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Research Article

"Nothing Matters, Boss": An Analysis of the Impact of Nihilism on Workplace Apathy

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Abstract

Nihilism, the belief that nothing inherently matters, has gained prominence in popular culture. This study examines two subsets of nihilism: existential nihilism, which posits that life and the universe lack meaning, and individual nihilism, which suggests that one's personal life holds no significance even if meaning exists elsewhere. The present study explored the relationship between these nihilistic beliefs and workplace variables, including job apathy and job satisfaction using a convenience sample of 58 adults in the work force. Four established scales were employed: the Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS), the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS, reverse-coded to measure individual nihilism), the Job Apathy Scale (JPS), and the Generic Job Satisfaction Scale (GJS). Point-Biserial correlations revealed significant negative relationships between age, income, and education with individual nihilism (PILS: r = -0.341, p = <.009) and job apathy (JPS: r = -0.325, p = <.013), while sex and hours worked showed no significant correlations. Participants aged 26–29 reported the highest levels of existential nihilism (M = 21.22, SD = 10.20) and individual nihilism (M = 29.48, SD = 10.76), whereas those in their 50s reported the lowest levels for both constructs. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between existential nihilism (ENS) and individual nihilism (PILS: r = 0.828, p = <.001). Both forms of nihilism were positively correlated with job apathy (ENS: r = 0.509, p = <.001; PILS: r = 0.629, p = <.001). Regression analysis demonstrated that existential and individual nihilism together accounted for 37% of the variance in job apathy. When analyzed split, individual nihilism (PILS) explained 39% of the variance while existential nihilism (ENS) explained 25%. Notably, when both predictors were included in the model, individual nihilism remained significant, while existential nihilism did not, suggesting that individual nihilism is a stronger predictor of job apathy. These findings highlight the psychological impact of nihilistic beliefs on workplace attitudes, with individual nihilism emerging as a critical factor in predicting job apathy. Study findings may support retention efforts and hallmark the importance of intrapersonal factors in the workplace. A non-diverse sample of participants and lack of research support the inverted use of the PILS are the studies chief limitations. Future research may seek to examine the influence of media on nihilistic beliefs and the impact these values have on workplace culture and productivity.

Keywords

Nihilism, Existential Nihilism, Individual Nihilism, Purpose in Life, Meaning in Life, Job Apathy

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1. Introduction

Nihilistic beliefs may be fueled by a variety of factors, such as harboring feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment in the broader context of meaning [37, 44]. These feelings are often accompanied by a negative mood and are commonly observed in depression [41]. While overall increasing, it does appear that certain populations are more vulnerable to developing nihilistic beliefs, such as young adults, individuals entering the workforce, and populations of Western countries [9, 25]. Longitudinal studies across generations have suggested that the perceived importance of values or purpose has changed over time [38, 39]. Observations following the nationwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further suggest a shift in how certain individuals derive meaning and motivation [40].

The many early writings on nihilism are unsurprisingly religious texts, wherein nihilistic patterns of thinking are addressed and their impact discussed [12]. The term nihilism, however, was popularized by German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi in the late 18th century [4] and author Ivan Turgenev in the mid-19th century, whose novel *Father and Sons* featured Yevgeny Bazarov, a nihilistic character [10]. Contemporary views of nihilism in Western culture continue to be most famously associated with philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Fredrich Nietzsche, who largely are credited with bringing the beliefs into pop culture [4, 10]. In the 21st century, these sentiments continue to be echoed through certain styles of music or television shows such as *Rick & Morty* or *BoJack Horseman.* Nihilistic beliefs also have prominence through social media use and internet memes where they are shared and even trivialized [7, 9].

