

# The Relationship between Meaning in Life and School Adaptation among College Students: The Moderating Effect of Family Functioning

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## Abstract

The present study has investigated the impact of meaning in life college students on their school adaptation and explored the conditions under which this effect can be strengthened. The moderating role of family functioning on the association between meaning in life and school adaptation has been explored in a sample of 968 Chinese college students. In this study, PROCESS was used to test the study hypothesis. The study's findings indicate that the meaning in life among college students significantly and positively impacts their school adaptation. Additionally, it is observed that family functioning significantly and positively moderates the influence of meaning in life on school adaptation. Specifically, the effect of meaning in life on school adaptation is stronger with higher levels of family functioning among college students. The present study contributes to deepen our comprehension of the relationship between the meaning in life and school adaptation among college students and holds both theoretical and practical implications for college educators seeking to improve students' school adaptation.

**Keywords:** college students, family functioning, meaning in life, school adaptation

## 1. Introduction

The process of school adaptation is a dynamic process, which is characterized by the ability of students to make favorable self-adaptations to the school setting, engage in diverse learning activities, cultivate positive social interactions with both teachers and peers, and attain academic accomplishments (Ki, 2020; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Tan, 2019; Tomás, Gutiérrez, Pastor, & Sancho, 2020). Deng and Gu (2007) identified four dimensions of school adaptation in the academic context: academic adaptation, collective adaptation, teacher-student relationship adaptation, student relationship adaptation. An increasing number of studies have focused on the significance of positive school adaptation as a fundamental basis for students' successful academic attainment and healthy physical and mental growth (Chenari, Vahedi, Bayrami, & Gharadaghi, 2022; Chui & Chan, 2017; Ki, 2020; Tomás et al., 2020). Despite the extensive discourse on the advantages of favorable school adaptation for students, it is essential to acknowledge that school maladaptation can have detrimental impacts on students. Research has shown that school maladaptation can lead to a decrease in students' subjective well-being (Tomás et al., 2020), leading to academic underachievement, dropout (Buote et al., 2007), and even suicidal tendencies (Park & Kim, 2018), posing a significant obstacle to the sustainability of education (Amirbagloie-Daryani, Shabani, Saraee, & Pasnak, 2022).

The issue of school adaptation among students of various ages has been a prevalent topic of interest among scholars from both Chinese and Western academic circles (Amai, 2022; Amirbagloie-Daryani et al., 2022; Burns, Martin, & Collie, 2018; Chenari et al., 2022; Tan, 2019). Studies have shown that compared with other phases, higher education represents a crucial juncture for college students in their transition to society, as they are required to manage and fulfill all aspects of their academic pursuits, personal life, and employment autonomously (Arnett, 2000; Ye et al., 2021). Several academic studies have indicated that a significant proportion of college students find the experience of learning and residing on campus consistently challenging (Chenari et al., 2022; Pan, Zhang, Liu, & Chen, 2016; Park & Kim, 2018). Hence, it is imperative to prioritize the school adaptation of college students and delve into the principal factors and influence mechanism that affect their school adaptation.

Person-context interaction theories believe that the individual is the principal determinants of his or her development, but a series of environmental systems influence the development of an individual, the interaction of personal and environmental factors may affect the generation of certain patterns and behaviors of individuals (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998; Lerner et al., 2006). Previous studies have shown that meaning in life is an essential internal personal resource (Steger et al., 2006), with positive significance for individuals' development of both physical and mental adaptation (O'Donnell et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2021). The concept of meaning in life pertains to an individual's subjective perception of the significance and purpose of their existence and the search for their life's goals (Steger et al., 2006). Meaning in life has been found to have a positive impact on students' school adaptation (Hajitabar Firouzjaee et al., 2019; Xiao & Li, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). Therefore, when exploring the influencing factors of college students' school adaptation, it is necessary to focus on the meaning in life.

