

Being Present: Witnessing Landmark Historical Events Boosts Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Although not everyone shapes history, everyone is present as it unfolds. Recognizing oneself as a witness to history may become especially important in an era marked by frequent landmark events. In this research, we locate individuals in the ongoing process of history and examine its existential benefits. Specifically, we hypothesize that witnessing history (i.e., the subjective sense of witnessing or being present as history unfolds) enhances meaning in life, both in terms of the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. Through five investigations, using a multi-method approach that includes large-scale field data from Weibo (2,317,527 posts) alongside experimental and field studies ($N = 1,945$), we found that witnessing history contributes to or increases presence of and search for meaning. Further, connectedness to history mediates the effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning, and a broadened perspective mediates its effect on the search for meaning. Our research provides a novel insight into how situating individuals within the ongoing progress of history can benefit their meaningful existence, and highlights the importance of cultivating a historical awareness and preserving historical heritage.

Keywords: witnessing history, meaning in life, presence of meaning, search for meaning, psychology of history

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Humanity is undergoing a period of transformation. Over the past decade, the world has experienced profound upheavals, from the COVID-19 pandemic, through the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine conflicts, to the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. This transformation shows no signs of slowing down. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Reports for 2023–2025 highlight a turbulent future, driven by ongoing health and economic challenges, escalating geopolitical tensions, climate change, and accelerating technological advancements (The World Economic Forum, 2023, 2024, 2025). As Harari (2018) noted, this may be a defining moment in history, an era where AI and biotechnology could transform the world on a scale that surpasses previous cultural revolutions. Living in such an era requires adaptability and resilience (Seidel et al., 2023; Silver et al., 2002; Soomro, 2024), but also presents unique opportunities to reflect on one's life and pursue meaning in it. We suggest that a shift in perspective—viewing oneself as a witness to unfolding history—can offer a promising path forward. Although not everyone has the opportunity to actively influence the course of history, simply witnessing landmark historical events as they unfold can foster meaning in life and perspective, even amidst uncertainty and change.

Witnessing history typically arises in the context of landmark historical events that reshape societies and leave enduring legacies across individual and collective life (Mayer, 2004; Sorrentino & Yamaguchi, 2011). For example, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 not only ended the Cold War but also dissolved divisions and merged cultural identities, profoundly altering personal lives and geopolitical landscapes (Engel, 2009; Sarotte, 2014). Even those who do not directly engage with such events are affected by their legacy, whether through political decisions, cultural norms, or the heritage edifices that surround them.

Numerous scholarly investigations have examined the macro-level impact of landmark historical events on societal structures and dynamics. For example, research in disciplines such as history, anthropology, media studies, and political science has addressed how these events influence political systems, social organizations, and cultural practices (Friedman, 1992; Kavanagh, 1991). However, compared to extensive work on macro or collective levels, the micro-level perspective (i.e., how individuals' lives interact with and are

influenced by these landmark historical events) remains understudied.

Prior work has begun to examine how individuals engage with landmark events, but much of it narrows inquiry to personally relevant episodes. For instance, mega-threats, the negative, identity-relevant societal events amplified by media, have been shown to elicit avoidant work behaviors and positive deviance among racial-minority employees (Leigh & Melwani, 2019, 2022). Likewise, people who link political events to personal identity report higher political participation (Duncan & Stewart, 2007). These studies are informative yet constrained. They target specific event types or particular social groups, and the focal events are not necessarily historical in scope.

Most germane to the present work, Ture et al. (2025) examined historical consciousness—the extent to which individuals incorporate the recollection of historical events into personal life narratives—and its associations with personality, well-being, and political engagement among late-midlife adults. Although valuable for explaining life trajectories and the formation of identity, this approach emphasizes the personal relevance of past events and leaves unexamined how people engage with broad historical events that may lack personal relevance and have not entered autobiographical memory, yet can still carry significant psychological implications. Such an examination is particularly critical in an era characterized by frequent turbulence and continual historical transformation.

We advance this line of work by shifting from retrospective incorporation of historical events into personal narrative identity toward a novel focus on the immediate experience of witnessing unfolding history. We refer to this subjective experience of witnessing or being present as history unfolds as “witnessing history.” Whereas historical consciousness relies on recollection and post hoc integration of bounded, identity-relevant events, witnessing history involves situating one’s present moment within a broader historical context. It is not about integrating the past into a life story, but rather about locating oneself against the larger arc of history.

By examining witnessing history, we reposition individuals not as retrospective narrators but as active participants in the ongoing flow of history and test how witnessing landmark historical events can cultivate meaning in life. We hypothesize, in particular, that

witnessing history enhances two fundamental components of meaning: the presence of it, defined as the perception that one's life is meaningful, and the search for it, defined as the active pursuit of meaning in one's life (Steger et al., 2006). We provide a rationale below.

First, witnessing history may strengthen subjective connectedness to it¹, thereby elevating the presence of meaning in life (Chung et al., 2024; Ries & Schwan, 2023). Coherence, purpose, and existential mattering are fundamental components of the presence of meaning in life (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; King et al., 2016). When individuals recognize that they are witnessing landmark historical events, they may perceive themselves as integral parts of history, enhancing their connectedness to it. This connectedness may foster coherence by enabling individuals to see their lives as structured and comprehensible in the process of integrating their personal experiences within a broader historical context (Martela & Steger, 2016; Stearns, 1998). Additionally, connectedness reinforces purpose by enabling individuals to understand their place in the world and set their life direction (Hirooka et al., 2023; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016). Moreover, connectedness enables the significance of historical events to transfer to individuals as part of history (Korostelina, 2008; Ture et al., 2025), allowing them to feel that their lives matter. By potentially enhancing coherence, purpose, and mattering, through connectedness to history, witnessing history will promote the presence of meaning.

Witnessing history may also foster the search for meaning via an enriched vista, a shift in focus from immediate concerns to a more expansive view of life. Recognizing that they are witnessing landmark historical events, which span far beyond an individual's lifespan, encourages people to step back from their personal, short-term perspectives and consider their lives within a broader temporal context. Additionally, landmark historical events comprise collective stories of larger entities like nations or humanity as a whole. Witnessing these events aids in transcending an egocentric viewpoint, predisposing

¹ Connectedness to history is conceptually related to, yet distinct from, witnessing history. Whereas witnessing history involves the immediate experience of perceiving history as it unfolds, connectedness to history reflects a deeper existential belonging to the broader historical narrative. In Study S4 (see Online Supplementary Materials, Appendix XI), we empirically demonstrated that connectedness to history can arise independently of witnessing a historical landmark event.

individuals toward a more inclusive and spatially expansive outlook (Lee & Ashby, 2001; Levstik, 2001). Moreover, landmark historical events often disrupt existing beliefs and frameworks, exposing people to new possibilities and prompting them to adopt a more open-minded and cognitively flexible approach (Camia et al., 2019; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This broadened perspective facilitates reflection on deeper existential questions (Frankl, 2006/1946; Park, 2010), such as purpose in life and one's role in the world. Stated otherwise, as individuals situate their personal experiences within the vast historical backdrop, they might be motivated to question their place in this broader narrative and explore the significance of their existence. This process of reflection and exploration will stimulate the search for meaning.

Overview of the Research

We hypothesize that (1) witnessing history enhances one's presence of and search for meaning in life (H1), and (2) this occurs through connectedness to history and a broadened perspective (H2), respectively. We tested these hypotheses in five methodologically diverse studies. In Study 1, we relied on field data from Weibo posts, soliciting preliminary evidence for the idea that witnessing history contributes to meaning in life. In Studies 2–4, we employed experimental designs, examining the causal impact of witnessing history on meaning in life. In Study 5, a field investigation, we evaluated whether indirectly witnessing history (i.e., by visiting historical sites) conduces to meaning in life. In Studies 2–5, we also tested the mediating role of connectedness to history and a broadened perspective.

We report four additional studies in Online Supplemental Material. In Study S1, we used Google Trends data as a preliminary test, demonstrating that search volume for the phrase “meaning in life” increased following witnessing landmark historical events. In Study S2, we tested the generalizability of the hypothesized effects, showing that witnessing history similarly influences the presence of and search for meaning in a U.K. sample. In Study S3, we successfully replicated the proposed theoretical model with alternative measures of affective states and meaning in life. Finally, in Study S4, we conceptually distinguished between witnessing history and connectedness to history by illustrating that the feeling of connectedness can occur independently of witnessing history.

