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## **Depression and the Meaning of Life in University Students in Times of Pandemic**

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# Depression and Meaning of Life in University Students in Times of Pandemic

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## Abstract

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The emergence of the pandemic has led to fundamental social and economic swaps throughout the world, the sponsored measures taken have a significant effect on the mental health of individuals. The objective of the study was to compare the level of depression related to the meaning of life in students in times of pandemic at the Continental University of Peru and the "Rafael María Baralt" National Experimental University of Venezuela. The type of research developed was descriptive correlational with a cross-sectional design. The sample was made up of two groups: the first corresponds to 300 students from Peru and 300 from Venezuela. The Beck Depression Inventory and the Dimensional Sense of Life Scale, standardized version for Latin America, were used as measurement instruments. With the Spearman correlation coefficient it was determined that there is a moderate negative relationship of  $-.610$ , which indicates that there is an inverse correlation in the variables level of depression and sense of life of the students and it was concluded that, among the students university students from both countries, there is a moderate inverse significant correlation between depression and the meaning of life, in the current times of pandemic.

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**Palabras clave:** Depression, college students, pandemic, meaning of life.

# **Depresión y Sentido de la Vida en Estudiantes Universitarios en Tiempos de Pandemia**

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## **Resumen**

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La aparición de la pandemia ha conllevado a permutas primordiales en lo social y en lo económico en todo el mundo, las medidas patrocinadas asumidas presentan un efecto significativo en la salud mental de los individuos. El objetivo del estudio fue comparar el nivel de depresión relacionado al sentido de la vida en estudiantes en tiempos de pandemia de la Universidad Continental del Perú y de la Universidad Nacional Experimental “Rafael María Baralt” de Venezuela. El tipo de investigación desarrollado fue descriptivo correlacional con diseño transversal. La muestra quedó integrada por dos grupos: la primera corresponde a 300 estudiantes del Perú y 300 de Venezuela. Se utilizaron como instrumentos de medición el Inventario de Depresión de Beck y la Escala Dimensional de Sentido de Vida versión estandarizada para Latinoamérica. Con el coeficiente de correlación de Spearman se determinó que existe una relación negativa moderada de  $-.610$ , lo cual indica que hay una correlación inversa en las variables nivel de depresión y sentido de la vida de los estudiantes y se concluyó que, entre los estudiantes universitarios de ambos países, existe una moderada correlación significativa inversa entre la depresión y el sentido de la vida, en los actuales tiempos de pandemia.

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**Palabras clave:** Depresión, estudiantes universitarios, pandemia, sentido de la vida.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) emphasizes the relevance of adolescent mental health care, urging the development of social and emotional habits that contribute to mental well-being, including sleep patterns, sports practice, resilience, emotional intelligence among others. The WHO alert is based on the estimate that between 10 and 20% of adolescents worldwide suffer from mental involvement and are undiagnosed. In net, an estimated 120 million adolescents suffer from mental illness, which is taxed by the concomitance of social, ethnic, cultural and economic conditions of stigmatization and exclusion that exacerbate risky situations for adolescents and young people. In 2018, 65 million adolescents lost their lives to self-infringing injuries or suicide (WHO, 2019). These figures express a reality that tends to be diluted among the multiplicity of risky conditions faced by adolescents and young people today.

Of all the mental pathologies affecting youth, depression positioned as the riskiest epidemiologically. Depression is seen as a global public health problem.

WHO's Mental Health Programme developed the Tenth version of the International Classification of Diseases CIE 11 - F30-39, which describes depression as a modality of Affective Disorder that may or may not present symptomatology (WHO, 2019). INCIE-11 defines recurrent depressive disorder as a pathology expressed by the successive sequence of depressive episodes. These episodes can fluctuate in the same individual from mild, moderate, or severe. Diagnosis is associated with apathy, inability to achieve pleasure, recurrent tiredness.

According to Beck, Steer and Brown (1996), depression originates because the person perceives the world in a negative and unrealistic way. According to this same author, people who become depressed have negative cognitions in three areas: themselves, the environment and the future.

