



## **Exploring Meaning in Life by Thematic Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Meaning in life is a common phenomenon when pondering the validation of human existence. In this study, an attempt is made to discover the meaning in individuals' lives, their experiences and the factors affecting them. It was a semi-structured interview method of data collection in qualitative research. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. A sample was taken from 10 students aged 19 years and above. The participants were students in a public sector university. The main themes were assigning meaning, making sense of chaos, continuous journey or destination, perspectives on the impact of positive and negative aspects, religion, society, culture and universal or subjective. Subjective factors influenced the outcome of this research. Negative emotions encouraged and helped the researchers to find different ways. It is concluded that meaning in life is deeply rooted in the intersection of societal expectations, cultural traditions, and religious convictions. The implications of meaning in life are integral for achieving a balanced, fulfilling, and resilient existence. It also influences how we reflect on our past, appreciate the present and envision or hope for the future.

**Keywords:** Meaning in Life, Purpose, Identity, Personal Growth

### **Introduction**

The meaning in life is about finding significance and purpose, which can be explored through philosophical thinking and living. There is no definitive answer and thinking or discourse to the question, "What is meaning in life?" This question has many answers from different cultures, societies, languages and ideologies. Searching for the answer to this question has produced more philosophical, metaphysical, scientific and theological speculation throughout history. Opinions vary on the usefulness of using time and resources to pursue an answer. The meaning of life does not only depend on a person's thinking but also depends on many factors, such as social, religious, past experiences, culture, family, and personal relationships. "The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction" is written by (Eagleton, 2007). In this concise book, he explores different philosophical perspectives on the meaning of life, including religious and nihilist viewpoints. The primary purpose of life is to gain happiness, satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment. Individuals should focus on a value-based life rather than controlling negative thoughts, and this approach will lead to a more meaningful and happy life (Harris, 2008). Having

a greater purpose in life directly relates to mortality in all age groups, stressing its significant impact on wellness and life expectancy (Hill & Turiano, 2014).

Life is a social phenomenon and continues regardless of feeling towards its end. Even in the last moment, life continues beyond the control. Perhaps the meaning of life has completely changed. One may be happy with the life or may be regretful. Perhaps defining life and its meaning is different based on everyone's experience. Existentialist philosophers like Sartre and Sebillé (1943) and Camus (1951) have explored the idea that individuals must create meaning through their choices and actions. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of freedom and responsibility for their existence. In common words, it can be said that anyone do what the/he wants to do and know about it. Everyone does not live the same life, but if everyone lives the same life, one can still define it differently because everyone observes it according to the thoughts. Everyone has his wishes or desires, no matter the situation. However, one may say that he/she keeps the wishes or desires aside when the situation is not friendly. Meaning in life is a positive indicator of well-being, which can further imply that meaning in one's life is directly proportional to one's well-being (Ryff et al., 1989). Frankl (1965) associates it with therapeutic growth, which is further described by (Lent & Brown, 2006). Instead, one can create meaning through experiences and pursuing one's purpose in life (Klinger, 1977).

By viewing the exploration of meaning in life, Javaid et al. (2024, 2025) and Asim et al. (2024) examine primary social connections and psychological and cultural elements impacting human experiences. The study evaluates multiple subjects, including the cultural imperialism alongside assessments of personality growth, ethnicity, cultural recognition, and sexual roles. They also view emotional intelligence measurement and mental consequences from music consumption. Further, Javaid et al. (2025) analyze cultural imperialism in the audiences who watch Bollywood and Punjabi films. As a global cinema leader, Bollywood spreads standard beliefs while erasing South Asian regional culture from its dominant position. Javaid et al. (2024) examined environmental mentality formations of personality aligned with meaning in life. This investigation confirms that people who experience nature develop emotional maturity and stronger empathetic skills. The theory receives validation from this research study because experiencing nature results in improved mental well-being with positive psychological features. This research strengthens scientific knowledge regarding environment-driven wellness and personal growth effects of nature contact during urbanization, which transfers humans away from natural settings. Javaid et al. (2025) assess the impact of ethnic identity on self-esteem and resilience across different parts of Pakistani urban and rural communities. Rural inhabitants show higher self-esteem levels and resilience because their ethnicity pervades their community boundaries. Javed et al. (2024) analyzed how single young adults understand their future marital relationships through gender roles. Youth participants in the qualitative research revealed significant shifts in marriage equality because they intensely transformed their views on gender roles.

