

Scientific article
IRSTI 02.15.51




<https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1281-2026-154-1-34-48>

ALIENATION, NIHILISM, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: A COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF POST-SOVIET AND POSTMODERN YOUTH NARRATIVES

^a Nazgul BOLATBEKOVA  , ^b Gulnar ADAYEVA , ^b Uydu Yücel MUALLA 

^a *L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan*

^b *Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey*

 nazgul.zholamanovna@mail.ru

Abstract. The article *Alienation, Nihilism, and the Search for Meaning: Comparative Philosophical Analysis of Post-Soviet and Postmodern Youth Narratives* explores the psychological, cultural, and existential transformations experienced by contemporary youth in two distinct yet converging socio-historical contexts: the post-Soviet space and the postmodern Western world. Through a comparative philosophical lens, the study examines how feelings of alienation, nihilism, loss of direction, and fragmentation of identity manifest in youth discourses, creative practices, and socio-cultural behaviors. The work analyzes the influence of rapid social change, destabilized value systems, digital hyperreality, and the erosion of traditional institutions on young people's search for meaning and belonging. Drawing on existential philosophy, critical theory, cultural studies, and narrative analysis, the article reveals both unique and shared patterns in youth responses to uncertainty, trauma, and ideological vacuum. Special attention is given to how young individuals negotiate their identity through art, online communities, subcultures, and creative self-expression. The research contributes to understanding the global crisis of meaning and offers insights into how youth construct new ethical frameworks, communal bonds, and existential strategies amidst socio-cultural turbulence.

Keywords: alienation; nihilism; post-Soviet youth; postmodern youth; existential philosophy; identity crisis; cultural narratives; digital culture; comparative philosophy; value systems transformation; social change; narrative analysis.

For citation:

Bolatbekova, N., Adayeva, G., & Mualla, U.Y. (2026). Alienation, nihilism, and the search for meaning: a comparative philosophical analysis of post-Soviet and postmodern youth narratives. *Jete – Journal of Philosophy, Religious and Cultural Studies*, 154 (1), 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1281-2026-154-1-34-48>

ЖАТСЫНУ, НИГИЛИЗМ ЖӘНЕ МАҒЫНА ІЗДЕУ: ПОСТКЕҢЕСТІК ЖӘНЕ ПОСТМОДЕРНДІК ЖАСТАР НАРРАТИВТЕРІН САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ ФИЛОСОФИЯЛЫҚ ТАЛДАУ

^a Назгуль БОЛАТБЕКОВА, ^a Гульнар АДАЕВА, ^b Уюду Юджел МУАЛЛА

^a Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті

^b Стамбул университеті

ОТЧУЖДЕНИЕ, НИГИЛИЗМ И ПОИСК СМЫСЛА: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ФИЛОСОФСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ ПОСТСОВЕТСКИХ И ПОСТМОДЕРНЫХ МОЛОДЁЖНЫХ НАРРАТИВОВ