Beck's Depression Inventory identified indicators of depression where self-negativity, the environment, and the world induce the subject toward pessimistic perspectives and unquestionable fatalities. No rational argument that provides alternatives other than those of the depressive subject is validated by the depressive subject. Beck et al. (1996) delve into identifying indicators of depression by distinguishing them from indicators of anxiety.

The depressive self-asserts in futility, hopelessness and loss, anxious subjects focus on imminent threats and their vulnerability to them.

For college students, depression is a factor that affects their academic performance, desertion, and overall quality of life. Factors such as time load, misfits, recurring economic failures, inadequacy of prior knowledge to address courses, among others maximize conditions for depressive pathologies to manifest at various levels (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Gajana & Minchekar, 2018; Ngasa et al., 2017; De Luca, Franklin, Yueqi, Johnson & Brownson, 2016). Studies have shown the association between depression and the abandonment of university studies (Mouza, 2015; Iglesias-Benavides, Blum-Valenzuela, López-Tovar, Espinosa-Galindo & Rivas-Estilla, 2016; Marthoenis, Meutia, Fathiariani & Sofyan, 2018). However, depression has levels that do not necessarily result in drop-out of schooling and/or extreme suicide cases. However, it is undeniable that depressive pathologies are elements that influence the quality of life of higher-level students (Moreno, 2014; Hwang, 2016; Alonso et al., 2018). It is then that the family, educational institutions and society at large are responsible for giving young people motivations and prospects of self-realization that give them meaning of life.

The search for the meaning of students' lives provides an efficient strategy to confront what Gengler (2009) called existential frustration, by activating the will of meaning. The will of meaning that understands the conscious responsibility to answer the questions that life asks it on a daily basis corresponds to the search for happiness and the inherent training to endure suffering during transit towards the attainment of transcendence. Otherwise, subjects who do not develop the will of meaning can potentially lead to existential emptiness, where conformism predominates and in its multiple manifestations.

In addition, everything raised is more accentuated in these times of COVID-19 pandemic, since, in case of contracting the virus, the likelihood of severe complications and even death is considerable (Mortier et al. 2015; Lizaraso & Del Carmen, 2020). In this sense, the population is generally affected by the consequences of the pandemic, leading from depressions to in many cases death.

In Peru, COVID-19 arrived on March 11, 2020, when President Martin Vizcarra reported the initial cases in Peru and similarly in Venezuela on

March 13, 2020, the first cases of the coronavirus disease pandemic were reported by Venezuela's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez. As a result, in the event that Peruvians are in a state of emergency, in recent months the population and communities are hit by COVID-19 disease, leading to the collapse of the health system. And in the case of Venezuelans, the situation presented by the pandemic must be added to the social problems already suffered by its inhabitants. Therefore, this COVID-19 disease has generated chaos and fear, creating existential emptiness, which is associated with depression.

In this order of ideas, Délano (2020) expresses how in recent months a new viral disease has been seen causing collapse in health systems and creating chaos and fears in people, first quetching Wuhan, China, and which is currently complicating everyone. However, activities do not stop, including academic ones, so it is necessary to specify and solve the depressive levels that university students may be presenting based on their senses of life in these times of pandemic.

The emergence of the pandemic has led to primordial social and economic swaps around the world, sponsored measures for their conduct have a significant effect on the mental health of individuals. Research suggests that from the initial moment of the pandemic people have generally had psychological problems, such as distress, depression and stress (Cobo-Rendón, Vega-Valenzuela & García-Alvarez, 2020; Eyzaguirre, Le Foulon & Salvatierra, 2020). The mental health of individuals in the face of this new context is at risk. Indeed, research on epidemics and retrospective pandemics states that individuals in the face of this prototype of circumstances manage to feel insecurity, fear of being a victim, impressions of isolation, heartbreak and irritation (Velavan & Meyer, 2020).

In educational contexts, establishments have had the need to continue educating students through the use of technologies, greatly transforming the formative and socio-emotional advancement of students. Previously, university classes were a stage especially with characteristics of socially very active interaction between students, currently they have to adapt to the new formative development and the way of teaching (online) demanded to prevent infections in the current times of pandemic. This is a new practice in which the student may feel somewhat confused to develop his or her particular abilities and abilities.

