


“When Crisis Becomes Growth”: Meaning-Making, Resilience, and Growth among Adolescents with Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy

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<p>Submitted: 2025-07-06</p> <p>Published: 2025-08-27</p> <p>Keywords: Meaning-making, Negative Experiences, Teen Pregnancy out of Wedlock</p> <p>Copyright holder: © Author/s (2025)</p> <p>This article is under:</p>  <p>How to cite: Sahertian, E. A. E., Adiyanti, M. G., & Wahyuningrum, E. (2025). “When Crisis Becomes Growth”: Meaning-Making, Resilience, and Growth among Adolescents with Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy. <i>Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy</i>, 7(2). https://doi.org/10.51214/002025071545000</p> <p>Published by: Kuras Institute</p> <p>E-ISSN:</p>	<p>ABSTRACT: This study investigates the meaning-making process of negative experiences among adolescents who experienced out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from five participants (17 to 19 years old when they got first pregnancy) through in-depth interviews and observations to explore their emotional and cognitive responses. The findings showed that the meaning-making process is gradual and shaped by both internal and external factors. Initially, the pregnancy was perceived as traumatic, marked by shame, fear, and social rejection. Over time, however, support from family and friends played a key role in helping the adolescents reinterpret their experiences. Family support, in particular, provided a safe, nonjudgmental space that enabled emotional recovery and personal reflection. This shift allowed the participants to develop a sense of responsibility, continue their education, seek economic independence, and pursue healthier relationships. These efforts reflect a transition from crisis to growth, guided by a “will to meaning” and the creation of purpose through action. In conclusion, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, while initially distressing, became a catalyst for personal development and a deeper understanding of life’s meaning.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy out of wedlock is one of the social problems frequently experienced by adolescents across the world, including Indonesia. According to Santrock (2019), adolescence is a transitional phase from childhood to early adulthood, usually ranging from the ages of 10 to 21. During this stage, experimental behaviors often emerge, including promiscuity, substance abuse, academic problems, and unprotected sexual activity, which increase the risk of premarital pregnancy (Susanti & Fatimah, 2020; Amira, Hendrawati, Sriati, Sumarni & Rosidin, 2023).

Pregnancy out of wedlock among adolescents continues to rise, with WHO (2020) reporting 21 million global cases annually, 49% of which occur outside marriage. In Indonesia, the majority of applications for child marriage dispensations are caused by pregnancy out of wedlock, reaching 59,709 cases in 2021—seven times higher compared to 2016 (Komnas Perempuan, 2021).

For adolescents, pregnancy out of wedlock is often perceived as a negative experience, as they face social stigma, ridicule, and exclusion from their surroundings (Hannani, 2021; Alifah, Apsari & Taftazani, 2022; Pertiwi & Abida, 2022; Tjolly & Soetjiningsih, 2023). Psychologically, adolescents experiencing pregnancy out of wedlock frequently report emotional distress, such as shame,

confusion, and hopelessness (Malik, Astuti, & Yulianti, 2015; Samawati & Nurchayati, 2021; Sari, Khumas & Jalal, 2024). The inability of partners to provide adequate support, coupled with limited family support, further exacerbates this experience (Damayanti, Nada, Adani, Putri & Surjaningrum, 2022; Iriyanto & Gusnita, 2024; Ndoloe & Huwae, 2024). As a result, many adolescents struggle with low self-confidence, severe stress, and difficulties in interacting with their social environment (Elizabeth & Naryoso, 2023; Hasibuan & Sahputra, 2023).

An initial assessment through interviews with three adolescents who experienced pregnancy out of wedlock in September 2024 revealed that such behavior was influenced by several factors, including excessive trust in their partners and the belief that sexual relations are a proof of love. These findings are consistent with studies by Ajayi, Odunga, Oduor, Ouedraogo, Ushie, and Wado (2021), as well as Habito, Morgan, and Vaughan (2021), which reported that adolescents often feel the need to prove love through sexual intercourse. In addition, limited knowledge about contraception and safe sexual practices was identified as a significant contributing factor, as supported by Myatt, Pattanittum, Sothornwit, Ngamjarus, Rattanakanokchai, Show, Jampathong, and Lumbiganon (2024). The adolescents also reported high levels of stress related to continuing their education, partner responsibilities, and fear of social stigma, which worsened their psychological condition, as found by Islamy, Khumas, and Zainuddin (2022). They expressed feelings of fear, shame, and isolation, while losing opportunities to pursue education and future aspirations.