^a Назгуль БОЛАТБЕКОВА, ^a Гульнар АДАЕВА, ^b Уюду Юджел МУАЛЛА

^a Евразийский национальный университет имени Л.Н. Гумилева, Астана, Казахстан

^c Стамбульский университет, Стамбул, Турция

Аңдатпа. «Жатсыну, нигилизм және мағына іздеу: посткеңестік және постмодерндік жастар нарративтерін салыстырмалы философиялық талдау» атты мақала қазіргі жастардың екі түрлі, бірақ өзара тоғысатын әлеуметтік-тарихи контексте – посткеңестік кеңістікте және постмодерндік Батыс әлемінде – бастан кешіп отырған психологиялық, мәдени және экзистенциалдық трансформацияларын зерттеуге арналған. Салыстырмалы философиялық көзқарасқа сүйене отырып, еңбекте жатсыну, нигилизм, өмірлік бағдарлардың жоғалуы мен тұлғалық иденттіліктің фрагменттелуі сияқты сезімдердің жастар дискурсында, шығармашылық тәжірибесінде және әлеуметтік-мәдени мінез-құлқында қалай көрініс табатыны талданады. Жастардың мағына мен тиесілілік сезімін іздеу үдерісіне жедел әлеуметтік өзгерістердің, құндылық жүйелерінің әлсіреуін, цифрлық гипершындықтың және дәстүрлі институттардың эрозиясының ықпалы қарастырылады. Экзистенциалдық философия, сыни теория, мәдениеттанулық зерттеулер мен нарративтік талдауға сүйене отырып, мақала белгісіздік, травмалық тәжірибе және идеологиялық вакуум жағдайында жастар реакциясының бірегей және ортақ үлгілерін айқындайды. Ерекше назар жастардың өз иденттілігін өнер, онлайн-қоғамдастықтар, субмәдениеттер және шығармашылық өзіндік өрнектеу практикалары арқылы қалай құрып, қайта пайымдайтынына аударылады. Зерттеу жаһандық мағына дағдарысын түсінуге үлес қосып, жастардың социомәде-

Аннотация. Статя «Отчуждение, нигилизм и поиск смысла: сравнительный философский анализ постсоветских и постмодерных молодежных нарративов» посвящена исследованию психологических, культурных и экзистенциальных трансформаций, переживаемых современной молодежью в двух различных, но во многом сходящихся социально-исторических контекстах: постсоветском пространстве и постмодерном западном мире. С опорой на сравнительную философскую перспективу в работе анализируется, каким образом чувства отчуждения, нигилизма, утраты жизненных ориентиров и фрагментации идентичности проявляются в молодежных дискурсах, творческих практиках и социокультурном поведении. Рассматривается влияние стремительных социальных изменений, дестабилизации ценностных систем, цифровой гиперреальности и эрозии традиционных институтов на поиски молодыми людьми смысла и принадлежности. Опираясь на экзистенциальную философию, критическую теорию, культурологические исследования и нарративный анализ, статья выявляет как уникальные, так и общие модели реакции молодежи на неопределенность, травматический опыт и идеологический вакуум. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как молодые люди конструируют и переосмысливают свою идентичность через искусство, онлайн-сообщества, субкультуры и практики творческого самовыражения. Исследование вносит вклад в осмысление глобального кризиса смысла и

ни турбуленттілік жағдайында жаңа этикалық шеңберлерді, қауымдастық формаларын және экзистенциалдық стратегияларды қалай қалыптастыратыны туралы жаңа ракурстар ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: жатсыну; нигилизм; посткеңестік жастар; постмодерндік жастар; экзистенциалды философия; иденттілік дағдарысы; мәдени нарративтер; цифрлық мәдениет; салыстырмалы философия; құндылық жүйелерінің трансформациясы; элементтік өзгерістер; нарративтік талдау.

предлагает новые ракурсы понимания того, как молодежь создает новые этические рамки, формы общности и экзистенциальные стратегии в условиях социокультурной турбулентности.

Ключевые слова: отчуждение; нигилизм; постсоветская молодежь; постмодерная молодежь; экзистенциальная философия; кризис идентичности; культурные нарративы; цифровая культура; сравнительная философия; трансформация ценностных систем; социальные изменения; нарративный анализ

Introduction

The contemporary era is characterized by radical social, cultural, and technological transformations that are experienced particularly acutely by young people. At the intersection of the post-Soviet historical experience and the globalized postmodern space, new types of worldview are formed, generating complex forms of alienation, nihilism, and existential search for meaning. Young people find themselves in a situation where familiar value systems have lost their stability, institutional authorities are discredited or fragmented, and traditional forms of identity are subject to constant revision. Under these conditions, the search for the meaning of life, self-determination, and the experience of one's own subjectivity become key existential tasks. The post-Soviet context carries within itself the experience of the collapse of the "grand narrative" of socialist ideology, the crisis of collective utopias, and the trauma of historical rupture. Generations that grew up after the fall of the Soviet Union inherited a contradictory space of memory, in which nostalgia for the stability of the past coexists with disappointment, criticism of the totalitarian experience, and the pragmatics of neoliberal reforms. In this situation, young people face a double burden: on the one hand, they are expected to adapt to the logic of the market, competitiveness, and individual success; on the other, they live in a cultural field of unfinished reflection on the Soviet past and an uncertain image of the future. This generates specific forms of alienation: from the state, from older generations, from official history, and often from their own collective "we," which has not yet crystallized into a stable identity.

