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Research Article

The Effect of Abandonment Schema on the Search for Meaning in Life: The Mediating Role of Borderline Personality Organization Among Instagram Users

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Abstract

***Aim*:** Instagram usage has grown substantially in recent years; thus, the psychological well-being of individuals who use this platform has been affected. The present study aimed to explore the effect of the abandonment/instability schema on the search for meaning in life, with the mediating role of borderline personality organization among active Instagram users.

Methods: This study applied a descriptive-correlational design using structural equation modeling. The target population consisted of active Instagram users, from whom a convenience sample of 208 participants was selected. The tools included the Short Form of the Personality Organization Questionnaire (Yamada et al., 2022), the Abandonment/Instability Schema Scale (Young, 1998), and the Meaning in Life Quest Scale (Steger, 2006). Data were analyzed using SPSS-26 and Mplus-7.

Results: The results indicated that only the effect of the abandonment/instability schema on borderline personality organization was significant (β=0.91, p<0.0001). Nevertheless, the effects of the abandonment/instability schema on the search for meaning in life (β=-0.37, p=0.33) and borderline personality organization on the search for meaning in life (β=0.58, p=0.14) were not significant.

Conclusion: The findings highlighted the potential utility of schema therapy in alleviating the development of borderline personality traits or related issues. However, lack of significant effects on the search for meaning in life emphasized the need for future research to explore other potential variables associated with meaning in life.

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1. Introduction

Today, 40% of the world's population has access to the internet, which has resulted in increased smartphone use. This has caused internet addiction to affect about 2% of the adult population (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2022). Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms, with an estimated 2 billion active users each month who spend an average of 53 minutes daily using the app. Most Instagram users are under 35 years old. The high usage statistics of this app and its potential influence on other aspects of life as well as distraction from important life areas (Roberts & David, 2023), make attention to its users significant. Nimbalkar et al. (2025) found that heightened Instagram use is associated with greater depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults., McGettrick et al. (2025) similarly reported adverse effects of Instagram use on adults' self-esteem. Fam and Mannikko (2025), in turn, observed that extensive use of social media platforms such as Instagram may heighten feelings of loneliness.

Given how heavily Instagram is used and the harm it appears to cause, young adults may turn to the platform in search of identity, connection, purpose, and meaning in life. Meaning in life is a concept that has no single definition since individuals' perspectives on achieving meaning in life differ, for which there is no universal meaning. Rather, each individual needs to find meaning for themselves. Frankl says there is an innate tendency in humans to find meaning, and if humans do not achieve it, they experience psychological distress (Steger et al., 2006). Indeed, meaning in life, defined as being valuable, meaningful, and purposeful, is an important factor in individuals' mental health; according to Frankl, it involves personal responsibility and contributes to individuals' health as well as longevity, making it significant. As such, individuals have either achieved meaning in life, referred to as the presence of meaning, or are in the process of searching for meaning in life, described as the search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006).

Given the importance of the search for meaning for mental health, it becomes necessary to identify the variables associated with this construct. Early maladaptive schemas are among the probable variables involved, regarded as filters through which individuals interpret and predict their environment. These schemas form based upon negative early environmental experiences, such as parental interaction styles and child temperament, while also influencing how individuals cope with events and people (Bar et al., 2023). Young, as the originator of this concept, defines schemas as broad, persistent patterns of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations that determine how individuals view themselves as well as their relationships with others (Bishap et al., 2021). Because schemas operate at the deepest cognitive level, it seems plausible that the search for meaning is linked to early maladaptive schemas. Orang et al. (2017), more directly, demonstrated that several early maladaptive schemas are positively related to the search for meaning in life, suggesting that such schemas may deprive individuals of a genuine sense of meaning. Moradian et al. (2022) further confirmed a significant negative effect of early maladaptive schemas on meaning in life. It has also been indicated that schemas can predispose individuals to internet addiction, where one of the schemas in this area is the abandonment/instability schema, which includes five schemas: emotional deprivation, abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, social isolation/alienation, and defectiveness/shame (Ostovar et al., 2021). This schema is examined here in relation to

the search for meaning, forming the first aim of the present study, given its ties to identity and to how people find meaning in their lives. Those with an abandonment schema often look to others for approval and reassurance about who they are, what they want, and whether their life has meaning — and Instagram, as a platform, seems well positioned to offer exactly that (Collins and Grant, 2025; Bontempo et al., 2026). Its entire structure rests on likes, public approval, and social validation, which may make it a particularly potent trigger for the abandonment/instability schema: users may compulsively chase reassurance as a way of managing a deep-seated fear of rejection, using the platform to shore up their sense of identity and worth (Collins & Grant, 2025; & Männikkö, 2025). Yet no study so far has looked directly at this schema among Instagram users specifically, and that gap is what the present study sets out to address.