Beyond internal pressures, adolescents who get pregnant out of wedlock also encounter social pressures from communities that are often judgmental rather than supportive. This stigma triggers guilt, shame, and anxiety about the future (Astari & Chusniyah, 2021; Samawati & Nurchayati, 2021; Djasmita & Huwae, 2023). Their unpreparedness to take on the role of young mothers, along with fear of becoming a family disgrace, further aggravates their situation (Rahman & Lawang, 2023; Suratno & Nugroho, 2023; Sari, Khumas & Jalal, 2024). Consequently, many adolescents experience depression, drop out of school, are abandoned by peers, and feel alienated from their environment (Wae, Aswim & Natsir, 2023; Ndoloe & Huwae, 2024).

Such negative experiences compel adolescents to confront major life changes, including being forced to mature prematurely (Handayani, Rahayu, Olivia, Meirini & Qurniasih, 2024). The adaptation process involves individual efforts to understand and assign meaning to the negative experiences they face. In coping with these circumstances, individuals attempt to interpret their experiences—whether positive or negative—by considering various factors. Factors such as social support, cultural and religious values, and views about the future play a significant role in shaping this meaning-making process. Moreover, decisions related to pregnancy, such as continuing the pregnancy, adoption, or other alternatives, also influence how individuals derive meaning from their experiences.

In confronting pregnancy out of wedlock, adolescents need to find meaning in their experiences in order to survive under pressure. Frankl (1962) emphasized that the meaning of life is achieved through the individual's freedom to choose their attitude toward situations, the drive to live meaningfully, and the discovery of meaning by the individual themselves. This perspective is further supported by Krok (2018), who found that meaning in life plays a crucial role in helping individuals endure suffering, find wisdom in adversity, and live with optimism.

Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of meaning in life among adolescents experiencing pregnancy out of wedlock. For instance, Sahertian and Huwae (2023) found a relationship between meaning in life and the big five personality traits, while Putri (2020) emphasized the link between meaning in life and future orientation, though her focus was on early adult women. Additionally, Pranungsari and Tentama (2018) explored meaning in life among street girls with children from unwanted pregnancies. Although the contexts and challenges differ, these findings remain relevant in providing insights into meaning-making among individuals facing pregnancy out of wedlock.

Other studies, such as those by Fauza (2021) and Puasa & Rahayu (2024), investigated aspects of self-acceptance in adolescents with pregnancy out of wedlock. Their findings indicate that adolescents must manage guilt, fear, and anxiety, while building hope for themselves, their children, and their families. Support from family and friends plays a vital role, enabling adolescents to accept themselves, adopt a more positive outlook on life, and feel a greater sense of direction. Furthermore, Damayanti et al. (2022) examined resilience among adolescents with premarital pregnancies and found that they were able to adapt and remain strong despite challenges such as lack of family support and partner abandonment.

Other research has also investigated meaning in life among individuals experiencing difficult situations. Chaidir and Tuapattinaja (2018) discovered that commercial sex workers with social support and role models were able to accept themselves and find happiness. Justitia, Neviryarni, and Syukur (2021) demonstrated that single mothers reinforced their meaning in life through acceptance and spirituality. Qomariah and Santi (2021) revealed that individuals engaging in non-suicidal self-injury still maintained hope and attained meaning in life through creativity, experiences, and attitudes. Windarti, Hakim, and Rasalwati (2021) studied housewives living with HIV/AIDS, who, despite facing severe challenges, found meaning in life through purpose, satisfaction, and self-worth. These studies indicate that individuals can derive meaning from negative life experiences.

Based on the above, this study aims to explore the meaning-making process of negative experiences among adolescents who get pregnant out of wedlock. The study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of adolescents' experiences in facing difficult and stressful situations, and how they discover meaning behind those experiences.

METHODS

Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore the meaning-making process of negative experiences among adolescents who get pregnant out of wedlock. This method was chosen because it aims to understand the deeper meaning of the negative experiences encountered by participants facing pregnancy out of wedlock.

