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The Role of Future Work Self in Highlighting Meaningful Prospective Work and Buffering Purpose in Life

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ABSTRACT

Future Work Self (FWSs, Strauss et al., 2012), which refers to cognitive representations of individuals' hopes and aspirations related to work, offers an opportunity to foster a profound sense of work meaning in work. The activation of the meaning-making process also contributes to achieving a sense of purpose in life. Hypotheses were tested through a three-wave survey conducted with a sample of graduate students ($N = 117$). The findings revealed that higher levels of FWS salience and positive affect in envisioning the FWS were significantly associated with meaning-making, which in turn predicted a greater sense of purpose in life. This study highlights how individuals can derive meaning from a hypothetical future work to guide their career management. It also contributes to the FWS literature by providing evidence of the predictive potential of FWSs in meaning-making and fostering a sense of purpose in life.

Keywords: Future work self; meaningful work; purpose in life.

Track: Organisational Psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current organizational environment, people are increasingly seeking occupations in which they perceive their work primarily as purposeful (Forbes, 2025; McKinsey, 2021), and as providing them a sense of existential meaning (McKinsey, 2021). Individuals are, to a greater extent, willing to work - and consequently earn - less in exchange for experiencing greater meaning in their work (Soren & Ryff, 2023). This phenomenon translates in a flourishing body of academic literature, including various reviews and special issues (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Bailey et al., 2019; Laaser & Bolton 2021; Lysova et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2023b; Rosso et al. 2010), and reflect an urgent scholarly interest in understanding the nature and underlying dynamics of meaningful work. This issue is of critical importance, as the construction of meaning in relation to one's work has been highlighted to be a significant factor influencing the career decision-making process (Lips-Wiersma, 2002). It is also recognized as a key element in the development of a fulfilling career (Zhang et al., 2017) and, ultimately, as a source of nourishment for eudaimonic well-being (Soren & Ryff, 2023).

In general, scholars agree on the idea that meaningful work represents how individuals subjectively evaluate and value their work, reflecting the personal attribution of positive valence, importance, worthiness and significance to it (Lysova et al., 2023a; Rosso et al., 2010). Research has widely highlighted the association between work meaningfulness and various benefits (e.g. lower intention to quit; Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). Consequently, scholars have sought to elucidate its determinants (de Boeck et al., 2019), identifying two main categories: work and worker-centric factors. Our research contributes to the less developed category

(Lysova et al., 2019) of worker-centric determinants (e.g., individual psychological factors), which indicate the agentic role of individuals in the construction of work meaningfulness (Fay et al., 2023). Specifically, we examine how individuals reflect on a hypothetical work scenario that mirrors their vocational interests in order to derive a sense of meaningfulness from potential future work, extending beyond the widely studied actual work experience. This type of practice is part of the broader category of practical methods (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021) to support personal growth and development, and it has been shown to enhance the experience of meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2023). To explain how individuals can identify careers that are meaningful to them, we draw on the concept of Future Work Self (FWSs, Strauss et al., 2012), which refers to individuals' representations of their deepest hopes and aspirations in relation to work. By envisioning a mental image characterized as a "quasi-perceptual simulation of a prospective reality" (Voigt et al., 2024, p. 1), FWSs offer a unique opportunity to pre-experience a professional choice even before actually living it.

Additionally, we also state that achieving a sense of meaningful work would influence one's purpose in life, defined as life direction (Fang et al., 2022). Having a sense of life purpose is paramount as, being fundamental for psychological well-being, it represents a critical dimension in human flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 1998). In parallel, preliminary evidence demonstrated an association between work-related ideal self and workplace well-being (Li et al., 2021), although the influence of FWS on a well-being dimension beyond the work domain - specifically purpose in life - remains unexplored. Furthermore, we posit that the cognitive process of achievement of work meaningfulness may function as a mediating mechanism underlying this relationship. Finding a way to foster purpose in life is relevant due to its inherent capacity to guide individuals' efforts by signifying an overarching ultimate goal that provides coherence to all subordinate actions. Exploring the connection between FWSs and the perception of purpose in life is relevant for enriching the FWS literature, representing an additional outcome associated with FWS that expresses its potential yet in the present, rather than being limited to future-oriented outcomes (e.g., career adaptability, Guan et al., 2014). Nonetheless, purpose in life as an outcome that extends beyond the frequently studied work-related outputs (e.g., proactive career behaviours; Taber and Blankemeyer, 2015), demonstrating the potential for FWSs - mediated by the cognitive acquisition of meaningfulness - to generate benefits that span into the broader life domain. Thus, the aim of our paper is to address the following research question: *Does envisioning FWSs enhance the acquisition of work meaningfulness, which in turn fosters the perception of having a purpose in life?* The relationships between the different constructs are depicted in Figure 1.

It is worth noticing that the potential of FWS has been already attested as particularly critical when considering graduate students who are transitioning into the work environment while navigating a wide range of possible career paths (Fang & Saks, 2022). For these individuals, FWS may serve as a "compass" (Strauss et al., 2012, p. 582), helping them gain insight into the types of work that authentically express their inner selves. In doing so, FWSs can foster a sense of prospective work meaningfulness, ultimately guide their career choices and ensure future employment that aligns with their personal values. This is even more critical for them to balance difficulties along the path toward their desired future self and ultimately contribute to a successful transition from school-to-work (Steiner et al., 2022). Specifically, we consider that the sense of meaningfulness derived from envisioning the FWSs may function as one of the psychological mechanisms that sustain over time the motivational potential previously attributed to FWSs by scholars (Strauss et al., 2012). This mechanism is key in spurring individuals to engage in subsequent behaviors - although a detailed examination of the well-established behavioural outcomes associated with FWSs is beyond the scope of this article (for more information see Strauss et al., 2012). Nonetheless, this dynamic may apply to already employed individuals that are willing to reconfigure their career trajectory. In general,

in a context where individuals are increasingly expected to take charge of their own career management (Hirschi & Koen 2021), it is more important than ever to explore the factors that can assist people in navigating the career construction process. In parallel, individuals who are either initiating or reconfiguring their careers may benefit from an enhanced sense of purpose in life, which can contribute to a greater psychological well-being, and help mitigate the strain associated with the uncertainty of this transitional life stage (Blokker et al., 2023; Kao et al., 2022).

