



# No time for meaning: How time scarcity impacts our meaning in life.



Existential Social Psychology Lab

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When time feels scarce, do you feel less capable, connected, and in control?

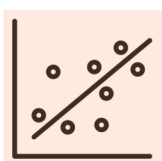
## 01. Introduction

80% of Americans feel like they “never have enough time” (Whillans, 2019)



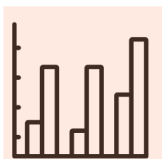
- This time perception is referred to as *time scarcity*, or the feeling that we do not have enough time to do all that we want or need to do. In contrast, *time affluence* refers to the perception of having more than enough time to engage in desired activities. While the benefits of time affluence are well-documented, far less is known about the costs of time scarcity – particularly its impact on meaning in life (MIL). *Meaning in life* consists of two components: presence, or the extent to which individuals feel their life is meaningful, and search, or the extent to which individuals seek meaning.
- Drawing from Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the present research proposes that time scarcity may undermine *basic psychological needs (BPN; i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness)*, which in turn shapes our sense of meaning. Despite widespread experiences of time pressure, little research has examined how time scarcity influences meaning through this self-determination lens.
- The study addresses the gap by 1) establishing a proof of concept for the relationship between time scarcity, time affluence, BPN, and MIL, and 2) exploring whether BPN mediates the association between time perceptions and MIL.

## 02. Hypotheses



### Proof of Concept

- Time scarcity will be associated with lower levels of BPN and presence of MIL, and greater search for MIL.
- Time affluence will be associated with higher levels of BPN and presence of MIL, and lower search for MIL.



### Exploratory Mediation

- Participants who experience time scarcity will feel diminished BPN, which in turn, reduces MIL.
- Participants who experience time affluence will feel elevated BPN, which in turn, increases MIL.

### Selected Literature

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>

Sharif, M. A., Mogilner, C., & Hershfield, H. E. (2021). Having too little or too much time is linked to lower subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 121(4), 933–947. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000939>

Yuan, Y., & Sun, X. (2025). Chasing my tail all day: The negative impact of time poverty on meaning in life and the mediating role of construal level. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Springer, 26(7), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-025-00963-8>

## 03. Methodology

**Materials:** Time Scarcity Scale (De Sousa et al, 2020) “I have more to do than I have time to do it in” alpha = 0.88  
 Time Affluence (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009) “I have been able to take life at a leisurely pace” alpha = 0.89  
 Basic Psychological Needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné, 2003)  
 Autonomy: “I feel like I am free to decide for myself how to live my life” alpha = 0.84  
 Competence: “Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from what I do” alpha = 0.84  
 Relatedness: “People in my life care about me” alpha = 0.87  
 Meaning in Life (Steger et al, 2006)  
 Presence: “I understand my life’s meaning” alpha = 0.87  
 Search: “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful” alpha = 0.94



**Prolific Participants:**

N = 236  
 Age: M = 36.34, SD = 11.81  
 54% White  
 102 Women, 124 Men

Cross sectional, correlation design, online Qualtrics survey

## 04. Correlational Analyses

Correlation Matrix of Time Perceptions, Basic Psychological Needs, Meaning in Life, and Demographic Variables.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Time Affluence	3.06 (0.92)	-								
2. Time Scarcity	2.72 (0.85)	-0.80**	-							
3. MIL Presence	4.73 (1.59)	0.22**	-0.28**	-						
4. MIL Search	4.43 (1.61)	-0.17**	0.18**	-0.17**	-					
5. Autonomy	4.89 (1.17)	0.47**	-0.43**	0.56**	-0.28**	-				
6. Competence	4.75 (1.29)	0.29**	-0.29**	0.69**	-0.11	0.71**	-			
7. Relatedness	5.10 (1.08)	0.24**	-0.27**	0.55**	-0.12	0.66**	0.68**	-		
8. Income	5.44 (2.44)	0.02	0.01	0.21**	0.02	0.13*	0.26**	0.29**	-	
9. SES	5.19 (1.77)	0.06	-0.09	0.31**	0.04	0.21**	0.40**	0.30**	0.50**	-

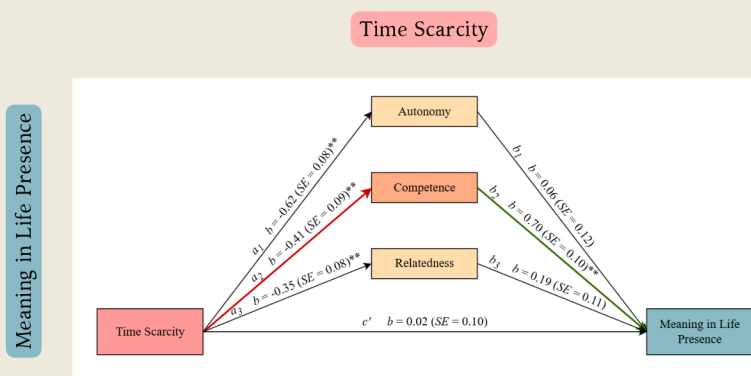
Note. MIL = Meaning in Life; \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.005

Time scarcity is associated with: lower levels of each of the basic psychological needs, lesser presence of MIL, and greater search for MIL.