In turn, the postmodern Western context is associated with phenomena of the fragmentation of reality, the loss of modernity's "grand narratives," total mediation of experience, and the digitalization of everyday life. Youth in postmodern culture live in conditions of information overload, acceleration of time, constant change, and a multitude of competing narratives that do not claim truth but function rather as styles, poses, and temporary masks. Under such conditions, there emerges a feeling of an "empty center," the absence of ultimate foundations, and the relativization of morality and truth. Nihilism here manifests itself not only as a philosophical position but also as an everyday sensibility: irony, cynicism, playful handling of identities, refusal of deep involvement, and skepticism toward any claims to authenticity.

Despite the differences in historical experience, post-Soviet and postmodern youth environments display shared features. In both cases, one can observe the growth of existential uncertainty, a sense of instability and fragility of social ties, the weakening of traditional

institutions of socialization (family, school, religious communities), as well as the shift of meaning-making into the sphere of individual experience and creative self-expression. Young people turn to art, literature, cinema, music, subcultures, and digital communities as spaces where they can experiment with identity and develop alternative forms of solidarity and meaning construction. In these narratives—personal diaries, blogs, social media posts, artistic texts, and representations in mass culture—experiences of alienation and despondency are concentrated, mingling with humor and self-irony, as well as attempts to formulate new grounds for life in a world without stable supports.

The relevance of this study stems from the fact that the phenomena of alienation and nihilism, traditionally examined in philosophy within the context of modernity and industrial society, require rethinking in light of new cultural and technological realities. Classical concepts of alienation (K. Marx, H. Marcuse, E. Fromm), nihilism (F. Nietzsche), and existential crisis (S. Kierkegaard, J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus) provide an important theoretical toolkit, yet today's youth reality adds new dimensions: digital mediation of experience, algorithmic governance of attention, virtualization of communication, and the strengthening of visual and performative aspects of identity. Under these conditions, alienation manifests itself not only as a socio-economic or political phenomenon, but also as an ontological and aesthetic condition of a subject living in "hyperreality" and network structures.

This article aims to carry out a comparative philosophical analysis of post-Soviet and postmodern youth narratives in which motives of alienation, nihilism, and the search for meaning are articulated. By narratives in this context, we understand both artistic and mass-cultural texts (literature, cinema, music, TV series) and autobiographical practices (diaries, blogs, social media posts, oral histories) through which young people construct and express their vision of the world and of their own "self." The comparative approach makes it possible to identify the unique features of each cultural-historical context as well as the shared structures of experience that reflect a broader global crisis of meaning.

The object of the study is the existential and cultural manifestations of alienation and nihilism in the discourses of post-Soviet and postmodern youth. The subject of the study is the philosophical foundations and narrative forms of the search for meaning under conditions of a fragmented, post-utopian, and digitally mediated world. The focus is on questions such as: how young people experience the gap between expectations and reality; what strategies of meaning-making they employ; how notions of freedom, responsibility, and community are transformed; what forms of resistance or adaptation are elaborated in response to experiences of emptiness, absurdity, and groundlessness (Nietzsche, 2018).

Methodologically, the study relies on an interdisciplinary approach that combines tools of philosophical hermeneutics, existential analysis, phenomenology, critical theory, and cultural studies. Narrative analysis plays a particularly important role, as it allows us to view youth statements not only as a reflection of social reality but also as an active process of identity and meaning construction. At the same time, the contextual conditioning of narratives is taken into account: post-Soviet stories are woven into the fabric of a transitional society, traumatic memory, social stratification, and inequality, while postmodern Western narratives unfold in a space of consumption, media excess, liberal democracy, and crisis of trust in institutions.

