

## Post-Modern Individualism and the Psychosocial Cost of Atheism

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the profound consequences of disbelief in the postmodern era, arguing that the distancing from God is, in reality, a distancing from one's own essence. The rejection of traditional beliefs results not just in a spiritual void but also in a psychosocial crisis characterized by loss of meaning, belonging, and direction. Drawing on the insights of influential thinkers such as Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Byung-Chul Han, the discussion highlights how the void of meaning manifests in contemporary life through spiritual exhaustion, identity fragmentation, and social isolation. The article emphasizes that sustaining a meaningful life goes beyond mere belief in God; it requires a proactive approach to create meaning amidst modern existential challenges. Solutions proposed include individual meaning production, spiritual resilience, and the revitalization of social bonds as pathways to repair the psychological wounds inflicted by modern disenchantment. Ultimately, this work serves as a call to action—reconnecting individuals with their essence and enabling them to cultivate a life rich in meaning, even in the absence of divine belief.

**KEYWORDS:** postmodern individualism – existential void – atheism – psychosocial cost – loss of meaning – burnout society – identity fragmentation – logotherapy – spiritual resilience

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Being Human in an Age of Disbelief The modern age presents a paradoxical challenge for humanity, revealing not only a disconnect from religious beliefs but, more significantly, a disconnect from a deeper sense of meaning. The shift to a postmodern perspective has shifted the dialogue from "What do we believe?" to "Why should we believe?" Such questions evoke a delicate balance between the liberating possibilities of freedom and the existential threats of nihilism. In Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity," this fragmentation reflects a social landscape where nothing is fixed—values and beliefs are dissolving, contributing to a disturbing state of identity (Palese, 2013). Within this framework, Viktor Frankl's views illuminate the critical importance of meaning in human life. Frankl argues that the absence of meaning can lead individuals to experience a deep spiritual void and depression (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Rollo May reinforces this view by suggesting that disbelief in traditional structures not only weakens faith in God but also erodes the individual's self-esteem. This groundlessness fuels a reality in which individuals seek satisfaction in external validation and fleeting experiences, often finding themselves adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

Byung-Chul Han's research in his work *The Burnout Society* further illuminates this dynamic, showing that contemporary society's obsession with productivity attempts to fill the spiritual void left by lost beliefs, but fails to do so (Joy et al., 2018). This relentless pursuit of success becomes a double-edged sword, leading to exhaustion without fostering a satisfying sense of self or community. In this context, the individual struggles with existential loneliness, and the price of disbelief reverberates not only in personal turmoil but also in relationships and social interactions.

The psycho-social dimensions of faithlessness offer important insights into understanding the individual's inner world within the complexity of modern existence. This study aims to explore how the search for meaning affects personal identity and social bonds, delving deeply into how it shapes an experience of collective alienation and disconnection in an era marked by an intense quest for purpose.

### 2. THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE POSTMODERN INDIVIDUAL

The postmodern individual, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, is deeply entangled with the transience of relationships, values, and beliefs, and faces a profound identity crisis. In his groundbreaking work *Consuming Life*, Bauman argues that the essence of postmodern life is characterised by the relentless pursuit of consumer goods, leading individuals to form superficial relationships with transient objects rather than lasting personal bonds (Miller, 2009). This understanding of consumption not only enriches the superficial layers of identity, but also perpetuates psychological fatigue and forces individuals to constantly rediscover themselves. The flow of

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consumer culture erodes traditional social structures, leading to a lasting sense of identitylessness, where individuals perceive themselves as fragile and constantly changing (Swank, 2009).

The effects of these rapid identity shifts are significant. In his work *Modernity and Personal Identity*, Anthony Giddens details how society's loss of tradition has led to a situation where individuals are expected to construct their own identities without established norms (Thomson & Holland, 2002). This project of personal identity formation is a challenging task and can lead to emotional exhaustion, making individuals prone to existential crises. The postmodern individual must find their way in an environment of increasing options, which paradoxically can lead to indecision and a lack of significant self-identity. This view aligns with Bauman's observations in liquid modernity that nothing is fixed, identities are personalised, but evaporate in the context of market-driven demands and transient social approvals, becoming increasingly insignificant (Liakh, 2022).

