

A Qualitative Investigation of the Meaning of Life Based on Identity Types among Adolescents

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Article type:
Original Research

Article history:

Received 29 May 2026

Revised 03 June 2026

Accepted 09 September 2026

Initial Publish 10 September 2026

Published online 01 May 2027

ABSTRACT

Adolescents who lack a coherent identity style and experience a low sense of meaning in life are vulnerable to a range of psychological and developmental difficulties. The present study aimed to qualitatively examine the meaning of life according to identity types among adolescents. This applied study used a grounded theory design based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. The statistical population consisted of all male and female junior and senior high-school students in District 5 of Tehran during the 2024-2025 academic year (N = 6,522). Based on adolescents' scores on the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status, 40 participants were selected purposefully according to the four identity statuses and were interviewed. Data were analyzed in MAXQDA 2020 using grounded theory procedures, including open, axial, and selective coding. The findings indicated that the meaning of life for adolescents is composed of categories such as social relationships, educational goals, career development, internal and external factors, beliefs, self-knowledge, spiritual experiences, service to others, individual values, and personal growth and development. Adolescents attend to these domains while searching for identity and meaning in life. Overall, the findings emphasize that meaning in life in adolescence is not a fixed destination, but rather a dynamic, interactive, and multilevel process.

Keywords: Meaning in life; identity; adolescents; dynamic process.

How to cite this article:

Nasr Azadani, F., & Bagheri, F. (2027). A Qualitative Investigation of the Meaning of Life Based on Identity Types among Adolescents. *Mental Health and Lifestyle Journal*, 5(3), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.61838/mhlj.307>

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period in which biological maturation, cognitive growth, changing social expectations, expanding interpersonal networks, and increasing demands for independence converge to reshape the individual's understanding of self and world. During this period, young people gradually move beyond childhood definitions imposed largely by family and immediate social structures and begin to ask more complex questions about who they are, what they value, where they belong, and what kind of future they wish to construct. These developmental changes make adolescence particularly important for the formation of both identity and a sense of meaning in life. The psychological characteristics of adolescence involve substantial transformations in personality, behavior, social relationships, occupational aspirations, emotional functioning, and value systems, all of which contribute to the adolescent's emerging orientation toward life (1). Contemporary accounts of adolescent identity similarly emphasize that identity development is neither a single decision nor a static developmental achievement, but an evolving process through which

adolescents explore alternatives, interpret experiences, form commitments, and organize beliefs and aspirations into a relatively coherent sense of self (2). The manuscript underlying the present study likewise treats meaning in life and identity as dynamically interconnected developmental phenomena among adolescents rather than as isolated psychological attributes.

Meaning in life is a multidimensional concept with philosophical, existential, psychological, moral, and spiritual foundations. At its broadest level, it concerns the extent to which individuals perceive their existence as coherent, purposeful, significant, and directed toward goals or values that transcend momentary experience. Questions concerning whether human life possesses purpose, what constitutes a meaningful existence, and how such meaning is recognized have long occupied philosophical thought. Naturalistic philosophical approaches have also examined the emergence of purposive goals and values as fundamental dimensions through which human beings interpret their existence and organize their actions (3). Ethical reflection similarly connects a meaningful life with values, responsibility, purposeful action, and judgments regarding what is worth pursuing (4). From an Islamic philosophical perspective, meaning is also associated with the teleological structure of human existence and the movement of the individual toward existential fulfillment; in Mulla Sadra's thought, the meaning of life is inseparable from the nature, purpose, and perfection of human existence (5). Accordingly, meaning in life cannot be reduced to transient pleasure or short-term satisfaction; rather, it encompasses the interpretive framework through which individuals understand their existence, goals, choices, relationships, values, and ultimate orientation.

Within psychology, the study of meaning in life has been strongly influenced by existential and logotherapeutic perspectives. Frankl's approach places the "will to meaning" at the center of human motivation and maintains that individuals seek purposes and values through which life becomes worth living even under difficult or painful conditions. Analytical discussions of Frankl's semantic therapy emphasize that meaning is not simply an abstract intellectual construct but a lived orientation that influences how individuals confront freedom, responsibility, suffering, choice, and existential uncertainty (6). Meaning therapy therefore focuses on helping individuals discover possibilities for meaning through purposeful activity, relationships, values, and attitudes toward unavoidable circumstances (7). Counseling and psychotherapy theories have similarly treated the search for meaning as a significant dimension of psychological functioning and adjustment, particularly when individuals encounter existential conflict, uncertainty, or a lack of direction (8). More broadly, conceptual analyses of meaning in life identify dimensions such as purposefulness, value orientation, coherence, transcendence, and a sense that one's existence possesses significance (9). These dimensions become especially salient during developmental periods in which previously accepted assumptions are questioned and new personal commitments must be constructed.

The importance of meaning in adolescence stems partly from the fact that young people are beginning to develop increasingly independent interpretations of their future, personal values, education, occupation, interpersonal relationships, and place within society. A review of factors related to meaning among adolescents has shown that meaning is connected with personal goals, values, relationships, psychological resources, and the ability to develop an integrated orientation toward future life (10). Meaning therefore functions as an organizing psychological resource that allows adolescents to integrate diverse experiences into an interpretable life narrative. When life is experienced as purposeful and understandable, adolescents

may be better equipped to tolerate uncertainty, persist toward goals, and interpret challenges within a broader framework. Conversely, a weak or unstable sense of meaning may be expressed through aimlessness, confusion, existential emptiness, reduced motivation, or difficulty integrating present experiences with future aspirations. Research on students has demonstrated that meaning in life is related to important educational and psychological outcomes, including boredom, perceived autonomy, motivational beliefs, and engagement with life goals (11). Thus, meaning in life is not merely a philosophical concern but a construct with concrete implications for adolescent adjustment and development.