Previous research on the issue of depression in college schoolchildren exposed to the pandemic refers to economic conditions, as well as delays in academic actions being recognized as components of danger to the progress of distress, signs that have been verified in great measure have been the increase in depressive symptoms, stress and distress (Lopez et al. , 2020; Pereyra, 2020). Studies in Chinese schoolchildren reveal that, at the same time of the existence of depressive signs and stress, excessive emotions of mistrust and problems in the permanence of sleep have been detailed, a study with Greek students verified an increase in suicidal inclinations in them (Kaparounaki et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2020).

Consequently, considering the transmission of COVID-19 and general care measures, the use of instructional models not agreed upon in university education regimes has become a forced tactic for the compliance with teaching purposes and commitments (Morales-Ulloa, Paz, Castro, Barahona & Fonseca, 2020). In this sense, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to promote an effective teaching-learning process remotely or remotely has proven to be an effective tool, which supports increasing the effectiveness of remote teaching methods and the accommodating of the thematic axes to the formative priorities of academic collectivity at stages of high application such as , by pattern, socioeconomic difficulties, natural disasters or pandemics (Carrillo, Aragon & Navas, 2020; Rosario-Rodríguez et al., 2020). On the other hand, within the malleability and advantages of ICT-mediated teaching, he emphasizes the contingency of building training environments that consent to: first, to increase the independence and commitment of the student in the timely development of learning; second, to break down the constraints stimulated by set-aside in space and time; third, allow the combination of fonts at different times; and fourth, collaborative training (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2020). The above advantages provide the ideal space for the impulse of an eager and interactive teaching-learning process taking into account the particular priorities and discrepancies of academic collectivity, especially that of students.

However, taking into account the coupling of the COVID-19, academic, scientific and psychic instances (caused by the impassable execution of instructional models in remote times and problems in the progress of effective implementation and training policies) have contributed to the perceived problems and obstacles of the university student, as well as taking an effective

attitude towards the use of ICTs in the instructional process (Sanz, Sáinz & Capilla, 2020). Consequently, global organizations such as UNESCO (2020) persuade an approximation based on the conceptual and theoretical assumptions in order to demonstrate the operations, instructions and routes that should be assumed in favor of academic collectivity, emphasizing the students (Monasterio & Briceño, 2020). All this, in order to verify elements that affect a good distance instruction experience and allow to refine the promised effects; circumstances where the procedures adopted are in the hands of the competences, resources and particularities of training with which each nation and its university training schemes present.

In this line of research, the most important discoveries show that students assumed difficulties related to stressors due to excessive schoolwork, poor execution of online courses, impairment of guidance of their institutions, little flexibility of their professors, among other aspects. These discoveries give rise to the analysis of the per mouths of the didactic characteristics (in person online) subjects and their effects on students (Rosario-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The results found achieve increases in signs of depression, craving, post-traumatic stress, desperate ideation and sleep inconveniences. The operations that institutions achieve in favor of the mental health of their students during and post-pandemic could soften the psychological consequences of COVID-19 and promote the progress of society.

In this sense, the possible adverse consequences of the extensive cessation of face-to-face classes in the training of students and the dangers a resulting therein, such as the widening of the fissures of teaching and student desertion (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2020). Therefore, three elements that are considered elementary in distance instruction are analyzed: fundamental skills for remote training, material circumstances of residence and support of family members. Analyzing the available data, one in five students were found to show significant inadequacies in the aspects analyzed. On the other hand, approximately one-third of the students of the first quintile of income are located in the highest-risk set and only 7% of the students of the richest quintile are located within this set (Eyzaguirre et al., 2020). Extensive disruption of face-to-face classes more acutely disrupts the most sensitive children and youth in nations and can have unfavorable effects of extended term if student drop-out and learning fissures increase.



In context, the question arose as to whether these mental health problems are linked to depressive states and/or demotions to find a meaning of life, appropriate for their academic performance and the achievement of their expectations of personal and professional development in their present life and for their future. From the above, the objective of this study was aimed at comparing the level of depression related to the meaning of life in times of coVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in students from two universities in Peru and Venezuela.