Javaid et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review examining emotional intelligence (EI) with self-concept for its effect on academic performance. The authors reported that emotional intelligence leads to substantial academic performance gains within culturally diverse environments. Javaid et al. (2025) investigated music listeners' emotional experiences in their study. Music effectively controls emotions because people use musical streams to manage stress and negative feelings and enhance their psychological health. Javaid et al. (2024, 2025) and Asim et al. (2024) provide valuable information about human elements regarding cultural origins

and environmental factors with psychological music responses and emotional competencies. The research studies extend cultural studies, psychology, and sociology theories by confirming that identity and environment, together with emotional processes, determine how individuals perceive their settings and stay mentally healthy. Research efforts should investigate how cultural surroundings and their elements connect and influence personal growth and societal advancement.

Psychologist (Frankl, 1965), in his book "Man's Search for Meaning", proposed that finding meaning in life is essential for human flourishing. He developed Logotherapy, a therapeutic approach that focuses on helping individuals to find purpose in their experiences. The Logotherapy suggests that the primary aim of human beings is to explore meaning in life by facing suffering and happiness simultaneously. Meanings can be discovered through purposeful work, mutual associations and a positive attitude towards unavoidable sufferings. Psychological research has long been focused on meaning in life. It reflects humanity's desire to understand life's significance and purpose (Wong, 2013). Understanding how individuals derive meaning is essential, as it profoundly influences mental health, wellbeing, and overall life satisfaction.

In the ancient era, the question of meaning in life was present in almost every discipline. However, in this era, it has become part of the research and theories of philosophy and psychology. This research is conducted to explore the meaning in the life of students in their adult years, how they relate their philosophies to their meaning in life, and whether their relationships help them or not. It is explored in research that meaning in life contributes to great happiness, resilience and overall life satisfaction. Meaning in life comes from something more significant than itself, such as using strength and virtues not for personal well-being but for the service of others by doing something for the well-being of others or participating in meaningful work or as spiritual activities. Pursuing a higher purpose leads to a meaningful life (Seligman et al., 2004).

### **Objectives**

- To explore meaning in life among adults.
- To find out either it is subjective or universal.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

Thematic analysis, a qualitative research method, offers valuable insights into this domain by examining patterns and themes within qualitative data, thereby uncovering how people construct and perceive meaning in their lives. The research method of thematic analysis proves perfect for studying personal subjective meaning because its primary significance emerges from this perspective. Various meaningful aspects of life have been successfully investigated through thematic analysis as an analytical methodology.

Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2019) explore how people develop meaning through their qualitative data by applying inferential and dispositional thematic analysis. According to Steffler and Murdoch (2013), thematic analysis reveals the spiritual beliefs and advances individuals' perception of meaningful life. This research tool allows investigators to determine the existence and the direction of personal meaning exploration. Thus creating a comprehensive understanding of this complex concept and employing thematic analysis within life means that research allows

to experience authentic human encounters. Personal stories combined with thematic analysis allow researchers to detect multiple ways people understand life events during their experience creation process before designing solutions that target human existential concerns.

A total of 10 participants from a public sector university completed the research interview and the sample includes 6 males and 4 female students. Qualitative research design was employed to explore meaning in life of students aged 19 and above. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which helped in exploring different perspectives on life of participants. Allowed the participants to answer all the questions according to their experiences and provided them a free environment to express their thoughts. Time span of each interview was approximately 15-20 minutes.

### **Procedure**

The procedure includes the interview, which is a semi-structured method for public sector university students. The researchers allowed the participants to express their thoughts and perceptions of their meaning in life. Moreover, before starting the interview, it is obtained participants' permission to share their experiences with researchers and allowed to record the interview (audio recording). The participants had to answer the questions according to what they thought about it and why they thought like this. In addition to this, we explained the topic and made them comfortable that their information was confidential and only used for a positive purpose

### **Results and Findings**

#### **Assigning meaning**

This theme focused on how people assign meaning to things. Rather they want to be successful in career or prefer happiness. What meaning they give to their life? What is their purpose in life?

*“Main apna waqt zaya nai karna chahta main chahta hon k isko achay tareeqay say istamal kar sakon.” (P7)*

*“Main auraton ko un k haqooq say aagha karna chahti hon is liye main LLB ka intakhaab kia”(P1)*

#### **Making sense of Chaos**

When we hear Chaos we interpret it negatively but the sense of chaos motivated the participants because according to them chaos is the source which kept them more motivated in their life. P1 to P10 believed that it encouraged them.

