



RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Unveiling How Life Meaning Affects College Students' Career Adaptability: The Role of Professional Identity

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**ABSTRACT**

Career adaptability is an individual's psychological and behavioral coping ability in the face of career changes and challenges, which can help individuals better cope with these challenges and achieve their personal career goals. This study aims to explore the influence of life meaning and professional identity on college students' career adaptability in tourism management in Guangxi universities in China. This study conducted a questionnaire survey on college students and collected a total of 435 valid questionnaires. It was found that there were significant differences in the performance of life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability by gender and grade level. In addition, life meaning can increase professional identity, and professional identity can also enhance college students' career adaptability, and professional identity has a mediating role between life meaning and career adaptability.

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### INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly changing social environment, individuals face many challenges in their career development. Therefore, enhancing career adaptability to cope with career challenges is a key aspect (Liu et al., 2023). Career adaptability is considered a resource in career constructs and is crucial for individuals' future career development (Zeng et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2023). In recent years, market changes have increased the need for individuals' career adaptability so that organizations can quickly deal with the problems caused by environmental changes (Hamzah et al., 2021). As an important part of the future labor market, the level of career adaptability of college students is directly related to individual career development and the improvement of the overall talent quality of society. Therefore, cultivating and improving college students' career adaptability is a difficult problem that colleges and universities need to solve.

In the current employment situation, college students majoring in tourism management face the challenges of fierce competition in the industry and high employment pressure (Grobelna & Marciszewska, 2016). Having strong career adaptability can help college students better cope with these challenges and achieve their personal career goals (Salim et al., 2023). However, career adaptability does not develop overnight; it is influenced by a variety of factors. Past studies have explored the influencing factors of career adaptability, such as an individual's career interest, career values, social support, etc., but the mechanism of the influence of life meaning on career adaptability has not yet been thoroughly explored (Ginevra et al., 2018; Wang & Fu, 2015; Ye, 2015). The perception of one's own life meaning and goals can profoundly affect their career decision-making

and development, but systematic analysis in this area is still lacking. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap in this area by exploring the impact of life meaning on career adaptability.

In order to elaborate the relationship between life meaning and career adaptability, the theoretical framework proposed by Savickas and Profeli (2012) is drawn upon. Career construct theory suggests that an individual's career development is constructed in the interaction of social structures and individual experiences (Savickas & Profeli, 2012). Life meaning, as an intrinsic driver of an individual's career development, not only influences his or her career choice, but also shapes his or her career goals and behavioral patterns (Savickas, 2005). It not only helps college students to clarify their self-concept, career interests, values, and strengths and weaknesses, as well as their understanding and career orientation in the tourism industry, but also helps to clarify their career goals and pursuits, and reduces their confusion and perplexity in their employment choices (Zhang et al., 2022).

In addition, professional identity, as an individual's understanding and acceptance of occupational roles, is an important bridge that connects an individual's internal values with the external occupational world. Professional identity is an individual's awareness of the career he or she is going to engage in and the prospect of career development, which influences the individual's attitude toward the career (Zhang et al., 2017). Professional identity enhances the clarity and persistence of individuals' career goals, for example, college students learn about their interests, abilities, values, etc., in order to clarify their orientation and development direction in the tourism industry. Meanwhile, professional identity also enhances college students' initiative and confidence in career planning, and based on self-assessment, they can better recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, improve their self-confidence and adaptability, and provide a strong support for developing career plans (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Based on this, this study aims to reveal how life meaning affects career adaptability through professional identity. This can not only enrich the theoretical framework of career adaptability, but also provide scientific basis and practical guidance for college students' career development.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Theoretical concept**

According to this study, it is critical how the meaning of life affects the professional identity and career adaptability of college students. Therefore, career construct theory was utilized to describe the relationship between these variables. Career construct theory emphasizes the importance of individual subjectivity and self-actualization in career development, individual initiative and creativity, and the social environment will have an impact on individual career development (Guan & Li, 2015). Career construct theory suggests that subjective psychological readiness or willingness to face adaptation positively is an important antecedent for individuals to access adaptive resources and outcomes (Savickas & Profeli, 2012). Career adaptability, a concept in career construct theory, is demonstrated in the early stages of career development when individuals face more changes and challenges (Savickas, 2020). Therefore, individual initiative and self-actualization are understood as a result of meaning in life and professional identity, and these can affect the career adaptability of college students.

