

CAPITAL UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY, ISLAMABAD



Exploring the Meaning in Life among Female University Graduate Students: A Qualitative Inquiry into Perspectives

by

Irsa Shahzeen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the
degree of Master of Science

in the

Faculty of Management & Social Sciences
Department of Psychology

2026

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Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I am profoundly grateful to Allah Almighty for granting me the strength, patience, and perseverance to complete this research. I want to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Ms. Iqra Kiran, for her invaluable guidance, patience, and unwavering encouragement throughout this journey. Her insightful feedback and continuous support not only shaped this thesis but also contributed significantly to my development as a researcher. I am also sincerely thankful to Dr. Sabahat Haqqani, Head of Department, for her support and guidance, and to Ms. Annum Tanweer, qualitative research expert, whose valuable guidance and feedback greatly strengthened the methodological rigor of this study. My heartfelt thanks go to the three participants of this study, whose openness, trust, and willingness to share their deeply personal experiences made this research possible. Their stories form the foundation of this work, and I am honored to have been entrusted with them. To my family and a special friend, thank you for your constant love, encouragement, and belief in me. Your support, understanding, and care gave me strength during both challenging and rewarding moments. This accomplishment would not have been possible without your unwavering presence, and I will always cherish the confidence and motivation you provided. Finally, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who contributed to this achievement in any way. Your guidance, assistance, and kindness played a meaningful role in completing this work, and I am sincerely grateful to each of you for being part of this journey.

(Irsa Shahzeen)

Abstract

This study explores how female university graduate students in Pakistan interpret and construct meaning in life across their lived experiences. Meaning in life is one of the most fundamental dimensions of psychological well-being; however, existing research has largely relied on quantitative approaches and undergraduate students, offering limited insight into the subjective, spiritual, and identity-based processes through which graduate students construct meaning. Graduate students navigate multiple, overlapping roles alongside evolving relationships, cultural expectations, and life transitions, making them particularly relevant to examining meaning-making as a dynamic, contextually embedded process. Female graduate students were purposively selected as their meaning-making is shaped by gendered and religious expectations largely unexamined in existing literature. Guided by Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory of Meaning and adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, data were collected from three Pakistani female graduate students through purposive sampling and semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using the IPA framework outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022). Four Group Experiential Themes were identified: faith and spirituality as a source of meaning; identity formation through education and purpose; relationships as sites of growth and meaning; personal growth and evolving self-understanding. The findings contribute to existential and qualitative psychology by illuminating the spiritual, relational, and identity-based dimensions of meaning-making and offering practical implications for educators, counselors, and mental health professionals who support graduate students' well-being.

Keywords: Meaning in life, Pakistani female graduate students, Existential theory, Qualitative research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Faith and spirituality, Identity formation

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Abbreviations

APA	American Psychological Association
CUST	Capital University of Science and Technology
GET	Group Experiential Theme
HEC	Higher Education Commission
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
MS	Master of Science
PET	Personal Experiential Theme
P1, P2, P3	Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Meaning in life constitutes one of the most enduring concerns of human existence, situated at the intersection of psychological well-being, motivation, and identity (Metz, 2022). It is broadly understood as the subjective sense that one's life is coherent, directed toward valued goals, and significant beyond the self (George and Park, 2021). Contemporary models conceptualize meaning as a multidimensional construct comprising coherence, purpose, and mattering, each contributing uniquely to an individual's overall sense that life is worth living (Park et al., 2021). Far from being a fixed trait, meaning in life is dynamically constructed through ongoing personal experiences, cultural belonging, and engagement with one's religious and relational worlds (Elias et al., 2025).

In recent years, scholarly interest in meaning in life has expanded considerably within psychological and educational research, reflecting recognition of its centrality to well-being, academic motivation, and the formation of personal and professional identity (Weatherton and Schussler, 2022). This growing interest has coincided with mounting evidence that the search for meaning intensifies during periods of transition and uncertainty, when established roles, relationships, and self-understandings are renegotiated (Tomlinson, 2023). Graduate education represented precisely such a period.

Across global higher education systems, graduate students confront intensive academic demands, prolonged career uncertainty, and continuously evolving personal values, conditions that frequently precipitate existential reflection and a heightened search for purpose (Chong, 2025). The transition into postgraduate study often requires students to reconcile emerging professional identities with pre-existing personal, familial, and cultural commitments, a process that can be both intellectually generative and existentially unsettling (Qian et al., 2026).

Although meaning in life has been extensively investigated within broader adult, clinical, and undergraduate populations, comparatively limited scholarly attention has been directed toward how graduate students specifically construct and sustain meaning amid the distinctive pressures of advanced study, including heightened competitiveness, social isolation, and uncertainty regarding future career trajectories (Vos, 2025). This relative neglect is particularly pronounced with respect to non-Western, religiously oriented populations, for whom meaning in life is frequently embedded within frameworks of faith, family obligation, and communal belonging rather than purely individual achievement (Malik, 2024).

In contexts such as Pakistan, where religious and collectivist values are deeply intertwined with everyday social life, the experience of meaning is unlikely to mirror the predominantly individualistic conceptualizations that have shaped much of the existing empirical literature (Rasool, 2024). While meaning in life has increasingly been examined among university populations, the experience of graduate study is not gender-neutral.

The predominance of female participants in the present study reflects the actual gender composition of the Department of Psychology rather than a deliberate focus on gender as an isolated study variable: women now outnumber men by roughly three to one in psychology doctoral programs and by nearly four to one at the master's level, consistent with the broader international "feminization" of the discipline (Marcus, 2026). Because the Psychology program itself produces a largely female graduate population, examining meaning-making among its students is, in

practice, an examination of the lived experience of the program's predominantly female population, rather than an artificially isolated gender comparison (Cardoso et al., 2025).

Existing research has rarely treated female students as a population of specific theoretical interest rather than an incidental subset of a mixed sample (Elias et al., 2025). For women in Pakistan, the pursuit of graduate education intersects with distinct cultural and relational demands, including gendered familial expectations, differential access to mentorship, and the negotiation of scholarly ambition alongside deeply held Islamic values regarding womanhood, duty, and belonging (Fazal et al., 2025).

Differential access to mentorship for women in Pakistani academia operates through concrete relational and structural mechanisms rather than as an abstract disadvantage: senior faculty positions remain disproportionately held by men, informal male-dominated professional networks continue to structure access to research collaboration and career sponsorship, and prevailing sociocultural expectations constrain the informal, after-hours interaction through which mentoring relationships are often built (Khan and Shah, 2026). For female graduate students, this can translate into fewer opportunities for the sustained, informal guidance that shapes not only academic progression but also students' sense of belonging and purpose within their discipline (Correa et al., 2025).

These pressures shape not only the practical experience of graduate study but the very terms in which meaning is sought, interpreted, and sustained, in ways that are unlikely to mirror the experiences of male peers navigating the same institutional environment (Malik, 2024). Attending specifically to female graduate students' accounts therefore allows the present study to surface a layer of existential and identity-based experience that has remained largely invisible within a literature that has, until now, treated gender as incidental rather than central to how meaning is constructed. Beyond these gendered relational dynamics, the meaning-making of Pakistani graduate students unfolds within a broader socio-political and

environmental context that a qualitative inquiry is particularly well-positioned to capture ([Gondal et al., 2025](#)).

Graduate students in Pakistan commonly navigate compounding, everyday pressures, including examination-related stress, the uncertainty surrounding upcoming job interviews and career transitions, and ongoing family and financial obligations that coexist with academic demands ([Khan et al., 2025](#)). These pressures are further layered onto a wider climate of socio-political uncertainty that has, at various points, disrupted academic life in Pakistan and generated additional psychological strain among young people navigating their education and future prospects ([Hussain, 2024](#)).

Specifically enrolled in a graduate Psychology program, the present study's participants also occupy an academic environment attuned to the dynamics of stress, coping, and well-being, a disciplinary backdrop that shapes how they interpret and narrate their own experiences of pressure and meaning ([Parkhouse et al., 2026](#)). For female graduate students in particular, these contextual pressures do not operate in isolation from gendered expectations but are layered onto them, shaping the conditions under which meaning must be actively constructed and sustained ([Kara et al., 2026](#)).

Given the complexity, subjectivity, and cultural embeddedness of these experiences, qualitative research is particularly well-suited to capturing the nuanced processes through which meaning is formed, interpreted, sustained, and at times challenged. Unlike quantitative approaches, which tend to reduce meaning to scores on standardized instruments, qualitative inquiry allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' own narratives, attending to the language, context, and interpretive richness through which meaning is actually lived ([Maneka, 2023](#)).

It is within this gap, between extensive quantitative documentation of meaning's importance and limited qualitative understanding of its lived construction among graduate students, that the present study was situated.

1.2 Gap Analysis

Although psychological studies on meaning in life are extensive, its central limitation is not a shortage of studies but a shortage of interpretive depth. Existing research reliably demonstrates that meaning matters for well-being, motivation, and resilience, yet it rarely illuminates how meaning is subjectively constructed, interpreted, and sustained by particular people situated in particular developmental positions and cultural worlds.

Three interrelated gaps follow from this observation: an underspecified developmental account of why graduate study constitutes a distinct meaning-making context; an underexamined and largely unjustified assumption that meaning-making is context-dependent; and a near-total silence on how Pakistani female graduate students, specifically, navigate this terrain. Each of these gaps is addressed in turn below.

The assumption that graduate students constitute a developmentally distinct population, however, is rarely grounded explicitly in developmental theory within the meaning-in-life literature, leaving the claim more asserted than demonstrated (Miller, 2022). Arnett (2000) theory of emerging adulthood situates the 18–25 age range as a period of identity exploration, instability, and self-focus that undergraduate education is structured around; graduate students, by contrast, are disproportionately clustered in their mid-to-late twenties and are consolidating rather than exploring identity, having already committed to a scholarly or professional trajectory (Nice and Joseph, 2022).

This places graduate students closer to what Erikson termed the intimacy-versus-isolation stage, in which the central psychosocial task shifts from identity formation to the negotiation of long-term commitments in work and relationships, even as the prolonged, high-stakes uncertainty of thesis research reintroduces an identity-like instability that undergraduate students do not typically face (Cherry, 2024). Meaning-in-life research that treats graduate and undergraduate samples as interchangeable therefore risks collapsing two distinct psychosocial positions into one, obscuring the developmental tension between a consolidating adult identity

and a destabilizing academic demand that plausibly shapes how graduate students experience meaning and purpose ([Wang and Fu, 2025](#)).

For female graduate students in Pakistan, this developmental tension does not unfold in a socio-cultural vacuum. Where Western emerging adulthood is characterized by prolonged autonomy from family and delayed role commitments ([Arnett, 2000](#)).

Pakistani women's progression through higher education is more often negotiated within, rather than apart from, family authority and gendered expectation ([Rana et al., 2024](#)): educational attainment is frequently sanctioned only as it does not conflict with marriage ability, domestic obligation, or family reputation, and women who pursue postgraduate study are simultaneously expected to fulfil relational and familial roles that their male peers are not ([Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024](#)).

[Zulfiqar and Kuskoff \(2024\)](#) find that highly educated Pakistani women commonly practice a "reformist agency," deliberately conforming to prevailing gender norms, such as dress codes and family obligations, to sustain access to education and mobility, which suggests that meaning-making for this population cannot be theorized as an individual developmental achievement alone but must be understood as continuously negotiated against collective and familial constraint ([Mandahu, 2025](#)).

This is the specific mechanism by which the female graduate experience diverges from that of male graduate students and from Western female undergraduates alike: it differs not simply because it is female, but because meaning must be constructed within, rather than through the rejection of, socio-cultural authority ([Fazal et al., 2025](#)).

The claim that meaning-making is context-dependent is frequently invoked in the literature but rarely unpacked into the specific mechanisms through which context is thought to operate. In the present study, "context" refers concretely to at least four intersecting layers ([Abdullah, 2021](#)). First, an Islamic context, in

which theological concepts such as *sabr* (patient perseverance), *rizq* (divinely allotted sustenance), and *qadar* (divine decree) supply an interpretive vocabulary for suffering, achievement, and purpose with no direct equivalent in secular meaning-in-life frameworks ([Iqbal and Skinner, 2021](#)).

Second, collectivism, in which the self is defined relationally rather than independently, such that meaning is sourced from, and validated by, family and community rather than constructed as an in-dividual achievement ([Kitayama and Salvador, 2024](#)).

Third, the structure of Pakistani higher education itself, which is stratified by gender, class, and regional access, and in which institutional norms around supervision, mobility, and academic authority differ from those typical of Western graduate programmes ([Rana et al., 2024](#)).

Fourth, gender norms, which determine whose educational and career aspirations are treated as legitimate, whose achievements require ongoing justification against competing familial roles, and whose meaning-making is therefore relational rather than purely self-authored ([Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024](#)). Framing meaning-making as context-dependent in this study therefore constitutes a substantive theoretical claim, tied to these four specific layers, rather than the generic gesture such framing often remains in the wider literature ([O’Keefe et al., 2025](#)).

Finally, the methodological gap extends beyond reliance on standardized instruments to the underuse of interpretive methods of inquiry: the idiographic, interpretive depth offered by approaches such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis has rarely been applied to this population, despite IPA’s particular suitability for illuminating subjective, identity-driven experience ([McLeod, 2024](#)).

This study seeks to address these gaps by qualitatively examining Pakistani female graduate students’ lived experiences and subjective interpretations of meaning, with specific attention to the spiritual, relational, and identity-based processes that have been largely overlooked in prior research.

1.3 Problem Statement

Psychological distress among Pakistani university students is neither rare nor incidental. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 35 studies involving more than 11,000 Pakistani university students estimated the pooled prevalence of depressive symptoms at approximately 51% (Niazi et al., 2025), with academic pressure, financial strain, and family obligation repeatedly identified as its principal drivers (Hussain, 2024).

Postgraduate students carry these pressures alongside thesis demands, professional role formation, and, for many, concurrent family and employment responsibilities (Akhter et al., 2025).

Meaning in life is among the few psychological resources shown to buffer this burden: meta-analytic evidence establishes a robust inverse association between meaning in life and psychological distress in student populations (Wang and Fu, 2025), and in a sample of 1,527 Pakistani postgraduate students, meaning in life mediated the relationship between spirituality, gratitude, forgiveness, and mental health (Adeeb et al., 2026). The unresolved question is therefore not whether meaning matters for this population, but how these students actually construct it.

The available evidence answers the first question far better than the second. A systematic review of meaning in life among university students identified 22 empirical studies, all conducted in European countries and predominantly survey-based (Ortega-Gómez et al., 2025), while the wider meta-analytic literature rests almost entirely on standardized self-report instruments (Wang and Fu, 2025). The limited Pakistani work follows the same pattern, treating meaning as a variable within correlational models rather than examining how it is experienced or interpreted (Huda et al., 2023). The processes through which faith, relationships, and identity formation generate meaning for graduate students in non-Western settings thus remain largely undocumented (Ferguson and Schussler, 2025). This gap is substantive rather than nominal: instruments developed on Western, secular, and individualistic samples cannot register meanings that are relationally and religiously constituted, so what such research records as low or absent meaning

may be meaning the measure was never designed to detect (O’Keefe et al., 2025).

For female graduate students in Pakistan, this limitation is compounded. Islamic concepts such as *sabr* (patient perseverance), *rizq* (divinely allotted sustenance), and *qadar* (divine decree) supply an interpretive vocabulary for suffering, achievement, and obligation that has no equivalent in the secular assumptions underlying most Western theorizing on meaning in life (Imam et al., 2023). Simultaneously, these students negotiate gendered expectations under which academic ambition is treated as provisional and requires continual justification against familial roles (Rana et al., 2024). Their meaning-making is consequently neither purely self-authored nor adequately captured by frameworks that assume it to be so.

The practical cost of this blind spot is measurable. Longitudinal evidence demonstrates that students with a stronger sense of purpose obtain higher grade point averages, earn more credits, drop fewer courses, and are significantly more likely to persist across successive years of study (Alderson et al., 2025).

Conversely, graduate students describing a loss of direction report disengagement from their programmes, deteriorating well-being, and consideration of withdrawal (Parkhouse et al., 2026), and rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in postgraduate populations substantially exceed those of the general population (Satinsky et al., 2021).

In the Pakistani context, where competing work and family responsibilities already depress postgraduate academic performance (Akhter et al., 2025) and where degree completion does not reliably translate into professional continuation for women (Rana et al., 2024), an erosion of meaning plausibly operates as an unrecognized contributor to attrition, underperformance, and abandoned goals. Existential difficulty of this kind seldom presents itself as such; it surfaces as missed deadlines, declining grades, or quiet withdrawal, and is therefore routinely absorbed into institutional systems organized around academic performance metrics rather than identified as a distinct dimension of student distress (Young and Petrescu, 2025). Support services cannot respond to what they are unable to name.

This study therefore addresses a specific and consequential unknown: how female graduate students in Pakistan themselves interpret and construct meaning in life, and through which spiritual, relational, identity-based, and growth-oriented processes that meaning is sought, sustained, negotiated, or lost across the university journey.

1.4 Conceptual Definition of Variables

Three constructs underpin the present inquiry and require conceptual clarification before the study's questions can be meaningfully posed: meaning in life, which is the phenomenon under investigation; spirituality, which the reviewed literature identifies as one of the most consequential domains through which that phenomenon is constituted in the present cultural context; and university graduate students, the population within which it is examined. Because this study is phenomenological rather than variable-analytic in orientation, these constructs are defined not as measurable quantities to be operationalized and correlated, but as conceptual boundaries that specify what the study attends to and how participants' accounts are to be understood.

Meaning in life is understood in this study as a multidimensional and dynamically constructed experience encompassing three interrelated facets: comprehension, the sense that one's life and experiences cohere intelligibly rather than as a series of disconnected events; purpose, the sense of being directed toward valued goals; and mattering, the belief that one's existence holds significance, whether to oneself, to others, or within a broader spiritual framework ([Park et al., 2021](#)). Rather than treating meaning as a static psychological trait amenable to fixed measurement, this study conceptualizes meaning in life as shaped through individuals' spiritual beliefs, social roles, relational experiences, and ongoing processes of personal growth and identity formation across different life stages ([Drob, 2022](#)). This conceptualization aligns with the interpretative and idiographic commitments of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, in which meaning is approached as it is lived and made sense of by the individual, and is accessed through the double

hermeneutic whereby the researcher interprets the participant's own interpretation of their experience ([Smith et al., 2022](#)). The study is therefore concerned with the experiential texture and quality of meaning as it is disclosed in participants' accounts, rather than with the structure, temporal sequencing, or storied form of those accounts, which would constitute the analytic focus of narrative inquiry. This distinction is maintained deliberately throughout: although participants necessarily communicate their experience through spoken accounts, those accounts are treated as a route of access to lived experience rather than as narratives to be analyzed in their own right.

