, Web of Science: 314). After removing 495 duplicate records, 416 unique records remained for title and abstract screening. During this initial screening, 292 records were excluded based on the eligibility criteria. Full-text articles were sought for the remaining 124 records, of which 16 could not be retrieved. The 108 retrieved full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, resulting in the exclusion of 30 articles that did not meet inclusion criteria. A total of 73 studies were included in the final review. The selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

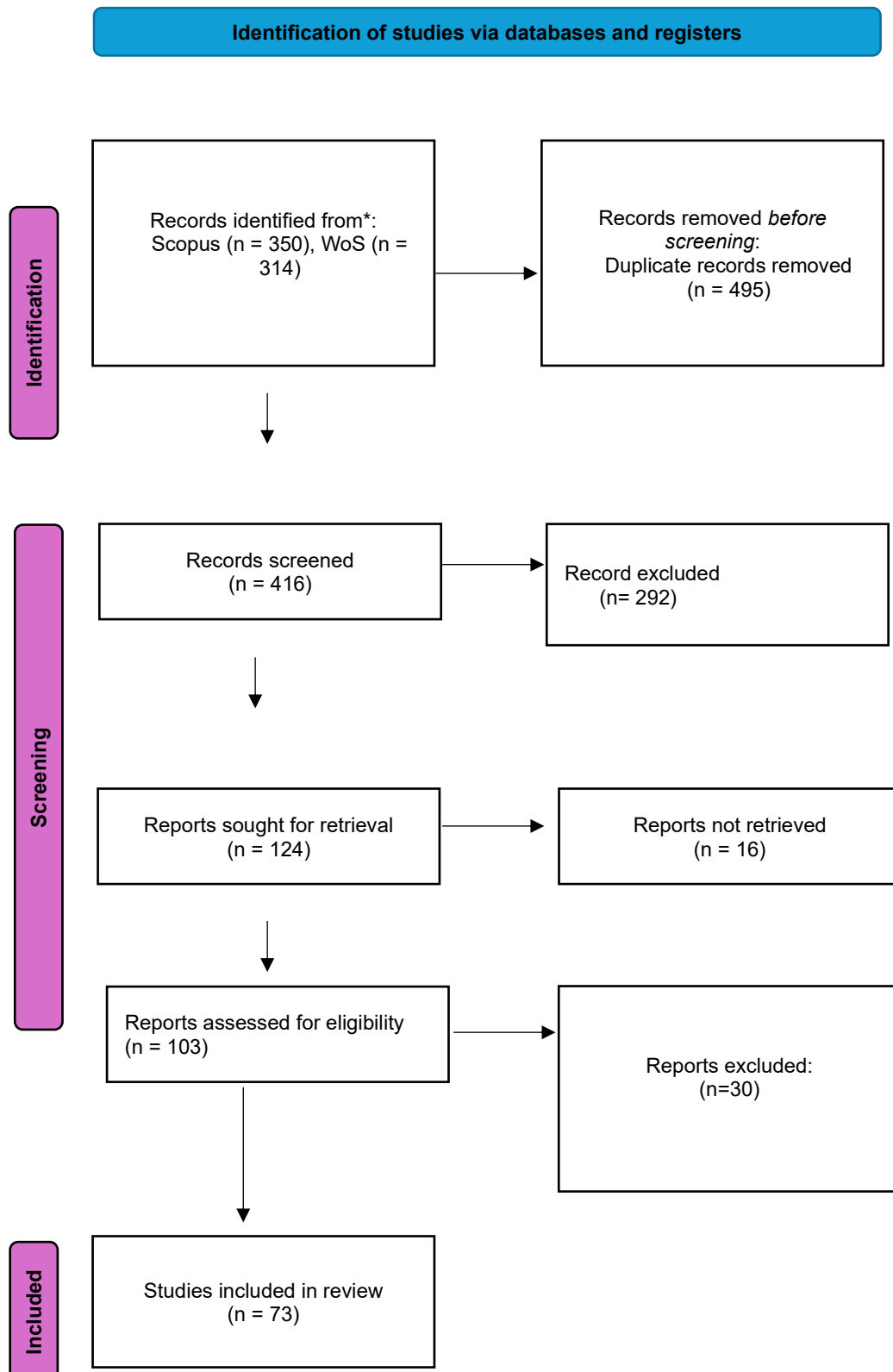


Figure 1. Prisma Diagram

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically capture relevant information from each included study. The following data were extracted:

- Study characteristics: author(s), year of publication, country
- Study design and methodology: research design (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods), specific methods used
- Sample characteristics: sample size, demographic details (age, gender, academic level)
- Purpose measurement: specific instrument or measure used to assess purpose in life
- Predictor variables: factors examined in relation to purpose in life
- Key findings: statistical results (correlation coefficients, regression coefficients, effect sizes) or qualitative themes related to factors associated with purpose

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Given the heterogeneity of study designs, populations, and measures across the included studies, a narrative synthesis approach was used rather than meta-analysis. The synthesis employed thematic analysis to organize and interpret findings across studies.

The thematic analysis followed a systematic process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarization with the data:** All extracted findings were reviewed to gain an overall understanding of the range of factors examined across studies.
2. **Initial coding:** Each study's findings were coded according to the specific factors examined in relation to purpose in life. Factors were coded based on their nature (e.g., self-efficacy, family support, religious involvement) and the direction of their relationship with purpose (positive, negative, or complex).
3. **Searching for themes:** Initial codes were examined for patterns and grouped into potential themes based on conceptual similarity and level of analysis. Factors that operated at similar levels (individual, relational, institutional) or shared common characteristics were clustered together.
4. **Reviewing and refining themes:** Potential themes were reviewed against the extracted data to ensure they accurately represented the patterns in the literature. Themes were refined through an iterative process, collapsing overlapping categories and splitting overly broad themes until a coherent thematic structure emerged.
5. **Defining themes:** Six final themes were defined: (1) Individual Psychological Resources, (2) Physical and Mental Health, (3) Identity Development, (4) Religious and Spiritual Factors, (5) Educational Experiences, and (6) Social Support and Relationships. Each theme was clearly defined based on the types of factors it encompassed and their relationship to purpose in life.
6. **Producing the synthesis:** For each theme, a narrative summary was developed describing the nature and direction of relationships between factors and purpose in life. Effect sizes, correlation coefficients, and regression coefficients were reported where available. Patterns were identified across studies, including consistent findings, contradictory results, methodological variations, and population-specific effects.

This thematic approach allowed for the organization of diverse findings into a coherent framework while preserving the complexity and nuance of literature. Consistent with scoping review methodology, formal quality assessment of included studies was not conducted. However, attention was given to study design (e.g., longitudinal vs. cross-sectional), sample size, and measurement approaches when synthesizing findings.

Findings

Theme 1: Individual Psychological Resources

This theme captures intrapersonal capacities that consistently align with stronger purpose in life among university students. Evidence converges on five clusters: (1) self-regulation and goal processes, (2) emotional and cognitive regulation, (3) identity and self-concept, (4) personality and dispositional traits, and (5) positive psychological states and experiences.

Self-Regulation and Goal Processes

Across studies, self-efficacy and structured goal processes show some of the largest and most replicable associations with purpose. General self-efficacy accounted for up to 41% of variance in purpose (DeWitz et al., 2009b). Both general and academic self-efficacy are positively related to purpose across cultural contexts (Cai & Lian, 2022; Green, 2020), while intrinsic motivation and goal-directed confidence also contribute (Rojas Zegarra et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2018). Importantly, goal-setting interventions yield measurable gains in purpose, with one study reporting a moderate effect of approximately $d = .57$ (Hudig et al., 2023), indicating these capacities are trainable rather than fixed. Informative feedback further supports purpose development, particularly for students with lower intrinsic motivation (Shin et al., 2018).