### **2.2 Differences in latent variables by gender**

Gender may influence college students' understanding and emphasis on life meaning, professional identity, and career adaptability. Males and females may have different focuses on life goals, family values, and personal achievement (Jónasdóttir, 2008). For example, women may be more inclined to focus on family and relationships, whereas men may be more focused on career and personal achievement. In terms of occupational role expectations, society has different expectations of

occupational roles for different genders, which may influence the professional identity of college students (Light, 2013). Females may be subject to more restricted occupational choices and societal expectations that affect their identification with occupational roles; males and females may be subject to different societal expectations and gender roles when choosing a career, and these differences may lead to differences in professional identity (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Additionally, gender may influence college students' adaptive strategies when facing career stress and challenges (Soylu et al., 2021). Females may rely more on social support when facing stress, whereas males may rely more on self-regulation. Gender differences may also influence the approach and content of career planning; females may place more emphasis on career and family balance, while males may focus more on linear progression in career development. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: College students' life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability differ significantly across gender

H1a: There is a significant difference between college students' life meaning across genders

H1b: There is a significant difference in college students' professional identity across gender

H1c: There is a significant difference in career adaptability of college students across gender

### **2.3 Differences in latent variables by grade**

Grade level may affect college students' performance in the areas of life meaning, professional identity, and career adaptability. From a maturity and experience perspective, as grades increase, so do college students' maturity and life experiences, which may affect their understanding and valuing of life meaning (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). For example, upperclassmen may be more concerned with future career development and life stability, whereas lowerclassmen may be more concerned with their current academic and social lives. In terms of professional identity, underclassmen may be in the career exploration stage and may not have a clear understanding of professional identity formation, whereas upperclassmen may have developed a clearer professional identity through internships and professional experiences (Irerri et al., 2013). Advancement in grade level is usually accompanied by more hands-on experiences and internships, which help students better understand their career interests and abilities, which can lead to a stronger professional identity. As they advance in grade, students typically face more career planning and employment challenges, which motivates them to improve their career adaptability. Growing older may have experienced more career planning and challenges and be better able to adapt to changes in the career environment (Zacher, 2014). Older students usually have accumulated more skills and experiences, which can enhance their career adaptability and make them more confident and flexible when facing career challenges. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There is a significant difference between college students' life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability across grades

H2a: There is a significant difference in college students' life meaning across grades

H2b: There is a significant difference in college students' professional identity across grade levels

H2c: There is a significant difference in career adaptability of college students across grade levels

## 2.4 Life meaning and career adaptability

Life meaning is an individual's feelings and perceptions about the nature and meaning of his or her existence and the importance of self (Steger et al., 2006). College students with a clear sense of meaning are more likely to build a broad social network throughout their careers. Such social networks not only provide college students with more career opportunities and resources, but also provide emotional support and assistance, thus enhancing career adaptability (Hamtaux et al., 2013). Life meaning motivates college students to engage in learning and practicing autonomously (Hamtaux et al., 2013). This intrinsic drive causes them to keep learning and improving their professional skills and knowledge, and this state of continuous learning enables them to adapt more quickly to new work environments and challenges (Rossier, 2015). It has been found that the higher life meaning of college students helps them proactively adapt to changes in their career environment (Lin & Jiang, 2023). Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: College students' life meaning has a positive effect on career adaptability

## 2.5 Life meaning and professional identity

Life meaning is a key factor in the development of college students' professional identity. College students' life meaning is closely related to their majors, and college students are more likely to find their own value and meaning in their careers, thus establishing a strong sense of professional identity (Johnston, 2018). Through a survey of college students, it was found that those who have a clear life meaning usually show a higher degree of self-confidence and decisiveness when facing career choices (Cheng et al., 2021). College students will be more aware of what they want and how to reach their career goals. This clear life orientation has a positive impact on professional identity (Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, life meaning, as a concentrated expression of personal values and life attitudes, has an indispensable influence on college students' professional identity. A positive and healthy life meaning can enhance students' professional identity, make them love their majors more and be willing to make more efforts for them (Cheng et al., 2021). Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: College students' life meaning has a positive effect on professional identity

