



Research Paper: Meaning of Life in Iranian Adolescents: A Qualitative Study



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Abstract

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Objective: The construction of meaning in one's life is a long endeavor. This small-scale exploratory study used a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach involving in-depth online interviews to explore meaning in life for typically-developing Iranian adolescents.

Methods: The investigation was conducted over six months in 2020, using a purposive sampling method with three male and nine female participants. Although meaning in life is unique to each person, there were similarities in meaning across this small sample of adolescents. Data analysis used Van Manen's six-step phenomenology method.

Results: The result revealed six main influences on the development of meaning—Ego-directed, Others-directed, Challenge-seeking, Spiritual, Future-directed, and Self-directed.

Conclusion: This study showed that the new generation on Iranian adolescent is confronting a new pattern of meaning of life but at the same acquire a solution to fix it. Their solution is to integrate the different or even opposite side of what they experiencing, yet they are experiencing both hedonism and spiritual aspect in this regards.

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1. Introduction

Meaning in life has been described as the possession of a clear purpose in life and devoting motivation and energy to accomplish it (King et al., 2006). Adding to this view, Yalom contends that meaning in life consists of a sense of cohesion and a feeling of purpose (Yalom, 2020). Within any group of people some individuals may have already developed meaning in life and this is revealed in the extent to which they see their life as important relevant and understandable. There will be other individuals who are still searching for meaning to better understand the significance and purpose in their life (Steger et al., 2008).

Among the many valuable outcomes of possessing meaning are greater satisfaction and better quality of life improved academic achievement and greater psychological flexibility (Arslan & Allen, 2022). Lack of meaning in life can be associated with depression, psychological distress (Li et al., 2019) and even suicidal tendencies (Kalashnikova et al., 2022). Searching for meaning in life is a driving influence that appears to be an innate characteristic of humans (Frankl, 1985). Studies in meaning in life among adolescents shows that personal meaning is strongly associated with the cognitive dimension and psychological wellbeing (Krok, 2018). In another study in adolescent, it showed even controlling for IQ and demographic variables, meaning-making can predict youths' more satisfying relationships and daily affective experiences, it is associated with greater working memory,

executive functioning, long-term memory, social reasoning, and creativity (Gotlieb et al., 2024).

The creator of logotherapy Frankl (Frankl, 2014) argued that the most important human drive is "the will to meaning"—and the non-fulfillment of this drive leads to "existential frustration" (Frankl, 2014). Frankl also posited that each person develops their own unique meaning. It is also accepted that humans may perceive different meanings in life at various stages across their lifespan (Alter & Hershfield, 2014). For example, adolescence is seen as a stage in which the formation of individual identity emerges and may also be the period when the search for meaning begins in earnest (Brassai et al., 2012). Identity formation in adolescence is closely linked to this searching for and acquiring meaning in one's life (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). In this context the more important role identity is to a person the more it should provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Thoits, 2012).

Identity processes and meaning in life dimensions are interconnected across time. To build personal identity adolescents need to shape a picture of their world and their place in it; and sometimes they must integrate and make sense of ostensibly conflicting information and experiences (Schwartz et al., 2011). The most common questions on the minds of adolescents are often those related to ontological concerns about "who am I" and the future — death religion philosophy of life and the meaning of life (Steger et al., 2011). Adolescence is thus a period that marks the emergence and consolidation of a personal meaning system (Heine et al., 2006; Reker &

Woo, 2011). Potential sources of influence for acquiring meaning in life are abundant. They include activities that give pleasure recognition of self-worth personal growth and observation of and relationship with others (Aupers & Houtman, 2006).

Frankl (Frankl, 2014) stressed that people might discover meaning through their normal actions—such as struggling to succeed experiencing new things becoming close to someone or forming a particular attitude towards the suffering of others. It is said that primary evidence of meaning includes altruism sacrificing for a cause hedonism self-actualization social interactions a collective lifestyle and participation in rituals and ceremonies (Heidarabadi et al., 2018; Mokhtarpour & Kiani, 2020; Hoo, 2021; Yalpm, 2020; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Meaning of life is affected by local culture as well as immediate environment (Speziale et al., 2011; Steger et al., 2008) and meaning in life may vary across cultures. For example, cultural context and demographic characteristics will influence values and beliefs acquired by individuals and these often become a foundation for finding meaning in life. Thus the sources of each person's meaning in life at a particular time reflect an interaction between micro-level life events and experiences and the macro-level cultural value system (Simon, 2008).