Recent research further indicates that meaning in life participates in a wider system of positive psychological functioning. For example, meaning has been examined alongside subjective well-being, spiritual intelligence, and creativity, suggesting that the perception of a meaningful life may provide a psychological context in which personal abilities and positive experiences are more fully realized (12). Likewise, meaning in life, psychological richness, life satisfaction, and beliefs about personal creativity have been found to be interconnected through mechanisms such as creative self-efficacy (13). Among junior high-school students, growth-oriented beliefs can also contribute to meaning in life through psychological and motivational pathways, indicating that adolescents' interpretations of their own capacity for change influence the way they perceive purpose and significance (14). These findings support the view that meaning develops through interactions among cognitive beliefs, emotional resources, self-perceptions, future expectations, and social experience rather than emerging from a single source.

Spirituality and religious orientation represent another important domain of meaning-making, particularly in cultural contexts in which religious beliefs constitute a central framework for interpreting personal and social life. Spiritual experiences may provide adolescents with a sense of coherence, hope, transcendence, moral orientation, and continuity during periods of uncertainty. Narratives of resilience have shown how religious and spiritual meaning systems can contribute to hope and strength when individuals confront difficult life experiences (15). Islamic lifestyle frameworks similarly conceptualize individual functioning through interconnected religious, moral, interpersonal, family, and behavioral dimensions that can shape how people interpret desirable living and purposeful action (16). Among adolescents, religious orientation has also been associated with psychological hardiness through identity-related processes, suggesting that identity may function as an important mechanism through which belief systems are incorporated into psychological adjustment (17). Religious identity itself has been linked with constructs such as foresight, self-control, and Islamic lifestyle, further indicating that future orientation, behavioral regulation, and value-based living are closely connected with the formation of an adolescent's identity system (18).

Identity is therefore a central construct for understanding how adolescents organize the potential sources of meaning available to them. Identity formation refers to the developmental process through which individuals construct a relatively coherent understanding of their personal characteristics, values, goals, social roles, beliefs, and future commitments. This process involves both exploration and commitment and is shaped by interactions between personal agency and social context. Research on Iranian adolescents has emphasized that psychosocial identity is embedded in family, cultural, interpersonal, and social experiences rather than developing independently of the adolescent's environment (19). Identity formation also unfolds across multiple domains and may be reflected in developmental trajectories involving the body, self-

evaluation, and body-related psychological experiences (20). Accordingly, identity should be understood as a multidimensional and changing structure through which adolescents interpret both internal experiences and their relationships with the surrounding social world.

The social context of identity formation is particularly important because adolescents do not construct identity in isolation. Family intimacy, peer relationships, psychological resources, and self-identity are mutually interconnected, and the strength of self-identity can modify the way family and psychological factors are translated into interpersonal functioning (21). Perceived social support is also relevant to adolescent identity and behavioral adjustment. Recent evidence indicates that identity styles are associated with self-harming behaviors through relational mechanisms such as attachment styles, illustrating that identity processes may become clinically important when adolescents lack secure social and emotional resources (22). These findings reinforce the need to consider identity as a socially embedded developmental process in which family relationships, peer interactions, attachment experiences, and perceptions of support can facilitate or obstruct the construction of coherent commitments and personal meaning.

Identity-style theory provides a particularly useful framework for examining individual differences in the ways adolescents and young people confront identity-related information and decisions. Identity styles refer to characteristic social-cognitive strategies used when individuals encounter questions concerning personal values, goals, beliefs, relationships, and future choices. Individuals using an informational style tend to actively seek, evaluate, and revise self-relevant information before making commitments; those characterized by a normative style tend to rely more strongly on expectations, standards, and values provided by significant others or established social structures; and those displaying a diffuse/avoidant orientation tend to delay or evade identity-relevant decisions until circumstances require a response. Research has shown that identity styles are associated with adaptation partly through commitment, self-agency, and self-regulation, demonstrating that the consequences of identity processing extend beyond self-definition to broader psychological and behavioral functioning (23). Moreover, commitments themselves differ in quality because their adaptive value depends not only on whether a commitment has been formed but also on the motives underlying it (24).

The distinction between exploration, commitment, and different identity statuses is particularly relevant during adolescence because apparently similar levels of certainty may arise from very different developmental processes. An adolescent may possess stable goals because alternatives have been actively explored and personally endorsed, or may appear similarly committed because family and authority expectations have been accepted without substantial exploration. Conversely, an adolescent may be actively questioning available options without yet reaching stable commitments, whereas another may demonstrate both limited exploration and limited commitment. These differences are likely to influence how meaning in life is understood. Meaning grounded in consciously selected values may differ experientially from meaning derived primarily from externally prescribed expectations, while continuing exploration may generate both opportunities for deeper self-understanding and periods of uncertainty. Diffusion may be especially problematic when adolescents lack both stable commitments and active engagement in searching for personally significant goals.

The relationship between identity and meaning is therefore conceptually close. A coherent identity provides individuals with answers to questions about who they are, what they value, what they intend to

become, and which goals deserve sustained commitment; these answers simultaneously constitute major components of meaning in life. Empirical work has begun to document this intersection. A recent model among students demonstrated that identity styles are directly implicated in the feeling of meaning in life and that their effects can operate together with self-related psychological processes such as self-acceptance (25). This finding is especially relevant because it suggests that the relationship between identity and meaning cannot be fully understood by measuring only whether goals or commitments exist; the adolescent's way of processing identity information and accepting the self may also influence whether those commitments are experienced as personally meaningful.