### **Methodology**

Correlational descriptive type research. This type of study is used to calculate two variables and determine the extent to which two variables are related at a single time (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2018). This research described the variables: the level of depression and the meaning of life in coVID-19 coronavirus pandemic times in college students and determined the relationship between the two aspects. Likewise, the study design was cross-sectional, since the data were collected in a single moment.

The exhibition consisted of two groups: The first corresponds to 300 students belonging to the First Cycle of the Continental University of Peru. The second Study Sample consisted of 300 students belonging to the Engineering Program of the First Semester. The inclusion criteria were: 1. Student enrolled in the Semester 2020 - I. 2.- Enrollment greater than 13 credits. 3.- Voluntary acceptance to participate in the study. The technique for collecting information that was used was the survey. The data collection instruments were two questionnaires, being applied to each subject, which are described below.

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### **Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-2)**

It corresponds to a self-administered instrument designed to quantitatively assess a person's depression levels (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). For Beck the BDI-2 addresses depression as a syndrome that can be screened by applying the instrument. Subsequent research showed that BDI-2 is efficient in diagnosing depression (Ginting, Noring, Van der Veld, Srisayekti & Becker, 2013; Contreras-Valdez, Hernández-Guzmán & Freyre, 2015; García-Batista et al., 2019). In this study the BDI-2 was applied validating it using Connbach Alpha, .905 was obtained for 21 elements.

### Dimensional Scale of Sense of Life (EDSV) standardized version for Latin America

It corresponds to an instrument designed to evaluate the affective/cognitive perception, which drives the action of people, based on values and references that are their own (Martínez, Trujillo, & Osma, 2011). In this study the EDSV was applied validating it using Cronbach Alpha, it was obtained. 926 for 20 elements.

The results were statistically analyzed with the SPSS Program and Spearman's correlation coefficient was determined.

## Results

### Peru

In Figure 1, the level of depression of university students in Peru is observed in 2020, where the highest percentage 65.3% is the minimum level, followed by the mild level with 18.4%, while the moderate level obtained 11.2% and the lowest is weighted at 5.1% of the level of severe depression in times of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic.

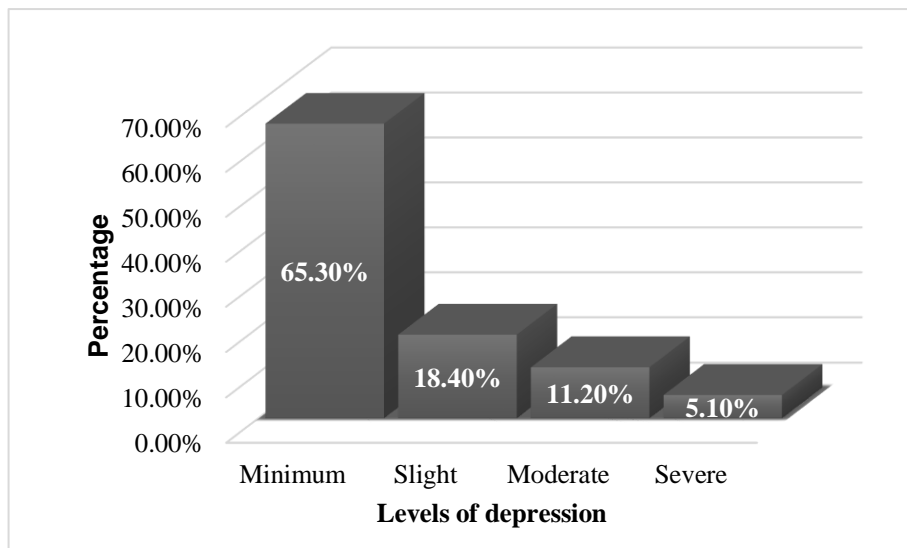


Figure 1. Level of depression of university students in Peru.