Beyond schemas, personality itself has also been shown to play a significant role among Instagram users. One study of 404 Instagram users indicated that personality influences individuals' behaviors on Instagram, including liking, commenting, etc., and predicts their virtual interactions (Keep et al., 2017). Personality is a significant yet complex concept. Thus, there are different perspectives on defining personality (Fadda et al., 2021). In trait theory, personality is defined as a relatively stable set of characteristics as well as styles that distinguish one person from another. Personality is also described as a set of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions that accompany an individual over the long term rather than situationally (Bergner, 2020). In a newer definitions and classifications from the psychodynamic perspective, Kernberg defines personality as personality organization, which is classified into three main categories. One of these categories is borderline personality organization, which can cause significant harm to individuals. Kernberg defines this personality organization based upon defenses, identity confusion, and reality testing (Yamada et al., 2022), which may negatively affect the meanings individuals make of themselves and their lives (Yiu et al., 2020). Hence, the role of borderline personality organization in inducing the search for meaning is considered as a second aim of the present study.

Meanwhile, since personality and disorders lie on a spectrum, early maladaptive schemas are expected to be related to personality disorders. When these schemas are activated, they lead to many cognitive and behavioral problems which can also include personality components (Ostovar et al., 2021). In this respect, the study by Bilge and Balaban (2021) noted that early maladaptive schemas predict personality disorders. Another study found that schema modes can predict personality disorders in individuals (Yakin et al., 2020), with the results of another study noting that schema therapy is effective in improving borderline personality in individuals (Arntz et al., 2022). Since in borderline personality organization, based upon its three components, individuals experience a kind of identity confusion and concurrently have difficulty in realistic evaluation of themselves, relationships, and events, and apply maladaptive defenses when facing problems (, Soroko & Górska., 2023), and considering the abandonment/instability schemas whose core is a deep feeling of being left out by others (Pilkington et al., 2024), those with these schemas may also experience identity confusion, unrealistic evaluation, and immature defenses, whereby these schemas may pave the way for the formation of this personality organization. Thus, since the relationship between these two variables

has not been appraised in previous studies, the present study, as one of its objectives, inspects the impact of the abandonment/instability schema on borderline personality organization. It has also been found that borderline personality disorder can be associated with problems considering the presence of meaning in life, and in the relationship between them, several variables can mediate this connection (Yiu et al., 2020). Hence, examining meaning in life and the influence of personality and schemas on it among Instagram users, who are engaged in a virtual activity to gain information and connect with others, can also be of importance. Meanwhile, there is a noticeable research gap in this area.

The theoretical basis for the proposed mediation model rests on three converging lines of evidence. Abandonment/instability schema, to start, has been shown to predict borderline personality organization — the two share identity confusion and maladaptive defenses as core features (Yakin et al., 2020; Bilge and Balaban, 2021; Arntz et al., 2022). Borderline personality organization, meanwhile, carries its own well-documented link to chronic emptiness and to trouble finding meaning in life (Yiu et al., 2020; Jańczak, Soroko & Górska, 2023). And the abandonment schema on its own may do damage here too: by feeding deep feelings of rejection and emotional deprivation, it can directly get in the way of the search for meaning (Orang et al., 2017; Moradian et al., 2022; Pilkington et al., 2024). Put these three pieces together, and a clear picture emerges — borderline personality organization looks like the mechanism through which the abandonment schema affects the search for meaning in life among Instagram users. Finally, since the research literature supports the examination of meaning in life as an influential element in mental health and the role of personality and schemas in it, and as these variables have not been studied within a model with the mediating role of personality in the relationship between schemas and meaning in life, as well as given the significance of studying Instagram users because of their large numbers and their risk of mental health problems, the present study aims to determine what influence the abandonment/instability schema has on meaning in life with the mediating role of borderline personality organization in Instagram users.