Furthermore, sociological research on love supports similar conclusions. Eva Illouz argues that romantic relationships are also subject to the commodification patterns of contemporary consumer culture. The search for lasting love is often replaced by short-lived cycles of enlightenment, which ultimately turn into disappointment. The search for deep and meaningful connections reflects consumption habits driven by instant gratification and leads to relational dynamics that mirror a broader crisis of social identity. Instead of forming deep bonds, individuals increasingly rely on consumer-oriented relationships that temporarily boost their self-confidence, and when these bonds dissolve, they intensify feelings of isolation and hopelessness (Sarpila, 2012).

The transient nature of these self-structures contributes to psychological fatigue, creating a cumulative effect that drives individuals into a crisis of self-identity. Amidst the kaleidoscope of choices and consumption, the search for an authentic identity leads to uncertainty about the self and a loss of direction. This situation is particularly evident in younger generations, such as Generation Z, who navigate social spaces defined by fluid identities that conform to external pressures rather than personal truths (Rosyida, 2021).

Essentially, the tension between consumption tendencies and the internal human desire for stable identities represents a fundamental struggle within the framework of postmodernity. The desire for continuity and depth conflicts with the transience characteristic of contemporary existence and undermines the foundations on which a unique identity can emerge. As society transforms into this complex fabric of fluid identities and transient connections, it is imperative to accept the psychological consequences of these changes that question who we are and who we can be.

### 3. VIKTOR FRANKL AND THE LOSS OF MEANING

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy teaches that the quest for meaning in life is the fundamental motivation driving human behavior, contrasting with the notion that happiness is the ultimate goal. Grounded in Frankl's experiences as a Holocaust survivor, this approach suggests that when individuals experience an "existential void," marked by a disconnection from meaning, they often resort to superficial pursuits such as pleasure and productivity to fill this void. However, such attempts frequently lead to feelings of emptiness and depression (Parker, 2021)(Rahgozar & Giménez-Llort, 2024). Frankl posited that this void arises from a failure to connect with deeper existential values and truths, leaving individuals spiritually barren and susceptible to mental health issues (Rahgozar & Giménez-Llort, 2024).

The existential void can exacerbate conditions like depression, as individuals struggle with a lack of purpose. Frankl asserted that meaninglessness is at the core of depression. When faced with suffering, individuals' abilities to identify meaningful experiences or reasons for their existence can diminish, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair (Robatmili et al., 2014). This idea is supported by empirical research demonstrating that logotherapy can effectively alleviate symptoms of depression by helping individuals reconnect with meaning and purpose amid life's adversities (Rahgozar & Giménez-Llort, 2024)Arefpour & Mahdavi, 2021). For instance, a study on Iranian international students during the COVID-19 pandemic found that logotherapy interventions significantly improved their mental health by fostering a deeper understanding of life's meaning (Rahgozar & Giménez-Llort, 2024).

Moreover, logotherapy emphasizes the profound potential within every individual to find meaning even in the most challenging circumstances. Frankl highlighted the importance of the "will to meaning," suggesting that individuals possess an intrinsic drive to discover purpose in every life event, including suffering. By reconceptualizing suffering as an opportunity for growth, individuals can transcend their immediate circumstances and find strength through meaning (Parker, 2021). This perspective not only reduces symptoms of depression but also encourages a proactive stance toward life's challenges, fundamentally altering individuals' relationships with their existential experiences.

In conclusion, Viktor Frankl's insights reveal that the search for meaning is essential to our psychological health and well-being. The existential void that arises when individuals lose touch with meaning fosters various mental health challenges, including depression. By embracing the logotherapeutic approach, individuals can navigate their existential dilemmas more effectively, fostering resilience and fortitude through meaningful engagement with their lives, even in the face of suffering. Such transformations highlight the significant impact of meaning on mental health and underscore the ongoing relevance of Frankl's work in contemporary psychological practice.