Transparency and Openness

We reported procedures for determining sample size, all data exclusions (if any), manipulations, and measures used in the research, and we followed journal article reporting standards (Appelbaum et al., 2018). We conducted mediation analyses via PROCESS 4.1 Model 4 (5,000 bootstrap samples) in R, version 4.2.1. In all such analyses, we coded the witnessing history condition as 1, and the control condition as 0, except in Study 4, which included three conditions. We provide (1) four additional studies (Studies S1–S4), (2) participants' educational status, (3) ancillary analyses, and (4) supplementary figures and tables in Online Supplemental Material. Preregistrations for Studies 2–5, Study S3, all data, analysis code, and stimulus materials are available at https://osf.io/n8tp6/?view_only=e5bc5f0b11bd4997960d0a73392375c0. All reported studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the corresponding author's institution and comply with all relevant ethical regulations. Participants in Studies 2–5 and S2–S4 gave informed consent.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested H1, which posits that perceiving oneself as witnessing history enhances meaning in life. To inform the design of Study 1, we first conducted an exploratory analysis (Study S1; Appendix VIII) using Google Trends data. Specifically, we examined whether public interest in topics related to meaning in life, as reflected in search volume for the phrase “meaning in life,” increased in the aftermath of landmark historical events. Results revealed a consistent and significant rise in Google searches for “meaning in life” following landmark historical events, regardless of the events' valence. This analysis provided preliminary evidence consistent with H1.

In Study 1, we further tested H1 using big data analytics, examining whether individuals who felt that they were witnessing history (vs. those who did not) expressed increased meaning in life in their social media posts following a landmark historical event. Our analysis centered on Weibo posts related to the death of British Queen Elizabeth II, a monarch whose 70-year reign marked a pivotal era not just for the United Kingdom but for the global community, including China. The passing of Queen Elizabeth II, signifying the

conclusion of a monumental era, attracted immense online attention. It rapidly reached the forefront of public discourse, dominating the trends on Weibo, China's largest microblogging platform.

We identified users who discussed the Queen's death on the day of its occurrence and then gathered posts from these users spanning six weeks before and after the event. Based on dictionary-based dichotomous coding, we measured the use of event-related, witnessing history-related, and meaning-related words in their Weibo posts (Figure 1). Following methodologies from previous research (Goldy et al., 2022), we then identified four stages around the Queen's passing based on the temporal variation in the use of event-related words: "Before Event," "Event Explosion," "Post-Event Echo," and "Event Dissipation." Subsequently, we categorized users into "witnessing history" and "non-witnessing history" clusters according to the use of history-related words across these stages. Using a logistic mixed-effects analysis, we examined the associations of the four narrative stages and user clusters (i.e., as predictors) with the usage of meaning-related words (i.e., as outcome). In accord with H1, we expected that those who witnessed (vs. did not witness) history through the event would evince heightened expression of meaning in life in their posts after the event.

Method

Weibo Data Collection

Primary Weibo Users. The passing of the British Queen Elizabeth II at the age of 96 on September 8, 2022, was a landmark historical event across the globe. Given the time difference, this news reached China in the late hours of September 8 and the early hours of September 9, 2022. Our study concentrated on the public response to this event on Weibo. We collected all the posts that mentioned the event on September 8th and 9th, 2022, using the keywords "British Queen + deceased" and "Elizabeth II + deceased" in Chinese.

To capture genuine and diverse public sentiments, our analysis only included content from non-verified Weibo users. These users typically represent the general populace and smaller entities,² in contrast to the verified accounts of celebrities and organizations. The

² In this context, by "entities," we imply small businesses or local groups without a verified account on Weibo. Unlike big companies, official accounts, or celebrities, the views of entities are regarded as more genuine and less influenced by institutions.

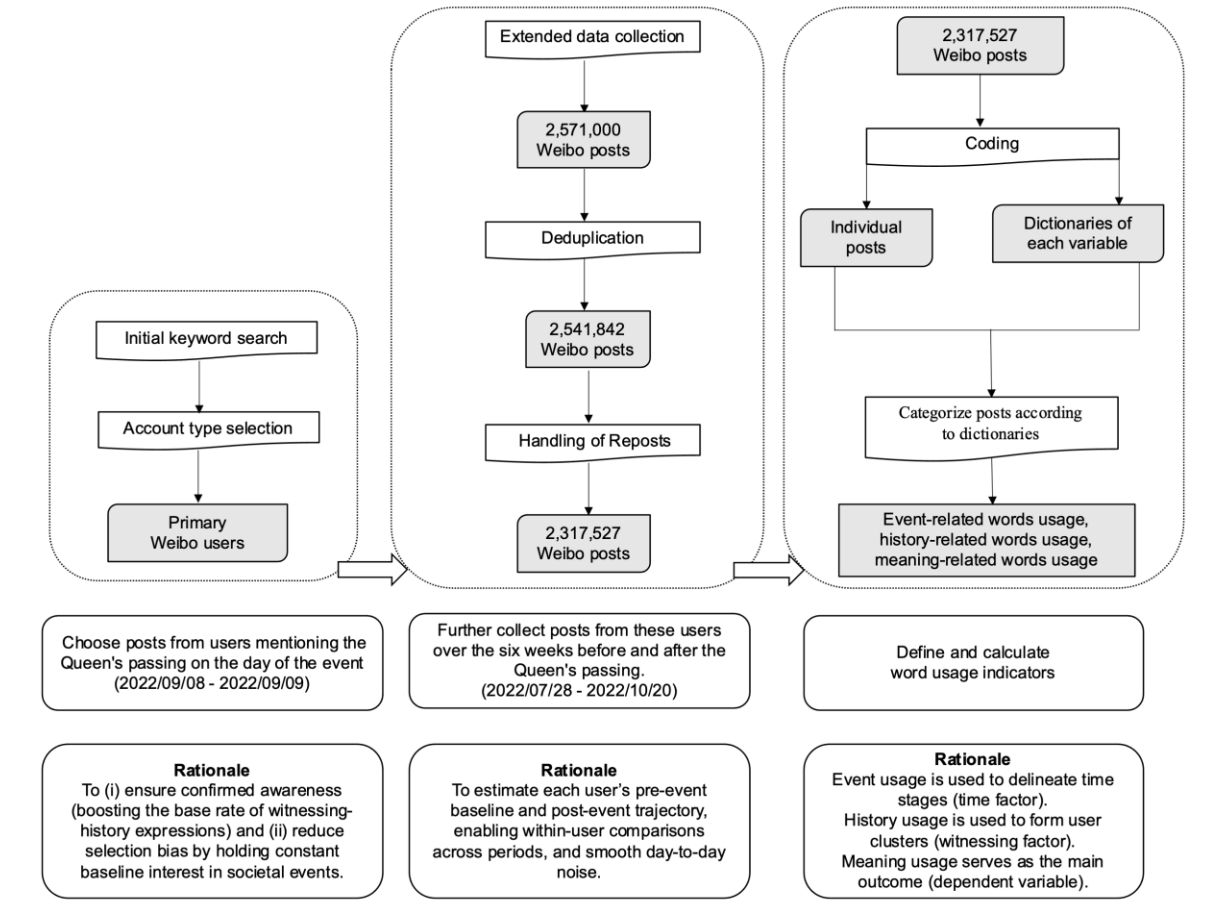
dataset comprised both original posts and reposts. We excluded any text extracted from images, as well as promotional and marketing content. We classified the individuals contributing to our dataset as “primary Weibo users,” ensuring a focus on everyday perspectives.

Extended Data Collection. We expanded our data collection to include posts from “primary Weibo users” over a 12-week period (Goldy et al., 2022), that is, from July 28th to October 20th, 2022. This period covered six weeks before and after the Queen’s passing. The initial collection yielded 2,571,000 Weibo posts, refined to 2,541,842 after removing duplicates. Extending the time span of data allowed us to establish a baseline and track post-event trajectories of language use.

Handling of Reposts. In our effort to ensure data quality, we meticulously filtered reposts lacking substantial content. For reposts containing meaningful new commentary (i.e., substantial reposts), we included in our analysis both the original post and the new commentary by the reposting users. However, we handled reposts without substantial new content (labeled as “转发微博,” “转发,” or “Repost”) as follows: (1) if the original post was empty, we removed the repost from the analysis, and (2) if the original post contained substantial content, we only included the original post while excluding the repost. This approach resulted in a final dataset of 2,317,527 Weibo posts from a diverse sample of 10,956 users, ensuring a high-quality and representative sample (See Figure 1 for an illustration of the procedure we used for Weibo data collection).