In addition, the study results of Bergman et al. (2018) show that the influence of family environment factors on individual school adaptation is ubiquitous and cannot be ignored, which needs to be concerned. As a comprehensive concept that can completely reflect the internal operation quality of the family system, family function can be regarded as a family environment factor, which is often discussed by researchers for its influence on adolescent school adaptation (Fang et al., 2004; Hussong et al., 2022; Ning & Zhou, 2022). It is worth mentioning that family functioning has strong plasticity (Liu et al., 2015), which is often discussed as a moderator variable in previous studies (Wu et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2019; Liu & Hu, 2023). Some empirical studies have shown that adolescents with high-levels home functioning are more school adaptation than adolescents in low-levels home functioning environments (Shorter & Elledge, 2020; Ning & Zhou, 2022). Therefore, this study speculates that the meaning in life (as a personal factor) could interact with family functioning (as an environmental factor) to affect college students' school adaptation (as a behavior or pattern).

Although there is no shortage of previous studies on the relationship between meaning in life and school adaptation, the moderating variables involved in this influencing process still need to be explored. Therefore, based on the person-context interaction theories, one of the aims of this study is to explore the effect of meaning in life on college students' school adaptation. The second aim of this study is to explore whether family functioning plays a moderating role in this process.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Meaning in Life and School Adaptation

According to a recent longitudinal study conducted by J.-B. Li, Wang, Dou, and Shang (2022), it was observed that college students tend to engage in more reflective thinking about the meaning of their lives upon entering higher education, and revealed that possessing a strong sense of meaning in life has a positive influence on their school adaptation. The establishment of meaning in life can promote college students to form correct self-assessments, actively pursue life goals, and then actively adapt themselves to various learning environments (Xiao & Li, 2022). Contrarily, the lack of meaning in life may result in college students experiencing a vacuous and uninteresting lifestyle and academic pursuits, impeding their capacity to adapt to school (Zhao et al., 2020). Prior research has indicated that meaning in life can enhance students' ability to cope with problems, foster self-acceptance, and be a dependable predictor of their school adaptation (Hajitabar Firouzjaee et al., 2019). The aforementioned studies have demonstrated a significant association between the meaning in life and school adaptation. Hence, the present study posited hypothesis 1 (H1): The meaning in life of college students has a significant and positive effect on their school adaptation.

### 2.2 Family Functioning as a Moderator

Although college students' meaning in life may have a significant positive effect on school adaptation, the extent of this effect is subject to variation under different conditions. The person-context interaction theories posit that various environmental systems shape the development of an individual and that the interplay between individual and environmental factors contributes to the manifestation of specific patterns and behaviors in individuals (Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, & Theokas, 2006; Magnusson & Stattin, 1998). Several prior studies have utilized this theory to elucidate the interaction between individual and environmental factors can influence their behavior (Chao et al., 2023; Lau & Nie, 2008; Sheng, 2023; L. Wu, Deng, Liu, Zhao, & Lin, 2019), while the present study proposed family functioning as a moderator of environmental aspects in this study is based on the following justifications. First, family functioning refers to the relationship structure of the family, encompassing the quality of interactions among family members, their level of intimacy, and their adaptability in addressing problems (Beavers & Hampson, 2000); Fang, Xu, Sun, and Zhang (2004) further pointed out that the family functioning is a comprehensive concept that can completely reflect the overall quality of functioning of the family system. Second, family functioning has been

confirmed to have a ubiquitous influence on school adaptation (Bergman, Choe, Cummings, & Davies, 2018). Third, family functioning is plastic (Q.-X. Liu et al., 2015) and has frequently been examined as a moderating factor in previous research (X. R. Liu & Hu, 2023; Lili Wu, Ding, Hu, Cheng, & Chen, 2021; Zhai et al., 2019). Besides, meaning in life is identified as a crucial intrapersonal asset (Steger et al., 2006). Therefore, the present study considered the meaning in life as an individual factor and the family functioning as an environmental factor, aiming to investigate whether the interaction between these two factors significantly impacts school adaptation among college students.

Shek (1997, 2002, 2005) conducted a series of studies examining the relationship between family functioning and school adaptation among adolescents, and the findings consistently indicated that higher levels of family functioning were associated with reduced problematic behavior and improved school adaptation among adolescents. Recent empirical research has indicated that adolescents who exhibit high levels of family functioning are capable of sustaining positive communication with their family members and receiving practical guidance when they face school adaptation difficulties, which can benefit them in enhancing and refining their school adaptation abilities (Ning & Zhou, 2022; Shorter & Elledge, 2020). On the other hand, teenagers with low levels of family functioning are more susceptible to difficulties in school adaptation due to their exposure to family conflict and a lack of emotional support, resulting in absenteeism and substandard academic achievements (Unger, McLeod, Brown, & Tressell, 2000). Therefore, this study speculated that when college students possess a sense of meaning of life and are within a high level of family functioning, it is more likely to encourage college students to be more active in completing their school adaptations under the influence of the meaning in life. In other words, family functioning may be a favorable condition for the relationship between college students' meaning in life and school adaptation, family functioning may enhance the positive effect of meaning in life on school adaptation. Accordingly, hypothesis 2 (H2) was proposed in the present study: Family functioning significantly and positively moderates the relationship between college students' meaning in life and school adaptation.

