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The role of emotional competencies in the perception of meaning in life and subjective well-being among youth

Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the relationships between emotional competencies and two constructs representing the division of psychological well-being into eudaimonic and hedonic well-being: subjective well-being and the perception of meaning in life. The primary research question focused on whether – and which – emotional competencies can successfully predict the levels of these two constructs within a sample of young adults (aged 18 to 30), covering the developmental stage of *Intimacy vs. Isolation* within Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. The following instruments were administered to a sample of 283 participants (59.7% male): the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the Short Subjective Well-being Scale (SSWB), and the Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ-45). The results indicated high and statistically significant positive correlations across all examined variables. The hypothesis was confirmed by the finding that emotional competencies are statistically significant predictors of both constructs, with a higher percentage of explained variance observed for subjective well-being (approximately 36%). Observed differences in the significance of individual predictors suggest that for the experience of meaning in life, the competency of perceiving and understanding others' emotions is more significant, while expressing and labeling one's own emotions is less so. For subjective well-being, the reverse pattern was found. For both constructs, the strongest predictor identified was the competency of emotional regulation and management – specifically, the ability to maintain a positive mood and utilize one's own and others' emotions to achieve significant life goals. Furthermore, the results showed that individuals who are in a relationship or married exhibit higher levels of competence in labeling and expressing emotions, as well as in emotion regulation and management, and a higher level of subjective well-being compared to those who are not in a partnership. We conclude that it would be beneficial to design and implement interventions aimed at developing emotional competencies in youth to enhance and preserve their mental health.

Keywords: emotional competencies, subjective well-being, meaning in life, psychological well-being.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-20th century, psychological research saw a gradual shift from studying so-called negative psychological states, or psychopathology, toward researching factors that contribute to the preservation of mental health and an individual's optimal psychological functioning – often cited as the essence of the concept of psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Concurrently, critiques emerged regarding the operationalization of this construct, as authors in earlier studies predominantly relied on measuring subjective well-being or happiness (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Within the study of psychological well-being, two dominant approaches have emerged: the eudaimonic and the hedonic (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In this study, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding of psychological well-being, we consider both representatives of this classification: subjective well-being as an indicator of the hedonic approach, and the experience of meaning in life as an indicator of the eudaimonic approach.

The perception of meaning in life can be defined as a sense of order, coherence, and purpose – specifically, as the belief that an individual sets and pursues goals deemed worthy of their effort and feels fulfillment upon achieving them. This construct has proven to be significantly associated with other theoretical aspects of psychological well-being, particularly with positive affective states (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). It can be argued that Viktor Frankl largely established and popularized this still relatively modern construct. Frankl (1954; 1984, as cited in Molasso, 2006) maintained that every human being possesses an innate need for meaning, which he termed the “will to meaning.” Alongside Frankl, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, Klinger (1998) stands out; asserting that possessing a goal to strive for is a fundamental biological imperative for all animals, while human symbolic and cognitive capacities elevate these biological drives to the level of experiencing a higher meaning or purpose. Through a literature review, Wong (1989, as cited in Yalcin & Malkoc, 2014) identified three components of meaning in life: the cognitive component, referring to an individual's interpretations and thoughts regarding everyday events and experiences; the motivational component, involving the pursuit and attainment of significant goals; and the affective component, relating to how an individual feels regarding the question of whether their life has meaning. This construct consistently proves to be vital for mental health – among other reasons, through its association to a reduced risk of suicidal behavior (Harlow et al., 1986; Costanza et al., 2019) and a lower likelihood of relapse in addictive behaviors (Martin et al., 2011).