#### **Continuous journey or Destination**

Participants saw their meaning in life as a continuous journey. A journey ends with death.

*“Nai janti k ye kab tak rahay Ga shyed akhiri sans tak”(P1)*

*“Ye hamesha rehney wala safar hai jis ko manzil nai”(P10)*

#### **Perspectives on impact of Positive aspects**

**Appreciation** Appreciations didn't make participants to be more firm in their meaning in life. They felt they didn't deserve a little bit of appreciation until they are satisfied with their performance.

*“Jab appreciation milti hai to ye fake lagti hai aur jo shaks appreciate karay wo jhoota lagta”*(P5)

*“It always becomes a cause of distraction.”*(P10)

**Happiness** Happiness is definitely connected with meaning in life because the participants felt happy when they took even a single step. They feel motivated.

### **Perspectives on impact of Negative aspects**

**Sufferings** Motivate us to be more firm or determinant in meaning. As the chaos becomes a source of motivation same goes with the suffering. Sufferings give them new ways to discover in their life’s meaning.

*“I love Pain kiun k ye mujhay hamesha haqeeqat btati aur motivate karti”*(P10)

*“Suffering hi wo waja hai jis say main khud ko btati hon k is k baad asani hai.”*(P2)

**Challenges and Obstacles** The challenges and obstacles motivate the participants rather than discourage. The challenges and obstacles give new paths and allow to more determinant.

### **Religion**

The interviews were conducted from the Muslim students. They believed their religion guide them to find more ways. If there is no way left then they move towards their religion for seeking guidance.

*“Seerat e Nabi (SAW) mein main apni har mushkil ka hal talaash karti hon aur hamesha mil b jata hai”*(P1)

*“Allah tala k asoolon k mutabiq zindagi guzarna”*(P4)

*“Zindagi k har lamhay mein mera mahzab meri madad karta hai”*(P10)

### **Society and Culture**

Society has no role in achieving the meaning in life. Society plays a negative role in this way and culture supports it and plays a positive role.

*“Is society ka hamesha negative impact hi raha hai lakin culture kahin na kahin contribute karta hai”*(P6)

*“Society to nai han lakin culture ki contribution nazar ati hai”*(P10)

### **Universal or Subjective**

The meaning in life is subjective in nature because all the individuals have their own perspective in seeing a life. No one knows the other’s experiences and their way of thinking. All the participants defined it subjective in nature.

*“Jo zindagi main jee rahi hon ya jesay halaat main face kar rahi wo bakiyon say muktalif hain isi tarha baki sab k sath b hai to ye subjective nature hai.”*(P2)

*“Han g ye subjective hai”* (P6)

### **Discussion**

The thematic analysis investigation across this study revealed several sophisticated ways that people experience and form a sense of meaning in their existence. The study confirms academic research about the subjective construction process but contributes new insights into personal interpretations of meaning. The research participants wanted to use their available time efficiently, so they prioritized career growth over personal fulfilment differently. According to

Frankl (1986), people find meaning by directing their "will to meaning" through their deliberate choices and personal actions. Self-achievement and personal growth represent how people achieve career success, which matches their drive to understand themselves (Steger et al., 2006). All participants looked past the common perception of chaos as they saw it activate their purpose-seeking behaviours. The exploration of encountering uncertainty results in increased individual growth as well as developing resilience, according to Miller (2024). Frankl (1986) explained how people discover meaning when they accept unavoidable incidents because this approach to unwanted difficulties leads to deeper self-purpose.

According to existentialist thought, life should be understood as an endless pursuit that lacks a final destination (Frankl, 1986). According to this viewpoint, one must stay dedicated to living in the current moment and constantly work on personal development to achieve a meaningful life. The participants found external appreciation unimportant for strengthening their life meaning since they considered this appreciation insincere. The results indicate that personal drives serve as stronger determinants for making meaning compared to what others think (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants demonstrated happiness through their belief that small goal-based achievements create motivational effects on their meaning of life. Research indicates that pleasant emotions strengthen individual self-directed purpose (Seligman, 2002). The participants acknowledged that suffering creates new opportunities for discovering meaningful directions, just as Frankl (1986) taught that individuals can discover deep purposes through their inevitable confrontations with adverse experiences. The confronting aspects helped participants instead of deterring them because they discovered fresh possibilities and developed stronger resolve. According to Frankl (1986), the process of dealing with obstacles results in personal advancement and deeper meaning

Participants' religious beliefs were vital because they used their faith as a guide to discover their purpose in life. Religious beliefs provide people with a meaningful purpose which supports studies (Pargament, 1997). Frankl (1986) says that religious or spiritual beliefs can bestow inner strength to someone during difficult periods. Society appeared to undermine the meaning-making process, but participants found cultural elements supportive of this goal. Individual perceptions of meaning are positively influenced by cultural values regardless of whether societal structures differ from those personal views (Hicks & King, 2009). Every person's unique life experiences form their perception of life purpose because understanding means personal to each individual. The theory that each person builds meaning through real-life interactions matches the research (Steger et al., 2006).