## 2.6 Professional identity and career adaptability

Career adaptability is a core component of college students' career development and encompasses an individual's readiness and resources to cope with current and future careers (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2015; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In tourism management, the combination of professional knowledge and career planning by university students is an important way to achieve career development. By gaining an in-depth understanding of the current situation and development trends of the industry, students are able to have a clearer understanding of their career orientation and development direction (Savickas, 2002). Interestingly, the degree of students' professional identity often determines the setting of future career direction and life goals. Professional identity is an individual's awareness of the career he or she is engaged in and his or her development prospects, and the positive feelings towards it (Zhang et al., 2017). Professional identity is an important tool for judging an individual's career development, which influences his or her future career choice and attitude toward the career he or she is engaged in (Liu et al., 2023). Some studies have confirmed that college students who understand career prospects and establish professional identity enhance their future career adaptability (Burnik & Kosir, 2017). In addition, professional identity not only has a direct positive effect on career adaptability, but also has an indirect positive effect on career adaptability through the mediating role of learning engagement (Liu et al., 2023). Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: College students' professional identity has a positive effect on career adaptability

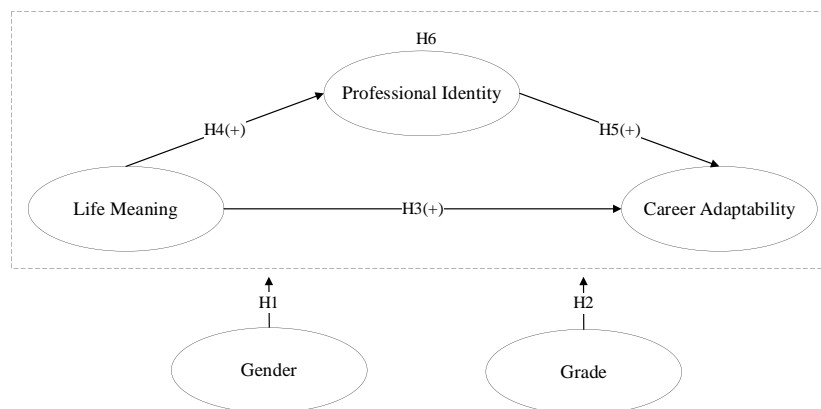
**2.7 The mediating role of professional identity**

Professional identity is recognized as a mediator between life meaning and career adaptability. Self-knowledge is the basis for the formation of professional identity. Through reflection and self-assessment, students gain a deeper understanding of their own interests, values, and abilities, and then form a professional identity that is consistent with their own characteristics (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Life meaning is the core driver of personal growth and development, which helps college students clearly recognize their own career values and career goals, thus enhancing their professional identity (Cheng et al., 2021). Professional identity helps students to understand their career roles and positioning, which can enhance their career adaptability and enable them to flexibly cope with various changes in their careers (Liu et al., 2023).

Career construct theory emphasizes that individuals construct career paths that are consistent with their uniqueness by continually understanding and interpreting the self, the environment, and the relationship between the two during the process of career development (Savickas, 2002). Life meaning is the core value and goal that an individual pursues in his or her life path, and it is the result of continuous reflection and exploration. Through active identification and acceptance of careers, college students are able to more clearly recognize the core values and goals they are pursuing in their life path (Liu et al., 2023). Further determination towards their career paths stimulates college students' motivation to learn and practice (Patton & McMahon, 2006). College students continue to improve their abilities and qualities in learning and practicing, become more determined and confident in the face of difficulties, and promote college students to connect and communicate with the career field in order to continuously adapt to changes in the environment and cope with challenges (Johnston, 2018). Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Professional identity has a mediating role between life meaning and career adaptability

Based on the career construct theory, the research hypothesis was formulated and the research framework diagram was summarized (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Research framework diagram**

**3. RESEARCH METHODS**

**3.1 Participants**

Participants were college students majoring in tourism in Guangxi Province, China. College students from four national first-class undergraduate programs, which are key support units set by the United

Nations World Tourism Organization in China and affiliated members of its Education Committee, were selected for the survey, and these schools have better developed tourism management majors. The Department of Education of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (2022) states that these four colleges and universities are better developed in terms of tourism management majors. Therefore, investigating college students from these four colleges and universities can better reflect the career adaptability of tourism management students, so college students from these colleges and universities were chosen for the investigation.