Spirituality, the second construct, is defined in this study as the individual's subjective orientation toward the transcendent, encompassing belief in and a felt relationship with Allah, the sense of being situated within a divinely ordered moral framework, and the practices, obligations, and interpretive resources through which that relationship is enacted and sustained in everyday life ([Malik, 2024](#)).

This definition deliberately locates spirituality within, rather than apart from, the religious tradition in which the participants are situated. Much Western psychological literature distinguishes spirituality from religiosity and treats it as a personal, non-institutional search for transcendence; in Pakistani and Muslim-majority contexts, by contrast, spiritual experience is characteristically constituted through Islamic belief and practice, such that faith, devotional observance, and personal transcendence are not experientially separable domains ([Huda et al., 2023](#)).

Spirituality is further understood here not as a fixed disposition but as a lived and at times contested process, capable of deepening, faltering, and being reconstructed in response to hardship, and functioning as a resource through which suffering is rendered interpretable and gratitude, acceptance, and moral purpose are cultivated ([Adeeb et al., 2026](#)). Clarifying the construct at this point is necessary because spirituality recurs throughout the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, and in the analysis that follows, as a principal avenue through which meaning is sought, sustained, and at times recovered.

University graduate students, the third construct, are defined as individuals enrolled in postgraduate Master's degree programs who are transitioning into advanced academic, professional, and personal roles while navigating the broader life transitions characteristic of early adulthood ([Ferguson and Schussler, 2025](#)). A Pakistani female university graduate student is accordingly someone enrolled in such a program at a public or private university chartered by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan or by a provincial higher education authority ([Ullah, 2023](#)). This population occupies a distinctive developmental position between undergraduate study and doctoral-level work, characterized by heightened self-direction, increased academic and financial responsibility, and the ongoing negotiation of an emerging professional identity ([Stets and Huft, 2026](#)). For the present study, the population is further specified as female graduate students enrolled in Master's-level Psychology programs at a private university in Islamabad, Pakistan, a specification that reflects the study's interest in the culturally and gender-specific dimensions of meaning-making within a particular educational and social context. Taken together, these three definitions establish the boundaries of the inquiry: they identify meaning in life as the phenomenon to be understood, spirituality as one of the principal domains through which it is constituted, and Pakistani female graduate students as the particular lives within which both are to be examined.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory of Meaning, most fully articulated in *Man's Search for Meaning* and subsequently developed through the clinical and philosophical system known as logotherapy ([Perera, 2020](#)). Frankl's central idea holds that the will to meaning, rather than the pursuit of pleasure or power, constitutes the primary motivational force in human life, and that this drive persists even, and perhaps especially, in conditions of extreme suffering and adversity ([Szabó and Baji, 2025](#)). According to Frankl, the absence of perceived meaning, termed existential frustration, underlies much psychological distress, while the discovery or restoration of meaning functions as a powerful

source of resilience and psychological flourishing ([Routledge and FioRito, 2021](#)).

Although Frankl's existential theory provides the primary theoretical anchor for the present study, it is one among several influential models of meaning in life, and situating it against these alternatives clarifies the specific conceptual work it is being asked to perform. [Baumeister \(1991\)](#) need theory conceptualizes meaning as arising from the satisfaction of four psychological needs, namely purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, offering a more need-based and less explicitly spiritual account than Frankl's logotherapy; its strength lies in specifying what a meaningful life supplies, but it says comparatively little about how meaning is arrived at under conditions of unavoidable adversity. [Wong \(2012\)](#) PURE model frames meaning-making as an integrative process encompassing purpose, understanding, responsibility, and enjoyment, and is in several respects the closest contemporary successor to Frankl; it is, however, principally a therapeutic and intervention-oriented framework, concerned more with cultivating meaning than with describing how it is discovered in the course of ordinary life.

[George and Park \(2021\)](#) tripartite model of comprehension, purpose, and mattering, which informs the conceptual definition of meaning adopted earlier in this chapter and which [Martela and Steger \(2022\)](#) subsequently refined by examining the relative weight of significance, provides a dimensional and measurement-oriented framework rather than a phenomenological one. Its precision makes it well suited to survey-based research but correspondingly less generative for the present inquiry, since it specifies the dimensions along which meaning varies rather than the existential situations in which it is sought.

The applicability of any of these frameworks within the Pakistani context requires explicit consideration rather than assumption, since psychological theories of meaning have been developed almost entirely within Western, individualistic settings and cannot be transported unexamined into collectivist and religiously structured regions ([Imam et al., 2023](#)). Frankl's theory is not itself culturally neutral. It emerged from a European existentialist tradition that privileges individual freedom of attitude, and its emphasis on the person's sovereign capacity to

choose a stance toward suffering stands in some tension with a social context in which obligation, familial expectation, and communal role are experienced not as constraints upon the self but as constituents of it ([Rasool, 2024](#)). What nonetheless recommends Frankl's framework over the alternatives considered above is its structural compatibility with Islamic understandings of the human situation, in which suffering is intelligible rather than arbitrary, endurance carries moral and spiritual value, and the self is oriented toward a purpose beyond itself ([Bilal, 2024](#)). Frankl's concept of self-transcendence and the Islamic orientation of the self toward Allah are not equivalent, but they are structurally analogous in a way that Baumeister's need satisfaction and Wong's enjoyment component are not, and it is this analogy that allows the framework to accommodate participants' spiritual accounts on their own terms rather than reducing them to coping strategies or to catalogs of well-being ([Iqbal and Skinner, 2021](#)).

Frankl's theory specifies three principal avenues through which meaning may be discovered. The first is the avenue of creative or purposeful work, through which individuals derive significance from accomplishing tasks, contributing to projects beyond themselves, or actualizing personally valued goals. The second is the avenue of experiential encounter, whereby meaning arises through relationships, love, and engagement with beauty or truth, situating meaning firmly within the relational and aesthetic dimensions of human experience.

The third avenue concerns the attitude one adopts toward unavoidable suffering: even where circumstances cannot be changed, Frankl argued that individuals retain the freedom to choose their stance toward adversity, and that this attitudinal freedom constitutes a distinctive and ultimately elevating source of meaning ([Perera, 2020](#)).

These three avenues map closely onto the specific dimensions of experience that the present study seeks to explore among female Pakistani graduate students. Educational and professional achievement corresponds to Frankl's avenue of creative work; relational experiences with family and friends correspond to the avenue of encounter; and the negotiation of academic disappointment, and life uncertainty corresponds to the avenue of meaningful suffering. Spiritual belief, while not

named as a discrete avenue within Frankl's original formulation, is understood in this study as a pervasive orientation that shapes how all three avenues are interpreted and lived, consistent with Frankl's own emphasis on the human capacity for self-transcendence, the orientation of the self toward someone beyond itself ([Routledge and FioRito, 2021](#)).

Frankl's theory was therefore selected as the study's primary theoretical anchor on three explicit grounds. First, it is an account of how meaning is discovered rather than of how it is distributed or measured, which matches the study's phenomenological aim of describing lived processes rather than establishing levels or associations. Second, its attention to suffering and attitudinal freedom addresses precisely the conditions under which meaning becomes salient for this population, namely academic disappointment, uncertain professional continuation, and gendered social constraint; need-based and dimensional models tend to treat adversity as a threat to meaning rather than as a possible avenue toward it. Third, and most consequentially for the design of this study, the three avenues supply a defensible structure for the interview guide reproduced in Appendix C.

The open-ing question concerning current life situation and roles establishes the lived context within which meaning is pursued; the question on relationships corresponds to the avenue of experiential encounter; the question on life stages, past experience, and future expectation corresponds to the avenue of creative and purposeful work; and the question on beliefs, values, and sources of personal strength corresponds to attitudinal freedom and self-transcendence. The interview guide is thus theoretically derived rather than thematically improvised, while remaining sufficiently open-ended to allow participants to introduce sources of meaning the framework does not anticipate.

The population to which this framework is applied is best characterized, in developmental terms, as emerging adults. [Arnett \(2000\)](#) theory identifies emerging adulthood as a distinct phase extending across the late teens and twenties, defined by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a sense of being in between adolescence and full adulthood, and an unusually wide field of perceived possibility. Master's students occupy the later portion of this phase, and their position within

it differs substantively from that of undergraduates: having already committed to a disciplinary and professional trajectory, they are engaged less in open-ended exploration than in consolidating and testing an identity already chosen (Nice and Joseph, 2022). Meaning in life has itself been shown to operate differently across this phase and to vary by gender within it, which is one reason the present study specifies both developmental stage and gender rather than treating student status as sufficient (Karayigit et al., 2024).

This developmental transition is simultaneously a career and role transition. Graduate study is the site at which an academic identity is converted into a professional one, a process involving anticipatory socialization into the norms and expectations of a discipline as well as the practical negotiation of entry into it (Qian et al., 2026). Identity-based motivation theory clarifies why this bears directly on meaning: the imagined future professional self is not a passive expectation but an active organizer of present effort, rendering current academic difficulty interpretable as movement toward a oneself is in the process of becoming (Oyserman and Horowitz, 2023).

Role transition compounds this, since the Master's period frequently coincides with the accumulation of adult roles, including employment, marriage, and caregiving, each carrying its own demands and its own potential sources of significance (Mize and Kincaid, 2025). For Pakistani women specifically, this trajectory is neither assured nor symmetrical with that of men, since movement from higher education into professional life is mediated by familial negotiation and social constraint to a degree that renders the emerging-adult transition itself uncertain (Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024).

One feature of this developmental position carries particular theoretical weight in the present context: continued financial dependency. Emerging adulthood in Western settings is typically characterized by progressive economic self-sufficiency, and the attainment of financial independence is among the criteria by which emerging adults themselves judge whether adulthood has been reached (Nice and Joseph, 2022). Master's students in Pakistan frequently do not meet this criterion. Many remain dependent on parents for tuition, living costs, and daily maintenance, either

because they are not in employment or because part-time earnings are insufficient to displace parental support ([Akhter et al., 2025](#)). This is theoretically consequential in two aspects. First, it means that the educational project is not experienced as an individual undertaking but as a family investment, so that meaning derived from academic work is bound up with obligation, gratitude, and the wish to justify what has been given; Frankl's avenue of creative and purposeful work must therefore be read alongside relational obligation rather than apart from it ([Mandahu, 2025](#)).

Second, financial dependence conditions attitudinal freedom in practice, since the capacity to choose one's stance toward adversity, which Frankl treats as inalienable, is exercised by individuals whose material circumstances and major decisions remain substantially subject to others ([Rasool, 2024](#)).

Recognizing this does not invalidate the framework, but it specifies the conditions under which its central claims are examined here, and it is one reason the study attends closely to how participants themselves describe the relationship between family, obligation, and purpose.

Within the context of female university graduate study specifically, Frankl's framework offers a conceptual lens for understanding how individuals construct meaning in relation to academic pursuits, personal development, and ongoing life transitions. Graduate study is frequently characterized by identity exploration, intensified academic demands, and uncertainty about future career paths, conditions that may intensify reflection on questions of life purpose and personal value ([Tomlinson, 2023](#)).

Applying Frankl's theoretical perspective allows the present study to examine how female graduate students interpret and derive meaning from their educational, relational, spiritual, and broader existential experiences, while remaining attentive to the specific cultural variations that shape how these avenues of meaning are understood and lived within a Pakistani context ([Sahin, 2024](#)).

1.6 Rationale

The case for conducting this study rests on a mismatch between what is already established and what remains unavailable to those who would act on it. The empirical record on meaning in life is extensive, and its principal associations are no longer in dispute; what that record does not supply is any account of the process by which meaning is arrived at, and for the population studied here it supplies almost nothing at all. Existing work has been conducted overwhelmingly through standardized instruments administered to Western undergraduate samples, a design that can establish that meaning correlates with well-being but cannot show how a particular student, situated in particular circumstances, comes to find their life meaningful (Pilcher and Cortazzi, 2023). The question this study sets out to answer is therefore not whether meaning matters for graduate students, which is settled, but how female graduate students in Pakistan construct it, a question that cannot presently be answered from the published literature at all.

This population warrants such attention for reasons that are consequential rather than merely descriptive. Depressive symptoms are estimated to affect approximately half of the Pakistani university student population (Niazi et al., 2025), and the postgraduate period compounds academic pressure with career uncertainty, financial strain, and concurrent family obligation (Gondal et al., 2025).

For women, the stakes extend beyond the degree itself. A substantial proportion of Pakistani women who complete higher education do not continue into professional life, their transition mediated by familial negotiation and structural barriers rather than by capability or credential (Rana et al., 2024), while those who do continue frequently encounter institutional environments in which advancement is obstructed (Khan et al., 2025).

An erosion of meaning under these conditions is not a private difficulty. It is a plausible contributor to attrition, disengagement, and abandoned professional trajectories, and one that institutions presently have no terminology for identifying, since it surfaces as missed deadlines and quiet withdrawal rather than as anything

an academic monitoring system is designed to detect (Young and Petrescu, 2025). The sampling logic warrants elaboration here, since it governs the study's design and not merely its recruitment. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis does not sample to represent a population; it samples to locate a group for whom the research question is meaningful in a shared way, so that convergence and divergence across cases may be interpreted as substantive rather than as objects of a heterogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2022). Homogeneity was accordingly sought along the dimensions on which the phenomenon is expected to turn: gender, discipline, degree level, institutional setting, and developmental stage.

Participants are female, enrolled in Master's-level Psychology programs at a single private uni-versity in Islamabad, and situated within the same phase of emerging adulthood, which means that where their accounts diverge, that divergence may be attributed to individual processes of meaning-making rather than to structural differences in their circumstances. A more varied sample would broaden the study's reach at the direct cost of the interpretive claim it is able to make (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024).

The decision to restrict the present sample exclusively to female graduate students reflects a developmental rather than a purely social rationale. In the Pakistani context, women's progression through higher education is typically embedded within a parallel, gendered developmental timeline governing marriage, childbearing, and household responsibility, a timeline that male students are not read against with the same intensity or at the same life stage (Fazal et al., 2025). This developmental mechanism, whereby a woman's advancement through graduate study is continuously interpreted in relation to her marital and familial readiness, generates a distinct configuration of existential pressures around timing, identity, and self-worth that would be concealed rather than clarified by combining male and female accounts within a single, apparently gender-neutral sample. Restricting the sample to female participants therefore reflects a methodological commitment to isolating this gender-specific developmental mechanism with the interpretive depth that IPA's homogeneous sampling logic demands (Squires, 2023), rather than an assumption that male students' experiences of meaning are theoretically

unimportant.

The gendered dimensions of graduate study constitute a further and underexamined layer of existential complexity. [Fazal et al. \(2025\)](#) characterize gender equity in Pakistani higher education as a persistent gap between stated aspiration and institutional reality, and the discriminatory practices constituting that gap take several distinct forms. Access to mentorship and supervision is unequal, since informal academic networks tend to form around male faculty and to reproduce themselves through sponsorship that women are less frequently offered ([Babatope, 2025](#)).

Participation in the activities through which academic careers are built conference attendance, fieldwork, off-campus collaboration, and evening or residential academic events is often contingent on familial permission in a way that male students' participation is not, so that opportunities formally open to all are practically available only to some ([Qian et al., 2026](#)).

Women remain markedly underrepresented in departmental leadership and institutional decision-making, which removes them from precisely the bodies that set the terms of academic advancement ([Ullah, 2023](#)). And a woman's degree is frequently read as provisional, pursued in the interval before marriage rather than as the foundation of a career, an assumption that shapes how seriously her ambitions are treated by faculty, family, and prospective employers alike ([Pari and Ali, 2025](#)). These practices bear directly on the sense of mattering that is constitutive of meaning: they communicate, cumulatively and often without being stated, that a woman's scholarly presence is conditional.

Qualitative exploration is therefore necessary to capture how such conditions are experienced and interpreted from within, in ways that quantitative instruments, however psychometrically robust, cannot achieve. Accordingly, this study addresses the gap identified above by adopting an IPA-informed perspective to examine the lived experiences through which female university graduate students in

Pakistan make sense of their lives. Its theoretical contribution lies in extending existential accounts of meaning-making into a collectivist and Islamically structured context that the dominant frameworks were not developed to describe. Its practical contribution can be specified considerably more concretely than the general appeal to student well-being that characterizes much of this literature, and four applications follow directly from the study's design.

The first concerns counseling practice. The findings identify the specific existential registers in which distress presents among this population, including disrupted life timelines, contested self-worth, and spiritual doubt following academic failure. This matters because university counseling provision in Pakistan is organized largely around symptom-based models that classify such presentations as anxiety or low mood and treat them accordingly, leaving their existential structure unaddressed ([Gondal et al., 2025](#)).

A practitioner equipped to recognize a crisis of meaning as such is positioned to respond to it rather than to its symptoms alone, and the present study supplies the descriptive material from which that recognition can be taught ([Sverdlik and Hall, 2020](#)).

The second concerns supervisory and faculty training. The findings indicate which junctures in the postgraduate trajectory carry existential weight thesis stagnation, rupture in the supervisory relationship, and the approach of graduation without a professional pathway in view and can inform brief, targeted training modules equipping supervisors to recognize these moments and to treat them as something other than problems of academic performance ([Babatope, 2025](#)).

The third concerns institutional policy. The study's account of how family investment, financial dependency, and gendered timelines shape students' sense of purpose stands on the design of specific provisions: the scheduling of academic obligations around familial constraint, transparency in the allocation of supervisors, and the extension of career-transition support to the point of graduation rather than its withdrawal at degree completion ([Young and Petrescu, 2025](#)).

The fourth concerns the design of pathways from graduate study into professional life. Findings speak to why credentialed Pakistani women disengage from professional trajectories despite having completed their degrees, a question ordinarily approached through structural analysis alone and rarely through the meaning-related processes that accompany the decision ([Tareen et al., 2025](#)).

Interventions built without that understanding address the barriers women face while leaving untouched the question of what they are being asked to find worth continuing for.