Today Iranian culture is being more heavily influenced by other cultures and a transformation is occurring in the value system and mores of the younger generation (Remschmidt & Belfer, 2005). Through media and communication technologies this

generation now encounters new and often conflicting opinions and ideas and they acquire new values and look at life from their own developing perspective (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). The small-scale exploratory study reported here was an attempt to examine typically-developing Iranian adolescents' awareness of the concept of meaning in life and to determine their perception of certain aspects of meaning in their own lives. It was also hoped to highlight cultural and other influences on meaning for this group.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Data were gathered from online interviews with 12 adolescents (nine females and three males) from 4 different provinces of Iran. Interviewees' age range was from 13 to 18 years ($M = 16.25$; $SD = 0.86$). All participants were Muslim. The full range of socio-economic classes was represented in the group with five individuals from the middle class five from the high class and two from the lower class. Participation was voluntary and participants received no compensation.

2.2. Sampling and Inclusion Criteria

Participants were selected by purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: interviewees must be within the age range 13-18 years. As meaning-making is significantly associated with higher psychological well-being (Hill et al, 2013) the authors chose participants that have no obvious mental problems or illnesses.

2.3. Interview Process

The topics addressed in the interview were influenced by reference to existing theoretical viewpoints and prior research on the nature of meaning in life and its acquisition (Frankel, 2014; Hoo, 2021; Yalom, 2020). Before using the interview protocol to collect data the interviewer evaluated its suitability by interviewing three adolescents in a pilot run. The final format for the protocol was determined by selecting questions that appeared to yield the most relevant information to clarify the adolescents' understanding of 'meaning in life.' The final protocol consisted of 12 questions covering various topics. In addition to the prescribed questions the interviewer also used appropriate probing and exploratory follow-up questions to obtain more detail. Interviews lasted from 45 to 95 minutes ($M = 72.08$ min; $SD = 12.65$).

Before conducting the interviews, the interviewer pondered her own beliefs expectations prejudices and assumptions about meaning in life frequently and consolidated them in a notebook. During subsequent data analysis the interviewer referred to these notes and made a conscious effort to avoid her beliefs influencing her interpretations.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Participants were given the explanation about the goals and process of the research. They were also told that they had the right to withdraw from the interview. To protect privacy, they were suggested to be in a private place. The interviewees were

identified by a number, not their real name, on transcripts or other material.

2.5. Data Analysis

For data analysis all interviews were transcribed verbatim and reference was made to any other relevant information that the interviewer had noted down during the online interview (such as pauses repetitions self-contradictions and confusions). The transcripts were input to MAX.QDA qualitative software. Participants' responses were analyzed using Van Manen's six-step method of phenomenology (Van Manen, 2023). The transcripts of the interviews were re-read and the researchers made notes of their initial interpretations. Then they each wrote down in a few paragraphs summarizing their general understanding of the picture emerging from the interview data. The codes were used as the frame of reference for classifying and collating the responses. The relationship of each emerging theme with other themes was also examined. To increase the rigor and accuracy of the study the Guba and Lincoln (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) criteria were used (Remschmidt & Belfer, 2005).

3. Results

Analysis of the transcripts identified six themes that emerged from participants' explanations of meaning in life, which are explained below;

Ego-directed themes

This ego-directed outlook led to egoistic experientialism. In this regard, Girl#11 said: "I hold a perspective toward life that a person should enjoy life as much as he/she can. This

is my life, and I should enjoy it as much as I can; and I think my life priority is me myself."

The main themes that all interviewees revealed was *hedonism* and their desire to gain instant pleasure from life. They believed that if they can accomplish a happy life where they can gain pleasure, then they will achieve meaning in life. Girl#1 said, *"Joy we can gain in this life is the aim, and I think that's enough"*.