The type of nihilism that has been so far discussed is best defined as existential nihilism. *Existential nihilism* is the belief that life has no meaning, and the human experience is inherently pointless [7]. We seek to make a differentiation between this and *individual* levels of nihilism, which in the literature is observed indirectly under the terms Meaning in Life (MiL) or Purpose in Life (PiL). PIL was first operationalized during the mid-20th century as a foundational part of logotherapy [5]. In the prevailing literature, PiL and MiL are often used interchangeably to refer to an individual's sense of direction or goal in life and are measured using various batteries [21, 31]. While PiL focuses on the individual's current personal goals and direction, MiL is often referred to as the broader search for significance in one's life experiences and activities [31, 32]. However, this distinction is not unanimously maintained throughout the literature as the concepts are relatively similar and both used to measure an individual's sense of well-being [21, 28].

Adopting a nihilistic perspective that morals are unfounded and life has no purpose can result in disengagement and a lack of motivation to engage in meaningful activities [10, 33]. Apathy, while a prominent symptom of depression, can also be regarded as a mindset independent of a depressive disorder [16, 19, 20]. Apathy as a mental state or emotional deficiency is distinguished from pathological apathy, which can occur in various neurocognitive disorders [6, 17].

Similar to modern nihilism, modern cultural attitudes of apathy were first identified in adolescents tied to social trends in the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, which emphasized themes of carelessness [11]. However, this did not appear to significantly affect the workplace until this generation prominently entered the workforce, taking apathy with them. Previous research conducted on job apathy was, similar to nihilism, measured indirectly. Much of the prevailing literature has focused instead on tops such as disengagement, absenteeism, lateness, and turnover [2, 3]. One of the earliest operational definitions of job apathy as identified by Marin, is a state of diminished motivation and affect toward a person's job [19]. In addition to this, it is possible that nihilism may also impact individual perceptions of job satisfaction. Individuals who struggle with meaning may perceive work-related tasks as meaningless, which inadvertently contributes to lower levels of job satisfaction [22]. Moreover, those who maintain perceptions of meaninglessness and lack of purpose may be more susceptible to adopt nihilistic beliefs [42]. Prior to the last decade, relatively little research specifically focused on job apathy, as it was not yet a well-established phenomenon [29]. Preliminary research suggests that employees who are married and younger may have higher levels of apathetic action in the workplace as opposed to their single and older counterparts, although it is unsure if this observation is applicable fully applicable to other populations. [45].

1.1. Study and Proposal

The increase in nihilistic beliefs has been observed through user traffic on social media, expressed through the medium of television and movies, and through the use of internet memes [9, 30]. As the literature and social trends have suggested, individuals who adopt such a nihilistic belief system are at an increased risk for depression and other mental health issues, as they struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Lower levels of PIL, individual nihilism, are found to share a positive correlation with psychoticism and neuroticism and a negative correlation with extraversion [27]. Similarly, increases in stress and disengagement regarding employment appear to be rising, possible precursors to job apathy [8]. Although these trends may be reflective of cultural shifts within the younger generations (i.e., Gen Z, Millennials), apathy and nihilistic beliefs and apathetic have been present to some extent within the prevailing American culture for multiple decades [13, 26]. Despite this, much of the literature has not measured nihilism directly instead assessing nihilism using other measures (i.e., PiL, MiL). Furthermore, job apathy, while having developed a strong initial literature base, has few direct comparisons in relation to the harboring of nihilistic beliefs.

Currently, there is a dearth in the literature regarding nihilistic belief systems and their potential relationship with job apathy, neither or which are well represented in the literature. Additionally, very few studies have utilized the ENS outside of its initial development date despite its statistical strength [7]. In contrast, the PILS has seen widespread usage, but usage, however, it has not been employed as an inverted measure to assess individual nihilism. The proposed study seeks to address the stated gap in the literature while also providing further psychometric data for the ENS and PILS.

1.2. Study Objectives and Hypothesis

(*Objective 1:* To determine the relationship between existential nihilism as measured by the ENS and individual nihilism as measured by the PILS.

Hypothesis 1.1: Existential nihilism and individual nihilism will have a significant positive correlation.