Figure 1

An Illustration of Weibo Data Collection and Dictionary-Based Dichotomous Coding in Study 1

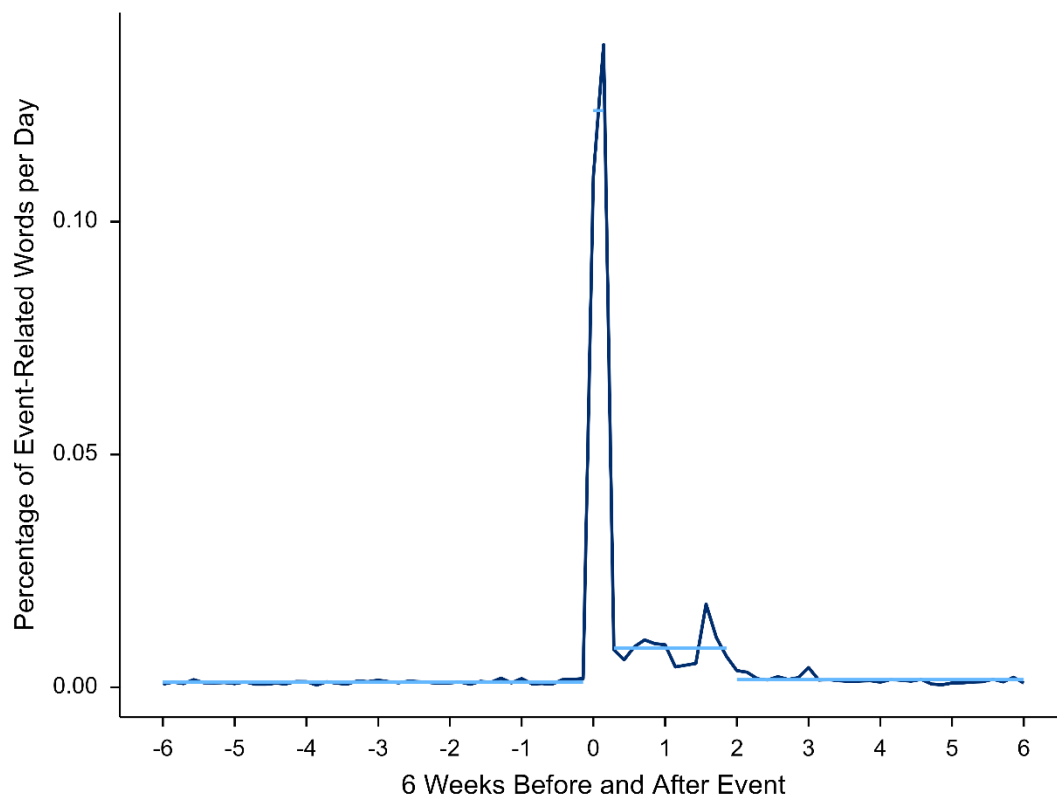


Measures. Before the application of the word usage indicators, we implemented a crucial preprocessing step on all Weibo posts. This step involved the removal of emojis, hashtags, punctuation, and URLs from the text (Duong & Nguyen-Thi, 2021). Such preprocessing was essential to ascertain data cleanliness and integrity, thereby enabling a more precise and reliable analysis.

Drawing on methods from previous research on tweet analysis (Goldy et al., 2022), we applied dichotomous coding to each Weibo post. This coding system involved categorizing posts based on whether they contained specific terms from our tailor-made dictionaries. We coded posts featuring at least one term from these dictionaries as “1,” and those lacking any such term as “0.” Specifically, we relied on three dictionaries. We labeled

the first one as the *Event-Related Dictionary*. Focused on Queen Elizabeth II's passing, it included the terms "British Queen/Queen of the UK" and "Elizabeth II" to filter posts directly related to the event. Of the posts, 0.81% ($n = 18,845$) contained relevant terms. We labelled the second dictionary as the *Witnessing History Dictionary*. It aimed to capture users' sentiments of witnessing an event of historical significance, which we employed to identify clusters of users with different response profiles in regard to witnessing history (i.e., distinguishing users who felt they were witnessing history during the event from those who did not). This dictionary comprised phrases such as "major historical event," "epoch-making," and "end of an era," highlighting the perception of the event's historical significance. Of the posts, 0.28% ($n = 6,479$) contained relevant terms. Finally, we labeled the third dictionary as the *Meaning Dictionary*. It concentrated on the existential reflections, encompassing phrases like "meaning of life," "meaning in existence," and "purpose of life," aiming to identify discussions that delved into life's meanings. Of the posts, 2.26% ($n = 52,279$) contained relevant terms. We detail the development of the dictionaries in the Online Supplemental Material, Appendix II.

Analytic Strategy. Following established methodologies (Goldy et al., 2022), we identified the four narrative stages and two user clusters before conducting the focal analysis. To determine distinct stages of public attention to the event, we calculated the daily proportion of Weibo posts containing words from the Event-Related Dictionary over the 12-week period. We then employed change-point analysis using the R package *changept* (Version 2.2.4; Killick & Eckley, 2014) to detect significant shifts in these proportions over time. This analysis revealed four distinct stages in public interest surrounding the Queen's passing: "Before Event," "Event Explosion," "Post-Event Echo," and "Event Dissipation" (see Figure 2 for an illustration of the results; see Online Supplemental Material, Appendix III for detailed methods of stage identification).

Figure 2*Change-Point Analyses Results in Study 1*

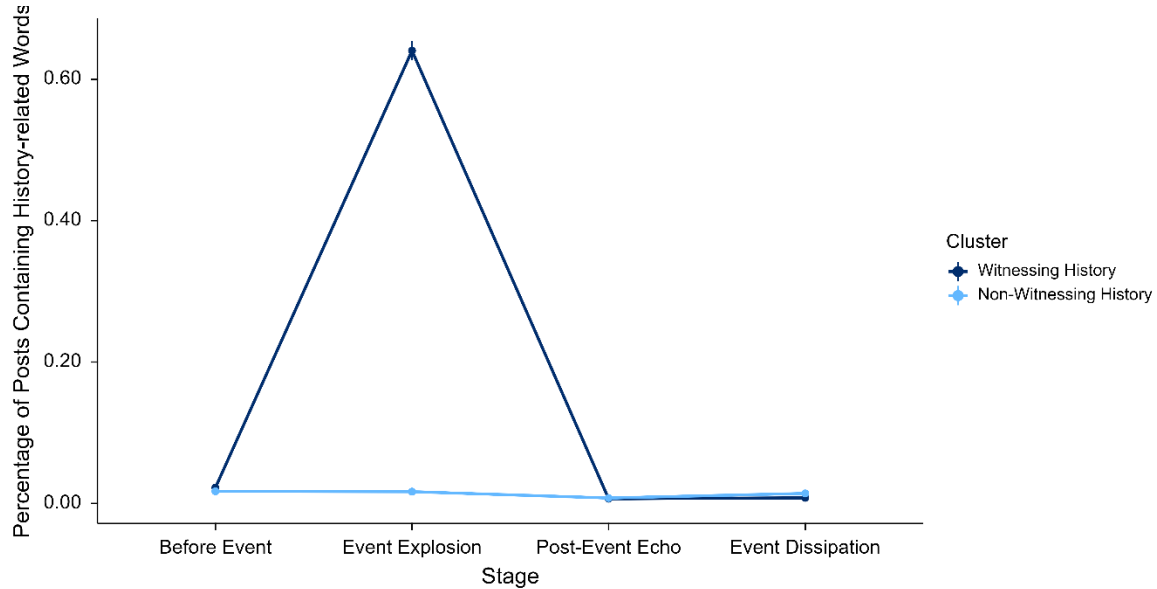
Note: Results of change-point analyses show the percentage of event-related words used per day over time. Blue lines indicate periods of elevated or decreased event-related word use.

Next, we categorized users based on their usage of words from the Witnessing History Dictionary, clustering them according to different patterns in their usage across the four stages. After initial data preprocessing, we applied the *k*-means clustering method via the R package *NbClust* (Version 3.0.1; Charrad et al., 2014), which initially suggested three clusters. However, closer inspection revealed that one cluster consisted of only a single user whose posting behavior was atypical. Thus, we decided to remove this user and their posts and re-run the clustering analysis, which suggested a 2-cluster solution. We labeled the two clusters as “witnessing history” ($n = 1,197$ users) and “non-witnessing history” ($n = 7,358$ users). We subsequently examined these two clusters for distinct temporal patterns in their application of Witnessing History Dictionary words across stages (Figure 3) to verify the face validity of the classification (see Online Supplemental Material, Appendix III, for detailed

methodology).

Figure 3

Witnessing-History-Related Words Usage Over Stages in Study 1



Note: The percentage of Weibo posts containing witnessing-history-related words in each cluster across four stages is displayed. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. $N = 8,555$ Weibo users.

Given that Weibo posts are nested within users, we executed a logistic mixed-effects model to examine the joint effects of stages and clusters (witnessing history vs. non-witnessing history) on meaning-related word usage, identifying the shifts across stages between the two clusters. Crucially, we controlled for the total number of Weibo posts made by each user by including it as a covariate, ensuring that our findings reflect genuine variations in sentiments rather than artifacts of differing posting frequency.