### 2.3 The Present Study

Based on the previous theoretical and empirical investigations, the present study posited the following research questions: (a) whether college students' meaning in life significantly affected school adaptation. (b) whether the effect of meaning in life on school adaptation was moderated by family functioning. The hypothetical model of the present study is depicted in Figure 1, which posits a deeper insight into the mechanisms influencing college students' school adaptation.

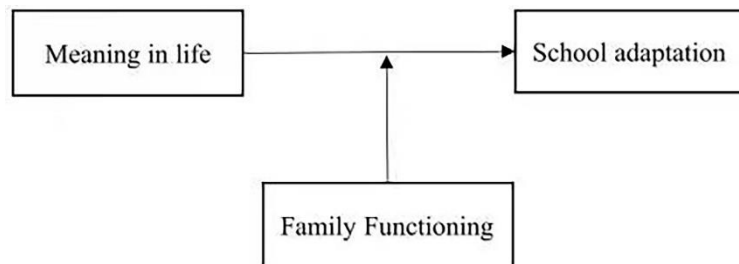


Figure 1. The hypothetical model

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Participants and Procedures

The present study was approved by the Academic Ethics Committee of Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology (HKD-2022-26). The questionnaire was collected by convenience sampling through the online survey distributing platform China Questionnaire Star ([www.wjx.cn](http://www.wjx.cn)). The present study recruited college students from three universities in three distinct provinces of China as participants. Data were collected on a voluntary and anonymous basis. The items of questionnaires did not have any objectively correct or incorrect options. They were granted the right to decline participation or retract their involvement in the event of any uncertainties regarding the questionnaire's structure or their physical well-being during the process. A total of 1100 questionnaires were distributed, and 968 valid questionnaires remained after eliminating invalid questionnaires with consistent answers and insufficient completion duration. The effective rate of the questionnaires was 88%. The sample population comprised 230 (23.8%) males and 738 (76.2%) females. Additionally, 360 (37.2%) students hailed from urban areas, while 608 (62.8%) came from rural areas. The distribution of students across academic years was as follows: 326

(33.7%) first-year students, 327 (33.8%) second-year students, 265 (27.4%) third-year students, and 50 (5.2%) fourth-year students.

### 3.2 Measures

#### 3.2.1 Meaning in Life

The present study employed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire Chinese Version (MLQ-C), revised by Wang et al. (2016). The scale consisted of 10 questions with two dimensions: the search for meaning in life (e.g., I am always looking to find my life's purpose) and the presence of meaning in life (e.g., My life has a clear sense of purpose). It was scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Absolutely untrue, 7=Absolutely true), with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of meaning in life among college students. The scale was set up with a reverse question. The issue of how the reverse items affect the scale's reliability has been widely discussed, and some researchers believe that it can be removed from the scale after some empirical analysis (Józsa & Morgan, 2017). After removing the reverse question in the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale was 0.957. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed that the standardized factor loadings (SFL) ranged from 0.858 to 0.951; the composite reliability (CR) values were 0.963 and 0.953; the average variance extracted (AVE) values were 0.840 and 0.836. The results satisfied the criteria of SFL greater than 0.5, CR greater than 0.7, and AVE greater than 0.5 (Cheung & Wang, 2017). The model fit indices were RMR=0.032, CFI=0.976, NFI=0.973, TLI=0.966, IFI=0.976, and PCFI=0.705, which met the criteria suggested by Marsh, Balla, and McDonald (1988).