On the other side of this dichotomy is subjective well-being, which Diener (1984) defines as the presence of high levels of positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and a cognitive evaluation that one is satisfied with their life conditions. Diener et al. (1999) argue that subjective well-being is a distinct research category rather than a singular construct. Building upon Wilson's (1967) earlier literature review, the authors identify new factors as key determinants of subjective well-being: a positive temperament, a tendency to direct attention toward positive aspects of experience, and the absence of a predisposition toward excessive rumination. According to their view (1999), a happy person lives in an economically developed society, possesses a stable and supportive social circle, and has adequate resources to progress toward significant life goals. Subjective well-being shows high positive correlations with mental and physical health, as well as longevity (Gana et al., 2016; Steptoe et al., 2015; Qian, 2019).

Since both constructs are theoretical representatives of the broader concept of psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001), a significant positive correlation between them can be hypothesized. This assumption has been empirically confirmed multiple times, both in studies of student populations (Dogan et al., 2012; Santos et al., 2012) samples of oncology patients (Teques et al., 2016), as well as in meta-analyses of the general population (Yuchang et al., 2016). Furthermore, a

substantial body of research seeks to identify potential mediating variables within this established positive relationship. Among these, the constructs of hope (Randelović & Minić, 2012; Wnuk et al., 2012; Yalcin & Malkoc, 2014) and religiosity (Tiliouine & Belgoumidi, 2009) have stood out. Together, both main constructs significantly predict happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2011), representing one of their key shared characteristics. However, they differ in the type of happiness they are associated with: subjective well-being is linked to hedonic happiness, which involves need satisfaction, relaxation, and a relative absence of problems, while eudaimonic happiness is associated with effort, personal growth, and overcoming challenges (Waterman, 2013). Consequently, despite their correlation, they remain two theoretically distinct constructs.

The primary theoretical framework for understanding the psychological well-being of young adults in this study is Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, according to which the period from ages 18 to 30 encompasses the developmental stage of Intimacy vs. Isolation. An individual who has successfully navigated the previous developmental phase possesses a sense of a stable and established identity, after which the need to establish close relationships with others emerges. In this process, romantic and close relationships become a space for identity integration, where both individual identities maintain their autonomy. If identity is not adequately formed, there is a risk that the individual will define themselves exclusively through interpersonal relationships or lack a stable internal anchor in the event of a breakup (Erikson, 1950, as cited in Syed & McLean, 2018). Based on this, it can be hypothesized that interpersonal relationships are of particular importance for the experience of meaning in life and the subjective well-being of young adults, as confirmed by findings in the literature (e.g., Lansford, 2018). Additionally, achieving goals perceived as personally important (Lansford, 2018) and possessing an internal locus of control during their pursuit (Sing & Choudri, 2014) have proven significant for youth.

This leads to the practical question of which competencies young adults could develop to successfully navigate this developmental stage. A potential answer lies in emotional competencies, which originate from the concept of emotional intelligence. One of the most widely accepted models is the revised model by Mayer and Salovey (1997/1999, as cited in Hajncl & Vučenović, 2013), which defines it as the ability to perceive, appraise, and express emotions, use emotions to facilitate thinking, and understand and regulate emotions. Takšić, Mohorić, and Munjas (2006) opt for the term emotional competencies, based on the stance that intelligence as a construct should be measured through performance tests rather than self-report instruments. The authors emphasize that the advantage of emotional competencies over other forms of intelligence lies in their contribution to solving everyday life problems and the possibility of their development throughout the entire lifespan.

Research indicates that the formation of emotional competencies is highly significant across all life stages, yielding important consequences and numerous benefits for individual functioning. For instance, in early school age, the inability to adequately recognize the causes of one's own emotions can be a significant predictor of aggressive behavior (Bohnert et al., 2003). Emotional competencies remain significant in adulthood and are increasingly considered characteristics of successful leaders (Cavallo & Brienza, 2001). Furthermore, emotional intelligence has been shown to be highly correlated with the quality of interpersonal relationships (Rivers et al., 2007). Research further suggests that this form of competence can be developed throughout life, rather than exclusively in childhood (Kotsou et al., 2011). Some findings even suggest that emotional competencies grow spontaneously with age: older employees in organizations have been found to possess higher levels of these competencies than their younger colleagues, allowing them to resolve workplace conflicts more successfully (Beitler et al., 2018).