Figure 2 shows the variable meaning of life of University students in Peru in 2020, where the highest percentage 48.5% is represented by students with a presence of meaning of life, followed by undefinition with 32.7% of students and 18.9% have a lack of meaning of life in times of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Moreover, according to Spearman's Rho test there is a moderate negative relationship of  $-0.486$ , indicating that there is inverse correlation in the variables depression level and life sense of students at times of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

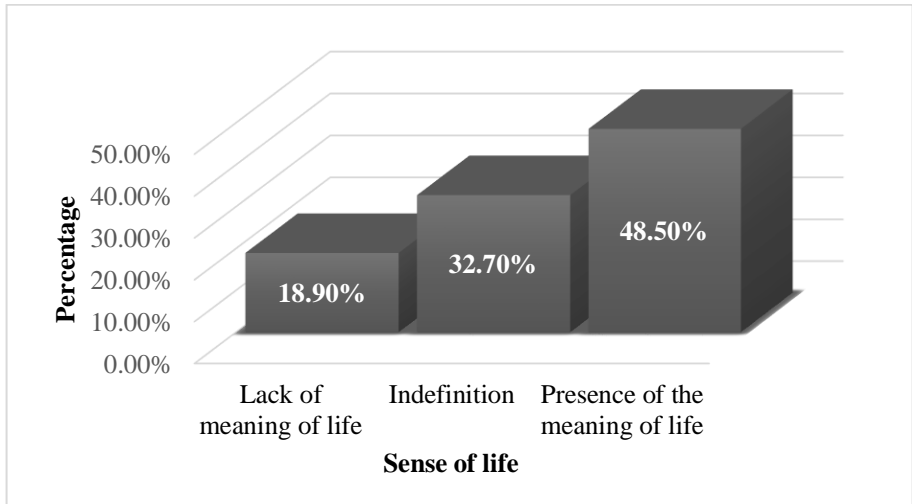


Figure 2. Sense of life of university students in Peru.

### Venezuela

Figure 3 shows the level of depression of Venezuelan university students, where the highest percentage 88.64% is the minimum level, followed by the mild level with 6.36% and the lowest is weighted at 5.00% in the level of moderate depression at times of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. It is important to note that, the level of severe depression is not present in any of the students unlike Peru that has 5.10% of students with severe depression level.

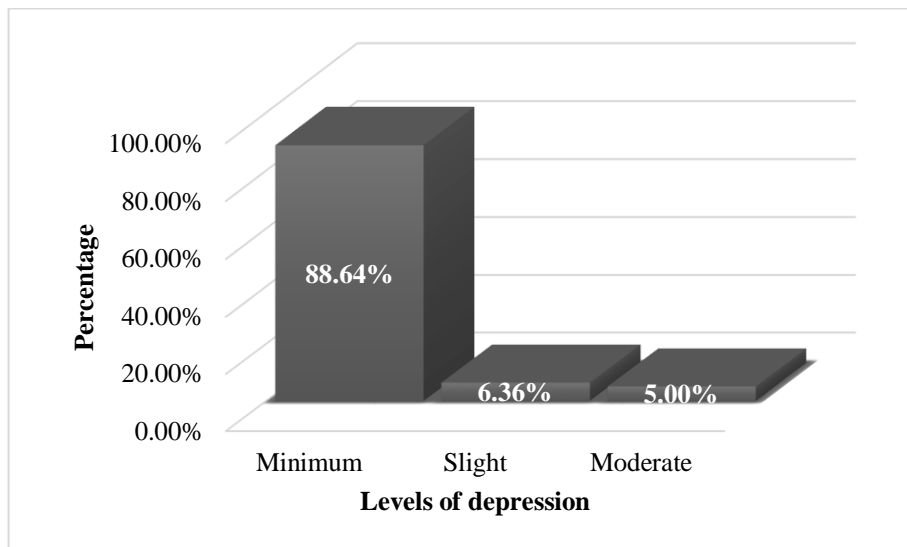


Figure 3. Level of depression of university students in Venezuela.