The scholarly novelty of the research lies in the attempt, within a single philosophical project, to compare two, at first glance, distinct but in many ways intersecting realities—post-

Soviet and postmodern youth cultures-through the prism of alienation, nihilism, and the search for meaning. Unlike works devoted primarily to sociological or psycho-pedagogical analysis of youth, this article emphasizes their existential and philosophical dimensions, interpreting youth narratives as a form of “everyday philosophy” in which fundamental questions about being, freedom, justice, and the possibility of authentic life are refracted. The practical significance of the work is linked to the fact that a deep philosophical understanding of the experiences and narratives of contemporary youth can contribute to comprehending crisis phenomena in education, politics, and culture, as well as to developing forms of dialogue and support that are more attuned and adequate to youth sensitivities. For educators, psychologists, social workers, cultural theorists, and youth policy specialists, the results of the study may serve as a basis for critically revising stereotypes about a “lost generation” and for formulating new approaches to working with young people, approaches grounded in respect for their complex, contradictory, yet deeply reflective experience (Camus, 2020).

The structure of the article follows the logic of a gradual deepening of analysis. First, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the concepts of alienation, nihilism, and the search for meaning in the history of European thought are elaborated; then, the post-Soviet and postmodern cultural contexts are analyzed; after this, the focus shifts to concrete youth narratives and practices of self-description. Particular attention is paid to how young people transform the negative experience of emptiness and devaluation into an impulse for creative self-expression, the formation of alternative communities, and the development of new ethical orientations. Thus, this study represents an attempt to hear the voice of youth as philosophically meaningful, to see in their texts and images not only symptoms of crisis but also a potential for rethinking human existence under conditions of late modernity. By analyzing the intersection of post-Soviet and postmodern narratives, the article seeks to contribute to a broader discussion of the fate of the subject, freedom, and meaning in a world where former supports have been destroyed, and new ones are only beginning to emerge in fragile yet intense practices of everyday life.

Methodology, methods, and materials

This study is based on an interdisciplinary corpus of materials and a combination of predominantly qualitative, humanistic methods of analysis, which is determined by the nature of the phenomenon under investigation: alienation, nihilism, and the existential search for meaning in the narratives of post-Soviet and postmodern youth. The materials of the research include both philosophical and theoretical texts and empirical sources that represent the living voice of the younger generation in various cultural and media forms (Sartre, 2002; Heidegger, 2011).

As a theoretical and philosophical foundation, the study draws on a body of classical and contemporary literature on the problems of alienation, nihilism, existential anxiety, and the crisis of meaning. This corpus includes works by K. Marx, F. Nietzsche, E. Fromm, H. Marcuse, S. Kierkegaard, J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, M. Heidegger, as well as authors of critical theory and poststructuralism who analyze the phenomena of late capitalism, postmodernity, mediation, and hyperreality (J. Baudrillard, F. Jameson, Z. Bauman and others). These texts serve not only as a source of conceptual tools, but also as a methodological orientation in the interpretation of contemporary youth narratives as manifestations of broader ontological and cultural processes.

A second major body of materials consists of cultural texts in which youth experiences and self-descriptions are expressed: fiction and poetry, cinema, song lyrics (including alternative, rock, rap, and indie scenes), TV series, comics and graphic novels, as well as products of mass culture addressed to youth audiences or created by young authors. The selection of these sources was carried out according to several criteria: first, their belonging to either the post-Soviet or postmodern (primarily Western) cultural context; second, thematic saturation with motifs of alienation, loss of reference points, existential emptiness, identity crisis, and search for meaning; third, the degree to which the text articulates the subjective experience of the younger generation, its specific language and imagery. Both canonized or critically recognized works and more marginal but highly indicative texts for youth sensibility were included in the analysis.