Participant

This study involved five female adolescents who had experienced pregnancy outside of marriage (See Table 1). All participants resided in City A and, at the time of the study, were pursuing education either at the senior high school level or in higher education. None of the participants were married when the interviews were conducted. Participant 1 (H), aged 18, is a student at a private university and became pregnant at the age of 17. At that time, she was living alone in a boarding house. Her child is currently around 8 months old. She had been in a dating relationship for two years before the pregnancy occurred. Participant 2 (C), aged 19, is continuing her education in the 12th grade of a public senior high school after having temporarily dropped out due to her pregnancy at the age of 17. She was living with her parents during the pregnancy, and her child is now around 8 months old. C had been in a dating relationship for one year before the pregnancy occurred. Participant 3 (N), also aged 19, is a student at a public university and experienced pregnancy while in the 12th grade of senior high school, at the age of 17. She was living with her parents at that time. Her child is currently about 12 months old. She had been in a dating relationship for one year before becoming pregnant. Participant 4 (Y), aged 20, is a final-semester student at a private university. She became pregnant at the age of 19 while in a dating relationship that had lasted four years. Initially, she was living alone in a boarding house, but later returned to live with her parents after learning about her pregnancy. Her child is now around 6 months old. Meanwhile, Participant 5 (T), aged 21, is completing her final thesis at a private university. She experienced pregnancy at the age

of 19 while still living with her parents. T had been in a dating relationship for two years before the pregnancy, and her child is now around 11 months old.

Table 1. Participant Information

Description	P1 (H)	P2 (C)	P3 (N)	P4 (Y)	P5 (T)
Current Age	18 years	19 years	19 years	20 years	21 years
Age at Pregnancy	17 years	17 years	17 years	19 years	19 years
Child's Age	8 months	8 months	12 months	6 months	11 months
Educational Status at Pregnancy	University	Senior High School (12th Grade)	Senior High School (12th Grade)	University	University
Current Educational Status	University	Senior High School (12th Grade)	University	University	University
Duration of Relationship	2 years	1 year	1 year	4 years	2 years
Living Arrangement during Pregnancy	Independent (boarding house)	With parents	With parents	Independent (boarding house), later with parents	With parents

Instruments

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to directly examine the participants' behaviors and socio-cultural contexts, in-depth interviews aimed to explore the perspectives and experiences of the participants and other informants, while documentation served to strengthen the data through non-human sources such as notes and audio recordings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed the stages outlined by Miles et al. (2014), which include refining, categorizing, directing, eliminating irrelevant data, and organizing the data to identify relevant themes and patterns. Through this approach, the study is expected to illustrate how adolescents who experience pregnancy out of wedlock construct meaning from their negative experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study was conducted from January 24, 2025, to March 12, 2025, involving five research participants. The participants consisted of adolescents who experienced pregnancy outside of marriage. The findings indicate that these adolescents underwent a gradual process of making meaning out of their negative experiences, and eventually, through reflection and support, they succeeded in constructing a new sense of meaning in life.

The process of meaning-making in adolescents who experience out-of-wedlock pregnancy is dynamic and complex. It begins with contributing factors, followed by the responses of both the environment and the individual, and eventually develops into a will to interpret the experience in a more positive way. Based on in-depth interviews with five female participants aged 17–19 who experienced out-of-wedlock pregnancy, it was found that this event did not occur suddenly but rather was influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. External factors included persuasion by a partner, emotional manipulation, coercion, peer influence, exploitation by older partners, and a permissive social environment that tends to neglect sexual issues. Meanwhile, internal factors encompassed a lack of knowledge about sex and reproduction, emotional attachment to a partner, low self-esteem, and weak self-control. These factors intertwined and formed the background for the occurrence of unplanned pregnancy.