Figure 4 shows the variable sense of life of Venezuelan students, where the highest percentage 55.45% is represented by students with a presence of meaning of life, followed by undefinition with 31.36% of students and 13.18% have a lack of meaning in life. These results are similar to those produced in students in Peru. However, it can be seen that Venezuelan students have a greater presence of life in times of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Moreover, according to Spearman's Rho test, there is a moderate negative relationship of  $-0.579$ , indicating that there is inverse correlation in the depression level and life sense variables of college students at the time of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

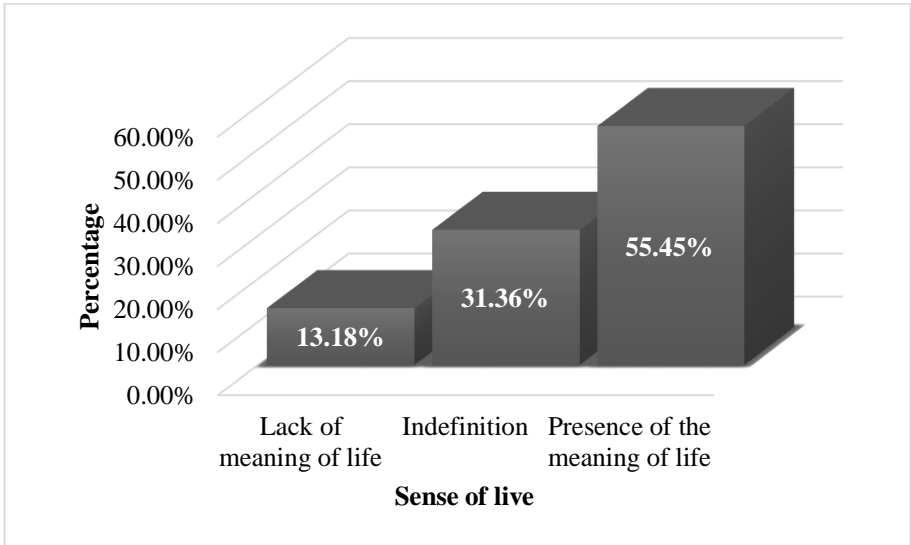


Figure 4. Sense of life of university students from Venezuela.

## Discussion

In the case of university students in Peru, participants in the study found that 34.7% showed symptoms of depression between mild, moderate and severe, according to the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-2), which shows a much higher rate than that expressed by the 9% recorded by WHO in 2019 for the general population. These results are analogs with those obtained by Brenneisen et al (2016), who conducted multicentric research in 22 Brazilian medical schools, analyzing personal and institutional factors applying the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), finding that of 1350 students 41% had the prevalence of depressive symptoms. In this order, there are also the results of the review conducted by Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams and Glazebrook (2012), who found an average prevalence of 30% in the rate of depression among college students.

In the field of the sense of life, 48.5% of Peruvian students surveyed expressed the meaning of life associated with the goal set as a life project. In addition, the results corroborate that obtained by the research of Hernández,

Valdez, Aguilar, Torres and González (2017), who found that 35.19% of men and 28.82% of women identified the meaning of their life with professional development.

The results indicate that, for Peruvian students, there is a significant high correlation between the level of depression and the meaning of life in students; in addition, the ratio turned out to be negative (reverse) of moderate level (-.307); that is, when a student has a higher level of depression the sense of life decreases, this is similarly to the results obtained by Smedema-Malonda and Franco-Módenes (2018), who found negative relationship between meaning of life and negative affectivity (depression, anxiety), among university students.

For Venezuelan students, it was observed that 11.36% showed symptoms of mild to moderate depression, without recording any cases of severe depression, according to the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-2), which shows a rate close to that expressed by the 9% recorded by WHO for the general population. These results are analogs with the results obtained by Molina-Correa, Gómez-Puentes, Bonilla-Pabón and Ropero-Gutiérrez (2018), who in the study carried out to medical students of the Institute of Caldas found that 10% on average in students manifest some degree of depression.

In the field of the sense of life 55.45% of Venezuelan students surveyed expressed the meaning of life associated with the goal set as a project of professional life. This result corroborates that obtained by the research of Chalela-Naffah, Valencia-Arias, Ruiz-Rojas and Cadavid-Orrego (2020), who conducted a study on students from seven universities in the city of Bogotá, concerning the meaning of life of university students; these authors found that young students expressed that the meaning of life found it in achieving material goals associated with the professional.