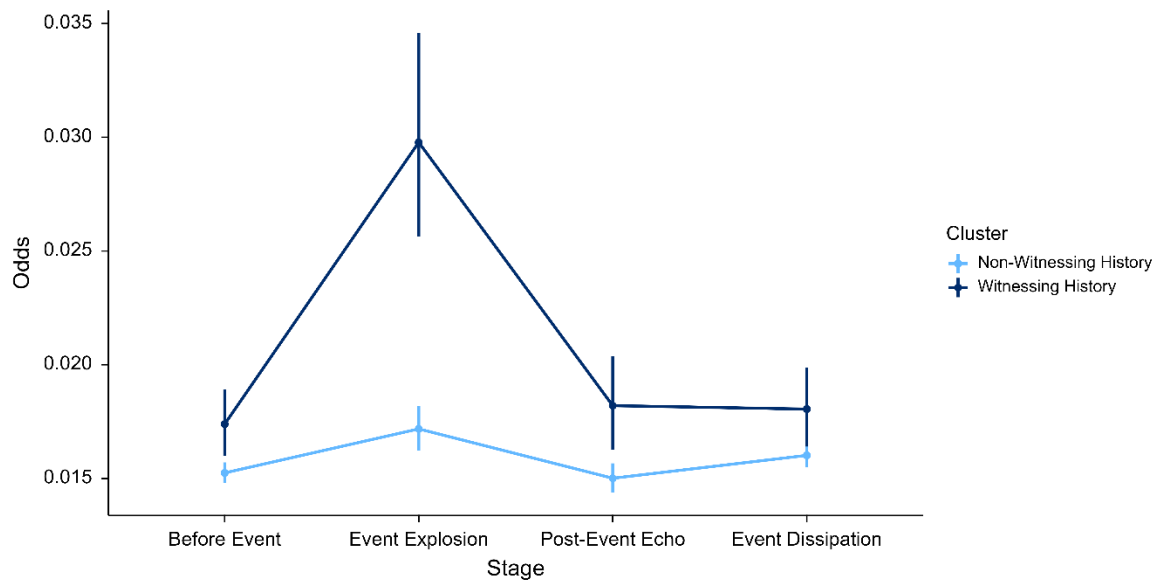
Results and Discussion

We conducted logistic mixed-effects models to examine how the use of meaning-related words varied across event stages and between users who witnessed history (i.e., the witnessing history cluster) and those who did not (i.e., the non-witnessing history cluster). The model revealed significant main effects of stage ($\chi^2[3] = 45.16, p < .001$) and cluster ($\chi^2[1] = 8.67, p < .001$), indicating that meaning-related expression varied across stages and

was generally higher among witnessing history (than non-witnessing history) users. Importantly, these effects were qualified by a significant Stage $\times$ Cluster interaction ($\chi^2[3] = 31.19, p < .001$), suggesting that the temporal pattern differed between clusters (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Odds of Posting Meaning-Related Words Over Stages by Clusters in Study 1



Note: The figure displays the odds of Weibo posts containing meaning-related words for each user cluster across four stages. Odds are calculated as the ratio of the probability of occurrence to non-occurrence. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Data are based on a logistic mixed-effects model. $N = 8,555$ Weibo users.

We further examined the interaction by testing three contrasts. First, to evaluate whether the Event Explosion stage elicited greater meaning-related expression than the other stages, we contrasted it with the Before Event, Post-Event Echo, and Dissipation stages pooled. The interaction between this contrast and cluster was significant ($\chi^2[1] = 29.79, z = 5.46, p < .001$). Simple effects analysis revealed that within the witnessing history cluster, Weibo users were significantly more likely to use meaning-related words during the Event Explosion stage than during the other three stages pooled (OR = 1.68, 95% CI [1.46, 1.93], $p < .001$). Among non-witnessing users, this increase was smaller but also significant (OR = 1.11, 95% CI [1.06, 1.17], $p < .001$). Moreover, during the Event Explosion stage, the odds of

meaning-related expression were 73% higher for witnessing history users compared to non-witnessing users (OR = 1.73, 95% CI [1.48, 2.03], $p < .001$). In contrast, across the other three stages, the corresponding odds difference was only 15% (OR = 1.15, 95% CI [1.06, 1.24], $p = .001$). These results indicated that the increase in meaning-related expression during the Event Explosion period was more pronounced among those who witnessed history.

Next, we tested whether the Before Event stage differed from the two post-peak stages (Post-Event Echo and Dissipation) pooled. This contrast yielded no significant interaction with cluster ($\chi^2[1] = 7.65$, $z = -0.30$, $p = .76$), suggesting both clusters showed a similar post-peak regression toward Before Event levels of meaning-related expression.

Finally, to examine post-peak patterns in meaning-related expressions, we compared the Post-Event Echo and Dissipation stages directly. Again, we observed no significant interaction ($\chi^2[1] = 1.96$, $z = 1.40$, $p = .16$), indicating parallel post-peak trends across clusters. Together, these results suggest that witnessing history selectively amplified meaning-related expression at the Event Explosion stage, but not before or after this peak.

Given that the interaction between cluster and the contrast comparing the Event Explosion stage with the pooled other stages was the only significant Contrast $\times$ Cluster interaction, we conducted additional pairwise comparisons to provide more fine-grained insight into this effect. Within the witnessing history cluster, the odds of using meaning-related words during the Event Explosion stage were significantly higher than during the Before Event (OR = 1.71, 95% CI [1.48, 1.98]), Post-Event Echo (OR = 1.64, 95% CI [1.39, 1.93]), and Dissipation (OR = 1.65, 95% CI [1.42, 1.92]) stages ($ps < .001$). Among non-witnessing users, the increases were more modest, with odds ratios ranging from 1.07 to 1.14 ($ps < .03$). These results further demonstrate that the increase in meaning-related expression during the Event Explosion period, relative to other stages, was more pronounced among those who witnessed history compared to those who did not.

Relying on big data analytics, Study 1 tested and supported H1, namely, that the experience of witnessing history is linked to meaning in life in real-world contexts.

Importantly, these effects could not be explained by death reflection, another factor known to

contribute to meaning in life (King & Hicks, 2021), as participants in both the witnessing history cluster and non-witnessing history cluster were aware of Queen Elizabeth's passing.

Yet, despite offering compelling insights, Study 1 precludes causal inferences. Also, we examined meaning in life as a unitary construct, without differentiating between the presence of and search for meaning. Finally, the dictionary-based approach to index meaning in life may not fully capture individuals' deeper contemplation of meaning. To address these limitations, we employed experimental designs in Studies 2–4 and distinguished between self-reported presence of meaning and search for meaning.

Study 2

In Study 1, we provided evidence that witnessing history is linked to the expression of meaning in life (H1). In experimental Study 2 (https://aspredicted.org/RPP_5DT), we tested H2, namely that connectedness to history and a broadened perspective mediate the effects of witnessing history on the presence of meaning and search for meaning, respectively. We instructed participants to describe in writing either a societal event that made them feel like witnessing history (witnessing history condition) or a societal event of concern to them (control condition). Next, we assessed connectedness to history and a broadened perspective. Subsequently, we assessed both the presence of meaning and search for meaning. Finally, we assessed positive and negative affect to determine whether the observed effects were independent of affective states.

Method

Participants

A power analysis via G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) suggested that at least 470 participants were needed to detect a small-to-medium effect size ($d = 0.30$) in a between-subjects design with power of .90 ($\alpha = .05$). As preregistered, we recruited 600 Chinese university students. We excluded 33 for failing one or more attention checks. The final sample consisted of 567 participants (374 women, 193 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.69$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.40$ years, 9 undisclosed). We randomly assigned them to the witnessing history ($n = 288$) or control ($n = 279$) condition.

Materials and Procedure

We manipulated witnessing history with a writing task. As previously described, in the witnessing history condition, participants wrote about a societal event that evoked a sense of witnessing history, whereas in the control condition, participants wrote about a societal event they found concerning.

We assessed connectedness to history with two items that we constructed for the purposes of this study: “I’m connected to history” and “I’m part of big history” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.53$; $r[565] = .74$, $p < .001$). We assessed a broadened perspective with two items that we also constructed: “I can reevaluate my life by placing it within a broader perspective” and “In thinking about my life at this moment, I am taking a very broadened view” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.30$; $r[565] = .73$, $p < .001$).

We measured presence of meaning ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 1.58$; $\alpha = .90$) and search for meaning ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 1.35$; $\alpha = .84$) with adapted items from the Presence of Meaning in Life and Search for Meaning in Life subscales of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*).³ The presence of meaning items were: “My life is meaningful,” “My life is valuable,” and “My life is worth living.” The search for meaning items were: “I want to do something that makes my life meaningful,” “I want to search for meaning in my life,” and “I want to think more deeply about the meaning in my life.” To ascertain that connectedness to history and a broadened perspective are distinct constructs, we conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Results supported the distinctiveness of connectedness to history and broadened perspective. A second CFA confirmed that presence of meaning and search for meaning are also distinct constructs (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix IV).

