

‘Life is Meaningless’: Selected Male YouTubers’ Reflections and Confessionals on Life’s Lack of Meaning and Their Philosophical and Higher Educational Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to look into the sense of meaninglessness highlighted by five purposively sampled YouTube videos created by males of various ages and ethnicities. This qualitative study, conducted on July 23, 2024, analyzed five YouTube confessionals from males of different ethnicities and ages discussing life's meaninglessness, published between June 21, 2021, and June 20, 2023. Participants included a 57-year-old, a young adult, two individuals in their 30s-40s, and another in their 40s. Their videos ranged from 8 to 23.5 minutes and were selected based on a confessional style. Transcripts were generated using a YouTube transcribing application and analyzed thematically. The study follows case study and data mining approach on adult males sharing on YouTube about life's meaninglessness. The reflections revealed themes of existential despair, criticism of modern capitalist society, isolation, dissatisfaction with work, frustration with technology, and a quest for authenticity and peace. Individuals grapple with deep disillusionment and search for meaning in a fragmented world. They question the value of life, criticize societal structures and capitalism, and feel isolated due to their critical views. Their reflections critique the notion of work providing fulfillment and express frustration with manipulative technology and consumerism. Despite this, they desire authenticity and peace, longing for a genuine existence free from societal pretenses and hoping for a peaceful afterlife, highlighting a profound yearning for meaning.

Keywords: YouTube, meaninglessness, adult males, confessionals, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

In the age of postmodernity, the concept of meaning has undergone a profound transformation, marked by a shift from singular, universal meanings to a landscape characterized by multiplicities and, at times, a perceived loss of meaning. This shift reflects broader cultural, philosophical, and social changes that challenge traditional notions of objective truth and stable values.

Postmodernity is characterized by a rejection of grand narratives and universal truths, embracing instead a pluralistic view of meaning. Lyotard (1979) captures this shift in his concept of the “incredulity towards metanarratives,” where overarching explanations for human experience are replaced by a multitude of smaller, localized narratives. This pluralism reflects the belief that meaning is not fixed but rather constructed through diverse, context-dependent interpretations. As a result, individuals and cultures generate multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings based on their unique perspectives and experiences. This decentralization of meaning aligns with Derrida's (1978) idea of deconstruction, which argues that meanings are always in flux and never fully stable or complete.

The postmodern condition also involves a sense of the “loss of meaning” or “existential vacuum,” a term popularized by Frankl (1984) to describe the absence of a unifying purpose in contemporary life. The erosion

of grand narratives and absolute values has led some to experience a profound sense of disorientation and nihilism. This sentiment reflects a broader cultural shift where traditional sources of meaning—such as religious, ideological, or cultural frameworks—are increasingly questioned or abandoned. This loss of singular meaning is not just a theoretical concern but is deeply felt in everyday life, leading individuals to grapple with existential uncertainties and the challenge of finding coherence in a fragmented world.

Role of Individual Agency and Constructivism

In response to the fragmentation of meaning, postmodernity emphasizes individual agency and constructivism in the creation of meaning. This perspective is supported by thinkers like Foucault (1977), who argued that meaning is constructed through discourses and power relations rather than being inherent or universal. Individuals are thus seen as active agents in the negotiation and creation of their own meanings within a complex and shifting cultural landscape. This process involves selecting from a variety of narratives, values, and identities to forge a sense of purpose and coherence in an otherwise fragmented reality.

Cultural and Social Implications

The multiplicity and loss of singular meaning also have significant cultural and social implications. The proliferation of diverse perspectives and the decline of universal standards contribute to a more inclusive, though often more contentious, public discourse. This pluralism can foster greater tolerance and recognition of diverse experiences and viewpoints but can also lead to conflicts and challenges in achieving consensus or shared values. The dynamic interplay between various meanings and interpretations reflects the complexity of living in a postmodern age where individuals must navigate an ever-evolving tapestry of meaning.

The role of meaning in the age of postmodernity is characterized by a shift from singular, universal meanings to a landscape defined by multiplicity and, in some cases, a sense of loss. This transformation challenges traditional notions of fixed purpose and objective truth, emphasizing instead the constructed and fluid nature of meaning. While this plurality can enrich individual and cultural experiences, it also necessitates a continual negotiation of values and purposes in a world marked by uncertainty and change.

The Decline in Quality of Life

The decline in quality of life and the loss of meaning are intertwined phenomena that reflect broader socio-economic, psychological, and cultural shifts. Both concepts capture the growing concerns about individual well-being and the search for purpose in an increasingly complex and fragmented world.

The decline in quality of life is often associated with various socioeconomic and environmental factors. Economically, rising inequality and the precarious nature of modern work contribute to a sense of instability and dissatisfaction. The growing divide between wealthy and impoverished populations exacerbates feelings of disenfranchisement and reduces overall quality of life for many individuals (Piketty, 2014). Job insecurity, stagnant wages, and the erosion of social safety nets further compound these issues, leading to increased stress and reduced well-being (Kalleberg, 2011).

In addition, the erosion of traditional social structures and community networks has led to increased isolation and loneliness. As social bonds weaken and the sense of community diminishes, individuals may experience a decline in emotional and psychological support, which is crucial for maintaining mental health (Putnam, 2000). The rise of digital communication, while offering connectivity, often lacks the depth and quality of face-to-face interactions, potentially exacerbating feelings of loneliness and alienation (Turkle, 2011).

Environmental concerns also play a significant role in the decline of quality of life. The impacts of climate change, pollution, and resource depletion create a sense of uncertainty and fear about the future, contributing to overall life dissatisfaction (Steffen et al., 2015). These environmental issues not only affect physical health

but also challenge the perceived stability and safety of living conditions.

Loss of Meaning

The loss of meaning is a psychological and existential concern that often arises in response to the complexities and challenges of contemporary life. This phenomenon is closely linked to the fragmentation of traditional values and the erosion of grand narratives that once provided coherence and purpose (Lyotard, 1979). In the postmodern context, where universal truths and overarching stories are questioned, individuals may struggle to find a sense of purpose or direction (Bauman, 2007).

Frankl (1984) addressed this issue through the concept of the “existential vacuum,” describing how the absence of a unifying purpose can lead to feelings of emptiness and despair. Without clear, guiding principles or goals, individuals may find themselves adrift, struggling to construct meaningful lives amidst a sea of competing values and narratives.

The search for meaning in a context of declining quality of life can exacerbate feelings of frustration and existential angst. As people confront the pressures of economic instability, social fragmentation, and environmental uncertainty, they may experience a heightened sense of meaninglessness (Seligman, 2011). This struggle to find purpose in the face of adversity can lead to increased psychological distress and a diminished sense of overall well-being.