The cultural context further complicates this relationship. Adolescents develop identities within value systems in which family expectations, religious traditions, educational demands, collective norms, and emerging individual preferences may coincide or conflict. In societies where family and collective values retain a strong role, commitments derived from significant others may provide stability, belonging, and clear interpretive frameworks, while at the same time potentially restricting independent exploration. Islamic perspectives on lifestyle and meaning emphasize the integration of personal conduct, social responsibility, spirituality, and value-based behavior (16), whereas research on Iranian adolescent identity highlights the necessity of interpreting identity development within the psychosocial and cultural environment in which it occurs (19). Consequently, theoretical expectations derived from individualistic contexts may not fully capture the forms through which Iranian adolescents experience identity commitments and construct meaning.

Another important consideration is that meaning in adolescence may not be reducible to a global score. Adolescents can experience meaning through social relationships, educational aspirations, career planning, personal growth, moral values, spirituality, self-knowledge, service to others, family expectations, and future-oriented choices. These domains may be interpreted differently depending on identity status. For some adolescents, relationships and family values may represent stable and personally meaningful commitments; for others, the same domains may be sources of external pressure or unresolved conflict. Career aspirations may express deliberate self-knowledge in one identity pattern but conformity, uncertainty, or avoidance in another. Similarly, spirituality may function as an internalized source of meaning, an inherited structure of commitment, an area of active questioning, or a domain of disengagement. Such differences underscore the limitation of approaches that examine identity and meaning only through aggregate quantitative associations.

Existing studies have substantially advanced knowledge regarding identity styles, psychological adjustment, social relationships, spirituality, and meaning in life, yet much of this literature has examined individual variables through correlational or structural models. Studies have demonstrated relationships between identity and adaptation (23), identity and religious or psychological functioning (17), identity and social-support-related behavioral vulnerability (22), and identity-related processes and meaning in life (25). Other research has clarified the contribution of growth-oriented beliefs, well-being, spiritual resources, and self-beliefs to meaning (12-14). However, these findings do not by themselves show how adolescents belonging to different identity statuses actually describe, interpret, and organize the sources of meaning in their lived experience. A qualitative investigation can address this limitation by identifying the categories through which meaning is constructed and by clarifying how these categories differ across identity patterns.

Such an inquiry is particularly important because adolescence is a transitional period in which instability is not necessarily pathological, yet prolonged confusion, weak commitment, limited self-knowledge, and absence of meaningful goals may increase vulnerability. Conversely, exploration can become developmentally constructive when it leads to personally endorsed values, stronger self-understanding, purposeful relationships, and realistic future commitments. Understanding the specific mechanisms through which identity status is associated with adolescents' meaning-making can therefore contribute to developmental psychology, counseling, school-based interventions, family education, and culturally responsive programs designed to strengthen purpose, self-knowledge, adaptive exploration, and psychological well-being. It can also provide a more differentiated account of meaning by showing how adolescents themselves locate significance in relationships, values, education, occupation, spirituality, personal development, and service to others rather than assuming that all identity patterns generate meaning through the same processes.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to qualitatively investigate the meaning of life based on identity types among adolescents.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This was an applied study that used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. In the qualitative phase, qualitative procedures were used to identify the underlying categories of the phenomenon under study, enabling the researcher to describe multiple aspects of the phenomenon. The qualitative component used grounded theory with the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. Grounded theory is a theory that emerges from data and represents an interpretive research strategy that includes a set of tools for the systematic collection and analysis of data related to the phenomenon under study. Using grounded theory, concepts can be inductively extracted from qualitative data and meaningfully employed in the development of data-based theories (Dearing & William, 2022).

Grounded theory enables researchers in various subject areas to formulate theories and propositions themselves rather than relying on existing and previously developed theories. Such theories and propositions are developed systematically based on actual data. The term grounded indicates that any theory or proposition developed through this method is founded on a documented basis of real data. Thus, grounded theory is a method for responding to new questions in areas that lack sufficient theoretical foundations for hypothesis formulation and testing, and for acquiring knowledge about topics that have not yet been comprehensively investigated or about which knowledge is limited.

The target population of the present study included male and female adolescents in junior and senior high school in District 5 of Tehran, aged 12 to 17 years. In the first stage, the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status was distributed among 200 adolescents (100 girls and 100 boys). Based on the results and mean scores, 40 adolescents were selected as the final sample according to four identity statuses and were interviewed. Similar to other qualitative designs, grounded theory does not rely on statistical representativeness for generalizability and authenticity of findings; rather, samples are usually selected purposefully. In the present study, theoretical sampling of the purposeful type was used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected participants. The process of data collection and sampling

continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until no new feature emerged and no new concept was generated during data collection. In this study, 40 participants (20 girls and 20 boys) were selected for data collection and interviewing based on availability and study conditions.

Data Collection Tools

The main instrument for collecting data related to the research topic was the interview. In qualitative research, especially grounded theory research, semi-structured interviews are commonly used (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection method in which the researcher asks participants the main questions and, when necessary, introduces additional questions during the interview. The purpose is to examine participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a specific topic. One important issue in data collection is respecting participants' views and understanding their perspectives. This does not mean that the researcher accepts all views; rather, the researcher records them, treats participants respectfully, and does not impose personal views during data collection and analysis, while ultimately applying interpretation to the data (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed in MAXQDA 2020 using grounded theory procedures, including open, axial, and selective coding.

Findings and Results

In line with the strategy used in the present study, data obtained from interviews with adolescents aged 12 to 17 years were analyzed according to grounded theory in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Subsequently, the dimensions of the paradigmatic model--central phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences--were identified.