Emotional and Cognitive Regulation

Emotion regulation—especially the ability to repair negative affect—is a robust correlate of purpose, explaining substantial variance comparable to self-efficacy findings (Paramio et al., 2024). Emotional clarity, broader emotional intelligence, and empathic happiness relate positively to purpose (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Paramio et al., 2024). By contrast, maladaptive strategies such as catastrophizing predict lower purpose (Sanchez-Sanchez et al., 2025).

Complementing affective skills, mindfulness—as a disposition and as a trained practice—shows consistent positive associations with purpose, with 8-week programs producing moderate-to-large and sustained improvements (Pearson et al., 2015; Terzioğlu et al., 2024; Verhaeghen, 2021).

Identity and Self-Concept

Self-concept clarity predicts higher purpose in Indonesian and Chinese samples, with standardized effects of approximately $\beta = .28$ to $.30$ (Yuliawati et al., 2024). And psychological autonomy shows cross-cultural links with well-being that encompass purpose (Gavilanes & Barco, 2024). Within Positive Youth Development (PYD), confidence, competence, and commitment to learning collectively explain ~50% of purpose variance, with positive identity the strongest contributor $R^2 = .495$; Rojas Zegarra, et al (2025). In Malaysian emerging adults,

all 5Cs relate positively to purpose, again with confidence strongest (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021).

Personality and Dispositional Traits

Broad traits show expected well-being-consistent patterns: conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, and extraversion are positively related to purpose, while neuroticism is negative (Reymann et al., 2015). Optimism supports purpose and pessimism undermines it (Chen et al., 2021). Perfectionism is bidirectional: adaptive (high personal standards) aligns positively with purpose and well-being, whereas maladaptive (self-criticism, socially prescribed standards) shows strong negative associations ($\beta \approx -.63$), partly buffered by self-compassion (Benedetto et al., 2024; Chang, 2006; Park & Jeong, 2015). Narcissism also splits: agentic extraversion relates positively, while neurotic/shame-based narcissism relates negatively (Velji & Schermer, 2024). Cognitive rigidity (inflexible beliefs about happiness) is another impediment (Belen & Yildirim, 2020).

Positive Psychological States and Experiences

Short-cycle positive states and structured well-being activities also align with purpose. Happiness predicts next-day increases in purpose, and purpose forecasts reductions in negative affect over subsequent days, suggesting reciprocal dynamics (McGowan et al., 2023). Flow is both associated with purpose and part of pathways buffering suicide risk in student samples (Hallaert, 2019). Purpose improves following well-being programs (e.g., Flourish-HE; $\eta^2 \approx .15$), although single-session hope interventions show short-lived gains without ongoing support (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Morgan et al., 2023). Broader psychological well-being is strongly correlated with purpose ($r \approx .56$) and links to academic outcomes in health-professional students (Siddiqui et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Physical and Mental Health

This theme encompasses health-related factors that influence students' sense of purpose, including mental health challenges, health-promoting behaviors, and chronic conditions. Evidence spans both enduring patterns and short-term fluctuations.

Mental Health Challenges

Psychological distress consistently predicts lower purpose. Perceived stress shows significant negative associations $\beta = -0.20$, $p = .008$ (Lai, et al., 2022), a pattern reinforced during COVID-19, where stressors undermined purpose formation. Depression and anxiety exhibit even stronger inverse correlations ($r = -.292$ and $-.431$ respectively) as noted by Liu et al. (2009), with anxiety demonstrating the larger effect size. Domain-specific concerns—such as financial and employment anxiety—also negatively affect purpose, particularly among final-year students facing career transitions (Noman et al., 2021).

Daily studies reveal nuanced temporal dynamics: while chronic anxiety consistently reduces purpose, moderate daily anxiety fluctuations occasionally predict small next-day increases ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = .029$) as noted by McGowan et al., (2023), suggesting that manageable challenge may sometimes catalyze purpose work. Additionally, cyberbullying victimization correlates

negatively with purpose ($r = -.19$, $p < .01$), operating through increased depressive symptoms as a mediator (Lee et al., 2023).