The decline in quality of life and the loss of meaning are interrelated issues that reflect broader societal trends. As individuals face economic, social, and environmental challenges, their capacity to find and sustain a sense of meaning can be significantly impacted. Conversely, the absence of meaning can exacerbate feelings of dissatisfaction and contribute to a further decline in quality of life. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving economic conditions, strengthening social bonds, and fostering environments where individuals can explore and construct personal meaning.

Loss of Meaning in the Age of YouTube. The rise of YouTube as a dominant cultural and social platform has profoundly shaped contemporary experiences of meaning and identity. While YouTube offers unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and connection, it also highlights and, in some cases, exacerbates the experience of meaninglessness in the digital age.

YouTube’s vast and constantly updating repository of content often leads to superficial engagement with a wide range of topics. The rapid consumption of short, often sensational content can undermine deeper, more reflective engagement with meaningful issues. The flood of information and entertainment might provide temporary distraction but can contribute to a sense of existential emptiness as users are bombarded with a constant stream of content that lacks substantial depth or coherence. This saturation creates a paradox where, despite the abundance of content, individuals may feel increasingly detached from authentic, meaningful experiences (Turkle, 2011).

In the age of YouTube, there is a growing emphasis on personal branding and self-promotion. Content creators often curate their lives to fit a specific image or persona, driven by the need to attract views, likes, and subscribers. This pressure to present a polished, marketable version of oneself can lead to a sense of inauthenticity and a disconnection from one’s true self. The quest for online validation and the commodification of personal experiences can exacerbate feelings of meaninglessness as individuals grapple with the discrepancy between their online personas and their real-life identities (Marwick, 2013).

YouTube has transformed the way narratives are constructed and consumed, often prioritizing immediacy and entertainment over depth and continuity. Traditional narratives that once provided coherent frameworks for understanding one’s place in the world are replaced by fragmented, episodic content. This shift can contribute to a sense of disorientation and a loss of overarching meaning as individuals struggle to make sense of their lives outside of the digital media they consume (Heath, 2018).

While YouTube enables users to connect with others across the globe, these connections are often mediated through screens and superficial interactions. The illusion of connection can sometimes amplify feelings of loneliness and alienation as individuals compare their real lives to the curated, idealized lives presented by content creators. The paradox of feeling connected yet isolated highlights the complexities of forming meaningful relationships in a digital age where virtual interactions often lack the depth and authenticity of face-to-face encounters (Hampton et al., 2011).

YouTube's recommendation algorithms shape what content users are exposed to, often reinforcing existing preferences and echo chambers. This algorithmic curation can limit exposure to diverse perspectives and reduce opportunities for critical engagement with new ideas. As users are continually served content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and interests, the potential for broadening one's understanding and finding deeper meaning may be diminished. The echo chamber effect exacerbates the experience of meaninglessness by promoting content that perpetuates existing narratives rather than challenging users to confront new or uncomfortable truths (Pariser, 2011).

Philosophical Underpinnings of Man's Search for Meaning

Jean-Paul Sartre. Jean-Paul Sartre, a central figure in existentialism, argued that life inherently lacks meaning, and it is up to each individual to create their own purpose. In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943) posited that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals are born without a predetermined purpose and must forge their own meaning through their choices and actions. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" highlights the tendency to deny this responsibility and adhere to societal norms or external expectations, thus avoiding the anxiety that comes with absolute freedom (Sartre, 1943).

Albert Camus. Albert Camus approached the search for meaning through the lens of the absurd, a concept explored in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus (1942) argued that life is inherently meaningless and absurd due to the conflict between humans' desire for order and the chaotic, indifferent universe. However, he asserted that individuals can find personal meaning by embracing the absurdity of existence and living fully despite its inherent lack of purpose. Camus uses the myth of Sisyphus, who eternally pushes a boulder up a hill, as a metaphor for human resilience and the pursuit of meaning in the face of an absurd world (Camus, 1942).

Friedrich Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy introduces the idea of the "Übermensch" (Overman) and the "will to power" as responses to the existential void left by the "death of God". Nietzsche (1883) contends that in the absence of a divine moral order, individuals must create their own values and meaning. The Übermensch represents a higher type of human who transcends conventional morality and societal norms, crafting a life of purpose and creativity (Nietzsche, 1883). Nietzsche's emphasis on individual strength and self-overcoming reflects a proactive approach to finding meaning in an otherwise indifferent world.

All three philosophers emphasize the profound freedom and responsibility of individuals in creating their own meaning and values. Sartre's existentialism asserts that "existence precedes essence," meaning that individuals are not born with predetermined purposes. Instead, they must navigate their freedom and responsibility to create their own meaning through choices and actions. This freedom, while empowering, also comes with the burden of responsibility and the possibility of "bad faith" (Sartre, 1943). Camus shares a similar emphasis on freedom in the context of the absurd. Although he does not frame it in terms of "existence precedes essence," he argues that individuals must confront the absurdity of life and embrace their freedom to live authentically despite the lack of inherent meaning (Camus, 1942). Camus's concept of "revolt" against the absurd reflects an active engagement with one's freedom to find personal meaning. Nietzsche also underscores the concept of individual freedom but frames it through the lens of the "Übermensch" and the "will to power." He argued that in the absence of divine or metaphysical values, individuals must assert their own values and purpose, embodying a proactive stance towards creating meaning (Nietzsche, 1883). Nietzsche's idea of overcoming traditional morality and crafting new values aligns with the existential notion of personal responsibility.

Statement of the Problem

This pervasive sense of meaninglessness highlights a critical problem: the existing frameworks for understanding and navigating life appear increasingly inadequate in addressing the complex, multifaceted nature of human experience in the 21st century. As individuals confront economic instability, social fragmentation, and environmental uncertainty, they struggle to find personal significance and satisfaction, revealing a significant gap between contemporary life conditions and the quest for existential fulfillment. This problem necessitates a re-examination of how meaning is constructed and sustained in a rapidly changing world, and underscores the urgent need for new approaches to fostering purpose and connection in the face of pervasive uncertainty and disillusionment.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative data mining and case study interpreted on July 23, 2024 involved five purposively-sampled YouTube confessionals of males with different ethnicities and ages who talked about life having no meaning (published on YouTube between June 21, 2021 and June 20, 2023). First, there was a 57-year old “YouTuber 1” (with 5,560 subscribers and 51,000 views on the selected 23.5-minute confessional with 2,100 likes). Second, there was young adult “YouTuber 2” (with 2,500 subscribers and 153,612 views on the selected 19.5-minute confessional with 7,800 likes). Third, there was 30-40-ish “YouTuber 3” (with 1,490 subscribers and 63,623 views on the selected almost 8-minute confessional with 2,500 likes). Then, there was 40ish “YouTuber 4” (with 11,800 subscribers and 41,665 views on the selected 18-minute confessional with 2,300 likes). Finally, there was 40-ish “YouTuber 5” (with 1,180 subscribers and 18,731 views on the selected almost 11-minute confessional with 868 likes). They were selected based on their confessional-style approach in sharing about the meaninglessness of life. They were transcribed using a YouTube transcribing application (<https://kome.ai/tools/youtube-transcript-generator>) and the transcripts were read multiple times in the conduct of thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Case Presentations on Individual Reflections

Case 1: Midlifer YouTuber 1. The speaker’s reflections reveal a profound and long-standing struggle with the meaning of life, fear of death, and a deep desire to protect their loved ones from mortality. Their journey is marked by personal loss, existential questioning, and a persistent, if quixotic, quest for an elixir of life. These reflections encapsulate the universal human struggle with existential concerns and the search for meaning in an uncertain world.