In the first stage of coding, known as open coding, raw data were identified after reviewing the interview sentences, and initial codes were extracted. All important statements were analyzed and their key concepts identified. For example, from the sentence 'I choose my friends according to the criteria I have,' the key concept of independence in choosing friends was extracted. In the same way, other initial codes were obtained. These codes were then organized into more abstract categories according to their similarity and conceptual consistency. This process was repeated several times, and through repeated refinement, initial codes were converted into concepts. Each concept was also organized into broader categories based on conceptual homogeneity. Finally, categories were integrated into broader classes according to conceptual similarities. The results of initial coding are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Open Coding

Class	Category	Concepts	Sample interview excerpt	Participant codes
Social relationships	Intellectual independence	Independent decision-making; not being influenced by social pressure; conscious	"I choose my friends according to the criteria I have." / "I do not want to accept things only	3, 7, 11, 13, 18, 24, 25, 32, 34, 37, 39

		decision-making; not blindly following others or society; making decisions according to personal values; critical thinking; searching for facts; not relying on only one source of information; not being quickly influenced by advertisements.	because others say so; I try to think and decide for myself."	
Social relationships	Quality and stability of relationships	Honest and transparent relationships; balanced social relations; respectful communication; clear relational boundaries; rapid attraction to or separation from relationships; unstable or superficial relationships; fear of commitment and long-term relationships; changeable relationships.	"I have been with my friend for four years; we have never lied to each other, we are ourselves, and we respect each other." / "Sometimes I fear that I may lose my freedom. When a relationship ends, I feel bad; this is a contradiction I have not yet managed."	3, 7, 11, 13, 18, 24, 25, 32, 34, 37, 39
Social relationships	Development of social skills	Accepting leadership roles in groups; participation in sports, charity, and cultural activities; tendency to establish diverse relationships; experimenting with different behaviors.	"Every year I try to become the student council president because I enjoy carrying out my ideas." / "I communicate easily with new people and like to try different behaviors."	9, 12, 21, 28, 33
Social relationships	Emotions arising from relationships	Anxiety in social interactions; feeling misunderstood; feeling isolated and lonely.	"I am always anxious about how to start or continue a conversation." / "Sometimes I think others do not care about my problems or do not understand why something matters to me."	15, 17, 24, 29
Social relationships	Limitations in social relationships	Avoiding relationships with people who have different views; limited social relationships; avoiding unfamiliar people; lack of diverse experiences; preference for small groups and familiar people; resistance to friends' views; tension and conflict in relationships.	"When someone's view differs from mine, I think it is better to avoid discussing it because I may not be able to explain my view properly." / "Connecting with unfamiliar people is difficult for me; I prefer talking with people I know."	20, 23, 25, 26, 27, 31, 34, 37, 39, 40
Social relationships	Influence of external factors	Parental control; dependence on traditional relationships; conformity to society; aligning one's views with others despite inner wishes; being influenced by friends, society, and social groups; excessive dependence on others' opinions; seeking social approval.	"My parents make most decisions and I do not disagree; I feel I should do what they want." / "I often worry about what others think of me and try hard to be approved."	13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 34, 35, 38, 39, 40
Goal and meaning of life	Understanding the meaning of life	Deep understanding of life meaning; searching	"I have no specific goal; I follow the plans my	9, 11, 12, 15, 20, 24, 27, 33, 39

		for meaning; questioning life; lack of understanding of meaning; inability to achieve a deep meaning; unclear understanding of life; monotonous life; ambiguity and doubt; indifference; lack of direction; lack of future orientation.	family sets, which are always about school and classes. I do not do anything special and just continue the same monotonous routine." / "The future is very vague for me, and I do not know where to begin."	
Career development	Professional ethics	Strong work ethic; responsibility; quality work; adherence to ethical principles; perseverance; occupational motivation; congruence between occupations and personal values.	"I already know what job I want in the future, and I am researching it and taking courses that may be useful."	2, 3, 5, 16, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37
Career development	Planning and organization	Precise planning; striving to gain experience; intelligent decision-making; balance between personal life and work; choosing a career path without research; lack of planning in skill acquisition; confusion about developing necessary skills.	"I do not know where to start. I feel there are many options, but I do not know which one to choose."	2, 3, 5, 16, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37
Career development	Career goals and development	Clear, realistic, and long-term career goals; flexibility and commitment to goals; absence of goals; lack of awareness of abilities; inability to identify fields of interest; uncertainty about career choice; fear of mismatch or wrong choice.	"Choosing a career is a major problem for me; I do not even know where to begin or what I am interested in." / "I feel my career path has already been determined and I do not have freedom of choice."	1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30, 33, 37, 38, 39
Career development	Willingness to learn	Positive view of learning; development of personal skills; participation in training courses; acquisition of new skills; desire to create new ideas; using the experiences of successful people; modeling mentors.	"Learning is an opportunity for me. I like to learn skills that help me become more independent or closer to my goals."	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10
Conflict of desires	Influence of family and society	Family pressure for financial success; meeting social expectations; tendency to choose occupations according to collective identity.	"I feel that the pressure of family and society sometimes makes my choices different from what I really want."	10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 24, 25, 27, 31, 33, 35
Conflict of desires	Individual desires and choices	Ignoring personal tendencies; awareness of interests; desire for change; attraction to temporary jobs or jobs without specific skills; choosing a career different from common social norms; inability to prioritize	"I quickly get tired of one job and prefer to work temporarily in many areas." / "If I feel that my job does not match my beliefs and values, I will definitely change it."	10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 24, 25, 27, 31, 33, 35