Objective 2: To determine whether Existential Nihilism as measured by the ENS or Individual Nihilism as measured by the PILS have a greater influence on Job Apathy as measured by the JPS.

Hypothesis 2.1: Existential nihilism will have a significant positive correlation with job apathy.

Hypothesis 2.2: Individual nihilism will have a significant correlation with job apathy.

Hypothesis 2.3: There will be a significant difference between the strength of these correlations.

Objective 3: To determine if there is a significant correlation between Job Apathy as measured by the JPS and job satisfaction as measured by the GJS.

Hypothesis 3.1: Job apathy will be negatively correlated with Job Satisfaction.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Study participants included 58 adults who were 18 years and older and employed in either a full-time or part-time position. Response rates were reported based on the total number of participants who started the survey in addition to the percentage of those who met screening criteria (i.e., employed adults) who consented to participate in the study. Participants were recruited using a convenience sample via social media websites and email.

2.2. Procedures

Approval for this study was obtained by the Florida Institute of Technology Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the collection of data. Participants were required to read and accept informed consent forms prior to undergoing participation in the study. The study measures were administered through a link using Qualtrics, an online survey and data-collecting software. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to gather basic demographic data (i.e., age, gender, race, average annual income, hours worked per week, highest degree earned) and then complete the following four measures: The Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS), the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS), the Job Apathy Scale (JPS), and the Generic Job Satisfaction Scale (GJS). Data sets were omitted from the study if they were incomplete or missing any data points. All participant data were assigned a code and analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Participants could respond to the survey in any setting in which they have access to a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Therefore, participants are not limited to location to initiate a survey response. Internet access was required for survey access and completion.

2.3. Measures

The Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS)

The Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS) was created in response to a perceived deficiency in the literature for a scale that measured nihilism directly. The author defined existential nihilism as a meaning-related worldview characterized by rejecting the existence of a meaning in life [7]. The result was an 8-item measure that utilized a 7-point Likert scale with strong internal consistency (α =.93) and validity creating a novel and reliable tool.

Purpose in Life Scale (PILS)

The Purpose in Life Scale (PILS) is a shortened version of the Purpose in Life Test (PILT) that was created to capture and measure the construct of purpose in life. The result was a 12-item inventory measured on a 5-point Likert scale with a strong internal consistency α = .92 [27]. For our study, the PILS was reverse coded so that high scores reflected lower purpose in life (i.e., individual nihilism).

Job Apathy Scale (JPS)

Schmidt and colleagues began their analysis with the purpose of creating a sound psychological measure for job apathy [29]. The result was a 10-item test (5 questions on apathic action and 5 on apathic cognition) on a 5-point Likert scale. Statistical analyses yielded a similar Cronbach's alpha of the items included in the measure (α = .87).

Generic Job Satisfaction Scale

The Generic Job Satisfaction Scale (GJS) was developed as a basic scale to be utilized by a wide variety of employers and occupations [18]. The scale itself has 10 items on a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha (α = .77) reached an adequate level and was thought to not be higher due to the diversity of the questions that analyzed multiple domains of workplace satisfaction [18].

2.4. Research Design

To examine the relationship between existential nihilism and individual nihilism with levels of perceived job apathy, a linear regression was conducted to determine the strength of the relationship. Assumptions and correlational analysis were conducted before the regression to assess the distribution of data and linearity. Point-biserial correlational analyses were utilized to compare collected demographic data to the scales measuring the listed constructs. Correlational analyses utilizing Pearson's r were utilized to compare all of the scales included in this study. A power analysis with a medium effect size of f^2 (V) = .30, power of .95, and $p < .05$ indicated N = 55 participants were needed for the current study. Adequate sample size was achieved at 58 participants.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistic of Participant demographic information Total Sample (N=58).*