Health-Promoting Behaviors

Physical activity demonstrates consistent positive associations with purpose across observational and intervention studies. Regular exercise correlates with higher purpose (Romero-Ramos et al., 2023), with dose-response patterns evident across intensity levels: moderate-intensity ($\beta = 0.105$, $p = .001$) and vigorous-intensity ($\beta = 0.094$, $p = .004$) predict greater purpose, while light-intensity activity shows no significant effect (Zhang et al., 2025). Moreover, Sleep quality also predicts next-day increases in purpose ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < .001$) as noted by McGowan (2023), though longer sleep duration unexpectedly predicts small decreases ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < .001$), indicating differential effects of sleep quality versus quantity.

Chronic Conditions

Students experiencing chronic physical or psychological adversity report substantially lower purpose. For example, those with chronic pain score significantly below healthy controls on purpose subscales $U = 966.500$, $p = .037$) as noted by Paramio et al., (2024). These findings underscore the enduring impact of health challenges on existential functioning.

Theme 3: Identity Development

Identity processes emerged as factors in purpose development among university students, with identity formation showing variation based on temporal stage and population characteristics.

Identity Exploration Processes

Identity exploration demonstrated contrasting associations with purpose depending on its temporal characteristics. Current, ongoing personal identity exploration was negatively associated with purpose in life (Schwartz et al., 2009), with this relationship operating through identity confusion as a mediating mechanism. Students actively exploring multiple possibilities without commitment reported lower adaptive functioning and diminished purpose, with identity confusion showing a strong standardized indirect effect ($\beta = -.51$, $p < .001$). In contrast, past personal identity exploration—representing a completed period of exploration—positively predicted purpose ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) as noted by Schwartz et al. (2009), demonstrating opposite effects for active versus resolved exploration.

Qualitative evidence provided additional perspective on these temporal patterns. Students who engaged in deliberate self-discovery through trial-and-error processes reported that curiosity-driven exploration deepened self-knowledge and clarified life aims (Verhaeghen, 2021), suggesting that the structure and intentionality of exploratory processes may influence their relationship with purpose.

Disability Identity

For students with disabilities, identity shaped purpose through multiple pathways that operated simultaneously. Newman et al. (2019) identified five distinct mechanisms: (1) directing purpose content toward careers helping others with similar disabilities; (2) constraining career

options through a "weeding out" process that eliminated incompatible paths; (3) motivating greater persistence and effort in goal pursuit; (4) inspiring desires to defy stereotypes and challenge societal expectations; and (5) disrupting the ability to conceptualize coherent purpose due to emotional or cognitive challenges associated with disability experiences. These pathways reflected both facilitative and constraining effects operating within the same population.

Gender and Demographic Patterns

Gender showed modest associations with purpose that varied across contexts. Female students reported higher clarity of purpose than males, with this difference most pronounced among women in female-dominated academic majors (Dawson-Threat & Huba, 1996). This pattern was replicated in athletic contexts, where female athletes scored significantly higher than male athletes on purpose subscales (mean = 3.83 vs. 3.67, $p = .040$) as noted by Chen et al., (2021). The consistency of gender differences across both academic and athletic domains, particularly in gender-congruent environments, indicated potential moderating effects of context on demographic patterns

Theme 4: Religious and Spiritual Factors

Religious and spiritual engagement showed significant associations with purpose in life among university students, with the nature and depth of religious involvement determining the direction and strength of these relationships.

Religious Orientation and Commitment

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity emerged as critical in understanding religion's relationship with purpose. Intrinsic religiosity—reflecting personally meaningful faith—consistently predicted higher purpose across multiple studies (Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014; Hui & Fung, 2008). Faith maturity, particularly the vertical dimension measuring perceived closeness to God, significantly predicted purpose among college students (Reymann et al., 2015), with longitudinal evidence showing that closeness to God over time continued to predict purpose development (Upenieks, 2022). Strength of religious faith similarly predicted life purpose (Byron & Miller-Perrin, 2009).