Feeling of Meaninglessness. The speaker opened with a profound statement about their perception of life’s inherent lack of meaning, both personally and universally. This sentiment is significant as it reflects a common existential concern that many individuals face. This feeling can lead to existential angst, a term popularized by existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who explored the notion of life being devoid of inherent meaning. The speaker’s acknowledgment that “life in general is meaningless” is a stark articulation of existential nihilism, a belief that life lacks intrinsic value or purpose.

Long-standing Existential Questions. The speaker's contemplation of existential questions for over two decades indicates a persistent quest for understanding and purpose. This aligns with the existentialist view that individuals must navigate their own paths to find meaning. They stated, “for about 20... more than that... there's been a thread going through my life where it started to... I've thought, you know, what's the purpose of life? Who am I? What am I?” These questions are central to human existence and are often explored through various philosophical and spiritual lenses. The inability to find definitive answers may contribute to the speaker’s ongoing sense of existential disquiet.

Fear of Death. The speaker's early confrontation with the fear of death reveals how childhood experiences

can shape lifelong anxieties. Their recounting of asking their mother, “Mommy, why do we have to die?” illustrates the natural yet unsettling curiosity about mortality that can arise at a young age. This early fear has persisted, underpinning much of their existential struggle. The speaker's vision of death as a child, imagining “being in a coffin,” suggests an acute awareness of mortality that has deeply influenced their worldview.

Childhood Vision and Its Impact. The mysterious vision of a multicolored cloud in their childhood room adds a layer of surrealism to the speaker’s narrative. This experience, described as “a kind of like multicolored cloud hovering in the top corner of my room,” can be interpreted in various ways. It could symbolize the speaker's imaginative mind or a psychological manifestation of their fears. The fact that their parents could not see it, and their subsequent visit to the doctor, underscores a sense of isolation in their experience. This vision may have reinforced their existential anxieties and feelings of being misunderstood.

Distracting from Existential Concerns. The speaker found temporary relief from their existential fears through relationships and work. They mentioned, “life got in the way... I had girlfriends... I did actually go to work for a short period of time when I was 16.” This suggests that engaging in the day-to-day activities of life can provide a temporary distraction from deeper existential concerns. However, this relief is often fleeting, as these distractions do not address the underlying issues. This aligns with existentialist thought, which posits that true meaning must be sought through authentic self-exploration rather than external distractions.

Return to Existential Fears After Losses. The resurgence of existential fears following significant personal losses, such as the death of the speaker's parents and the collapse of their marriage, highlights the impact of grief and isolation on existential well-being. They shared, “now that my parents have gone... my marriage collapsed... I've got no more family.” These losses have left the speaker feeling vulnerable and alone, exacerbating their existential angst. The absence of close relationships and support systems can intensify feelings of meaninglessness and despair.

Concern for Children's Mortality. The speaker's love for their children intensifies their fear of mortality. They expressed, “the thought of them dying just breaks my heart into so many pieces.” This concern reflects a natural parental instinct to protect one’s offspring from harm, including the ultimate harm of death. The speaker's fear for their children's mortality underscores the profound emotional impact of existential anxieties. It also highlights the paradox of love and loss—loving deeply makes the prospect of loss even more devastating.

Desire for Immortality. The speaker’s desire to create an “elixir of life” to extend life or achieve immortality reflects a desperate wish to defy the natural order. They explained, “I want to save them... create an elixir of life that can either extend their lives for hundreds of years or create an age-arresting drug.” This desire is emblematic of humanity’s long-standing quest for immortality, seen in myths, religious texts, and scientific endeavors. The speaker’s pursuit of an elixir symbolizes a hope to transcend mortality and protect their loved ones from death, albeit through fantastical means.

Feelings of Insignificance. The speaker grapples with feelings of insignificance in the vastness of existence. They stated, “in the grand scheme of things, you're just like a speck of dust in a speck of sand in the Sahara Desert. You're nothing.” This metaphor poignantly captures the existential perspective that human life is fleeting and inconsequential in the grand scheme of the universe. Such feelings of insignificance can contribute to a sense of despair and hopelessness, challenging individuals to find personal meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe.

Pessimistic View on Achievements. The speaker believes that achievements and possessions are ultimately meaningless because they cannot be retained after death. They asserted, “you're going to lose it all anyway because you're going to die... all your achievements... it's all going to be gone.” This viewpoint resonates with existentialist and nihilist perspectives that question the value of material and social accomplishments. The speaker’s pessimism highlights the transient nature of life and the futility they perceive in striving for

worldly success.

Personal Failures and Regrets. The speaker reflected on their personal failures and regrets, particularly regarding their father's advice to become self-sufficient. They admitted, "my dad left and I'm still a disorganized wreck. I haven't established anything in my life." This admission reveals a deep sense of failure and disappointment in themselves. The speaker's struggle to meet their father's expectations and their own perceived shortcomings contribute to their feelings of inadequacy and existential despair.

Struggle with Neurotoxic Experimentation. The speaker recounted a period of experimenting with substances in pursuit of an elixir of life, which resulted in neurotoxic symptoms. They described, "I started suffering from symptoms of neurotoxicity... I was taking this white substance... I stopped taking it." This dangerous experimentation reflects the lengths to which the speaker is willing to go in their quest for immortality. It also underscores the risks and potential harms of such pursuits, highlighting the desperation and urgency driving their actions.

Determination to Continue the Quest. Despite past failures, the speaker remained determined to continue their quest for life extension, albeit more cautiously. They concluded, "I've been thinking about it again... this time doing it more intelligently... make sure I know where the sources of these ingredients come from." This persistence reflects a deep-seated hope and determination to find a solution, despite previous setbacks. The speaker's commitment to refining their approach indicates a learning process and a desire to achieve their goal more safely and effectively.

Case 2: Young Adult YouTuber 2. The speaker's reflections paint a vivid picture of a young person grappling with existential questions, societal disillusionment, economic hardships, and mental health struggles. Their candid admissions reveal a deep sense of meaninglessness, disillusionment with societal expectations, economic and emotional despair, and a critical view of authority and social structures. Despite these overwhelming challenges, the speaker's desire for an outlet and expression hints at a lingering hope for finding purpose and connection in an indifferent world. These reflections underscore the universal human struggle with existential concerns and the search for meaning in an uncertain and often disheartening reality.