Some forms of hedonism are Egoistic goal-directed, which embraces desires like gaining fame or wealth. One participant said: *"I always had in mind that I will hold my concert one day, and people will sing my songs. I would like to be a famous person so that everyone knows me."*

Others-directed themes

Some saw the family as a pillar of endurance in times of crisis. For this group, meaning of life came from humanistic goals, such as helping the family in any way possible, and this was one of the constituents of life for these adolescents. Boy#8 said *"The goal is to help my parents, to have a job, and to help others."* They also treated the family as a source of hope, as well as a source of meaning. Some adolescents express a different view of family, believing that meaning in their life is associated more with freedom and independence than dependence on family. Girl #1 said: *"It's not like I want to continue for the sake of my family."* For these participants, friendship and connection within the community also gave meaning to their lives.

The majority of these interviewees believed that humanitarian practices such as helping others can bring meaning to their life. Making friends and connecting with society also gave meaning to their life. One participant said: *"I think what people can at least do is to make each other feel good. I think this is a social responsibility that every person should do in addition to the job responsibility"*.

Challenge-seeking themes

It is reasonable to assume that meaning in life is shaped to some extent by the challenges one faces every day. The participants remarked that they face the challenge of lack of independence in their lives due chiefly to parental constraints. They also reported intergenerational ideological conflicts and witnessing gender discrimination in society. They worry about nonacceptance by their families and other adults based on their gender, behavior, or interests. Girl#10 said: *"I think being obliged to do whatever they [parents] ask you to do is a form of coercion. You are not free to say that you don't like this or that. Often, you have to do things out of compulsion and a set of restrictions."*

Life, in their view, was a set of ups and downs and contrasting elements that give meaning to life. Girl#6 said: *"There are bright days and dark days in life. The dark days may outweigh... but if it was not for those days, you could not understand the bright days and appreciate them."* Adolescents believed that to have meaning in life, one can carry on despite difficulties in achieving goals. The desire to make changes

in individual, family and social life processes gave meaning to their lives. Girl #2 stated: *"What makes me happy is that there are so many things to learn and change. Change can be just as gratifying as it can be devastating. Change is all I have."*

Spiritual themes

The adolescents whose responses revealed this source of themes considered the universe to have meaning and believed that everything in the universe was created by God and has purpose. Many believed that the soul is the essence of humans and continues after death. *"The human body eventually decays, but your soul is perpetual. It does not vanish"* (Girl #4). These interviewees believed that soul puts the afterlife into perspective and human life cannot be meaningless. They believed that in the hope of creating an afterlife, man should pursue his actions in the material world in the right direction and in the pursuit of talents as well as helping others.

Future-directed themes

Some were hopeful for the future and had a positive outlook on life. This made them eager and motivated to continue living. Girl#8 said: *"I see the future very clearly and positive. I never think negatively because that can ruin my work. It's because of the future that I strive for."*

They saw pursuing career-educational goals as a way to achieve personal aspirations and advance one's socio-economic class. The effort for academic success and participating in the country's best universities was a promise for a bright future."

Self-directed themes

It appears that for most teens, meaning in life is related to pursuing goals and realizing one's potential. Participants here saw life as a journey that enables them to develop their potential when the environment is compatible with their abilities.

It is the individual who must self-direct and adapt to existence to accomplish desired goals. In this regard, an interviewee said: *"We did not come to make sense of life—life itself has meaning."* This belief made adolescents capable of fulfilling the mission that they think God has put on humans to continue life and pursue their aims. In this regard, one participant said: *"We were born to fulfill a mission, and I believe that God created us for a reason."* Independence and agency in personal life was the main motivator within adolescents' meaning in life.

An important aspect of self-direction is *self-actualization*. Striving for progress and success leads adolescents to take steps towards personal growth and self-improvement. *"I always think about the ideal person and try to achieve that in my own life. That's the meaning of all of striving and life."*

Table 1

Themes and Sub-themes of meaning in life

Main themes	Sub-themes	Frequency
Ego-directed influences	egoistic experientialism	32
	egoistic goal-directed influences	31
	search for happiness and inner satisfaction	27
	living in accordance with desires	25
Others-directed influences	family and social relationships	28
	experiencing love and emotional relationships	25
	altruism and social interest	23
Challenge-seeking influences	life as a challenge	29
	pain, as a source of meaning	24
	hardiness and endurance in the face of adversity	22
	adaptability and striving for change	20
Spiritual influences	The precedence of the soul over the body	21
	purpose in the world of creation	20
	God as a life planner	15
	belief in the resurrection and the afterlife	6
Future-directed influences	hope for the future and positivity	18
	career and educational perspectives	18
	believing in life as a mission	15
Self-directed influences	autonomy and individual agency	13
	self-actualization	13

