STUDENTS' EXISTENTIALISM IN THE EDUCATIONAL SPHERE: DEFINING THE MEANING OF SELF AMID ACADEMIC DEMANDS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the existential experiences of university students within the context of higher education, particularly how they perceive their own existence amid academic and social pressures. The aim of this research is to describe the existential realities faced by students through a descriptive qualitative approach, using reflective questionnaires and literature review. Data were collected from 38 student respondents from various universities in Indonesia. The findings reveal that most students experience identity crises, uncertainty about their life direction, and pressure from academic and family expectations. However, they also show awareness of their freedom to make decisions and a sense of responsibility for their life choices. The discussion connects the findings to existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Heidegger. The study examines four main aspects: crisis of meaning and personal struggle, freedom and life choices, existential reflection amid social-academic pressure, and freedom of thought along with personal responsibility. This study concludes that students are in the midst of an important existential process, where education should serve not only as a space for academic achievement, but also as a reflective journey to build authentic meaning and self-understanding. Therefore, a more humanistic and reflective educational approach is necessary to support students in discovering their true selves.

Keywords: existentialism; students; meaning of life; higher education; self-awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the word *existence* derives from the Latin *existere*, which means "to emerge," "to appear," or "to have an outward being." In philosophical discourse, existence refers to actual and concrete being, something that has form and can be consciously recognized. Humans are considered existential beings because they possess self-awareness, the ability to make choices, take actions, and create meaning in their own lives. From the perspective of existentialist philosophers, existence is always linked to human experience, particularly the process of discovering one's true self. Questions such as "Who am I?", "Why am I here?", and "What is the purpose of my life?" lie at the core of this existential inquiry (Ekawati et al., n.d.). Existence is one of the ways in which human beings are present in the world (Rohmah, 2019). To exist means to be oneself. Only human beings truly exist. The way in which humans are in the world is what defines existence (Wahid, 2022).

Existentialism is a philosophical school of thought that views all phenomena as originating from existence. The nature of human existence differs from that of material objects, which are not conscious of themselves. In contrast, humans possess self-awareness and coexist with fellow beings, giving meaning to material things through their consciousness (Rohmah, 2019). Humans are aware of their own existence and determine their actions. One becomes truly existential when they realize their being and construct the meaning of their life through conscious choices and actions.

The central focus of existentialism lies in the condition of human existence. Therefore, existence can be understood as the way in which humans are present in the world, only humans are truly capable of existing in this sense. This philosophy seeks to help individuals become themselves and experience their own individuality. The recognition of human "being" as an existential subject is rooted in immediate and subjective awareness, which cannot be confined within systematic or abstract frameworks (Wahid 2022).

According to Sartre, a key figure in existentialist philosophy, a person exists first and only later defines the meaning and purpose of their life. That is, human beings are not born with a fixed essence or predefined role. Instead, through freedom, experience, and conscious decisions, each individual determines their own direction in life and the values they choose to uphold (Purbajati et al., 2024). A person is not born with an external "fixed purpose." Rather, they are born first, and then, through decisions, responsibility, and life experiences, they shape who they are. Existence precedes essence; one must exist first, then define themselves.

In the realm of education, this philosophy is highly relevant, particularly in addressing the realities faced by university students who struggle with academic pressure, social expectations, and identity crises. Education should not be merely a medium for transferring knowledge, but also a reflective space for individuals to discover their true selves. Existentialist philosophy views human beings as entities who exist first and then create their own meaning and essence through the freedom to choose and lived experiences (Rohmah, 2019).

Kierkegaard, known as the father of existentialist philosophy, emphasized the importance of personally seeking truth. He valued honesty in the search for the meaning of life more than academic titles or formal knowledge that is not lived authentically. He rejected educational systems that solely pursue worldly success, not because he was anti-knowledge, but because he feared such systems might distance individuals from their own souls (Ekawati et al., n.d.). Kierkegaard was not against schooling or science; rather, he criticized forms of education that cause individuals to lose their inner selves. He was a deeply critical thinker who sought to help individuals become themselves, not mere copies of others.

University students, particularly in the early years of college, often find themselves in a transitional phase toward emotional and intellectual maturity. Amid academic pressure and expectations from family and society, many experience inner restlessness, such as confusion about life direction, a sense of emptiness, and deep existential questioning. This situation is worsened by an educational system that overemphasizes cognitive achievements and standardized measures of success, while neglecting the subjective and emotional dimensions of student life. In the view of existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Sartre, however, personal experience and the freedom to choose are at the very core of authentic existence (Ahyan & Sya'bani, n.d.).