Life's Meaninglessness. The speaker articulates a profound sense of life's lack of purpose, encapsulating a worldview steeped in nihilism. They stated, "Life has no meaning. No meaning whatsoever. We're here to die." This bleak perspective suggests a belief that existence is ultimately futile, devoid of intrinsic value or direction. Further emphasizing this point, the speaker asserts that all efforts and accomplishments ultimately amount to nothing: "Anything I work towards in my life will ultimately mean nothing." This sentiment echoes existential nihilism, where the transient nature of life renders all human endeavors insignificant.

Disillusionment with Societal Expectations. The speaker conveys a deep disillusionment with societal norms, particularly the traditional path of education and employment. They criticized this conventional trajectory by saying, "Go to college so you can waste your [expletive] life away to some corporation that doesn't give a [expletive] about you." This statement underscores a sense of betrayal by societal promises that education leads to fulfillment and success. Instead, the speaker sees it as a pathway to meaningless toil. The alternative, as they see it, is equally bleak: "Or don't go to college and land an even shittier job that gives even less [expletive] about you." This perspective highlights the speaker's belief that both paths lead to unfulfilling, exploitative work.

Economic Struggles and Materialism. Economic struggles and the futility of materialism are recurring themes in the speaker's reflections. They described the relentless effort to make ends meet: "You trade your soul and your time for paper that you buy [expletive] with to drown out the feelings of loneliness and sadness." This metaphorical "trade" represents the dehumanizing nature of modern labor, where one's essence and time are exchanged for money to purchase distractions from existential despair. Furthermore, the speaker emphasized the ultimate meaninglessness of material possessions: "None of this material [expletive] will ever mean anything." This sentiment aligns with the existential critique of consumer culture, suggesting

that material goods cannot fulfill deeper human needs for meaning and connection.

Mental and Emotional Despair. The speaker vividly described their mental and emotional despair, painting a picture of deep-seated hopelessness. They confessed, "I don't see a life for myself where I'm happy, and that sucks. That sucks a lot." This admission revealed a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and an inability to envision a future where happiness is attainable. The lack of direction and purpose exacerbates these feelings: "I don't know what my direction is, what my purpose is, what anything is. I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do." This existential crisis is marked by confusion and a profound sense of being lost, unable to find meaning or direction in life.

Critique of Authority and Social Structure. The speaker offered a strong critique of societal hierarchies and authority, questioning the legitimacy of power structures: "Who the [expletive] put one human being in charge of another human being?" This rhetorical question challenges the foundations of social and political authority, reflecting a deep skepticism about the fairness and justice of hierarchical systems. The speaker also pointed to the control exerted by the elite as a major source of societal issues: "The top one percent in the world... give us everything around us. Everything that we see was decided by the top one percent." This critique highlights the speaker's belief that the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few shapes societal realities, often to the detriment of the majority.

Substance Use as a Coping Mechanism. In a candid admission, the speaker discussed their use of substances to cope with their overwhelming thoughts: "I smoke so much weed just to deal with my thoughts because I can't deal with them sober." This reliance on substances suggests a desperate attempt to manage unbearable mental states and emotions. The speaker acknowledged the negative consequences of this coping mechanism: "My cognitive ability, my memory, it's all suffered because of it." This recognition of the harmful impact of substance use reflects a complex interplay between seeking relief from existential pain and the detrimental effects on mental and cognitive health.

Lack of Fulfillment and Future Outlook. The monotonous and unfulfilling nature of work is another critical point raised by the speaker. They lamented, "Work will never give anybody any sense or any sort of fulfillment unless they were lucky enough to know what they wanted to do from an early age." This statement underscored the speaker's belief that meaningful work is a rare privilege, often inaccessible to those who have not discovered their passion early in life. The uncertainty and lack of a clear future path contribute significantly to the speaker's misery: "I don't know what the next step is, and it's got me so [expletive] miserable." This uncertainty exacerbates their sense of hopelessness, as they struggle to envision a fulfilling or purposeful future.

Desire for an Outlet and Expression. Amidst the overwhelming negativity, the speaker expressed a desire to find an outlet for their thoughts and possibly a sense of purpose through creative expression. They revealed, "I'd love to make YouTube videos. I'd love to be a YouTuber. That's my real [expletive] passion." This aspiration suggests that despite their profound despair, there remains a flicker of hope and a desire for connection and expression. Creating content could provide the speaker with a sense of purpose and a way to share their experiences and perspectives with others.

Case 3: Young Midlifer YouTuber 3. The case reveals a deep-seated disillusionment with societal expectations and the conventional life path. The speaker's reflections on life's stress, the futility of work, and existential questioning underscore a profound sense of despair and dissatisfaction. Their critique of materialism, the American Dream, and the repetitive nature of modern life reveals a broader commentary on the systemic issues underlying contemporary existence. Through their existential questioning, the speaker grapples with the search for meaning in a world that often seems devoid of purpose.

Life's Stress and Suffering. The speaker's reflections highlighted the pervasive stress and suffering associated with modern life. They expressed a deep sense of overwhelm, stating, "Sometimes I just don't want to live because life's so stressful. It causes me a lot of mental pain, physical suffering, emotional

suffering." This admission underscores the intensity of the mental, physical, and emotional toll that life can impose. The speaker's experiences reflect a broader commentary on how the demands of daily existence can lead to significant distress, suggesting that the cumulative effect of life's pressures can be debilitating and demoralizing.

Monotony and Futility of Work. The monotony and perceived futility of work are central themes in the speaker's discourse. They critiqued the repetitive nature of modern employment with the assertion, "Go to work, make money, pay your bills, achieve goals, be a slave right, a modern-day slave to the job you work for." This depiction of work as a form of modern-day slavery emphasizes the lack of fulfillment and autonomy in the work environment. The speaker further questioned the purpose of such efforts with the observation, "What's the point of all that if it means in the end we're all gonna die?" This reflects a nihilistic view where the ultimate end of death renders all work and effort seemingly meaningless.

Universal Nature of the Grind. The speaker expands their critique to the universal nature of this monotonous cycle. They stated, "It's a universal thing... rinse and repeat right, most people do this on a daily basis." This statement highlights the sense that the repetitive nature of work and life is not unique but rather a global phenomenon. The speaker's frustration is compounded by the realization that this cycle is pervasive, affecting a vast number of people who find themselves trapped in a similar routine. This universality adds to the sense of futility, as it suggests that the struggles faced are part of a broader, systemic issue.