		occupational choices; lack of congruence between work and inner values.		
Beliefs	Individual doubts and ambiguities	Doubt about the existence of God; doubt about life meaning; ambiguity in core values; insufficient understanding of beliefs; inability to defend beliefs; lack of commitment to beliefs; delayed formation of personal beliefs; political beliefs based on research and political activity.	"I am not sure whether the beliefs I have are correct; therefore, I do not insist on them strongly." / "Political issues are always interesting to me; I follow political news and pages and form my views based on my research."	1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 15, 16, 19, 23, 24, 28
Beliefs	Modeling and influence from others	Strong influence from others; influence of external circumstances; reliance on specific groups to define beliefs; formation of beliefs based on others' opinions; inspiration from schools of thought; media models; commitment to family religious beliefs; reliance on family values.	"The opinions of others are very important to me. Many times I use my friends' opinions." / "Our family is religious, and I have my religious beliefs by following them."	10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 20, 26, 29, 30, 34, 37, 38
Beliefs	Orientation toward religious issues	Indifference toward religious issues; lack of interest in religious matters; absence of internal orientation; rapid acceptance of religion.	"Religious issues are not very important to me because I have not reached a proper understanding of them." / "I am confused about beliefs because everyone has a different belief."	21, 24, 25, 33, 34, 37, 39
Beliefs	Repeated change of beliefs	Frequent change of beliefs; instability in views; contradictory opinions; rapid changes in viewpoint; lack of definite beliefs; unclear position; confusion about moral values.	"I think one should not be too strongly committed to one thing. Society's needs change, families change, and we should also change our beliefs."	20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 29
Self-knowledge	Self-awareness	Accurate knowledge of personality traits; awareness of strengths, weaknesses, needs, life path, and limitations; acceptance of positive and negative aspects of personality; self- acceptance; intellectual and emotional maturity; overcoming life challenges; not seeking others' approval; emotional management.	"When I argue with a friend, I first try to calm down and understand the reason for the problem; then I talk and try to resolve the misunderstanding." / "Sometimes others oppose what I want to do, but I prefer that others be dissatisfied while I am satisfied with myself."	3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 21, 26, 30, 33
Spiritual experiences	Deep spiritual experiences	Connection to a spiritual truth; spiritual personality growth; use of spirituality to understand life meaning; positive and constructive relationship; improved mental health; spirituality as a guide	"I feel that spiritual experiences can guide me when I am confused about life."	23, 24, 27, 28, 30, 33, 34, 36, 39

		in life; openness to new spiritual experiences; deep understanding of spirituality.		
Spiritual experiences	Attitudes toward spiritual experiences	Viewing spirituality as a threat; seeing spiritual experiences as duties; superficial spiritual relationship; lack of deep connection; acceptance of spiritual beliefs under social influence; possible change of religious beliefs.	"These spiritual beliefs only take away the freedom of girls and women; if I am forced, I may follow them sometimes." / "Although I do not have a deep understanding of spirituality and religion, I accept them when everyone around me is committed."	23, 24, 27, 28, 30, 33, 34, 36, 39
Spiritual experiences	Spiritual connection	Inability to find a spiritual path; distancing from spirituality; superficial and transient spiritual experiences; lack of spiritual support; informal approaches to spirituality; lack of importance of spirituality.	"When my parents separated, I cried and begged God, but it did not help; since then I have distanced myself from prayer and belief."	11, 13, 14, 35, 38, 40
Service to others	Internal and stable motives	Deep sense of social responsibility; high understanding of others' feelings and needs; striving to create a positive impact; encouragement to help; satisfaction in life; balance between personal and social life.	"Helping others gives me a sense that my life matters and that I can have a positive effect."	15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 25, 27
Service to others	Compulsory motives	Serving others to meet expectations; serving as a social duty; following traditional models; social pressure; influence by others.	"My family expects me to help my classmates and friends whenever I can." / "The models that have always existed in our family are valuable, and we try to follow them."	11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 25, 27
Service to others	Variable and unstable motives	Uncertainty about motives for service; trying to understand how to help; participation in different charity activities; mixed motives; lack of stable commitment; desire for social approval; need for belonging; avoiding criticism; service not being a priority.	"I do not know how to help others or where to start. Sometimes I join charity groups, but they make me more confused." / "Sometimes I want to show that I am good enough to help others, but if nobody notices, my interest fades."	4, 8, 9, 13, 16, 17, 18, 21, 24, 28, 29, 30, 32, 35, 36, 38, 40
Individual values	Moral values	Respect for others; respect for cultural differences; helping others; justice; fairness; balance in life; indifference toward moral values.	"Respecting differences and fairness are among the things that can make relationships and life meaningful."	3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 21, 24, 25, 28, 32, 36, 39, 40
Individual values	Acceptance of values	Unquestioning acceptance; necessity of parental expectations; emphasis on social norms; obedience; seeking approval from authority figures; acceptance of rules with minimal questioning;	"The expectations of teachers and parents seem right to me, and we should accept them without question." / "The society we live in has expectations, and to succeed we should accept its rules."	3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 21, 24, 25, 28, 32, 36, 39, 40

		conformity to society's values; use of imposed values; willingness to follow collective value frameworks.		
Individual values	Discovery and revision of values	Exploration and examination of values; new experiences; distancing from imposed parental values; unstable values; searching for newer values; values shaped by experience; respect for others' values; openness to criticism; continuous questioning; gradual formation of values; deep search.	"I am always trying to discover what is valuable to me and what gives meaning to my life." / "I do not accept things superficially; I ask many questions and examine others' views."	1, 2, 9, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 27, 31, 38, 40
Individual values	Stability and persistence of values	Weak commitment; exposure to various values; no clear values; lack of internal criteria; uncertainty about personal values; lack of independent values.	"I do not have clear values and I am still trying to find the values of my life. I am not strongly committed and accept change when necessary."	20, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29
Personal growth and development	Personal growth	Self-knowledge; identifying strengths and weaknesses; accepting the real self; not pretending; weak self-confidence; lack of stable identity; inaccurate understanding of wishes.	"I try to know myself better and understand what I really want rather than pretending to be someone else."	20, 23, 28, 31, 34, 36, 37
Personal growth and development	Communication skills	Cooperation; empathy; ability to establish healthy relationships; acceptance of differences; avoiding emotional exploitation; constant evaluation of others.	"We do group activities with friends, and this cooperation strengthens our friendship." / "When misunderstandings happen, we try to understand each other and not care too much about what others say."	20, 23, 28, 31, 34, 36, 37