Committed religious orientations characterized by Interest, Persona, and Centrality positively correlated with purpose (Aghababaei & Lueke, 2023). In contrast, extrinsic social religiosity—reflecting participation motivated by social conformity—negatively predicted purpose (Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014), as did uncommitted and reflective orientations such as Tentativeness and Dialogue (Aghababaei & Lueke, 2023).

Religious Practice and Community Involvement

Behavioral religious engagement showed consistent positive associations with purpose. Religious attendance positively predicted purpose in life (Upenieks, 2022), and participation in religious organizations associated with higher purpose across multiple samples (Turton et al., 2018). Among Chinese university students, religious involvement—particularly its interpersonal aspects—positively predicted purpose (Wang et al., 2016).

An experimental Ignatian spirituality intervention incorporating discernment and reflective exercises produced significantly higher post-intervention purpose scores compared to control conditions ($B = .169$, $p = .026$) as noted by Campanario et al., (2022), demonstrating causal effects of structured spiritual practices on purpose development.

Gender Differences and Mediating Roles

Gender moderates the relationship between religious orientation and purpose. Among women, intrinsic religious orientation negatively predicted purpose, while among men, extrinsic social religious orientation positively predicted purpose (Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). Purpose in life also functioned as a mediator in relationships between religiosity and well-being outcomes. Purpose significantly mediated the relationship between both religious and scientific attitudes with subjective well-being (Aghababaei et al., 2016), and fully mediated the relationship between religious faith and perceived wellness (Byron & Miller-Perrin, 2009).

Theme 5 Educational experience

Campus and Co-Curricular Engagement

Participation in campus activities and service-learning consistently predicts higher purpose. Students involved in extracurricular organizations report greater self-awareness and goal clarity (Patterson & Dorwart, 2019). Volunteering and service-learning courses not only strengthen purpose during college but also predict long-term prosocial orientation up to 13 years post-graduation (Bowman et al., 2012). Motivation matters: volunteering driven by enjoyment or meaningful contribution shows stronger associations than obligation alone (Okun & Kim, 2016).

Academic and Applied Learning

Academic rigor and intellectual engagement foster purpose development, particularly for first-generation and high-achieving students (Hébert, 2018). Program type influences outcomes: helping-oriented tracks (e.g., dental hygiene, therapy) predict greater purpose than technical programs (Harris et al., 2022). Applied learning experiences—such as internships and work—help students integrate career goals with personal values, reinforcing purpose (Sharma et al., 2023).

Transformative Experiences

Some experiences show nonlinear effects. Wilderness orientation programs were linked to lower purpose in one study (Bailey & Kang, 2015), while major life events—bereavement, illness, or profound volunteering—often trigger re-evaluation of priorities and deepen purpose (Cupit et al., 2016; Verhaeghen, 2021). Retrospective perceptions suggest students believe purpose grows over time, even when earlier self-reports were similar (Green et al., 2020).

Theme 6: Social Support and Relationships

Relational factors consistently predict purpose in life among university students, with evidence emphasizing quality over quantity of connections. Findings cluster into three domains: (1)

family and early influences, (2) peer and mentoring relationships, and (3) institutional and cultural supports.

Family and Early Influences

Family support and parental involvement show strong positive associations with purpose. Both mother and father involvement predict higher purpose ($\beta = .29$ and $.27$) respectively as noted by Sebokova, (2018), and broader family dynamics—such as family pride and self-concept—contribute to purpose development (Hébert, 2018; Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Longitudinal evidence indicates that early parent–child conflict predicts lower purpose in emerging adulthood, with maternal conflict showing the strongest negative effect (Hill et al., 2019).

Peer and Mentoring Relationships

Peer relationship quality—not network size—emerges as a key predictor of purpose (Lund et al., 2022). Structured peer-learning activities (study groups, collaborative projects) also show positive effects ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < .01$) as noted by Hanson et al., (2016). Mentoring relationships matter most when they are high-quality; the number of mentors is not predictive (Lund et al., 2019). Coaching interventions further enhance purpose, with life coaching increasing confidence in life purpose by nearly 29% and professional coaching producing significant gains (Brown et al., 2021; Huffman et al., 2025).