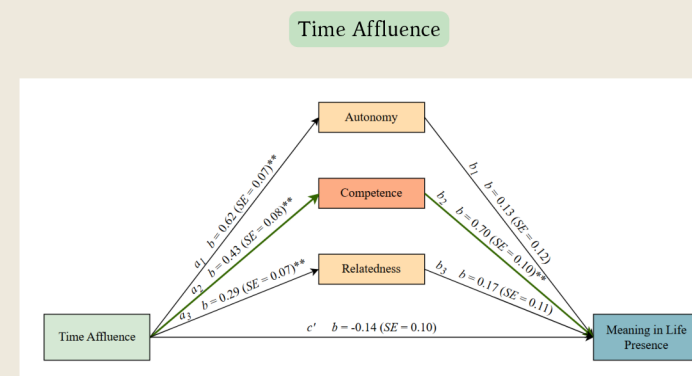
Time affluence is associated with: higher levels of each of the basic psychological needs, greater presence of MIL, and lesser search for MIL.



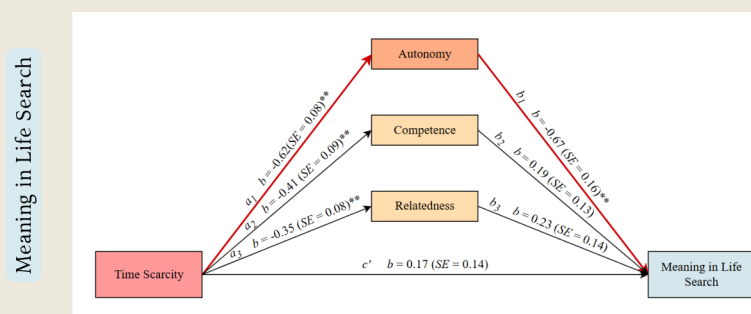
## 05. Parallel Mediation Analyses



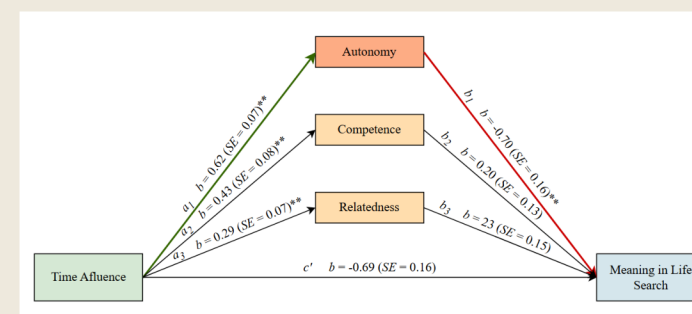
Indirect effect of competence: b = -0.29 (SE = 0.09), 95% CI = (-0.48, -0.14)



Indirect effect of competence: b = 0.30 (SE = 0.07), 95% CI = (0.16, 0.45)



Indirect effect of autonomy: b = 0.42 (SE = 0.13), 95% CI = (0.19, 0.68)



Indirect effect of autonomy: b = -0.43 (SE = 0.12), 95% CI = (-0.68, -0.22)

## 06. Conclusion

- The present research is among the first to examine the relationship between time perception and meaning in life through the lens of Self-Determination Theory.
- Correlational analyses* suggest that individuals experiencing greater time scarcity reported feel lower presence of meaning and greater search for meaning, whereas those experiencing greater time affluence reported higher presence of meaning and lower search.
- Parallel mediation analyses* further revealed that time scarcity predicted lower autonomy and competence, which in turn were associated with lower presence of meaning in life and greater search. Conversely, time affluence predicted greater autonomy and competence, which in turn were associated with higher presence of meaning and lower search.
- These findings highlight the important role of time perception in shaping meaning in life.* However, the present study is limited by its cross-sectional design, preventing conclusions about true mediation or causal relationships.
- Future research should experimentally test the effects of time perception on basic psychological needs and meaning in life, with appropriate temporal ordering, to extend these initial findings.