

EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM ON EMOTIONAL REGULATION OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SUBANG JAYA

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Abstract. This qualitative study delves into the prevalence of existential nihilism and its impact on emotional regulation among 11 private university students in Subang Jaya. The participants comprise 7 females and 4 males in total. Post semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis was used to unravel the unique experiences and coping mechanisms utilised by the participants, which were predominantly distinct. The findings reveal a pervasive sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness among the participants, with each individual navigating their existential turmoil in unique ways. While some embraced their nihilistic tendencies and engaged in existential questioning, seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfilment, others grappled with existential angst and depression, leading to challenges in emotional regulation. The study highlights the diversity in coping mechanisms, with patterns indicating a predominance of negative experiences and varied emotional responses to existential nihilism. Moreover, the research highlights the link between existential nihilism and mental health disorders, emphasising the need for strategised interventions to support students in Subang Jaya and others who are emotionally affected by existential nihilism.

Keywords: *coping mechanisms, existential angst, mental health, thematic analysis, existential nihilism*

Introduction

The multiple objectives of this study include, firstly, exploring the impact of existential nihilism on the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya; secondly, determining the presence of existential nihilism and identifying the coping mechanisms employed by these students; and thirdly, examining how these students regulate their emotions while experiencing existential nihilism. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the emotional challenges faced by private university students in Subang Jaya and the strategies they use to cope with existential nihilism. The research questions guiding this study are how existential nihilism influences the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya, what the prevalence of existential nihilism is among these students, and what coping mechanisms they employ. Additionally, how private university students in Subang Jaya regulate their emotions in the presence of existential nihilism. These questions aim to uncover the emotional impact of existential nihilism and the strategies used by students to manage their emotional well-being. The rapidly changing world can be challenging for individuals without a sense of purpose, as intrinsic meaning is crucial for growth and adaptation. People's understanding of life and their values significantly influence their emotions, responses, and behaviors. Without a solid frame of reference, they may feel disconnected and unable to function. This disconnection can be particularly adverse for students experiencing existential nihilism, impacting their identity formation, mental health, and well-being. Existential crises amplify their existential concerns, leading to feelings of hopelessness and existential depression (Berra, 2021).

Background and problem statement

Existential nihilism also isolates students from their peers with different beliefs, making it difficult to form meaningful connections. This social isolation can prolong feelings of pensiveness and negatively affect future interactions. In their academic pursuits, these students often question the value of education, leading to skepticism and devaluation of academic engagement. This struggle with motivation and direction results in distorted emotional regulation, causing academic performance to suffer as students become apathetic, confused, and disengaged. Studying existential nihilism and the emotional regulation is part of understanding the potentially derelict as well as varied life experiences of different people, and it has its justifications. This is a topic that has piqued the interest of myself, as a researcher, because of how complacent people have considered life to be and how it affects them unknowingly. Although they do realise such occurrences affecting them, addressing it has been minimal. It is important to note that the transition in time and how people react differently, according to the generations, plays a role in the current real-world scenario. The motivations, emotions, reactions, behaviours and thought processes have altered with time as well. One particular scenario can evoke multiple emotional experiences and regulations in different individuals. They can also be an effect of being subjected to different stressors, especially if these individuals face them on a daily basis or they experience them at different stages of their lives. The pandemic has had its hold on nihilism. People have resorted to meaningless virtues and sharing ideas of complacent lifestyles on social media. An example would be how the subreddit on nihilism grew from the initial amount of 31 000 people in January 2019, pre-pandemic, to 115000 in April 2022 (Bradley, 2022). This oddly becomes a way to cope with reality and what people understand of it.

Understanding existential nihilism involves addressing various subjective experiences and knowledge gaps, particularly its impact on emotional regulation. This study aims to fill these gaps, especially the lack of research on private university students. Previous studies focused on the general population and often used quantitative methods, limiting insights into the experiences and coping strategies of those affected by existential nihilism. By exploring these challenges qualitatively, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya. Methodologically, the study's qualitative approach, though rich in data from individual experiences, may affect generalisability due to a limited number of participants and interviews. Unlike quantitative studies, this approach may present diverse outliers, offering an in-depth understanding of the topic through purposive sampling and data saturation. Theoretically, the study addresses the limited integration of counselling theories with existential nihilism, exploring how existential therapy and other psychological theories navigate existential dilemmas and emotional reactions. This integration can strengthen the study's foundation and promote emotional well-being through targeted interventions (Schnipke and MacKay, 2023). Practically, the study emphasises translating qualitative insights into actionable interventions to support students struggling with existential nihilism. Understanding their experiences and coping mechanisms can inform the development of workshops and counselling programs, bridging the practical gap and contributing to their academic success and emotional well-being. The study aims to provide concrete evidence for effective

interventions, aiding students in managing their nihilistic beliefs and enhancing their overall mental health.

Existential nihilism poses a significant challenge to the emotional well-being of private university students in Subang Jaya, Malaysia, characterised by a perceived absence of intrinsic purpose or meaning in life (Veit, 2018). Despite its potential impact on students' academic journeys, there is a notable scarcity of research examining how existential nihilism influences their emotional regulation (Özdoğan, 2021). This gap in understanding hinders the development of targeted interventions aimed at supporting students who struggle with feelings of isolation and apathy when confronted with existential questions (Veit, 2018). The exploration of existential nihilism among students is critical as it prompts critical self-reflection and challenges conventional assumptions about life's purpose and nature (Brown, 2020). This philosophical perspective not only complicates emotional responses but also limits clarity in personal beliefs and aspirations, thereby exacerbating feelings of alienation from societal norms and values (Khan et al., 2022; Maes, 2022). Moreover, the emotional distress associated with existential nihilism, including existential depression, presents significant barriers to students' mental health and overall well-being (Wang, 2022). Therefore, there is a pressing need for qualitative research to comprehensively investigate how existential nihilism manifests among private university students in Subang Jaya. By elucidating the emotional struggles and challenges associated with nihilistic perspectives, this study aims to inform the development of effective support systems and interventions tailored to the unique needs of these students. This research seeks to contribute to the field by deepening the understanding of existential dilemmas in educational contexts and fostering resilience among students grappling with existential concerns (Özdoğan, 2021; Veit, 2018).

Literature review

Existential nihilism has had its repercussions since the early days. Before its conceptualisation, people were already influenced by its significance through the treatise of many others, including people of power and existentialists. Previous studies have examined the constructs of existential nihilism and psychological well-being, highlighting its influence on a person's beliefs, identity and purpose. By understanding the findings, gaps in the research can be filled and people can understand their unique challenges as well as their cognitive processes through insights into the emotional experiences of people with existential nihilism.