### 4. ROLLO MAY AND EXISTENTIAL COURAGE

Rollo May's concept of existential courage challenges the idea that unbelief is equivalent to emptiness; on the contrary, he sees it as a profound test of the human spirit. May states, "Courage is the ability to create meaning in spite of emptiness," emphasising the natural responsibility individuals assume to create their own meaning even when faced with doubt and cynicism. This ideology argues that unbelief does not lead to purposelessness; rather, it offers individuals an opportunity to confront their existential realities and chart meaningful paths in life (Peltomäki, 2023). Within this framework, a lack of belief leads to a distinct awareness of freedom and responsibility, and this awareness can be overwhelming. May notes that for some individuals, the weight of this freedom evokes feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and emptiness, driving them towards avoidance behaviours. The challenge lies in confronting these feelings rather than escaping them. When people cannot bear the magnitude of freedom, they may feel paralysed and stuck due to existential anxiety. In contrast, embracing this freedom with existential courage enables individuals to regain the will to begin forging connections and discovering value in their lives amidst chaos and uncertainty. Paul Tillich offers a similar perspective in his work *The Courage to Be*, which explores existential courage. Tillich argues that true courage is not merely the absence of fear, but the ability to affirm one's own existence in the face of non-being or existential threats. He elaborates that people often seek security and validation from external sources, attempting to avoid a painful confrontation with their existential void (Walter, 2024). This avoidance ultimately tends to perpetuate a cycle of avoidance that deprives individuals of the opportunity for true self-realisation. Tillich suggests that by accepting our fears and existential anxieties, we can develop a courageous attitude towards life and establish a deeper connection with our personal and collective existence.

Furthermore, Erich Fromm highlights this dynamic in his work *Escape from Freedom*, arguing that as individuals experience increasing freedom, they are often confronted with a deep anxiety about the responsibility that comes with it. Fromm defines this escape from freedom as a psychological defence mechanism against the discomfort associated with self-liberation and initiative. He explains how this escape manifests in various forms, such as authoritarianism or conformism, and ultimately stifles individual growth and originality (Ratner, 2015). However, true existential courage involves resisting the tendency to revert to familiar but restrictive identities, thereby fostering a richer, more meaningful life.

As summarised by May, Tillich, and Fromm, existential courage empowers individuals to confront their circumstances and construct personal meaning despite the anxieties inherent in existence. This courageous act not only enables individuals to navigate life's complexities but also serves as a catalyst for authentic existence. By recognising and embracing their freedom and responsibility, individuals can regain the capacity to create values and meaning in a world that often feels empty. (Ratner, 2015). Thus, the courage to confront emptiness becomes not only a personal journey but also a collective call to overcome existential despair and forge deeper connections with ourselves and others.

### 5. BYUNG-CHUL HAN AND THE BURNOUT OF THE MODERN SPIRIT

Byung-Chul Han identifies "burnout" as a pervasive crisis at the heart of modern existence, challenging conventional notions of productivity and fulfillment. In his influential work, *The Burnout Society*, Han argues that, in the absence of a spiritual framework or belief in God, contemporary individuals have become enslaved to the "god of performance." This shift has engendered a culture obsessed with constant output, visibility, and the relentless pursuit of success, ultimately leading to a state of profound exhaustion and alienation from one's own essence (Pikalov, 2025).

In this performance-driven society, the obligations imposed by the neoliberal agenda create a paradigm where personal value is derived from productivity, leaving little room for introspection or genuine human connection. Individuals find themselves as both the prisoners and the guards of their own "work camps," perpetually striving for unattainable goals and constrained by the weight of self-imposed expectations (Pikalov, 2025). As Han eloquently articulates, the drive for achievement transforms aspirations into compulsions, resulting in a silent suffering that manifests as depression, exhaustion, and loneliness—the hallmark experiences of modern life.

Han's analysis offers a stark critique of how modern culture valorizes excessive positivity and productivity, which he associates with a broader malaise of self-exploitation. This relentless focus on performance often overlooks the individual's need for meaning and connection, which cannot be cultivated through mere productivity (Pikalov, 2025). Instead, Han advocates for a re-examination of our values, suggesting that genuine fulfillment arises from deeper emotional and connective experiences rather than from constant visibility and achievement.

Furthermore, Han's reflections resonate with Alain Ehrenberg's notions in *The Weariness of the Self*, which similarly examines the psychological toll of modernity on individual identity and well-being. Ehrenberg posits that the pressures of self-optimization and continuous performance have led to a crisis of selfhood, where individuals feel increasingly detached from their own needs and identities (BİÇER, 2024). This social landscape compels people to prioritize superficial success over meaningful engagement, resulting in a collective sense of emptiness.