The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

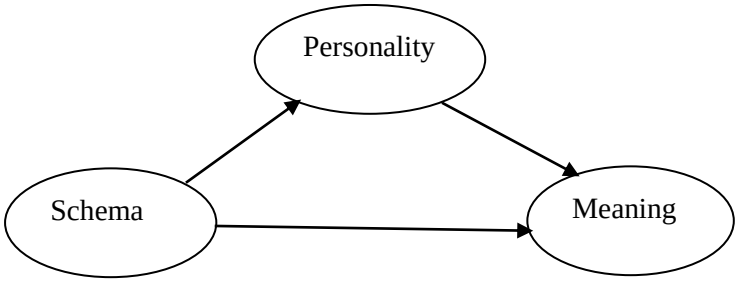


Figure 1. Conceptual model

2. Objectives

The present study pursues four objectives:

A) the effect of the abandonment/instability schema on borderline personality organization

B) the influence of the abandonment/instability schema on the search for meaning in life

C) the effect of borderline personality organization on the search for meaning in life

D) the effect of the abandonment/instability schema on the search for meaning in life with the mediator role of borderline personality organization

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and procedure

The present study is a descriptive-correlational research based upon structural equation modeling (SEM). The target population consisted of Instagram users, from whom 208 participants were selected through non-random convenience sampling. This sample size was considered adequate, given that a minimum of 200 participants has been recommended for models of moderate complexity (Kline, 2016). Questionnaires were prepared online, and their links were distributed via Instagram direct messages by the researchers and several of their acquaintances to their respective contacts. Before accessing the questionnaire link, explanations were given about the inclusion criteria required for participation in the study, whereby eligible individuals proceeded to complete the questionnaires. The inclusion criteria included age 20 to 30 years, posting stories at least three times a week or making at least one post per month. The exclusion criteria were incomplete questionnaires (with more than 10% missing responses) and participants who provided random responses (identified through attention check items embedded within the questionnaire). The participants had a mean age of 24.57 years (SD = 4.12), with women constituting the majority (75.4%, n = 156) compared to men (24.6%, n = 51). Marital status distribution indicated that 50.7% (n = 105) were single without a romantic relationship, 28.5% (n = 59) were single with a romantic relationship, 17.9% (n = 37) were married without extramarital relationships, and 2.9% (n = 6) were married with extramarital relationships. Considering educational attainment, 14% (n = 29) held a high school diploma, 7.7% (n = 16) had an associate degree, 54.6% (n = 113) possessed a bachelor's degree, 19.3% (n = 40) held a master's degree, and 4.3% (n = 9) had earned a PhD.

3.2. Research Tools

The study applied four questionnaires to measure the variables:

3.2.1. Demographic Information Questionnaire

It captured age, gender, marital status, and education level.

3.2.2. Personality Organization Questionnaire (IPO) – Short Form:

Developed by Yamada, Kataoka, and Kitamura (2022), this 9-item questionnaire was confirmed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to have a three-factor structure. Each factor consists of 3 items: Primitive defenses, Identity diffusion, and Reality testing. The questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never true (0) to Always true (4). Confirmatory factor analysis presented good model fit (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.056, χ^2/df = 1.76). For validity, the three factors revealed correlations of 0.45,

0.41, and 0.36 with depression and -0.20, -0.22, and -0.17 with resilience, respectively. The factors also correlated strongly (0.83, 0.85, 0.85) with the long form of the IPO (Yamada et al., 2022). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha for these factors was 0.52, 0.65, and 0.74, respectively. AVE values for the three components were 0.26, 0.37, and 0.44, respectively. Finally, the HTMT values between the component pairs were 0.52, 0.48, and 0.51.

3.2.3. Abandonment/Instability Schema Questionnaire:

Derived from Young's 75-item Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ) (Young, 1998), this study utilized only the 25 items linked to the abandonment/instability domain, covering five subscales as Emotional deprivation, Abandonment/instability, Mistrust/abuse, Social isolation/alienation, and Defectiveness/shame. Each subscale contains 5 items, rated on a 6-point Likert scale (Completely untrue of me [1] to Describe me perfectly [6]). Confirmatory factor analysis supported the 5-factor model (RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.90) (Shute et al., 2019). For validity, this questionnaire correlated strongly (0.80) with the long form of the YSQ (Ebrahimi et al., 2023), and the five factors revealed correlations of 0.40, 0.39, 0.43, 0.53, and 0.46 with the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (Ghiasi et al., 2011). In this study, Cronbach's alpha values were 0.89, 0.84, 0.81, 0.79, and 0.84, respectively. AVE values were 0.62, 0.53, 0.49, 0.42, and 0.51, respectively. Further, HTMT values between the component pairs ranged from 0.68 to 0.79.