Variable		***n***	**(%)**	***Total Sample (N=58)***
Gender				
	Male	24	(56.9%)	
	Female	33	(41.4%)	
	Prefer not to answer	1	(1.7%)	
Age				
	18-20	1	(1.7%)	
	21-25	7	(12.1%)	
	26-29	23	(39.7%)	
	30-39	11	(19.0%)	
	40-49	5	(8.6%)	
	50-59	8	(13.8%)	
	60-69	2	(3.4%)	
	70+	1	(1.7%)	
Race				
	Hispanic	5	(8.6%)	
	White	49	(84.5%)	
	Two or more races	4	(6.9%)	
Highest Level of Education				
	High school/GED	2	(3.4%)	
	Some college	9	(15.5%)	
	Associates degree	6	(10.3%)	
	Bachelor's degree	20	(34.5%)	
	Some graduate school	2	(3.4%)	
	Master's degree	14	(24.1%)	
	Doctoral Degree	5	(8.6%)	
Annual Income				
	$0-10,000	2	(3.4%)	
	$10,000-30,000	6	(10.3%)	
	$30,000-60,000	26	(44.8%)	
	$60,000-80,000	7	(12.1%)	

Variable		*n*	(%)	*Total Sample (N=58)*
	$80,000-100,000	6	(10.3%)	
	$100,000-150,000	4	(6.9%)	
	$150,000+	7	(12.1%)	
Average hours worked per week				
	10-20 hours	2	(3.4%)	
	20-30 hours	5	(8.6%)	
	30-40 hours	27	(46.6%)	
	More than 40	24	(41.4%)	

3. Results

3.1. Demographics

A total of 58 participants were included in this study, with demographic information shown in Table 1. All participants were adults in the workforce, 41.4% identified as female (n = 33), 56.9% identified as male (n = 24), and 1.7% preferred not to answer, (n = 1). Age was categorized with 1.7% between 18-20 (n = 1), 12.1% between 21-25 (n = 7), 39.7% between 26-29 (n = 23), 19% between 30-39 (n = 11), 8.6% between 40-49 (n = 5), 13.8% between 50-59 (n = 8), 3.4% between 60-69 (n = 2), and 1.7% being above at or above 70 (n = 1). Regarding participant ethnicity, 84.5% (n = 49), identified as white/Caucasian, 8.6% (n = 5) as Hispanic, and two or more races at 6.9% (n = 4). Regarding educational status, 3.4% indicated having at least a high school diploma (n = 2), 15.5% to hold some college education (n = 9), 10.3% holding an Associate's degree (n = 6), 34.5% holding a Bachelor's degree (n = 20), 3.4% holding some graduate level courses (n = 2), 24.1% holding a Master's degree (n = 14), and 8.6% holding a Doctorate degree (n = 5).

Annual income was assessed in brackets with 3.4% of participants indicated they earned less than or equal to $10,000 over the past year (n = 2), 10.3% between $10,000-30,000 ($n$ = 6), 44.8% between $30,000-60,000 ($n$ = 26), 12.1% between $60,000-80,000 ($n$ = 7), 10.3% between $80,000-100,000 ($n$ = 6), 6.9% between $100,000-$150,000 (n = 4), and 12.1% with an income at or above $150,000 ($n$ = 7). Regarding the amount of hours worked in an average week, 41.4% stated that they worked over 40 hours (n = 24), 46.6% stated 30-40 hours (n = 27), 8.6% stated 20-30 hours (n = 5), and 3.4% stated 10-20 hours (n = 2). A breakdown of these reported characteristics are found in Table 1.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics

Point-biserial correlations were utilized to measure demographic data against the primary measures used in this study. Relevant comparisons of the data are reported. Out of the age groups analyzed in this study sample, those between the ages of 26-29 reported the highest levels of existential nihilism (M = 21.22, SD = 10.20) and individual nihilism (M = 29.48; SD = 10.76). Whereas participants in their 50's reported the lowest for both existential (M = 8.63, SD = 1.19) and individual (M = 16.88, SD = 3.04) nihilism. Notably, both sex and average hours worked per week were not correlated with any of the variables. Results of a point-biserial correlation indicated that there was a significant negative correlation between age and the ENS r = -.304, p = < .020; PILS r = -.341, p = <.009; and JPS r = -.325, p = < .013. Income was only correlated with individual nihilism as measured by the PILS, r = -.334, p = < .010, and no other variables. Level of education was found to have a significant negative correlation with the PILS r = -.301, p = < .022 and the JPS r = -.337, p = < .010.