Thus, understanding the phenomenon of burnout through Han's lens emphasizes the critical need for balance between productivity and emotional well-being. As individuals navigate their lives within this performance-oriented culture, establishing spaces for authenticity, self-care, and relational depth becomes essential. By challenging the prevailing paradigms of success and recognizing

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the limits of achievement, individuals can begin to reclaim their essence and cultivate a more meaningful existence amid a society that often promotes relentless self-exploitation. Ultimately, Han's insights into the burnout of the modern spirit invite us to re-evaluate what it means to live well in an age defined by performance demands and existential fatigue.

### 6. SPIRIPSYCHOSOCIAL COST: THE COLLAPSE CREATED BY DISBELIEF IN THE VOID

The concept of psychosocial cost, particularly in the context of modern society, stems from the interplay between disbelief and its resultant impact on individual and collective well-being. Disbelief, whether it manifests as skepticism towards traditional values or a lack of spiritual conviction, can lead to significant psychological challenges at the individual level. As individuals distance themselves from meaningful belief systems, they increasingly operate as solitary observers rather than as active members of a community. This isolation diminishes shared solidarity and trust, essential elements required for a functioning society (Pikalov, 2025).

The contemporary individual, faced with an existential void, often finds themselves seeking instant gratification as a substitute for deeper connection and meaning. This tendency is further exacerbated by the pressures of a performance-driven culture, as articulated by Byung-Chul Han in "The Burnout Society." Han suggests that when individuals are conditioned to constantly strive for success and visibility, they may forsake authentic relationships and self-realization (Pikalov, 2025; (Fernández–Manso, 2024). The emphasis on individual achievement can erode social bonds, contributing to an atmosphere of collective depression where shared experiences are replaced by competing for validation and success.

In this landscape, mental resilience becomes increasingly fragile. As community connections fade, individuals may resort to superficial engagements—whether through social media or transient relationships—in an attempt to fill the void left by deeper connections. This incessant chase for external validation ultimately leads to psychological strain, marked by feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and burnout (Fernández–Manso, 2024). The erosion of meaning results in not only an individual's disconnection from their essence but also a broader societal decline in cohesion, as trust in shared values diminishes.

Moreover, this disengagement fosters a culture of instant gratification, where long-term fulfillment is sacrificed for immediate pleasure. The pursuit of meaning—a pursuit that calls for patience, introspection, and a willingness to confront one's own vulnerabilities—essentially becomes sidelined in favor of quick rewards and distractions. As noted by Han, this shift is emblematic of a larger existential crisis in which individuals find themselves entangled in self-exploitation, leading to a pervasive sense of fatigue and malaise that is often normalized in contemporary life.

The psychosocial costs of this situation extend far beyond individual experiences, manifesting in a collective narrative characterized by depression and despair. When the societal fabric is weakened, the potential for communal resilience diminishes, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and disconnection. Therefore, reclaiming meaningful connections—both on an individual and societal level—becomes essential for reversing the prevailing trends of disbelief and its consequences. This requires a return to values that prioritize community, interdependence, and a shared sense of purpose, allowing for more profound engagement with life that transcends the superficial chase for performance metrics.

In essence, navigating this landscape necessitates a concerted effort to redefine success, encouraging individuals to seek meaning not just through achievement but through the reconnection with self and others, aspiring to create a society where trust, solidarity, and genuine fulfillment can flourish despite the challenges posed by disbelief.

### 7. SPIRIPSYCHOSOCIMOVING AWAY FROM GOD OR MOVING AWAY FROM YOURSELF?

The postmodern individual's distancing from God reflects a deeper disconnection from their own essence, leading to psychosocial trauma. This detachment often manifests as a spiritual crisis and a significant loss of meaning in life. In an era where traditional belief systems are increasingly questioned or dismissed, individuals commonly find themselves grappling with an existential void, resulting in feelings of rootlessness both spiritually and socially (Pikalov, 2025).