1.7 Research Questions

- i. How do female university graduate students in Pakistan construct and interpret meaning in life through lived experiences extending beyond as well as within their graduate study?

1.8 Research Objectives for This Study

- i. To qualitatively examine the spiritual, relational, and identity-based processes through which female university graduate students in Pakistan interpret and construct meaning in life through their lived experiences.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a thematically organized review of the theoretical and empirical literature about meaning in life among female university graduate students, with particular attention to the cultural, relational, spiritual, and gendered dimensions of meaning-making in non-Western contexts. The review moves from foundational conceptual frameworks through empirical literature on graduate student well-being, cultural and religious dimensions of meaning, gender and identity formation, and the methodological rationale for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Taken together, these bodies of literature establish the theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study while identifying the specific gaps in existing knowledge that the study seeks to address.

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental dimensions of human psychological well-being, functioning as a motivational anchor that enables individuals to endure adversity, sustain engagement, and construct a coherent sense of self across time ([Martela and Steger, 2022](#)). In contemporary psychological scholarship, meaning in life is broadly understood as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising three interrelated components: coherence (the sense that one's life makes sense), purpose (the sense of being directed toward significant goals), and mattering or significance (the belief that one's existence is of value)

(George and Park, 2021). Each of these dimensions may be differentially salient at various stages of life and across diverse cultural and relational contexts, underscoring the importance of examining meaning not as a static trait but as a dynamically constructed, lived experience.

These three dimensions were theorized as interrelated but distinct: an individual may experience strong coherence and purpose while lacking a sense of mattering, or conversely may feel deeply significant to others while struggling to make sense of their own life trajectory (Park et al., 2021). The relative salience of each dimension varies across life stages, cultural contexts, and individual circumstances, underscoring the importance of examining meaning not as a fixed psychological trait but as a dynamically constructed, contextually embedded experience (Martela and Steger, 2022).

For graduate students navigating identity transitions, academic challenges, and relational renegotiations simultaneously, the maintenance of all three dimensions of meaning may be particularly demanding, and disruptions to any one dimension can generate existential distress with consequences for academic performance and psychological health (Qian et al., 2026).

Furthermore, grounded in Viktor Frankl's existential framework, meaning in life is understood as something discovered rather than invented, emerging through engagement with creative work, loving relationships, and the attitudes one adopts toward unavoidable suffering (Perera, 2020). Frankl's logotherapeutic perspective holds that the primary human motivation is the will to meaning, and that existential frustration, the experience of feeling unable to discover meaning, underlies much psychological distress (Routledge and FioRito, 2021). Contemporary empirical research has largely corroborated this insight, demonstrating robust associations between the presence of meaning and lower rates of depression, anxiety, and burnout, as well as higher levels of resilience, life satisfaction, and engagement with one's social world (Arslan and Yildirim, 2021). Importantly, scholars have drawn attention to the distinction between the presence of meaning and the active search for meaning, noting that intense searching in the absence of a felt sense of meaning is associated with heightened psychological distress, while

the co-occurrence of high presence and motivated searching may reflect a mature existential orientation ([Martela and Steger, 2022](#)).

2.2 Meaning in Life Among Graduate Students: Well-Being and Protective Factors

University graduate students occupy a distinctive psychosocial position that makes the question of meaning particularly prominent. This stage of life is characterized by heightened academic demands, identity exploration, career uncertainty, and exposure to existential questions about purpose and contribution ([Chong, 2025](#)). Graduate study frequently intensifies the search for meaning by immersing students in intellectual inquiry, requiring sustained self-directed effort, and exposing them to environments that both stimulate and challenge their sense of scholarly identity ([Spronken-Smith, 2022](#)).

Research among graduate student populations indicates that meaning in life functions as a significant protective factor against psychological distress, with studies reporting associations between a strong sense of purpose and lower rates of burnout, anxiety, and depression ([Sverdlik and Hall, 2020](#)). Conversely, the experience of meaning deficit, characterized by purposelessness, disconnection from one's work, and difficulty sustaining a coherent sense of self, has been identified as a significant contributor to graduate student attrition and mental health difficulties.

The empirical literature on graduate student well-being has expanded considerably in recent years. Large-scale systematic reviews document that graduate students, particularly doctoral candidates, experience rates of depression and anxiety markedly higher than those found among age-matched non-academic populations, with estimates suggesting that up to 40% of doctoral students experience clinically significant psychological distress during their studies ([Satinsky et al., 2021](#)). The causes are multifactorial, encompassing academic performance pressure, social isolation, financial uncertainty, and the structural ambiguities of mentoring relationships.

A qualitative study examining graduate students' emotional processing of unexpected events during their academic journeys found that disruptions to anticipated trajectories often triggered deep existential questioning about purpose, direction, and the value of continued academic effort ([Ferguson and Schussler, 2025](#)).

These findings highlight the importance of understanding how graduate students construct and sustain meaning not only in favorable circumstances but in the face of setbacks, uncertainty, and disappointment ([Young and Petrescu, 2025](#)). A phenomenological approach is particularly well-suited to illuminating these experiential processes, as it attends to the subjective meaning-making that unfolds within the texture of daily academic life ([Katongole, 2021](#)).

2.3 Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Meaning-Making

The role of cultural context in shaping the experience and expression of meaning in life has received growing theoretical and empirical recognition, driven by the observation that the individualistic, materialistic assumptions embedded in dominant Western psychological frameworks inadequately represent the meaning-making of individuals from non-Western, religious, or collectivist backgrounds ([Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024](#)).

In Pakistani society and across Muslim-majority contexts more broadly, meaning in life is not experienced as an individual psychological achievement but as a spiritually and relationally constituted phenomenon, grounded in one's relationship with Allah, one's obligations to family and community, and one's orientation toward transcendent moral purpose ([Malik, 2024](#)).

Empirical research in Pakistani and South Asian contexts validates the central role of Islamic faith in shaping well-being and meaning. [Huda et al. \(2023\)](#) found that religious orientation was among the strongest predictors of meaning in life and life

satisfaction among Pakistani university students, with stronger Islamic faith associated with substantially higher levels of meaning presence. These findings were consistent with a broader cross-cultural literature demonstrating that religious engagement functions as a robust meaning-making resource across diverse traditions, operating through mechanisms including the provision of coherent frameworks for understanding suffering and adversity, the cultivation of gratitude and acceptance, and the sense of belonging to a transcendent community of shared purpose and practice ([Routledge and FioRito, 2021](#)).

The collectivist cultural orientation of Pakistani society further shapes meaning-making in ways that Western individualistic frameworks cannot adequately capture. In collectivist contexts, personal identity is substantially constituted through relational roles and communal membership, and the significance of individual achievement is typically located within a framework of familial pride and communal contribution rather than personal satisfaction alone ([Kuusisto et al., 2023](#)). For Pakistani graduate students, the conviction that their education brings honor to their family, fulfills communal expectations, and advances opportunities for women within their social networks constitutes a powerful and culturally distinctive source of meaning that enriches but also complicates their existential experience ([Pari and Ali, 2025](#)). Understanding these culturally specific dimensions of meaning-making requires research approaches that are attentive to the particular contexts within which individual meaning is embedded.

2.4 Gender and Meaning in Life Among Female Graduate Students

Gender constitutes a significant dimension through which meaning in life is differentially experienced, expressed, and constrained among university graduate students ([Karayigit et al., 2024](#)). Female graduate students navigate a set of gendered institutional and social experiences that shape their meaning-making in ways that have received insufficient systematic attention in the empirical literature ([Elias](#)

[et al., 2025](#)). These experiences include differential access to mentoring and sponsorship, exposure to implicit and explicit forms of gender-based marginalization within academic disciplines, impostor phenomena, and the negotiation of competing expectations regarding scholarly achievement and domestic or relational responsibilities ([Babatope, 2025](#)).

Research across diverse cultural contexts indicates that women in higher education draw substantially on relational sources of meaning, including close mentoring relationships, peer solidarity, and the desire to contribute to others' well-being and development, alongside intellectual and vocational sources of purpose ([Wu et al., 2024](#)).

This relational orientation is amplified within Pakistani cultural contexts, where women's identities are more substantially constituted through relational roles and where the quality of family bonds, social support networks, and communal belonging is a primary determinant of psychological well-being and existential satisfaction ([Rasool, 2024](#)). For female graduate students in Pakistan, relationships with parents, siblings, and friends constitute active sites of meaning-making in which the significance of their scholarly endeavors is continuously negotiated, affirmed, and sometimes contested ([Akhter et al., 2025](#)).

Navigating gendered institutional environments poses specific existential challenges for female graduate students. Research has documented that women in graduate programs frequently encounter experiences of marginalization, tokenism, and institutional invisibility that threaten the sense of mattering and belonging central to the experience of meaning in life ([Ferguson and Schussler, 2025](#)).

These challenges demand active and often exhausting psychological labor to manage, adding a distinctive burden to the existential work of meaning-making that is not present in equivalent form for male peers. In the Pakistani context, where broader social transformations regarding gender and education are underway but where traditional gender hierarchies remain structurally entrenched, the existential management of these challenges constitutes a particularly significant dimension of female graduate students' meaning-making experience ([Pari and Ali, 2025](#)).

2.5 Identity Formation and Meaning in Life During Graduate Study

Graduate study constitutes a critical developmental juncture for identity formation, characterized by the emergence of new professional and scholarly roles, the renegotiation of existing self-understandings, and the integration of multiple identity dimensions into an evolving but increasingly coherent self-concept ([Weather-ton and Schussler, 2022](#)).

Identity and meaning are mutually constitutive: one's sense of who one is provides the framework through which the significance of activities and relationships is apprehended, while the experience of meaning provides the motivational and affective foundation that sustains identity, commitment, and growth across time ([Stets and Huft, 2026](#)). The identity challenges of graduate study, therefore, are simultaneously existential challenges in which the coherence, purpose, and mattering dimensions of meaning are directly implicated ([Drob, 2022](#)).

The life stage of graduate study is also characterized by significant transitions that can both precipitate and disrupt the experience of meaning ([Tomlinson, 2023](#)). Transitions between undergraduate and postgraduate education, and between student and emerging professional identities, are experienced as critical junctures at which existing meanings are tested, and new meanings must be sought ([Chong, 2025](#)). Developmental scholarship on identity formation highlights the ways in which transitions can serve as catalysts for existential reflection, prompting individuals to reassess their values, commitments, and sense of direction ([Weatherton and Schussler, 2022](#)).

For graduate students, the transition into postgraduate study frequently involves a renegotiation of identity that is simultaneously intellectually stimulating and existentially unsettling, creating conditions in which the question of meaning becomes both more urgent and more complex. Qualitative research that attends to participants' own narratives of these transitions can capture the experiential richness of this process in ways that aggregate data cannot ([Isik, 2025](#)).

For female graduate students in Pakistan, identity formation during graduate study involves additional layers of complexity arising from the negotiation of scholarly identity alongside gendered social roles and Islamic spiritual identity (Fazal et al., 2025). None of these identity dimensions can be simply subordinated to the others without significant psychological cost. The integration of scholarly ambition with Islamic values, familial obligation, and gendered social expectations requires a sustained creative effort that is cognitively demanding, emotionally intensive, and ultimately generative of the distinctive forms of meaning that the present study seeks to illuminate (Sahin, 2024). Qualitative research that attends closely to this complex identity work can reveal the specific configurations of meaning through which Pakistani female graduate students navigate their academic and existential lives (Isik, 2025).

2.6 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Meaning in Life Research

The methodological landscape of meaning in life research has been predominantly shaped by quantitative approaches, with self-report measures such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire serving as the dominant mode of inquiry (Jovanović et al., 2024). While these instruments have generated important empirical findings, they are necessarily constrained in their ability to illuminate the subjective, contextual, and narrative dimensions of how individuals actually construct and inhabit meaning (Pilcher and Cortazzi, 2023). A growing body of scholars has called for qualitative approaches capable of exploring these experiential dimensions with the depth and interpretive sensitivity that the phenomenon demands (Maneka, 2023).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in particular, has emerged as a valuable methodology for meaning-in-life research, given its explicit focus on how individuals make sense of their significant lived experiences and its philosophical grounding in phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions (McLeod, 2024). IPA is an idiographic methodology that prioritizes detailed, in-depth exploration of

individual cases over the generation of broad generalizations (Squires, 2023). Its commitment to understanding how specific individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences makes it particularly well-suited to the study of meaning in life, which is, by its very nature, a deeply personal and contextually embedded phenomenon (Nickerson, 2024).

Furthermore, IPA's analytical process involves a sustained interpretive engagement with participants' accounts, through which the researcher seeks to illuminate both what participants say and the deeper meanings communicated through the texture, structure, and language of their narratives (Smith et al., 2022). The double hermeneutic, the recognition that the researcher is engaged in making sense of the participant making sense of their own experience, ensures that IPA findings are always understood as co-constructed, interpretive achievements rather than straightforward reports of pre-given facts (Ramos, 2025). This epistemological transparency is a significant methodological strength in a field where phenomena of interest are inherently subjective and resist reduction to observable variables (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022).

2.7 Critical Synthesis and Analytical Comparison of Reviewed Literature

There is a persistent methodological asymmetry between large-sample, instrument-based studies that dominate the field and the interpretive depth the present study seeks to provide (Pandey et al., 2025). A recent large-scale Pakistani study conducted with 1,527 postgraduate students across ten public universities in Punjab illustrates this asymmetry well: using structural equation modelling, it found that meaning in life partially mediated the relationship between gratitude, forgiveness, spirituality, and mental health, offering robust evidence that spiritually inflected constructs matter for Pakistani postgraduate students' well-being (Adeeb et al.,

2026). However, the study's reliance on standardized Likert-scale instruments meant that the specific content of what these students found meaningful, and how Islamic faith concretely shaped that meaning, remained outside the scope of the analysis, a gap that the present qualitative, IPA-based inquiry is positioned to address.

A cross-national comparison highlights how contextual assumptions travel unevenly across the literature. Ortega-Gómez et al. (2025) systematic review of 22 empirical studies involving over 7,700 European university students found meaning in life functioning primarily as a protective factor against depressive symptoms, with self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and social support, largely secular constructs, identified as its principal correlates.

Set against the Pakistani and South Asian literature reviewed in this chapter (Huda et al., 2023), in which religious and spiritual frameworks anchor the very language in which meaning is articulated, this comparison suggests that models of meaning in life developed within predominantly secular, individualistic European contexts cannot simply be transposed onto a Pakistani, Islamic, and collectivist setting without risking a mischaracterization of what meaning-making actually involves for the population under study (Malik, 2024).

Although several of the reviewed studies acknowledge gender as a relevant variable (Elias et al., 2025), none treats female graduate students as a population of primary theoretical interest in the way the present study does; where gender is examined, it functions largely as a demographic control rather than as a lens shaping the qualitative texture of meaning-making. Taken together, these comparisons indicate that the existing literature is strong on establishing that meaning in life matters across cultural and demographic groups, but comparatively weak on specifying, with cultural and gendered precision, how it is lived and interpreted, an analytical gap, rather than a simple absence of prior research, that the present study addresses. In summary, the existing literature establishes meaning in life as a multidimensional, contextually embedded, and experientially rich phenomenon

that is particularly salient for graduate students navigating the demands of post-graduate study. Theoretical frameworks rooted in Frankl's existential psychology, together with contemporary empirical scholarship on the dimensions of meaning, provide a robust conceptual foundation for the present inquiry ([Szabó and Baji, 2025](#)). At the same time, the predominance of quantitative approaches leaves significant gaps in the understanding of how meaning is subjectively constructed, narrated, and lived by individual graduate students within specific cultural, relational, and institutional contexts ([Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024](#)). The present study addresses these gaps by adopting an IPA methodology to explore the lived experiences of female graduate students, attending to the gendered, relational, and cultural dimensions of meaning-making that have received insufficient attention in the existing literature ([Ramos, 2025](#)). The findings are anticipated to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical support of graduate student well-being and existential flourishing.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework, research design, and procedural decisions governing the present study. In qualitative research, a methodology chapter serves not merely to describe procedures but to articulate the epistemological and philosophical commitments that justify those procedures, establishing coherence between research questions, theoretical framework, and methods of inquiry. The chapter proceeds from philosophical foundations through specific methodological choices regarding design, sampling, data collection, and analysis, and concludes with consideration of reflexivity, ethics, and quality.

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Philosophical Paradigm and Epistemological Orientation

The present study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which views social reality as socially and contextually constructed through individuals' interpretations of their lived experiences ([Pilcher and Cortazzi, 2023](#)). Consistent with this epistemological position, phenomena such as meaning in life, identity, and well-being are understood as subjective and meaning-based rather than objectively measurable. Accordingly, the study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a methodological approach grounded in phenomenology and

hermeneutics that seeks to explore how individuals experience and make sense of their lives ([McLeod, 2024](#)). IPA recognizes that experiences are shaped by cultural, linguistic, and personal contexts and that understanding is co-constructed through the participant's interpretations and the researcher's reflective engagement with those interpretations.

3.1.2 Type of the Study

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its primary methodological framework. IPA is well-suited for exploring how individuals make sense of significant lived experiences and is particularly appropriate for investigating how female graduate students in Pakistan interpret and construct meaning in life, a phenomenon that is subjective, context-dependent, and interpretive in nature ([Smith et al., 2022](#)).

IPA is grounded in three key principles: phenomenology, which focuses on participants' lived experiences; hermeneutics, which recognizes that understanding is achieved through interpretation by both participants and researchers; and idiographic, which emphasizes in-depth analysis of individual cases before identifying shared patterns across participants ([Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024](#)). These principles ensure alignment between the study's research questions, epistemological orientation, and methodological approach.

3.1.3 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants capable of providing rich, reflective, and experientially grounded accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach is methodologically consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and the IPA framework, both of which prioritize the quality and interpretive depth of participants' accounts over the breadth and generalizability of the sample ([Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024](#)).

Furthermore, a relatively homogeneous sample was sought to facilitate a detailed idiographic analysis. By focusing on female graduate students within a specific

age range and academic context, the study aims to examine shared experiential structures while still allowing for nuanced individual differences. This homogeneity enhances the interpretative depth and coherence of the analysis, enabling meaningful comparisons across cases (Squires, 2023).