Regarding potential explanations for the relationships between emotional competencies and the two constructs of well-being in this study, Bar-On's (2010) thesis, based on extensive empirical data, is particularly noteworthy. According to this view, emotional intelligence contributes to the achievement of significant life goals through the use of positive affect, which motivates the individual and signals their success. Furthermore, accepting one's own emotions allows for the development of a healthier relationship with oneself, while emotions – through the processes of regulation and reflection – facilitate perspective-taking and adequate reality testing. All of the above indirectly contributes to subjective well-being and success in the pursuit of meaning in life. Another possible explanation stems from the finding that majority of people derive their sense of meaning from interpersonal relationships (Settersten, 2002), and that they are a significant source of happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2011). High-quality interpersonal relationships are of particular importance for the subjective well-being of young adults (Lansford, 2018) and represent a vital source of meaning in life (Čurlin, 2018; Pavlović & Kolić, 2013). Emotional intelligence, or emotional competencies, consistently proves to be a statistically significant predictor of the quality of interpersonal relationships (Rivers et al., 2007). Additionally, emotional competencies have been found to moderate the relationship between social networks and the experience of meaning in life (Donhoe & Greene, 2009; Zysberg, 2011).

The primary **research problem** of this study involves determining whether, and which, emotional competencies contribute to higher levels of psychological well-being among youth.

The **aim of the research** is to examine the interrelationships between emotional competencies (the ability to perceive and understand emotions, the ability to express and label emotions, and the ability to manage emotions), the experience of meaning in life, and subjective well-being.

In accordance with the above, the following **hypotheses** were formulated:

1. There is a statistically significant correlation between the experience of meaning in life and subjective well-being.
2. There is a statistically significant correlation between emotional competencies (the ability to perceive and understand emotions, the ability to express and label emotions, and the ability to manage emotions) and both subjective well-being and the experience of meaning in life.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The research utilized a **convenience sample** consisting of 283 participants. Out of the total, 169 participants (59.7%) were male and 114 (40.3%) were female. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of **24.24 years ($SD = 3.41$)**. Regarding relationship status, 161 participants (56.9%) identified as single 104 (36.7%) were in a relationship, 17 (6%) were married, while one person identified as divorced or in the process of divorce. A total of 12 participants (4.2%) had children. In terms of residence, 245 participants (86.6%) lived in urban areas, while 38 (13.4%) lived in rural areas.

2.2 Measures

1. The Meaning in Life Scale (MIL) – This questionnaire is an adaptation of the **Purpose in Life (PIL) test** (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), conducted by Vulić-Prtorić and Bubalo (2003). It measures the experience of life's meaning, capturing both cognitive and affective components simultaneously. It consists of 23 items rated on a 5-point **Likert-type scale** (1 – does not apply at all; 5

– applies completely). The total score is the sum of all responses, with 10 items being reverse-coded. Reliability in the current sample was very good on our sample. ($\alpha=.88$)*

2. The Short Subjective Well-being Scale (SSWS) – (Jovanović & Novović, 2008). This 8-item scale assesses the affective and cognitive motivational components (termed “positive attitude toward life”) of subjective well-being. All items are positively coded, with the affective component focusing on positive affect. In this study, the scale was used as an overall measure of subjective well-being. Reliability in the current sample was excellent ($\alpha=.92$)*

3. Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ-45, Takšić, 2002) – This 45-item instrument was developed on a sample of Croatian high school students, based on the Mayer-Salovey emotional intelligence model (1997, as cited in Takšić, Bradić, & Zauhar, 2013). It includes three subscales: **Perception and Understanding of Emotions (U)** (15 items); **Expression and Labeling of Emotions (EL)** (14 items); and **Emotion Regulation and Management (RM)** (16 items). All items are positively coded, and their sum provides an overall emotional competence score. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The subscales demonstrated high reliability, except for the third (RM), which showed solid reliability ($\alpha=.72$)*

*Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients for all scales and subscales are presented in Table 1 within the Results section.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in late July and early August 2021 via the **Google Forms** platform. The study was anonymous, as emphasized in the introductory section, and participants were asked to respond as honestly as possible. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Participation was voluntary, and it was highlighted that participants could withdraw at any time. After providing **informed consent**, participants proceeded to the questionnaires, each of which included instructions regarding the response scales. The sole prerequisite, of which participants were immediately informed, was being between 18 and 30 years of age.

