

EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

An existential crisis is a growing concern among young adults, particularly university students, yet the concept remains vague and underexplored in specific cultural contexts. This study aims to investigate how undergraduate students at a public university in Malaysia understand and interpret existential crises. Using a qualitative research design based on objectivist grounded theory, the study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected students from various academic backgrounds. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: loneliness, hopelessness, and unfulfillment. These themes highlight multidimensional struggles, including emotional isolation, persistent suffering, and a lack of life purpose or direction. The findings provide valuable insights into the internal experiences of students grappling with existential dilemmas, underscoring the urgent need for culturally relevant mental health interventions that address the emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of meaninglessness in higher education.

Keywords: Existential crisis, university students, perception, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Existential crises, episodes of deep questioning about one's purpose, identity, and the meaning of life, have gained increasing attention in contemporary psychological research. These crises can be particularly acute among young adults, especially university students, as they transition into adulthood and face new academic, social, and existential pressures. The urgency of this issue is reflected in a study at the Russian State University for the Humanities, where 90% of participants reported grappling with existential concerns (Mokhov & Babushkina, 2021). Marques (2020) emphasised that existential crises are among the most pressing human experiences, a notion echoed by Berman et al. (2006), who viewed them as a potentially regular part of human development. Among university students, existential concerns are closely linked to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, burnout, and academic disengagement. Alfuqaha et al. (2021) and Tabatabaei Barzoki et al. (2018) found that an existential vacuum and external locus of control predict psychological burnout, while Roy et al. (2023) observed that existential distress significantly impacts academic performance. Despite the global relevance of these findings, few studies have explicitly focused on Malaysian university students, whose cultural and social contexts may shape their existential experiences in distinct ways. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining how Malaysian university students perceive and experience existential crises, particularly in the context of meaninglessness. The research is guided by the following question: How do Malaysian university students define and make sense of existential crises in their lives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature, existential crises (meaninglessness) are discussed from various perspectives. Tallish's model highlights the inevitability of death and mortality, the accompanying feelings of emptiness and existential anxiety, and a culminating sense of guilt and condemnation (Weems et al., 2004). Butenaitė et al. (2016) further elaborate on this by describing the emotional turmoil, such as pain, despair, helplessness, and loneliness, as well as the cognitive struggles, including a loss of meaning and a breakdown in value systems and decision-making. Behaviourally, individuals experiencing existential crises may exhibit restrained actions, relationship issues, health problems, addictions, anti-social behaviour, and a need for therapy.

Frankl and Boyne (2017) attributed existential crises to the collapse of traditional belief systems and values. Other researchers, such as Kristovič (2021) and Nistor (2017), highlighted the roles of social anonymity, loss of connection with God, and being consumed by hedonistic desires as contributing factors to existential crises. Additionally, a meta-analysis by Boreham and Schutte (2023) reveals that a greater sense of purpose in life is significantly associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety across various samples, with stronger associations found in clinical populations, suggesting that cultivating a sense of purpose can mitigate the impact of existential crises. Sullivan (2016) emphasises that culture shapes how people experience existential threats and suffering. Kirmayer and Ryder (2016) highlight that cultural contexts influence the onset, experience, course, and outcome of mental disorders. These findings suggest that insights from other regions may not fully apply to Malaysian students, underscoring the need for culturally specific research.

While previous qualitative research has extensively explored the concept of meaningfulness and what constitutes a meaningful life (Alves et al., 2022; Derkx et al., 2020; Ekwonye et al., 2021; Hupkens et al., 2021; Isene et al., 2021), particularly among university students (Hill et al., 2013, 2015), there is a gap in understanding existential crises (meaninglessness), especially in the context of Malaysian university students.

Although one notable study explored existential crises among caregivers of patients with brain tumours (Applebaum et al., 2016), there is limited research focused on university students, particularly in Malaysia.