### **3.2 Data collection**

The data for this study was obtained by means of a questionnaire using convenience sampling method. In the specific process of distributing the questionnaire, the relevant departments of each university were first contacted to obtain permission and cooperation. We identified the group of students who volunteered to participate in the survey by communicating with the student affairs office or the relevant discipline head. The questionnaires were filled out online and sent via email or pushed through the university's internal platform to ensure that a wider group of students was reached. During the survey, participants were informed that the content of the survey did not involve personal privacy, and participants were promised data confidentiality and the significance of the authenticity of the questionnaire data in the hope that they would fill in the questionnaire truthfully. Finally, the questionnaire was recovered through the Questionnaire Star platform. To ensure the accuracy of SEM analysis, there should be at least 400 questionnaire data (Hair et al., 2010).

### **3.3 Measuring instrument**

All instruments were measured on a 5-point Likert scale using validated and well-established scales. Scores ranging from 1 to 5 indicate responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Life meaning was measured by a 10-item scale developed by Steger et al. (2006), with items such as "I am always looking to find my life's purpose.". Professional identity was measured by a 16-item scale developed by Zhang et al. (2017), with items including "I am optimistic about the career prospects for graduates of this program". Career adaptability was measured by a 17-item scale developed by Liang and Zhang (2016) with items including "My ability to overcome career obstacles is remarkable". These scales were recognized in the study with good reliability and validity.

## **4. Data analysis**

### **4.1 Demographics and reliability**

Based on the demographic analysis, it can be seen that in terms of gender, the number of males is 199 (45.7%) and the number of females is 236 (54.3%). In terms of grade level, the number of freshmen was 51 (11.7%), sophomores was 81 (18.6%), juniors was 97 (22.3%), and seniors was 206 (47.4%).

Reliability was assessed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Cronbach's Alpha value for life meaning was 0.907, the Cronbach's Alpha value for professional identity was 0.932, and the Cronbach's Alpha value for career adaptability was 0.922. These variables' Cronbach's Alpha values were all greater than 0.7 with good internal consistency (Bonett & Wright, 2015).

### **4.2 Validity analysis**

Before testing the hypotheses, validation factor analysis was used to test the validity of the measurement models. The first one assessed the fitness of the model, and a good model was obtained by measuring CMIN/DF less than 3, CFI, GFI, AGFI, and NFI greater than 0.8, and RMSEA and SRMR less than 0.08 (MacCallum & Hong, 1997; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). The second is to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the variables. Convergent validity is assessed by CR and AVE, where generally a CR greater than 0.7 indicates that the latent variables are

internally consistent, and an AVE greater than 0.5 indicates that the latent variables are able to explain at least 50% of the variance of the observed variables, and have good convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Distinguishing validity was assessed by the square root of the variance extracted (AVE) method, where the square root of the AVE of the latent variables was greater than the correlation coefficients between the variables to ensure that the correlation between the variables did not exceed 0.7, with good distinguishing validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The results of the analysis showed that the model had a good model fit index. The ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF) was 1.618, which is within the acceptable range (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). CFI (0.988), GFI (0.924), AGFI (0.888), and NFI (0.916) were all greater than 0.8, which is in line with the general research criteria (MacCallum & Hong, 1997). RMSEA (0.038) and SRMR (0.044) are both less than 0.08, which satisfy the minimum criteria for model fitting (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In addition, as shown in Table 1, the CR of each variable was greater than 0.7 and the AVE was greater than 0.5, which implies good convergent validity for each latent variable.