The results indicate that there is a significant high correlation between the level of depression and the meaning of life in Venezuelan students; in addition, the ratio turned out to be negative (reverse) of moderate level (-.520); that is, when a student has a higher level of depression the meaning of life decreases.

Comparing the results of selected universities in both countries, a high significant correlation was found; between depression and the meaning of life; because according to Spearman's Rho test the significance was calculated well

below the error (1%). In both countries the level of correlation was moderate; however, in Peru the correlation level turned out to be a little lower (-.355), than in Venezuela where the correlation was -.520. In both samples of university students, an inverse relationship was evident between the variables depression and sense of life at the time of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. The greater the depression, the sense of life falls. These results are analogs with those obtained by Smedema-Malonda and Franco-Módenes (2018) and those of Chalela-Naffah et al. (2020).

According to Spearman's Rho test for being the bilateral asymptotic significance (Sig.000) lower than the maximum permissible error level (.01), there is sufficient evidence to confirm the research hypothesis: the level of depression is significantly, inversely and moderately related to the meaning of life at the time of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in university students in Peru and Venezuela.

### **Conclusions**

The study expressed according to the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-2), differences between the rate of depression expressed by university students in Peru and those in Venezuela at the time of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. In the Peruvian case, depression at mild to severe levels exceeds WHO's overall indicators by 20 percentage points. In Venezuelan, the difference is 1.36 percentage points from the overall WHO rate.

Determining the correlation between the study variables showed that there is a significant high correlation between the level of depression and the meaning of life in college students; in addition, the relationship turned out to be negative (reverse) of a moderate level, that is, when a student has a higher level of depression the meaning of life decreases.

On the other hand, comparing the results of selected universities in both countries found a high inverse significant correlation; between depression and the meaning of life in times of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. In addition, university students from both countries agree to associate the meaning of life with the achievement of career goals. It is therefore essential that universities generally take the relevant forecasts to avoid major ills in their students.

In this sense, it is necessary to carry out activities in the universities that grant the student to promote the national commitment of their educational institution. In the light of the above, pandemic-time universities must address the difficulties of the nation and its benefit teams, including the mental health of their students through their institutional core purposes. In this way, the pandemic disturbs all the environments of universities: from instruction to extension; equivalently upsets the university community from teachers to students, goods and services; the relevance of leadership skills of teachers and governing authorities.

The management of mental health in the pandemic has to be assumed from a comprehensive approach without prepondering economic aspects above the social. So, the committed conception of the mental health of its students is truly due to two of its brands as an organization. Firstly, it is a mission, because by worrying about its participants and internal benefit sets, it creates a socially comprehensive university association. On a secondary level and according to the above, it compensates to some extent for its formative impacts, since the student, by perceiving in the work of the organization the concern for his mental health, assimilates from those general practices and services, on a large scale impacting on his values, his way of deciphering the universe and holding on to it.

In addition, if the above is added to the scientific perspective in the production of socially committed knowledge combined with its mediation in the mental health of its students, it can be reflected that the institution is also responsible for its cognitive impact, so it affects the clarification and discrimination of the difficulties of the academic agenda, creating a sense of belonging in the face of the general emergency and its recipients. Finally, each of the activities carried out by educational institutions in favor of the mental health of their educated during and after the pandemic, admits that universities take care of the progress of society and promote the solution to essential difficulties, transcending and creating positive social impacts in communities.

In this order of ideas, universities can implement as organizational components as welfare units for students, with psychological care and general guidance, as areas outlined for the promotion of mental health in the institutional environment by executing operations with mediation regimes, support or educational advice for the progress of healthy educational journeys that take stock of the university demands of the hand with the priorities of the



context in which they are developed. Likewise, through the institutional activities of the units raised, they can also be engaged in the prevention of psychosocial conflicts such as the psychological moments mentioned as academic distress, sense of life, decay of the purposes of existence caused by the consequences of the pandemic, which without hesitation will disturb the interest of students, the willingness of learning and persistence in the regime of universities.

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