Education has become overly intellectual and impersonal; institutions prioritize memorization and theoretical mastery over personal experience and the search for meaning. True knowledge should touch one's existence, not just what can be tested on paper. As a result, many students become preoccupied with grades, titles, and career paths, yet fail to understand who they truly are, what their life purpose is, whether their actions are meaningful, or what happiness means to them.

In reality, many university students feel disconnected from learning experiences that should be meaningful. An educational system that is overly bureaucratic, rigid, and outcome-oriented often neglects the need for self-reflection and the development of life's meaning. The existential problems faced by students are not merely theoretical, they manifest as personal restlessness, internal pressure, and identity confusion (Irwani & Syaifulloh, 2020). Pressures from family, academic institutions, and society at large make many students feel as if they are not truly living their own lives. As a result, a sense of alienation, loss of direction, and even existential emptiness often arise, feelings that are difficult to articulate (Rumianowska, 2020).

Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, viewed human beings as *Dasein*, entities that do not merely exist, but are aware of their existence in a world that is absurd and not of their own choosing. Heidegger emphasized that human beings are "thrown into the world" (*Geworfenheit*) without consent. Nevertheless, each person has the potential to determine the direction of their own authentic existence (Purbajati & Hasan, 2021). In the context of education, this means that students must cultivate reflective awareness of their own existence, rather than passively going through academic routines. Anxiety, alienation, and uncertainty about the future are not weaknesses, but rather signs that a person is actively confronting the meaning of their own life (Heidegger, as cited in Wahid, 2022).

This condition reflects what Kierkegaard called "silent despair": a life that functions outwardly, but lacks inner meaning (Kierkegaard, *as cited in* Wahid, 2022). In this context, existentialism offers a liberating perspective: human beings must take full responsibility for their own lives, make conscious choices, and dare to be themselves. Education should not merely be a social tool for producing employable graduates, but a profound process of self-discovery. The fundamental task of education is to awaken every individual to the awareness that they alone are responsible for creating meaning and defining their own existence (Rohmah, 2019).

Amid this situation, the ability to know oneself becomes essential for university students. Without awareness of who they are, students may easily become overwhelmed by external pressures and lose direction when making important life decisions. Self-knowledge does not merely mean understanding one's talents and interests; it also involves awareness of one's values, life goals, beliefs, and personal direction. As Heidegger asserted, humans are beings who are aware of their own existence in the world (Purbajati & Hasan, 2021). Such awareness can only emerge when one has the courage to confront oneself honestly, including the courage to face anxiety, alienation, and uncertainty about the future. True education should assist students in this process, not alienate them from self-reflection.

The primary objective of this research is to illustrate the existential reality of university students through a descriptive qualitative approach that combines data from reflective questionnaires and literature review. The urgency of this study lies in the importance of deeply understanding students' existential experiences, as part of an effort to uncover psychological and philosophical realities often overlooked by formal educational approaches. Through reflective questionnaires and theoretical studies, this research seeks to portray the inner dynamics students experience in dealing with academic pressure, identity search, and existential crises, serving as a foundation for critical thinking about a more humanistic and existence-aware direction in education. By gaining deeper insight into these subjective experiences, the study aims to contribute to the development of an educational approach that is more humane and attentive to individual existence.

Based on this background, the article will explore how students perceive themselves in the context of higher education, the types of pressures they face, how identity crises and the search for meaning emerge, and the extent to which they are able to engage in academic life consciously, authentically, and responsibly. This study also seeks to open a space for critical reflection on the current state of education, whether it truly serves as a means for self-discovery, or instead distances students from the potential of their authentic being.

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. All participants involved in the questionnaire process gave their consent voluntarily and consciously. The collected data is guaranteed to remain confidential, will not be used for purposes other than this research, and is presented anonymously without disclosing personal identities. The researcher also ensured that the process took place without coercion and respected the participants' right to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable. Thus, this research is expected to provide an in-depth picture of the psychological and existential condition of students, while also encouraging a more reflective and humanistic direction in education.

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RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at providing an in-depth depiction of university students' existential experiences and meaning-making within the context of higher education. The central focus of the research is on how students perceive their own existence, respond to academic and social pressures, and discover personal meaning throughout their educational journey.