In the axial coding stage, the categories extracted during open coding were compared and linked according to the paradigmatic model of the grounded theory approach. One category was selected as the central category, and the relationship between the other categories and the central phenomenon was specified. Table 2 presents the findings of this stage according to the Strauss and Corbin paradigmatic model: central phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

Table 2. Axial Coding

Paradigm	Classes and categories
Central phenomenon	Goal and meaning of life: influence by external factors; understanding the meaning of life; lack of goal and direction.
Causal conditions	Conflict of desires: influence of family and society; individual desires and choices. Self-knowledge: self-awareness; intellectual and emotional maturity.
Contextual conditions	Beliefs: individual doubts and ambiguities; knowledge of and ability to defend beliefs; modeling others; orientation toward religious issues; repeated changes in beliefs. Individual values: moral values; acceptance of values; process

	of discovering and revising values; stability and persistence of values.
Intervening conditions	Social relationships: intellectual independence; quality and stability of relationships; development of social skills; emotions arising from relationships; limitations in social relationships; influence by external factors.
Strategies	Personal growth and development: personal growth; communication skills.
Consequences	Spiritual experiences: deep spiritual experiences; attitudes toward spiritual experiences; spiritual connection. Career development: professional ethics; planning and organization; career goals and development; willingness to learn. Service to others: internal and stable motives; variable and unstable motives; compulsory motives.

Model of Meaning in Life Based on Adolescent Identity

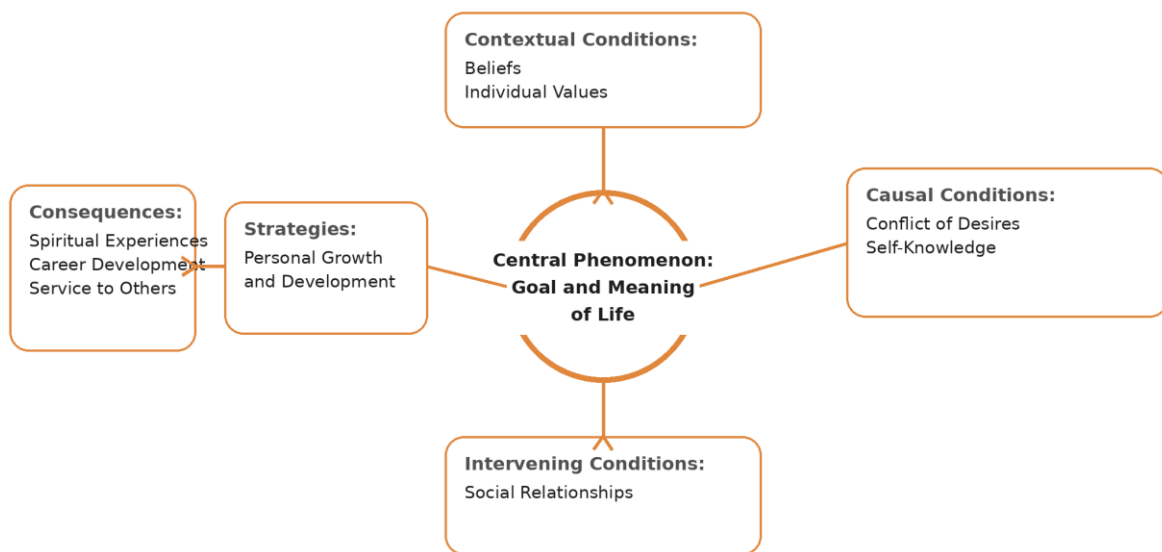


Figure 1. Model of meaning in life based on adolescent identity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the meaning of life according to different identity types among adolescents and showed that meaning in life is a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon constructed through the interaction of personal, relational, social, value-based, spiritual, and future-oriented processes. The qualitative findings identified social relationships, goal and meaning of life, career development, conflict of desires, beliefs, self-knowledge, spiritual experiences, service to others, individual values, and personal growth and development as the principal domains through which adolescents understood and experienced meaning. Within the paradigmatic model, goal and meaning of life constituted the central phenomenon; conflict of desires and self-knowledge emerged as causal conditions; beliefs and individual values functioned as contextual conditions; social relationships acted as intervening conditions; personal growth and development represented strategies; and spiritual experiences, career development, and service to others were identified as consequences. These findings support the view that meaning in adolescence cannot be understood as a single cognitive judgment about whether life is meaningful. Rather, it is formed through adolescents' continuous attempts to integrate self-knowledge, values, relationships, aspirations, beliefs, and

future commitments into a coherent personal orientation. This interpretation is consistent with theoretical approaches that conceptualize meaning as involving purpose, coherence, value, and direction in life (4, 9). It is also compatible with existential and logotherapeutic perspectives in which meaning is understood as something that becomes manifest through purposeful action, values, relationships, and the individual's orientation toward life circumstances (6-8).