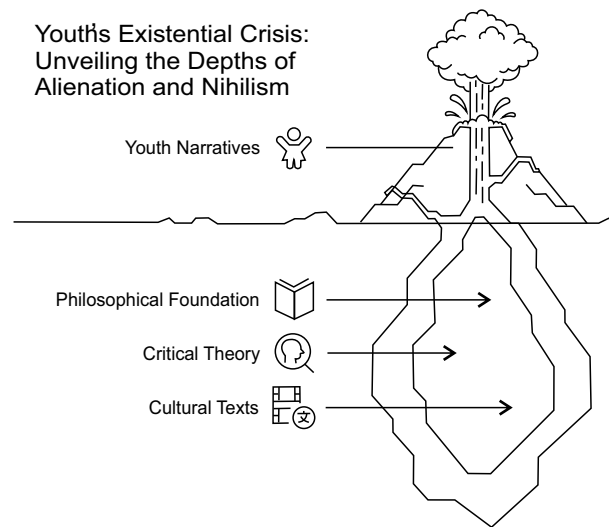


Figure 1. Youth's Existential Crisis: Unveiling the Depths of Alienation and Nihilism

A third group of materials comprises autobiographical and everyday narratives created by young people themselves in digital and offline environments: personal blogs, posts, and comments on social media, personal essays, diary entries, and oral histories recorded through qualitative interviews and semi-structured conversations. These sources make it possible to see not only the artistically elaborated, but also a more “raw,” immediate level of experiencing alienation and nihilism, as well as everyday attempts at meaning construction. The selection of such materials was based on thematic monitoring of open platforms and on analysis of interview transcripts with members of youth communities in post-Soviet and Western contexts. In working with these sources, ethical aspects were taken into account: anonymization of personal data, avoidance of quoting sensitive content in recognizable form, and a respectful attitude to the boundaries of private life (Marx, 1988; Fromm, 2019).

The methodological framework of the study is built on a combination of several key approaches. Central to this framework is the hermeneutic method, which allows youth narratives to be considered as texts requiring interpretation in light of their historical, cultural, and individual context. The starting principle here is the understanding of narrative not as a “transparent” reflection of social reality, but as a meaning-generating practice in which the subject simultaneously describes and constructs their mode of being in the world. Hermeneutics

makes it possible to uncover hidden horizons of meaning, implicit assumptions, and value orientations that structure young people’s statements about themselves and the world.

Alongside the hermeneutic approach, narrative analysis is actively employed, as developed in contemporary philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies. Narrative analysis entails attention to the structure of the story, types of plot, character images, modes of representing time, and the use of metaphors, irony, and intertextual references. Youth narratives are viewed as variations on fundamental plots-loss, rupture, exile, revolt, journey, search-while it is important to trace how these plots are modified in post-Soviet and postmodern contexts, and what forms are taken by the figure of the “superfluous,” “excess,” or “invisible” subject (Baudrillard, 2015), (Bauman, 2008).

The comparative (comparativist) method is the second major analytical tool. The research is constructed as a step-by-step comparison of two contexts, post-Soviet and postmodern, at the level of thematic motifs, narrative structures, images of time and future, attitudes toward the past, and forms of articulating alienation and nihilism. This comparison is not reduced to a simple opposition of “East” and “West” or “transitional” and “developed” societies; on the contrary, the emphasis is on discovering intersections, analogies, and resonances that allow us to speak of the global character of the crisis of meaning while preserving key cultural and historical differences.