Questioning the Purpose of Life. The speaker grappled with the rationale behind enduring such a life, posing a profound existential question: "Why the [expletive] do I want to live if I have to live like this?" The lack of choice in this lifestyle is particularly disheartening to them: "It's not even a choice either, which is the sad part, because everybody's doing it." This reflects a deep sense of resignation and a lack of agency in shaping one's life path. The speaker's questioning reveals a profound dissatisfaction with the predetermined nature of societal expectations and the perceived lack of alternatives.

Materialism and the American Dream. The critique of materialism and the traditional notion of the American Dream is another significant theme. The speaker condemned the pursuit of material goods, stating, "We pretty much just work for money just so we can buy [expletive] and also spend it on meaningless stuff." This criticism underscored the superficial nature of material success and its inability to provide true fulfillment. Additionally, the speaker questioned the validity of the American Dream: "How am I living the American dream you know, because I am from America?" This questioning challenges the idealized notion of achieving success and happiness through material wealth and societal status, suggesting that the promise of the American Dream may be an illusion for many.

The Unfulfilling Nature of Work. The speaker challenges the idea that hard work leads to fulfillment, lamenting, "Are we really living if we're going to live a life that's unfulfilled because all we're doing is working, getting by, surviving?" This statement reflects a deep skepticism about the rewards of working hard if the work itself is unfulfilling. The prospect of retirement is not seen as a solution to this dissatisfaction: "You stress the [expletive] out until retirement day, and then I have a few years left... where's the fun in that?" This perspective suggests that the promise of future relaxation or leisure cannot compensate for the years of unfulfilling labor and stress.

Existential Despair. Existential despair is a recurring theme, as the speaker contemplates the inevitability of death and the seeming futility of life. They questioned, "What's the point of even doing anything... I will no longer exist, I will no longer be aware of my thoughts, I will no longer care because I can't care anymore." This acknowledgment of the finality of death renders all efforts and achievements inconsequential. The repetitive cycle of life, work, and death is viewed as inherently futile: "You're born, you become a work slave, you serve to whatever job you work for, then you die. Where's the fun in that?" This existential viewpoint underscores a profound sense of meaninglessness and a lack of fulfillment in the conventional life trajectory.

Lack of Reward and Fulfillment. The speaker questioned the rewards of hard work, noting, "People say 'oh work hard, prepare for the future'. What [expletive] future? You [expletive] die at the end of the day." This skepticism reflects a belief that the promises of future rewards or security are hollow in the face of life's inevitable end. The overall purpose of life is deeply questioned: "What good does it do for anybody really? You work, you serve, you die. That's it... what's the [expletive] point?" This existential inquiry highlighted the speaker's profound disillusionment with the conventional narrative of success and fulfillment.

Case 4: Young Midlifer YouTuber 4. The speaker articulated a complex critique of modern society, encompassing issues of mental health, societal alienation, and dissatisfaction with contemporary life. The speaker's observations reflected a broader sense of disillusionment with societal norms, the impact of capitalism, and the challenges of maintaining authenticity in a conformist world. Their reflections underscore a deep-seated search for meaning and peace in a world they view as fundamentally flawed.

Perception of Negativity and Mental Health. The speaker expressed frustration with being labeled as negative or depressed, pointing out that such perceptions often stem from their critical view of the world. They stated, "people say we're very negative people... say we suffer from depression," which highlights a disconnect between their genuine concerns and the labels imposed upon them. This sentiment is further elaborated with the assertion, "How can we talk about something positive when pretty much everything in this world is negative?" This view underscores a belief that the overwhelming negativity present in the world makes it challenging to focus on or promote positive aspects of life, thereby reinforcing their perceived negativity.

Isolation from Society. The speaker feels alienated due to their divergent views on society. They described their experience with societal rejection: "people talking [expletive] about you... people thinking different about you... basically you're an outcast to society because you don't want to participate in society." This statement captures the profound sense of isolation felt by those who dissent from mainstream societal norms. The speaker's reluctance to conform to societal expectations and their critical stance result in their marginalization, accentuating their sense of disconnection from the broader community.

Critique of Modern Life. The speaker offered a stark critique of modern life, describing it as increasingly difficult and costly: "Life is just getting more and more unbearable to tolerate, you know... it's getting more expensive... pointless... [expletive] inflation just keeps going up." This critique reflects a perception that the challenges of modern life—marked by escalating expenses and what they perceive as meaningless societal pressures—are becoming intolerable. Additionally, the speaker is disillusioned with the apparent lack of critical thinking, illustrated by their comment, "We just listen to whatever the lord tells us to do... if the lord tells us to murder someone, we'll get paid five hundred dollars, we'll do it." This criticism suggests a belief that society uncritically accepts directives without questioning their validity or morality.

Views on Money and Capitalism. The speaker's reflections on money revealed a deep skepticism about its value and impact. They asserted, "I just feel like it's overrated to the point where... it's literally for every little thing... just to yawn five cents," suggesting that the obsession with money detracts from the quality of life and contributes to a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction. Furthermore, they argued that humanity's relentless pursuit of material gain exacerbates global issues: "it's humanity that's ruined the planet and we continue to ruin the planet to the point where I just say to myself even though I'm not blaming it the actual planet." This viewpoint highlights the belief that capitalist pursuits and environmental degradation are inextricably linked, contributing to a broader sense of existential crisis.

Technology and Consumerism. The speaker's frustration with technology and consumerism is evident in their critique of corporate practices. They expressed irritation at perceived manipulations by tech companies: "They do this [expletive] on purpose to us so we keep upgrading the phone... and not only upgrading the phone, upgrading your memory which equals more money." This criticism reflects a broader discontent with how technological advancements and corporate strategies often seem designed to generate profit at the expense of consumer satisfaction and financial well-being.

Work and Slavery. The speaker challenged the traditional concept of work, even when it is enjoyable. They acknowledged the positive aspects of loving one's job but remain critical of the broader implications: "whether you love your job and if you do love your job I'm happy for you... but at the same time at least you love what you're doing so you can sort of get it through." This statement underscores a belief that the structure of work itself, regardless of personal satisfaction, can still be exploitative or unfulfilling. The term "slavery" in this context conveys a deep sense of being bound by the demands and constraints of the working world.

Freedom and Authenticity. The difficulty of maintaining authenticity in a conformist society is another key theme. The speaker lamented the challenge of pretending to enjoy life to meet societal expectations: "I can't just pretend to please people and be like. "Oh, life's great... I love life... I love having to work... I love paying bills." This expression of frustration highlights the struggle to reconcile personal truth with societal pressures, revealing a deep-seated desire for genuine expression and rejection of superficial conformity.

Existence and Afterlife. Finally, the speaker expressed uncertainty about the afterlife while yearning for a peaceful existence beyond this life: "I just hope if there is an afterlife they ain't like here man... hope there's no suffering... I hope there's no torment... no pain... nothing." This statement reflects a profound existential concern and a wish for a respite from the hardships of the current existence. The speaker's hopes for the afterlife signify a desire for escape from the suffering they perceive in their present reality.