4. Discussion

Growing up in any society necessitates adolescents seeking to find and establish their identity (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). It can be concluded that the Iranian adolescents are trying to construct a more or less integrated meaning of life among the conflicting poles. In this process they are similar to teenagers in other parts of the world. However, they are different from them in some ways because they live in a different culture with some different values traditions and beliefs. Different historical events and

happenings have shaped that culture and culture and norms of society are known to have a strong influence on meaning in life (Simon, 2008). All adolescents in the world today face conflicts (Hill et al, 2013) but our study shows that Iranian adolescents choose and suggest ways to resolve them. In comparison to other studies, this studies tried to delve into the dimation of meaning in life, other studies take the existence of meaning to which a person considers his life important, meaningful and understandable, and the second part which is the search for meaning refers to the active effort and exploration of a person in order to understand the meaning,

importance and purpose of his life (Steger, 2012). The other study in alignment of this study showed that searching for meaning in life has the most important role in defining behaviours in adolescents (Brassai, 2012). Also some non aligned studies with the current one, stated that family is the most important component of meaning in life in adolescents (Ahmadi, et.al, 2016), while this study shows that the most frequent component were Ego-directed desires like behaving in cordinance with personal goals or making joy and happiness. In the same study of Ahmadi, et.al, 2019 they showed hendonism is ranked as the 10th component of dimation of meaning in life, while the current study showed hendonism is one of the most frequent component in meaning in life in new generation of adolescent.

The first conflict that manifests itself by reflecting on the first theme is the pressure that the Iranian adolescent endures through the efforts of society (formal and informal institutions and structures) for otherness and commitment to moral standards. This pressure can be called "pious socialization" which is somewhat different from the pressures in Western and secular societies; Adolescents worldwide face a challenge called community in finding and establishing their identity (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). In addition to this challenge Iranian adolescents must endure the special pressure of society to follow and pursue a moral and pious life that is desirable to them. The content of the Ego-oriented approach and hedonistic content of the first theme found in this study shows that the Iranian adolescents

in this scale are not only severely under the pressure of "pious socialization" but also they do not accept it and have risen up against it; However, by analyzing other themes this demand has been a source of conflict itself. The participants tend to have a hedonistic and Ego-centered life by the pressure from urgent needs (the first theme; Ego-centered approach), on the other hand they try to live in society cope with social norms establish stable close relations with others and even be committed to its humanistic and humanitarian beliefs (second theme; Other-centered approach). They also tries to endure hardships with a challenging approach and create meaning from pain to change the world (the third theme; challenge-seeking approach). They want to build the future with optimism by pursuing a long-term career and educational goals (the fifth theme; the future-directed approach). On one side, believing in God as the designer of life he should prioritize the soul over the body and try to preserve his afterlife and save himself from eternal destruction in any way he can (the fourth theme; Self-directed approach). The Iranian adolescent on the one hand experiences the present clearly or is exposed to its pressures both immediate here & now (ego-directed approach) and here and now socially (others-directed approach) and on the other hand faces the future both the physical future (future-directed approach) and the metaphysical future (spiritual-directed approach).

The following figures illustrates this conflict:

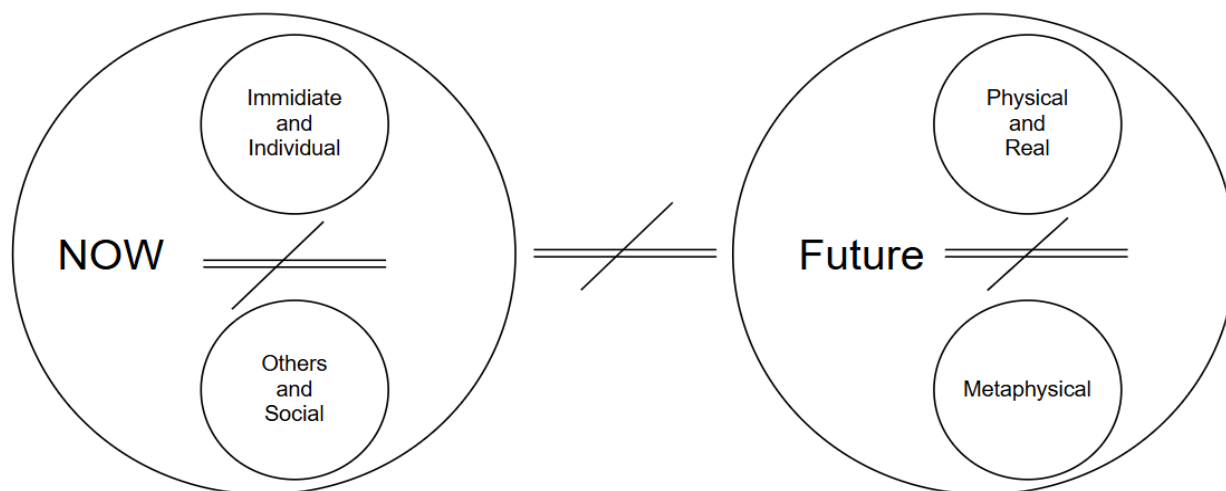


Figure 1

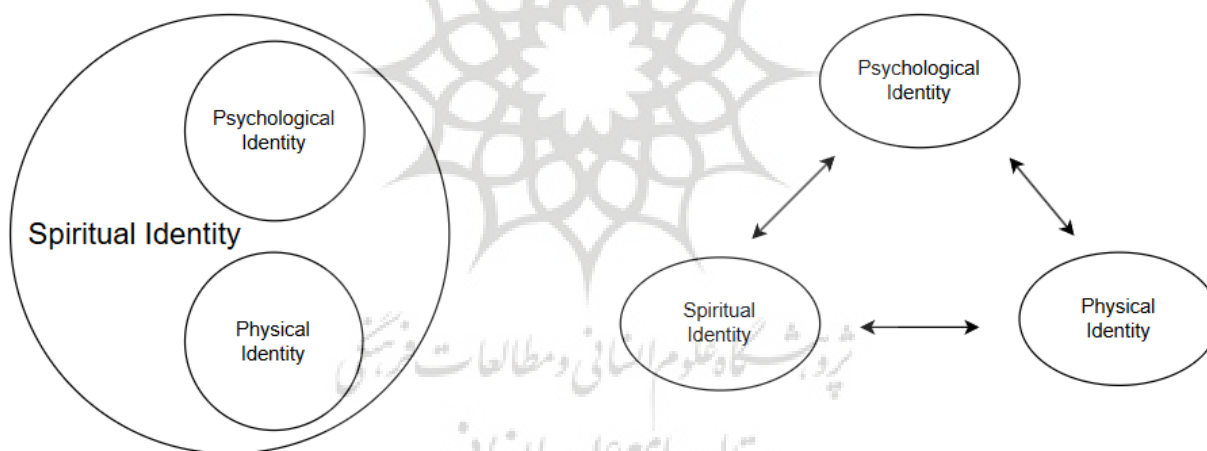


Figure 2

Figure 3

These three identities are normally in conflict: Ego with the Other and Ego with spirituality (Figure 1). Although spiritual identity per se has the capacity to accommodate physical and psychological identities and eliminate conflict this is only possible if spirituality is at the forefront of

individual identification as it is the case with orthodox believers in different religions (Ivtzan et al., 2013) (Figure 2). The sixth and final theme (self-directed approach) seems to be the second and more modern solution to conflict resolution. Based on this theme the Iranian adolescent believes that he has a

mission throughout his life trying to find the will and the ability to act as psychologists like William Glasser (Glasser, 2005) and Albert Ellis (Ellis, 2001) believe in human agency or as can be seen in Will Therapy from Otto Rank (Wadlington, 2012), and to stand on its own and flourish it the ideal path that

Abraham Maslow depicts for human life (Gawel, 2019). If he finds such a capacity, he can resolve the conflicts mentioned above and achieve a unified identity without necessarily following in the footsteps of the ancestors and being forced to submit to religious behavioral and belief frameworks.