2.4 Data Analysis

Collected data were processed using the statistical software **IBM SPSS for Windows v.26**. First, descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for all scales were calculated. Subsequently, differences based on gender, marital status, residence, income, education level, age, parental status, and living arrangements were tested. For variables assuming a normal distribution, **one-way ANOVA** was conducted. Due to significant group size inequalities in other cases, the non-parametric **Mann-Whitney U test** for independent samples was utilized, followed by **post-hoc tests** to identify significant differences between groups. To determine the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being, **Pearson’s correlation coefficient** was calculated. To test the predictive power of emotional competencies for meaning in life and subjective well-being, **hierarchical regression analysis** was performed, and the partial contributions of each variable were calculated.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Descriptive statistics, based on the mean total scores, indicate that this sample of young adults exhibits a pronounced positive level of emotional competencies and subjective well-being (exceeding half of the total possible score), while the scores for meaning in life are concentrated around the

midpoint. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients across all scales range from good to excellent; the Emotion Regulation and Management scale showed slightly lower, yet still satisfactory reliability. (Table 1)

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Emotional Competencies, Subjective Well-being, and Meaning in Life Scales

	Min	Max	Total M	Item M	SD	α
Emotional Competencies						
Perception and Understanding of Emotions	2.84	4.25	55.4	3.69	.63	.91
Labeling and Expression of Emotions	2.91	4.03	49.3	3.53	.85	.84
Emotion Regulation and Management	2.77	4.25	58.2	3.63	1.14	.72
Subjective Well-being	3.15	4.09	29.3	3.66	.61	.92
Meaning in Life	2.71	4.70	65.1	3.75	.81	.88

Regarding demographic variables, relationship status emerged as a statistically significant effect. Participants who were married or in a relationship exhibited significantly higher competencies in labeling and expression, emotion regulation and management, and higher levels of subjective well-being compared to single participants (Table 2). A post-hoc (Tukey HSD) test for the one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between married and dating participants; therefore, the category was collapsed into two groups: single and in a relationship. Financial status (income), parental status, employment, age, type of residence, and education level were not found to be statistically significant.

Table 2

One-way ANOVA Results and Descriptive Indicators for Differences in Relationship Status

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Relationship Status					
Subjective Wellbeing	1	969.7	969.7	11.8	.001**
Labeling and Expression of Emotions	1	395.3	395.3	14.9	.000*
Emotion Regulation and Management	1	539.9	539.9	10.7	.001**
	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Single					
Subjective Wellbeing	24	75	53.5	9.8	169
Labeling and Expression of Emotions	27	68	47.7	8.7	169
Emotion Regulation and Management	34	76	57.2	7.6	169
In a Relationship					
	22	75	58.2	9.8	114
Subjective Wellbeing					
Labeling and Expression of Emotions	22	70	51.6	9.5	113
Emotion Regulation and Management	33	76	59.6	7.3	114

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ **3.2 Relationships Between Emotional Competencies, Subjective Well-being, and Meaning in Life**

The correlation between subjective well-being and meaning in life was high and statistically significant ($r = .423, p < .01$). Furthermore, all three emotional competence subscales achieved high, positive, and statistically significant correlations with both subjective well-being and meaning in life. These correlations are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Correlations Between Emotional Competencies, Subjective Well-being, and Meaning in Life

	Meaning in Life	Subjective Well-being
Emocional competencies		
Perception and Understanding of Emotions	.33**	.32**
Labeling and Expression of Emotions	.45**	.27**
Emotional Regulation and Management	.60**	.41**
Subjective Well-being	.42**	

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

3.3 Prediction of Subjective Well-being and Meaning in Life Based on Emotional Competencies

Results of the first multiple regression analysis indicate that emotional competence dimensions contribute significantly to the prediction of subjective well-being, explaining approximately 36% of the variance. However, individual contributions show that the first subscale, Perception and Understanding of Emotions, has the smallest contribution.

