



BEYOND HAPPINESS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF IKIGAI IN MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract. *This article examines the Japanese concept of Ikigai from scientific, analytical, and critical perspectives by exploring its psychological, philosophical, and sociocultural dimensions. The study investigates the role of Ikigai in shaping personal motivation, emotional resilience, and existential meaning within contemporary society. Particular attention is given to the transformation of Ikigai from a traditional Japanese life philosophy into a globally commercialized self-development phenomenon. The research critically evaluates how modern interpretations frequently simplify the concept into motivational formulas while neglecting its deeper cultural and ethical foundations. Through interdisciplinary analysis, the article argues that Ikigai should not be understood as a universal model of happiness, but rather as a multidimensional framework that encourages harmony between individual aspirations, social responsibility, and inner psychological balance. The findings demonstrate that the growing international interest in Ikigai reflects a broader global search for meaning in conditions of social instability, emotional exhaustion, and identity fragmentation.*

Keywords: *Ikigai, existential meaning, psychological well-being, life purpose, emotional resilience, Japanese philosophy, self-realization, social harmony, cultural identity, motivation, mindfulness, existential psychology, human development, modern society, critical analysis*



Introduction

In contemporary society, where rapid technological progress and material competition increasingly dominate human life, the question of existential meaning has become more urgent than ever before. Economic achievement, professional success, and social recognition are often presented as universal indicators of fulfillment; however, the growth of psychological exhaustion, emotional instability, and identity crises demonstrates the limitations of purely materialistic approaches to happiness. Within this context, the Japanese concept of Ikigai has attracted significant global attention as an alternative framework for understanding purpose, inner balance, and sustainable well-being.

The term “Ikigai” is commonly translated as “a reason for being,” yet such a simplified interpretation fails to fully capture its cultural and philosophical depth. Historically rooted in Japanese social consciousness, Ikigai reflects not only individual ambition but also a harmonious relationship between personal desires, social contribution, emotional satisfaction, and daily continuity of life. Unlike many Western motivational paradigms that emphasize exceptional achievement and measurable productivity, Ikigai is often associated with modest consistency, meaningful routines, and psychological equilibrium. This distinction reveals an important philosophical divergence between consumer-oriented success models and value-oriented life philosophies.

The growing international popularity of Ikigai has transformed it from a localized cultural principle into a global self-development phenomenon. Numerous motivational books, digital platforms, and commercial coaching systems now promote Ikigai as a universal strategy for achieving happiness and career success. Nevertheless, this popularization has also generated conceptual distortion. In many modern interpretations, the idea is reduced to a simplistic diagram connecting passion, profession, mission, and income, while its deeper sociocultural dimensions are neglected. Such reductionist approaches risk converting a historically nuanced philosophy into a marketable psychological product designed to satisfy contemporary anxieties rather than critically address them.



From a psychological perspective, Ikigai intersects with theories of intrinsic motivation, self-determination, emotional resilience, and existential psychology. Researchers increasingly associate the concept with lower stress levels, stronger social engagement, and enhanced life satisfaction, particularly among elderly Japanese populations. At the same time, scholarly debates continue regarding whether Ikigai represents a universally applicable model of well-being or a culturally specific phenomenon shaped by Japanese collective values, discipline, and social structure. This debate is especially relevant in multicultural societies where individual perceptions of success and fulfillment vary significantly according to historical, economic, and ideological conditions.

Furthermore, the modern fascination with Ikigai reflects a broader intellectual tendency to search for stability in an era characterized by uncertainty and psychological fragmentation. The acceleration of digital communication, the pressure of constant self-optimization, and the commodification of personal identity have intensified the human need for meaningful orientation. In this environment, Ikigai functions not merely as a philosophical abstraction but as a response to contemporary existential fatigue. However, idealizing the concept without acknowledging its cultural limitations may lead to superficial interpretations that ignore structural social realities such as inequality, economic pressure, and emotional alienation.

This article aims to examine Ikigai through scientific, philosophical, and critical perspectives by analyzing its historical origins, psychological significance, sociocultural foundations, and contemporary transformations. The study also evaluates the tension between authentic philosophical meaning and modern commercial representation. Through analytical observation and interdisciplinary interpretation, the paper argues that Ikigai should not be understood as a universal formula for happiness, but rather as a complex cultural framework that encourages individuals to establish a conscious relationship with work, society, and personal existence.