3.2.4. Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ):

Developed by Steger (2006), this 10-item scale appraises the Presence of meaning (5 items) and the Search for meaning (5 items) dimensions. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly agree [1] to Strongly disagree [5]). Concurrent validity with cognitive motivation was 0.19 (Kadhim, 2019). The presence of meaning correlated negatively with depression (-0.48), whereas the search for meaning correlated positively (0.36). Model fit indices were excellent (GFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.09, CFI = 0.93), with Cronbach's alpha values being 0.82 and 0.87 (Steger et al., 2006). In the Iranian validation study (Mesrabadi, Jafarian, & Ostovar, 2013), confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the two-factor structure (GFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.09). This study employed only the search for meaning subscale ($\alpha = 0.88$). AVE for this questionnaire was 0.66.

3.3. Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants' anonymity was maintained, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All data were kept confidential and employed solely for research purposes, and no identifying information was included in the final report.

3.4. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Following data collection, 208 responses were analyzed. Data were preprocessed in SPSS-26 for suitability, with descriptive statistics computed. Confirmatory factor analysis and hypothesis testing were conducted in MPLUS.

4. Results

The data were initially preprocessed in SPSS to ensure their suitability for analysis. Along this phase, one participant was excluded owing to random responding, while no duplicated, outlier, or missing data were identified. Thus, the final sample comprised 207 participants who were included in the subsequent analyses.

Descriptive statistics for the primary variables and their respective subscales are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive information of variables

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
			Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Personality	11.53	5.74	.45	.16	.28	.33
Personality1	5.02	2.19	-.14	.16	.06	.33
Personality2	4.19	2.52	.31	.16	-.18	.33
Personality3	2.31	2.52	1.21	.16	1.40	.33
Schema1	13.65	7.05	.69	.16	-.461	.33
Schema2	14.02	6.05	.68	.16	-.180	.33
Schema3	13.38	5.76	.73	.16	.191	.33
Schema4	11.43	4.96	.80	.16	.281	.33
Schema5	8.78	4.47	1.62	.16	2.942	.33
Meaning	30.23	5.25	-1.84	.16	4.49	.33

Note. The means and standard deviations for each variable and their subscales are outlined in this table. The skewness and kurtosis values reported in the table reveal that the variables follow a normal distribution, supporting the usage of covariance-based software such as MPLUS for analysis.

Correlations of variables are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations of variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	1										
2	.80**	1									
3	.82**	.55**	1								
4	.76**	.41**	.37**	1							
5	.72**	.60**	.61**	.51**	1						
6	.45**	.37**	.43**	.26**	.76**	1					
7	.56**	.49**	.48**	.37**	.78**	.43**	1				
8	.68**	.51**	.58**	.52**	.81**	.44**	.61**	1			
9	.61**	.51**	.48**	.47**	.77**	.46**	.42**	.58**	1		
10	.57**	.50**	.44**	.43**	.84**	.54**	.63**	.59**	.66**	1	
11	.19**	.13	.16*	.15*	.16*	.11	.11	.20**	.12	.08	1

Note 1. borderline personality organization, 2. Primitive defenses, 3. Identity diffusion, 4. Reality testing, 5. abandonment/instability schema, 6. Emotional deprivation, 7. Abandonment/instability, 8. Mistrust/abuse, 9. Social isolation/alienation, 10. Defectiveness/shame, 11. Search for meaning in life

Table 2 lays out the picture: abandonment/instability schema correlated positively with both borderline personality organization ($p<.01$) and the search for meaning ($p<.05$), and personality organization itself correlated positively with the search for meaning as well

(p<.01). These correlations, taken together, justified moving forward with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

In MPLUS, CFA was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. The initial model yielded the following fit indices: χ^2/df = 1.76, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.87, TLI = 0.87, and SRMR = 0.07. For improving model fit, validity, and reliability, a modified model was developed based on modification indices suggested by the software. The revised model indicated improved fit indices: χ^2/df = 1.59, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, and SRMR = 0.06, indicating acceptable model fit.