**Table 1 Convergent validity**

Latent Variable	Dimension	Item	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Life Meaning	Presence	LM1	.774	.886	.609
		LM2	.781		
		LM3	.779		
		LM4	.789		
		LM5	.779		
	Search	LM6	.815	.899	.641
		LM7	.812		
		LM8	.788		
		LM9	.784		
		LM10	.802		
Professional Identity	Sense of professional motivation	PI1	.786	.927	.678
		PI2	.844		
		PI3	.846		
		PI4	.807		
		PI5	.840		
		PI6	.817		
	External influencing factors	PI7	.761	.897	.685
		PI8	.855		
		PI9	.832		
		PI10	.858		
	Sense of professional benefits	PI11	.869	.928	.682
		PI12	.838		
		PI13	.837		
		PI14	.824		
		PI15	.782		
		PI16	.801		
Career Adaptability	Career concern	CA1	.770	.897	.636
		CA2	.802		
		CA3	.821		
		CA4	.811		
		CA5	.783		
		CA6	.827		

	Career Curiosity	CA7	.767		
		CA8	.770		
		CA9	.824		
		CA10	.818		
	Career Confidence	CA11	.744	.821	.605
		CA12	.783		
		CA13	.806		
	Career Control	CA14	.775	.879	.644
		CA15	.801		
		CA16	.831		
		CA17	.802		

As can be seen in Table 2, the AVE square root of each latent variable is greater than the correlation coefficient between the variables, and the correlation coefficient between the variables does not exceed 0.7, which implies that there is a good discriminant validity between the latent variables.

**Table 2 Discriminant validity**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Presence	.780								
Search	.560***	.800							
Sense of professional motivation	.179***	.214***	.824						
External influencing factors	.189***	.246***	.567***	.827					
Sense of professional benefits	.183***	.223***	.436***	.501***	.826				
Career concern	.323***	.377***	.197***	.216***	.287***	.798			
Career Curiosity	.361***	.409***	.280***	.269***	.309***	.480***	.802		
Career Confidence	.403***	.421***	.222***	.221***	.248***	.511***	.514***	.778	
Career Control	.271***	.358***	.258***	.257***	.277***	.462***	.447***	.524***	.803

Note 1: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; The diagonal is the square root of the AVE of each variable.

### 4.3 Difference analysis

In order to see if there are differences in life meaning, professional identity, and career adaptability across demographic variables (gender, grade level), difference analysis were conducted through independent samples t-tests and ANOVA one-way analyses of variance. Difference analysis is used to compare differences between groups or conditions to determine if a significant difference exists, and results are usually assessed through p-values.

The results from Table 3 show that there is a significant difference between life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability in terms of gender. In life meaning, male mean is 3.716, female mean is 4.223, female mean is greater than male, t-value is 6.409, p-value is 0.000; in professional identity,



male mean is 3.563, female mean is 3.896, female mean is greater than male, t-value is 3.805, p-value is 0.000; in career adaptability, male mean was 3.684, female mean was 4.139, female mean was greater than male, t-value was 6.404, and p-value was 0.000, indicating that these variables showed significant gender differences (Chow, 1988).

**Table 3 Gender difference**

Variable	Gender	Number	Average	Standard Deviation	t	p
Life Meaning	male	199	3.716	.982	6.409	.000
	female	236	4.223	.579		
Professional Identity	male	199	3.563	1.004	3.805	.000
	female	236	3.896	.782		
Career Adaptability	male	199	3.684	1.014	6.404	.000
	female	236	4.139	.371		

The results from Table 4 show that there is a significant difference between life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability in terms of grade level. In life meaning, freshman mean is 3.496, sophomore mean is 4.032, junior mean is 4.067, senior mean is 4.062, junior mean is greater than freshman, sophomore, senior mean, F value is 7.220, p value is 0.000; in career identity, freshman mean is 3.217, sophomore mean is 3.699, junior mean is 3.799, senior mean is 3.866, senior mean is greater than the mean of freshman, sophomore, and junior, F value is 7.527, p value is 0.000; in career resilience, freshman mean is 3.232, sophomore mean is 3.872, junior mean is 3.967, senior mean is 4.110, senior mean is greater than the freshman, sophomore, and junior mean with an F-value of 20.229 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that these variables exhibit significant differences in grade level (Chow, 1988).