We assessed affect with the International Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short

³ As mentioned in the preregistration, we exploratorily assessed willingness to search for meaning in four activities: “Engaging in volunteer activities and social causes,” “Taking adventures and pushing your limits,” “Reading philosophical books,” and “Spending more time in solitude for reflection” (1 = *much lower than usual*, 9 = *much higher than usual*; $M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.25$; $\alpha = .65$). Participants in the witnessing history ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 1.27$) and control ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 1.23$) conditions did not differ in terms of their willingness to search for meaning in these four activities, $t(565) = 1.26$, $p = .21$, $d = 0.11$, 95% CI $[-0.06, 0.27]$. Future research may consider employing a representative and diverse array of activities to provide a more accurate assessment.

Form (I-PANAS-SF; Thompson, 2007). Participants rated their current affect (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) in terms of five positive adjectives (active, determined, attentive, inspired, alert) and five negative adjectives (afraid, nervous, upset, hostile, ashamed). We created separate indices for positive affect ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.02$; $\alpha = .83$) and negative affect ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.10$; $\alpha = .85$). A 1-item manipulation check concluded the experimental procedure: Participants rated the extent to which the event they described at the beginning held great historical significance (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*; $M = 7.58$, $SD = 1.84$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 8.20$, $SD = 1.12$) perceived more historical significance in the event they described than controls ($M = 6.94$, $SD = 2.19$), $t(411.07) = 8.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$, 95% CI [0.56, 0.89]. The manipulation was effective.

Meaning in Life

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 7.34$, $SD = 1.44$) reported higher presence of meaning than those in the control condition ($M = 6.93$, $SD = 1.69$), $t(545.69) = 3.12$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.43]). Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 7.58$, $SD = 1.28$) also reported greater search for meaning than controls ($M = 7.27$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(565) = 2.69$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.39]. The results supported H1.

Mediation

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.28$) reported greater connectedness to history than those in the control condition ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.69$), $t(517.17) = 5.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.46$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.63]). Also, participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.22$) reported having a broader perspective than controls ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(553.05) = 2.11$, $p = .035$, $d = 0.18$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.34]. Further, connectedness to history mediated the effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.15, 0.35], and a broadened perspective mediated the effect of witnessing history on the search for meaning, $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.23] (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix XII, Figures S4 and S5). The results

are consistent with H2.

Controlling for Covariates

Controlling for affective states did not alter the significant effects of witnessing history on the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. In addition, the proposed mediations remained significant after including affective states as parallel mediators (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix V). The observed effects could not be attributed to different levels of positive affect or negative affect. We replicated these findings with alternative measures of affective states and meaning in life (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix X, Supplementary Study S3).

Study 3

In Study 2, we manipulated witnessing history through a writing task, instructing participants to write either a societal event that made them feel they were witnessing history or one that they were concerned about. However, variation in the type of events across conditions introduces potential confounds, potentially compromising the experiment's internal validity. In Study 3 (https://aspredicted.org/53K_5JM), we addressed this limitation by testing whether framing the same event as either being of historical significance or not (i.e., holding the event constant but varying its portrayal) would lead to an enhanced presence of meaning and search for meaning. Specifically, we focused on COVID-19, which emerged in late 2019 and rapidly escalated into a pandemic. It affected billions of people, causing health risks and loss of loved ones, disrupting daily routines, transforming social interactions, and necessitating swift adaptation to new modes of living and working. Recognized as one of the deadliest pandemics in modern history (Harteloh & van Mechelen, 2024), the COVID-19 pandemic holds high potential of being framed as a landmark historical event that evokes the sense of witnessing history. We conducted Study 3 on November 29, 2022, just prior to the lifting of quarantine policies in China. The prolonged effects of COVID-19, combined with stringent quarantine measures, contributed to psychological distress (Daly & Robinson, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020) and fatigue (Bartoszek et al., 2020; Joli et al., 2022). We sought to explore whether adopting a witnessing history perspective could provide a potential buffer against these adverse effects. Centered on the COVID-19 pandemic, participants either read a

paragraph depicting it as a landmark historical event (witnessing history condition) or a societal event that impacted people's lives (control condition), and listed their thoughts. Then, they responded to measures of connectedness to history, broadened perspective, presence of meaning, and search for meaning.

Method

Participants

We carried out Study 3 in China in November 2022, during a pivotal phase between the renewed enforcement of the “dynamic zero-COVID” policy in October and its nationwide termination in December, a time when the pandemic dominated public discourse. Compared to participants in Study 2, who recalled a recent unfolding historical event, participants in Study 3 were experiencing a significant historical event in real time. Therefore, we anticipated a larger statistical effect than that observed in Study 2. A power analysis via G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) suggested that at least 172 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size ($d = 0.50$) in a between-subjects design with power of .90 ($\alpha = .05$). As preregistered, we recruited 180 Chinese participants via the platform Credamo. Credamo workers reflect a diverse demographic composition, encompassing a broad spectrum of regions and socioeconomic backgrounds across China. All participants passed an attention check, yielding a final $N = 180$ (113 women, 67 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 29.24$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.76$ years). We randomly assigned them to the witnessing history ($n = 88$) or control ($n = 92$) condition.

Materials and Procedure

We manipulated witnessing history with a writing task. In the witnessing history condition, we framed the pandemic as a landmark historical event. Participants read the following paragraph and then described in writing how the pandemic made them feel like witnessing history:

In March 2020, the World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a ‘pandemic.’ This pandemic has led to severe global social and economic disruption and is considered the most serious crisis faced by humanity since World War II. COVID-19 has altered the life trajectories of millions of people, changing the course of human history. The spread and prevalence of COVID-19 have made us witnesses to history, with each day of life

becoming a testament to history.

In the control condition, we framed the pandemic as a societal event that impacted people's lives. Participants read the following paragraph and then described in writing how the pandemic impacted their lives:

In March 2020, the World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a 'pandemic.' This pandemic has led to severe global social and economic disruption, affecting the lives of millions and altering the trajectories of people's lives.

We assessed connectedness to history with the same two items as in Study 2 ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 0.99$; $r[178] = .58$, $p < .001$). We assessed a broadened perspective with two items adapted and expanded from those used in Study 2, with the aim of more comprehensively capturing the construct. The items were: "I take a step back from the event and place it in a broader perspective," and "In thinking about my life at this moment, I am taking a very broad view rather than focusing on a few specific moments" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.24$; $r[178] = .65$, $p < .001$). We assessed the presence of meaning ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 1.69$; $\alpha = .92$) and search for meaning ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 1.40$; $\alpha = .80$) as in Study 2. Finally, participants rated their agreement with the statement that the COVID-19 pandemic represented an event of great historical significance (1 = *strongly agree*, 11 = *strongly disagree*; $M = 8.96$, $SD = 1.90$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 9.49$, $SD = 1.49$) perceived more historical significance in the COVID-19 pandemic than controls ($M = 8.46$, $SD = 2.10$), $t(164.39) = 3.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.86]. The manipulation was effective.

Meaning in Life

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 7.11$, $SD = 1.33$) reported higher presence of meaning than those in the control condition ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 1.85$), $t(165.40) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.94]. Additionally, participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 7.41$, $SD = 0.98$) reported higher search for meaning compared to

controls ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(149.87) = 3.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.86]. The results replicate Study 2 findings in support of H1.

Mediation

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 0.71$) reported higher connectedness to history than controls ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(154.28) = 4.54$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.67$, 95% CI [0.38, 0.97]. Further, participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.95$) reported a broader perspective than controls ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(162.24) = 4.19$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.62$, 95% CI [0.33, 0.92].

Connectedness to history mediated the effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI = [0.06, 0.48], and a broadened perspective mediated the effect of witnessing history on the search for meaning, $b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.18, 0.58] (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix XII, Figures S6 and S7). The results are consistent with H2. The effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning and search for meaning in life, as well as the mediational pathways via connectedness to history and broadened perspective, remained significant even after controlling for the affective valence of participants' COVID-19 narratives, which we coded (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix VI for detailed analyses).