History and previous studies

Existential nihilism scrutinises the concept that life lacks inherent meaning or value, impacting the emotional well-being of university students, which is crucial for their development and success. Philosophers like Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche argue that confronting the meaninglessness of existence is imperative for individuals to find their meaning (Veit, 2018). Media significantly shapes public perception of existential nihilism, often portraying it in films and television. For instance, "Bojack Horseman" and "Rick and Morty" emphasise existential themes, reflecting a naturalistic worldview that transcends traditional existentialism. Modern media portrayals, such as the 1999 film *Fight Club*, showcase existential nihilism through dystopian narratives and character studies that challenge conventional notions of life's meaning. These

portrayals often resonate with younger generations, reflecting disillusionment with consumer culture and Nietzsche's ideas on western civilisation's self-destruction (Karakasis and De Lera, 2022). Literature has long depicted existential nihilism, with Albert Camus's 1942 novel *The Stranger* exemplifying the theme through its apathetic protagonist, Mersault. Media and literature shape individuals' perceptions of existential nihilism, influencing their beliefs about life and purpose. Research indicates that media exposure to existential themes can increase curiosity and exploration of life's meaning, challenging nihilistic beliefs (Westerhof and Keyes, 2010). This study highlights the potential of philosophical literature and media to imbue individuals with a greater sense of life's purpose.

The precursor of nihilism traces back to Socrates, but the term "nihilism" was coined in the eighteenth century by Friedrich Lebrecht Gotz in "De Nonismo et Nihilismo in Theologia" (Tartaglia and Llanera, 2020). It gained prominence through debates on Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism, which suggested human cognition limits our perception of the external world, leading critics like Jacob Hermann Obereit and Daniel Jenische to accuse Kant of promoting nihilism. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's Letter to Fichte further popularized the term by linking nihilism with German idealism, criticising the dissolution of an independently knowable reality (Forsythe and Mongrain, 2023). In the mid-19th century, nihilism rose in Russia after the Crimean War, becoming associated with political activism and violence, including the assassination of Tzar Nicholas II (Tartaglia and Llanera, 2020). Friedrich Nietzsche solidified nihilism as a concept of existential crisis due to the loss of meaning, truth, purpose, and value, influencing 20th-century existentialists like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Martin Heidegger (Veit, 2018). These thinkers explored the idea that the universe is meaningless, emphasising personal development and authenticity. By the late 20th century, nihilism was discussed within the postmodernist tradition, with philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida associating it with the end of traditional Western metaphysics. Today, nihilism is prevalent in cultural expressions and social media, emphasising life's ultimate meaninglessness (Pitre, 2020).

Understanding existential nihilism is crucial in contemporary society due to its prevalence and profound emotional impact on individuals. This philosophical stance, which asserts the inherent meaninglessness of existence, can permeate various aspects of life, affecting daily functioning, academic performance, personal relationships, and overall sense of purpose. In response to these existential challenges, disciplines like existential psychology offer frameworks to help individuals navigate their experiences, finding meaning and purpose amidst the apparent futility posed by nihilistic beliefs (Binder, 2022a). Delving deeper into the implications of existential nihilism reveals its intricate relationship with mental health. Studies suggest that individuals subscribing to nihilistic worldviews often exhibit lower life satisfaction, heightened depressive symptoms, and increased susceptibility to existential crises (Forsythe and Mongrain, 2023). Moreover, negative consequences such as hopelessness and diminished motivation can significantly undermine individuals' psychological well-being, potentially leading to mental health disorders like depression (Lundvall et al., 2022). The societal perception of existential nihilists further exacerbates the challenges they face. Research indicates the presence of negative stereotypes surrounding individuals with nihilistic beliefs, particularly concerning their social characteristics and adaptability (Scott and Cohen, 2022). Moreover, factors such as gender, religious

adherence, and fear of failure have been identified as significant predictors of nihilism, underscoring the multifaceted nature of this philosophical stance and its impact on individuals' lives (Jahangiri and Ghareh, 2015).

In response to the growing recognition of existential nihilism's significance, efforts have been made to develop tools for its measurement and assessment. The development of the Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS) represents a notable advancement in this regard, providing a validated framework for understanding the nuances of nihilism's influence on mental health and societal outcomes (Forsythe and Mongrain, 2023). By acknowledging and addressing existential nihilism, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their emotions and experiences, empowering them to navigate life's challenges and find meaning amidst the apparent void. Existential depression is a multifaceted mental health condition characterised by persistent feelings of sadness and a pervasive loss of interest in life's endeavors. Its complexity extends to a range of psychosomatic symptoms that vary in severity, complicating the emotional landscape of affected individuals. Rooted in existential experiences, this form of depression reflects an inability to regulate emotions effectively, perpetuating a cycle of despair and disengagement (Wang, 2022). Avoiding existential questions exacerbates the condition, leading to stagnation and neglect in confronting life's fundamental uncertainties. Educators are increasingly recognising the importance of creating interactive environments conducive to exploring personal beliefs and values in response to emotional nihilism among students (Wang, 2022). By fostering introspection and dialogue, they aim to mitigate the risk of existential depression and emotional detachment, empowering students to confront existential questions with resilience and purpose. This proactive approach not only addresses students' immediate needs but also cultivates a deeper understanding of existential concerns within educational settings. Existential loneliness, another consequence of grappling with life's meaninglessness, underscores the profound impact of existential nihilism on individuals' social and emotional well-being (Van Tilburg, 2021; Wong and Yu, 2021). This pervasive sense of isolation stems from a fundamental disconnect with others, as individuals struggle to reconcile their existential beliefs with differing perspectives. Such feelings are further exacerbated in contexts of severe illness and end-of-life situations, highlighting the far-reaching implications of existential despair (Van Tilburg, 2021; Wong and Yu, 2021). Research suggests that cultivating a sense of purpose can serve as a protective factor against suicidal thoughts, offering a lifeline amidst existential turmoil (Moscardini et al., 2022). The interplay between existential nihilism and comorbid conditions, such as schizophrenia, highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of the existential model of nihilism and its implications for mental health (Klar and Northoff, 2021).

Understanding counselling methodologies is crucial for effective practice. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, a meaning-based psychiatric therapy, centers on the idea that humans need purpose to function, helping individuals cope with suffering by finding meaning (Rahgozar and Giménez-Llort, 2020). Its three tenets—the will to meaning, the meaning of life, and freedom of will—guide individuals in their search for significance and their capacity for choice in adversity (Chan, 2024). This approach is particularly relevant for addressing emotional dysregulation in individuals with existential nihilism, providing a framework for finding meaning despite life's challenges. Frankl's dimensional ontology views humans through psychological, physical, and spiritual dimensions, emphasising the noetic dimension. This dimension allows individuals to transcend limitations and find meaning through spiritual resources like humor,

creativity, and love. Self-distancing and self-transcendence are key concepts that help individuals gain perspective and connect with the world beyond themselves (Schulenberg et al., 2008). These concepts empower individuals to reclaim their freedom in responding to problems, fostering resilience and personal growth. A meta-analysis showed that psychological distress negatively correlates with meaning in life (PML) but positively with the search for meaning in life (SML). Cultural, regional, and demographic factors influence these relationships (He et al., 2023). Additionally, distress indicators moderated the relationships between psychological distress and both PML and SML, highlighting the complex interplay between meaning and mental health. Integrating philosophical counselling with logotherapy can enhance therapeutic efficacy in addressing existential concerns like nihilism (Sharaf, 2021). This combined approach can provide a more robust framework for therapists to help individuals navigate existential crises and find lasting meaning in their lives.