To illustrate how FWSs facilitate process acquisition of a sense of meaningful work, which in turn fosters a sense of purpose in life, this study collected data at three time points. At Time 1, information on participants' personality traits (e.g., neuroticism) and demographic characteristics was gathered. Participants were then asked to reflect on and elaborate their future work self. The day after the vision submission, at Time 2, data on FWS salience and affect were collected. A follow-up survey at Time 3, conducted 12 weeks later, assessed meaningful work and purpose in life. Specifically, we invited them to rate how they perceived their FWS had influenced the acquisition of a sense of life meaning and purpose. Our approach differed from previous studies that focused on behavioural outcomes of FWS (e.g., proactive behaviours) and reflect our intention to highlight the intrinsic potential of FWS to enhance individuals' identification of one's purpose in life.

This paper intends to offer several contributions to the existing literature. First, it addresses the underdeveloped area of work meaningfulness literature that examines individual-level factors (Lysova et al., 2019), by investigating the influence of vocational interests on the perception of meaningful work. By highlighting how an inner reflection leading to a deep self-awareness can also provide meaning in relation to work and guide career decisions, we expand the understanding of how meaning can be derived by reflecting on a work scenario, even when only hypothesized. In this way, we also contribute to the empirical evidence demonstrating how meaning can be derived from the future while transcending the present (de Boeck et al., 2019; Fay et al., 2023), thereby emphasizing the significance of the future in the experience of meaningfulness.

Additionally, we intend to add to the FWS literature first extending the role of FWS as an antecedent of meaning associated with work, considering how work can be pre-experienced through mental travel to a future reality. Although the meaningfulness is purely prospective, we expect that FWS facilitate the definition of a future to strive toward that is characterised by personal significance and positive valence for the individual. In this process, we highlight the spurring role of both the affective and cognitive dimensions associated with the FWS. In parallel, the expected mediated relationship between FWS and purpose in life demonstrates FWSs' relevance beyond career-related outcomes, positioning FWSs as a valuable concept for enhancing individuals' overall well-being. Such evidence is particularly relevant given the current interpretation of careers as broader construct, in which perception of both meaningfulness and wellbeing guide employees choices.

Furthermore, this study aims to encourage further research into antecedents of purpose in life. Specifically, we contribute by examining how FWS may lead to this essential dimension of psychological well-being, particularly through the experience of work meaningfulness. We propose that work meaningfulness functions as a psychological condition that transforms the perceived meaning of work into a vital motivational resource for sustaining wellbeing. Finally, this paper aspires to expand the range of practical applications that support educational and work organizations in guiding both the current and future workforce in constructing their careers toward fulfilling employment and sustained well-being.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Meaningful work

In order to clarify our understanding of “meaningful work”, we draw upon two well-established assumptions. The first pertains to the general characterization of human beings as “meaning-making organisms” (Dik & Duffy, 2007, p. 428), suggesting that the capacity to derive a sense of meaning from experience is an intrinsic aspect of human nature. The second emphasizes the fundamental human search for a connection between work and its meaningfulness, to the extent that scholars have described meaningful work as a “fundamental human need” (Yeoman, 2014, p. 235). Thus, organizational scholars have been largely interested in the relationship between work and the sense of meaningfulness (Dik et al., 2014; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). This growing body of research has given rise to an increasingly active academic debate, providing efforts to develop a clear and widely accepted conceptualization of meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2023; Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Lepisto and Pratt, 2017; Michaelson, 2021). A premise clarifies the distinction between meaning and meaningfulness. On the one hand, “meaning”, namely individuals’ subjective interpretation of the elements that are present within the environment in which they operate and assign a positive, negative or neutral evaluation (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). On the other hand, “meaningfulness” represents a “subjective individual-level experience” (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021, p. 2976) that is significant to the individual, worthwhile and carries a positive valence (Lysova et al., 2023a). In the present paper, work meaningfulness is conceived “not as simply whatever work means to people (meaning), but as work that is both significant and positive in valence (meaningfulness)” (Steger et al., 2012, p. 323). According to this conception, we emphasise that meaningfulness is subjectively constructed by individuals and emerges from personal experience reflecting on a specific job (Rosso et al., 2010), in alignment with their broader sense of identity and place in the world (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). The consistency ensures that, when individuals refer to work as meaningful, they evaluate it as significant, worthwhile for their wider life, and imbued with positive meaning, in line with literature that conceptualizes meaningfulness as a eudaimonic psychological state (Bailey et al., 2019).

The importance of individuals perceiving their work as meaningful may be related to the variety of positive outcomes for both the individuals and the organization (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2023). Among them, performance-related outcomes (Bailey et al., 2019) and work-related attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, such as higher organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Steger et al. 2012), psychological well-being (Kim and Beehr 2020) or job engagement (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015). For organizations, having employees reporting higher levels of meaningfulness translates into several benefits, such as increased extra role behaviours (e.g., Allan et al., 2019). Given the variety of relevant outcomes, research has also examined which factors predict a sense of meaning related to work. De Boeck et al. (2019) distinguish between work-centric and worker-centric factors. The former refers to various elements of the work itself, and their adjustment as source of work meaningfulness. Blustein et al. (2023) categorized the work-centric antecedents in four macro-categories: organization-specific factors (e.g., work climate), social context– related (e.g., leadership), job design–related (e.g., task clarity), and employment-related working conditions (e.g., condition of employment). In contrast, the “worker-centric” perspective (Fay et al., 2023) emphasises the active role of individuals as agents who derive meaning from different aspects of their work experience, through engagement in a meaning-making process.