Alternative explanations for the findings are plausible. First, the higher meaning in life in the witnessing history condition than in the control condition might be attributable to a decrease in meaning in life in the control condition rather than (or in addition to) an increase in meaning in life in the witnessing history condition. That is, recalling the impacts of COVID-19 on daily life in the control condition may have dampened meaning in life compared to a neutral baseline. To address this possibility, we introduced in Study 4 a neutral control condition that was unrelated to COVID-19. Second, the effect of witnessing history might stem from increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, or reduced self-diminishment. Viewing oneself as a witness to history might conduce to positive affect, a well-established source of meaning in life (King & Hicks, 2021), or buffer against negative affect and a sense of self-diminishment, both of which undermine meaning in life (Rivera et al., 2020; Wen & Miao, 2022). We addressed this possibility in Study 4.

Study 4

We had three objectives in Study 4 (https://aspredicted.org/MPY_WQZ). First, we sought to replicate the findings of Studies 2–3 in a larger sample. Second, we introduced a neutral condition (i.e., the daily-control condition) to rule out the possibility that the observed higher meaning in life in the witnessing history condition is merely due to recalling the impact of COVID-19 on daily life, thus dampening meaning in life. Third, we tested the alternative explanations pertaining to (increased) positive affect and (reduced) negative affect as well as self-diminishment.

Method

Participants

As preregistered, we recruited 1,000 Chinese Credamo workers. Thirteen failed the attention check question, yielding a final sample of 987 participants (662 women, 325 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.95$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.75$ years, 2 undisclosed). We randomly assigned them to the pandemic-history ($n = 325$), pandemic-control ($n = 332$), or daily-control ($n = 330$) condition.

Materials and Procedure

We manipulated witnessing history with a writing task. The pandemic-history condition and the pandemic-control condition were the same as in Study 3. Additionally, we introduced a daily-control condition, in which participants recalled their typical activities on past Wednesday mornings.

We used the same instruments as in Study 3 to measure connectedness to history ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.43$; $r[985] = .79$, $p < .001$), a broadened perspective ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.24$; $r[985] = .67$, $p < .001$), the presence of meaning ($M = 6.89$, $SD = 1.55$; $\alpha = .90$), the search for meaning ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 1.31$; $\alpha = .83$), and perceived historical significance of the event (i.e., the manipulation check; $M = 7.71$, $SD = 2.84$). We administered the same I-PANAS-SF (Thompson, 2007) as in Study 2 to measure positive affect ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.82$; $\alpha = .83$) and negative affect ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.84$; $\alpha = .79$). We also incorporated two items to measure self-diminishment (“I feel small” and “I feel insignificant”; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). We averaged them to create an index of self-diminishment ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.36$; $r[985] = .36$, $p < .001$).

Results

Manipulation Check

A one-way Analysis of Variance yielded a significant effect of condition on perceived historical significance, $F(2, 984) = 441.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .47, 90\% \text{ CI} = [.44, .56]$.

Analytical comparisons (p -value adjusted based on the Bonferroni method) revealed that participants in the pandemic-history condition ($M = 9.49, SD = 1.31$) rated events as more historically significant than those in the pandemic-control condition ($M = 8.67, SD = 1.89$), $t(984) = 5.09, p < .001, d = 0.40, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.21, 0.58]$, and those in the daily-control condition ($M = 5.00, SD = 2.74$), $t(984) = 27.85, p < .001, d = 2.18, 95\% \text{ CI} [1.99, 2.36]$. Moreover, participants in the pandemic-control condition reported higher perceived significance than those in the daily-control condition, $t(984) = 22.88, p < .001, d = 1.78, 95\% \text{ CI} [1.59, 1.97]$. The manipulation was effective.

Meaning in Life

We observed a significant effect of condition on the presence of meaning, $F(2, 984) = 49.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09, 90\% \text{ CI} = [.06, .12]$. Participants in the pandemic-history condition ($M = 7.48, SD = 1.08$) reported more presence of meaning than those in the pandemic-control condition ($M = 6.87, SD = 1.44$), $t(984) = 5.27, p < .001, d = 0.41, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.22, 0.60]$, and those in the daily-control condition ($M = 6.33, SD = 1.82$), $t(984) = 9.96, p < .001, d = 0.78, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.59, 0.97]$. Participants in the pandemic-control condition also reported a higher level of presence of meaning than those in the daily-control condition, $t(984) = 4.72, p < .001, d = 0.37, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.18, 0.55]$.

Similarly, the effect of condition on the search for meaning was significant, $F(2, 984) = 47.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09, 90\% \text{ CI} = [.06, .12]$. Participants in the pandemic-history condition ($M = 7.41, SD = 0.98$) reported more search for meaning than those in the pandemic-control condition ($M = 7.17, SD = 1.24$), $t(984) = 2.44, p = .044, d = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.004, 0.38]$, and those in the daily-control condition ($M = 6.49, SD = 1.50$), $t(984) = 9.41, p < .001, d = 0.74, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.55, 0.92]$. In addition, participants in the pandemic-control condition reported a higher level of search for meaning than those in the daily-control condition, $t(984) = 7.00, p < .001, d = 0.54, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.36, 0.73]$.

Mediation

Condition Effects on Mediators. As hypothesized, we observed a significant effect of condition on connectedness to history, $F(2, 984) = 201.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .29$, 90% CI = [.25, .33], and a broadened perspective, $F(2, 984) = 46.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$, 90% CI = [.06, .12]. Participants in the pandemic-history condition ($M = 5.80, SD = 0.86$) reported more connectedness to history than those in the pandemic-control condition ($M = 5.49, SD = 0.99$), $t(984) = 3.32, p = .003, d = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.45], and those in the daily-control condition ($M = 4.03, SD = 1.63$), $t(984) = 18.76, p < .001, d = 1.47$, 95% CI [1.28, 1.65]. Also, participants in the pandemic-control condition reported more connectedness to history than those in the daily-control condition, $t(984) = 15.52, p < .001, d = 1.21$, 95% CI [1.02, 1.39]. Likewise, participants in the pandemic-history condition ($M = 5.41, SD = 0.89$) adopted a broadened perspective than those in the pandemic-control condition ($M = 5.07, SD = 1.12$), $t(984) = 3.68, p < .001, d = 0.29$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.47], and those in the daily-control condition ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.47$), $t(984) = 9.60, p < .001, d = 0.75$, 95% CI [0.56, 0.94]. Participants in the pandemic-control condition also adopted a broadened perspective than those in the daily-control condition, $t(984) = 5.96, p < .001, d = 0.46$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.65].

Analytic Strategy and Dummy Coding of Condition. We proceeded to examine the proposed mediation models. Given that the independent variable (i.e., condition) had three levels, we employed a dummy coding strategy to evaluate specific comparisons between conditions. We introduced the daily-control condition in Study 4 because we were concerned that the pandemic-control condition, which instructs participants to recall the impact of COVID-19 on daily life, could reduce meaning in life compared to a neutral baseline. However, results indicated that this concern was unwarranted: both the presence of meaning and search for meaning were significantly higher in the pandemic-control condition than in the daily-control condition. The pandemic-control condition, then, is the more stringent of the two control conditions, and this results pattern informed the dummy coding scheme that we implemented in the mediation analysis. Specifically, we designated the pandemic-control condition as the reference category (i.e., coded '0' on both dummy variables). For the first dummy variable, we coded the daily-control, pandemic-control, and pandemic-history

conditions as 0, 0, and 1, respectively. For the second dummy variable, we coded these conditions as -1, 0, and 0.⁴ The first dummy variable compares the pandemic-history condition to the pandemic-control condition, testing the effect of witnessing history as in Study 3. The second dummy variable compares the two control conditions and informs the question of why meaning in life was higher in the pandemic-control than daily-control condition. In all mediation models, we included positive affect, negative affect, and self-diminishment as parallel mediators to account for alternative explanations. Although our proposed mediators consistently explained the observed effects as hypothesized, the alternative mediators showed more complex and inconsistent patterns of results. We provided full results and interpretations in the Online Supplemental Material, Appendix VII.

Mediation of the Presence of Meaning. We first examined whether connectedness to history mediated the effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning. We entered the dummy variables as independent variables, connectedness to history, positive affect, negative affect, and self-diminishment as parallel mediators, and the presence of meaning as the dependent variable (PROCESS Model 4, 5,000 bootstraps; Online Supplemental Material, Appendix XII, Figure S8). Comparing the pandemic-history condition with the pandemic-control condition (Dummy 1), as hypothesized, the indirect effect via connectedness to history was significant, $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.09], revealing that witnessing history (relative to pandemic-control condition) enhanced the presence of meaning through increased connectedness to history, even after accounting for alternative mediators. The indirect effects through increased positive affect, reduced negative affect, and reduced self-diminishment were also significant (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix VII for details).