Materials and Methods

This study investigates how existential nihilism affects the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya, Malaysia. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed insights into the students' experiences and perspectives (Howarth et al., 2016). Participants, who identified with experiencing existential nihilism, were ensured confidentiality and provided informed consent, with ethics approval obtained for their protection. The semi-structured interviews used open-ended questions to explore the impact of nihilistic beliefs on emotional regulation. Data analysis, conducted with supervisor insight, maintained participant anonymity to ensure accurate and relevant findings. The study revealed how students' nihilistic beliefs shape their emotional responses, offering valuable insights for developing targeted interventions and support within educational settings.

Research design

The qualitative approach in this study enabled an in-depth exploration of how existential nihilism influences the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya. It gathered rich descriptive data, emphasising subjective interpretations, experiences, and meanings, aiming for data saturation. This method focused on understanding participants' perceptions of their nihilistic beliefs and their emotional impacts, allowing for a diverse analysis of emotions and coping mechanisms. Individualistic interpretations were studied through personal narratives, providing comprehensive insights into their emotional experiences and regulation strategies. Data collection via interviews allowed for accurate analysis of emotional regulation, uncovering underlying meanings and connections. Perspectives were analysed through sub-themes to identify patterned experiences related to existential nihilism. Importantly, the subjective experiences were unique, influenced by diverse educational, cultural, and societal contexts (Tilley, 2019). This nuanced and reflexive approach offered valuable insights into the complex phenomenon of existential nihilism and its emotional influence.

This qualitative study utilised a phenomenological approach to explore private university students' lived experiences and perceptions of existential nihilism. Recognising the importance of viewing these experiences individually, the study

allowed students to share their personal beliefs and emotional regulation methods. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of their unique experiences rather than generalising them. According to Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), phenomenology facilitated free expression and detailed exploration through probing. The thematic analysis aimed to identify recurring patterns in their emotions and experiences, offering insights into how existential nihilism affects students in Subang Jaya.

Research sample

This qualitative study employed purposive sampling to select participants based on specific criteria relevant to exploring existential nihilism and emotional regulation among private university students in Subang Jaya. The sample comprised 11 undergraduate and postgraduate students from Taylor’s University Lakeside Campus, HELP University Subang, Monash University, and Sunway University. This selection ensured diversity in gender, culture, and academic disciplines, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The study included students from various local states and international countries, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and stressors related to existential nihilism and emotional regulation. The sample size was determined by data saturation, following the precedent set by Lundvall et al. (2020), who used eight respondents for similar qualitative research (*Table 1*).

Table 1. *Participant demographics.*

Participant pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education level
Zack	22	M	Undergraduate
Sham	33	M	Postgraduate
Paul	33	M	Postgraduate
Vivian	25	F	Postgraduate
Amy	30	F	Postgraduate
Ivan	26	M	Postgraduate
Reena	25	F	Undergraduate
Sally	32	F	Postgraduate
Rani	20	F	Undergraduate
Vaani	23	F	Undergraduate
Stella	29	F	Postgraduate

Note: The table above contains demographics of participants from universities in Subang Jaya.

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participants, who were private university students, were informed about their participation parameters, consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. The study's benefits, purpose, and risks were explained, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Ethical approval was obtained from Taylor’s Board of Ethics Committee, as noted in Appendix A. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and interview questions were designed to align with the research topic and objectives, ensuring objectivity. The first step was to recruit participants from private university students in Subang Jaya. Using a non-probability, purposive sampling approach, 11 students were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences with existential nihilism. The inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in private universities in Subang Jaya, be 18 years or older, and capable of articulating their experiences with clarity and honesty. The sample

included a diverse mix of students in terms of gender, age, disciplines, culture, socioeconomic status, and coping mechanisms, ensuring comprehensive data on their emotional experiences.

Data collection procedure

Qualitative data was primarily collected through an interview protocol which includes an in-depth, semi-structured interview in a confined area that made the students feel comfortable to participate in. The confidentiality in the setting was also taken into consideration, along with the participant's informed consent, to ensure an ethical and professional approach. That way, the participants of this study were able to freely express their perceptions and their beliefs, parallel to their emotional experiences with existential nihilism. Their cultural biases and relevant contributing variables were also considered during the data collection procedure for objective findings. The interview questions complemented the research objectives and it also included opportunities to probe in the efforts of obtaining rich data pertaining to their emotional regulation. To ensure high internal validity, the research questions were developed based on the research objectives, yielding significant patterns and answers. Validity was also enhanced by minimising limitations and providing detailed descriptions of findings to understand the context (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Efforts to maintain personal biases in check and align the interview protocol with the topic's dimensions, through consultations with the research supervisor, ensured content validity (Sargeant, 2012). The participants were given the freedom to express and the interview sessions had to be recorded, audibly, with their consent. Necessary notes on verbal and non-verbal cues were also noted as well. The participants were notified that these details would be expunged after being referenced with the supervisor and throughout the overall study.

Data analysis procedure

Recurring patterns were noted in codes to later be translated into sub-themes in the data analysis procedure of the study. Irrelevant information not pertaining to existential nihilism and the emotional regulation of these students were also excised for a focused study. The interview recordings were first transcribed before they are coded to understand ideas and patterns in the participants' responses. They formed themes after being organised, for reviewing and development in discussion. These themes were then analysed to tally with the research objectives and questions based on the premise that the students were subjected to existential nihilism. The utilisation of thematic analysis highlighted an inductive approach as categories and themes emerged from the obtained information. Additionally, descriptive interpretations were also made to gain an insight on their sharing, perspectives and experiences as they dealt with existential nihilism.

Debriefing

The well-being of students who participated in the study was ensured through a debriefing process. This process addressed any psychological or emotional reactions from discussing existential nihilism and emotional regulation. Participants who felt overwhelmed or triggered could discuss their thoughts and seek clarification about the study. When necessary, a service sheet was provided with information on counselling referrals, resources, and emotional support, useful for students in an academic setting.

Results and Discussion

This section describes the themes identified through thematic analysis of private university students' experiences with existential nihilism and their emotional regulation strategies. Four main themes were revealed: emotional turmoil and existential despair, distinct coping mechanisms and strategies, the role of support systems, and strategised educational interventions. Each theme is discussed with reference to students' contexts and experiences, including direct excerpts from interviews. The study highlights common notions and different expressions among participants. Students reflected on their emotional changes since experiencing existential nihilism, discussing its overall effects and their individual perspectives. The results section is structured to cover the varied data, including anecdotes, coping mechanisms, individual thoughts, feasibility for change, and emotional experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of existential nihilism on emotional regulation.