Although meaning-making has been considered “a property of human beings” (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009, p. 493), increasing organizational scholarly and practical attention has been directed toward understanding how individuals derive meaningfulness from their current or past work experiences (Lysova et al., 2019). In order to better disentangle the complex relationship between work and meaning, scholars (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010; Lysova et al., 2023a; Steger et al., 2012) have focused on the mechanisms

and “‘content’ dimensions of meaningful work that interrelate with each other” (Lysova et al., 2023a, p. 1127), aiming at explaining how the perception of meaning is achieved. As a prominent contribution to this line of research, Lysova and colleagues (2023a) identify awareness as a strong state-level predictor of meaning-making, from which to derive work meaningfulness. Individuals’ awareness fosters a flexible thinking that enables people to deal with information about work in a way that clarifies work significance, positive impact and worthiness, enhancing their likelihood of experiencing work as meaningful. This is also relevant to the process of career construction, as the flexibility gained through self-awareness enhances the adaptability required for the development of fulfilling careers (Savickas, 2013). Interestingly, a few studies have explored work meaningfulness through the lenses of temporality (Bailey & Madden, 2017; de Boeck et al., 2019; Fay et al., 2023), examining how individuals relate their present work to who they have been, who they might become, or what they might accomplish in the future. Bailey and Madden (2017) explained work meaningfulness as an experience of vivid and present awareness during the act of working - or immediately after the practice is completed - wherein meaningfulness arises from a perceived coherence between individuals’ self in the past and their “projected future” (Bailey & Madden, 2017, p. 15). Further empirical contributions that emphasize the importance of extending beyond the present time come from De Boeck et al. (2019), who provided evidence that individuals can derive meaning by drawing on who they might become, thereby expressing untapped potential in their work. Similarly, Fay et al. (2023) showed the possibility of creating work meaning through future-oriented proactive actions.

Recently, scholars also conceptualized - without any further empirical test - that meaningful work should be seen as “an aspirational work condition oriented toward experiencing a sense of significance” (Blustein et al., 2023, p. 300), suggesting that meaningful work could represent a desired scenario that differs from one’s current situation. However, the potential role of a desired work in engaging individuals with a sense of meaningfulness remains largely unaddressed. In the present study, we examine how a work that has not yet been realized, but is actively imagined and thoughtfully reflected upon can serve as a source of meaningfulness. In this context, the cognitive representation of future work is deeply intertwined with the self, to the extent that perceived meaningfulness emerges from a self-referential reflection, in which individuals connect the work to their personal identity and aspirations. This connection allows individuals to experience a sense of work meaningfulness even before making actual career decisions or investing personal resources in pursuing that work. Nonetheless, at the beginning of one’s career or during a process of revising one’s professional identity, it may be especially useful to transcend the here-and-now perspective, relying on a pre-experience of particular work and deriving meaning from it, while also potentially being energized by this mental image to engage with the future desired work. Following these suggestions, we now introduce FWS as a concept that encapsulates work in a future-oriented and aspirational dimension.

2.2. FWS as antecedent of Meaningful Work

2.2.1. *Future Work Self features*

A future work self is “an individual’s representation of himself or herself in the future that reflects his or her hopes and aspirations in relation to work” (Strauss et al., 2012, p. 580). This representation should be understood as a future-oriented cognition, in which an individual creates a mental image of autobiographical events in relation to work they wish to experience in the future (Szpunar et al. 2014). FWSs are a type of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), reflecting who individuals wish to become in the future (Higgins, 1987), in the domain of work. By definition (Strauss et al., 2012), FWSs depict a work identity that is positive for each individual, serving as a reference value to acknowledge the discrepancy between a

person's current and desired work-related state. This has been demonstrated to be a motivational resource, a behavioural standard in self-regulation and motivating individuals to set goals and take actions to achieve their envisioned future (Strauss et al., 2012; Strauss & Kelly, 2017; Strauss and Parker, 2018). Indeed, research to date identified FWS as an antecedent of several relevant outcomes. Beyond the well-established positive association between FWSs and proactive career behaviours (Parker & Bindl, 2016; Strauss et al., 2012; Taber and Blankemeyer, 2015), other studies emphasize the relationship between FWS and a range of outcomes, including job search success (Fang & Saks, 2022), employment status (Guan et al., 2014) and performance (Lin et al., 2016).

Existing studies on FWSs predominantly focus on the effects of its cognitive characteristics on subsequent outcomes. Seminal work by Strauss and co-authors (2012) identified FWS salience (i.e., the extent to which the mental image of the future work self is easy and clear to envision; Talluri et al., in press) as the fundamental dimension to observe the potential of FWSs. Being the quality that determines the activation of FWS in the self-concept, the FWS literature has been dominated by salience (Cai et al., 2015; Guan et al., 2017; Kao et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2017), while a recent study (Voigt et al., 2024) also considers the role of perception of control, highlighting a different FWS quality. To the best of our knowledge, any other aspect outside these two dimensions of FWS has been overlooked, especially neglecting any quality beyond the cognitive domain. Specifically, no prior research on FWSs has specifically focused on the potential affective component associated with envisioning the future self. However, literature (Rawolle et al., 2016; Schubert et al., 2020) suggests that positive visions of a prospective reality are connected with positive emotions that can be pre-experienced through mental prospection (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Nonetheless, in the seminal paper by Markus and Nurius (1986), they introduced the concept of possible selves explicitly highlighting the role of affect. In fact, linking self-cognition to motivation, possible selves also relate to “self-feelings or affect” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 958) and subsequent empirical studies also showed the association of possible selves with positive affect (Meara et al., 1995). For these reasons we regard the presence of an affective component, and that it is a paramount one. Eventually, studies adopting a neurological perspective confirm the connection between envisioning of a hoped-for, future-oriented representation of the self with the activation of positive emotional attractor (PEA), a psychophysiological state characterized by cognitive openness and optimal neurobiological functioning, facilitated by the activation of the parasympathetic system (Boyatzis, 2006). Drawing on the aforementioned argumentation, we posit that FWSs comprise both cognitive and affective dimensions.

2.2.2. *FWS anticipates meaningful work*

The FWS, mainly acknowledged as a motivational resource to regulate subsequent behavior, is here investigated for its potential beyond behavioural consequences (Zhang et al., 2017). Given that FWSs represent a future-oriented mental image of one's deepest work-related hopes and aspirations, aligned with core personal values, we propose that envisioning a FWS has the potential to trigger a profound self-understanding, which, in turn, translates into a sense of prospective meaningful work. Scholars (Dik et al., 2015; Steger et al., 2012) demonstrated that gaining a salient understanding of who individuals aspire to become in the future enhances their likelihood of experiencing a sense of meaning. In fact, work meaningfulness is enhanced when current work activities are aligned with desired future (de Boeck et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) in which actions are designed in accordance with the fulfilment of deep values that the individuals consider crucial to their existence (Allan et al., 2019). The possibility - and importance - of envisioning a future-oriented ideal self-representation as a means of fostering a sense of work meaningfulness in the present aligns with seminal research on the self-concept, which suggests that individuals derive perceived meaning from different selves, temporally

situated in the past or in the future (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Nonetheless, in the work meaningfulness literature, Bailey and Madden (2017) explained meaningfulness arousal when past, present and future converge in a single transcendent moment. The hypothesized potential of FWS in predicting meaningful work is also made viable by prior research showing that work meaningfulness can be conceptualized as a state-level construct that varies over time (Lysova et al., 2023a), and be understood as an episodic experience (Bailey & Madden, 2017). These conditions are paramount for FWS to function as a construct that enables the experience of meaningful work. In this context, perceived meaning does not stem from actual work that is consistently performed over time, rather from an ideal representation that is, by definition, aligned with the individual's aspirations and values at the moment it is envisioned, while also allowing for evolution over time.