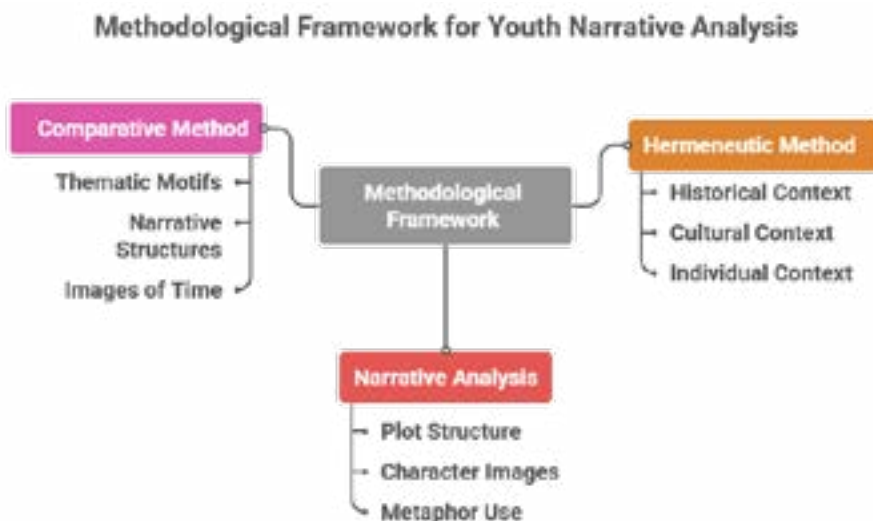


Figure 2. Methodological Framework for Youth Narrative Analysis

Existential analysis is used to uncover the basic structures of human existence that manifest themselves in youth narratives: experiences of limit situations (meaninglessness, absurdity, death, loneliness), the experience of freedom and responsibility, fear of nothingness, search for authenticity, and striving for recognition and belonging. This method makes it possible to interpret individual stories not only as symptoms of social pathology or products of cultural fashion, but also as distinctive “existential reports” on the encounter between the human being and the fundamental conditions of their existence (Beck, 2000).

The phenomenological approach complements existential analysis by focusing on how everyday reality is experienced by young people-how the world is “given” to them: fragmented, accelerated, media-centered, saturated with images, and deficient in genuine encounter

with the Other. Describing the phenomenological horizon of experience makes it easier to understand why certain philosophical motifs-nihilism, alienation, absurdity-become for youth not abstract notions but existentially charged realities. Critical theory is used as a tool for analyzing structures of power, ideology, and hidden mechanisms of normalization and control that influence the formation of youth narratives. It helps examine how economic, political, and media practices shape the “fields of the possible” for young people, set the boundaries of what is desirable and acceptable, and what forms of resistance, irony, and distancing young people develop in response.

The analytical procedure was carried out in several stages. At the first stage, the theoretical background was formed: key philosophical concepts of alienation, nihilism, and existential crisis, as well as works on the sociology and cultural studies of youth, were examined. At the second stage, empirical materials were collected and initially selected: literary, journalistic, and autobiographical texts, cinematographic and musical works, and digital narratives (blogs, posts, etc.). At the third stage, coding and thematic grouping of materials were conducted: major motifs (emptiness, meaninglessness, anxiety, aggression, irony, revolt, exhaustion, search for support, desire for community and so forth), stable images (the city as a space of alienation, the family as a source of trauma or support, virtual space as refuge or trap, etc.), and typical plot moves were identified. At the fourth stage, these motifs and structures were compared across post-Soviet and postmodern contexts, similarities and differences were revealed, and typological models were formulated (Boym, 2016).

An important methodological element of the research was the reflexivity of the researcher. Recognizing that the interpretation of narratives is inevitably linked to the researcher’s own values and cultural presuppositions, efforts were made throughout the study to become aware of and explicate these presuppositions. This approach helped minimize the risk of projection and moralizing, treating the voices of young people not as an object of judgment but as a partner in philosophical dialogue. The study is purposefully limited to qualitative rather than quantitative analysis. Statistical representativeness is not the primary goal here; instead, the focus is on “thick description” of individual narratives and the in-depth interpretation of typical cases and symbolically rich images. Such an approach is consistent with the aims of philosophical research oriented toward understanding meaning rather than measuring the frequency of a phenomenon (Yurchak, 2014).

Certain methodological limitations are related to linguistic and cultural boundaries: the analysis primarily covers Russian-language post-Soviet and English-language (or translated) Western corpora of texts, which inevitably leaves part of the diversity of youth voices outside the scope. In addition, the dynamic nature of the digital environment and the constant renewal of content make it impossible to construct a fully exhaustive corpus of sources. These limitations are recognized and taken into account in the formulation of conclusions, which claim typological and heuristic, rather than universal, validity. Thus, the materials and methods of this study are aligned with the task of hearing and interpreting the voice of youth in its philosophical significance, comparing different cultural-historical contexts, and identifying common existential structures within them. The combination of hermeneutic, narrative, existential, phenomenological, and critical analysis makes it possible to discern in youth narratives not only symptoms of crisis, but also attempts at creative overcoming of alienation and nihilism and the development of new forms of meaning and community under the conditions of the late modern world (Goffman, 2000; Turner, 2004).