Recent studies have continued to explore these themes in various contexts. For instance, Roy, Muhamad, and Che Amat (2023) examined existential crises among university students in Bangladesh, focusing on how such crises impact academic performance and mental health. Their findings emphasise the necessity of addressing existential crises within educational settings to improve both academic outcomes and overall well-being. Similarly, Astilla and Sulaeman (2023) explored the “sophomore crisis” among students in Jakarta, identifying identity issues and career uncertainties as key factors contributing to existential crises. This study emphasises the significance of academic guidance and monitoring in helping students navigate such challenges.

Dong and Li (2021) studied the psychological crises experienced by university students in Jiangsu Province. They identified personality traits, emotional characteristics, and past experiences as significant contributing factors. Their research emphasises the importance of understanding the various elements that lead to psychological distress among students. Similarly, Ezatpour et al. (2020) investigated the impact of parent-adolescent conflict and social support on predicting existential crises. Their findings highlight the critical role that family dynamics and social networks play in this phenomenon.

Additionally, Baatouche et al. (2022) explored the connection between the meaning of education and student well-being, suggesting that a stable investment in life goals and reflective work can foster psychological well-being during the study period. These insights are particularly relevant for understanding how educational experiences can mitigate existential anxiety.

Thus, this study contributes to filling this gap by using a qualitative approach to investigate how Malaysian students perceive existential crises, offering culturally relevant insights that may inform mental health and academic support interventions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design and utilised Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis to explore university students’ perceptions of existential crises, with a specific focus on the concept of meaninglessness. Although the original plan mentioned using an objectivist grounded theory, thematic analysis was ultimately selected because of its flexibility in identifying and interpreting themes across participant narratives without the theoretical constraints associated with grounded theory. This clarification highlights the conceptual inconsistency between the initial methodology label and the actual analytical process employed.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to ensure a diverse representation of student perspectives from different academic disciplines. Participants included undergraduate students aged 21 to 24 from a Malaysian public university, selected based on their responses to a preliminary screening survey designed to evaluate their familiarity with and reflection on existential themes. Out of 35 respondents, 15 students (8 males and 7 females) were selected, representing various academic programmes, including psychology, business, engineering, and medical studies. This sampling strategy adhered to the guidelines established by Palinkas et al. (2015), emphasising the importance of recruiting information-rich participants in qualitative research.

Table 1 Participants' Profile

Respondent's details	Faculty	Gender
Student 1	Tropical forestry	Female
Student 2	Medical	Female
Student 3	Foundation	Male
Student 4	Foundation	Female
Student 5	Foundation	Female
Student 6	Software Engineering	Male
Student 7	Science and Natural Resources	Female
Student 8	Psychology and Education	Female
Student 9	Psychology and Education	Male
Student 10	Psychology and Education	Female
Student 11	Civil engineering	Male
Student 12	Foundation	Male
Student 13	Education and psychology	Male
Student 14	Business, Economy, and Accountancy	Female
Student 15	Business, Economy, and Accountancy	Male

INTERVIEW PROCESS

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring the unique experiences of students while maintaining a core focus. The interview questions were developed based on a review of existing literature and were aligned with the study's objective to investigate perceptions of meaninglessness. The two primary questions asked were: (1) What factors might lead someone to consider suicide? and (2) What does it mean to have an empty or meaningless life? These questions were designed to elicit both personal reflections and conceptual interpretations related to existential crises. The first question explored the link between suicidal ideation and existential distress, while the second examined perceptions of life's meaning or the absence of it. The interviews were conducted either in person or virtually, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using ATLAS.ti 23. Coding was carried out using a hybrid approach, where initial codes were developed deductively from prior research (e.g., Butenaitė et al., 2016; Frankl, 2017), followed by inductive refinement based on participants' narratives (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Two researchers independently coded the transcripts and compared coding outcomes to enhance reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion. This iterative process led to the identification of three major themes—loneliness, hopelessness, and unfulfillment—each supported by multiple subthemes. The rigour of the analysis was further supported by the complementary expertise of the research team: the first author, an experienced undergraduate qualitative researcher with Scopus-indexed publications, and the second author, a psychologist with a doctoral degree and extensive research experience in qualitative methods.

FINDINGS

In this study, the concept of existential crisis is delineated into three main categories. However, these themes do not operate in isolation; they are intricately interconnected and exhibit a bidirectional relationship with each other. These themes were loneliness, hopelessness, and unfulfillment.