Hypothesis 1

The presented study sought to determine the strength of the relationship between existential nihilism as measured by the ENS and individual nihilism as measured by the PILS. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between the variables. Results indicated a significant and strong positive correlation between the two variables, r = .828, p = <.001, see Table 2.

Hypothesis 2

The study sought to determine the strength of the correlation between the ENS and job apathy as measured by the JPS. First, a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between the variables which yielded a significant positive correlation, r = .509, p = < .001. Pearson correlation coefficient was then computed to assess the linear relationship between individual nihilism and job apathy and was also found to have a significant positive correlation, r = .629, p = < .001 (Table 2).

Additionally, a linear regression was conducted to determine the amount that the ENS and PILS predict scores on the JPS. Results indicated that together the ENS, and PILS explained a significant proportion of variance in JPS scores, R^2 = .37, F (2,55) = 18.04, p = < .001. The analysis suggested that 37% of the variance in the levels of reported job apathy in the workplace were accounted for by harboring existential and individual nihilistic thoughts.

Both scales were then run individually to compare the difference in predictive ability between the two variables. The ENS predicted 25% of the variance in the total JPS score, R^2 = .25, F (1,56) = 19.56, p < .001. The PILS predicted 39% of the variance in the total JPS score, R^2 = .39, F (1,56) = 36.67, p < .001. Analyses showed that both the ENS and PILS significantly predict job apathy when run individually. The PILS, when run with the ENS, still demonstrated statistical significance; however, when run together the ENS no longer demonstrated statistical significance. These results suggested that individual nihilism is a stronger predictor of job apathy than rates of existential nihilism. Even after controlling for correlated demographic variables (i.e., age, education, income) these results were found to be significant.

Hypothesis 3

An ancillary analysis sought to measure the hypothesized negative relationship between the JPS and job satisfaction as measured by the GJS. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between these two variables. Results indicated that there was a significant negative correlation between the two variables of job apathy and job satisfaction, r = -.481, p = < .001 (Table 2).

Table 2. *Means, standard deviations and correlations with confidence intervals.*

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
ENS	16.67	9.37				
PILS	24.03	9.65	0.828**			
			[.72, .90]			
JPS	23.34	7.61	0.509**	0.629**		
			[.29, .68]	[.44, .76]		
JSC	35.07	6.83	-0.309*	-0.489**	-0.481**	
			[-.53, -.06]	[-.66, -.27]	[-.66, -.25]	

Note, M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. * = p < .05. ** = p < .01.

4. Discussion

Nihilism has also been keenly described as experiencing feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment toward traditional sources of meaning and purpose, although the term is nebulous [37]. Presently, much of the current literature on nihilism has been philosophical and speculative. Overcoming this and presenting nihilism as a concept that deserves empirical attention was a goal during this research project. Our study sought to establish the difference between different types of nihilism and operationalize these distinct constructs. In doing so, we seek to expand the small literature base and support both future research and potential workplace retention efforts.

In our study, it was observed that individuals in their 50s reported the lowest rates of nihilism when compared to all other age groups. However, the results of our study are in contrast with previous findings from Pinquart, et al., on PIL who found levels of individual nihilism increased as individuals aged [24]. Randle & Eckersley, however, noted that young adults were found to experience higher levels of nihilism than their older adult counterparts, which were consistent with our studies findings. [25]. Given the time between these studies, it is possible that the difference in reported nihilism levels may be explained as generational differences rather than contradicting data.