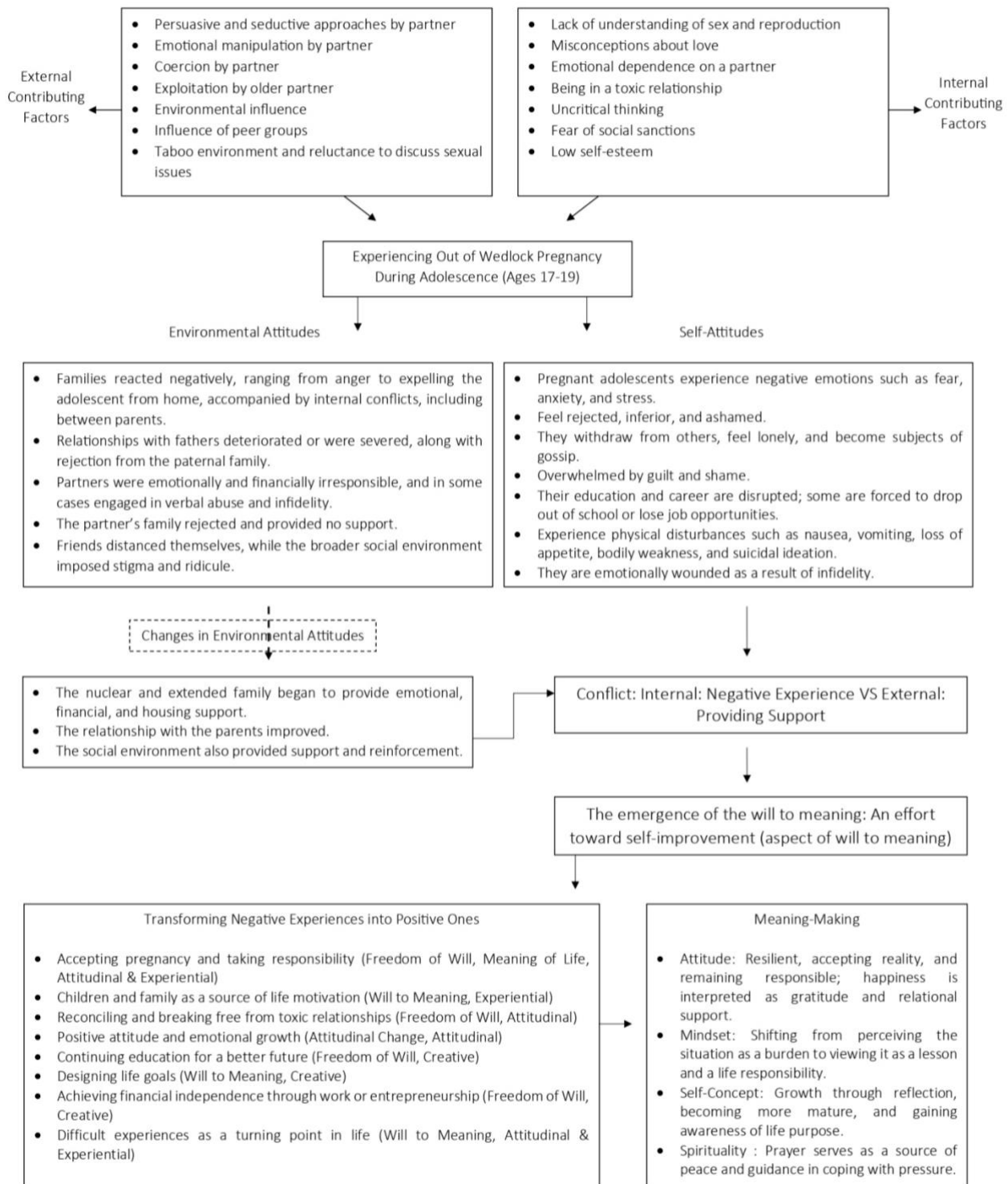


Figure 1. The Meaning-Making Process of Negative Experiences in Adolescents Who Get Pregnant Out of Wedlock

Once pregnancy occurred, the participants faced various reactions from their surroundings. Most of them experienced negative responses from family members, such as anger, disappointment, and rejection, even to the point of estrangement or being expelled from home. Partners often avoided responsibility, both emotionally and financially. In addition, the broader social environment reinforced negative stigma through judgment and exclusion. These circumstances intensified the participants' psychological distress, manifested in emotional reactions such as shock, fear, anxiety, sadness, and prolonged stress. They also experienced inner conflict,

feelings of shame, and decreased self-esteem due to changes in social relationships and unwanted bodily conditions.

Nevertheless, the process was not entirely negative. Some participants experienced positive changes in their environment's attitudes over time. Support gradually emerged from the nuclear family—especially from mothers—as well as from figures such as grandmothers, uncles, and cousins who offered acceptance and care. Some also received support from friends or neighbors who were willing to listen and provide emotional encouragement. These shifts in environmental attitudes became essential elements in helping the participants' psychological recovery and rebuilding their hope for the future.