This aligns with the interpretivist epistemology underpinning IPA, where knowledge is co-constructed through participants' meaning-making rather than derived from representative sampling. Thus, purposive sampling is methodologically consistent with IPA's emphasis on depth, relevance, and detailed exploration of lived experience, rather than breadth or statistical generalizability.

3.2 Time Horizon, Study Setting and Data Collection Procedure

3.2.1 Time Horizon

The present study employs a cross-sectional design, with data collected at a single point in time during the April to May 2026 academic year. This design is appropriate given the study's primary focus on participants' accounts of their current and retrospective experiences of meaning in life, rather than on the longitudinal development of meaning across time.

3.2.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted at a private university in Islamabad, Pakistan, which offered graduate-level degree programs in psychology. Private universities in Pakistan's urban centers attract students navigating the specific challenges and opportunities of advanced education amid expanded social mobility and evolving gender norms (Tareen et al., 2025). Interviews were conducted in quiet, private spaces on university premises, including the library's study room, selected to minimize interruption and ensure confidentiality.

Several features of the context in which data were collected stand out in how the interviews unfolded and are recorded here for transparency. Data collection coincided with an active semester in which participants were carrying coursework and internship placements simultaneously. Scheduling was correspondingly difficult, and arranging each interview required considerable flexibility from both the researcher and the participants, with several appointments rearranged before a workable time could be found.

Because classes for these participants were held at weekends, the periods in which participants were reliably available on campus were those immediately following a full day of teaching. Interviews were therefore conducted at the close of demanding class days, and participants arrived at them already fatigued. This is recorded not as a limitation to be excused but as a condition of the data: it plausibly affected the length of some responses and the stamina available for sustained reflection, and it is one reason interview length was treated as an indicator of the depth reached rather than as a target to be met.

3.2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich accounts of participants' lived experiences and understandings of life's meaning (George, 2022). This format is particularly suited to IPA's phenomenological goals, creating the conditions for participant-led exploration in which the researcher follows, deepens, and expands the participant's narrative rather than directing it toward predetermined response categories. The procedure included the following steps:

3.2.3.1 Participant Recruitment:

Recruitment commenced only after ethical approval had been obtained. Potential participants were then approached individually through WhatsApp, the communication platform already in routine use among students at the institution, which made contact unobtrusive and allowed each student to respond in their own time. A number of potential participants were contacted in this way. Each initial exchange served two purposes: to establish whether the student met the inclusion

criteria set out in Section 3.3.2, and to ascertain whether she was willing to take part before any formal consent process began. Individual contact was preferred to a group announcement or an in-class invitation.

Because it avoids the implicit peer pressure a public invitation generates and allows a student to decline with-out her decision being visible to classmates. Each potential participant received information explaining the study's purpose, its voluntary nature, the confidentiality assurances, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Willingness expressed at this stage was treated as provisional only; formal written consent was obtained separately, immediately prior to interview.

3.2.3.2 Informed Consent:

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before each interview, following procedures consistent with the APA 7th edition ethical guidelines for research with human participants ([American Psychological Association, 2020](#)).

3.2.3.3 Interview Process:

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide developed specifically for this study and informed by the research questions, theoretical framework, and established IPA interview design principles ([Brinkmann and Kvale, 2022](#)). The guide addressed four thematic areas: participants' current life situation and the roles they inhabit; the role of relationships and social roles in shaping their sense of meaning; the development of meaning across different life stages; and the role of beliefs, values, and spiritual resources in their experience of meaning. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes ([Chandlers, 2024](#)).

This duration allowed for in-depth exploration while maintaining the participant's engagement and comfort. Interview length was treated as an indicator of depth rather than a fixed target: interviewing continued within each session until no substantially new content relevant to the research questions was emerging and each participant's

account had reached a point of experiential saturation, consistent with IPA’s idiographic emphasis on rich, in-depth engagement with a small number of cases rather than breadth across a large sample (Smith et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews allowed for a flexible and participant-led exploration of lived experiences, enabling individuals to reflect on and express how they make sense of their experiences. This aligns with the interpretative and phenomenological focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Interviews were conducted face-to-face. Open-ended questions allowed participants to express their thoughts freely. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

TABLE 3.1: Interview Timing for each Participant

Participant	Interview Duration
Participant 1 (P1)	58 minutes
Participant 2 (P2)	68 minutes
Participant 3 (P3)	70 minutes

3.2.3.4 Data Management: All recordings and transcripts were securely stored and anonymized to protect participant identity.

3.3 Sample Characteristics

3.3.1 Characteristics of the Respondent’s Sample

The study sample comprised three female graduate students enrolled in a Master’s degree program at a private university in Islamabad, Pakistan. A sample of three is consistent with IPA’s established conventions: the methodology endorses very small sample sizes because depth and quality of analysis achieved through intensive engagement with few cases is more epistemologically valuable than breadth achieved through larger samples (Smith et al., 2022).

The idiographic nature of IPA emphasizes intensive analysis of individual cases before identifying patterns across participants. Therefore, a smaller sample size is appropriate to ensure a rich, nuanced interpretation of participants' experiences ([Ramos, 2025](#)).

All three participants were Pakistani women aged between 23 and 27 years, enrolled in Psychology Master's programs, unmarried at the time of participation, and resident in Islamabad or its surrounding urban region. This demographic homogeneity is consistent with purposive IPA sampling principles and enables focused analysis within a coherent experiential and cultural context.

3.3.2 Inclusion Criteria

- i. Participants were currently enrolled in a Master's program.
- ii. Only female students were included in this study to ensure a more homogeneous sample and to facilitate an in-depth exploration of shared lived experiences.
- iii. Participants aged 23 to 27 years ([Tareen et al., 2025](#)), ensuring a comparable stage of academic and personal development.
- iv. Participants were graduate students enrolled in the Psychology program.
- v. Participants who were able and willing to articulate and reflect upon their lived experiences, particularly in relation to meaning, purpose, and personal life experiences.

3.3.3 Exclusion Criteria

- i. Students enrolled at undergraduate, MPhil, or PhD level, each of which occupies a distinct developmental and academic position ([Nice and Joseph, 2022](#)).
- ii. Students in full-time employment alongside study, whose experience of the graduate period is structured by a substantially different configuration of role demands ([Akhter et al., 2025](#)).

3.3.4 Measures

The primary data collection instrument was the semi-structured interview guide developed specifically for this study. The guide draws on established IPA interview design principles and the study's theoretical framework and research questions (Smith et al., 2022). The interview guide was validated by research supervisors and subject experts (qualitative methodologists) to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Participants' demographic information was collected at the beginning of the interview using a short 'demographic information form' to aid contextual understanding of their responses.

Consistent with IPA's interpretivist epistemology, the study does not employ standardized psychometric instruments, which would be epistemologically inconsistent with its commitment to exploring the subjective, contextual, and interpretively constituted dimensions of lived experience. The interview guide functions not as a measurement instrument but as a conversational structure creating conditions for reflective, participant-led exploration. Quality and rigor were therefore assessed not through psychometric properties such as reliability and validity but through the depth, richness, and reflexive quality of the phenomenological accounts generated.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The analytical procedure follows guidelines established by Smith et al. (2022) and elaborated by Nizza et al. (2021). IPA analysis is a multi-stage, iterative process moving from close engagement with individual cases toward the development of group-level themes through sustained interpretation. Although described sequentially, the process is recursive in practice, involving repeated movement between stages as understanding deepens.

3.4.1 Steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The first stage involves repeated, immersive reading of each interview transcript, approached with phenomenological openness and without premature interpretive

categorization. The researcher attends to content, language, and affective texture, making exploratory marginal notes about what participants say, how they say it, and the possible significance of particular words, phrases, or linguistic choices. These initial notes were deliberately exploratory and non-systematic, designed to maximize sensitivity to the specific details of each participant's account.

The second stage involves developing experiential themes from the exploratory notes, identifying patterns of significance within each participant's account and clustering related observations into emerging thematic categories that capture the interpretive essence of particular aspects of the participant's experience.

This is a process of interpretive abstraction, moving from the specific details of participants' accounts toward more general characterizations of the experiential structures they embody, while maintaining fidelity to the content and texture of participants' own language and expression.

The third stage involves case-by-case mapping, in which themes developed for each individual participant were reviewed, refined, and organized into a coherent thematic structure capturing the most significant and interpretively rich aspects of that participant's experience of meaning in life. This case-by-case approach ensures that the unique features of each participant's experience are honored before any attempt to identify patterns across the sample. Themes at this stage remain specific to individual cases and were not yet generalized.

The fourth stage involves identifying Group Experiential Themes (GETs) through comparative analysis of the experiential themes developed for each case. GETs are thematic patterns that appear across multiple or all participants' accounts, reflecting aspects of experience shared at a general level while remaining variable in specific expression across individuals.

This comparative process identifies both convergences that unite the group's experiences and idiographic divergences that distinguish individual meaning-making processes. The GETs form the primary analytical and reporting structure for the study's findings.

The fifth and final stage involves writing up the analytic account, in which GETs and constituent subthemes are described, elaborated, and theorized in relation to the study's theoretical framework and relevant literature. The account is written to honor the experiential texture of participants' accounts through extensive use of verbatim quotation while also moving toward the theoretical elaboration that gives findings their broader significance. The writing of the analytic account is itself a stage of analysis rather than merely a reporting of completed interpretation, as the process of articulating themes invariably deepens the researcher's understanding.

The object of this final stage is the meaning-making process itself rather than the content of what participants found meaningful. What is written up is accordingly not an inventory of the sources from which participants derived meaning but an account of how they arrived at, sustained, revised, or lost it: the interpretive moves, reappraisals, and shifts in orientation through which meaning was constructed over time. Descriptive content enters the account as evidence of that process rather than as the finding in itself, and each Group Experiential Theme is accordingly formulated to name a process rather than a topic.

3.5 Reflexivity and Positionality

The interpretive account offered in this study was produced by a researcher whose position in relation to her participants requires explicit statement rather than assumption. The researcher is a female Pakistani graduate student who, during the period of the study, was enrolled in an MS Psychology program at a private university in Islamabad and falls within a comparable age range to the women interviewed; she is bilingual in Urdu and English, as were the participants, and conducted and transcribed every interview herself. She shares with participants a religious and cultural frame of reference in which faith is an ordinary rather than an exceptional register for speaking about purpose, a familial context in which educational and professional decisions are negotiated collectively rather than settled individually, and the experience of undertaking graduate study at a point at which its professional continuation is uncertain.

Stating these attributes is not by itself reflexivity, however, and a declaration of position does analytic work only where its consequences for the account are specified. Two consequences follow. The first concerns access: a shared linguistic repertoire allowed participants to move into Urdu for emotionally weighted material without pausing to explain themselves, and shared religious and familial reference points meant that culturally specific expressions could be received in their own terms rather than translated at the moment of hearing into the vocabulary of coping or well-being (Squires, 2023).

The second concerns interpretive risk, and runs in two directions: proximity invites under-distance, in which the researcher assumes she already knows what a participant means and consequently stops listening interpretively, while distance invites evaluative reading, in which an account unlike her own is scrutinized more sharply than one resembling it. Disclosure alone does not dissolve either risk.

In IPA, the researcher's fore-understanding is not an obstruction to be eliminated but the resource through which the participant's sense-making becomes intelligible, and the requirement is therefore that it be worked with knowingly and left open to inspection rather than allowed to operate unexamined (Smith et al., 2022), which in an interpretivist inquiry follows from the researcher's standing as the instrument through which the data are produced rather than a channel through which they pass (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022).

The management of this position was not undertaken in isolation, and supervisory oversight constituted the study's principal external bias-control measure. The supervisor's involvement took four specific forms rather than a general advisory one. First, she read the reflexive journal at intervals across data collection and analysis and raised for discussion the patterns of response recorded in it, including those the researcher had noted without recognizing as patterned, so that the boundary between the researcher's assumptions and the participants' accounts was assessed by someone other than the person who had drawn it. Second, she read transcript material independently alongside the researcher's coding of it and questioned interpretive claims whose grounding in the participant's own words was not evident

on the page.

Third, where her reading of an extract differed from the researcher's, the difference was resolved by returning to the transcript rather than by negotiation between readers, and the interpretation was retained only where it could be evidenced verbatim. Fourth, she reviewed the movement from individual experiential themes to Group Experiential Themes in order to establish that the thematic structure had been derived from the accounts rather than imposed upon them.

This form of oversight is an interpretive check and not a test of inter-rater agreement: IPA does not seek consensus coding, since an analysis is understood as the product of a particular researcher's engagement with a particular account, and a second reader is therefore not employed to converge on identical codes ([Smith et al., 2022](#)). The supervisor's function was rather to establish that the interpretation offered was one a competent independent reader could recognize as grounded in the data, which is the standard of transparent and appropriate use of evidence by which quality in IPA is properly assessed ([Nizza et al., 2021](#)).

The reflexive journal was the instrument through which these measures were recorded and made auditable. Entries were written immediately after each interview, when the encounter was still recent enough to be recorded rather than reconstructed, and again at each substantive stage of analysis, and each entry documented three things: the researcher's affective response to the account, the points at which she noticed herself interpreting from her own experience rather than the participant's, and the analytic decision that followed. Reflexive practice, however, is evidenced not by the keeping of a journal but by what was done with what the journal disclosed, and four biases identified in this way each produced a traceable change in the handling of the data. The first was under-distance in relation to P1, whose account of faith and family closely resembled the researcher's own; the recording was consequently listened to in full a second time before any coding was undertaken, exploratory noting on this transcript was confined to descriptive and linguistic comment on a first pass with conceptual commentary put off to a later one, and the coded transcript was read by the supervisor specifically

for points at which the researcher's account appeared to have been substituted for the participant's.

The second was an evaluative reading of P3's emotional self-reliance and relational distance, which the researcher recognized she was assessing more critically than comparable patterns in her own life; the first-pass codes for this transcript were accordingly set aside, the transcript was coded again from the beginning, codes carrying an evaluative charge were rewritten in descriptive terms drawn from the participant's own vocabulary, and the supervisor reviewed the revised codes for residual evaluative wording before they were carried into theme development.

The third was uneven analytic attention across cases, closer engagement having been given to the accounts that resonated with the researcher; a second coding pass was therefore carried out in which the same sequence of steps was applied to each transcript in turn irrespective of felt proximity, and the cross-case matrix reproduced in Appendix E was used to track which cases contributed to each theme in which it was identified rather than resting on one case and being extended by assumption to the others.

The fourth was theoretical anticipation, namely the expectation recorded in the preconceptions memo that accounts would organize themselves around Frankl's three avenues; the interview guide was consequently left open enough for participants to raise sources of meaning the framework does not name, codes were generated from participants' language before any mapping onto the framework was attempted, and material that did not correspond to the three avenues, including gratitude, spiritual reconnection, and obligation experienced as constitutive of the self rather than as constraint, was retained and developed on its own terms rather than assimilated.

Representative extracts from the journal are reproduced in Appendix E, and the memo, the journal, and the record of supervision together constitute an audit trail through which the influence of the researcher's position on the findings can be examined by a reader rather than taken on assurance, which is the form in

which reflexive awareness functions as a marker of quality rather than a statement of intent (Nizza et al., 2021).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The present study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the APA 7th edition (2020) and with the specific ethical requirements (Ethics Review Checklist for Research Projects) of the hosting institution. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, ensuring that a qualified oversight body reviewed study procedures. Primary ethical considerations include the protection of participant autonomy and informed consent, the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity, the management of potential harms arising from the exploration of sensitive experiential material, and the equitable treatment of participants.

Informed consent was obtained through a thorough, non-pressuring process ensuring that all participants understood the nature of their involvement, their unconditional right to withdraw without penalty, and the audio-recording procedures requiring explicit agreement.

Participants were provided contact information for both the researcher and the institution's well-being center. The voluntary character of participation was explicitly emphasized, and no incentives were offered that could have created undue pressure. Confidentiality was protected through systematic data anonymization, including pseudonym assignment, and secure password-protected storage of all recordings and transcripts. Participants were informed at the outset that they could decline to answer any question, take breaks as needed, and withdraw at any point without explanation.

3.7 Quality and Rigor in IPA Research

The assessment of quality and rigor in qualitative research requires criteria appropriate to the epistemological commitments and methodological goals of the

TABLE 3.2: Quality and Rigor Criteria Addressed in This Study

Quality and Rigor Criterion (Nizza et al., 2021)	How This Study Addressed It
Theoretical coherence	Maintained through explicit alignment of philosophical foundations, analytical procedures, and reporting framework with established IPA conventions.
Depth and richness of interpretive engagement	Pursued through the multi-stage, iterative analytical process and an analytical stance that moves beyond description toward genuine interpretive elaboration.
Appropriate and transparent use of evidence	Ensured through systematic grounding of all interpretive claims in verbatim quotations from participants' accounts.
Reflexive awareness	Cultivated through the reflexive journal maintained throughout the research process and transparent discussion of the researcher's positionality.

specific approach employed, rather than the application of criteria premised on quantitative assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the goals of inquiry.

[Nizza et al. \(2021\)](#) identified four markers of high-quality IPA research that are particularly relevant to the present study: theoretical coherence, the extent to which the interpretive framework is consistent with IPA's epistemological commitments and the study's theoretical background; depth and richness of interpretive engagement, the extent to which analysis moves beyond surface description to illuminate deeper meanings and interpretive structures; appropriate and transparent use of evidence, the extent to which interpretive claims are grounded in and illustrated by verbatim extracts from participants' accounts; and reflexive awareness, the transparency and depth with which the researcher's own influence on the analytical process is examined and managed.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Data Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews conducted with three female Pakistani university graduate students. The study aimed to explore how meaning in life is experienced, constructed, and negotiated within the context of graduate study. In keeping with IPA's dual commitment to the particular and the shared, this chapter proceeds in two movements: it first attends to the lived experience of each participant individually, before moving to a cross-case analysis in which Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were developed and discussed. The chapter is organized around four GETs that emerged from a close iterative reading of all three cases. Each GET is elaborated through subthemes, illustrated with verbatim participant extracts, and interpreted through an analytic lens that draws on both phenomenological description and psychological commentary.

The three participants were referred to throughout as P1, P2, and P3. All were enrolled in a master's program in psychology at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in bilingual communication (Urdu and English) and subsequently translated into English by the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately one hour (58 mins, 68 mins, 70 mins respectively). In accordance with IPA methodology, the analysis prioritizes depth over breadth: the aim is not to

produce generalizable statements about graduate students as a population, but to offer a rich, nuanced, and theoretically credible account of what meaning-making looks like in the lives of these particular young women.