Discussion

The analysis of theoretical sources and diverse youth narratives has shown that the phenomena of alienation, nihilism, and the search for meaning in post-Soviet and postmodern contexts indeed form a shared problem horizon, yet they manifest in different modes and with varying intensity. At the same time, the similarities prove to be no less significant than the differences: both contexts display a profound crisis of traditional foundations of identity, the weakening of collective utopias, and a shift of the search for meaning into the sphere of individual experience, creativity, and micro-communities. One of the key results of the study is the identification of several stable typologies of alienation that recur in youth narratives from both contexts, though with different emphases. In post-Soviet texts, historically charged alienation from the state, official discourse, and the “grand history” is particularly prominent. Young people often describe themselves as a generation living “after” -after the collapse of the empire, after the failure of utopias, after a great project that was not their choice yet defined the space of their lives. This “after” is experienced as the inheritance of a not fully processed trauma: narratives repeatedly return to motifs of distrust toward institutions, irony toward official rhetoric, and suspicion of any “great ideas” coming from above. Here, alienation functions as a protective distance, an attempt to preserve a space of personal freedom in conditions where collective identity appears either imposed or empty.



Figure 3. Alienation and Search for Meaning in Youth Narratives

In postmodern Western narratives, alienation is much more closely linked to a sense of being dissolved in the media and consumer environment. The central reference point is not so much the state or ideology as “the system” in a broad sense: the market, corporations, algorithms, standardized trajectories of success. Young authors describe themselves as “invisible parts” of a vast machine, as “profiles no one needs” in an endless digital stream. Alienation here takes the form of fatigue with constant self-presentation, with the need to endlessly construct an attractive image of the self that meets the expectations of others. Unlike the post-Soviet skeptical distance

toward the past, the dominant tone here is exhaustion with the present, with the excessive intensity of the “here and now.”

In both contexts, however, a shared experience stands out: the sense of being “superfluous” or “excessive” in relation to social structures. In post-Soviet narratives, this appears as a mismatch between official rhetoric of success, modernization, and digitalization and the actual experience of periphery, poverty, and symbolic invisibility. In postmodern narratives, it is expressed through the experience of communicative oversaturation alongside a lack of genuine closeness, a feeling of replaceability and interchangeability of the person within the logic of the market and social networks. Thus, alienation proves to be not only a social but also an anthropological phenomenon: young people describe themselves as those whose presence in the world has no guaranteed meaning or justification. Another important result is the identification of several forms of contemporary nihilism that differ from classical philosophical models. In post-Soviet texts, one frequently encounters a “hereditary” nihilism linked to the devaluation of previous ideological constructions. Youth who were not direct participants in the Soviet project nonetheless live in a space where words like “ideal,” “duty,” and “service” are associated with experiences of hypocrisy, violence, and coercion. As a result, there arises an attitude of “believing in nothing,” perceiving any lofty language as potential falsehood. Such nihilism is protective: it shields against the repetition of historical trauma but simultaneously blocks the possibility of positive self-identification with any values.

In postmodern narratives, an “ironic nihilism” is more common - a combination of skepticism toward any claims to absolute truth with a playful, citational, and at times deliberately superficial stance. Young people describe the world as a space of endless simulations, styles, and fandoms, where seriousness and depth are constantly undermined by irony and meme culture. Nihilism here is expressed less in the explicit claim that “nothing has meaning” than in the inability to maintain a serious attitude toward anything for very long. Any involvement appears temporary, any identity a performative mask, any experience content to be produced and consumed.