In the hierarchical regression analysis, gender, relationship status, and living arrangements were added in the first step, explaining approximately 3.8% of the variance; relationship status was the only statistically significant predictor. When emotional competencies were added in the second step, the total explained variance increased to 40%. This suggests that beyond demographic variables, the competencies of Labeling and Expression and, particularly, Emotion Regulation and Management stand out as significant predictors.

In the second multiple regression analysis, emotional competencies significantly contributed to the explanation of meaning in life, accounting for approximately 19% of the variance. The significance of individual predictors differed in this model; Perception and Understanding of Emotions and Emotion Regulation and Management emerged as statistically significant partial contributors (Table 4).

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Predicting Subjective Well-being and Meaning in Life

Predictors	Subjective Wellbeing(β)	Meaning in Life(β)
Gender	.017	.065
Relationship Status	-.16*	
Living Arrangements	.048	
R^2	.04*	.01
Emotional Competencies		
Perception and Understanding of Emotions	-.007	.15*
Labeling and Expression of Emotions	.23***	.06
Emotion Regulation and Management	.50***	.31***
ΔR^2	.36***	.18***
Total R^2	.40***	.19***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

4.DISCUSSION

The primary research question of this study was whether, and which, emotional competencies contribute to a greater experience of subjective well-being and meaning in life. A novel contribution of this research regarding the psychological well-being of youth in the local context is the integration of emotional competencies with both eudaimonic and hedonic well-being, measured via the Meaning in Life Scale (Vulić-Prtorić & Bubalo, 2003) and the Short Subjective Well-being Scale (Jovanović & Novović, 2008).

Regarding our initial hypotheses, both were confirmed: subjective well-being and meaning in life exhibit a statistically significant high positive correlation, and emotional competencies significantly

predict both constructs of psychological well-being. Furthermore, all primary variables achieved statistically significant positive correlations with one another. However, the results revealed that while the competencies of **Labeling and Expression** and **Regulation and Management** emerged as significant predictors of subjective well-being, the competency of **Perception and Understanding** did not. Conversely, Perception and Understanding, alongside Regulation and Management, stood out as significant predictors of meaning in life, whereas Labeling and Expression did not.

In attempting to explain this divergence, we observe that the Perception and Understanding subscale focuses heavily on detecting the feelings of others (e.g., “When I meet an acquaintance, I immediately realize their mood”), while Labeling and Expression is more oriented toward recognizing and displaying one’s own feelings. This outward focus on understanding others’ emotions may be linked to constructs such as empathy and altruism, which have proven significant for a greater sense of meaning in life (Xi et al., 2018); thus, this competency may help individuals derive a sense of purpose through altruistic tendencies. Interestingly, research on compassion fatigue among medical professionals (Tei et al., 2014) concluded that individuals with an empathic disposition are more prone to burnout if they lack the ability to adequately label their own emotions.

A clearer example of the contribution of focusing on others’ emotions over expressing one’s own can be seen in parents caring for children with cancer; a study found that many parents cope by avoiding “feeling too much” and hiding their negative emotions (Miedema et al., 2010). This aligns with the distinction between eudaimonic and hedonic goals (Waterman, 2013), where eudaimonic goals involve a degree of effort or sacrifice. Within this context, achieving a higher purpose may sometimes require an individual to withhold their true feelings or avoid focusing on them enough to label them – which, in the extreme, can lead to fatigue. Consequently, we may hypothesize that a high level of attention to others’ emotions does not necessarily contribute to hedonic goals, which involve instant gratification and problem avoidance (Wong, 2011, as cited in Li, Wong & Chao, 2019).