4.2 Profiles of the Interview Participants

The following table presents the demographic profiles of the three female graduate students who participated in this study. Consistent with the ethical commitment to confidentiality, participants were identified using pseudonyms.

TABLE 4.1: Demographic Profiles of the Interview Participants

Demographics	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Age	26 years	23 years	24 years
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Ethnicity	Punjabi	Kashmiri	Punjabi
Primary Language	Urdu	Urdu	Urdu
Marital Status	Unmarried	Unmarried	Unmarried
University Sector	Private	Private	Private
Degree Program	MS Clinical Psychology	MS Clinical Psychology	MS Clinical Psychology
Current Semester	2nd Semester	2nd Semester	2nd Semester
Employment Status	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed

4.3 Group Experiential Themes

Group Experiential Themes represent higher-order themes developed through the systematic comparison of individual participants' experiences. After identifying Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) within each case, patterns of convergence and divergence were examined across all participants. Themes that reflected shared meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences were clustered together to form Group Experiential Themes. These themes capture the collective essence

of participants' experiences while preserving the idiographic commitment of IPA by acknowledging both commonalities and unique variations. The development of GETs involved an iterative process of reviewing transcripts, emergent themes, and thematic connections across cases to generate a coherent understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of these themes, each GET is addressed in two complementary stages across this thesis. In this chapter, Chapter 4, each theme is presented through both description and interpretation, grounded in verbatim extracts from participants' accounts alongside an analytic commentary that draws out their meaning. In Chapter 5, these same four themes are revisited at a deeper interpretive level, situating participants' experiences within the existing theoretical and empirical literature on meaning-making, identity, and psychology. This structure allows the findings to be both authentically described and interpreted at the case level before being extended into a broader theoretical discussion. The four GETs that structure this chapter revolve around: (1) Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning; (2) Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose; (3) Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning; and (4) Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding.

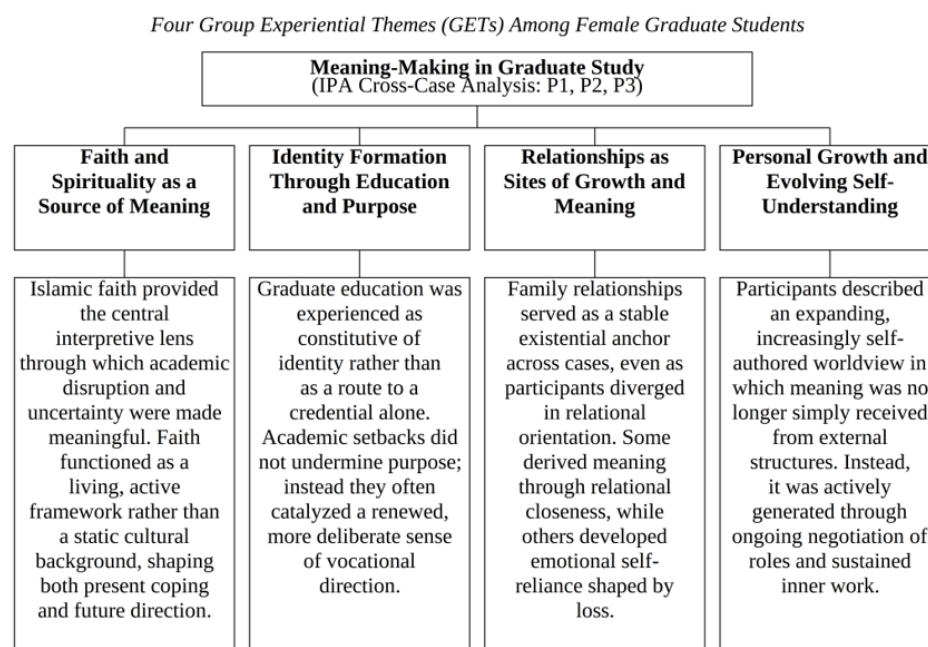


FIGURE 4.1: Four Group Experiential Themes

Note. Each GET was derived through iterative, idiographic-to-shared cross-case comparison of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) across P1, P2, and P3. The contextual elaborations below each GET summarize how each theme functions within participants' broader meaning-making process.

4.4 GET One: Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning

The most convergent finding across all three participants was the central role that Islamic faith plays in the construction and sustenance of meaning. For each woman, religion was not a background feature of cultural identity but a living, active framework through which life events were interpreted, suffering was metabolized, and future direction was oriented. While the precise texture of their spiritual engagement differs, all three share a fundamental orientation in which meaning ultimately flows from a relationship with Allah and from the teachings of Islam. This theme encompasses three subthemes: faith-based meaning-making in uncertainty; an Islam-centered sense of identity and future orientation; and the experience of spiritual reconnection and gratitude.

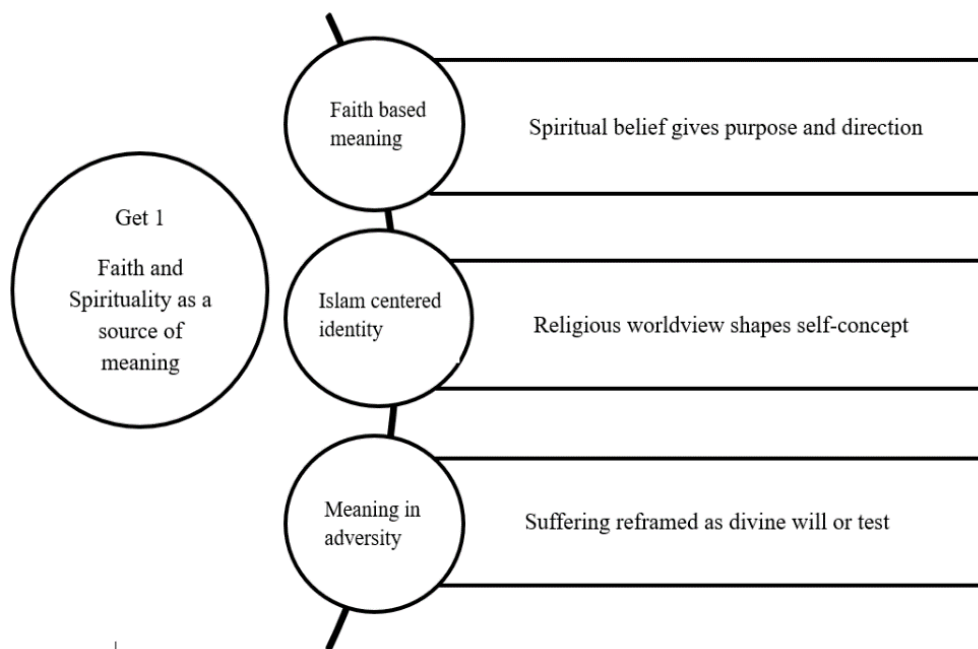


FIGURE 4.2: Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning

4.4.1 Faith-Based Meaning-Making in Uncertainty

Each participant described a period of significant uncertainty or disruption in which religious belief served as the primary resource for meaning-making. For P1, this disruption took the form of academic disappointment: the failure to secure a place in a medical program she had worked toward since childhood precipitated an existential crisis that she described in striking terms. She reflected,

“Islamic education ki motivation jo thi, start karne ki, wo asal mein ye thi keh ma tayyari kar rahi thi. Mjhe apna medical ka entry test dena tha, jese ap dete ho — second year ke baad bachche tayyari karte hain. To aik attempt mera ho gaya tha, to wo mera ho nahi saka tha, to pher wo mera second attempt tha. To unhi dinon mein mjhe is tarha ehsas hona shuru hua keh matalab, ma ye kaise zindagi guzaar rahi hon? To mujhe, sawal aane lage keh meri zindagi ka maqsad kia hai — bas ye is tarha ki sochain aati thi.” (P1)

This moment of rupture is significant not only as a biographical turning point but as an existential opening. The collapse of a previously unquestioned life narrative, defined by achievement and social expectation, created the conditions for a deeper form of inquiry. What was notable is that P1 did not resolve this crisis by locating a new external goal, but by turning inward and toward her faith. The question of purpose, once raised, found its answer not in another career pathway but in a renewed relationship with Islam and with the Quran. She went on to describe a persistent inner state that animated this search:

“Wo andar kuch na kuch, wo aik kami rehti hai keh, matalab, wo apko aik talaash hoti hai keh apko pata hona chahiye.” (P1)

This sense of incompleteness should be read not merely as a symptom of frustration but as a phenomenologically significant experience, a form of what might be understood as existential hunger, a readiness for meaning that could not be satisfied by worldly achievement alone. It was this very incompleteness that opened

P1 toward a deeper spiritual engagement.

For P2, disruption came through a combination of academic redirection and a serious health crisis. When her original plan of pursuing medicine was derailed, she described managing the uncertainty through a framework of divine providence:

“Wo just aik time aisa aaya tha, wo jab aisa keh Allah ki taraf se ho raha tha — I was like, theek hai, Allah ne koi behtari sochi hogi.” (P2)

This is not a passive or resigned statement. Rather, it reflects an active reinterpretation of events through a theological lens — one in which apparent failure is reconstituted as providential guidance. Later in her account, this interpretive move was elaborated and deepened:

“To maine socha keh shayad mere liye waqai mein Riphah hi hai, kyunki eventually saare doors baqi cheezon ke liye band ho rahe the, aur uske liye khul rahe the. To maine socha, or Bismillah parh kar start kar diya uske liye.” (P2)

The use of the word ‘waqai mein’ is analytically significant: it signals a shift from contingency to meaning, from accident to intention. P2 is not simply coping with disappointment but actively constructing a narrative in which her life has direction and her current situation has purpose. This faith-based hermeneutic functions as a psychological container, one that holds anxiety about an uncertain future and transforms it into a sense of being held by something larger than oneself.

P3’s engagement with faith-as-meaning-making is perhaps the most viscerally rendered of the three. She described a period of stagnation and frustration during which she found herself in open confrontation with her own beliefs:

” “Once, I was very frustrated and I started talking to her, saying that I didn’t want to do this anymore and that I would get angry at Allah. And she was so

welcoming about it, so humble, so chill. She would simply say, 'Okay, it's up to you.' And she would talk to me about Allah so humbly and lovingly that I started going back to those things." (P3)

The mention of a significant other figure who embodied a loving relationship with Allah is important here: it suggests that for P3, spiritual reconnection was mediated through a relational encounter.

The anger she describes is itself meaningful; it reflects an engaged rather than indifferent relationship with faith, and it ultimately gave way to a transformed understanding. Her account of the same period also articulates a distinctly reflective mode of spiritual inquiry:

"The whole Ramadan, I kept asking Allah, 'Why am I stuck here? What are you trying to teach me through this?' " (P3)

The framing of adversity as an educational encounter, something that Allah is using to teach, transforms suffering from a senseless imposition into a meaningful experience. This move, present in varying forms across all three accounts, represents one of the most powerful ways these participants generate coherence and purpose from difficulty.

4.4.2 Islam-Centered Identity and Future Orientation

Across all three participants, Islamic belief operates not only as a resource for managing the present but as a compass for envisioning the future. For P1, this took the form of a sustained project of integration: the desire to bring together her religious identity and her professional formation in a coherent whole. She described her encounter with Islamic Psychology as a moment of profound alignment:

"Masters mein unki aik degree thi 'Masters in Islamic Counselling' to usme meri dono cheezain ho rahi thin." (P1)

This statement, though brief, carries considerable weight. It captures the relief of resolving an identity tension that had been present throughout her educational journey, the tension between her religious commitments and her intellectual and professional aspirations. Her vision for the future reinforces this integrative orientation:

“Abhi filhaal to mera yahi hai keh main Masters karke apni Islamic education mein aur cheezain seekhon. Ab mujhe yahi hai keh aage, ab jitna bhi ho, main apni Islamic education karoon side by side, chahe main PhD karoon ya job. Mujhe lagta hai keh mujhe abhi bohat saari cheezain seekhni hain us domain mein.” (P1)

The phrase ‘side by side’ is evocative: it refuses the choice between religious and worldly development, insisting instead on their simultaneous cultivation. Her subsequent reflection, ‘We should actually carry both religious and worldly education together’, makes this a not merely personal but normative claim, a statement about how a meaningful life ought to be lived.

For P2, the Islam-centered orientation of her future is somewhat less explicit as an integrated project but equally present as a background framework that gives her professional aspirations their moral weight. Her vision of opening a private clinic and working as a clinical psychologist is not framed in terms of personal ambition alone but in terms of service, a service that, by implication, is understood as an expression of divinely given capacity and responsibility.

P3 articulates this most directly. When she describes her career as a responsibility given to her by Allah, she is making an explicit claim about the origin and nature of her vocational sense of purpose:

“I take my career as a responsibility, rather than something that I wanted to do. Earlier, it used to be that I would have a title, some money, income, and all that. Now it feels like a responsibility, that I am doing something for the community,

and there is so much that goes into it. I am doing it for Allah, because I feel like it's a responsibility from Him, and I should do it right." (P3)

This is reinforced by her account of the opportunities she has received:

"I see it as a duty from Allah, that He has given me these opportunities. He has given me this privilege, kay main yeh kar sakti hun." (P3)

There is a layered complexity here: P3 experiences her educational privilege not as a source of personal pride but as a form of sacred responsibility.

The meaning she draws from her career is thus not self-referential but God-centered, rooted in accountability to a divine giver rather than in personal satisfaction or social validation.

4.4.3 Gratitude and Spiritual Reconnection

A final dimension of this theme concerns the role of gratitude in anchoring meaning. For P1, the discipline of Quranic study and the aspiration toward Hifz represents a form of active spiritual devotion, a way of drawing closer to what she described as the source of all meaning:

"Main jaanna chahti thi keh, matalab, main Quran ko parhon aur Allah ko janon." (P1)

For P2, it was a health crisis, witnessing her parents' distress during a period of serious illness, that catalyzed a renewed appreciation for her own life and her relationships.

The experience produced what might be described as an existential reorientation: meaning shifted from the achievement of future goals to the present value of life and connection. For P3, the journey through anger and doubt toward gratitude represents perhaps the most psychologically textured spiritual arc in the

data:

“Not everybody is getting the privileges that I am, and very casually at that. I get a lot of privileges very casually that I am not really mindful of, and people don’t get it. It’s humbling, and I am grateful that Allah gave me this experience.”
(P3)

That this gratitude extends to a period she had experienced as deeply frustrating speaks to the transformative capacity of faith-based meaning-making. It also signals a mature relational stance toward the divine: not demanding but receptive, not transactional but relational.

4.5 GET Two: Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose

The second GET concerns the centrality of education as a site where identity was formed, negotiated, and sometimes fractured. For all three participants, the decision to pursue graduate study is not a straightforward or unambiguous one: it is entangled with family expectations, personal aspirations, cultural pressures, institutional constraints, and an ongoing search for a self that is both authentic and coherent. This theme is organized around three subthemes: education as identity rather than credential, the future professional self as a source of present meaning, and academic disappointment as an existential trigger.

4.5.1 Education as Identity, Not Merely Credential

A striking feature of all three accounts is the degree to which educational choices were experienced as identity choices, decisions not merely about career but about who one is and wants to be. For P1, this is most clearly expressed in her response to the discovery of Islamic Psychology, which she experienced as a resolution of a long-standing tension between her religious and intellectual commitments. The

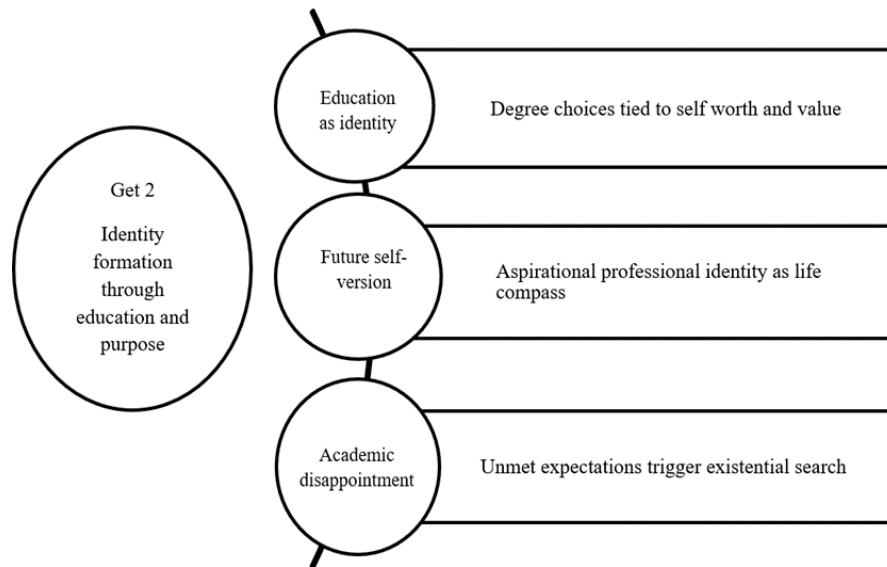


FIGURE 4.3: Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose

relief she describes is not merely cognitive but existential: finding a degree that combined her two identities meant that she did not have to choose between them. Her earlier account of career uncertainty, 'I honestly had no idea which field I should choose for the future', gains its full meaning when read against this subsequent relief. The uncertainty was never merely vocational; it was a crisis of self.

P2's relationship to education is shaped by a passionate and long-standing investment in learning for its own sake:

"Mujhe shauq hai keh main parhon, mujhe higher education ka bohat shauq hai."
(P2)

What is significant here is the affective quality of the statement; the word 'shauq' signals that education is not merely instrumentally valued but intrinsically meaningful. This investment in learning as a form of self-expression and self-development is what makes P2's subsequent disappointment, her sense that 'meaningful learning is not really happening for me', so painful. The gap between her love of learning and the reality of her current program is experienced not as a practical inconvenience but as a form of deprivation: a severing from something essential to her sense of self.

P3 offers a distinctive variation on this pattern. For her, education carries the weight not only of personal aspiration but of familial inheritance:

“Ab MS karna, it was not just mera dream, balke baba ka bhi dream tha.” (P3)

The phrase ‘it was not just mera dream, balke baba ka bhi dream tha’ is phenomenologically rich: it positions education as a site where personal identity and familial bond converge. The MS program is meaningful precisely because it is shared, it is a project undertaken in relation to and in honor of her father. At the same time, P3 also frames her educational situation in terms of privilege and accountability, describing her presence in a master’s program as ‘a privilege’, a word that carries a sense of unearned good fortune and the responsibility it generates.