Table 2 Themes and Sub-Themes of Research Findings

Sub-theme	Theme
Social Disconnection Inability to Share Inner Turmoil	Loneliness
Inescapable Suffering Lost Opportunities and Regret	Hopelessness
Lack of Life Purpose Dependency/lack of independence Pursuit of Transient Goals Having no impact in the world	Unfulfillment

Theme 1: Loneliness

The first theme identified was loneliness, which reflects an individual's absence of connection with others. This theme can manifest in various forms, ranging from a lack of physical interaction with others to a more profound sense of emotional isolation. Loneliness can occur when one is unable to connect with others or finds themselves in situations where all significant people in their life have disappeared. Moreover, loneliness can also manifest as a lack of someone who can engage with or understand one's inner struggles.

Sub-theme 1: Social disconnection

Social disconnection refers to a condition in which an individual experiences a lack of close relationships with family and friends. This phenomenon can occur even in the presence of others when meaningful connections are not established. Moreover, it can stem from catastrophic events that result in the loss of all loved ones. As noted by Student 6, individuals who perceive their lives as empty often find themselves without family or friends, which can lead to a state of isolation.

"I would say he has no friends. I would not say no family, but not very close to their family. They are very isolated." (Student 6)

Student 10 presents an alternative perspective, suggesting that while such individuals may not actively choose to be alone, circumstances can nonetheless lead to a state of isolation. She provides an example of someone who lost all their family and relatives in an earthquake, suggesting that in such a scenario, one would feel a profound sense of emptiness.

"I remember an earthquake in Iran where a person lost all their family. I think that is loneliness — to be completely alone, no friends, no family. It's a scary, meaningless life." (Student 10)

Sub-theme 2: Inability to share inner turmoil

The sense of loneliness extends beyond the mere absence of people or friends. It can be a more profound, less tangible feeling of not having someone with whom to share thoughts and problems. It is about lacking individuals who truly understand one's struggles. For example, Student 7 noted that people may struggle and feel stressed because they have no one to talk to. Similarly, Student 4 observed that those who contemplate suicide may lack someone to lean on or rely on.

"I think, I think it is stress, they feel stress, and they cannot speak to someone, talk to someone." (Student 7)

"But that one, well, there are those people outside that they commit suicide because they do not have people to lean on, to rely on, well about that." (Student 4)

This form of loneliness is not limited to physical or emotional isolation. According to Student 11, a sense of loneliness could arise from the belief that no one else can comprehend what one has experienced:

"What are the conditions that make them think that? I think, it is like what I said just now. They may think that with the situation, that they are going through. They may think that no one else understands them." (Student 11)

Theme 2: Hopelessness

Feelings of emptiness and disengagement from the world characterise hopelessness. Individuals may reach this state after enduring prolonged suffering that seems inescapable. They may also experience regret due to lost opportunities and perceived failures in their lives.

Sub-theme 1: Inescapable suffering

This sub-theme encompasses situations where individuals have experienced significant suffering in their lives, whether through job loss, the loss of loved ones, or financial hardship. This suffering may reach a point where it feels endless and insurmountable. The theme of hopelessness emerged through participants' descriptions of ongoing suffering and regret. Student 3 shared, "If something is not going their way... they keep going down thinking they have no hope." Other students echoed similar views, suggesting that such individuals are plagued by misfortune, including financial struggles or multiple traumatic events. Student 5 noted:

"Of course, it could be that they consider themselves unlucky. But the unlucky I things, it depends on he or she perspective." (Student 5)

Students also highlighted various factors contributing to this sense of inescapable suffering:

"Another factor that we student. Some of the student may think that our life not meaningful. Which is money. Because prices are increasing rapidly right now. So, we feel the pressure off." (Student 1)

"It could be physical or emotional trauma. Maybe they were abused." (Student 6)

"Okay, I think that people who commit suicide think that they cannot solve their problem already. Like, they if like, bankrupt. Example of somebody bankrupt. Then he thinks I did not get money already. Then my family run then I do not have friends." (Student 7)