It can be further argued that at least some of the discrepancy observed within the literature on nihilistic beliefs could be in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. The higher levels of both existential and individual nihilism that were found in the young adult population in our study parallel findings from previous research on COVID-19. Panchal et. al., found that positive mental health outcomes in young adults decreased substantially after the pandemic with as many as 56% of young adults surveyed reporting either experiencing anxiety or depression [23].

Additionally, there is strong evidence from the literature suggesting an individual's attitude toward work is a stable trait that is personality dependent [15, 34, 35]. In our study, individual levels of nihilism were found to have a greater impact on job

apathy than existential beliefs alone. While not directly measured, these findings support the idea that personality-based belief system's likely have an underlying impact on job apathy. This interpretation is further supported by more recent journal articles on the impact of personality on workplace outcomes [14, 43].

4.1. Future Directions

Further research that assesses and defines the personality constructs within individual nihilism would tie our findings more strongly to the literature base. Additionally, past research has documented the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased levels of stress [1]. However, it does not appear that any studies have measured the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on nihilistic beliefs, suggesting further directions.

The results should also be conceptualized within current social and cultural factors, specifically internet usage, with the possibility that rates of individuals harboring nihilistic worldviews or similar beliefs have increased [39, 40]. Further research on cultural influence would be required to assess the degree that consumption of media predicts individual or existential nihilism.

4.2. Limitations

Firstly, a notable limitation was that race-based group comparisons were not interpreted in the statistical analysis due to an insufficient subgroup sample size. Secondly, a chief limitation of the study's literature review is the relatively lower number of articles that have measured nihilism directly resulting in a reliance on the constructs of PiL and MiL. Additionally, the subcategories of the JPS of apathetic cognition and apathetic action were not interpreted [29]. This choice was made primarily for simplicity due to the concept of nihilism already being assessed as two distinct forms.

Furthermore, the decision to utilize a PiL scale as opposed to MiL scale likely had an impact on the conclusions that can be derived from this study, since these constructs are related but distinct [31]. The PILS was selected for its specific wording of its items and ability to be reverse coded during analysis to support the construct of individual nihilism. Lack of evidence supporting the reverse coding of the PILS is a significant limitation and may not allow for direct comparison with future or previous studies utilizing the scale. A lack of developed scales sufficient in measuring individual nihilism further supported our decision to use the PiL scale. Lastly, the nature of data collection and the possible impact of self-report bias is worth noting while interpreting the results of our study.

5. Conclusions

Our study sought to address a dearth of the literature by conducting research on the predicted correlation between nihilistic beliefs and job apathy. Overall, it was found that the two measures predicting nihilism (i.e., ENS, PILS) and the measure predicting job apathy (i.e., JPS) were correlated and that the harboring of nihilistic beliefs, both individual and existential, significantly predicted the reported levels of job apathy. Much of the previous research concerning apathy has been primarily focused on workplace outcomes such as turnover, absenteeism, and productivity [2, 3]. More recently, apathy has now identified as its own workplace construct [29, 45]. Although our study yielded significant results, there is more potential for future research to observe the impact that nihilistic beliefs may have on work-related outcomes. Optimistic nihilism, the positive reframing of perceived meaninglessness, may also warrant further attention in the literature. Although not conventionally observed, the belief that nothing matters has been interpreted as a reason to create our own meaning out of life [33]. Other philosophical underpinnings suggest that harboring nihilistic beliefs can even provide a sense of freedom [36]. Perhaps it's our own cognitive framing that determines whether we are defeated or empowered when confronted with meaninglessness, and if anything, really matters.

Abbreviations

PIL	Purpose in Life
MIL	Meaning in Life
ENS	Existential Nihilism Scale
PILS	Purpose in Life Scale
JPS	Job Apathy Scale
GJS	Generic Job Satisfaction Scale

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Author Contributions

Zachary Tokar: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Patrick Aragon: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing

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Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

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