Emotional turmoil and existence despair

Participants reported various emotional turmoil associated with extended periods of existential nihilism, with experiences differing based on individual contexts. Introspective accounts reveal that existential nihilism significantly impacts the emotional and psychological well-being of private university students in Subang Jaya. Two main subthemes emerged: academic disillusionment and existential angst and depression. Many participants described feelings of “meaninglessness” and a “lack of purpose,” which influenced their emotional and psychological challenges. A significant consequence of existential nihilism is its impact on academic performance, diminishing the perceived value of education and causing emotional turmoil that affected their studies. An example would be how Sally iterated her decision to avoid being present at her university:

“So I was in my final year degree at that time, and I actually never went to college. So the two semesters in that year, I did not go for my classes. I did not even pay my fees and join those subjects...I stopped whatever I used to do.” (Sally)

Another significant result of battling existential nihilism is existential despair, which thrusts individuals into a tumultuous sea of insecurity and identity conflict. The perpetual questioning and doubting of purpose breeds a profound sense of existential angst, permeating all facets of life. Participants recounted their intrinsic struggles, highlighting conflicts with education and emotional well-being. This internal strife cripples productivity and spreads a pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair.

“...to be honest, like I said, for me, my perspective on existential (nihilism) is based on depression right. So for emotional experiences, what I felt during most of the assignments that was given to me back then, especially, I think, in semester number two, that was the worst I felt in years or maybe perhaps in my life, I think.” (Sham)

Academic disillusionment

A significant repercussion of participants' emotional and psychological turmoils when facing existential nihilism is academic disillusionment. This left them feeling disconnected from their education, thus feeling demotivated to proceed and continue

with academics. Three participants with distinct anecdotes express a deep feeling of disillusionment with the conventional educational paradigm, believing that academic pursuits are meaningless during the period of their experience with existential nihilism. This is primarily due to the negative aspects that overpowered their lives at that point of time, thus leaving education devoid of relevance. One participant vividly describes this particular sentiment, stating:

“And like, you know, studies is always going to be there. And, and it's worse when you know you have an assignment coming up or when you have an exam coming up and this feeling kicks in. You know in that sense that you just think that you know like it's okay it doesn't matter if I'm going to study or not at the end of the day like the exam is an exam if I fail, I fail.” (Vaani)

Disillusionment due to existential uncertainty leads participants to see academic pursuits as inconsequential, eroding their motivation and creating a psychological conflict between the value of education and societal expectations. This results in academic disengagement and poor performance. The lack of existential purpose fosters a cycle of avoidance and procrastination, as participants like Rani, Ivan, and Vani feel stuck and recognise the futility of their efforts, using avoidance as a coping mechanism to delay tasks and reflect their emotional conflict. One particular expression that stood out:

“...I would basically try to avoid the inevitable of having to go to class by just procrastinating so much. And I think that was my way of just kind of delaying the day as much as possible because, and I tried to, and I was coping using procrastination because that was my way of delaying everything that I needed to do at the time.” (Ivan)

Highlighting the pervasive sense of apathy, participants feel an obvious disconnect from their professional aspirations. This also takes a toll on their personal judgements of themselves. There is an internal dialogue which happens, questioning their self-identity, ambition and capabilities. Cultivating these thoughts has an increased effect on doubt, hindering clarity on life and its direction. Amy briefly described her dilemma with self-identity and education, prior to becoming a part-time student and working at the same time. She mentioned having the need to sort out her imbalances within before making the decisions she needed to make in terms of studies and determining the direction she sought to take.

“.....So like during my university time, I'm not sure what I want to become, what I want to study. So at that time I questioned myself a lot like who am I? That kind of question. Why am I here? And this gave me quite a huge impact on emotional in that sense that I feel like myself quite useless.” (Amy)

There is a struggle with the nihilistic emptiness and participants wonder if their accomplishments matter in the face of existential irrelevance. Without a clear purpose or value, the pursuit of knowledge is pointless and might result in feelings of apathy and ennui. Participants describe a persistent sense of existential sadness that eclipses any feelings of fulfilment for a significant period in their academic journey.

Existential angst and depression

One of the most prominent emotional and psychological aspects of existential angst and depression is a persistent sense of hopelessness and despair. Participants spoke of experiencing a deep sense of inner conflict and anguish as a result of trying to answer existential questions about the need to do the things that they do and the purpose of life. A recurring pattern among the responses includes an internal question on whether the pursuit of something they are currently focused on “matters or not”. Feelings of alienation and hopelessness result from this internal conflict, which shows itself as a severe contradiction between one's sense of self and the pervasive existential void. It precipitates an identity crisis, where participants express feelings of profound uncertainty and ambiguity regarding their intrinsic sense of self. This ambivalence is rooted to the core, questioning one's value, purpose and overall self. This is exemplified in Zack's response when he was asked regarding his experience with existential nihilism.

“.....I became very anxious, my anxiety started going off the roof. I started doubting myself every day. I started doubting my capabilities, my intelligence, my appearance and everything in general. Like it became very difficult for me to live a normal life. And obviously since I couldn't share it with anyone, I had to keep it all in. And I lost the sense of myself in a way when it came to this kind of stuff.” (Zack)

Participants experiencing existential nihilism often describe a profound erosion of self-identity and a lack of purpose, feeling detached and aimless. They recount a deep sense of detachment due to their inability to reconcile internal conflicts with societal norms. Stella reflects on this, describing it as a visceral reality affecting her deeply. This existential sadness, stemming from the inherent absurdity and meaninglessness of existence, fosters a pervasive sense of nihilistic dread, leading to despair and disappointment. The dread impairs emotional regulation and daily functioning, casting a fog over thoughts and feelings. Many participants also experience alienation from themselves and the world, intensifying feelings of loneliness and isolation. Stella's reflection highlights the journey from “despair to self-realisation”, emphasising the “resilience of the human spirit”. Furthermore, the lack of existential meaning traps individuals in cycles of hopelessness, resulting in lethargy and indifference towards life's activities. Sally also described her thoughts on the subject matter, regarding how extreme existential nihilism can affect oneself and how it can impact one's psychological well-being.