Institutional and Cultural Supports

Institutional support systems—including teacher competence for purpose support and university-level resources—positively influence both purpose search and identification (Jiang et al., 2016; Noman et al., 2021). Role models exert influence through psychological proximity, with closer perceived distance predicting stronger purpose effects (Yang et al., 2024). Cultural variations also shape relational pathways: for example, *amae*, a Japanese relational style, predicts increases in purpose during college transitions ($\beta = .39$, $p = .02$) as noted by Niiya, (2017).

Discussion

In this study we map the factors that might be associated with the development of purpose in life among university students. And it was organized into six themes which include individual psychological resources, physical and mental health, identity development, religion, education experience, finally social support and relationship.

SDT prospective on the development of purpose in life

A substantial portion of identified factors align with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that purpose in life emerges as an outcome of satisfying three fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Weinstein et al., 2012) (Weinstein et al., 2012). The convergent evidence across psychological, social, educational, and health domains suggests that purpose development among university students fundamentally depends on experiences and environments that support these core needs.

Competence, the first core need, demonstrated particularly robust associations with purpose across multiple domains. Self-efficacy emerged as the strongest predictor, accounting for substantial variance in purpose scores (DeWitz et al., 2009). Emotional intelligence and regulation similarly explained considerable purpose variance (Paramio et al., 2024), while self-concept clarity predicted purpose across Indonesian and Chinese samples (Wardhani et al., 2024), indicating cross-cultural stability of competence-related factors.

Beyond psychological resources, physical competence also contributed meaningfully to purpose development. Moderate- and vigorous-intensity physical activity predicted greater purpose, while light-intensity activity showed no significant effects (Zhang et al., 2025). This dose-response pattern suggests that experiences of physical mastery rather than mere movement facilitate purposeful engagement.

Educational contexts further reinforced competence development. Academic rigor, honors programs, and teacher competence support consistently facilitated purpose (Jiang et al., 2016). Notably, competence-building interventions such as goal-setting programs produced measurable purpose increases (Hudig et al., 2023), demonstrating that structured opportunities to develop mastery directly enhance students' sense of direction.

Autonomy needs the second core psychological requirement, revealed a critical pattern that transcended individual domains: across religiosity, perfectionism, motivation, and identity development, intrinsic, self-endorsed orientations consistently predicted higher purpose while extrinsic, socially controlled orientations predicted lower purpose.

This pattern emerged most clearly in religious society. Intrinsic religious orientation reflecting personally meaningful faith positively predicted purpose (Hui & Fung, 2008; Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014), whereas extrinsic social religiosity motivated by conformity negatively predicted purpose (Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014). Faith maturity, representing internalized spiritual values, similarly predicted purpose among Christian students (Reymann et al., 2015). Perfectionism revealed the same intrinsic/extrinsic distinction. Adaptive perfectionism defined by self-set standards positively associated with purpose, whereas maladaptive perfectionism driven by socially prescribed expectations strongly predicted lower purpose (Chang, 2006). This suggests that high standards support purpose only when autonomously chosen rather than externally imposed.

Identity development demonstrated comparable temporal autonomy dynamics. Past personal identity exploration positively predicted purpose, while current ongoing exploration negatively predicted purpose through identity confusion as a mediator (Schwartz et al., 2009). This temporal pattern indicates that autonomy supports purpose only after consolidation, when self-exploration yields coherent, self-endorsed commitments rather than continued uncertainty. Mindfulness interventions and psychological autonomy provided additional autonomous pathways, with mindfulness-based programs producing substantial purpose increases maintained at follow-up (Terzioğlu et al., 2024; Gavilanes & Barco, 2024).

Relatedness the third fundamental need, emphasized that social connection quality matters more than quantity for purpose development. Mentoring quality significantly predicted purpose commitment, whereas number of mentors showed no association (Lund et al., 2019), demonstrating that deep, meaningful relationships matter more than extensive networks.