**Table 4 Grade differences**

Variable	Gender	Number	Average	Standard Deviation	F	p	A Posteriori Comparison
Life Meaning	Freshman	51	3.496	1.256	7.220	.000	Junior > Senior > Sophomore > Freshman
	Sophomore	81	4.032	.704			
	Junior	97	4.067	.739			
	Senior	206	4.062	.740			
Professional Identity	Freshman	51	3.217	1.205	7.527	.000	Senior > Junior > Sophomore > Freshman
	Sophomore	81	3.699	.938			
	Junior	97	3.799	.865			
	Senior	206	3.866	.773			
Career Adaptability	Freshman	51	3.232	1.225	20.229	.000	Senior > Junior > Sophomore > Freshman
	Sophomore	81	3.872	.608			
	Junior	97	3.967	.714			
	Senior	206	4.110	.595			

**4.4 Path analysis**

This study explored the causal relationship between variables through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which indicates that there is a direct effect between variables when the direct relationship is significant. The path analysis from Table 5 shows that there is a significant relationship between life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability. The effect of life meaning on career adaptability is 0.601 (p < 0.001), which indicates that life meaning has a positive effect on career adaptability and hypothesis 3 is supported. The effect of life meaning on professional identity was

0.397 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicates that life meaning has a positive effect on professional identity and hypothesis 4 was supported. The effect of professional identity on career adaptability was 0.248 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that professional identity had a positive effect on career adaptability and Hypothesis 5 was supported.

**Table 5 Path analysis**

Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Life Meaning→Career Adaptability	.601	.078	7.303	***
Life Meaning→Professional Identity	.397	.079	5.501	***
Professional Identity→Career Adaptability	.248	.055	3.904	***

**4.5 Mediation analysis**

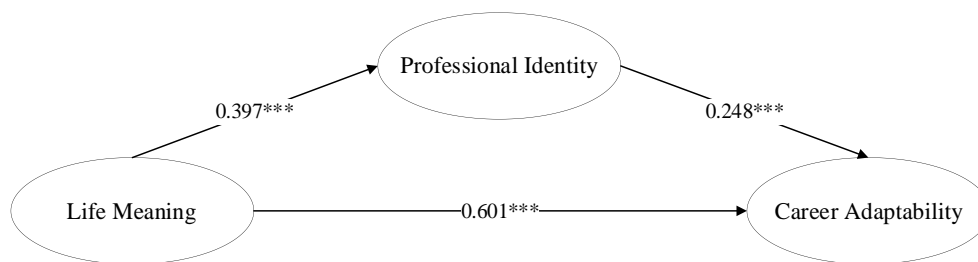
SEM is used to estimate and test the relationship between several variables at the same time, through Bootstrap's test, which aims to estimate and test the effect size of the mediating variable in the causal relationship and its significance using repeated sampling. If the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect does not include 0, this means that the indirect effect is significant and there is a mediating effect. Meanwhile, if the 95% confidence interval of the direct effect includes 0, this means that the direct effect is not significant and is a fully mediated effect. If none of the 95% confidence intervals for the direct effect includes 0, this means that the direct effect is significant and is a partial mediation effect (Cheung & Lau, 2008).

As can be seen in Table 6, professional identity has a mediating effect between life meaning and career adaptability. The total effect of life meaning on career adaptability was 0.699 ( $p < 0.001$ ), with a 95% confidence interval between 0.544 and 0.823 excluding zero, indicating a significant total effect of life meaning on career adaptability. The indirect effect of life meaning on career adaptability was 0.098 ( $p < 0.001$ ), with a 95% confidence interval between 0.046 and 0.183 excluding 0, indicating that the indirect effect was significant and that the mediating effect of professional identity was present. The direct effect of life meaning on career adaptability was 0.601 ( $p < 0.001$ ), with a 95% confidence interval between 0.446-0.752 excluding 0, indicating a significant direct effect of life meaning on career adaptability. Therefore, professional identity has a partial mediating role in the effect of life meaning on career adaptability and hypothesis H6 is supported.