“....They can have a lot of those depressive episodes that might lead to worse things. you know just not knowing where they're going or having a meaning in their lives or not sure what they want, I think that can lead to depression, a lot of anxiety issues, a lot of depression and hopefully not lead to suicide issues.” (Sally)

Distinct coping mechanisms and strategies

Existential nihilism introduces significant uncertainty into the lives of private university students in Subang Jaya, challenging their sense of purpose and meaning. To navigate this existential crisis, students employ various coping strategies, from embracing existential questions to seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfillment,

resisting the pull of meaninglessness. Students perceive existential nihilism as a tangible reality affecting their daily lives, leading to emotional and physiological reactions. These coping strategies are shaped by their unique backgrounds and evolving life perspectives. For some, the existential void represents a profound emptiness, while for others, it sparks a persistent quest for deeper understanding and purpose, becoming central to their psychological and emotional well-being. As Stella also quoted:

“....So each trial and tribulation has been like a testament to, I don't know if I make sense, but testament to like the resilience of human spirit, the testaments of like- finding meanings amid the chaos of existence.” (Stella)

The three subthemes that fall under these distinct coping mechanisms include seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfilment, embracing existential questioning, and refusing to be consumed by the void. Discussing this, it was stated that there is a frequent need to face difficult realities about the nature of existence in order to successfully navigate through the complexities of existential nihilism. It is also evident that many of the participating students faced existential questioning as a chance for them to grow out of the phase, personally develop and encourage self-discovery rather than shying away from it. As Zack noted, “You start to realise that maybe you don't belong somewhere and you question whether or not you're good for people, whether or not people should actually be around you. And you're constantly looking for clarity.” This embrace of existential inquiry acts as a stimulant for introspection and philosophical investigation, resulting in a more profound understanding of the self and the world around the individual. By asserting participants' agency in crafting personal narratives amidst existential chaos, their resistance becomes a form of defiance. This defiance sparks further questions, making them proactive and increasing their momentum, providing opportunities to find meaning. It underscores their indomitable spirit when confronting life's abyss. Paul shared, “....it is the philosophy that becomes the belief. And so then it is the challenge of the belief in the hopes to somehow hit the philosophy in that sense and perhaps change. I would say that I think the easiest sentence which I will always say is that no matter whether life is meaningful or what, it is just to embed a statement that life is always worth living...”

Seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfilment

Among private university students struggling with existential nihilism, seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfilment appears to be one of the coping strategies that provided significant help. In fact, this emphasises a multifaceted approach to the meaning-finding process, in which seeking professional help and engaging in intellectual inquiry are complemented by spirituality. There is solace in the said approach, providing composure and allowing the participant to be able to revert to personal beliefs and reframe the existing philosophy within. One particular participant articulated this sentiment aptly by stating:

“....if I had to speak from my point of view, I needed that spirituality, not, not specifically religion. It could be religion, it could be spiritual, but I needed that along with the intellectual and the getting help and seeking help that I needed. So I needed to find a sanctuary amidst the storm of uncertainty I was going through.” (Stella)

It is evident that existential nihilism causes individuals to turn to their philosophical framework. This is primarily done to make sense of their own experiences and find a sense of purpose in the midst of constant despair and uncertainty. Additionally, there is a tendency for deep introspection to occur while exploring responsibility and existential questions, inclusive of philosophical concepts, to cultivate a profound grasp of the self and their worldview. Another participant shared similar sentiments, highlighting the value of philosophical acumen when navigating issues pertaining to existential nihilism.

“...if you talk about the external, it's like, oh, this person seems happy or more joyful or contentment and satisfied. Does the person reflect a person who has meaning in life or purpose in life? However, I'd say that for this question that I very much do not agree to that also because that doesn't mean a person who is nihilistic cannot exhibit such emotions. Yeah, because again, it comes back to the philosophy, the belief...”(Paul)

There is also an emphasis on the need for “sanctuary amidst the chaos” of existential doubt, as Stella mentioned towards her reflection at the end of the interview. Seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfilment involves a process of inner alchemy, where people go through personal growth and change via introspective techniques and philosophical study. Ultimately, it becomes clear that pursuing philosophical or spiritual fulfilment is a helpful coping strategy for private university students experiencing existential nihilism because it gives them a sense of refuge and meaning in their own thoughts when facing existential nihilism.

Embracing existential questioning

Another significant coping mechanism among the private university students in Subang Jaya facing existential nihilism includes acknowledging and embracing existential questioning. This subtheme reflects an inclination in philosophical stance where people explore the depths of existential questioning while embracing the discomfort it causes. The study's participants demonstrated differing levels of involvement with existential questions, pinpointing the crux of this approach in negotiating the intricacies of meaninglessness. This also reflects the idea that addressing existential issues calls for a certain amount of philosophical introspection and curiosity. Rani shared her perspective on the subject matter by stating:

“ And they will see life completely just as a black and white kind of kind of way. You know, they will just say like, they will just see the good as the good and the bad as the bad. they will not see that there's any value to it because for them it's like life has got no meaning you know life doesn't have any purpose so why should I look too much into it you know...” (Rani)

While not many were able to “confront” the meaning of existential nihilism head-on, they had their own specific points of scrutiny that fostered the inclination. The proactive approach they took to tackle existential nihilism implies that one is willing to face, rather than constantly run from, life's inherent uncertainties. Participants also talked about how embracing existential questions gave them a framework for decoding their experiences. Stella said, "So each trial and tribulation has been like a testament to, I don't know if I make sense, but testament to like the resilience of human spirit, the testaments of like- finding meanings amid the chaos of existence. So I used to ask

questions like this in my head basically every moment of the day." This viewpoint emphasises how existential questioning may be a transforming tool for building resilience and development. Accepting existential questioning also necessitates acknowledging the changeable dynamic of meaning and purpose. This acknowledgement emphasises how unique it is, requiring each participant to find their own way across the existential abyss in search of their own meaning, direction and purpose. Participants also stressed the significance of confronting existential concerns bravely and honestly, while taking appropriate measures to proactively act on them. Refusing to give up shows a dedication to facing existential uncertainty with fortitude and resolve. This was also stressed in Amy's response as she reflected on her coping strategies:

"...I have a heart of resilience and also a determination that I know I want to change and I need to change, that kind of thing. So I keep on looking for answers. This is something that I feel maybe it could be one of the things that is hidden in me which I didn't notice actually helps to regulate my emotions." (Amy)

The importance of existential questions in promoting self-awareness and personal development was also discussed by the participants. When engaging with existential topics, one learns more about their priorities, values, and beliefs. This realisation illustrates how existential questioning has the potential to profoundly shape one's identity and perspective. Paul shared his epiphany on the topic, "..... because things are not within your control. So it starts coming up, you know, but the idea is that you kind of try to challenge it.. " (Paul). This subtheme is a reflection of a philosophical tendency to confront life's uncertainties with courage and curiosity. Participants develop resilience, understanding of their experiences, and regulate their emotions effectively via engaging with existential problems. Ultimately, embracing existential questions provide a means out of the existential nihilism towards authenticity and meaning.