A major finding was that adolescents with achieved identity displayed the deepest and most stable understanding of meaning in life. These adolescents showed greater intellectual independence, clearer self-awareness, stronger commitment to personal values, more deliberate decision-making, greater stability in social relationships, clearer career goals, and a stronger tendency to integrate spiritual and social experiences into a coherent life direction. Their choices were generally informed, reflective, and aligned with their values, and they appeared more capable of identifying strengths and weaknesses, regulating emotions, and making purposeful plans for the future. This result can be explained by the defining characteristics of achieved identity, in which exploration is followed by relatively stable and personally endorsed commitments. When adolescents have both examined alternatives and committed to goals and values, they are more likely to experience continuity between present identity and future aspirations. Research on identity development similarly emphasizes that coherent identity is associated with stronger adjustment, self-agency, self-regulation, and commitment (23). The quality and motive underlying identity commitment are also important, because commitments based on autonomous endorsement are more strongly associated with personal adjustment than commitments driven primarily by external pressure (24). The current findings therefore suggest that achieved identity contributes to meaning not simply because commitments exist, but because those commitments have been evaluated, internalized, and integrated into the adolescent's self-concept.

The finding regarding achieved identity also aligns with evidence that identity formation is fundamentally related to the construction of life meaning. Identity helps adolescents answer questions concerning who they are, what they value, what they intend to pursue, and how they understand their place in society. These are simultaneously core questions of meaning in life. Recent research has shown that identity styles significantly contribute to the feeling of meaning in life, partly through self-related mechanisms such as self-acceptance (25). The present study extends this relationship by showing how self-knowledge, value clarification, social responsibility, career planning, and spiritual interpretation may serve as concrete pathways connecting achieved identity to greater meaning. This is also consistent with research indicating that meaning in life is strengthened when individuals possess clearer goals, positive self-beliefs, and adaptive psychological resources (13, 14). Adolescents with achieved identity may therefore experience a stronger sense of life direction because their values and goals are not merely abstract ideals but are incorporated into organized plans, relationships, and behaviors.

The results further showed that adolescents with foreclosed identity could also experience a relatively coherent sense of meaning, although the basis of that meaning differed from that observed in achieved identity. These adolescents tended to accept family values, religious beliefs, social expectations, and authority-based standards with limited exploration. Their meaning in life was often derived from established social and cultural frameworks, and their occupational and educational goals were more strongly influenced by parental or collective expectations. This result is important because foreclosure is not necessarily

associated with immediate meaninglessness. In cultural contexts where family cohesion, religious values, and collective expectations are highly salient, externally provided commitments may furnish adolescents with ready-made systems of purpose and direction. Research on Iranian adolescents has emphasized the central role of family, cultural expectations, and social context in identity development (19). Similarly, Islamic lifestyle frameworks highlight the significance of family, social responsibility, moral values, and spirituality in organizing meaningful patterns of living (16). Thus, the relatively organized meaning observed among foreclosed adolescents may reflect the stabilizing effect of clear external frameworks, even when those frameworks have not yet been critically explored.

At the same time, the findings suggest that the meaning associated with foreclosed identity may be less autonomous and more dependent on social approval and external expectations. Adolescents in this group frequently reported parental control, conformity, reliance on authority, and acceptance of values with minimal questioning. This distinction is consistent with the argument that not all identity commitments have the same developmental quality. Commitments formed because of pressure, obligation, or controlled motives may provide short-term structure while offering less opportunity for autonomous self-definition (24). The present results therefore suggest that foreclosure can support a sense of coherence and purpose while simultaneously limiting exploration and intellectual independence. The practical implication is not that family or cultural values are inherently restrictive, but that their developmental effect may depend on whether adolescents can actively reflect on and personally integrate them. This interpretation is compatible with findings connecting religious orientation, identity style, and psychological hardiness in adolescents (17), as well as with evidence showing that religious identity is associated with foresight, self-control, and lifestyle patterns (18).

Adolescents with moratorium identity demonstrated a different pattern. They were actively involved in exploration but had not reached stable commitments, and this was reflected in ambiguity regarding beliefs, values, career choices, relationships, and life direction. Their narratives were characterized by questioning, uncertainty, changing viewpoints, difficulty prioritizing alternatives, and incomplete understanding of personal goals. Meaning in life for these adolescents was therefore often experienced as an unresolved search rather than a stable structure. This result is developmentally understandable because moratorium involves active identity work without consolidated commitment. Exploration may promote growth, but when it is prolonged or insufficiently organized, it can also generate uncertainty and psychological strain. Contemporary reviews of adolescent identity describe identity formation as an ongoing process involving exploration, revision, and reorganization of commitments (2). The developmental trajectories reported in identity research likewise demonstrate that adolescence may involve considerable movement and instability across identity-related domains (20). Thus, the uncertainty found in the present study may be a transitional feature of identity development rather than evidence of permanent dysfunction.

Nevertheless, the study also suggests that prolonged moratorium may weaken adolescents' experience of meaning when exploration is not accompanied by sufficient psychological, relational, or value-based support. Participants in this category frequently expressed uncertainty about beliefs, career choices, relationships, personal values, and future plans. This lack of stable commitment can make it difficult to construct continuity between present experience and future purpose. The finding corresponds with research indicating that meaning in life is associated with motivational beliefs, future orientation, and adaptive

psychological functioning (11, 14). It also aligns with evidence that well-being and positive self-beliefs are related to the experience of meaning and life satisfaction (12, 13). Accordingly, adolescents in moratorium may benefit from exploration when it ultimately facilitates clearer commitments, but they may experience greater ambiguity when they lack adequate resources for organizing choices into a coherent identity.

The findings concerning diffuse identity were more clearly negative. Adolescents with diffuse identity displayed lack of direction, unstable goals, limited self-knowledge, weak commitment, superficial or inconsistent relationships, uncertainty in beliefs, and reduced investment in career and future planning. They were more likely to describe life as monotonous, vague, aimless, or lacking clear purpose. This pattern indicates that diffusion may restrict access to several important sources of meaning simultaneously. Without stable values, meaningful commitments, dependable relationships, or future-oriented goals, adolescents may have difficulty developing the coherence necessary to experience life as purposeful. Previous research has similarly linked diffuse or avoidant identity processing with poorer self-regulation and adaptation (23). Identity-related vulnerability has also been connected with maladaptive outcomes in adolescence, including self-harming behaviors, particularly when social support and attachment processes are compromised (22). These findings support the present conclusion that diffuse identity may represent a significant risk factor for reduced meaning in life.