"From a small matter, maybe, from a stress, just a stress. Then gradually escalate into extreme stress. Because they cannot escape from that level." (Student 8)

"Okay, okay, I got this one. Perhaps emptiness is something that cannot be fought anymore. Which is a dilemma, or depression that you cannot handle anymore. Which is the dark spot in yourself. Consume you too much. And then you cannot, you cannot pass out. Pass-out the darkness." (Student 9)

Student 10 observed that a sense of meaninglessness arises when individuals endure excessive suffering, reaching a point where they no longer desire to live:

"Why they choose. They do not want. Some people do not want to live anymore. Some people suffer, they cannot tolerate more suffering. Or maybe they feel like it. If they are alive. They should hurt people. Maybe I think some people should be dead if they hurt lots of people." (Student 10)

She also highlighted the plight of individuals who dedicate their entire lives to work, only to end up with nothing:

"Some people work hard all their lives but feel they gain nothing. Such prolonged suffering may lead individuals to perceive life as meaningless." (Student 10)

Sub-theme 2: Lost opportunities and regret

A sense of hopelessness can arise from experiencing lost opportunities and perceived failures, which leads to feelings of regret and resentment. These feelings can leave individuals feeling lost, as they believe there is no hope for the future. Student 12 shared his perspective on this, relating it to his university experience:

"At university, life became harder. Exam failures and breakups made me feel regret. I think regret is a vital reason people consider suicide." (Student 12)

Theme 3: Unfulfillment

Unfulfillment reflects the existence of some level of joy and happiness, but without crucial elements such as purpose, pursuit of worthwhile goals, independence from others, and a sense of significance in the world.

Sub-theme 1: Lack of life purpose

A core element of an unfulfilling life is the failure to discover or seek one's purpose. This element manifests as an inability to determine what one is living for, leading to a sense of moving in endless circles without direction. Even significant achievements may lack value and fail to provide life satisfaction without a sense of purpose. Many students characterised an unfulfilled life as lacking purpose or direction. Individuals in this state are often unsure of what to do, engaging passively in basic activities without clear direction:

"Perhaps some people simply do not seek their life's purpose. So, by that day, they will be life doing nothing. and just, just." (Student 4) *"In the person itself. They feel like, they do not have a purpose in life."* (Student 6)

"I think that someone has empty life. They live without a clear purpose. It is just like, a bottle in the ocean. You just go, you just go with the flow. Whatever comes, comes, he or she will just face it. I think that is my opinion on living an empty life." (Student 15)

"A meaningless life, I think, occurs when people lack a clear purpose. Their just like wake-up, go to path. And then after you path just eat and work. And then sleep. Does not, if I think they do not know the purpose of life." (Student 12)

Sub-theme 2: Dependency/lack of independence

Some participants indicated that depending on others to make decisions led to stress and a sense of unfulfillment. This lack of autonomy diminished their sense of personal direction and control.

"When you do not have any firm decision, then you rely on others... you feel so stressed." (Student 14)

Sub-theme 3: Pursuit of transient goals

Some participants associated unfulfillment with pursuing short-term or superficial goals.

"It's meaningless if your goal is something that ends—like money." (Student 11)

"I think someone who is always trying to find happiness. And avoid sadness whenever they can. Is someone who does not have any meaning in their life. Because we need happiness and sadness for a life that has meaning. Without sadness, it might hurt. Hurt to be sad. But it is necessary for our maturity and evolution as a person, for human beings." (Student 3)

Sub-theme 4: Lack of significance in the world

Finally, individuals may feel unfulfilled when they perceive their life as insignificant, believing their existence or non-existence holds equal value. Student 6 viewed the meaning of life as intertwined with its importance, suggesting that failing to strive for self-improvement may lead to a lack of meaning:

"Just a sense of meaninglessness. They do not feel like they are important in the world. Or maybe they cannot. They think that the world itself is meaningless." (Student 6)

"They do not bring much. Let us say if they have work. They do not bring much impact to their work. Because they are so it is meaningless. They are just pretending to be busy. They are jobs like that. They do not have any impact on their job. And I would say they do not strive to be more. To be a better version of themselves. They just let life go by. I would say that is meaningless." (Student 6)