Refusing to be consumed by the void

Participants emphasised that resilience is crucial for emotional regulation when dealing with existential nihilism. They noted that determination and resilience are necessary to navigate this challenging phase. While some adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms, others engage in positive activities such as sports and taking on committee roles in club events. Despite these efforts, many still feel trapped in the existential ordeal, experiencing a cyclical struggle with the existential void. Resilience emerged as a key coping strategy, highlighting a proactive approach to confronting existential turmoil and not succumbing to it. This was also exhibited in Reena's response when her feelings were conflicted when she was experiencing existential nihilism:

".....they are struggling a lot and that maybe also because they can't openly like get help sometimes, they feel maybe that they're going to be judged or whatsoever. So I think that I believe that it's very important to cope with those, if they're feeling negative, it's very important to cope with that..." (Reena)

Participants' anecdotes detailed the severe impact of existential nihilism on their mental health. Despite moments of hopelessness, a recurring theme was their inner strength and determination to persevere. This resilience often stemmed from the belief

in personal growth and self-discovery, even amid intense existential doubt. While participants had diverse upbringings and life ideologies, they commonly experienced existential nihilism as a predominantly negative force. They described doing whatever it took to emerge from this phase, if not completely, then enough to gain clarity and purpose. Sally resorted to journaling to process her emotions and build the courage to speak about her existential void, stating, "I think eventually what helped me was journaling...thank God, that was still something I felt like doing." Meaninglessness had caused several of the participants to undergo physical changes as they lived mundane lives. Their personalities and methods of approaching things or people differed in comparison to before. These participants also expressed a complex understanding of the existential void, recognising its existence but consciously resisting its all-consuming power. It was a deliberate effort to find meaning and reclaim agency over one's emotional state. Stella explained:

“So it's basically, it's discomfort. So it's within the discomfort that... mmm. It's like you have to refuse to be consumed by the existential void. So, you know, at first it's like anxiety and uncertainty and meaninglessness.” (Stella)

This subtheme highlights the participants' resilience when facing existential nihilism. They demonstrated dedication when confronting their existential concerns and finding meaning in the intrinsic chaos, even amidst conflicted emotions. This proactive approach to emotional regulation also illustrates how introspection may be an effective tool for resolving existential crises and building resilience in the face of adversity.

The role of support systems

In the face of meaninglessness and despair, participants struggled with diminished emotions and the challenge of standing back up. They faced a variety of issues with existential nihilism, each experiencing different tolls due to a lack of willpower and support. Addressing these problems among Subang Jaya's private university students requires a strong understanding of support systems. The qualitative study revealed that strong support systems are crucial for navigating existential crises. Many participants highlighted that professional services, such as counselling, had become a vital pillar of support in their experiences and recovery. Vani explained, “I think the support system is really a big factor here. A lot of people, they just generally don't have people to talk to”. This emphasises how important it is for students to have access to professional help in order to deal with the difficult emotions and existential concerns they can encounter. The two subthemes that emerge through analysis on the findings include importance of professional services and need for open conversations. Throughout the course of the study, participants emphasised the importance of having open conversations. Many expressed how crucial it is to have spaces where people may talk about existential issues without worrying about being judged or shrugged off. Paul aptly captured this sentiment, stating:

“But the question is, we don't see it because it's not talked about. It's not something we talk about in this era anymore. In Subang Jaya or relevant premises, I don't. I again, you know, you don't, you don't hear it.” (Paul)

The study highlights the importance of discussing and understanding existential nihilism's impact on students' emotional well-being, emphasising the need for open and inclusive environments. Participants indicated that supportive communities and professional services are crucial for overcoming existential crises, with universities playing a key role in addressing students' emotional needs, resilience and providing accessible resources.

Importance of professional services

When it comes to navigating existential nihilism among private university students in Subang Jaya, support systems play a crucial part in reducing emotional turmoil and building resilience. The significance of professional services, particularly counselling, in giving students the tools they need to successfully navigate the challenges of their existential journey is a crucial subtheme within this larger context. Participants in this qualitative research primarily stressed the critical role that professional mental health services play in overcoming existential crises and fostering emotional well-being. Professional help, however, includes various sources. These sources attend to different needs through multiple different approaches. Participants acknowledge their universities' help and efforts in providing accessible channels for students to seek professional support. Vaani highlighted the significance of counselling services by stating:

“...talking to counsellors are definitely going to help. And that's one good thing that I think universities are doing these days. In that sense, I'd say it's quite good.” (Vaani)

After first accepting that external help is needed, taking the first step to plan a session with a counsellor is important. The participants resorted to mental health professionals both internally at the university and externally at private practices. One participant, Sham, mustered up the courage to visit a psychiatrist due to prolonged meaninglessness during his education. It took a toll on his academic performance, but knowing that he had to pull through with the support of the people around him, he gathered the courage to make a proactive move and seek professional help for the betterment of his emotional well-being. Additionally, Ivan also echoed this sentiment by sharing his point of view, stating:

“So of course going for therapy and counselling is very helpful or if you have a mentor to talk to as well, I think that helps a lot.” (Sham)

External guidance is highly beneficial, as highlighted by participants. Interviews revealed a consensus on the value of professional services in fostering introspection and self-discovery. Participants felt heard when someone actively listened and saw things from their perspectives, aiding in the management of negative emotions and cultivating courage. This multifaceted approach of professional help, such as counselling, emphasises its role in helping students struggling with existential issues develop resilience and a holistic sense of progress. The objectivity and trust provided by professional sessions underscore the importance of impartiality in these supportive relationships. Amy shared a different perspective after utilising a different source of professional help. She focused more on discourses and general means to build her motivation and in pursuit of her self-identity and self-discovery. She explained:

“...I'll always look for, go for like talks, last time like motivational talks. Then, at that time I didn't go to therapy, to be honest. I went for training. So the training actually gave me quite a lot of insights in terms of self-discovery. And I believe self-discovery is a very important thing for a person if they want to make a change in their life, be it even for this existential crisis.” (Amy)

The participants highlight how important professional services are for helping those who are struggling with existential nihilism. These services have been shown to be essential in fostering emotional resilience and well-being in them. Such services range from offering support and resources for self-discovery to creating a safe space to converse.

Need for open conversations

Participants stress the importance of open conversations in addressing existential nihilism among students at private universities in Subang Jaya. They emphasise the need for opportunities where students can freely discuss existential concerns without fear of judgment. This highlights the importance of destigmatising discussions around existential nihilism and mental health within educational institutions. However, there is a noticeable gap in understanding that hinders these conversations, affecting students' clarity and their ability to address their situation. Some participants felt emotionally conflicted and hesitant to discuss their experiences, feeling trapped in their thoughts. Stella shared her thoughts on existential nihilism after having gone through the experience herself, highlighting the lack of awareness on the topic:

“It's something that it's something it needs to be a conversation that like you know how like people are not even aware of the term” (Stella)

The dismissiveness when trying to discuss existential concerns was also exemplified in other participants' responses. This is also due to the preconceived notions people already had, making the conversation difficult to occur. Reena highlighted that there is a tendency for people to succumb to their circumstances, as she said: “...they are struggling a lot and that maybe also because they can't openly like get help sometimes”. Open conversations are necessary for more than just raising awareness; they also need to provide an environment conducive to sincere questioning and exploration. Zack struggled earlier on, prior to his decision of approaching counselling services. He explained:

“I had gone through that phase in life and I had no one to help me out. I had no one to talk about my problems with. And it does make you feel alone for a while. It does make you feel like you are inferior to everyone else.” (Zack)

Participants stress the importance of providing safe platforms for students to explore existential nihilism and mental health, advocating for open dialogue and destigmatisation. They suggest tailored mentorship and counselling programs and emphasise the role of education in shaping attitudes. Recognising the intersectionality of these issues, there's a call for holistic approaches and support systems in educational institutions to promote students' emotional well-being.