The psychological implications of such distancing are substantial; modern individuals, lacking a guiding framework or community ties, often become solitary observers rather than active participants within a community. This isolation can lead to diminished mental resilience, increased susceptibility to despair and anxiety, and feelings of loneliness and depression. By distancing themselves from meaningful connections—whether divine or communal—individuals inadvertently cultivate environments where collective despair can thrive, further eroding the social bonds that sustain community (Oliveira et al., 2022). The deterioration of these social networks intensifies feelings of alienation, manifesting as an erosion of meaning and purpose in everyday life.

This situation warrants a reevaluation of the relationship between disbelief and meaning. The proposition that the solution lies not in a return to God but in a return to meaning is particularly salient. Viktor Frankl's assertion that "what keeps a person alive is not what they believe in, but why they live" underlines this idea. He posits that the construction of meaning is a fundamental human drive, crucial for emotional survival and psychological health (Jost et al., 2004). When individuals redirect their focus towards cultivating personal meaning—whether through interpersonal relationships, creativity, or altruistic endeavors—they can begin to heal from existential dislocation.

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However, the challenge of rekindling a sense of meaning in a performance-driven culture is daunting. Byung-Chul Han argues that contemporary society's emphasis on competition and individual achievement often undermines authentic human connections, leaving individuals vulnerable to "burnout" and psychological dissolution (Pikalov, 2025). To navigate these complexities, individuals should prioritize meaningful engagements over superficial pursuits, fostering deep relationships, pursuing passions that resonate with their core values, or participating in community activities that nurture a sense of belonging.

Ultimately, moving away from God may compel individuals to confront the reality that they have also distanced themselves from their core identities. Regaining a sense of purpose and authenticity necessitates a conscious effort to reconnect with oneself and others, creating pathways leading to meaningful experiences and relationships. By centering meaning in their lives, individuals can cultivate resilience against the overwhelming challenges of modern existence, paving the way for personal growth and community revitalization.

## 8. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The conclusion of this study highlights a crucial observation regarding the postmodern individual's relationship with meaning, self, and community in a world increasingly marked by disbelief. The rejection of God signifies a more profound disconnection from essential aspects of existence, resulting in a spiritual void that many individuals encounter today, which manifests itself in various forms—spiritual exhaustion, identity fragmentation, and social isolation. This disconnection underpins a pervasive sense of aimlessness and despair among individuals navigating the complexities of modern life.

The concept that atheism transcends a mere metaphysical break and encapsulates psychosocial trauma is particularly compelling. This perspective illuminates the subtle yet profound impact that a lack of belief in something greater has on both individual psychologies and societal dynamics. The isolation that follows from such disbelief can lead individuals to feel disconnected from a higher power as well as from one another, eroding the sense of belonging essential for psychological well-being.

However, the pressing issue becomes one of sustaining a meaningful life rather than merely engaging in the discourse of religious belief. As Rollo May profoundly stated, "Courage is the ability to create meaning in spite of nothingness." This essence of courage is not about reconstructing outdated belief systems but rather fostering individual resilience and creating personal meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. May's assertion suggests that individuals have the capacity to find or create value and purpose in their lives through relationships, self-exploration, and pursuits.

In this context, solutions to address the psychosocial voids created by unbelief demand a multipronged approach. Individual meaning production plays a vital role in this process, encouraging individuals to engage deeply with their passions, interests, and interpersonal relationships, thus forging connections that can facilitate personal growth and satisfaction.

Additionally, fostering resilience can serve as a buffer against the psychological impacts of modern life. This may not necessarily require a traditional religious framework but can involve an exploration of philosophy, art, and nature—elements that can provide individuals with a sense of connection to something larger than themselves. Moreover, strengthening social bonds through community involvement and shared activities can mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation, enabling individuals to regain a sense of belonging and support critical for mental health.

In conclusion, the journey toward repairing psychosocial voids created by disbelief underscores the importance of reconnecting with oneself and fostering meaningful connections with others. While the pathway may differ for each individual, embracing the courage to seek meaning and understanding within oneself and within the community can pave the way for a more enriched and fulfilling existence in an increasingly fragmented world. A holistic approach to meaning production and community engagement can play an essential role in the revival of social cohesion and personal identity, ultimately leading to a healthier society.

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