The study utilizes two primary methods: the distribution of an online questionnaire via Google Forms to students from various universities across Indonesia, and a literature review of relevant scholarly sources, including philosophical journals and educational articles that explore themes of existentialism. The research explores students' existential experiences, particularly in relation to self-discovery, identity crisis, freedom of choice, and both academic and social pressures. The scope of the study is limited to active undergraduate students from a range of Indonesian universities.

A structured closed-ended questionnaire was employed, using a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire consists of four main indicators: (1) Crisis of Meaning and Inner Struggle, (2) Freedom and Life Choices, (3) Existential Self-Reflection and Social-Academic Pressure, and (4) Freedom of Thought and Personal Responsibility. Each indicator comprises five questions, resulting in a total of 20 items. In addition, literature from academic journals, scholarly articles, and philosophical books was used to strengthen the study's conceptual framework.

The primary variable examined in this study is the existential experience of students in the context of higher education. This variable is broken down into four main indicators, structured according to existentialist theory. First, the crisis of meaning and inner struggle refers to conditions in which students experience confusion about life direction, a sense of emptiness, questions about the purpose of their existence, and even performative social behaviors in order to gain acceptance. Second, freedom and life choices reflect the extent to which students feel autonomous in choosing their field of study, life goals, and direction, without fully submitting to external pressures such as family or societal expectations. Third, existential reflection and academic-social pressure highlight students' experiences dealing with academic demands, pressure from lecturers or parents, and internal conflict between personal values and social expectations. Lastly, freedom of thought and personal responsibility concerns how students perceive their ability to express themselves authentically, think freely, and acknowledge that every decision they make is part of their personal accountability for their own life.

The collected data was identified based on the response trends for each indicator. Thematic analysis was carried out using dimensions derived from existentialist philosophy. In addition, questionnaire findings were interpreted through comparison with the thoughts of major existentialist figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Søren Kierkegaard, as well as with insights from previously reviewed academic journals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Respondents' Questionnaire Results

No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Crisis of Meaning and Inner Struggle
1	I feel like I am experiencing an identity crisis.	8	14	14	1	1	38/38
2	I am afraid of disappointing the expectations others have of me.	2	1	9	8	18	38/38
3	I lack ambition and feel like I'm just going with the flow of life.	5	13	12	3	5	38/38
4	I lack self-confidence when making decisions.	4	7	14	9	4	38/38
5	I do not know what kind of plans I should make for my future.	11	11	9	7	0	38/38
Freedom and Life Choices
1	I feel free to determine my own life path.	2	2	12	7	15	38/38
2	My choice of major was entirely my personal decision.	6	3	12	9	8	38/38
3	I attend university because I genuinely want to	1	0	4	7	26	38/38

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	learn, not due to parental pressure.						
4	I have a clear career plan.	1	3	18	7	9	38/38
5	I believe self-awareness is the key to achieving success.	0	1	3	7	27	38/38
Existential Self-Reflection and Social-Academic Pressure							
1	I feel that I am searching for the meaning of life through the learning process at university.	0	2	12	11	13	38/38
2	I understand and am aware of who I am and what my role is during my academic journey.	0	2	14	13	9	38/38
3	I feel burdened by academic expectations from lecturers and family.	7	13	14	4	0	38/38
4	I experience inner conflict between my personal desires and external demands.	8	11	11	3	5	38/38
5	I find it difficult to be myself due to the social pressures around me.	11	10	9	2	6	38/38
Freedom of Thought and Personal Responsibility							
1	I feel free to express my opinions in class without fear of being judged.	4	1	6	13	14	38/38
2	I feel supported by my lecturers to think independently.	1	1	11	10	15	38/38
3	I am able to explore personal ideas in academic assignments.	1	0	10	11	16	38/38
4	I am aware that I am responsible for all the life choices I make.	0	0	3	7	28	38/38
5	I am aware of and understand the consequences of my decisions, and that they come with responsibility.	0	0	3	12	23	38/38

Crisis of Meaning and Inner Struggle

This section aims to identify and understand the extent to which students experience existential anxiety, particularly in the form of identity crises, confusion about life direction, and the loss of clarity regarding personal meaning during their academic journey.

The findings reveal that a majority of respondents experience identity confusion and feel as if they are trapped in the current of life. In response to the statement *"I feel like I am experiencing an identity crisis,"* 14 respondents selected option 3 (neutral), and 8 respondents chose option 2, indicating ambivalence toward their sense of identity.