This dynamic created a strong internal conflict: the struggle between painful negative experiences and the presence of constructive external support. From this conflict arose an inner drive to search for meaning in their experiences. The participants began to show a will to improve themselves and no longer viewed pregnancy merely as a disgrace, but as a life event that could be understood in a broader sense. This reflects the emergence of the *will to meaning*—the drive to find meaning in suffering and to redirect one's life toward a better path.

In the following stage, the participants began to transform their negative experiences into meaningful and positive ones. They showed efforts to accept the reality of pregnancy, take responsibility for their condition, and mend relationships with family members. Some were motivated to continue their education, develop economic independence, and plan for a future with the child they were expecting. This experience also fostered the growth of spirituality, which strengthened their inner resilience and helped them live their lives with greater calm and hope.

The entire meaning-making process illustrates how adolescents experiencing out-of-wedlock pregnancy are not merely trapped in traumatic experiences, but are capable of constructing meaning through their attitudes, decisions, and self-developed values. This meaning-making process is reflected in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, particularly through the aspects of *will to meaning* (the will to find meaning), *freedom of will* (the freedom to choose one's attitude), and the three sources of values: *attitudinal value* (the value of one's attitude toward suffering), *creative value* (the value of action or contribution), and *experiential value* (the value derived from experiences, including relationships and spirituality). Ultimately, the participants not only discovered inner strength, but also came to view pregnancy as part of the process of self-formation and a meaningful life journey.

Discussion

This study aims to explore the meaning-making process of negative experiences among adolescent girls who experienced pregnancy out of wedlock. For the participants, such pregnancies were emotionally, socially, and even existentially disruptive events. The findings reveal that participants experienced immense pressure upon discovering their pregnancy, particularly due to psychological and social unpreparedness. Pregnancy out of wedlock emerged as a profound source of suffering, marked by shame, alienation, and fear of the future (Damayanti et al., 2022). At the initial stage, pregnancy was not perceived positively but rather regarded as a life burden threatening social relationships, education, and family support.

The factors leading to such pregnancies are highly complex, involving an interplay between external and internal influences. Externally, adolescents often face pressure from partners (Umaroh, Kusumawati & Kasjono, 2017), peer influence (Wijaya & Sabilu, 2022), as well as coercion or emotional manipulation (Sitorus, 2020; Suazini & Humaeroh, 2020). A social environment that treats sexuality as taboo exacerbates the situation, leaving adolescents without safe spaces to understand the risks of sexual relationships (Yulianingsih & Masykur, 2019; Maesaroh, Sunarti & Muflikhati, 2019). Furthermore, exploitation by older partners constitutes another serious factor that heightens

adolescent vulnerability (Iriyanti, Suryawati, & Nugraheni, 2018; Shahrudin, Mansor, Madon, & Hamsan, 2018; Alifah, Apsari & Taftazani, 2022).

Internally, several factors further increase the risk of unmarried pregnancy. Adolescents often display low self-control (Hidayah, 2020), emotional dependency on partners, and distorted perceptions of love. Low self-esteem and a lack of knowledge about sexuality are also major contributing factors (Alifah, Apsari & Taftazani, 2022; Oktaria, Suryati & Puspita Dewi, 2024). Those who naively interpret love tend to agree to sexual relations as a way to maintain their relationships (Afrita & Yusri, 2022; Umaroh, Kusumawati & Kasjono, 2017). Emotional dependency and fear of social sanctions further aggravate adolescents' psychological conditions, as highlighted in studies by Pertiwi & Wardani (2019), Hidayah (2020), and Mediastuti & Revika (2019).

The initial reactions expressed by participants upon discovering their pregnancies included shock, fear, sadness, and a sense of devastation (Samawati & Nurchayati, 2021). None of them initially perceived the pregnancy positively. They experienced a loss of life direction, rejection from families and partners, and social exclusion from their communities, schools, and religious groups. These findings align with studies by Wulandari, Fihastutik, & Arifianto (2019), as well as Sahertian & Huwae (2023), which highlight the psychological and social consequences of stigma against pregnant adolescents. In this context, Frankl's (1962) concept of existential alienation becomes evident—suffering without meaning can destroy an individual's will to live.