Strategised educational interventions

Addressing the impact of existential nihilism on private university students in Subang Jaya involves strategised educational interventions to support emotional regulation and psychological well-being. Educational institutions face the challenge of implementing effective interventions amidst students' struggles with disillusionment and existential setbacks. Two specific subthemes within this theme are encouraging exploration and awareness, and fostering supportive communities. Participants stress the importance of promoting awareness and exploration in learning environments, as well as establishing environments conducive to open discussions about existential issues. Vivian shared her perspective and provided examples of what could be done at a university level. She mentioned:

“Alright, so besides giving a few examples before like counselling, mindfulness exercise, support groups, I believe I haven't talked about the... positive psychology workshop. So it's important for universities or anything to actually emphasise positive psychology principles. The session can actually help the student to focus on their strength.” (Vivian)

Educational institutions are pivotal in supporting students facing existential nihilism, fostering resilience, and mental health awareness. Through programs promoting inquiry and open communication, universities provide tools for students to navigate crises effectively, as noted by Vivian in her interview. Participants recognise the potential of educational interventions to mitigate the detrimental effects of existential nihilism, facilitating academic and personal growth. Integrating existential themes into campus programs and curriculum fosters a community of introspection, reducing feelings of isolation and enabling students to develop coping mechanisms within a supportive environment. These strategised interventions offer a proactive approach to addressing the intricate relationship between emotional regulation and existential uncertainty, shaping students' experiences and promoting holistic well-being. As Stella explained, while highlighting its current lacking:

“Yeah, it's like, it's basically promoting mental health awareness and encouraging exploration where I feel like we do not really encourage exploration within our education system.” (Stella)

Encouraging exploration and awareness

Under the overarching theme of strategised educational interventions, encouraging exploration and awareness emerges as a critical subtheme in combating existential nihilism among students at private universities in Subang Jaya. The study's participants highlighted the significance of fostering exploration and awareness as essential measures in reducing the effects of existential nihilism. A participant emphasised that universities should cultivate an atmosphere that encourages students to discuss existential issues and concerns in an open manner. Vivian mentioned:

“.....I would say some of them may express it more strongly because of the private university itself, the environment. Also they encourage diverse perspectives and also critical thinking.” (Vivian)

Educational institutions play a crucial role in supporting students' emotional and psychological well-being by raising awareness of existential concerns and providing necessary support. Participants underscore the importance of incorporating conversations and introspective activities that prompt students to confront existential issues, whether through multidisciplinary approaches or dedicated courses aimed at identity development. By integrating existential questioning into academic discourse, universities can foster critical thinking and intellectual curiosity. Participants express diverse preferences for coping mechanisms, from physical activities to targeted interventions like counselling, highlighting the need for universities to create spaces of acceptance where students can freely discuss their difficulties without fear of judgment. Despite the prevalence and apparent effects of existential nihilism, awareness of the term and its severity remains limited. Highlighting the lack of awareness, Paul and Stella stresses how the negative experiences are common among those with existential nihilism, but the word itself is not widely known. Stella emphasises:

“.....they discuss it, they speak about it, but I don't think a lot of people have the knowledge of existential nihilism or the word itself.” (Stella)

This shows the dichotomy between participants' thoughts on the subject matter, where some point out the lack of awareness, while others focus on budding opportunities where universities are putting in effort to expand their professional services such as counselling and incorporate inclusivity in their programs. The approach also acknowledges the interconnectedness of existential, emotional and psychological well-being. Ultimately, an environment of openness and resilience among students could be encouraged by normalising conversations on meaning, purpose, and existential issues.

Fostering supportive communities

The responses from the participants emphasise how crucial it is to create environments where people feel understood, welcomed, and supported in their existential struggles. This sense of community provides students a place to express their experiences and seek solace in shared understanding, which acts as a crucial buffer against the alienating consequences of existential nihilism. It is also important to acknowledge that a person's individuality and their ways of emotional regulation are heavily influenced by their upbringing, culture, and family background. This forms the basis of their core support system, determining whether they are able to cope with the effects of existential nihilism. Amy shared this in her response as she highlighted the prevalence of said issue:

“....I don't have much stats about how heavy or frequent this thing happens. But I believe it's majorly impacted by a person's belief, their culture, their family background.” (Amy)

Vaani emphasised the crucial role of educational institutions for students who “struggle” at home, often due to generational gaps. Proactive measures, such as peer support platforms and holistic university orientations, are essential to help students feel a sense of belonging and to foster mental health. Participants highlighted the importance of societal acknowledgment and acceptance of existential issues, stressing the need for inclusivity and understanding in both social and academic contexts. By destigmatising discussions about existential setbacks, communities can create safer environments for individuals to explore and manage these challenges without fear of rejection or judgment. Ultimately, fostering supportive communities and recognising existential issues are vital for enhancing students' emotional and mental well-being. Peer-led initiatives have the ability to offer practical help and empathy to those struggling by promoting peer collaboration. Ivan explains this through his experience:

”.....And I think just explaining yourself to these people and if they're really your friends and they really love you, I think they will understand in that sense.” (Ivan)

Addressing existential nihilism requires private university environments to cultivate supportive communities. Institutions may foster an atmosphere that enables students to face existential challenges with confidence by implementing proactive measures, peer support networks, and societal awareness initiatives. This section particularly delves into the interplay between existential nihilism and the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya, as unveiled through thorough and comprehensive analysis of the results. Participants in this particular research exhibited various outputs, unique to their own individual experiences. Scrutinising their shared experiences and perspectives, contextualising the findings with existing literature will aid in the critical evaluation of the research. Existential nihilism, as identified by the participants in similar fashion, relates to existential meaninglessness and a lack of purpose. Identifying patterns and differences was key in the process of analysis. Personal reflections on the research shall also be discussed, and the implications of it to various parties directly and indirectly involved, providing an overall view of existential nihilism and its effects on emotional regulation. The primary aim of the study was to explore the effects of existential nihilism on the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya. The information obtained included the intricacies of participants' experiences with the subject matter, some helpful and some not. That being the case, there were a plethora of similar details which complemented the existing literature reviewed prior to conducting the study. While that was highlighted, the participants also exhibited different methods of expression and coping mechanisms which contributed to the varied findings in the research. Thematic analysis was used to generate themes and subthemes after coding, to help identify findings related to the research objective.