The statement *"I lack ambition and feel like I'm just going with the flow of life,"* received the highest number of responses at option 3 and 4, suggesting a tendency toward existential stagnation among students. These results indicate a significant level of uncertainty or existential unease.

This resonates with Kierkegaard's concept of "silent despair," a condition in which a person functions outwardly, physically present and following routines, but is not truly alive in a conscious, meaningful way. In this context, the students are not necessarily failing academically. Rather, they have lost touch with themselves. They may appear active in campus activities, yet deep within, they have not found answers to fundamental questions: *"Why am I doing all of this?"*

Existentially, this illustrates that students are caught in the liminal phase between *existence* (physical presence) and the search for *essence* (meaning and life purpose). They are present, yet have not reached the stage of actively realizing and defining who they are and where their life is headed. In Heidegger's terms, they are "thrown into the world" without choice, yet have not yet decided to live authentically.

If this condition is not addressed through a reflective and humanistic educational approach, students may remain trapped in a passive mode of life, merely following the system, completing assignments, yet losing direction and never truly knowing themselves. Therefore, this crisis should not be seen as a weakness, but rather as a gateway to existential awareness, provided it is consciously confronted and supported by a learning environment that fosters self-discovery.

Students who feel empty are not failing. On the contrary, they are encountering the deepest core of human existence, when life is no longer just about achievement, but about the fundamental question: *"Who am I, and what am I living for?"*

Freedom and Life Choices

This section aims to analyze the extent to which students feel they have the freedom to determine their own life paths, including choosing their field of study, planning for the future, and making decisions without external pressure.

In this aspect, the responses were quite varied. For the statement *"I feel free to determine my own life path,"* 15 respondents selected option 4, and 7 selected option 3, indicating a relatively high level of autonomy. This is a positive indication that the majority of students are beginning to pursue their academic journey based on personal awareness, rather than merely due to external pressure or societal expectations.

Interestingly, for the statement *"I attend university because I genuinely want to learn, not due to parental pressure,"* 26 respondents selected option 4. This suggests that most students perceive higher education as a personal decision rather than one imposed by others. This supports the notion of freedom in making significant life decisions. However, despite feeling free to choose, not all students yet possess a clear structure or direction for their goals. In existentialist philosophy, freedom does not merely mean the ability to choose, but also includes being fully aware of one's choices and accepting their consequences.

Jean-Paul Sartre asserted that human beings are "condemned to be free," meaning that they cannot escape freedom itself. They must choose and each choice is a declaration of who they are. Students who feel free to determine their major or life direction are, in fact, engaged in an existential process: actively shaping the meaning of their lives, rather than simply inheriting it from family or society (Purbajati et al., 2024).

However, this freedom also comes with responsibility. When someone chooses their own path, they can no longer blame their parents, the education system, or society. In this context, students are undergoing a transition from being *directed beings* to becoming *self-directed beings*, a critical stage in existential growth.

These findings suggest that higher education is not merely a space for cognitive development but also a training ground for life, particularly in freedom and responsibility. When students become aware that they are free to choose their life path, they simultaneously begin to learn how to become whole human beings: conscious, autonomous individuals who take full responsibility for the meaning of their existence.

Student freedom is not only the right to choose a major, but the courage to design their own life and to accept that every choice they make comes with the responsibility of owning their future.

Existential Self-Reflection and Social-Academic Pressure

The purpose of this section is to examine the dynamic between students' efforts to reflect on their existence and the social-academic pressures imposed by lecturers, family, and campus life.

The questionnaire findings reveal a complex interaction between students' attempts to understand themselves and the social expectations they face. In response to the statement *"I feel burdened by academic expectations from lecturers and family,"* option of 3 and 4 were dominant, selected by 13 and 10 respondents respectively. This indicates that external expectations remain a significant source of pressure. There exists a tension between the desire for authentic personal growth and the drive to meet social expectations.

Meanwhile, the statement *"I feel that I am searching for the meaning of life through the learning process at university,"* yielded a more neutral response, with 12 respondents selecting the neutral midpoint. This reflects that while academic pressure poses a real challenge that can hinder existential reflection, some students are beginning to associate learning with the pursuit of life's meaning.