Family relationships showed particularly strong developmental effects. Both mother and father involvement significantly predicted adolescent purpose (Sebokova, 2018), while early parent-child conflict predicted lower purpose in emerging adulthood (Hill et al., 2019). General social support demonstrated bidirectional relationships with purpose longitudinally, with each predicting the other over time (Zhang et al., 2019), suggesting that purpose and relatedness mutually reinforce each other rather than operating unidirectionally.

Structured relational interventions capitalized on this need effectively. Life coaching significantly enhanced purpose confidence (Huffman et al., 2025), while service-learning predicted purpose up to 13 years post-graduation (Bowman et al., 2010), indicating remarkably durable effects. Informal relational contexts also facilitated purpose, with campus recreation, student organizations, and extracurricular involvement providing community belonging (Patterson & Dorwart, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022).

Notably, culturally specific relational styles demonstrated universal relatedness need expressed through culturally variable forms. Amae—a Japanese construct reflecting interdependent relational seeking—predicted purpose increases over students' first college year (Niiya, 2017), suggesting that the relatedness need operates across cultures despite different expressions.

While satisfaction predicted higher purpose, the opposite pattern held equally true: need frustrations consistently undermined purpose development. Mental health challenges—perceived stress, depression, and anxiety—strongly predicted lower purpose across multiple studies (Lai et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2009), representing fundamental frustrations of competence (inability to function effectively), autonomy (symptom-controlled behavior), and relatedness (social withdrawal).

Physical adversity such as chronic pain and experiences of cyberbullying victimization similarly reduced purpose (Paramio et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023), further demonstrating how need frustration operates across physical and social domains. The SDT framework thus reveals that purpose emerges from integrated satisfaction of multiple psychological needs rather than isolated factors, with many effective interventions—such as life coaching—satisfying competence, autonomy, and relatedness simultaneously. This integration suggests that multi-domain approaches addressing all three needs may prove more effective than single-factor interventions for enhancing student purpose.

Temporal and Developmental Complexity

Purpose development among university students does not follow simple linear trajectories. Several findings revealed temporal paradoxes and bidirectional relationships that complicate straightforward interpretations of how purpose emerges.

The timing of identity exploration proved critical. Students currently engaged in active identity exploration reported lower purpose, with this relationship mediated by identity confusion (Schwartz et al., 2009). However, students who had completed a period of exploration in the past showed higher purpose. This suggests that exploration itself is not inherently beneficial or harmful—rather, the developmental stage matters. During active searching, uncertainty and lack of commitment undermine students' sense of direction. Only after consolidating insights from exploration into coherent commitments does purpose strengthen. Universities may need

to support students through this uncomfortable transitional phase rather than expecting immediate purpose clarity.

Similarly, some educational experiences showed counterintuitive immediate effects. Wilderness orientation programs designed to foster development actually reduced participants' reported sense of purpose in the short term (Bailey & Kang, 2015). Rather than indicating program failure, this may reflect that transformative experiences initially disrupt existing purpose frameworks before facilitating deeper exploration. Qualitative evidence supports this interpretation: students described how major life events—both positive experiences like profound religious moments and negative ones like illness or loss—triggered rapid re-evaluation of life priorities (Verhaeghen, 2021). Purpose development may sometimes require temporary disorientation.

Interestingly, students' retrospective perceptions diverged from their actual earlier reports. When asked to recall their past purpose levels, students believed they had grown substantially during college, even though their actual earlier self-ratings were equivalent or higher (Green et al., 2020). This suggests that developmental narratives—how students make sense of their growth—may matter as much as objective changes. The subjective experience of having developed purpose may itself contribute to well-being and motivation, regardless of whether measured purpose levels actually increased.

These temporal complexities highlight that purpose development is not a steady accumulation of resources or experiences. Instead, it involves periods of confusion and clarity, disruption and consolidation. Interventions and support systems should anticipate non-linear trajectories rather than expecting continuous upward progress.