Comparing pandemic-control and daily-control conditions (Dummy 2), the indirect effect via connectedness to history was significant, $b = 0.26$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.15, 0.38]. The indirect effects through decreased positive affect, increased negative affect, and

⁴ We used “-1” in the second dummy variable to reverse the contrast from “daily-control minus pandemic-control” to “pandemic-control minus daily-control.” This only affects the sign of the coefficients and indirect effects, not their significance or magnitude. The reversal clarifies interpretation and aligns with our framing of results (i.e., why meaning in life was higher in the pandemic-control than daily-control condition).

increased self-diminishment were also significant, countervailing the indirect effect via connectedness to history and dampening meaning in life (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix VII for details). These results account for the elevated levels of meaning in life observed in the pandemic-control condition relative to the daily-control condition, an effect solely attributable to heightened connectedness to history.

Mediation of Search for Meaning. Next, we examined whether a broadened perspective mediates the effect of witnessing history on the search for meaning. We entered dummy variables as independent variables, a broadened perspective, positive affect, negative affect, and self-diminishment as parallel mediators, and the search for meaning as the dependent variable (PROCESS Model 4, 5000 iterations; Online Supplemental Material, Appendix XII, Figure S9). As hypothesized, comparing the pandemic-history condition with the pandemic-control condition, the indirect effect of a broadened perspective was significant, $b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.14], indicating that witnessing history (vs. the pandemic-control condition) enhanced the search for meaning in life through increased broadened perspective, even when including alternative mediators. The indirect effect via increased positive affect was also significant, the effect through decreased negative affect was significant but in the opposite direction, and the effect through decreased self-diminishment was not significant (see Online Supplemental Material, Appendix VII for interpretation).

Comparing pandemic-control and daily-control conditions, the indirect effect of a broadened perspective was significant, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI = [0.08, 0.22]. Additionally, the indirect effect via increased negative affect was significant, the indirect effect through decreased positive affect was significant but in the opposite direction, and the indirect effect through decreased self-diminishment was not significant (see Online Supplemental Material, Appendix VII for interpretation). These results explain the higher levels of search for meaning in life observed in the pandemic-control condition relative to the daily-control condition, an effect attributable to a broadened perspective and more negative affect.

In summary, Study 4 replicated the results of Studies 2–3. These findings reveal that the observed heightened meaning in life obtained in Study 3 was not due to reduced meaning in life in the control condition, as participants in the pandemic-history condition reported significantly higher levels of the presence of meaning and search for meaning compared to those in both the pandemic-control and daily-control conditions. The findings also rule out alternative explanations that the observed difference is exclusively due to increases in positive affect or reductions in negative affect and self-diminishment, as the proposed mediation effects held after controlling for these variables.

Notably, participants in the pandemic-control condition also reported higher levels of both the presence of meaning and search for meaning relative to those in the daily-control condition. This pattern may reflect the profoundness of COVID-19; merely mentioning it could have activated participants' awareness of its historical relevance and a sense of witnessing history, producing a similar (albeit weaker) effect to the pandemic-history condition. This explanation is bolstered by mediation analyses, which indicated that increases in the presence of meaning and search for meaning in the pandemic-control condition (vs. the daily-control condition) were also mediated by connectedness to history and a broadened perspective, respectively.

Study 5

In Studies 1–4, we primarily investigated individuals' responses to witnessing history by virtue of being present during a landmark historical event. In Study 5 (https://aspredicted.org/9ZN_LT8), we extended this inquiry to a more accessible and common experience: indirectly witnessing history by visiting the site of a landmark historical event. We theorized that such a visit functions as a potent form of witnessing history by situating individuals within the physical environment where history unfolded, evoking a sensory and affective impression akin to being in the midst of the event itself. We anticipated that the effect on meaning in life would emerge not only from directly living through the event, but also from the immediate and visceral experience of “standing where history was made.” We conceptualize this as an indirect yet perceptually immediate form of witnessing.

We tested whether such indirect witnessing, operationalized as visiting a historical site,

enhances both the presence of and search for meaning in life (H1). Further, we hypothesized that these effects would be mediated by heightened feelings of connectedness to history and the adoption of a broadened perspective, respectively (H2). To test these hypotheses, we conducted a field study at Hunan University, China. Participants were approached at one of two proximate locations to minimize environmental confounds while avoiding interference between experimental conditions. In the experimental condition, participants were at the University's Science Building, a site of significant historical events that occurred before their birth. In the control condition, participants were surveyed at a nearby park. We expected for participants in the witnessing history condition (Science Building) to report greater presence and search for meaning compared to those in the control condition, and for these effects to be explained by connectedness to history and broadened perspective, respectively.

Method

Participants

As preregistered, we sought to recruit as many participants as possible within the specified time window (July 25 to 27, 2023). Six research assistants (three at each site), unaware of the hypotheses, approached visitors at random, either at the historical site (witnessing history condition) or a local park (control condition), and asked them to take part in a brief survey. Almost all visitors consented. We recruited 211 Chinese participants (119 women, 92 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 26.84$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.46$ years, 39 undisclosed). Of them, 108 were in the witnessing history condition and 103 in the control condition.

Materials and Procedure

We harnessed the historical significance of the Science Building at Hunan University. This site holds a distinguished place in Chinese history, being one of the venues for the Second Sino-Japanese War surrender ceremony, where memorandums by Japanese forces were signed. The building's past imbues it with a unique historical aura, making it a suitable location for our investigation into the effects of indirect experiences of witnessing history. Research assistants approached visitors at either the Science Building or a nearby local park located approximately 100 meters away. Importantly, the Science Building currently serves as an office space and is relatively unknown to the general public as a historic site. Therefore,

it is unlikely that participants approached near the building systematically differed from those approached near the park. In fact, most participants were local residents or university students who happened to be passing by either location. They were provided with a brief introduction to the corresponding site (detailed in Stimulus Materials) and invited to complete a brief questionnaire.

We assessed connectedness to history ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.37$; $r[209] = .81$, $p < .001$) and a broadened perspective ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.26$; $r[209] = .86$, $p < .001$) as in Study 4. Further, we assessed the presence of meaning ($M = 7.92$, $SD = 1.48$; $\alpha = .94$) and search for meaning ($M = 7.69$, $SD = 1.55$; $\alpha = .93$) as in Studies 2–4. Finally, as a manipulation check, we instructed participants to indicate the extent to which they believed the site they just visited holds historical significance (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; $M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.17$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 0.77$) perceived more historical significance in the site they visited than controls ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(159.30) = 5.36$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$, 95% CI [0.47, 1.02]. The manipulation was successful.

Meaning in Life

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 8.23$, $SD = 1.13$) reported higher presence of meaning relative to controls ($M = 7.60$, $SD = 1.72$), $t(175.13) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.43$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.70]. Additionally, participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 7.94$, $SD = 1.26$) reported higher search for meaning than controls ($M = 7.42$, $SD = 1.78$), $t(182.97) = 2.46$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.34$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.61].

Mediation

Participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.05$) experienced higher connectedness to history than controls ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(177.98) = 4.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.56$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.83]. Further, participants in the witnessing history condition ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.04$) experienced a broader perspective than controls ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(186.22) = 2.78$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.66]. Moreover, connectedness to history mediated the effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning, $b = 0.48$, $SE = 0.13$,

95% CI = [0.24, 0.76], and a broadened perspective mediated the effect of witnessing history on the search for meaning $b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI = [0.12, 0.68] (Online Supplemental Material, Appendix XII, Figures S10 and S11). The results are consistent with H2.

Importantly, the target landmark historical event occurred before any of the participants were born, thereby precluding personal memory connections. Therefore, these findings broaden the scope of witnessing history, indicating that its psychological effects are not limited to firsthand experience but can extend to events with no direct experience or autobiographical ties.

General Discussion

Summary of Findings

We examined the relation, correlational and causal, between witnessing history and meaning in life. In Study 1, based on an analysis of Weibo posts, we observed that individuals who felt they were witnessing history after a landmark historical event (compared to those who did not) were more likely to use meaning-related words during the explosion phase (i.e., peak emergence) of this event, suggesting a deeper contemplation of meaning in life. In Studies 2–5, we further distinguished between the presence of meaning and search for meaning, using experimental designs to examine causality and a field study to increase ecological validity. We demonstrated that witnessing history bolsters the presence of meaning and search for meaning, whether manipulating witnessing history through recalling societal events (Study 2), framing an event differently (Studies 3–4), or approaching participants at a historical (compared to control) site (Study 5). This effect was not due to differences in positive or negative affect, self-diminishment, or event valence. Throughout Studies 2–5, we examined underlying mechanisms, convergently revealing that connectedness to history mediated the effect of witnessing history on the presence of meaning, and a broadened perspective mediated its effect on the search for meaning. Overall, these findings provide evidence that witnessing history contributes to the meaning-making process.