Composite reliability values were calculated to ascertained the internal consistency of the constructs. For borderline personality organization and its three subscales, the values were 0.87, 0.64, 0.75, and 0.77, respectively. For the abandonment/instability schema and its five subtypes, the values were 0.87, 0.87, 0.81, 0.81, 0.72, and 0.81. The search for meaning in life subscale presented a composite reliability of 0.87. These values, along with the Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported in the Methods section, confirm that the variables offer acceptable reliability.

Following these analyses, the structural model was inspected to test the study's hypotheses. The findings are presented in Figure 1 and Table 2, illustrating the path coefficients and significance levels for the proposed relationships among the variables.

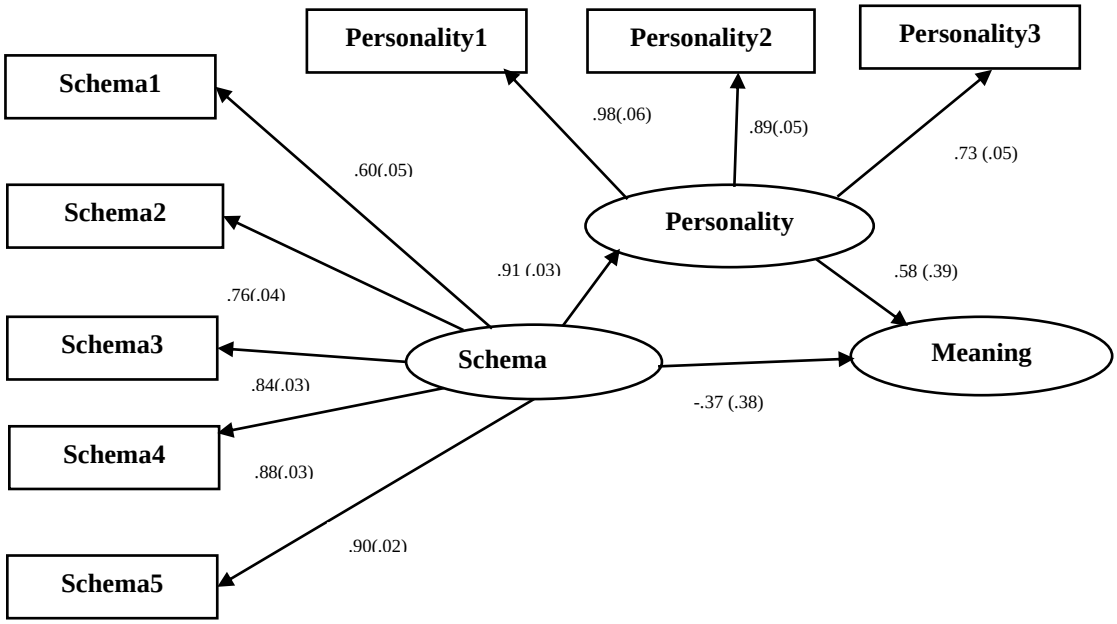


Figure 2. Structural equation model for hypothesis testing

Note. Path diagram of the structural equation model testing relationships between schemas, personality factors, and search for meaning. Standardized coefficients are indicated with standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3. Examination of hypotheses through structural equation modelling

Assumptions	Estimate	S.E.	Est./S.E.	P value
Shema…..>Personality	0.91	0.03	24.25	0.000
Personality…..>Meaning	0.58	0.39	1.46	0.14
Schema……>Meaning	-0.37	0.38	-0.95	0.33

Based on Figure 2 and Table 3, only the hypothesis considering the impact of abandonment schema on borderline personality organization was confirmed (β = 0.91, p < .0001). The other two hypotheses - the influence of borderline personality organization on meaning in life search (β = 0.58, p = 0.14) and the effect of abandonment schema on meaning in life search (β = -0.37, p = 0.33) - were not supported.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) for borderline personality organization was 0.83, indicating that 83% of the variance in borderline personality organization is explained by the suggesting schema. This strong predictive power is in line with the high beta value (β = 0.91), demonstrating that the abandonment schema has a substantial effect on borderline personality organization. In contrast, the R^2 for meaning in life was only 0.07, reflecting that merely 7% of the variance in meaning in life is accounted for by these two variables (borderline personality organization and abandonment schema). This finding accords with the non-significant effects of these variables on meaning in life.