4.5.2 The Future Professional Self as Meaning Compass

Each participant made significant use of a projected future self as a source of present direction and meaning. This is particularly notable given that all three participants also describe significant dissatisfaction or disappointment with their current academic experiences. It is as if the future professional self serves as a corrective vision, a point of coherence and purpose that compensates for the uncertainties and frustrations of the present moment.

For P1, this future self is defined by integration: she envisions continuing her development in both Islamic education and psychology simultaneously, pursuing a life in which religious and worldly knowledge are not merely compatible but mutually enriching. The specificity and consistency of this vision across her account suggest that it is not merely a fantasy but a genuine organizing principle, a narrative identity that is already operative in shaping her present choices and commitments.

P2’s future self is vivid and professionally articulated:

“Abhi bhi, jab meri apne doston se baat hoti hai ya ghar mein kisi se baat hoti

hai, to mera yahi hai keh main as a clinical psychologist hi aap logon ko miloon gi, Inshallah, jab bhi miloon gi. Aur meri bohat khwahish hai keh, obviously, shuru mein mujhe us grind ka hissa banna parega jo hoti hai, lekin mera khwab hai keh main private clinic start karoon, kyunki that would be better.” (P2)

The use of the third person, ‘aap logon ko miloon gi’, is striking: it suggests a form of perspective-taking in which P2 imaginatively occupies a future vantage point from which her current struggles appear as the necessary prelude to a fully realized professional identity.

This prospective vision is a significant psychological resource: it sustains motivation and provides a narrative frame that gives present difficulty its meaning as necessary rather than arbitrary.

P3’s future orientation is less about personal professional achievement and more explicitly about social contribution and role modelling:

“I was given this chance, so I just don’t want to be that banda jo kay time pass kar kay bas nikal kay ja raha hai. I want to be passionate about it, so that I can tell other people that you can be passionate about life and you can make it.” (P3)

Her aspiration to demonstrate to other women that they do not have to limit themselves because of stereotypes positions her future self as a social actor as well as a professional one. For P3, meaning is not primarily self-referential: it flows from the impact she might have on others, particularly on women who share her social context.

4.5.3 Academic Disappointment as Existential Trigger

A convergent and analytically significant finding across all three accounts is the role of academic disappointment in generating existential reflection. For P1, dissatisfaction with her master’s experience is expressed as a sense of unmet intellectual potential:

“Mujhe kuch itna seekhne ko nahi mila.” (P1)

This is not simply a critique of curriculum design. When read against her earlier account of education as central to her identity and development, it registers as a deeper complaint: that the educational space that should be facilitating her becoming has, thus far, failed to do so.

Her additional remark, ‘Behtar hota agar hamare paas zyada practical exposure hoti’, suggests that what she is seeking from education is not only intellectual but experiential and formative learning.

P2’s disappointment is perhaps the most acutely felt in the data:

“Main yahi soch rahi thi keh ye sab to main nahi karna chah rahi thi, ye sab kya ho raha hai? Shayad main thori confused hun abhi apne current period mein, aur learning perspective se, learning waise nahi ho rahi.” (P2)

The conjunction of confusion and the absence of meaningful learning is significant: P2 is experiencing her academic environment as a site of existential, not merely academic, failure.

The expectation that the master’s program would provide not only knowledge but direction and purpose has not been met. This gap between expectation and reality has produced a form of disorientation that goes beyond academic frustration.

P3’s relationship to this subtheme is more indirect but present nonetheless. The framing of her career as ‘a responsibility rather than something that I wanted to do’ suggests a negotiated relationship with her own aspirations, one in which original desire has been subordinated to duty.

This is not experienced as suffering in P3’s account, but it does reflect a degree of resignation or reorientation that parallels the disappointment visible in the other two cases.

4.6 GET Three: Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning

The third GET concerns the role of relationships with family, friends, and the social world more broadly in establishing and sustaining meaning. For all three participants, relationships are not merely the backdrop of life but a primary arena in which identity is formed, tested, lost, and recovered.

This theme is notable for exhibiting both strong convergence in the centrality of family, particularly parents, and a theoretically significant divergence in relational orientation between participants. Three subthemes were identified: family as existential anchor; growth through relational loss and pain; and divergence in relational orientation.

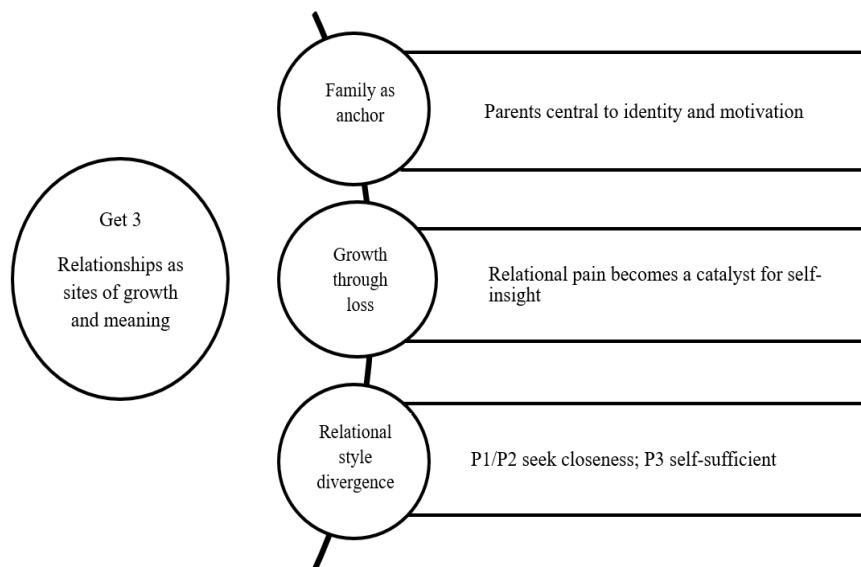


FIGURE 4.4: Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning

4.6.1 Family as Existential Anchor

The parental relationship occupies a position of singular importance in all three accounts. For P1, the centrality of her parents is articulated in terms of relational priority and daily practice:

“Unko shauq hai, wo khush ho jaain keh main parh rahi hun. Aur mere jo bhi roles hain, un mein sabse pehle main apne parents ko rakhti hun — matlab behn bhaion ke saath bhi hai, lekin parents ke saath zyada hai. Unki khwahishat poori karoon, unhon ne kabhi mujhe force nahi kiya, har cheez mein free hand diya. To mujhe laga keh mujhe kuch karna hai unke liye.” (P1)

This statement is followed by a description of daily phone calls maintained despite physical distance from home, and a reflection on the nature of the parental bond that reveals its psychological depth.

Notably, P1 describes her parents’ practice of giving her freedom as a source not of liberation from responsibility but of a heightened sense of it: ‘Unhon ne kabhi mujhe force nahi kiya, har cheez mein free hand diya.’ The freedom she has been given is experienced as a gift that creates obligation, a phenomenological inversion in which autonomy produces not independence but deeper relatedness.

For P2, the significance of the parental relationship was crystallized by a health crisis in which witnessing her parents’ distress produced a transformative shift in how she understood her own life:

“I was sick, aur hum gaon gaye hue the. Wahan meri tabiyat kharab hui, to meri nano ne kaha, ‘Isko le kar jao aur blood test karwao.’ Aur jab karwaya, to mere parents dar gaye, mera HB kaafi low tha, aur doctors ne bhi kaafi dara diya tha. Lekin wohi hai keh maine wo cheez bohat closely experience ki thi. Us se pehle, maine kabhi life ko itna value nahi kiya tha, aur us se pehle maine kabhi life ko serious nahi liya tha. To us waqt apne parents ko pareshan dekh kar, maine soch liya keh nahi, ab life ko serious lena hai aur apni health ka khayal rakhna hai.” (P2)

This moment is striking in its structure: it is through perceiving her own life as meaningful to her parents that P2 comes to experience it as meaningful to herself. Meaning here is not self-generated but relationally discovered, she finds the value of her own existence reflected in her parents’ eyes. The relational basis of self-worth is rarely made this explicit in the data, and it deserves careful attention.

P3's relationship with family is more complicated. She describes her family bonds as emotionally reserved but practically reliable:

"I'm not close with them. But it's not like, oh my God, I hate them. It's like, kay I'm different from them." (P3)

And yet she also describes the family's mutual care in terms of practical solidarity, 'if any of us need help, we immediately show up for each other', and attributes her most fundamental moral values to what her family has taught her: 'The greatest lesson they taught us was kindness and patience.'

For P3, the family is an anchor not through emotional intimacy but through the transmission of values and the assurance of practical support. This is a different form of anchoring from P1 and P2, but no less meaningful.

4.6.2 Growth Through Relational Loss and Pain

A second convergent subtheme concerned the transformative function of relational difficulty. All three participants described experiences of friendship loss, betrayal, or disruption that proved, in retrospect, to be significant sources of personal development. This finding is particularly consistent with IPA's interest in how adverse experiences were made sense of and integrated into an ongoing self-narrative.

For P1, the transformative relationship is not characterized by loss but by unexpected expansion. Her transition to hostel life exposed her to a social world that was significantly broader than anything she had previously encountered:

"Jabse Bachelors start hua, tabse hostel life ne bohat influence kiya. Jab meri friend ke saath 4 saal yahin guzare, aik room mein, wo mujh se senior thi, un cheezon ne kiya influence, wo is tarah influence kiya keh mujhe ye hota tha keh zyada logon se baat cheet karna mujhe pasand nahi tha, aur logon ko time nahi de

sakti thi. Mujhe zyada ye acha lagta tha keh main discipline wali life guzar rahi thi, par wo cheez wahan nahi thi.” (P1)

The hostel context, she reflected, ‘has influenced me a lot’, an understatement that her surrounding account fills in: it broadened her relational world, challenged her preference for a ‘very disciplined and quiet life,’ and introduced her to a friend who ‘understands me very well’ and who supported her through a difficult transition. Relational growth here is associated with the expansion of self.

P2’s relational narrative is the most extensively processed in the data. She describes a deep friendship that became ‘family-like’ before ultimately dissolving in a way that left her feeling abandoned and questioning her own worth. The depth of her self-reflection on this process is notable:

“Jo friendships thi meri life mein, wo problematic rahi hain. Bachon wali soch, aur sabko dekhte dekhte khud ko neglect kar diya. Aur mujhe shayad wohi regret ho raha tha. Aur mujhe samajh nahi aa raha keh ye regret kyun hai, kyunki ab to wo sab cheezain khatam ho gayi hain, aur wo khatam maine hi ki hain. Aur wo main us waqt bhi khatam kar sakti thi, aur ache se handle kar sakti thi main.” (P2)

This reflective move in which P2 assumes partial responsibility for the dynamics that led to her hurt is not self-blame but genuine psychological insight. She is able to name the pattern of self-neglect and emotional over-investment that made her vulnerable to loss.

What is equally significant is that she identifies specific friendships as sources of personal transformation even in their painfulness: ‘Friend one helped me correct many things in myself... Friend two also taught me a lot.’ Relationships were understood not merely as sites of comfort but as vessels of self-development.

P3’s account of relational loss is less narratively elaborated but structurally significant. Her description of herself as someone who does not feel close to anyone

in her life, 'I don't think so, I am necessarily close to anybody in my life right now', followed by her 'no reliance on people' policy, suggests that past relational difficulty has produced a protective stance. Her one explicitly positive friendship is described in terms of safety and the absence of excessive dependency:

"She is very easy to approach. When I go to her, I ask her to talk it out. Then, she will give her opinion. She is going to rant. Then, we will mutually agree to a point. It's like a very safe space. Also, we don't rely on each other. She has her own life. I have my own life.

Two worlds are linked together. For me, it's a healthy bond. It's not based on too much dependency. If I start to depend on somebody, I get clingy. Then, I have that avoidant pattern. Then, I move aside. I am getting too involved. I am getting too into it. Maybe, I should be away. But, she is a safe surrounding to be at. " (P3)

The language of safety rather than warmth, intimacy, or love reveals the particular quality of relational need that P3 has arrived at: not closeness as such, but reliability, a space in which she can exist without anxiety about betrayal or loss.

4.6.3 Divergence in Relational Orientation

The most analytically significant finding within this theme is the divergence in relational orientation that emerges from a cross-case comparison. P1 and P2 both moved, over the period covered in their accounts, toward greater relational openness and willingness to be known by others. For P1, this movement was catalyzed by the social immersion of hostel life; for P2, it was the product of painful reflection on patterns of self-neglect and the gradual development of emotional boundaries:

"Main bohat walk karti hun — main walk shayad isliye karti hun keh mujhe sukoon milta hai. Main walk karti hun, meri body thak jaati hai, lekin mujhe pata hai meri body nahi, brain thak raha hai in sab cheezon ki wajah se. I'm not in my best days." (P2)

This move toward balance between investment in others and care for the self represents a form of relational maturation that both P1 and P2 articulate, though through different routes. P3's trajectory is strikingly different. Rather than moving toward greater relational openness, she has developed a principled stance of emotional self-reliance:

"I have this like. No reliance on people policy... I don't even like asking for basic favors from people. I am like I can do it myself." (P3)

What makes this divergence particularly rich, from an IPA perspective, is that P3 does not describe this stance as entirely satisfying. She acknowledges a fundamental ambivalence:

"I do have that urge to belong. To have people. To have those bonds. That you are close to them. But I actively avoid them as well." (P3)

This sentence contains within it the phenomenological tension that characterizes P3's relational world: the desire for belonging and the protective retreat from it exist simultaneously, and neither fully resolves the other.

This is not a failure of self-knowledge; P3 is acutely self-aware, but rather reflects a genuine experiential tension that she is living with rather than resolving. In IPA terms, it is precisely this internally complex, unresolved experience that the methodology is designed to honor and illuminate.

The divergence between P1/P2's orientation toward relational openness and P3's orientation toward self-sufficiency reflects not a difference in values, all three value meaningful connection, but a difference in the risks they are currently willing to assume in pursuit of it.

This idiographic variation within a convergent theme is one of the most analytically productive aspects of the present dataset ([Nizza et al., 2021](#)).

4.7 GET Four: Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding

The fourth and most overarching GET concerns the experience of personal transformation and the evolving relationship each participant has with her own sense of self. Across all three accounts, a temporal dimension is strongly present: each participant is not only describing her current life but narrating a process of becoming, in which past selves are reflected upon, present selves are evaluated, and future selves are envisioned. This theme is organized into three subthemes: an expanding and transformed worldview; the development of agency and self-generated meaning; and the negotiation of multiple roles as a form of ongoing self-work.

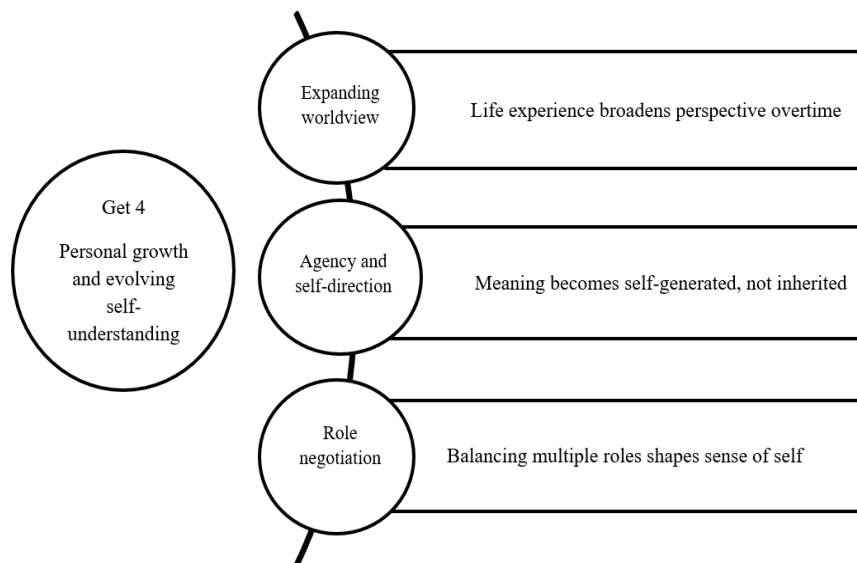


FIGURE 4.5: Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding

4.7.1 Expanding and Transformed Worldview

All three participants describe significant shifts in how they understand the world and their place within it. These shifts were not merely cognitive updates but lived transformations, reorganizations of how experience was structured and what things mean.

For P1, this transformation was developmental in character: she describes the

natural movement from a simplified, achievement-oriented understanding of life, 'When you are young... there is usually just one simple goal', to a more complex and layered appreciation of purpose. The encounter with Islamic education was a catalyst for this broadening:

"Maine jab apni Islamic studies shuru ki, tab maine samjha keh yahi sara kuch nahi hai, hamein sab kuch saath le kar chalna hai. Ye nahi keh dunyawii taleem nahi hasil karni, wo bhi bohat zaroori hai." (P1)

This is a statement about epistemic expansion about the discovery that the framework within which she had been operating was not the only possible framework.

The encounter with Islamic thought opened a wider horizon, one in which meaning was not confined to worldly achievement but extended to spiritual development, moral formation, and the cultivation of a relationship with Allah.

P2's expanded worldview is characterized by a shift in her understanding of permanence and loss. Having experienced the dissolution of her deepest friendship and subsequently a health crisis, she arrived at a more realistic, and, paradoxically, more freeing understanding of the nature of relationships and life:

"I feel keh nahi, wo sab temporary hain, aur mujhe samajh aa gaya keh sirf aapke maa baap hi aapke hote hain, permanent sab kuch. Aik waqt par aapke behn bhai badal jaate hain, aur aik waqt par aapke dost, rishtay, sab badal jaate hain." (P2)

This insight is not merely a cognitive acknowledgement of impermanence but a lived realization, one arrived at through genuine loss. In the context of her broader account, it serves as the foundation for a new relational and existential stance: one in which attachment is maintained without the expectation of permanence, and meaning is sought in the quality of present experience rather than in the guaranteed continuation of any given situation.