#### 3.2.2 School Adaptation

The Life Adaptation Scale in School (LASS) for College Students, modified by Deng and Gu (2007), was used in the present study. The scale consisted of 31 questions with four dimensions: academic adaptation (e.g., I can understand what the teacher says in class), collective adaptation (e.g., I will not be late for class), teacher-student relationship adaptation (e.g., I can meet the teacher's requirement for me), student relationship adaptation (e.g., I do not feel lonely in the class). It was scored on a 4-point Likert scale (1=never, 4=always), with higher scores indicating better school adaptation. The scale was set up with eight reverse questions, which were removed for data analysis (Józsa & Morgan, 2017). After that, the scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.925. CFA showed that the SFL ranged from 0.673-0.959, CR values were 0.858, 0.917, 0.900, and 0.884, and AVE values were 0.668, 0.737, 0.694, and 0.605, satisfying the criteria (Cheung & Wang, 2017). The model fit indices were RMR=0.026, CFI=0.934, NFI=0.926, TLI=0.919, IFI=0.934, and PCFI=0.763, which met the criteria suggested by Marsh et al. (1988).

#### 3.2.3 Family Functioning

The present study utilized the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale (FACESII-CV), a revised Chinese version of Fei et al.(1991). It was a 30-question scale that contained two dimensions: family cohesion (e.g., family members are proactive in talking to others in the family about what is on their mind) and family adaptability (e.g., each member in our family is free to express his or her opinion). All responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1=never, 5=always), with higher scores indicating better family functioning among college students. The scale was set up with six reverse questions, which were removed for subsequent data analysis (Józsa & Morgan, 2017). After the removal, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale was 0.971. The results of the CFA satisfied the criteria (Cheung & Wang, 2017), with SFL ranging from 0.604 to 0.876, CR values of 0.951 and 0.957, and AVE values of 0.617 and 0.651. The model fit indicators were RMR=0.038, CFI=0.913, NFI=0.902, TLI=0.905, IFI=0.913, and PCFI=0.831, which met the criteria suggested by Marsh et al. (1988).

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22. The arithmetic means and standard deviation of each variable were calculated, followed by a correlation analysis of each variable. The present study employed a moderating model (Model 1) provided by Hayes' PROCESS version 3.5 to test the hypotheses regarding the relationship between meaning in life, family functioning, and school adaptation. The Bootstrap method was used to generate 5000 samples and test the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the path coefficient. The moderating effect was deemed significant if the CI did not include 0 (Hayes, 2013).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of each variable examined in the present study. Meaning in life was found to be significantly and positively correlated with school adaptation ( $r=0.636$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), as well as with family functioning ( $r=0.522$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Family functioning was found to be significantly and positively

correlated with school adaptation ( $r=0.446, p<0.001$ ).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Meaning in life	School adaptation	Family functioning
Meaning in life	5.390	1.031	1		
School adaptation	3.146	0.461	0.636***	1	
Family functioning	3.890	0.762	0.522***	0.446***	1

Note:  $n=968$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.001$

#### 4.2 The Moderating Role of Family Functioning

The study employed PROCESS model 1 to investigate the moderating effect of family functioning on the relationship between meaning in life and school adaptation, with the meaning in life as the independent variable, the school adaptation as the dependent variable, and the family functioning as the moderating variable. Table 2 and Figure 2 depict the results, indicating a significant and positive effect of the meaning in life on school adaptation ( $B=0.248, p<0.001, 95\% CI=0.219, 0.278$ ), thereby confirming H1. The interaction between meaning in life and family functioning had a significant positive effect on school adaptation ( $B=0.083, p<0.001, 95\% CI=0.052, 0.111$ ), indicating that the effect of meaning in life on school adaptation was moderated by family functioning, thereby confirming H2.

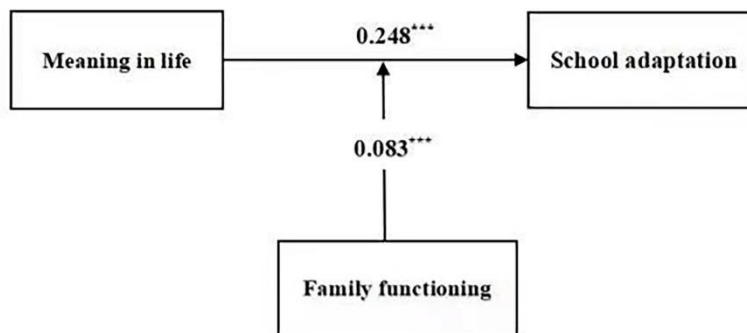


Figure 2. Moderation analysis

Table 2. Testing the moderating role of family functioning

Variables	School adaptation		
	B	SE	95% CI
Constant	3.112***	0.012	3.088, 3.136
Meaning in life	0.248***	0.013	0.219, 0.278
Family functioning	0.101***	0.017	0.065, 0.136
Meaning in life × family functioning	0.083***	0.012	0.052, 0.111
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		0.449	
<i>F</i>		261.458***	

Note:  $n=968$ ; B are unstandardized coefficients; \*\*\* $p<0.001$ .