Literature Review and Methodology



The philosophical and psychological dimensions of Ikigai have attracted growing academic attention during the last two decades, particularly in the fields of cultural psychology, existential studies, and well-being research. Although the concept originates from Japanese social philosophy, its modern interpretation has largely been shaped through interdisciplinary studies conducted by foreign scholars examining the relationship between life purpose, emotional resilience, and human longevity.

One of the most frequently cited works on Ikigai belongs to Mieko Kamiya, whose book *Ikigai-ni-Tsuite* (“On the Meaning of Life”) established the conceptual foundation for later academic discussions.[1] Kamiya interpreted Ikigai not as a temporary source of pleasure, but as a deeply internalized sense of existential value connected with social belonging and psychological continuity. Her analysis emphasized that individuals often discover meaning not through extraordinary achievements, but through sustained engagement with everyday responsibilities and interpersonal relationships.

Contemporary international scholarship has expanded this perspective by integrating Ikigai into modern psychological frameworks. Researchers such as Akihiro Hasegawa and his colleagues investigated the correlation between Ikigai and mental stability among elderly populations in Japan.[2] Their findings suggest that individuals possessing a strong sense of purpose demonstrate lower levels of anxiety, emotional isolation, and depressive symptoms. Similar conclusions were reached in longitudinal health studies conducted by Japanese and American researchers, where Ikigai was associated with increased longevity and reduced cardiovascular risk factors.

[3] From a sociological viewpoint, foreign scholars have critically examined the globalization of Ikigai as a cultural phenomenon. Gordon Mathews argued that the Western adaptation of Japanese life philosophies often removes them from their original social context and reconstructs them according to neoliberal ideals of productivity and personal optimization.[4] This critique is particularly relevant in



discussions surrounding self-help literature, where Ikigai is frequently simplified into motivational formulas detached from its historical and ethical roots.

A significant contribution to the popular internationalization of Ikigai was made by Héctor García and Francesc Miralles through their globally recognized book *Ikigai*. [5] While the work successfully introduced the concept to broader audiences, several academics criticized its interpretative approach for romanticizing Japanese culture and presenting anecdotal observations as universally applicable psychological principles. Such criticism reveals an important methodological challenge within Ikigai studies: the tension between academic analysis and commercial popularization.

In addition, existential psychologists including Viktor Frankl indirectly contributed to the theoretical understanding of Ikigai through the concept of “meaning-centered existence.” [6] Frankl’s argument that human beings can psychologically endure suffering when life possesses meaning resonates strongly with the philosophical core of Ikigai. Nevertheless, unlike Frankl’s existential model, Ikigai emphasizes harmony in ordinary life rather than transcendence through extreme adversity.

Despite the growing number of publications, current literature still demonstrates several limitations. Many studies focus predominantly on positive psychological outcomes while insufficiently addressing cultural specificity, economic realities, and ideological reinterpretations. Moreover, a considerable portion of contemporary discussions relies on secondary narratives rather than empirical investigation, creating a gap between philosophical authenticity and modern representation. Therefore, a critical and interdisciplinary approach remains necessary for a more balanced understanding of the concept.

Methodology

This research applies a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology based on comparative literature analysis, philosophical interpretation, and critical discourse evaluation. The study primarily examines academic publications, psychological research articles, sociological analyses, and cultural studies produced by foreign



scholars specializing in existential psychology, Japanese philosophy, and well-being theory.

The methodological framework combines three analytical approaches. First, the historical-comparative method is employed to identify the transformation of Ikigai from a traditional Japanese cultural notion into a globalized self-development concept. This approach enables the identification of ideological shifts that occurred during the international adaptation of the term.

Second, the study utilizes critical discourse analysis to evaluate how contemporary media, motivational literature, and commercial self-help industries reconstruct the meaning of Ikigai. Through this method, the research investigates the linguistic and conceptual simplifications that emerge when philosophical ideas are transformed into mass-market psychological products.

Third, elements of psychological interpretation are incorporated to analyze the relationship between Ikigai, emotional resilience, motivation, and subjective well-being. Particular attention is given to comparative evaluations between Japanese collectivist perspectives and Western individualistic models of self-realization.

The research relies predominantly on peer-reviewed international sources, monographs, and interdisciplinary studies to ensure academic reliability and analytical objectivity. By synthesizing philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives, the methodology aims to produce a multidimensional understanding of Ikigai rather than a purely motivational or descriptive interpretation.

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