DISCUSSION

This study examined the existential crises experienced by Malaysian university students, revealing three core themes: loneliness, hopelessness, and a sense of unfulfillment. These findings align with and extend prior theoretical and empirical research, offering both conceptual insights and practical implications. The theme of loneliness underscores not just physical solitude but a profound emotional and existential disconnection, which aligns with Yalom's (1980) theory of existential isolation. Participants described the inability to share their inner turmoil, reinforcing the notion that existential loneliness is rooted in a lack of authentic human connection. This finding supports research by Kefala et al. (2022), which found that meaningful interpersonal relationships are central to one's sense of life purpose. The significance of this theme highlights the importance of interventions that promote peer connection, such as mentorship programs, group therapy, and campus community-building initiatives.

Hopelessness, characterised by inescapable suffering and regret over missed life opportunities, aligns with Butenaité et al.'s (2016) dimensions of existential crises, specifically emotional despair, and cognitive dissonance. The findings also resonate with Frankl and Boyne (2017) assertion that when meaning is absent, suffering becomes intolerable. Participants' reflections suggest that repetitive life failures, academic pressures, and personal loss foster a belief that no future improvement is possible. Supporting studies, such as Roy et al. (2023), have shown that such hopelessness significantly correlates with poor mental health and academic disengagement among students. Hence, institutions should implement early mental health screenings and provide training for academic staff to identify students at risk.

The third theme, unfulfillment, reflects a life devoid of direction, autonomy, and personal significance. Many participants associated this with pursuing transient goals, such as wealth or social status, rather than more enduring values. The perception that material goals are inherently unfulfilling aligns with Martela and Steger's (2016) framework of meaningful living, which emphasises intrinsic goals over extrinsic ones. As Student 11 remarked, "It's meaningless if your goal is something that ends—like money," reflecting how extrinsically motivated pursuits may fail to provide lasting purpose or coherence in life. Furthermore, the findings align with those of Baatouche et al. (2022), who emphasised that educational environments must foster purpose-driven learning to enhance student well-being. Students' remarks about lacking autonomy also align with self-determination theory, which posits that personal agency is essential for psychological well-being. Interventions such as values-based counselling and reflective journaling can help students clarify their goals and sense of purpose.

While much of the existential literature originates from Western contexts, this study offers culturally grounded insights. In line with Kirmayer and Ryder's (2016) emphasis on the importance of cultural context in mental health, our findings indicate that Malaysian students experience existential crises in ways that are influenced by local social norms, academic expectations, and familial structures. Therefore, it is imperative for interventions to be culturally sensitive, incorporating Islamic or collectivist perspectives where relevant. It is also essential for universities to prioritise existential well-being within their mental health frameworks. This could involve including modules on purpose and meaning during orientation or first-year programmes, expanding access to mental health services, such as peer counselling, and integrating existential themes into existing university-wide mental health awareness campaigns. Additionally, educators and policymakers need to recognise that existential crises can impact both academic and emotional development. Policies promoting holistic education that fosters identity development, autonomy, and purpose is critical to student resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into how existential crises manifest among Malaysian university students, uncovering three interrelated core themes: loneliness, hopelessness, and unfulfillment. These themes represent not only emotional and psychological challenges, but also broader issues related to identity, purpose, and the meaning of life. Loneliness was not merely physical isolation, but also the inability to connect with others on an emotional and intellectual level. Hopelessness emerged from continuous suffering, perceived failures, and lost opportunities, while unfulfillment reflected a lack of purpose, autonomy, and perceived significance in the world. The findings underscore the urgent need for universities to adopt proactive mental health strategies that address existential concerns. It is imperative for interventions to foster meaningful social connections, promote reflective life planning, and encourage purpose-driven engagement. Support services that incorporate counselling, peer mentorship, and value-based goal setting could help students build resilience against existential distress. In conclusion, understanding the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of existential crises can inform the development of more tailored and effective mental health and educational interventions. Helping young adults cultivate meaning and connection is essential to improving their well-being and academic success.

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