The research highlights the profound impact of existential nihilism on the emotional regulation of private university students in Subang Jaya, with broader implications for psychological well-being. Through semi-structured interviews, participants described existential nihilism as a negative outlook due to a perceived lack of purpose, echoing previous research (Scott and Cohen, 2022). They reported feelings of meaninglessness and being stuck, which hindered progress and development. Emotional turmoil, including anxiety, isolation, and hopelessness, was common, affecting their ability to regulate emotions despite using various strategies. Thematic analysis revealed patterns in participants' responses, aligning with prior literature and supporting the research

question. A recurring theme was emotional turmoil and existential despair, with depression linked to nihilistic tendencies, as discussed in previous studies (Wang, 2022). The personal anecdotes shared in the semi-structured interviews illustrated the prevalence of existential nihilism among the private university students. Participants dealt with existential concerns, experiencing emotional and psychological tolls, regardless of whether they were facing personal or academic stress. Coping mechanisms varied widely, from seeking professional help to embracing spiritual and philosophical perspectives, highlighting the diverse strategies employed by participants to navigate existential nihilism. A significant theme in the participant accounts was distinct coping mechanisms and strategies, which highlighted the many methods people use to deal with the emotional turmoil caused by existential nihilism. The three subthemes include seeking spiritual or philosophical fulfilment, embracing existential questioning and refusing to be consumed by the void. The findings complement a previously studied paper on isolation, particularly existential and emotional loneliness as well as emptiness (Van Tilburg, 2021). Finding meaning through intrinsic exploration and utilising spiritual practices such as mindfulness and meditation helped participants in seeking solace. They also elaborated on efforts to resist feelings of despair and meaninglessness by seeking external help and engaging in introspection. It was not easy, as explained, but embracing personal responsibility and taking necessary actions helped them resist being consumed by the void.

The participants' experiences revealed diverse strategies for managing emotions amidst existential nihilism, including counselling, physical, spiritual, and social methods. Educational institutions, where participants spend considerable time, must incorporate discussions on purpose and self-identity into their curricula while providing emotional support resources (Toubassi et al., 2023). These findings highlight the need for comprehensive approaches to address existential nihilism and its impact on emotional regulation both in and beyond educational settings. Support systems emerged as crucial in dealing with emotional turmoil and existential despondency. The importance of professional services, such as mentoring and counselling, was underscored, as was the need for open conversations about existential issues to foster de-stigmatisation and ease in seeking assistance. Media portrayals also contribute to this shift, using creative measures to discuss mental health, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Krishnamurthy et al., 2024). Educational institutions must encourage exploration and awareness of existential concerns and foster supportive communities for students to seek guidance and understanding. The study emphasises expanding theoretical understanding, particularly self-determination theory, which addresses intrinsic motivation and the importance of relatedness for growth (Ryan, 2017). A multidisciplinary approach integrating philosophy, counselling, and individual experiences is essential for developing effective interventions for those struggling with existential nihilism. Addressing existential nihilism in educational settings and providing necessary tools and support can help individuals develop and thrive, emphasising the role of support systems and awareness in promoting emotional well-being.

Implications of the research

The formation of an individual's identity relies on numerous factors, including growth and exposure from a young age, and involves various parties in cultivating a student's purpose, identity, and meaning. The study emphasises the importance of

addressing the complexities of existential nihilism and its impact on emotional well-being among private university students in Subang Jaya. It underscores the need for increased awareness and support to mitigate issues related to existential nihilism, promoting self-awareness and appropriate coping mechanisms among students (He et al., 2023). Family support emerges as a significant factor in students' ability to confront existential concerns, highlighting the role of nurturing and empathetic environments in fostering emotional resilience and personal growth (Binder, 2022b). Counsellors and therapists can benefit from the study's findings by implementing specialised interventions, such as existential therapy techniques and logotherapy, to help students navigate existential challenges and develop healthy coping mechanisms. Universities are urged to integrate existential awareness into their support services and mental health programs to address existential concerns effectively. This collaboration with mental health professionals can facilitate workshops, support groups, and educational programs focused on existential nihilism and emotional well-being. Future research can build upon these insights by investigating the long-term impacts of existential nihilism on students' academic achievement and overall well-being through longitudinal studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is encouraged to allocate resources for mental health programs targeting existential issues and collaborate with academic institutions to develop holistic policies prioritising existential well-being. Other stakeholders, including student programs, non-profit organisations, and employers, also play vital roles in supporting students with existential nihilism through workshops, support groups, and awareness campaigns (He et al., 2023). Ultimately, addressing existential nihilism among private university students requires cooperation from multiple parties to enhance academic achievement and emotional well-being. By prioritising professional initiatives, cultivating supportive environments, and expanding awareness of existential nihilism, these parties contribute to the holistic development of students in Subang Jaya and beyond.

Limitations and recommendations for the future research

Future research should prioritise addressing existing gaps in understanding existential nihilism, particularly its prevalence among private university students (Croft et al., 2021). Despite insightful information from the current study on Subang Jaya's private university students, there is limited research on this topic, highlighting the need for more comprehensive studies into the complexities of existential nihilism and its effects on emotional well-being (Yair et al., 2020). Additionally, it is crucial to determine whether specific therapeutic modalities, such as logotherapy, can mitigate the negative effects of existential nihilism on students' ability to regulate their emotions. Potential disparities in emotional sensitivity between men and women in the context of existential nihilism should also be considered (Croft et al., 2021). Understanding if men and women perceive and manage existential nihilism differently could inform the development of gender-sensitive interventions tailored to meet the unique needs of both male and female students. Longitudinal research is necessary to explore the long-term effects of existential nihilism on students' emotional and psychological well-being (Sezer and Gülleroğlu, 2017), offering insights into academic performance, mental health outcomes, and emotional regulation. Recognising the diversity of students' backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic situations is crucial for inclusive research (Yair et al., 2020). Future studies should encompass a variety of perspectives and experiences to ensure interventions are available to all students. Expanding research

beyond private universities in Subang Jaya to include public universities, colleges, and vocational institutions would provide a comprehensive understanding of how existential nihilism manifests in various educational settings and demographic groups. Developing a theoretical basis grounded in self-determination theory can further the understanding of existential nihilism and its effects on emotional regulation (Sezer and Gülleroğlu, 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study sheds light on the nuanced experiences of private university students in Subang Jaya grappling with existential nihilism and their emotional regulation. The examination of themes like emotional turmoil and existential despair highlights the obstacles individuals undergo while attempting to make sense of their purpose and meaning, similar to these students in their educational settings. Furthermore, the identification of distinct coping mechanisms and strategies demonstrates the variety of approaches students take to managing existential nihilism, ranging from managing existential angst, resisting from being consumed by the void to pursuing spiritual or philosophical fulfilment. The findings highlight the significance of awareness and strategised educational interventions in educational settings, as well as the helpfulness of a proper support system. The analysis of reflexivity highlights the necessity of ongoing education and awareness about existential nihilism in academic environments, particularly on its emotional and psychological impact. The acknowledgment of limitations, such as focusing on students attending private universities and the need for further research across a wider range of educational institutions while considering different emotional sensitivities, highlighting the importance of broadening our understanding of the prevalence and consequences of existential nihilism. In the future, interventions that promote awareness as well as supportive communities could be extremely important in helping students become more emotionally cognizant and resilient in the face of existential nihilism.

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Conflict of interest

This study was independently conducted by the author, ensuring no conflicts of interest with any external parties.

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