Case 5: Young Midlifer YouTuber 5. The case provides a vivid exploration of nihilistic thought, characterized by a rejection of meaning, purpose, and divine order in life. The speaker's reflections challenge conventional beliefs and societal norms, advocating for self-reliance and acceptance of life's inherent randomness. This existential discourse highlights the complexities of human existence and the struggle to find meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe.

Life is Random and Meaningless. The speaker's primary assertion is that life lacks intrinsic meaning and is governed by randomness. They declared, "life is and always will be random and meaningless," indicating a belief that there is no inherent purpose or order to existence. This perspective challenges the common human inclination to seek patterns, meanings, and purpose in life events. By labeling life as "random and meaningless," the speaker implied that efforts to find or create meaning are ultimately futile and that existence is characterized by chaos and unpredictability.

Denial of Fate and Destiny. The speaker categorically rejected the concepts of fate and destiny, referring to them as "bullshit." They argued that "fate is not real, Destiny is not real, and life itself has no meaning." This rejection stems from a belief that there is no predetermined path or divine plan guiding human lives. Instead, events occur arbitrarily, without any underlying purpose or direction. This viewpoint starkly contrasts with many cultural, religious, and philosophical systems that posit the existence of a preordained plan or destiny.

Humanity's Limited Understanding. The speaker highlighted the limitations of human understanding, stating, "we can barely explain anything about ourselves" and suggesting that humans are "too dumb to acquire" certain knowledge. This perspective underscores a sense of intellectual humility or even cynicism regarding human capabilities. It reflects a belief that despite advancements in science, technology, and philosophy, there remains a vast expanse of unknowns that humans may never comprehend. This acknowledgment of our cognitive limitations serves to reinforce the speaker's overarching theme of existential uncertainty.

Animals vs. Humans. The speaker draws a comparison between humans and animals, stating, "animals don't look at life as this blessing or this gift in disguise." They implied that animals accept life as it is, without ascribing meaning to it, whereas humans complicate their existence by seeking purpose and meaning. This contrast suggests that the human quest for meaning may be an unnecessary and self-imposed burden, leading to discontent and existential angst. By observing that animals simply live without such preoccupations, the speaker implied that a more straightforward, acceptance-based approach to life might be

more natural and less distressing.

Critique of Societal Norms. The speaker criticized societal norms and expectations, particularly those related to work, education, and material success. They expressed frustration with the societal emphasis on productivity and conformity, stating, "all society wants to promote is working hard and busting your ass for someone that doesn't care about you." This critique reflects a broader discontent with the capitalist system and the pressure to achieve conventional success. The speaker suggests that these societal pressures detract from genuine happiness and fulfillment, reinforcing their belief in the meaninglessness of life.

Rejection of Higher Beings and Divine Plans. The speaker denies the existence of a higher being or divine plan, asserting, "there's no higher being that's trying to make this world a better place" and "the universe doesn't care about us." This perspective aligns with atheistic or agnostic views, rejecting the idea of a benevolent, omnipotent deity who oversees and orchestrates human affairs. By dismissing the notion of a divine plan, the speaker reinforced their belief in the randomness and lack of inherent purpose in life, suggesting that humans are left to navigate existence on their own, without divine guidance or intervention.

Acceptance of Death as the Only Escape. The speaker views death as the only escape from life's meaninglessness, stating, "I'm not saying we should all kill ourselves. I'm saying the only option we have is to just wait and die." This grim perspective reflects a profound sense of hopelessness and resignation. While the speaker does not advocate for suicide, they suggested that the ultimate resolution to life's inherent suffering and chaos is death. This viewpoint underscores the depth of their existential despair, as they perceive no viable solutions or alternatives to alleviate the burdens of existence.

Self-Reliance and Individualism. The speaker advocated for self-reliance, emphasizing, "the only person or individual that is at the end of the day in control as far as loving yourself is you." This call for self-reliance and individualism is a response to the perceived indifference of the universe and society. By focusing on self-love and personal autonomy, the speaker suggested that individuals can find some semblance of meaning and contentment in an otherwise meaningless existence. This emphasis on self-reliance aligns with existentialist philosophy, which posits that individuals must create their own meaning and purpose in life.

Criticism of the Idea that Suffering Has Meaning. The speaker vehemently opposed the notion that suffering has meaning or benefits, stating, "there's no benefits to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), there's no benefits to trauma and anger and depression." They criticized the idea that suffering is part of a grand plan or that it serves a higher purpose. This rejection of redemptive suffering challenges many religious and philosophical perspectives that view suffering as a path to growth or enlightenment. The speaker's perspective is rooted in a belief that suffering is inherently negative and devoid of any intrinsic value or purpose.

Nihilistic Belief and Pragmatism. The speaker concluded with a nihilistic outlook, reinforcing the belief that "life is random and meaningless." They advised others to "just enjoy life" despite its randomness and lack of meaning. This advice suggests a pragmatic acceptance of life's inherent chaos, encouraging individuals to find moments of joy and contentment without seeking deeper meaning. The speaker's final remarks, "Life doesn't care about you... rely on yourself," encapsulate their overarching message of existential self-reliance and the rejection of external sources of meaning and validation.

Recurring Themes

The reflections converge on themes of existential despair, criticism of modern capitalist society, isolation, dissatisfaction with work, frustration with technology, and a quest for authenticity and peace. Together, these themes paint a portrait of a speaker grappling with deep-seated disillusionment and searching for meaning in a world they perceive as increasingly fragmented and unsatisfactory.

Existential Despair and Futility. A pervasive sense of existential despair and the perceived futility of life's

efforts is evident throughout the reflections. The speaker repeatedly questions the value of life and the point of human endeavors. They expressed frustration over the meaninglessness of work and material pursuits, encapsulated in statements like “What’s the point of all that if it means in the end we’re all gonna die?” and “What’s the point of even doing anything... I will no longer exist, I will no longer be aware of my thoughts, I will no longer care because I can’t care anymore.” This theme underscores a profound disillusionment with the traditional markers of success and achievement, leading to a deep existential crisis.

Critique of Modern Society and Capitalism. The speakers are highly critical of modern societal structures and capitalist systems. They discussed the increasing difficulty and cost of living, and expressed skepticism about the value of money and material goods. Statements like “Life is just getting more and more unbearable to tolerate... it’s getting more expensive... pointless... and [expletive] inflation just keeps going up” and “We pretty much just work for money just so we can buy [expletive] and also spend it on meaningless stuff” highlight a critical view of capitalism’s impact on individual well-being and societal health. This theme reflects a broader discontent with how modern economic systems are perceived to contribute to existential and practical problems.