Within the existentialist framework, this condition is described as the conflict between the *self* and *the others*. Human beings do not live in isolation, they exist alongside others who influence their actions. Sartre referred to this condition as *living under the gaze of others*, which can lead individuals to lose their authenticity. One becomes like an "actor" performing according to a social script, rather than living as their true self.

Academic pressure can obstruct the process of becoming oneself. When students begin to feel that grades, GPA, and parental validation matter more than honesty with oneself, existential reflection is displaced by structural compliance. Heidegger described this state as *das Man*, a condition in which individuals live as "one lives," passively following the crowd without reflective awareness of their existence (Purbajati & Hasan, 2021).

Even so, the emergence of questions like *"Who am I?"* or *"What does all of this mean?"* in students' minds is a sign that they are seriously wrestling with existence. It is precisely from such unrest that awareness can grow. Thus, the educational system should provide space for students to navigate these pressures, rather than drowning them in academic bureaucracy and cognitive standards alone.

Existential reflection is not a weakness. It is the deepest human call to know oneself, even amid the constant glare of shifting social demands.

Freedom of Thought and Personal Responsibility

This section aims to explore the extent to which students feel free to think and act independently, as well as their capacity to understand and accept responsibility for the life decisions they make.

In this aspect, the majority of respondents showed a positive tendency. In response to the statement *"I feel free to express my opinions in class without fear of being judged,"* 16 respondents selected option 3 and 8 selected option 4, reflecting a relatively open academic environment that provides space for self-expression and the courage to speak up, an essential foundation for the development of authentic existence. Similarly, in response to *"I am aware that I am responsible for all the life choices I make,"* 28 respondents strongly agreed. This is a highly encouraging finding, indicating that most students have begun to realize that their lives are shaped by their own decisions rather than solely by external pressures.

However, for the statement *"I am aware of and understand the consequences of my decisions, and that they come with responsibility,"* 12 respondents selected option 4. This suggests that although freedom of thought is relatively strong, the capacity to take full responsibility for personal choices remains a challenge for some.

In existentialist philosophy, freedom of thought is the essence of human existence, but freedom is never without cost. Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized that "man is condemned to be free," meaning that freedom is a fundamental condition of human life, yet with it comes the necessity to bear the full weight of one's choices (Purbajati et al., 2024). In other words, there is no longer room to blame others or the system. When one makes a choice, one is simultaneously declaring who they are and must be prepared to face the moral and existential responsibilities that follow.

This awareness is crucial in the field of education, for students should not be shaped merely into critical thinkers, but also into individuals who have the courage to live in accordance with the values they believe in. When students are able to think independently, explore their ideas, and accept the consequences of their decisions, they are transcending the role of a mere *learner* and becoming an existential subject.

Nonetheless, some respondents expressed neutral responses to statements related to idea exploration or lecturer support for independent thinking. This shows that while individual awareness is beginning to grow, the educational system has not yet fully cultivated an environment that holistically encourages freedom of thought.

Being a student is not only about thinking logically, it is about having the courage to think freely, to choose consciously, and to fully carry the meaning of those decisions. It is in this space that human existence becomes real.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explores the existential issues faced by university students in the context of higher education, particularly in dealing with academic pressure, identity crises, and the search for personal meaning. Through a descriptive qualitative approach based on questionnaires and literature review, this research aims to provide a deep portrayal of students' inner experiences as individuals who exist within the structure of formal education. The findings indicate that students are indeed engaged in a genuine existential struggle. They experience identity confusion, feel trapped in the flow of life, and face social-academic pressures from their environment. Nevertheless, the majority also exhibit an awareness of their freedom to choose their own path and take responsibility for those choices. This demonstrates that students are not entirely passive within the system, but are actively becoming reflective and self-aware existential subjects. Freedom of thought and a sense of responsibility emerge as central aspects of students' existential experiences. In this context, existentialist philosophy offers a framework of understanding in which the search for meaning and the courage to be oneself are seen as the very core of authentic education. Education should not be limited to cognitive

achievement alone, it must also serve as a space for self-discovery and conscious meaning-making. Students are not merely learners; they are human beings rewriting the meaning of their lives, within classrooms, under pressure, and through their most silent questions. Thus, this study affirms that existential concerns are not just abstract philosophical discourses but concrete realities lived by students. A reflective, ethical, humanistic, and existentially aware approach to education is urgently needed, so that students do not lose themselves within the system, but instead grow as free individuals ready to face the world authentically and responsibly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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