Implications and Conclusions

This review looked at what factors relate to purpose in life among university students. Based on what we found across 75 studies, there are some practical takeaways for universities and some clear gaps that future research needs to address.

What Universities Can Do

Help Students Build Psychological Skills

Self-efficacy stood out as particularly important—it explained 41% of the differences in students' purpose scores (DeWitz et al., 2009). What this means practically is that helping students feel more capable and confident seems to directly support their sense of purpose. Programs that focus on goal setting, emotional regulation, and mindfulness showed real benefits in several studies. For example, an 8-week mindfulness program had strong effects that lasted even at the 3-month follow-up (Terzioğlu et al., 2024).

The flip side is that mental health struggles consistently got in the way of purpose development. Students dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression reported lower purpose across multiple studies. This reinforces why accessible counseling services matter—not just for treating mental health problems, but also because these challenges directly undermine students' ability to find direction. Financial anxiety hit graduating students especially hard (Noman et al., 2021), so

linking career services with mental health support during senior year might be worth considering.

Focus On Quality Relationships, Not Quantity

Here's an interesting finding: having high-quality mentoring relationships predicted purpose, but just having more mentors didn't matter (Lund et al., 2019). What seems to count is depth, not numbers. Rather than trying to assign every student multiple mentors, universities might get better results by training mentors to build truly meaningful connections.

Life coaching programs worked well too, with one study showing a 29% increase in students' confidence about their life purpose (Huffman et al., 2025). And there's something else worth noting: purpose and social support actually strengthen each other over time (Zhang et al., 2019). Students with more purpose tend to build better social connections, which then supports even more purpose development. This suggests that peer programs and learning communities could have ripple effects beyond what we initially see.

Create Experiences That Matter

Service-learning stood out for having staying power. One study tracked students for 13 years after graduation and found that those who did service-learning in college still showed benefits more than a decade later (Bowman et al., 2010). That's remarkable staying power compared to most educational interventions.

Getting involved in campus activities—clubs, recreation, student organizations—also connected to higher purpose (Zhang et al., 2022). These aren't just nice extras; they seem to be spaces where students actually work out what matters to them and where they're headed.

For religious students, faith-based reflection activities helped develop purpose (Campanario et al., 2022). This raises a question for secular institutions: how do you provide similar opportunities for deep reflection and meaning making for students who aren't religious? That's something worth thinking through.

What Research Still Needs to Figure Out

The Causality Problem

Most studies measure everything at one point in time, which means we can't really say what causes what. The handful of longitudinal studies were much more informative. For instance, one study showed that actively exploring your identity actually lowers your purpose temporarily—but once you've worked through that exploration, it then increases purpose (Schwartz et al., 2009). We wouldn't have learned that timing detail without following students over time. More of that kind of research would be really valuable.

Another issue is that different studies measured purpose differently, making it hard to compare results. Some used the Purpose in Life Test, others used Ryff's subscale, and still others created their own measures. These might not all be capturing the same thing.

Missing Voices

Most studies came from Western universities, with heavy U.S. representation. The few studies from other cultural contexts sometimes found different patterns. For example, a Japanese concept called *amae*—which involves interdependent relationship-seeking—predicted purpose development in ways that don't fit typical Western individualistic models (Niiya, 2017). We need studies from more diverse cultural contexts to understand what's universal versus what's culturally specific.

We also didn't find many studies focused on first-generation students, students with disabilities, or other underrepresented groups. The few that did exist showed that purpose development can look quite different for these students. One qualitative study found that students with disabilities navigated purpose through their disability identity in complex ways—sometimes clarifying their direction, sometimes complicating it (Newman et al., 2019). More research here would help.

Testing What Actually Works

Here's a practical gap: very few studies actually tested interventions. Most just measured what factors correlate with purpose. The studies that did test interventions—mindfulness programs, coaching, goal-setting workshops—showed promising results, but we don't have good comparisons of different approaches. Which interventions work best? For which students? How long do affects last? These are answerable questions that would really help universities decide how to invest resources.

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