Connecting FWS to an outcome such as meaningful work enriches the FWS literature offering insight into how an image of the future work can provide necessary cognitive support before directing any behaviour - thereby functioning as an intermediate mechanism bridging envisioning and action. Specifically, the acknowledgment of meaningfulness derived from a salient and affectively impactful FWS facilitates individuals' career decision-making process by imbuing such choices with the internalized significance they ascribe to their envisioned future work self. The purposefulness derived from an envisioned future self has been scarcely addressed in the FWS literature, with the exceptions provided by Zhang and coauthors (2017) and Liu and Hou (2024), who demonstrated that FWSs can anticipate a sense of calling. However, drawing on the established distinction between FWS and calling (Zhang et al., 2017), as well as the one between work meaningfulness and calling (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021), we clarify that, in the present paper, the sense of prospective work meaningfulness arises through a process of meaning-making rooted in the envisioned FWS. This process involves the cognitive recognition of the worthiness of that ideal future and the energizing potential associated with visualising the benefit associated with the achievement of the FWS (Voigt et al., 2024), in contrast to calling, which refers to a transcendent summon or an intense, consuming passion for a particular career (Dobrow et al., 2023).

To substantiate our hypothesized relationship between FWS dimensions and meaningful work, we rely on cognitive mechanisms literature provides to explain how individuals derive a sense of meaningful work. The desired scenario resulting from the acknowledgment of the ideal self in relation to work satisfies both the authenticity mechanism proposed by Rosso et al. (2010), in which individuals derive meaning from work when they perceive a sense of coherence with their "true" self, and the awareness state required by Lysova et al. (2023a), in which individuals acquire vividness and clarity, enabling them to better interpret their desires to experience their work as meaningful. As Lepisto and Pratt (2017) observe, the "positivity" inherent in meaningful work" (p.106) stems from the full expression of the self and the perception of self-realisation in one's work - both of which are integral characteristics of FWS by definition. The FWS depicts a scenario centered on authentic expression of the self through the envisioning of self-worth content, where personal desires and aspirations are realized. Therefore, we expect that envisioning the FWS enables the experience of the perceived awareness in coherence with the self, which shapes prospective work meaningfulness.

However, to better support our hypothesis, we draw on different evidence presented by the literature. To disentangle the relationship with meaningfulness and FWS, we draw on career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) to explain the role of FWS salience, and leverage broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) to elucidate the role of FWS positive affect.

In accordance with career construction theory (Savickas, 2005; 2013), the development of a meaningful career occurs through meaning-making based on one's vocational interests and behaviors. Interestingly, Savickas (2005) notes that meaning arises from the harmonisation of

past and present experiences, while also encompassing future aspirations (Zhang et al., 2017). Thus, career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) emphasizes the importance of a clear, future-oriented self-concept - and the process of meaning-making derived from it - as a key component in explaining the adaptive process central to the theory. Nonetheless, FWS salience has been identified as an antecedent to career adaptability (Guan et al., 2014), which equips individuals with readiness to cope with future career challenges (Johnson, 2016). Support for the relationship between FWS affect and meaningful work also comes from the broaden-and-build theory. Fredrickson (2001) recognizes that positive emotions broaden individuals' cognitive and behavioural repertoires, promoting the ability to perceive and pursue meaningful goals. Scholars have provided evidence that positive affect forms a foundation for individuals to experience meaning in the work context (Dik et al., 2015) and, through positive affect they are more likely to perceive a sense of meaning in relation to their work (Lee et al., 2020). In our study, positive affect was derived from pre-experiencing the FWS, namely an inner source of positive affect, rather than the work context. This highlights a critical source that can influence the likelihood of experiencing a sense of meaning, wherein a work-related factor actively contributes to the attribution of meaningfulness to the prospective work.

Given these empirical and theoretical evidence, we state the following:

Hypothesis 1a: FWS salience positively influences meaningful work

Hypothesis 1b: FWS positive affect positively influences meaningful work.

2.3. The relationship between FWS, meaningful work and purpose in life

Among the various outcomes associated with meaningful work, we focus on purpose in life as a potential individual-level outcome. Purpose in life is recognized as a core component of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). It is defined as “the aspect of meaning in life that is specifically associated with the sense of direction” (Fang et al., 2024, p. 63), being a teleological underlying life goal that orientates human existence. Functioning as a motivational system that organizes and stimulates personal development (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), purpose in life guides the alignment of subordinate goals with an overarching ultimate goal, thereby offering valuable information on what to prioritize in life in order to support individuals' overall wellbeing. Given that the work dimension has been shown to play a critical role in how individuals assess their overall sense of purpose in life (Sewdas et al., 2017), the way people shape their work lives could significantly influence their experience of purpose in life. Overall, we regard purpose in life as a critical psychological resource individuals should strive to sustain, particularly in light of its multiple positive outcomes associated with a greater sense of purpose in life, such as health outcomes (e.g., lower risk of dementia; Sutin et al., 2021), behavioural outcomes (e.g., better emotional regulation; Balzarotti et al., 2016), and employment related outcomes (e.g., higher income; Hill et al., 2016).

Among the established determinants of purpose in life, prior research has emphasized the influence of work meaningfulness on a “broader transcendent life purpose” (Bailey and Madden, 2017, p. 4), signaling a “spillover effect” (Kim & Beehr, 2020, p. 1) from a work domain to life in general, demonstrated how meaning related to work drives higher significance and flourishing beyond the work domain, such as the development of purpose in life (Kim & Beehr, 2020; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Indeed, empirical explorations showed that a work perceived as meaningful promotes overall positive judgement about one's life (Steger & Dik, 2010) and sense of meaning in life (Allan et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012). This relationship may be understood as the commencement of a process involving the investment of personal resources to sustain the source of meaning, thereby ultimately contributing to the protection and enhancement of overall well-being (Fletcher, 2019). More broadly, meaningful work has been shown to positively impact on psychological well-being (Allan et al., 2019; Arnold et al., 2007; Fang et al., 2024; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Steger et al., 2012; Zika & Chamberlain,

1992). However, research that thoroughly examines this dimension and its associated well-being outcomes remains in its adolescence (Bailey et al., 2019). This limited scholarly attention is surprising, given the pervasive role of work in human life and its central importance in fulfilling various needs, a factor that makes it particularly relevant for the attainment of well-being (Deci et al., 2017).