Isolation and Alienation. A strong sense of isolation and alienation from society is a recurring theme. The speaker feels outcast due to their critical views and non-conformity, as illustrated by remarks like “you’re an outcast to society because you don’t want to participate in society.” This alienation is compounded by their sense that society is fundamentally flawed, leading to further estrangement from societal norms and expectations.

Critique of Work and the Concept of Fulfillment. The reflections express a critical stance on the notion of work and its supposed role in providing fulfillment. The speaker challenges the idea that hard work inherently leads to a meaningful or rewarding life. They argued that even if one enjoys their job, it does not necessarily address broader existential concerns or provide true fulfillment: “Are we really living if we’re going to live a life that’s unfulfilled because all we’re doing is working, getting by, surviving?” This critique extends to the concept of retirement as a solution, with the speaker questioning the value of working towards a distant future without immediate satisfaction.

Frustration with Technology and Consumerism. The speakers expressed frustration with modern technology and consumerism, viewing them as manipulative and exploitative. They criticized the practices of tech companies for encouraging continuous upgrades and associated expenses: “They do this [expletive] on purpose to us so we keep upgrading the phone and not only upgrading the phone upgrading your memory which equals more money.” This theme reflects a broader disillusionment with how technological advancements and consumer culture are perceived to exacerbate financial and emotional stress.

Search for Authenticity and Peace. Despite the critical and often despairing tone, there is an underlying desire for authenticity and peace. The speaker longs for a genuine existence free from societal pretenses, as seen in their statement, “I can’t just pretend to please people and be like oh life’s great... I love life... I love having to work... I love paying bills.” Additionally, they expressed a hope for a peaceful afterlife, indicating a search for respite from their current suffering: “I just hope if there is an afterlife they ain’t like here, man... hope there’s no suffering I hope there’s no torment, no pain, nothing.” This search for authenticity and peace amidst the perceived chaos of modern life highlights a profound yearning for meaningful and fulfilling existence.

DISCUSSION

The Sense of Meaningfulness Implied in the Discussions of Meaninglessness

Given the assertions about the meaninglessness of life expressed by the speakers, several assumptions about what constitutes a meaningful life can be inferred. These assumptions reflect their perspectives on what is lacking or problematic in their current existence. Here are the significant assumptions:

Purpose Beyond Material Success. The speakers' critique of the focus on work and money as insufficient for true fulfillment reflects an underlying assumption that a meaningful life must involve more than just material success. This perspective aligns with existential and humanistic theories that argue for the necessity of purpose beyond financial achievement. For instance, Frankl (1984) posited that meaning is found through experiences that transcend material gain, emphasizing that "meaning can be found in the most ordinary aspects of life" (p. 121). This implies that a meaningful life should be anchored in deeper values and personal significance rather than just societal or economic benchmarks.

Authenticity and Personal Fulfillment. The speakers' dissatisfaction with societal norms and conformity suggests a belief that a meaningful life requires authenticity and personal fulfillment. According to Sartre (1943), authenticity involves embracing one's freedom to create meaning and live according to one's true self, free from societal constraints. This notion is echoed by May (1983), who argued that personal fulfillment is achieved when individuals align their lives with their genuine desires and values, rather than adhering to external expectations (p. 65). The yearning for self-expression and alignment with personal passions underscores the assumption that authenticity is integral to a meaningful life.

Connection and Belonging. The sense of alienation experienced by the speakers points to the assumption that a meaningful life involves connection and belonging. Maslow (1954) highlighted the importance of social connections and a sense of belonging as crucial components of self-actualization and meaning. He asserted that "the need for love and belonging is as fundamental as the need for safety" (p. 90). This implies that meaningful living requires integration within a community or network that supports and resonates with one's values and experiences.

Critical Reflection and Autonomy. The speakers' critique of societal norms and the call for critical thinking suggest that a meaningful life involves autonomy and the ability to question established structures. According to Nietzsche (1883), true autonomy comes from challenging traditional values and creating new ones, which aligns with the speakers' desire for critical reflection and self-determined action. Additionally, Arendt (1958) emphasized that critical thinking and personal responsibility are essential for authentic living, arguing that "freedom is not merely the absence of restraint, but the ability to act in accordance with one's own judgment" (p. 159). This highlights the importance of autonomy in the pursuit of meaning.

Existential Fulfillment and Peace. The speakers' reflections on existential despair and hope for an afterlife free from suffering indicate an assumption that a meaningful life involves existential fulfillment and peace. Frankl (1984) underscored that achieving existential fulfillment requires finding meaning even amidst suffering, and that "true fulfillment can be found only when individuals transcend their immediate circumstances" (p. 132). The desire for peace and resolution both in life and potentially beyond reflects the belief that meaningful living encompasses achieving a state of inner contentment and existential understanding.

Impact and Legacy. The dissatisfaction with conventional paths and the pursuit of lasting achievements suggest an assumption that a meaningful life involves making a significant impact or leaving a legacy. This is supported by Becker (1973), who argued that individuals seek to create something enduring as a means of transcending their mortality, stating, "The desire to leave a mark is a central aspect of human motivation" (p. 45). The speakers' critique of the futility of current achievements aligns with the belief that meaningful living includes contributing to something greater than oneself, thereby achieving a lasting impact.

Philosophical Implications of the Recurrent Themes Associated with Life's Meaninglessness

The themes of existential freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning present both resonances and dissonances with the philosophical assertions of Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche. The speakers' reflections align with the existential and nihilistic concerns of these philosophers, demonstrating a shared preoccupation with the creation of meaning and the confrontation with absurdity. However, their expressions of despair and resignation also reveal tensions with the more proactive and empowering aspects of the philosophers' views,

highlighting the complexities of navigating existential freedom and responsibility.

Resonance with Philosophical Assertions. In examining the reflections, a striking engagement with the themes of freedom and responsibility that echo the existential philosophies of Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche was observed. The speakers grappled with the profound burden of existential freedom, resonating with Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" and illustrating the struggles of navigating one's freedom to create meaning amidst feelings of disillusionment and monotony. This existential weight, coupled with the speakers' rejection of traditional structures and their efforts to assert personal values, aligns with Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch" and the need to craft one's own values in a godless world. Additionally, the speakers' confrontation with the absurdity of their experiences mirrors Camus's notion of embracing the absurd and actively revolting against it to find personal meaning.

Freedom and Responsibility. The speakers in the transcripts frequently confront the weight of existential freedom and responsibility, mirroring Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence." For example, the speakers' sense of disillusionment and existential crisis reflects Sartre's idea that individuals must navigate their freedom and create their own meaning. One speaker's frustration with life's inherent lack of purpose and their feeling of being trapped in a monotonous cycle illustrate Sartre's notion of the burden of freedom and the potential for "bad faith" (Sartre, 1943). Similarly, the emphasis on personal responsibility and the rejection of external structures resonate with Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch" and the need to assert one's own values in the absence of divine or metaphysical guidance (Nietzsche, 1883).