In order to capture the moderation of family functioning, the simple slope was calculated to assess the extent of the meaning in life on school adaptation under conditions with different levels of family functioning, as depicted in Figure 3. Compared to the predictive effect of meaning in life on school adaptation among college students with low levels of family functioning (simple slope=0.185,  $t=11.864, p<0.001$ ), the effect was stronger among those with high levels of family functioning (simple slope=0.311,  $t=19.860, p<0.001$ ).

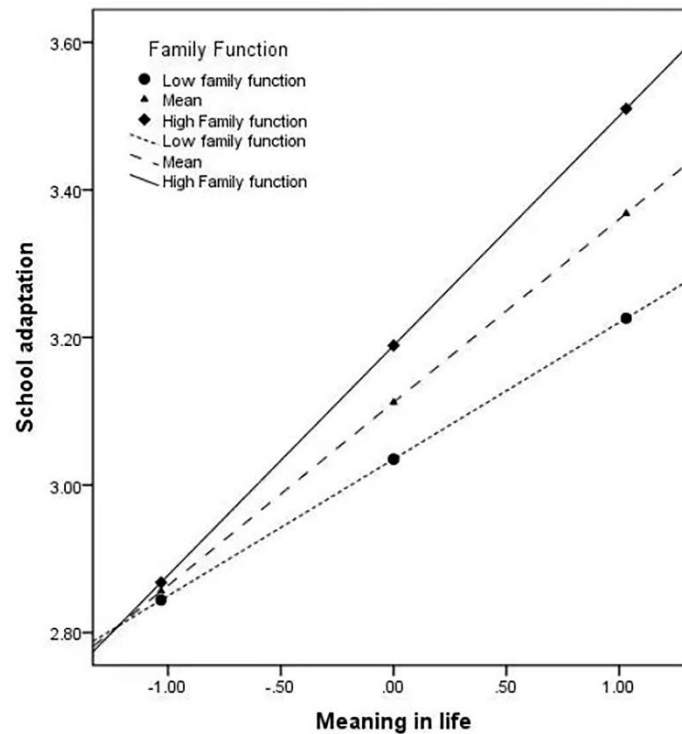


Figure 3. The moderation of Family functioning

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

The present study's findings provide evidence in favor of H1, which posits that college students' meaning in life has a significant positive effect on school adaptation, consistent with prior studies (Xiao & Li, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). It may be attributed to the following reasons. First, meaning in life is a crucial intrapersonal asset that can facilitate the growth and adaptation of individuals in diverse domains (J.-L. Lee & Park, 2019; Zhao et al., 2020), which can help college students in coping with stress arising from distinct environments and interpersonal relationships, as well as motivate them to engage in active self-regulation and achieve positive adaptation to various stressful academic situations (J.-B. Li et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). Second, the absence of perceived meaning in life may result in college students experiencing emptiness and unstimulating existence, thereby generating pessimism and slackness, which may impede the cultivation of their school adaptation (Zhao et al., 2020). Conversely, the establishment of meaning in life can serve as a driving force for college students to actively strive toward their values and goals, ultimately leading to favorable school adaptation. Third, it has been highlighted that meaning in life can stimulate favorable outcomes such as learning motivation and happiness in college students (Tian, Zhang, & Fu, 2021), and these positive factors will make college students show a more optimistic attitude in the learning process and promote their adaptation to school.