Another important finding was the central role of social relationships as an intervening condition. Adolescents' descriptions of meaning were strongly influenced by friendship quality, social skills, interpersonal stability, family pressure, social approval, isolation, and the ability to maintain respectful relationships. Those with more coherent identities tended to approach relationships with greater independence and stability, whereas adolescents with moratorium or diffuse identity reported greater uncertainty, social limitation, and dependence on others' evaluations. This finding is strongly supported by research showing that family intimacy and adolescent peer relationships are related through psychological capital and self-identity (21). Social support can also interact with identity processes in shaping psychological vulnerability (22). These findings indicate that relationships are not merely external circumstances surrounding identity development; rather, they are active contexts in which adolescents test values, receive feedback, experience belonging, and construct meaning.

Beliefs and individual values also emerged as important contextual conditions. Participants differed in the extent to which their values were personally examined, inherited from family, unstable, or continuously revised. Similarly, spiritual and religious beliefs could function either as a deep source of guidance or as an externally imposed or uncertain framework. These results are consistent with the view that meaning is closely connected to value systems and moral orientation (4, 5). Spiritual and religious resources may also strengthen meaning by providing interpretive frameworks for adversity, hope, and personal continuity (15). In adolescents, religious orientation and identity style have been shown to interact in relation to psychological hardiness (17), while religious identity is related to foresight and self-regulation (18). The present results therefore suggest that the effect of spirituality on meaning depends partly on the degree to which beliefs are personally understood and integrated into identity.

Personal growth and development were identified as key strategies for strengthening meaning in life. Self-awareness, emotional maturity, recognition of strengths and weaknesses, acceptance of the self, and communication skills appeared to help adolescents move from confusion toward greater clarity. These

findings are compatible with evidence that self-acceptance mediates relationships between identity-related factors and meaning in life (25). They also correspond with research linking meaning with subjective well-being, creativity, and positive self-beliefs (12, 13). In this sense, personal growth may function as an active mechanism through which adolescents transform identity exploration into coherent goals and values. The process of meaning-making therefore appears to require not only external opportunities but also internal capacities for reflection, emotional regulation, self-evaluation, and intentional choice.

Finally, the identified consequences of meaning-making—spiritual experiences, career development, and service to others—show that meaning extends beyond internal cognition and is reflected in adolescents' engagement with life. Adolescents who developed greater meaning were more likely to report purposeful career planning, willingness to learn, professional ethics, deeper spiritual experiences, and stronger motives to contribute to others. This pattern is consistent with existential theories emphasizing that meaning is realized through commitments, values, and action rather than through reflection alone (6, 7). It also corresponds with research showing that meaning is associated with well-being, life satisfaction, future orientation, and adaptive goal pursuit (10, 13, 14). Overall, the findings indicate that adolescent meaning in life is best understood as a developmental system in which identity type influences how values, relationships, beliefs, self-knowledge, and future goals are organized, and these processes subsequently shape adolescents' psychological and social engagement with life.

The present study had several limitations. First, participants were selected from junior and senior high-school students in District 5 of Tehran, which limits the transferability of the findings to adolescents from other geographical, cultural, socioeconomic, and educational contexts. Second, the sample consisted of 40 adolescents selected according to identity status, and although this number was appropriate for the qualitative design and theoretical saturation, it cannot represent the full diversity of adolescent experiences. Third, the findings were derived primarily from semi-structured interviews and therefore depended on participants' willingness, verbal ability, self-awareness, and accuracy in reporting personal experiences. Social desirability may also have influenced responses, particularly in sensitive domains such as religion, family expectations, personal values, and social relationships. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the investigation did not allow observation of changes in identity and meaning over time, even though both constructs are intrinsically developmental and dynamic.

Future studies should replicate the present investigation with adolescents from different provinces, cultural groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and school environments to determine which components of meaning are stable across contexts and which are culturally specific. Longitudinal research is particularly recommended to examine how adolescents move between identity statuses and how changes in exploration and commitment correspond to changes in meaning in life. Mixed-method designs could combine qualitative interviews with standardized measures of identity, meaning, psychological well-being, family functioning, peer relationships, and spirituality to test the relationships identified in the present model. Future studies could also compare boys and girls more systematically, examine the role of parental autonomy support and peer influence, and investigate whether self-acceptance, psychological capital, self-regulation, or social support mediate the relationship between identity status and meaning. Intervention studies would also be valuable for determining whether structured identity-exploration and meaning-centered programs can

increase purpose, value clarity, and psychological adjustment among adolescents with moratorium or diffuse identity.

The findings suggest that schools, counselors, psychologists, and families should provide adolescents with structured opportunities for self-exploration, value clarification, decision-making, and future planning rather than emphasizing premature commitment or passive conformity. School-based programs can incorporate reflective exercises, career exploration, communication-skills training, emotional regulation, goal setting, and opportunities for meaningful social participation. Counselors working with adolescents who show diffuse or prolonged moratorium identity should focus on helping them identify personal strengths, clarify values, organize competing alternatives, and translate broad interests into realistic commitments. Parents should be encouraged to maintain supportive and open communication, allow adolescents to question beliefs and expectations without fear of rejection, and provide guidance without excessive control. Meaning-centered activities such as volunteering, creative projects, mentorship, spiritual reflection, and purposeful extracurricular participation may also help adolescents connect personal identity with contribution, belonging, and future direction.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their deep gratitude to all participants who contributed to this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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