Confrontation with Absurdity. Camus's exploration of the absurd and the concept of "revolt" are evident in the speakers' reflections on the futility and meaninglessness of their experiences. The sense of absurdity expressed by several speakers—who question the purpose of their actions and the value of their efforts—aligns with Camus's idea that individuals must confront and accept the absurd nature of existence (Camus, 1942). Their active engagement in trying to find personal meaning despite the apparent absurdity reflects Camus's notion of embracing freedom in the face of the absurd.

Creation of Meaning. The speakers' attempts to find or create meaning in their lives resonate with the philosophers' emphasis on personal agency. Sartre's focus on authentic choice and action, Camus's call for active revolt against absurdity, and Nietzsche's advocacy for the creation of new values are all reflected in the speakers' struggles and desires to forge their own paths amidst a perceived lack of inherent meaning (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1942; Nietzsche, 1883). For instance, the desire to find personal fulfillment or express individuality despite societal pressures mirrors the philosophers' emphasis on crafting one's own meaning.

Dissonance with Philosophical Assertions. Despite the philosophical emphasis on freedom and personal empowerment found in the works of Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche, some individuals express a deep sense of despair and powerlessness that contrasts sharply with these ideas. While Sartre's concept of "existence precedes essence," Camus's notion of "revolt," and Nietzsche's call for the creation of new values all highlight the potential for individuals to shape their own meaning, the speakers often feel trapped in a monotonous and meaningless existence, revealing a disconnect from this transformative freedom. Their resignation to traditional values and lack of philosophical engagement with their existential challenges further illustrate a passive struggle that diverges from the proactive stance advocated by these philosophers, highlighting a significant gap between the ideal of personal empowerment and the lived experience of existential paralysis.

Rejection of Freedom. Despite the resonance with the philosophical emphasis on freedom, some speakers express a sense of despair and powerlessness that contrasts with the philosophers' more proactive stances. Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche argue that individuals have the capacity to shape their own meaning through their freedom and choices. However, the speakers' feelings of being trapped in a monotonous and meaningless existence suggest a disconnection from this potential for transformative freedom. Their perceived lack of agency and existential paralysis stand in contrast to the philosophers' more optimistic view of personal empowerment.

Critique of Traditional Values. While Nietzsche's critique of traditional values and the call to create new ones align with the speakers' dissatisfaction with societal norms, some speakers also express a resignation to traditional structures that they find unfulfilling. This resignation, rather than an active overcoming of old values, reveals a tension with Nietzsche's proactive stance on value creation. Similarly, Sartre's notion of creating meaning through authentic choice is challenged by the speakers' sense of resignation and lack of direction, which contrasts with the philosopher's emphasis on the empowering potential of freedom (Nietzsche, 1883; Sartre, 1943).

Philosophical Engagement. The speakers' engagement with their existential questions often lacks the philosophical rigor seen in Sartre's, Camus's, and Nietzsche's works. The existential and absurdist philosophies offer frameworks for actively engaging with the meaning of life and personal values. However, the speakers' expressions of nihilistic despair and disillusionment sometimes appear more passive, reflecting a struggle to engage with their freedom and responsibility in a manner consistent with the philosophers' ideas.

Implications and Challenges to Higher Education

The philosophical insights provided by Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche, alongside the recurrent themes in the five transcripts, present several challenges to higher education. These challenges reflect deeper existential concerns and critiques of societal structures, influencing both the perceived value and function of higher education. Here are the key challenges:

Perceived Lack of Meaning and Purpose. The existential themes from Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche highlight a crisis of meaning and purpose. Many individuals grapple with the sense that traditional structures, including higher education, do not offer inherent meaning or fulfillment. For instance:

Sartre's Existentialism. The notion that "existence precedes essence" implies that individuals must create their own meaning. This can challenge the purpose of higher education if students view it merely as a societal expectation rather than a personal journey toward self-creation and authentic choices (Sartre, 1943).

Camus's Absurdism. The struggle with the absurdity of life, as Camus describes, may lead to questioning the value of investing time and resources in higher education if it seems to offer no ultimate resolution to life's inherent meaninglessness (Camus, 1942).

Nietzsche's Overcoming of Traditional Values. Nietzsche's critique of traditional values and the call to create new ones may lead to skepticism about conventional higher education paths, which might be seen as perpetuating outdated or imposed values rather than encouraging the development of personal and transformative values (Nietzsche, 1883).

Economic Pressures and Materialism. The reflections in the transcripts frequently touch upon the futility of material pursuits and economic pressures. This is a significant challenge for higher education:

Economic Struggles. Many speakers express frustration with the economic demands of higher education and the perceived futility of the financial investment if it does not lead to meaningful outcomes or personal fulfillment. This is reflected in the criticism of materialism and the economic burden of student loans (transcript).

Materialism Critique. Higher education is often criticized for emphasizing economic gain over personal growth or critical thinking. The focus on job preparation and financial return may seem misaligned with the pursuit of deeper, existential meaning, leading to questions about the true value of higher education (transcript).

Conformity and Lack of Authenticity. The existential philosophers' emphasis on authenticity and individuality presents challenges to the conventional higher education system:

Conformity. Sartre's and Nietzsche's ideas about the necessity of creating one's own values and resisting conformity can clash with the standardized nature of higher education, where students are often required to follow a predetermined curriculum and conform to institutional norms (Sartre, 1943; Nietzsche, 1883).

Authenticity. The struggle to maintain personal authenticity in a system that may prioritize grades, degrees, and institutional prestige over genuine personal development can lead to a crisis of purpose and fulfillment in higher education (transcript).

Disconnection from Practical and Existential Concerns. Higher education may sometimes appear disconnected from practical and existential concerns expressed in the transcripts:

Practical Concerns. The focus on theoretical knowledge and academic achievement can seem detached from the practical and existential challenges that individuals face, such as economic pressures, societal expectations, and personal struggles for meaning.

Existential Despair. The existential despair expressed by some speakers might be exacerbated by a higher education system that does not adequately address or support students' deeper existential questions and mental health needs.

Questioning of Traditional Values. The challenge posed by Nietzsche's critique of traditional values is particularly relevant to higher education:

Traditional Values. Higher education often reflects and reinforces traditional values and norms, which may not align with the evolving personal values and philosophical insights of contemporary students. This misalignment can create a disconnect between the educational experience and the pursuit of individual meaning and purpose (Nietzsche, 1883).

The philosophical insights and existential concerns discussed highlight several challenges facing higher education. These include perceived meaninglessness, economic pressures, conformity, disconnection from practical concerns, and questioning of traditional values. Addressing these challenges requires rethinking the purpose and approach of higher education to better align with the search for personal meaning and the need for authentic, practical, and transformative experiences.

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