P3's transformation is perhaps the most quietly radical of the three. Her movement

from a conventional orientation toward career success and personal achievement to a stance of stewardship and social responsibility represents a fundamental re-orientation of the relationship between self and world:

“There are so many women mere aas paas, jin ko main dekhti hun kay parhhna chahti hain, aage barhna chahti hain, unko life mein nahi mil raha chance. But I was picked.” (P3)

What is most significant here is that this reorientation does not diminish P3’s ambition; she remains deeply purposeful, but it relocates the source of that ambition from the self to a set of relational and spiritual obligations.

Her curiosity, her intellectual drive, her professional aspirations: all of these persist, but they were now understood as gifts to be managed rather than attributes to be displayed.

4.7.2 Agency and Self-Generated Meaning

A powerful convergent finding in this fourth theme was the emergence of a sense of personal agency in meaning-making, the recognition that meaning was not simply received from external sources but actively constructed by the self. This was most explicitly articulated by P2:

“The only person who can influence me, mujhe lagta hai wo main khud hi thi, kyunki karna tha to maine kiya, aur meri life ko bhi maine hi meaning dena hai.” (P2)

This statement represents a significant psychological development in the arc of P2’s account. Earlier in her narrative, meaning was largely located outside herself, in academic achievement, in friendships, in the approval of significant others. The shift toward self-generated meaning is the product of a painful journey through relational loss and existential confusion. The statement is followed by one of equal importance:

"I am doing some stuff, kuch cheezain parhna start ki hoi hain maine, kuch cheezain sunna start ki hoi hain maine, aur main usko khud par implement kar rahi hun, kyunki mujhe lagta hai wohi mujhe le kar chalney chahiye. So yeah, main apni life ko khud hi meaning dene ki koshish kar rahi hun." (P2)

Together, these two statements articulate an emerging sense of personal authorship: P2 is learning to be the narrator of her own life rather than a character in someone else's story. This is not narcissistic self-absorption but a developmentally mature form of self-directedness.

For P1, agency in meaning-making is expressed through the sustained pursuit of integration, the refusal to allow external circumstances (the unavailability of certain degrees in Pakistan, the expectations of family, the limitations of the current program) to permanently determine the shape of her life.

Her commitment to continued education, 'Education is something I definitely want to continue', and her vision of simultaneous development in Islamic and psychological domains reflect a confident sense of self-authorship.

P3's intellectual curiosity functions as a similarly agentic force in her life. Her self-description as 'a curious child' who has held onto that curiosity throughout her life positions her intellectual drive not as an external requirement but as a fundamental aspect of who she is:

"I always held onto that kind of in my head, kay, I'm a curious kid, and I need to practice being more curious. So, that's something that I always kept in my life." (P3)

The verb 'held onto' is evocative: it suggests that the maintenance of this identity has required active effort, that there have been forces, internal or external, against which this self-concept has had to be preserved. Curiosity, for P3, is not a passive trait but a practice of self-cultivation.

4.7.3 Role Negotiation and the Labor of Self-Work

The final subtheme concerns the experience of managing multiple, often competing, social roles and how this negotiation is itself a form of meaning-making. All three participants inhabit an unusually dense set of simultaneous roles: student, daughter, sister, friend, teacher, professional trainee, and all three describe the strain of managing these roles alongside the meaning they provide. P1's articulation of her multiple roles is both matter-of-fact and revealing:

“Student ka role hai, daughter ka role hai, friend ka bhi role hota hai, aur behn bhaion ka role hai.” (P1)

This list is not merely an inventory but an account of a self-constituted through relational obligations. Immediately following it, P1 describes teaching the Quran to children online, adding yet another layer of responsibility to an already full life.

The consequence of this multi-role existence is fatigue: ‘I never really took a proper break’ and ‘I felt it was becoming difficult to manage all these responsibilities together.’ Yet what is equally striking is that P1 does not describe any of these roles as ones she wishes to abandon. The difficulty is real, but so is the meaning that each role provides.

P2 describes the psychological weight of her multiple roles in more explicitly distressed terms:

“Meri body thak jaati hai, lekin mujhe pata hai meri body nahi, brain thak raha hai in sab cheezon ki wajah se” (P2)

The distinction she draws between bodily and mental exhaustion is phenomenologically precise and important: it is the cognitive and emotional labor of managing multiple responsibilities, expectations, and relational commitments that depletes her, not any single physical demand. As class representative, P2 carries responsibility not only for her own academic performance but for those of her peers, a role

that amplifies the sense of being accountable to others that diffuses her account.

P3's approach to role management is characterized by a strategic self-positioning as the self-sufficient member of her family system:

"I'm sort of the self-sufficient kid of the family." (P3)

This role, the reliable, capable, non-dependent one, provides P3 with a clear and stable identity within her family, but it also carries costs that she does not explicitly name but that are legible in her broader account: the difficulty of asking for support, the maintenance of a self-image that does not permit vulnerability, the loneliness of being the one who shows up for others but cannot easily allow others to show up for her.

Role negotiation, for P3, is thus not only a practical challenge but a form of existential positioning in a way of being in the world that both protects and constrains.

4.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of a cross-case IPA analysis of three female Pakistani graduate students' experiences of meaning in life. Four Group Experiential Themes have been identified and elaborated. Across all four themes, a number of analytically significant patterns emerge. First, meaning for these participants is neither static nor given: it is actively constructed, sometimes painfully revised, and always oriented toward both past experience and future possibility. Second, Islamic faith functions not merely as a cultural backdrop but as an active and primary framework for existential orientation, one that provides not only comfort but genuine direction, purpose, and interpretive coherence in the face of difficulty.

Third, relationships with parents, friends, and the social world more broadly are experienced as deeply constitutive of meaning, though the nature of that constitutive function differs substantially across participants. Fourth, all three participants are engaged in an ongoing project of self-formation: they are not passive recipients

of a culturally prescribed identity but active agents who are learning, through experience and reflection, to understand themselves and to construct lives that were genuinely their own. The idiographic variation within these convergent themes is as analytically significant as the convergence itself. The divergence in relational orientation, P1 and P2 moving toward greater openness, P3 toward protective self-sufficiency, is not a contradiction of the convergent findings but an enrichment of them. IPA's capacity to hold both the shared structure of experience and the fundamental individual texture of each life is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in this particular finding.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings reported in Chapter 4, situating them in relation to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework of Viktor Frankl's Existential Theory of Meaning, and the methodological commitments of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The chapter is organized around the four Group Experiential Themes (GETs) that emerged from the analysis: Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning; Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose; Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning; and Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding. Following the discussion, the chapter addresses the theoretical and practical contributions of the study, acknowledges its limitations, offers recommendations for future research, and concludes with a reflective summary of the study's significance.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

The present study set out to explore how female university graduate students in Pakistan interpret and construct meaning in life across their lived experiences. The findings, drawn from in-depth IPA interviews with three female graduate students, reveal that meaning-making among this population is a dynamic, multilayered, and culturally embedded process that cannot be adequately captured through

quantitative measurement alone. The discussion that follows addresses each GET in turn, drawing connections to existing theory and empirical literature.

5.2.1 Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning

The most convergent and analytically prominent finding of this study is the central role of Islamic faith in participants' construction of meaning. Across all three accounts, religious belief functions not as a passive cultural backdrop but as an active, interpretive framework through which uncertainty is metabolized, suffering is transformed into purpose, and future direction is oriented. This finding strongly validates and extends empirical work conducted in South Asian and Pakistani contexts that has identified religious faith, familial obligation, and communal values as primary structuring forces of meaning and purpose ([Huda et al., 2023](#)) and is consistent with broader accounts of Islam functioning as a unifying, identity-shaping force within Pakistani society ([Malik, 2024](#)).

The present study deepens this understanding by revealing the specific psychological mechanisms through which faith operates in graduate students' lives: it provides coherence in the face of disrupted life narratives, reframes apparent failure as divine providence, and grounds vocational identity in sacred responsibility rather than personal ambition ([Graça and Brandão, 2024](#)).

These findings resonate with Frankl's existential framework, which identifies the encounter with the transcendent as one of three fundamental avenues through which meaning may be discovered ([Perera, 2020](#)). For all three participants, the relationship with Allah functions precisely as Frankl described: as a source of meaning that transcended worldly circumstance and rendered suffering purposeful. Participant 1's turn toward Islam following her failure to secure a place in medical school illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. Her existential hunger, the inner sense of incompleteness she articulated, was resolved not through the achievement of a new external goal but through a deepened spiritual orientation. This aligns with Frankl's contention that the will to meaning, when frustrated by circumstance, may find its most durable satisfaction in a transcendent rather

than a worldly object (Bailey, 2022), a pattern consistent with evidence linking transcendent meaning to both individual and societal flourishing (Routledge and FioRito, 2021) and with recent narrative reviews affirming the continued clinical relevance of logotherapy and existential analysis (Szabó and Baji, 2025).

The findings also speak to the distinctions drawn in contemporary scholarship between the presence of meaning and the active search for meaning (Martela and Steger, 2022). Participant 3's account, in which she moved through a period of spiritual anger and doubt before arriving at a stance of gratitude and sacred responsibility, reflects the mature existential orientation that Martela and Steger (2022) describe as the co-occurrence of high presence and motivated searching. Her anger was not an absence of faith but a deeply engaged form of spiritual inquiry that ultimately produced a more integrated and stronger sense of purpose. This finding highlights the importance of attending to the process and not merely the outcome of meaning-making in qualitative research with religious populations (Müller et al., 2025). This distinction is also reflected in recent psychometric work confirming that the presence of and search for meaning represent separable, co-occurring dimensions (Jovanović et al., 2024) and aligns with calls to attend to the realization of meaning at both macro and micro levels rather than treating meaning as a static endpoint (Vos, 2025).

The Islam-centered orientation of participants' future selves represents a theoretically significant contribution. All three participants described their professional aspirations not primarily in terms of personal achievement or financial security but in terms of service, accountability, and divinely given responsibility. Participant 3's reframing of her career as 'a responsibility from Allah' rather than a personal desire illustrates a form of vocational meaning-making that is theocentric rather than ego-centric. These findings challenge Western psychological frameworks that tend to locate the source of vocational meaning in personal authenticity and self-actualization, suggesting that in Islamic Pakistani contexts, meaning is more frequently understood as something received and held in trust than as something generated from within (Bilal, 2024). This pattern echoes cross-cultural findings that

the life purposes of higher education students are often manifested through values oriented beyond the self (Kuusisto et al., 2023), and underscores the relevance of multidimensional models that distinguish purpose, significance, and coherence as related but separable components of meaning (Park et al., 2021).

5.2.2 Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose

The second GET reveals that graduate study is experienced by these participants not merely as a credential-seeking endeavor but as a profound site of identity formation, existential negotiation, and self-discovery. This finding is consistent with developmental scholarship on identity formation, which emphasizes transitions in higher education as catalysts for existential reflection and the reassessment of values, commitments, and sense of direction (Weatherton and Schussler, 2022), echoing broader conceptualizations of educational transitions as liminal spaces in which identity is actively renegotiated (Tomlinson, 2023). It also aligns with Ferguson and Schussler (2025) observation that disruptions to anticipated academic trajectories frequently trigger deep existential questioning about purpose, direction, and the value of continued effort. All three participants in the present study had experienced significant disruptions to their original educational plans, and all three had used these disruptions as the occasion for a deeper and more integrated engagement with questions of identity and purpose.

The subtheme of education as identity rather than credential is particularly noteworthy. Participants did not experience their degree programs instrumentally, as a means to an end, but as expressions of who they were and who they were becoming. Participant 1's relief at discovering Islamic Psychology, a field that allowed her to pursue her religious and psychological interests simultaneously, was experienced not as a practical convenience but as an existential resolution: the discovery of a self that did not have to choose between its competing commitments (Iqbal and Skinner, 2021). This resonates with Frankl's first avenue of meaning, the creation of work or the accomplishment of a task (Perera, 2020), which in this context is understood not merely as professional performance but as a form of identity

expression and self-realization. This finding is consistent with identity-theory accounts that locate the self within socially structured roles and meanings (Stets and Huft, 2026), and with qualitative evidence that academic identity is actively constructed through ongoing participation in scholarly practice (Qian et al., 2026).

The role of academic disappointment as an existential trigger is a particularly clinically and educationally relevant finding. All three participants reported significant dissatisfaction with the quality of their current academic experience, and this dissatisfaction generated existential distress that went well beyond ordinary frustration. For Participant 2, the gap between her love of learning and the reality of her program was experienced as a form of deprivation, a severing from something essential to her sense of self.

This resonates with Sverdlik and Hall (2020) identification of meaning deficit as a significant contributor to graduate student distress and attrition, and underlines the importance of educational environments that attend not only to academic outcomes but to students' existential and identity needs. This finding also resonates with evidence that graduate study is associated with elevated rates of psychological distress (Satinsky et al., 2021), that competing work and family demands can compound academic strain for post-graduate students in Pakistan specifically (Akhter et al., 2025), and that graduate students often report a perceived decline in the broader self-care practices, such as physical activity, that buffer against this distress (Jett et al., 2024).

The future professional self as a meaning compass represents a psychologically adaptive strategy that all three participants employed to sustain motivation in the present through investment in a projected future identity. This finding is consistent with narrative identity theory, which emphasizes the role of future-oriented self-narratives in generating coherence and purpose in the face of present difficulty (Chong, 2025). Crucially, the future selves these participants envisioned were not merely more successful versions of their current selves but qualitatively different persons: more integrated, more purposeful, and more explicitly committed to the service of others and of Allah (Oyserman and Horowitz, 2023). This suggests that the future professional self, in this population, functions not only as a motivational

resource but as a moral and spiritual aspiration. This finding is consistent with philosophical accounts of meaning as bridging present action and a value-laden vision of life lived well (Drob, 2022), and with lifespan research suggesting that meaning is increasingly anchored in purpose and future orientation during the transition into established adulthood (George and Park, 2021).

5.2.3 Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning

The third GET confirms that relationships occupy a central and constitutive role in participants' experience of meaning, while also revealing a theoretically important divergence in relational orientation across cases. These findings were consistent with a substantial body of literature demonstrating that meaningful relationships, social roles, and a sense of belonging were among the most frequently cited sources of meaning across diverse populations (Wu et al., 2024). The present study extends this literature by illuminating the specific relational dynamics through which meaning is generated, tested, and transformed in the lives of young Pakistani women navigating graduate study.

The parental relationship emerged as the most consistently significant relational source of meaning across all three accounts, though the precise nature of that significance differed. For Participant 1, parents were prioritized above all other roles, and the freedom they had extended to her is experienced not as liberation from obligation but as the creation of a deeper sense of responsibility. For Participant 2, witnessing her parents' distress during a health crisis catalyzed a fundamental reorientation toward the value of her own life: she discovered the meaning of her existence by perceiving its significance in her parents' eyes. This relational discovery of self-worth resonates with relational theories of identity development that emphasize the role of significant others in mirroring and affirming the self (Collins and Beike, 2025). For Participant 3, the family provides meaning not through emotional intimacy but through the transmission of values and the assurance of practical solidarity, a form of relational anchoring that is quieter but no less structurally significant. This pattern is consistent with broader sociological accounts of

the Pakistani family as a primary site of value transmission and solidarity, even as its functions continue to evolve under contemporary social change ([Rasool, 2024](#)).

The subtheme of growth through relational loss and pain offers a nuanced counterpoint to idealized accounts of relationships as uncomplicated sources of support and belonging. All three participants described friendships that had been painful, disappointing, or ultimately dissolved, and all three identified these difficult relational experiences as significant sources of personal transformation. This finding supports the broader literature on post-adversarial growth and is consistent with IPA's theoretical interest in how adverse experiences are made sense of and integrated into an ongoing self-narrative ([Nizza et al., 2021](#)).

It also resonates with Frankl's third avenue of meaning, the adoption of a meaningful attitude toward unavoidable suffering ([Perera, 2020](#)): all three participants had, to varying degrees, transformed relational pain into psychological insight and developmental growth. This is consistent with evidence that relationship status and the quality of relational experience are closely tied to meaning in life during emerging adulthood ([Karayigit et al., 2024](#)).

The divergence in relational orientation between Participant 3 on the one hand and Participants 1 and 2 on the other is among the most analytically significant findings in the dataset and merits careful theoretical attention. While P1 and P2 were moving, over the period covered in their accounts, toward greater relational openness and willingness to be vulnerable, P3 had developed a principled stance of emotional self-reliance. This divergence is not adequately explained by differences in cultural background or values; all three participants shared broadly similar cultural contexts, and all three expressed a genuine desire for meaningful connection. The divergence is better understood as reflecting different risk thresholds in the pursuit of belonging, shaped by the particular relational histories and psychological resources each participant brought to her current life. This idiographic variation within a convergent theme exemplifies the kind of finding that IPA methodology is distinctively equipped to illuminate ([Smith et al., 2022](#)) and reinforces calls in the broader literature for multi-component conceptualizations of meaning capable

of accommodating such within-theme variability (Maneka, 2023).

5.2.4 Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding

The fourth and most overarching GET reveals that all three participants were engaged in an active, ongoing, and consciously narrated process of self-formation. This finding aligns with developmental scholarship emphasizing the graduate student life stage as a critical juncture for identity renegotiation and existential reflection (Weatherton and Schussler, 2022), and with narrative identity theory's emphasis on the role of self-authored life stories in generating coherence and purpose (Chong, 2025).

What distinguishes the present findings from these broader frameworks is the specificity and depth with which participants described the nature of their self-transformation, the concrete sources of epistemic expansion, and the developmental labor involved in sustaining an evolving sense of self.

The subtheme of an expanding and transformed worldview captures a phenomenon that is simultaneously cognitive, experiential, and spiritual: the discovery that one's previous interpretive framework was incomplete, and the gradual construction of a wider, more integrated horizon of meaning.

For Participant 1, this expansion was catalyzed by the encounter with Islamic education; for Participant 2, by the lived experience of relational loss and physical illness; for Participant 3, by the growing recognition of her own privilege and the social obligations it generated.

In each case, the transformation involved not merely the acquisition of new information but a fundamental reorganization of how experience is structured and what things mean. This resonates with Frankl's framework as it describes a deepening engagement with the question of meaning rather than its resolution; the participants were not arriving at settled answers but learning to inhabit the question with greater courage and clarity, a stance consistent with philosophical treatments of meaning as an evolving relationship between the self and a wider horizon of value.

rather than a fixed possession (Metz, 2022).