Meaning in life is subjective rather than universal. The study of knowing what you're meaning is in life makes it evident that everyone has meaning in life. It may be a purpose, love, or happiness. Meaning in life for some of them is to be financially independent. The purpose of life is to be happy and ambitious to fulfil one's desires (Henson et al., 2024). It does not have a destination. It ends with the death. It is not an easy task to find meaning in life because it depends upon many factors such as social, cultural, religious, family, and experiences. All these factors are necessary to play a role in meaning in life. The meaning in the life of the individuals is also affected by these factors because if these factors play a role in finding meaning in life, it will affect one's thoughts as well.

At this point, we cannot conclude that two people have the same meaning in life because they live different lives. In addition to this, their abilities to observe and think are also different from

one another. However, everyone has meaning in one's life. Some of them find their meaning in life, and some of them are still on their way to finding theirs. The study demonstrates its significance to life-meaning research by exploring varied individual methods of setting the purpose in their lives. Spiritual, cultural and other personal and cognitive factors combine to create a complex system of meaning establishment. Research should extend its focus on these dimensions to understand environmental influences on personal meanings better since it needs to examine cultural elements and societal impacts on interpretation.

### **Conclusion**

In short meaning in life is subjective in nature. Every individual has his/her own meaning in life which depends on one's own thinking and experiences. After analyzing or re-reading the data from the interviews, it can be concluded that finding meaning in life is not easy for individuals rather they relate things which give them happiness to their purpose in life. Finding meaning in life is a never ending journey and they are struggling towards it. Some of the participants want to be financially independent. Some wants to supports their family. Everyone has different concept to find their meaning in life from the others. Even one participant told us that he relates his happiness with spending quality time with the family because he hates when he watches reels on mobile phone for a long time. Finding meaning in life and struggling towards it is not an easy job. Everyone has meaning in life that is essential to his/her goal. According to this study, the role of the society is nothing in finding the meaning of life or neither the society helps. But the culture and religion contribute a lot. The meaning in life is connected with the happiness.

### **Implications**

#### **Mental Health**

The sense of meaning is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety. It provides a framework for understanding life's challenges and adversities, leading to better coping strategies.

#### **Emotional Stability**

Meaningful life experiences contribute to emotional resilience, enabling individuals to navigate life's ups and downs more effectively.

#### **Longevity**

The study suggests that individuals, who perceive their lives as meaningful tend to live longer, might be due to better health behaviors and a reduced risk of stress-related illnesses.

#### **Health Behaviors**

A sense of purpose can motivate healthier lifestyle choices, such as regular exercise, balanced diet, and adherence to medical advice.

#### **Relationships**

Meaning in life often enhances relationships by fostering empathy, compassion, and a sense of connectedness with others. Meaningful relationships, in turn, reinforce one's sense of purpose.

#### **Community Engagement**

People who find meaning in life are more likely to engage in community service and altruistic activities, contributing to a sense of belonging and societal well-being.

### **Sense of Coherence**

Meaning provides a sense of coherence and order in life, helping individuals to make sense of their experiences and existence.

### **Spiritual Fulfillment**

For many, meaning in life is tied to spiritual beliefs, which can offer comfort, hope, and a framework for understanding life's bigger picture.

### **Goal Setting**

A meaningful life often involves setting and striving towards personal and professional goals. This sense of direction fuels motivation and perseverance.

### **Personal Growth**

Pursuing meaning encourages continuous personal development and self-actualization, leading to a richer and more fulfilling life.

### **Adversity Handling**

Meaning provides a buffer against life's inevitable hardships. Individuals with a strong sense of purpose are better equipped to find silver linings and grow from challenging experiences.

### **Hope and Optimism**

A meaningful life fosters a positive outlook, enhancing one's ability to remain hopeful even in difficult times.

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