Building on the previous considerations, we propose to replicate the following relationship in order to further contribute to the body of research demonstrating the association between work meaningfulness and a highly significant dimension of psychological well-being:

Hypothesis 2: Meaningful work is positively related to purpose in life.

Scholars completely overlooked the inquiry of a possible relationship between FWS and purpose in life, although scholars scantily questioned the relationship between hoped-for work selves and well-being. Specifically, Pisarik and Shoffner (2009) explored the impact of the discrepancy between current and ideal work selves on psychological well-being. Also, more recent empirical research has provided initial findings suggesting that salient FWSs are indirect predictors of employee wellbeing (Li et al., 2021). Overall, based on the aforementioned evidence that focuses on psychological well-being, we propose that this relationship may similarly apply to the specific dimension of purpose in life, which is one of the fundamental aspects of psychological well-being (Ryff et al., 1989). According to career construction theory (Savickas 2013), a clear future self might promote a goal, purpose, and meaning, directing the efforts to attain the ideal future, thereby enhancing the experience of having life direction. Beyond the cognitive component of ideal selves initially explored in the aforementioned studies, we hypothesized, in accordance with prior research (Fredrickson, 2001), that the affective component experienced through envisioning the FWS could enhance the sense of well-being. Therefore, we expect that the following mediation will be observed:

Hypothesis 3a: FWS salience has a positive association with purpose in life, via meaningful work.

Hypothesis 3b: FWS positive affect has a positive association with purpose in life, via meaningful work.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT, SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

Data were collected from an Italian public university context through a three-wave study in a sample of graduates of both Italian and international nationalities. Graduates attended a series of seminars designed by an academic centre, aimed at supporting students in their school-to-work transition by increasing awareness of their career aspirations and helping them define their future work self. To do so, students were asked to mentally travel into the future and envision a day in the life of their future work self (Strauss & Parker, 2018). Then, they are asked to describe their future work self in a written document of about 1,000 words, with the purpose of illustrating their professional aspirations and connecting their deepest values and core goals they wish to pursue.

The data collection consists of three online surveys. Participants were explicitly informed about the confidential treatment of all responses and personal information, in accordance with research ethical standards. The first survey collected demographic characteristics (e.g., gender) and personality traits (e.g., neuroticism). Two weeks after the beginning of the course, participants were asked to submit their future work self statement and complete, at Time 2, a survey to assess positive affect in envisioning the FWS and FWS salience. After the end of the program (twelve weeks from Time 2), at Time 3, students received a follow-up survey to measure their perception of having found a life meaning and psychological well-being.

To minimize the risk of common method bias (CMB), we structured the survey in accordance with the recommendations proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Additionally, we sought to address this issue by temporally separating the measurement of certain variables in the model. Specifically, the mediator and outcome variables were collected with a temporal lag relative to the predictors. This strategy has been shown to be a valuable remedy when examining relationships between internal states that are difficult to observe due to their intentional concealment (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To further ensure the absence of CMB, we employed additional statistical methods, which are presented in the results section.

The initial number of enrolled students was $N = 163$, corresponding to the number of respondents to the first survey. At Time 2, 157 students responded to the second survey. The final sample, consisting of students who answered all surveys, is $N = 117$. This represents a response rate of 71,8%. The average age of the sample was 25 ($SD=4.1$). Seventy-eight percent of the sample was female, which resembles the gender and nationality distribution in the population of students attending the considered university.

3.1. Measures

3.1.1. FWS salience. At T2, sample's future work self salience was measured by the 5-item scale developed by Strauss et al. (2012). Participants were asked to rate how clear and easy it was for them to imagine the visualization of their desired future, using a Likert scale with a response format ranging from 1 (= *Strongly disagree*) to 5 (= *Strongly agree*). A sample item is "I am very clear about who and what I want to become in my future work". The construct and predictive validity of the measure were validated in Strauss et al. (2012). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .94.

3.1.2. FWS Positive Affect. The positive affect associated with the experience of FWS envisioning was assessed using the Positivity and Negativity Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) at Time 2. Consistently with previous applications in the literature, we used a selection of the items related to detecting positive affect (Lee et al., 2019; Shao et al., 2024). Respondents were presented with five adjectives ("enthusiastic," "inspired," "determined," "proud," and "active") and responded using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = (*Very slightly*) to 5 = (*Extremely*). The question specifically asked participants to rate the extent to which each item describes the affective state they feel in relation to their desired future self (i.e., "*How does the image of your desired future make you feel?*"). Cronbach's alpha was .87.

3.1.3. Meaningful work. At Time 3, meaningful work investigated how respondents' FWSs represent a source of meaning in life. This variable was measured through four items we adopted from Steger and colleagues (2012) (Meaning Making through Work subscale, part of the broader Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) and Kohles et al., (2012). From the original phrasing, we adapted the text to adjust it to our context that analyzes the FWSs. A sample item is "*The mental image of my future work self has helped me to better understand what is important in my educational path*". Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*), participants were asked to rate the perception of meaning achieved after the formulation of a future work self statement during the twelve weeks prior. Cronbach's alpha was .90.

3.1.4. Purpose in Life. At Time 3, participants' purpose in life was assessed using 5 items from purpose in life subscale from the Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWB, Ryff 1989). A sample item is "*I feel good when I think about what I have done in the past and what I hope to do in the future*". Participants rated how clear their sense of purpose in life was between the time they wrote the future work self statement and T3 (twelve weeks later), using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .89.

3.1.1. Control variables

Given the concern about gender differences in the ability to envision a different future (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2009), we controlled for the potential influence of gender on FWS salience and FWS positive affect. To do so, we collected information on gender with a specific question at T1 and included it as a control variable in our analyses (dummy coded with 0 = male and 1 = female).