The present study's findings support H2, indicating that family functioning significantly and positively moderated the relationship between college students' meaning in life and their school adaptation. While prior research has established the moderating effect of family functioning between daily stress and children's behavioral difficulties (Lili Wu et al., 2021), limited research has explored the moderating effect of family functioning on the impact of college students' meaning in life on school adaptation (J.-B. Li et al., 2022). The present study has not only explored the positive role of meaning in life for college students' school adaptation in the setting of higher education but also uncovered the moderating impact of family functioning on this relationship. It may be attributed to the fact that family serves as the initial social context that college students encounter, and favorable family functioning exert a significant influence on the cultivation of individual adaptive behavior (Bergman et al., 2018; L. Wu et al., 2019). Research has demonstrated that adolescents with high levels of family functioning are better equipped to manage adaptation-related difficulties that may arise in the school setting (Shorter & Elledge, 2020; Ning & Zhou, 2022). Therefore, high levels of family functioning can furnish college students with proficient communication, guidance,

and emotional support, which can aid in cultivating a stronger sense of meaning in life. Consequently, these students exhibit better school adaptation than those with lower levels of family functioning.

Furthermore, person-context interaction theories (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998) offer a plausible account for the present study's findings, indicating that the individual assumes a central role in their development. As individuals undergo the process of personal growth, they engage with environmental factors, and this interaction can impact the manifestation of individual behavior. The findings of the present study confirm that the interaction between meaning in life (it can be regarded as an individual factor) and family functioning (it can be regarded as an environment factor) significantly positively affects their school adaptation (it can be regarded as a behavior). Specifically, the primary factor influencing school adaptation among college students in the present study is their perception of meaning in life, which can facilitate favorable school adaptation among college students (J.-B. Li et al., 2022; Xiao & Li, 2022). Besides, the interaction between college students' meaning in life and family functioning has a significant positive effect on the development of school adaptation, highlighting that family functioning can enhance the positive influence of meaning in life on school adaptation.

### 5.2 Practical Implications

The present study bears several practical implications. First, it is imperative to acknowledge the positive influence of meaning in life on school adaptation. Accordingly, college educators should employ meaning-centered counseling and therapy approaches, such as logotherapy and therapies based on personal construct theory, to tackle the issue of insufficient meaning in college students' academic and personal lives (Wong, 2012). In addition, colleges can organize thematic events centered on meaning in life. Through targeted discussions or practical activities, college students may be prompted to contemplate their meaning in life from diverse vantage points and to pursue their aspirations with optimism, thereby fostering a constructive outlook on the meaning of life.

Second, the study's findings indicate that family functioning enhances the influence of college students' meaning in life on school adaptation. This discovery serves as a reminder to college educators to acknowledge the positive intervention role of family functioning. It is recommended that college students should be encouraged to maintain positive emotional exchanges with their parents to foster healthy familial connections. Furthermore, colleges can provide psychological counseling institutions to administer structured family therapy interventions to college students experiencing low levels of family functioning. Therapy interventions can equip students with the necessary skills to navigate familial conflicts, improving parent-child relationships and overall family functioning (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2017).

### 6. Limitations and Future Directions

First, the present study's sampling population was limited to three provinces in China; thus, generalizing the findings to all Chinese college students would be inappropriate. Future research endeavors may benefit from expanding the sample to include college students from other provinces in China. Second, the present study employed a cross-sectional design. While some scholars have posited that cross-sectional studies offer valuable insights into variable relationships (Hayes, 2017; Kline, 2015), it is worth noting that such designs do not reveal the temporal sequence of variable associations (Maxwell, Cole, & Mitchell, 2011). Therefore, future research endeavors may benefit from a longitudinal design to enhance our comprehension of the time ordering of the influence process. Finally, the study's findings indicated that family functioning moderated the relationship between meaning in life and school adaptation. Future research may expand on our findings by examining the moderating role of additional school-related factors, such as school climate (Jia et al., 2009), school support (J. Li, Hu, & Pan, 2022), and teacher support (J. Li, Huang, & Chen, 2022).

### 7. Conclusion

The study's findings indicated that the meaning in life among college students significantly and positively impacted their school adaptation. Additionally, it was revealed that family functioning moderated the relationship between meaning in life and school adaptation. Under the condition of high levels of family functioning, the positive effect of a college student's meaning in life on school adaptation is stronger. By identifying the significance of family functioning as a crucial moderating variable in the association between college students' meaning in life and school adaptation, the present study not only supports the person-environment interaction theories but also contributes to a more profound comprehension of the interplay among college students' meaning in life, family functioning, and school adaptation. The study's findings have important practical implications for higher education teachers seeking to reduce school adaptation difficulties among college students.

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