Over time, participants' social environments showed dynamic changes. Families that initially rejected them gradually began to accept both the adolescents and their unborn children. Emotional and financial support from mothers, siblings, and even fathers began to emerge. Friends who had previously distanced themselves reconnected, and the broader community started to provide space for acceptance (Muthelo et al., 2024; Ntshayintshayi, Sehularo, Mokgaola, & Sepeng, 2022). This situation created an inner conflict for adolescents between the negative experiences of early pregnancy and the external support that slowly grew. Feelings of shame, fear, and loss of future still lingered, but acceptance from close relations rekindled hope and a sense of meaning. This acceptance became a crucial turning point in the meaning-making process, as individuals realized they were no longer alone. Damayanti et al. (2022) and Puasa & Rahayu (2024) emphasized that social support is essential for the psychological recovery of pregnant adolescents.

This internal conflict between suffering and external support ultimately gave rise to the will to meaning, serving as the foundation for adolescents' self-transformation. From Frankl's (1962) perspective on meaning in life, suffering is not inherently meaningful; it requires reflection, value internalization, and attitudinal change to gain meaning. When adolescents began reflecting on their experiences, the process of searching for meaning was set in motion. This marked a shift from perceiving themselves as victims of circumstance to becoming active agents who determine the meaning of their own life experiences.

Furthermore, adolescents demonstrated freedom of will in choosing their attitudes toward suffering. Although they could not change the reality of their pregnancy, they chose to take responsibility for their unborn child and their future. They began to reconcile with themselves, end unhealthy relationships, and strive to build a better future. Such choices reflect attitudinal values, including courage, resilience, and the awareness that life retains its worth even in difficult circumstances.

The process of meaning creation was also evident in participants' concrete actions. They decided to continue their education, sought economic independence, and regarded their unborn children as motivation to become better individuals. These choices represent the realization of creative values, meaning-making through personal responsibility and contribution. Along this process, adolescents' self-concepts transformed—from shame and self-deprecation to resilience, reflection, and the pursuit of new life goals.

Additionally, spirituality played a significant role in the meaning-making process. Several participants stated that prayer provided them with peace, illustrating how spirituality became a source of comfort and hope for rebuilding their lives. This finding aligns with Sopaheluwakan & Huwae (2022), who demonstrated that spirituality functions as an essential psychological resource for coping with life challenges.

In conclusion, this study shows that the meaning-making process among unmarried pregnant adolescents is gradual and dynamic. Beginning with negative experiences and rejection, they move toward a search for meaning and eventually succeed in creating meaning that provides strength for survival and growth. This process is influenced by the interaction between internal factors, external support, and personal values. Each participant displayed unique forms of meaning-making, yet all showed efforts to rise, improve themselves, and establish new meanings that give direction to life. The three aspects of meaning in life according to Frankl—will to meaning, freedom of will, and creative values—are clearly reflected in participants' life journeys. A key finding of this study is that family support plays a pivotal role in accelerating psychological recovery and the creation of new life meaning. Amid suffering, supportive families provide a safe haven that offers security, acceptance, and hope.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis and field findings, the author concludes that the process of making meaning from negative experiences among adolescents who experience pregnancy out of wedlock occurs gradually, dynamically, and is influenced by the interaction between internal and external factors. In the early stage, pregnancy is perceived as a highly distressing event, evoking feelings of shame, fear, and alienation due to rejection from family, partners, and the broader social environment. However, over time, dynamics within the social environment—particularly acceptance and support from family and peers—create space for adolescents to reframe and reflect on their experiences. Family support emerges as a crucial factor in this meaning-making process. Families that offer acceptance, provide emotional and financial support, and foster a safe and nonjudgmental environment help adolescents overcome psychological crises and begin to reconstruct a sense of meaning in life. The internal conflict between past suffering and the presence of external support encourages the emergence of a will to find meaning from the experience (will to meaning). This meaning-making process is reflected in the development of a sense of responsibility toward the pregnancy, the aspiration to continue education, the pursuit of economic independence, and the effort to build healthier relationships—manifestations of freedom of will and the creation of life's meaning through actions (creative values). Thus, adolescents who initially perceived the pregnancy as a negative experience are able to undergo self-transformation and reinterpret the pregnancy as part of their life growth process rather than solely as suffering.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors accept and agree to the final version of this article.

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