Mediation analysis could not be performed since neither the direct path from abandonment schema to meaning in life search nor the indirect path through borderline personality organization was significant (both p-values > 0.05). The results of the mediation analysis is reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Indirect effect of schema on meaning with the mediator role of personality

Assumptions	Estimate	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	P value
Shema.....>Personality.....>Meaning	.53	(-.18, 1.24)	>.05

5. Discussion

The present study examined the impact of the abandonment/instability schema on the search for meaning in life, with borderline personality organization (BPO) as a mediator, among active Instagram users.

The results indicated a robust predictive relationship between the abandonment schema and BPO (β = 0.91, p < .0001, R^2 = 0.83), accounting for 83% of the variance in primitive defenses, identity diffusion, and reality-testing impairments. This finding is in line with prior research by Bilge and Balaban (2021) and Yakin et al. (2020), reinforcing the role of maladaptive schemas in personality pathology. Early maladaptive schemas are conceptualized as core cognitive–emotional filters through which individuals interpret themselves as well as their relationships (Bar et al., 2023). When abandonment-related schemas dominate this filtering process, they might systematically bias interpersonal evaluations, thereby reinforcing the defensive and identity-related features central to borderline personality organization. Specifically, schemas such as emotional deprivation, abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, social isolation/alienation, and defectiveness/ shame significantly affected psychological functioning, with abandonment/instability emerging as the most prominent predictor. According to Kernberg (1967), early unstable relationships can leave lasting impacts on how a person understands themselves. In borderline personality organization, this often emerges as a confused sense of identity, and people may rely on fundamental ways to cope when things get challenging (Yamada et al., 2022). According to, abandonment-related schemas develop slowly over time, shaped by repeated experiences where emotional needs are not fulfilled or losses are strongly felt.

One can see how these experiences gradually affect not only how someone handles their emotions, but also how they view themselves. Abandonment and instability seem not to be just side effects—they really shape the way borderline personality organization develops, guiding how individuals relate to themselves and others (Bishap et al., 2021). This may help explain why early relational difficulties have such a lasting influence on both identity and coping patterns. Given that Instagram users spend an average of 53 minutes daily on the platform (Roberts & David, 2023), it's worth considering what that much repeated exposure to likes, comments, and other social feedback might do over time. Each moment of feedback could work as a kind of trigger—quietly reactivating abandonment-related schemas and, bit by bit, reinforcing the identity confusion and primitive defenses that sit at the center of BPO (Yamada et al., 2022). None of this happens in isolation, either. Instagram use has already been linked to depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, and loneliness (Nimbalkar et al., 2025; Woodward et al., 2025; Fam & Männikkö, 2025)—all of which may act as contextual amplifiers of abandonment-related schema activation.

Contrary to expectations, neither the abandonment schema nor BPO significantly predicted the search for meaning in life ($R^2 = 0.07$). As an interpretation, one can consider the difference between searching for meaning in life and actually feeling that life has meaning (Steger et al., 2006). Research suggests that people with borderline personality organization often feel a deep, ongoing emptiness, which appears to affect their sense of having meaning more than their drive to look for it (Yiu et al., 2022). In other words, schemas tied to abandonment might not stop someone from seeking meaning, rather they could make it harder for that meaning to really take hold once they find it. This finding does not concur with studies by Huang et al. (2020) and Yiu et al. (2020), which emphasized the role of personality in meaning formation. Sample and measurement differences likely explain at least some part of these inconsistencies. Huang et al. (2020) and Yiu et al. (2020) both examine general population samples. Active Instagram users are a distinct population — the one the present study examined — whose experience of meaning may be shaped by online, platform-specific processes that standard meaning in life measures were never designed to detect (Roberts & David, 2023). Although previous studies have indicated that early maladaptive schemas are negatively linked to meaning in life (Moradian et al., 2022) and positively correlated with meaning-seeking tendencies (Orang et al., 2017), these effects may vary depending on contextual factors. The search for meaning may function as a compensatory strategy in digital spaces like Instagram, one that stays relatively independent of underlying personality pathology. Instagram exposes users to continuous social feedback and offers opportunities for identity performance — this can reactivate abandonment-related fears while also providing compensatory meaning through social connection (Ostovar et al., 2021; Yiu et al., 2022). This allows the search for meaning to continue despite underlying schema-driven deficits (Roberts & David, 2023). It is also possible that some users use meaning-seeking itself as an adaptive coping strategy (Bar et al., 2023), which may further mask deficits in this domain. The strong path coefficient linking schemas and personality organization, in turn, suggests a considerable degree of conceptual overlap between the two constructs. This aligns with Young's framework, in which schemas are foundational to personality development rather than being separate constructs (Bishap et al., 2021; Ostovar et al., 2021). The collinearity between these