Additionally, we considered neuroticism as an individual personality trait to be included in the model to examine whether it could influence the ability to derive a sense of meaning from work experience (Lysova et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2006). We assessed neuroticism at T1, relying on 6 items from the Italian version of the Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ-2) (Caprara et al., 2008). Participants were asked to respond on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 = (*Strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Finally, we consider the role of FWS negative affect besides the positive affect. At T2, along with the measurement of positive affect, we measured the negative affect associated with the experience of FWS envisioning. We employ 5 items (i.e., "nervous", "anxious", "distresses", "inadequate", "scared") from the Positivity and Negativity Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). As in the case of positive affect, respondents rated the extent to which each negative item described the affective state they experienced while writing their future self statement. They used a Likert scale ranging from 1 = (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 = (*Strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .86.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Hypotheses testing was performed using structural equation modeling (SEM). We used Lisrel 10 to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are reported in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

With the aim to assess discriminant validity, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the four variables within the model. Results from the data analysis indicates that the model fits the data well [Satorra–Bentler chi-square $\chi^2 = 205.81$, $df = 146$; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06; CI (RMSEA) = 0.0389 - 0.0772), PCI = 0.21; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.06; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.96] (Hair et al., 2010; Hu and Bentler, 1999). To address the risk of CMB, following the suggestion of Podsakoff et al. (2003), we applied a single common method approach and compared the standardized regression weights of all items for models with and without a common latent factor. The differences in these regression weights were negligible, which confirmed that CMB is not a major issue in our data. Nevertheless, since we measured both meaningful work and purpose in life at Time 3, we conducted a closer examination of these variables to control for CMB. We constrained meaningful work and purpose in life to a single factor. Results show a poorer fit for this model [$\chi^2=795.01$, $df=152$; RMSEA=0.19; CI (RMSEA)=(0.0177 - 0.203), PCI=0.00; SRMR=0.13; CFI=0.59].

Our hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). In Model 1 we analyse the relationships to test how the FWS (salience and positive affect) influence meaningful work, which, in turn, is associated with purpose in life. We also try to detect whether meaningful work fully mediates the relationship between FWS dimensions and purpose in life. The global fit indexes of the SEM model 1 [$\chi^2=214.09$, $df=148$; RMSEA=0.06; CI (RMSEA)= 0.0424 - 0.0794), PCI=0.15; SRMR=0.07; CFI=0.96] demonstrate a good model fit according to the criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999).

Hypothesis 1a and 1b posit a positive association of FWS salience (1a) and FWS positive affect (1b) with meaningful work. The analysis confirms a positive and statistically significant relationship between FWS salience and meaningful work ($\beta = .27, p = .007$), and a strong and highly significant relationship is also attested between FWS positive affect and meaningful work ($\beta = .50, p < .001$). These results demonstrate that both FWS dimensions are reliable and robust predictors of meaningful work, providing full support for hypotheses 1a and 1b. Hypothesis 2, which indicates that meaningful work anticipates purpose in life, was supported by the findings that show a positive and significant relationship between meaningful work and purpose in life ($\beta = .69, p < .001$).

Moreover, to test the mediation (Hypothesis 3a and 3b), we followed suggestions of James et al., (1984; 2006) and used the fully mediated model as a base adding the direct paths to it. We tested three comparative models, adding a direct path from FWS positive affect to purpose in life only (Model 3), adding a direct path from FWS salience to purpose in life only (Model 4), and including both direct paths (Model 2). Results, summarized in Table 2, show Model 3 fits slightly better when considering the global fit indexes [$\chi^2=194.37, df=147$; RMSEA=0.06; CI (RMSEA)=(0.04 - 0.08), PCI=0.22; SRMR=0.06; CFI=0.97]. Relationships among the variables are maintained. Specifically, the hypothesized relationship between the two FWS dimensions and meaningful work is strong and significant when considering FWS salience (1a) ($\beta = .27, p = .007$), as well as when considering FWS positive affect (1b) ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). The relationship between meaningful work and purpose in life (H2) is also unchanged, showing a strong and significant influence ($\beta = .42, p < .001$). Moreover, when testing the hypothesized mediating relationship between FWS positive affect and purpose in life (H3b), we observed that the direct effect of FWS positive affect on purpose in life is strong and significant ($\beta = .32, p = .021$). As Model 3 does not include a direct path between FWS salience (3a) and purpose in life, we relied on Model 2 to further verify this relationship. Results confirm that the direct relationship between FWS salience and purpose in life (3a) is weak and not significant ($\beta = .10, p = .034$). Overall, these findings suggest that the relationship between FWS positive affect and purpose in life is partially mediated by meaningful work, while the relationship between FWS salience and purpose in life is fully mediated by meaningful work. Therefore, hypothesis 3a is supported, while hypothesis 3b is partially supported.

We performed the analysis including three control variables (i.e., gender, neuroticism, FWS negative affect), and the results are the following. First, we repeated the analysis in Model 3 in order to verify the hypothesized relationships do not differ between the two genders. Results indicate a worse fit of the model [$\chi^2=292.30, df=165$; RMSEA=0.08; CI (RMSEA)=(0.06 - 0.09), PCI=0.00; SRMR=0.17; CFI=0.92]. The influence of gender on FWS salience ($\beta = .11, p = .25$) and FWS positive affect ($\beta = .00, p = .97$) is not significant, while the pattern of findings when controlling for gender is maintained.

Second, we rerun the model considering the effect of neuroticism and its potential effect on meaningful work [global indexes: $\chi^2=389.84, df=167$; RMSEA=0.06; CI (RMSEA)=(0.05 - 0.08), PCI=0.06; SRMR=0.07; CFI=0.93]. Results show that in our sample neuroticism does not significantly influence meaningful work ($\beta = -.10, p = .24$), while the findings of the main model are maintained.

Third, we controlled for the influence of negative affect. We rerun model 3 including the direct and mediated influence of FWS negative affect on purpose in life [$\chi^2=359.43, df=243$; RMSEA=0.06; CI (RMSEA)=(0.05 - 0.08), PCI=0.06; SRMR=0.07; CFI=0.94]. Results showed that FWS negative affect does not have a significant influence on meaningful work ($\beta = -.13, p = .18$), while it does directly influence purpose in life ($\beta = -.26, p = .005$). All the other relationships in the model are maintained.