Nevertheless, all three emotional competencies showed significant positive correlations with both constructs (Table 3). Based on the developmental model of emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997/1999, as cited in Takšić, 2001), an individual with high emotional regulation likely possesses the other two competencies, as they are developmentally antecedent. The finding that **Emotion Regulation and Management** was the strongest predictor for both outcomes aligns with Bar-On’s (2010) theory: by actively maintaining positive affect, an individual successfully achieves significant goals, leading to greater happiness and facilitating the search for meaning.

4.1 Interpersonal Context and Developmental Implications

Our assumption, based on Erikson’s psychosocial theory (1950, as cited in Syed & McLean, 2018), that well-being and meaning in youth are primarily derived from interpersonal intimacy and goal achievement was partially confirmed. Individuals in a relationship reported higher subjective well-being, consistent with findings that married individuals exhibit higher well-being levels (Settersten & Ray, 2010, as cited in Lansford, 2018). We also found that these individuals differ from single participants regarding Labeling and Expression and Regulation and Management, but not in Perception and Understanding. This partially diverges from previous research (Fitness, 2001) which found all competencies significant in marital contexts, noting that emotional intelligence reaches its peak importance interpersonally because complex emotions (e.g., jealousy, guilt, love) gain meaning through relations with others. A possible explanation for the lack of significance for Perception and Understanding here might be that excessive focus on a partner’s emotions can become a burden, thus not contributing to subjective well-being, even if vital for relationship quality. Furthermore, partnership status was not significantly associated with meaning in life.

This finding aligns with Pavlović and Kolić (2013), who found that partnership status relates to the *search* for meaning but not necessarily the *presence* of a stable sense of meaning, which was more closely linked to job stability.

Interestingly, income, employment, and education level were not statistically significant, despite potentially representing success in goal achievement. However, it is crucial that goals are intrinsically motivated and accompanied by an internal locus of control (Singh & Choudri, 2014); our demographic data does not reveal if, for example, a participant's employment was personally desired. While previous studies (e.g., Lever et al., 2005) found a link between income and well-being, our lack of such a finding may be influenced by our recruitment via social media, where a certain level of digital literacy and resource access is already implied.

4.2 Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that the sample is not fully representative of all social strata of youth in Serbia, as it was restricted to those active on social media. As Diener et al. (1999) noted, a happy person possesses adequate resources for progress, and internet access is a vital modern resource. Additionally, the sample lacks a sufficient number of young parents under 30. Finally, various responses in the "Other" categories for employment and living arrangements had to be collapsed due to small sub-group sizes, potentially masking nuances such as seasonal employment.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Our findings provide a comprehensive overview of the factors contributing to psychological well-being in youth by integrating both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. Our results suggest that young adults (aged 18–30) with higher emotional competencies report significantly higher levels of subjective well-being and a greater sense of meaning in life. A notable distinction emerged: while perceiving others' emotions appears vital for cultivating life meaning – likely through empathy and altruism – authentic emotional expression may be less critical in this context, as individuals may occasionally suppress their own feelings in pursuit of a 'higher purpose'."

We also found that individuals in relationships differ from single individuals in their superior emotional regulation and management, as well as more adequate labeling and expression of emotions. These individuals also report higher subjective well-being, aligning with Erikson's psychosocial theory. Future research should include greater socio-economic diversity and examine participants' subjective assessments of their goal success and internal locus of control.

Finally, this study suggests that it is both meaningful and beneficial to design interventions aimed at developing emotional competencies in youth, particularly teaching them to utilize emotions for progress in interpersonal relationships. As emotional competencies can be developed throughout the lifespan and significantly predict well-being and meaning – two constructs vital for mental health – such interventions could improve the prevention of psychopathological issues while providing a foundation for facing the challenges of later life stages.

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