variables is therefore theoretically expected rather than a methodological artifact, since schemas and borderline personality organization share core features — identity confusion, maladaptive defenses, and distorted relational appraisals (Jańczak, Soroko & Górska, 2023). Given this overlap, the independent contribution of personality organization to meaning in life may have been statistically obscured, thereby explaining the non-significant mediation. These findings also carry theoretical implications for schema theory. Young's model positions early maladaptive schemas as pervasive determinants of psychological functioning (Bishap et al., 2021; Ostovar et al., 2021). However, the current results suggest that the search for meaning may retain relative autonomy from schema influence in digital contexts (Roberts & David, 2023). This points to a more nuanced reading of schema theory, one in which the interplay between dispositional vulnerabilities and contextual factors shapes existential processes. This reading fits with evidence that the search for meaning can operate as a self-regulatory strategy independent of underlying psychopathology (Bar et al., 2023; Yiu et al., 2022).

The mediation analysis puts these findings in context. Early maladaptive schemas significantly predicted personality organization ($\beta=0.91$, $p<.0001$), consistent with theoretical accounts that link schema formation to personality structure (Bar et al., 2023; Bilge & Balaban, 2021). Personality organization's mediating role between schemas and meaning in life, however, wasn't supported ($\beta=-0.022$, 95% CI [-0.965, 0.001]). Bivariate correlations did show significant links — both between the abandonment schema and the search for meaning, and between personality organization and the search for meaning — but neither held up once entered into the structural model, likely because of the shared variance between schema and personality organization discussed above. Larger samples in future work may help tease apart what each construct contributes on its own.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the reliance on convenience sampling, though entailed by recruitment challenges, may limit the generalizability of findings. Further, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. In addition, the exclusive focus on the abandonment schema domain leaves open questions about the role of other schemas. Ultimately, the measurement of meaning in life within digital environments may require further refinement to capture platform-specific nuances.

7. Future Direction

The strong association between abandonment schema and BPO highlights the potential efficacy of schema therapy for this population. Schema therapy’s integrative approach, combining cognitive, behavioral, psychodynamic, and experiential techniques (Bar et al., 2023), is particularly suited to address the multifaceted nature of personality as defined by Bergner (2020). Clinicians working with Instagram users should prioritize interventions targeting abandonment/instability schemas, together with primitive defenses, given their heightened clinical relevance. Further, integrating psychoeducation about schema influences into digital mental health initiatives could enhance therapeutic outcomes for at-risk individuals. This implication is consistent with evidence demonstrating that schema therapy effectively mitigates borderline personality features by targeting early maladaptive

schemas and schema modes (Arntz et al., 2022). Since abandonment/instability schemas have also been linked to vulnerability to internet addiction (Ostovar et al., 2021), addressing these schemas may be especially relevant for psychologically at-risk Instagram users.

Future studies should explore qualitative differences in how Instagram users construct meaning compared to non-users. Longitudinal designs could clarify the temporal dynamics between schema activation, personality development, and existential well-being. Further, research should examine other personality constructs, such as narcissistic traits, in relation to meaning-seeking behaviors. Culturally adapted schema measures tailored to digital-native populations as well as clinical trials testing modified schema therapy protocols for social media users are also warranted.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the findings aligned with theoretical models that locate early maladaptive schemas at the core of personality organization while suggesting that existential processes, such as meaning-seeking, may function through partially distinct mechanisms. This study made two key contributions. First, it establishes the abandonment schema as a potent predictor of BPO features among Instagram users, supporting schema therapy as a viable intervention. Furthermore, it highlights the need for alternative theoretical frameworks to understand meaning-seeking in digital environments. While schema-focused interventions present promise for mitigating personality pathology, the existential dimensions of social media usage demand innovative approaches that account for the unique phenomenology of algorithmically mediated interactions. Researchers and clinicians should consider both transdiagnostic mechanisms as well as the distinct ways digital platforms shape identity and purpose.

9. Author Contributions

The first author was responsible for drafting the manuscript and conducting the statistical analyses. The second author contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study and performed the translation tasks. The third author developed the questionnaires and managed their distribution as well as data collection. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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11. Conflicts of interest

No conflicting interest.

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