Insert Table 2 about here

5. DISCUSSION

Having meaningful work is a shared aspiration for both experienced workers and young adults entering the job market, as meaningful work ensures several important outcomes such as purpose in life. While research predominantly focuses on contextual organizational factors to explain how work can be perceived as meaningful, we enrich literature that provides evidence on how individuals have an agentic role in building meaning related to work. Specifically, our findings contribute to the literature focusing on how meaning is derived from work by including the possibility of creating meaningfulness through the pre-experience of an hypothesised and desired work scenario. In doing so, we add insights to the scarce research on work meaningfulness that adopts a temporal lens (Bailey & Madden, 2017; de Boeck et al., 2019, Fay et al., 2023), in which individuals achieve to transcend the present and meaning is derived from a connection with the future (Bailey & Madden, 2017; de Boeck et al., 2019). We addressed this by employing the construct of FWS, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of its role by highlighting the relationship between future-oriented hopes and aspirations related to work and the experience of work meaningfulness. Overall, the verified relationships support the idea that FWS could be a valuable construct for enhancing general eudaimonic well-being, defined as a “sense of living a meaningful and purposeful life” (Pradisi et al., 2024, p. 4). Specifically, our results demonstrate how the concept of FWS functions as a powerful antecedent that triggers the meaning making process that enables the pre-experience of a meaningful work. Considering FWSs as consisting of both cognitive and affective dimensions, we show that both FWS salience and FWS positive affect have a positive influence on the acquisition of meaning, even when this meaning is attached to a pre-experienced work scenario. This insight is particularly important in career development, as it suggests that meaning could be created in advance, thus preparing individuals to navigate the career construction process.

Our evidence further confirms the predictive role of meaning on shaping the perception of a purpose in life. Additionally, we illustrate that FWS can impact the perception of a purpose in life, with meaningful work serving as a mediator in this relationship. In this way, the acquisition of meaning becomes a crucial turning point: on the one hand, once the FWS is defined, it is essential to engage in a cognitive processing, driven by meaning making, to be fully prepared for the subsequent steps following the definition of the FWS; on the other hand, it is necessary and preparatory for developing a purpose in life, which is paramount in managing goal setting and sustaining consistent behaviours, aligned with the inner self. Interestingly, the mediating role of work meaningfulness shows a slight variation depending on the dimension of FWS that anticipates the relationship. The FWS positive affect exerts both a direct and an indirect influence - through meaningful work - on purpose in life, indicating that work meaningfulness only partially mediates the relationship between FWS positive affect and purpose in life. The interpretation reveals that individuals experiencing positive affect related to FWS are more likely to perceive greater meaning in their work and report a stronger sense of life purpose, even beyond the meaningfulness derived from work itself. In contrast, the full mediation of work meaningfulness in the relationship between FWS salience and purpose in life suggests that the influence of the cognitive component of FWS on life purpose operates exclusively through the perception of meaningful work. This might imply that simply envisioning a clear and vivid desirable work scenario does not directly enhance life purpose, rather it does so only when that ideal self contributes to amplify awareness of meaningful work.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

Overall, individuals are placing greater emphasis on well-being as a key criterion when evaluating future and current employment opportunities (Gallup 2021; Gallup 2025). At the same time, human resource management departments are actively working to address the fundamental psychological need for meaningfulness (Yeoman, 2014), as the literature acknowledges that individuals' sense of meaningfulness can be enhanced through *ad hoc* interventions (Bailey et al., 2019). Consequently, organizations that implement practices reflecting a workplace culture in which employees' sense of meaningfulness and psychological well-being are genuinely valued can significantly enhance both their ability to attract and retain talent. In practical terms, organizations must determine how to effectively cultivate these values and identify strategies through which promote meaningfulness within the organization. Providing opportunities for personal development has been shown to be a successful approach (e.g., Fletcher, 2019) for fostering a strong sense of meaningfulness, which constitutes a fundamental determinant of well-being (Soren & Ryff, 2023). However, our study proposes a novel possibility to organizations - across both the workplace and education settings - designed to enhance individuals' experience of meaningful work and to promote a broader sense of significance in society by fostering awareness of their career aspirations. Among the developmental opportunities, we highlight the potential value of FWSs, given their capacity to strengthen individuals' sense of meaningfulness and purpose in life. Practitioners are encouraged to implement conditions and activities that support organizational members in reflecting on their FWSs. This can be achieved by shaping both organizational and higher education environments in ways that promote self-reflection and critical inquiry into one's desired work-related self. For this reason, organizations should consider the relational conditions that foster such an environment and enhance the practice of FWS envisioning, with the aim of helping individuals experience greater work meaningfulness. A possible strategy involves the establishment of supporting relationships (Kao et al., 2022) (e.g., counseling, mentoring, coaching, peer coaching) that assist individuals, both students at their initial career stages and employees seeking to restructure their career path. These relationships help individuals prepare to engage in a career planning grounded in a salient FWS, fostering a sense of meaning and direction aligned with their aspirations and core life values.

Career development experts should implement interventions designed to facilitate the envisioning of one's FWS, as a particularly beneficial practice for graduates transitioning into the workforce, for helping them towards their future career development (Cullen et al., 2013; Marko and Savickas, 1998). The discomfort associated with a poor transition from education to employment (Blokker et al., 2023), underlines the importance of helping students mentally project themselves into a desirable future work scenario. This process can foster meaning that guides their career choices and imbues them with a sense of purpose. Similarly, individuals already within the work environment who are seeking to change their current job situation through new placement may also benefit from engaging in this practice. Human resource departments, in turn, can gain valuable insights into how to design learning opportunities that align with employees' aspirations, thereby increasing the likelihood of employees experiencing greater work meaningfulness within the organization. Overall, educational institutions and organizations that facilitate meaning making in relation to a current or future work support their members addressing stressful transitions, promote the aforementioned several positive outcomes and foster purpose in life, as they need a sense of direction to guide them along their career path. For this, another helpful practice for individuals entering the job market, vocational ideation (Cullen et al., 2013) has been identified - though not yet tested - as a potential intervention in which self-awareness is developed through a deep reflection on personal identity to further direct future career behaviours and design accordingly specific development programs with learning goals.

7. LIMITATION AND FURTHER LINES OF RESEARCH

The study presents several limitations and opportunities for further research.