**Table 6 Mediation analysis**

Effect	Path	$\beta$	Sig.	LLCI	ULCI
Total Effect	Life Meaning→Professional Identity→Career Adaptability	.699	.001	.544	.823
Direct Effect		.601	.001	.446	.752
Indirect Effect		.098	.001	.046	.183

In this study, the results of the study were obtained by analyzing the data and the tests of the hypotheses were summarized (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 Analysis results**

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the difference analysis, differences in the manifestation of life meaning, professional identity, and career adaptability on contextual variables (gender, grade level) were revealed. Males and females differed in their definitions of self-importance due to differences in socialization experiences, cultural norms, and physiological traits, similar to the findings of Edwards and Holden (2003). The formation and development of professional identity and career adaptability are influenced by multiple factors, including gender, which is similar to the findings of Fitzgerald (2020), Tokbaeva and Achtenhagen (2023) research resonates. As the grade level increases, college students' understanding and pursuit of the life meaning gradually changes, and the level of professional identity shows significant differences, which resonates with Shin and Steger (2016), Engelbertink et al. (2021) reached the same conclusion. It is worth mentioning that students in higher grades tend to show higher maturity and clarity in career planning and career adaptability, which is consistent with the study by Pang et al. (2021).

Based on the path analysis, the relationship between life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability was revealed. Life meaning provides college students with intrinsic motivation and direction when facing future career choices and life planning, and shows higher career adaptability, which is consistent with the findings of Lin and Jiang (2023). Life meaning enables college students to have clearer goals in career choice and future development, find a career direction that is consistent with their personal values, and enhance their identification with their chosen careers, which is similar to the study by Bailey and Phillips (2016). It is worth noting that college students with higher professional identity will be more positive and confident in their career choices and show greater career adaptability, which is consistent with Liu et al.'s (2023) study. These results reflect that life meaning and professional identity have a key role in college students' career adaptability.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study describes how life meaning influences the process of college students' career adaptability from the perspective of career constructs. Through the study, it was found that life meaning, professional identity and career adaptability showed significant differences in gender and grade level. In addition, college students with high levels of life meaning were more proactive in focusing on their future careers and showed higher levels of career concern. Students are more willing to make long-term career plans and have higher career adaptability when facing dynamic changes in the tourism management industry. Meanwhile, professional identity plays an important mediating role in this process. College students with higher professional identity are more comfortable in the process of career exploration and adaptation, actively respond to workplace challenges, and demonstrate higher career adaptability.

### 6.1 Contributions and management recommendations

This study enriches related research by exploring the pathways through which life meaning influences career adaptability. Notably, it reveals how life meaning can enhance college students' career adaptability by enhancing professional identity. This helps to deepen the role of professional identity in the process of career development and provides some experience for subsequent research.

From a practical point of view, this study can provide some suggestions to improve the career adaptability of university students. Colleges and universities can develop a series of activities, such as values exploration workshops and lectures on the life meaning, to help students develop positive career attitudes and clear career goals. Students can also be guided to recognize the importance of professional identity in career development through a variety of ways, such as curriculum and

practical activities (Caza & Creary, 2016). Colleges and universities should strengthen the integration of academic support and career development to develop all the competencies required for students' careers. For example, activities such as academic lectures and academic seminars should be organized to stimulate students' academic interests, and relevant career training should be provided to enhance students' comprehensive quality. Encourage students to actively participate in social practice. In addition to classroom learning, students should also actively participate in social practice activities to develop their adaptability in different environments.

## 6.2 Limitations and future research

There are still some shortcomings in this study. In the study of college students' career adaptability, more consideration should be given to the role of life meaning and professional identity, and this study focused only on career adaptability, failing to comprehensively explore the mediating role and interactive effect of these two factors in the development of career adaptability. In the future, the effects of life meaning and professional identity on career adaptability can be explored dimensionally, and these dimensions may have different degrees of effects on career adaptability. Literature citations refer to some relatively old literature and fail to fully utilize the relevant research results in recent years. In the future, attention can be paid to the latest research to further enhance the timeliness and foresight of the study. It is also recommended that theoretical supplementation and literature combing be conducted in conjunction with academic developments to find newer perspectives and theoretical frameworks.

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