Implications

Our findings advance the literature on landmark historical events. Although the

implications of landmark historical events on society and intergroup relations have been addressed across social science disciplines (Friedman, 1992; Nunn, 2009; Spier, 2015), their impact on personal psychological experiences remains underexplored. Prior work has investigated how certain collective events can shape identity and behavior (Duncan & Stewart, 2007; Leigh & Melwani, 2019, 2022), yet the events in question are not necessarily historical in nature. More recently, research on shared episodic narratives (McLean & Syed, 2016) introduced the concept of historical consciousness (i.e., the extent to which individuals incorporate reflections of historical events into personal narratives), demonstrating its associations with identity formation, well-being, and political engagement (Ture et al., 2025). However, this retrospective approach, confining inquiries to those finished historical events of personal relevance, offers limited insight into the psychological effects of broad historical events as they unfold—an understanding increasingly crucial in an era marked by continuous historical transformation. Importantly, we moved beyond integrating past historical events into personal narratives to situating individuals within a broader historical arc unfolding. We demonstrated that the sense of witnessing history through recognizing the historical significance of landmark events, even without autobiographical ties (as evidenced in Study 5) fosters both the presence of and search for meaning. In doing so, our research complements and extends Ture et al. (2025) by highlighting how broad, unfolding history, not just remembered past events, can shape fundamental psychological processes.

The findings also offer insights for navigating turbulent times, situating life experiences within a broader historical context. During a period characterized by societal upheavals, such as wars, pandemics, climate change, and the rapid advancement of AI (King & Petty, 2021; Morin & Kern, 1999), established worldviews may be challenged, leading to a pervasive sense of purposelessness and meaninglessness (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; King & Hicks, 2021). We propose a novel method for reconstructing meaningful existence during such times by attending to a broad historical narrative, acknowledging that individuals are witnesses to the unfolding of history. This approach was particularly supported where our research involved the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating that reframing a physically and psychologically distressing event as historically significant can elevate meaning in life.

Additionally, we introduced and examined the psychological construct of witnessing history, the subjective experience of sensing that history is unfolding. We established the existential benefits of witnessing history and identified potential mediating processes through which it operates: witnessing history enhances presence of meaning via connectedness to history and the search for meaning via a broadened perspective. The construct of witnessing history captures the feeling of presence during consequential events. Unlike retrospective integration, it renders history an immediate, perceptible phenomenon that affirms one's place in the broad historical arc.

Although Studies 1–4 focused on responses to direct witnessing of history (i.e., the experience of observing landmark historical events as they unfold), Study 5 extends this framework to indirect witnessing: the sense of witnessing history not through real-time exposure, but through engagement with its enduring traces, such as visiting historical sites, museums, or monuments. Critically, we distinguished indirect witnessing from mere retrospective historical awareness. Retrospective awareness involves a detached, intellectual understanding of past events, whereas indirect witnessing evokes a vivid, quasi-perceptual sense of witnessing history through physical or narrative immersion. By standing at the site where history occurred or engaging with curated artifacts, individuals may feel as though they are “there,” that the event is unfolding within their immediate awareness. This type of engagement transforms history from an object of learning into an event of felt presence. Our findings demonstrate that this form of indirect witnessing, such as through site visitation (Study 5), can act as a psychological bridge to the past. Such experiences foster connectedness to history and a broadened perspective, while enhancing both the presence of and search for meaning in life. Taken together, the results highlight an accessible pathway to meaning-making: by adopting the stance of a historical witness, individuals can situate their personal stories within a larger historical continuum. In so doing, abstract history becomes a perceptually immediate reality, affirming one's place within the unfolding human story.

Moreover, the findings contribute to the literature on meaning in life by revealing an antecedent: witnessing history. This novel viewpoint introduces a source of meaning in life that is more readily attainable, as it does not require active involvement like personal

achievement (Greenberg et al., 1986; Rogers et al., 2023), pursuing intrinsic goals (Cozzolino, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012), cultivating positive emotions (Rivera et al., 2020; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018), or building social connections (King & Hicks, 2021; Lambert et al., 2010), which are commonly emphasized as primary sources of meaning. By demonstrating that observing and experiencing landmark historical events can raise meaning in life, our research deepens understanding of how broader societal and temporal contexts influence personal meaningful existence. This path expands the domain of meaning in life literature beyond the individual's immediate environment to include their interaction with larger historical processes.

Our findings also speak to the nuanced relation between the presence of and search for meaning in life. Previous work has been mostly cross-sectional, often reporting that the two variables are unrelated or negatively related, and that they have independent or opposing associations with well-being outcomes (Newman et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2006, 2008). The prevailing presence-to-search model further suggests that a low presence of meaning motivates the search for meaning (Steger et al., 2008). Further, experimental studies have typically examined the presence of meaning (Rivera et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2023) or search for meaning (Alter & Hershfield, 2014) in isolation, offering limited insight into their interplay. Our finding that witnessing history simultaneously increased both the presence and search for meaning points to an alternative pathway beyond the presence-to-search model. Specifically, search for meaning may emerge not only in response to its absence but also when individuals experience a broadened perspective, which allows for deeper reflection on life's significance (Frankl, 2006/1946; Park, 2010). These findings point to the possibility of a growth search, a process through which individuals deepen their understanding of life and discover additional meaning even when they already possess a fulfilling sense of purpose or when circumstances are especially supportive (Chu & Fung, 2021). Future research, especially involving longitudinal designs, could explore how the search for meaning unfolds under these circumstances and its downstream consequences for personal growth.

Furthermore, our findings suggest the importance of recognizing history-in-the-making within mundane experience. History does not always announce itself conspicuously;

often, it unfolds gradually, in ways that escape immediate recognition (Risi et al., 2019; Zerubavel, 2003). For instance, during the incremental rise of digital technology throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many individuals used early personal computers, mobile phones, and the internet without fully grasping the transformative significance of their actions. They were, in effect, participating in a global technological revolution, one that would redefine communication, work, and social interaction, yet their lack of conscious awareness may have prevented them from deriving deeper meaning from their role in these changes.

Societal institutions, such as government, educational systems, and the media, can play a vital role in enhancing public recognition of historically significant developments as they occur (Bleeze, 2024). By framing contemporary events within a broader historical context, such institutions can help individuals perceive themselves as active witnesses to history. This framing fosters a psychological capacity for historical self-location, the ability to situate one's personal experience within the larger arc of human history. Crucially, even when individuals do not incorporate these events into their personal identity, recognizing their place within an unfolding historical context can imbue everyday experiences with existential meaning. In doing so, individuals may come to view their own lives as part of a shared, evolving historical narrative.

Generalizability

To establish the generalizability of our findings, we sampled participants from China and the U.K. (see Study S2 in the Supplemental Material for a replication in the U.K.), and analyzed Google Trends data (Study S1 in the Supplemental Material) at both the global level (though limited to English-speaking users due to the use of an English search term) and the national level (specifically within U.S.). Our investigation covered events with different affective valence and from diverse geographic locations, including the death of the British Queen Elizabeth II, the COVID-19 pandemic, Donald Trump's presidency in the U.S., and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. To balance internal and external validity, we collected data from controlled laboratory experiments and a naturalistic field survey.

Despite these methodological strengths, our sampling of populations, landmark

historical events, and contexts is limited. Future investigations should aim to expand on these findings by incorporating a broader range of demographics and events. Moreover, we primarily investigate the short-term effects of witnessing history. Although in Study 1 we collected data over 12 weeks and explored the trajectories of witnessing history's contribution to meaning in life, follow-up work could employ ecological momentary assessments and cross-lagged designs to examine the long-term influence and trajectories of witnessing history on meaning in life. Additionally, although we focused on the contribution of witnessing history to meaning in life, the individual implications of witnessing history merit further exploration. For example, adopting a broad temporal perspective fosters equanimity, an unbiased state of mind toward all experiences regardless of valence (Pan et al., 2024). Witnessing history might promote equanimity via a broadened perspective.

Coda

Recognizing the experience of witnessing history allows individuals to situate themselves against a broader historical context. This awareness enables them to understand how their stories are connected with collective history and shift their focus from the immediate environment to a broader perspective, thereby enriching meaning in life. Although studying history through books offers insights into societal evolution, human behavior, and diverse viewpoints, individuals can derive meaning by situating their life experiences within the flow of current historical context.

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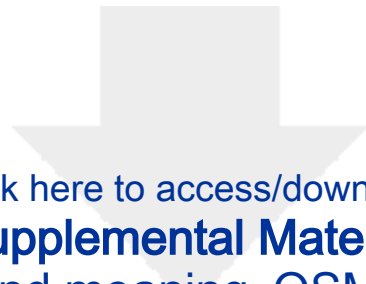
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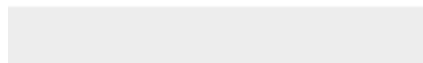
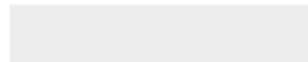
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