First, some concerns are associated with the sample choice. We focused exclusively on a group of young adults - graduate students - raising concerns about generalizability of the results in contexts involving different populations. Previous studies highlighted potential differences between different ages with respect to purpose in life (Sutin et al., 2023) and student/non-student samples due to their demographics (Kao et al., 2022). However, given that the topic explored is particularly relevant for individuals in transitional phases, such as graduate students, we considered the sample population to be a suitable choice. Replicating the study in other transition settings outside the student domain (e.g., individuals seeking to restructure their career position or those about to retire; public servants undergoing planned career advancement) would offer an opportunity to assess the generalizability of our findings. Future research could also explore whether tenure influences the relationships under investigation, by assessing potential differences between individuals entering the job market and those who are already experienced employees. Specifically, it is possible that prior work experience plays a role in shaping individuals' ability to derive meaning from work. Furthermore, given the nature of the current research, which focuses on prospective work meaningfulness among students, we adopted the broader definition of the work meaningfulness, without distinguishing between meaningfulness *in* work (i.e., the value of the task goal or purpose, judged to the individual's own ideals of standards' (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990, p. 672) and meaningfulness *at* work (i.e., work as enhancing one's membership and connection with the organization (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021, p. 2977). Replicating this research in a setting involving individuals already part of an organization could offer a valuable opportunity to better explore the distinction between the two types of work meaningfulness, particularly shedding light on the influence of meaningfulness *at* work. Eventually, the last concern about the sample may arise regarding the self-selected nature of participants, as the majority of them (70%) enrolled on a voluntary basis. Future empirical research should examine whether prospective work meaningfulness can still be fostered beyond elective participation in this type of study.

Second, the study context was relatively homogeneous in terms of cultural diversity, as it was conducted in an Italian setting where the majority of attendees were predominantly Caucasian. However, cultural differences can affect the orientation toward the past rather than the future (Caruso et al., 2024), which may influence individuals' willingness to engage in envisioning their FWS, as much as differences in well-being conceptualizations (Zheng et al., 2015). Additionally, the perception of purpose as a psychological resource may vary across economic contexts (Sutin et al., 2022). For broader generalizability, future studies could benefit from using a sample that includes greater diversity in terms of participants' geographical origins.

Third, a potential limitation of this study lies in the fact it captures only a snapshot of certain individuals' perceptions, thereby offering a simplified representation of reality, and in the use of a single measurement point to evaluate outcome with a single measurement. Future research could address these flaws in different ways. First, it should investigate the influence of additional personality factors (e.g., self-efficacy) or contextual factors that may affect the relationships under examination. Incorporating these factors into the model would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding. Alternatively, conducting a parallel study using a qualitative research method could provide deeper insights into the dynamics among the key constructs. Additionally, the time lag employed to assess the evolution in meaningful work and purpose in life following the FWS intervention could be extended. Although the twelve-weeks' time lag resembles attested examples in the literature to study the consequences of FWSs (e.g., Guan et al., 2017), future studies should consider a longer follow-up or additional measurement points (e.g., six-months) to exclude the possibility that these changes reflect short-term

fluctuations rather than enduring change in both the constructs of meaningfulness and purpose in life.

Fourth, given the attested impact of mattering, defined as the meaning created by the experience of being valued by others, on psychological well being (Paradisi et al., 2024), and how meaningfulness is enhanced through the convergence between actual, ideal, and ought selves (Elangovan et al., 2010), future studies should investigate the role of ‘ought self’ - defined as the representation of the self that others think the person should be (Higgins, 1987) - in the construction of meaningful work. Examining this aspect could clarify how recognition from others influences individuals’ wellbeing when evaluating career paths. Such insight might contribute to a deeper understanding of how different possible selves interact in shaping a meaningful perspective work, and subsequent sense of purpose in life.

Finally, self-report data may introduce the risk for CMB. To compensate for this limitation we conducted CFA and collected data at two different time points, although two variables in the model were measured simultaneously. To ensure more robust findings, we suggest that future empirical studies integrate self-reports with other types of behavioural measures, and also to temporally separate the measurement of each variable to mitigate any risk for reverse causality. This is particularly critical for those variables in the model that were assessed at the same time point (i.e., work meaningfulness and purpose in life) and for which the literature identified different relationships from those proposed in our study.

8. CONCLUSION

In the current paper, we investigated how meaning can be derived from the desired work of individuals who are planning their career path. The concept of FWS serves as a means for individuals to anticipate and prepare for future work challenges by fostering a sense of meaningfulness in their work, cultivated through self-awareness and self-reflection on how work could be personally meaningful. Nonetheless, a sense of purpose in life is sustained by the clarity achieved through the envisioning of FWS and the identification with meaningful work. Together, these relationships enhance our understanding of how the professional dimension can contribute to a meaningful and purposeful life.

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FIGURE 1

The mediating model.

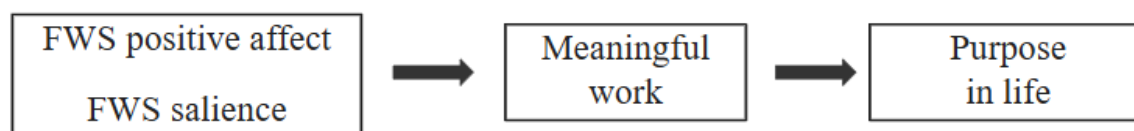


TABLE 1

Means, standard deviations and correlations.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 FWS salience	3.31	1.00						
2 FWS positive affect	3.55	0.88	.47**					
3 Meaning making	3.83	0.91	.32**	.51**				
4 Purpose in life	3.68	0.88	.42**	.52**	.48**			
5 Neuroticism	3.06	0.90	-.27**	-.09	-.18	-.42**		
6 FWS negative affect	2.03	0.89	-.37**	-.39**	-.32**	-.49**	.39**	
7 Gender	0.79	0.41	.08	.01	.08	-.14	.33**	.08

Note. $N = 117$

$p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE 2

Model 1 and Model 2 Goodness-of-Fit Indexes.

	SB- χ^2 (df)	RMSEA	CI	PCI	CFI	SRMSR
Model 1	214.09 (148)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.15	0.96	0.07
Model 2	193.75 (146)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.21	0.97	0.06
Model 3	194.37 (147)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.22	0.97	0.06
Model 4	199.11 (147)	0.06	0.04; 0.08	0.16	0.97	0.06
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)

Note: (a) Satorra-Bentler chi square (degrees of freedom); (b), (c), (d) RMSEA, confidence interval, and probability of close fit for RMSEA; (e) Comparative Fit Index; (f) Standardized root mean square residual.