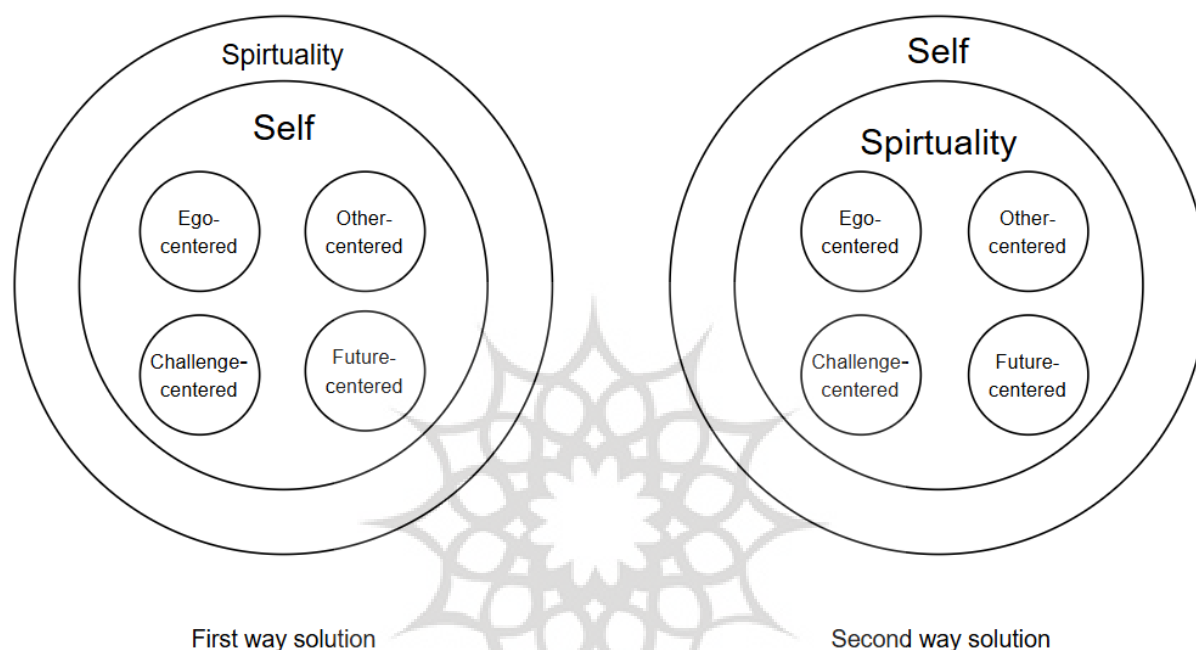


Figure 4

Based on the findings of this study Iranian adolescents are faced with fundamental conflicts in the meaning of life that seem to have two ways to resolve these conflicts and build a unified meaning of life. The first way which is the way of many religious people of the world and the society of the previous culture of Iran is to resolve their conflicts by hanging on to spirituality and religion (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Rajaei et al, 2010; Memar, 2017). The second way which is more modern and has been considered by some psychologists and many existentialists is to use oneself to resolve all conflicts. One

of the reasons for this preference is the easier access and more sociable the first way is in Iran as Iranian society is still one of the most religious communities (Ahmadi et al, 2016). Another reason could be that the Iranian adolescent prefers to follow a tried and tested path (first solution) to a path that has not yet been tried and its components are not yet very familiar (second solution). Based on our analysis of the findings of this study the Iranian adolescents according to this scale are faced with conflicting meanings of life but they suggest two solutions that can help us

better understand their present and future behaviors that become influential adults.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the diverse and multifaceted nature of meaning in life as experienced by Iranian adolescents. The results underscore that while each adolescent navigates a unique path toward meaning, common themes emerge that reflect both personal and cultural influences. The six identified themes—ego-directed, others-directed, challenge-seeking, spiritual, future-directed, and self-directed—illustrate the interplay between individual desires, social relationships, and existential questions. The adolescents in this study demonstrated a capacity to integrate opposing forces, such as hedonistic pursuits and spiritual beliefs, suggesting resilience and adaptability in their search for meaning. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the importance of fostering environments that encourage personal growth, social connection, and a sense of purpose, which can contribute to greater psychological well-being and life satisfaction during adolescence.

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Conflict of Interest

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