The emergence of personal agency in meaning-making, articulated most explicitly by Participant 2, represents a developmentally significant achievement. Her statement that ‘it was she herself who must give meaning to her own life’ reflects the shift from externally located to internally generated meaning associated with mature existential functioning in Frankl’s framework (Perera, 2020) and with the kind of autonomous self-directedness that developmental psychologists associate with healthy emerging adulthood. This finding is particularly notable given that it emerged from and through a period of significant relational difficulty and academic disappointment; the development of self-authorship in this case was not a comfortable achievement but a hard-won one.

The subtheme of role negotiation and the labor of self-work highlights the often-overlooked experiential cost of inhabiting multiple, often competing roles simultaneously. All three participants described fatigue, strain, and difficulty in managing their complex role sets, while simultaneously acknowledging that each role was a source of meaning as well as demand. This dual quality of roles as both meaningful and exhausting is consistent with the broader literature on role theory and well-being, which notes that role accumulation can both enhance and deplete psychological resources depending on the quality and personal significance of the roles involved (Mize and Kincaid, 2025).

This is in keeping with research highlighting structured mentoring and support relationships as important resources for helping individuals navigate the cumulative demands of competing institutional roles (Babatope, 2025). The present findings contribute a qualitatively rich account of how this tension is actually lived and negotiated by young Pakistani women, offering a level of experiential specificity that quantitative approaches cannot provide.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several distinct contributions to the theoretical literature on meaning in life and qualitative psychology. First, it extends Frankl’s Existential

Theory of Meaning into a non-Western, Islamic cultural context, demonstrating that his three avenues of meaning, creative work, experiential encounter, and the attitude toward suffering, are not only applicable but particularly generative when applied to the experiences of Pakistani Muslim women. The findings suggest, however, that in this cultural context, faith does not function as simply one avenue of meaning among three. Rather, it operates as an overarching lens through which the other two avenues (education and relationships) are themselves given meaning. For these participants, it was their relationship with Allah that made their education purposeful and their relationships significant, rather than the other way around. This integrated configuration of faith, scholarship, and vocation lends empirical support to recent theoretical proposals for reimagining scholarly identity at the intersection of Islamic and Western higher education traditions (Sahin, 2024).

Second, the study contributes to the growing literature on meaning in life in graduate student populations by offering a qualitatively nuanced account of how meaning is constructed, disrupted, and reconstructed in the specific context of postgraduate study in Pakistan. The finding that academic disappointment can shake a student's sense of purpose, not just their grades or motivation, suggests that universities need to look beyond academic performance and also support students' deeper need for meaning and direction.

Third, the study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the distinctive value of IPA for meaning-in-life research with culturally specific populations. The methodology's idiographic commitment allowed the present study to honor both the convergent themes that emerged across cases and the theoretically significant divergences that distinguished individual participants, particularly in the domain of relational orientation. This capacity to hold convergence and divergence simultaneously is a methodological strength that combined approaches cannot replicate.

Finally, the study contributes to feminist and gender-sensitive qualitative psychology by providing a detailed account of how female graduate students in a non-Western context navigate gendered expectations, relational responsibilities,

and the negotiation of scholarly identity. The findings affirm and extend [Elias et al. \(2025\)](#) observation that female graduate students navigate meaning-making through a particular set of gendered demands and opportunities, while adding the culturally specific dimension of Islamic identity and Pakistani social context that the existing literature has not adequately addressed. These findings sit alongside and add experiential depth to ongoing scholarship documenting the gendered structural barriers that continue to shape Pakistani women's access to and experience of higher education ([Fazal et al., 2025](#)), as well as the transformative potential of higher education for women's empowerment more broadly in this context ([Pari and Ali, 2025](#)).

5.4 Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for counselors, mental health professionals, and educators who work with graduate students in Pakistani universities and in comparable non-Western contexts. For university counselors and mental health professionals, the study underlines the importance of culturally sensitive practice that acknowledges the role of Islamic faith as a primary meaning-making resource.

Counselors working with Pakistani graduate students should avoid frameworks that treat spiritual belief as unrelated to psychological well-being or as a factor to be bracketed in therapeutic encounters. The present findings suggest, on the contrary, that Islamic faith is often the most robust and deeply integrated source of meaning available to these students, and that therapeutic approaches which engage with rather than bypass this dimension are more likely to be experienced as relevant and effective. Meaning-centered therapeutic modalities, particularly those informed by logotherapy and existential psychology, may be especially well-suited to this population, given longitudinal evidence linking meaning in life to resilience and mental well-being even under significant adversity ([Arslan and Yildirim, 2021](#)).

For academic institutions, the finding that academic disappointment functions as an existential trigger carries particular significance. Programs that fail to provide

students with the intellectual depth, practical engagement, and sense of professional identity they are seeking do not merely produce academic dissatisfaction; they precipitate existential distress. This suggests a need for program review processes that attend not only to learning outcomes and student satisfaction scores but to students' experiences of meaning, purpose, and identity development within their programs.

Institutions may also benefit from creating structured opportunities for graduate students to reflect on their vocational purpose and personal development through mentoring relationships, reflective journaling practices, and community-building activities that support a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Such efforts would align with broader calls for academic programs to systematically incorporate graduate students' own perceptions of their experience into program evaluation and design ([Young and Petrescu, 2025](#)).

For educators, the study highlights the significance of acknowledging and supporting the multiple roles that graduate students live simultaneously. The psychological weight of managing student, family, professional, and spiritual roles simultaneously is a frequently invisible dimension of the graduate student experience. Educators who are aware of this complexity are better positioned to respond with empathy and flexibility when students appear disengaged, overwhelmed, or uncertain about their direction.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

While this study offers rich and theoretically significant findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size of three participants, while appropriate for IPA methodology, necessarily limits the transferability of the findings. IPA does not seek generalizability in the statistical sense, but the findings must be understood as contextually specific to this particular group of young Pakistani women at this particular moment in their academic lives. Future research with larger and more diverse samples would allow for a more expansive

exploration of meaning-making processes among Pakistani graduate students.

Second, the homogeneity of the sample, while methodologically intentional, means that the study's findings reflect a particular set of social, academic, and cultural experiences. All three participants were female, unmarried, in their twenties, enrolled in the same program at the same private university in Islamabad, and from similar ethno-linguistic backgrounds. This homogeneity enhances the depth and coherence of the analysis but limits the extent to which the findings can speak to the experiences of graduate students from different regions, disciplines, and university sectors within Pakistan.

Third, the cross-sectional design of the study captured participants' meaning-making at a single point in time, limiting the capacity to trace the longitudinal development of meaning across the graduate student journey. A longitudinal-based qualitative design would allow future researchers to examine how meaning-making processes evolve over the full duration of a graduate program and in response to key transitions and milestones.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Several directions for future research are suggested by the present findings. First, future studies might extend the present inquiry by including male graduate students, allowing for a gender-comparative exploration of meaning-making processes in Pakistan's higher education. The present study's female-only sample, while theoretically justified, leaves open the question of whether and how meaning-making differs across gender lines in this cultural context.

Second, future research might adopt a longitudinal design to explore how meaning in life is constructed, disrupted, and reconstructed across the full arc of graduate study. A repeated-interview design would allow researchers to capture the dynamic, process-oriented nature of meaning-making in ways that a single-point cross-sectional study cannot.

Third, comparative qualitative research across different Pakistani university contexts, including public versus private institutions, urban versus regional campuses, and students from different disciplinary backgrounds, would enrich understanding of the ways in which institutional culture and disciplinary context shape meaning-making processes.

Fourth, future research might explore the interface between meaning in life and specific psychological outcomes, within a mixed-methods design. While the present study deliberately prioritized depth over breadth, a mixed-methods approach that combines IPA's interpretive richness with quantitative measurement of psychological outcomes could offer a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between meaning-making and graduate student well-being in Pakistan.

Finally, there is a need for intervention research that builds on the qualitative insights generated by studies such as this one. The present findings offer a theoretically grounded basis for developing meaning-centered support programs for graduate students in Pakistani universities; future research might evaluate the effectiveness of such programs through both qualitative and quantitative methods.

5.7 Conclusion

This study set out to explore how female university graduate students in Pakistan interpret and construct meaning in life through their faith, roles, relationships, and evolving sense of self.

The findings, generated through an IPA analysis of three in-depth interviews, reveal a rich and coherent picture of meaning-making as a process that is simultaneously spiritual, relational, identity-driven, and agentic. Islamic faith emerged as the primary and most consistently articulated source of meaning across all three accounts, functioning not merely as a cultural identity marker but as an active interpretive framework through which adversity was transformed, vocation was oriented, and gratitude was cultivated. Educational and professional roles were experienced as profound sites of identity formation

and existential negotiation, with academic disappointment functioning as a catalyst for deeper self-reflection rather than a terminal setback. Relationships with family and peers were central to participants' sense of meaning, providing both existential anchoring and the conditions for personal growth through difficulty. And all three participants were engaged in an ongoing, consciously narrated process of becoming: learning, through experience and reflection, to inhabit their lives with greater agency, coherence, and purpose.

These findings make several contributions to the theoretical and empirical literature on meaning in life. They extend Frankl's existential framework into an Islamic, non-Western context; deepen understanding of meaning-making among graduate students in Pakistani higher education; and demonstrate the distinctive capacity of IPA methodology to honor both the shared structures and the individual textures of lived experience. They also carry practical implications for counselors, educators, and academic institutions who support graduate students' well-being and existential flourishing.

Ultimately, this study affirms that meaning in life, for these three young Pakistani women, is not discovered passively but actively constructed through the ongoing encounter with faith, learning, love, and the enduring human project of understanding oneself. It is hoped that the insights generated here will contribute to a more contextually grounded, culturally sensitive, and human-centered understanding of what it means to live meaningfully as a graduate student navigating the challenges and possibilities of postgraduate life in contemporary Pakistan, in keeping with broader calls to bridge philosophical and psychological perspectives on the meaning of life ([Drob, 2022](#)).

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Appendix A

Research Title: Exploring the Meaning in Life among University Graduate Students: A Qualitative Inquiry into Perspectives Greetings! My name is Irsa Shahzeen, and I am a graduate student at Capital University of Science & Technology. I am inviting you to participate in a research study that explores how graduate students understand and experience meaning in life. The goal of this study is to learn about your unique perspectives, challenges, and what gives your life a sense of purpose while you are pursuing advanced studies.

If you agree to participate, you will take part in a **one-on-one interview** lasting about **45–90 minutes**, where you will be asked about your personal views on purpose, goals, and meaning in life. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded for accurate transcription. Your identity will remain confidential, with a pseudonym (false name) used in all notes and reports, and all recordings and transcripts will be securely stored and used only for this research.

There are no physical risks associated with this study; however, talking about meaning in life may sometimes cause mild emotional discomfort. You may skip any question or withdraw at any time. If you require any assistance, you can contact the CUST Well-Being Center (wbc@cust.edu.pk) for help. While there is no direct compensation, your participation may contribute to a better understanding of student well-being and inform future university support services.

Certificate of Approval

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions

stated above.

Participants Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you have questions regarding this study, please contact:

Irsa Shahzeen (Msp243012@cust.pk)

Appendix B

Demographic Information Form

Form No.

- o Email ID: _____
- o Contact No: _____
- o Age: _____
- o Gender: _____
- o Ethnicity: Punjabi / Sindhi / Pashtun / Balochi / Other: _____
- o Primary Language: _____
- o Marital Status: _____
- o University Sector: Public / Private o University Name: _____
- o Field of Study: _____
- o Degree Program: _____
- o Current Semester in Program: _____
- o Employment Status: _____

All responses will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

General Lived Experience

1. Can you describe your current life situation and the different roles you are living in at this stage?

Roles & Relationships

2. How do your relationships with others (such as family or friends) and the roles you hold within these relationships shape your sense of meaning in life?

Life Stages

3. Looking across different stages of your life (past experiences, present situation, and future expectations), what influenced the way your sense of meaning in life has developed or changed?

Existential Development

4. Are there any beliefs, values, or sources of personal strength (such as faith, spirituality, or your sense of who you are) that have shaped the meaning you find in your life?

Appendix D



Capital University of Science & Technology
Your Journey Awaits

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Ref. CUST/IBD/PSY/Thesis-1923
April 07, 2026

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR DATA COLLECTION

Capital University of Science and Technology (CUST) is a federally chartered university. The university is authorized by the Federal Government to award degrees at Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate level for a wide variety of programs.

Ms. Irsa Shahzeen registration number **MSP243012** is a bona fide student in MS Psychology program at this University from Fall-2024 till date. In partial fulfillment of the degree, she is conducting research on "Exploring the Meaning in Life among University Graduate Students: A Qualitative Inquiry into Perspectives". In this continuation, the student is required to collect data from your institute.

Considering the forgoing, kindly allow the student to collect the requisite data from your institute. Your cooperation in this regard will be highly appreciated.

Please feel free to contact undersigned if you have any query in this regard.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sabahat", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Sabahat Haqqani
Head, Department of Psychology
Ph No. 111-555-666 Ext: 178
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April 07, 2026

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE CERTIFICATE OF REVIEW AND SUPPORT

This is to certify that Project titled: “Exploring the Meaning in Life among University Graduate Students: A Qualitative Inquiry into Perspectives” submitted by Scholar: Irsa Shahzeen MSP243012 and supervised by: Ms. Iqra Kiran reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee of Faculty of Management and Social Science, meets the requirements of the American Psychological Association’s Ethical guidelines for Human Research and is **REVIEWED** and **APPROVED** by Research Ethics Committee of Faculty of Management and Social Sciences.

It is the Scholar’s responsibility to ensure that all researchers associated with this project are aware of the conditions of approval and which documents have been approved.

The Scholar is required to notify the Research Ethics Committee in case of any amendment in the project, specifically:

- Any significant change to the project and the reason for that change, including an indication of ethical implications (if any)
- Serious adverse effects on participants and the actions taken to address those effects
- Any other unforeseen events or unexpected developments that merit notification
- The inability of the Principal Investigator to continue in that role, or any other change in research personnel involved in the project
- A delay of more than 12 months in the commencement of the project; and,
- Termination or closure of the project.

Dr. Sabahat Haqqani

Convener, Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Management and Social Sciences
Capital University of Science and Technology
Islamabad

Appendix E

Cross-Case Analysis: Development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) from Participant-Level Codes and Verbatim Extracts

Group Ex- periential Themes	Personal Expe- riential Themes	Participant	Emerging Code	Verbatim Transcript Extract
GET One: Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning	Faith-Based Meaning-Making in Uncertainty	P1	Existential questioning after an academic setback	“Islamic education ki motivation jo thi, start karne ki, wo asal mein ye thi keh ma tayyari kar rahi thi... To mujhe, sawal aane lage keh meri zindagi ka maqsad kia hai.”
GET One: Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning	Islam-Centered Identity and Future Orientation	P3	Faith-based purpose/duty	“I take my career as a responsibility, rather than something that I wanted to do... I am doing it for Allah, because I feel like it’s a responsibility from Him.”
GET One: Faith and Spirituality as a Source of Meaning	Gratitude and Spiritual Reconnection	P1	Desire for spiritual closeness	“Main jaanna chahti thi keh, matalab, main Quran ko parhon aur Allah ko janon.”
GET Two: Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose	Education as Identity, Not Merely Credential	P2	Academic passion as identity	“Mujhe shauq hai keh main parhon, mujhe higher education ka bohat shauq hai.”

Group Ex- periential Themes	Personal Expe- riential Themes	Participant	Emerging Code	Verbatim Transcript Extract
GET Two: Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose	The Future Professional Self as Meaning Compass	P2	Profession-centered future vision	“Abhi bhi, jab meri apne doston se baat hoti hai... mera khwab hai keh main private clinic start karoon.”
GET Two: Identity Formation Through Education and Purpose	Academic Disappointment as an Existential Trigger	P1	Academic dissatisfaction/unmet intellectual potential	“Mujhe kuch itna seekhne ko nahi mila.”
GET Three: Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning	Family as Existential Anchor	P3	Supportive but reserved relationships	“I’m not close with them. But it’s not like, oh my God, I hate them. It’s like, kay I’m different from them.”
GET Three: Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning	Growth Through Relational Loss and Pain	P2	Self-neglect in relationships	“Jo friendships thi meri life mein, wo problematic rahi hain. Bachon wali soch, aur sabko dekhte dekhte khud ko neglect kar diya.”
GET Three: Relationships as Sites of Growth and Meaning	Divergence in Relational Orientation	P3	Self-sufficiency as protection	“I have this like. No reliance on people policy... I don’t even like asking for basic favors from people.”
GET Four: Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding	Expanding and Transformed Worldview	P1	Shift in worldview through Islamic studies	“Maine jab apni Islamic studies shuru ki, tab maine samjha keh yahi sara kuch nahi hai, hamein sab kuch saath le kar chalna hai.”
GET Four: Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding	Agency and Self-Generated Meaning	P2	Self-generated meaning	“The only person who can influence me, mujhe lagta hai wo main khud hi thi... meri life ko bhi maine hi meaning dena hai.”
GET Four: Personal Growth and Evolving Self-Understanding	Role Negotiation and the Labor of Self-Work	P3	Self-sufficient family positioning	“I’m sort of the self-sufficient kid of the family.”

Sample Extracts from the Researcher's Reflexive Journal The following extracts are drawn from the reflexive journal maintained throughout data collection and analysis, referenced in Section 3.5 (Reflexivity and Positionality). They are included here as evidence of the ongoing reflexive practice that informed the study's interpretive process and were periodically reviewed with the thesis supervisor as part of that process.

Journal Entry – April 2026 (following the interview with Participant 1) “Today's interview touched on something very close to my own experience with faith and family. I noticed myself wanting to finish her sentences in my head before she had finished explaining. I had to consciously slow down and remind myself that her experience, even where it resembles mine, is still her own and needs to be listened to on its own terms, not assumed.”

Journal Entry – May 2026 (following the interview with Participant 3) “P3 spoke about keeping relationships at a distance and relying mostly on herself. I noticed I was more critical of this in my own head than I have been of similar patterns in my own life. Writing this down so that when I code her transcript, I check whether I am judging her choices instead of trying to understand them.”

Journal Entry – May 2026 (mid-analysis reflection) “Going back over my early codes, I can see that I responded differently to different participants depending on how close their experiences felt to mine. I want to be honest about this in the write-up rather than pretend I approached every transcript identically. Naming it here is the first step toward correcting for it in the next coding pass.”