At the same time, in both contexts we find another form that may be termed “paradoxical nihilism”: the proclaimed absence of meaning is paradoxically accompanied by an obsessive, often painful striving for meaning. Youth texts repeatedly articulate messages about emptiness, meaninglessness, and absurdity, but the sheer intensity of these statements testifies to dissatisfaction with such a position. Nihilism appears not as an endpoint, but as an experience of an intermediate state, a kind of “purgatory of meanings” through which the contemporary subject passes. Of particular interest is how young people in both contexts seek to overcome alienation and nihilism by developing strategies for the search for meaning. One of the most visible strategies is the turn to creativity and aesthetic self-fashioning. Artistic, musical, literary, and visual practices -often emerging on the periphery of official culture -become spaces where it is possible to express non-obvious, “improper” emotions for public discourse: shame, rage, despair, trauma, exhaustion. A text, drawing, track, short video, or post becomes a form of existential expression and at the same time a way of creating around oneself a micro-community of people with similar experiences.

In the post-Soviet context, such practices are often accompanied by a turn to local contexts and memory: urban ruins, sleeping districts, abandoned sites, and family histories become material for aestheticization and reflection. Through the fixation of cracks, gaps, and voids, young people symbolically appropriate a space that official rhetoric either silences or glosses

over. This can be interpreted as a strategy of “weak resistance” -an attempt to defend the right to one’s own gaze that fits neither a heroic nor a purely consumerist narrative.

In the postmodern Western context, aesthetic practices are frequently linked to identity construction through genre mixing, stylization, irony, and the use of digital effects. Youth narratives show complex play with gender, corporeality, and affiliation with particular subcultures. Here, the search for meaning is often expressed not through an appeal to collective memory but through the invention of one’s “own” language, visual code, and performative style by which the subject asserts their existence in a world where “nothing is true, and everything is permitted.” Another common tendency identified in the study is the shift of the search for meaning from the sphere of “grand” projects and ideologies to the domain of small, everyday practices. Youth narratives in both environments demonstrate the growing importance of micro-solidarities: circles of friends, creative collectives, online communities, activist initiatives, and local mutual-aid projects. Meaning here ceases to be understood as something once and for all given “from above” and is instead experienced as something created in joint action, in care for the other, in the experience of co-presence and participation.

In the post-Soviet context, such practices often take the form of horizontal initiatives: informal educational projects, volunteer movements, local cultural centers, and independent media. In conditions of mistrust toward official structures, it is precisely these forms that become spaces of genuine interaction for young people and of the formation of alternative value orientations. In the postmodern context, network-based communities of interest, fandoms, activism around minority rights, ecology, and mental health play a crucial role. Despite the fragmentary and temporary nature of many of these associations, it is within them that young people often first experience recognition, support, and the possibility of speaking about their experiences without fear of judgment.

It is noteworthy that in both contexts, the theme of mental health, burnout, anxiety, and depression occupies a significant place. Youth narratives increasingly articulate the experience of inner disintegration, insomnia, panic attacks, and the feeling of an “emotional desert.” At the same time, the engagement with this theme is linked not only to complaint but also to the search for a language that can legitimize one’s fragility and vulnerability in a world oriented toward efficiency, productivity, and success. In this sense, discussions about mental health become a new form of ethics: they imply the recognition of people’s interdependence and the need for care and gentle attitudes toward oneself and others. An important task of the discussion is to reflect on the limitations and potential risks of the strategies identified. Creative and ironic reworking of nihilism, the aestheticization of alienation, retreat into micro-communities and digital spaces carry not only the potential for resistance but also the risk of solidifying a position of chronic distance and “playing instead of living.” Acknowledging the absence of grand meanings can relieve the pressure of unattainable ideals, but it may also weaken the willingness to assume long-term responsibility and political engagement.

In the post-Soviet context, excessive orientation toward “small worlds” and individual trajectories risks pushing systemic problems -inequality, corruption, violence, authoritarian tendencies -to the periphery of attention or turning them into something perceived as beyond the possibility of change. In the postmodern context, constant play with identities and meanings can lead to a perception of any form of collective action as yet another “performance” lacking depth and durability. Nevertheless, the synthesis of research results allows us to claim that in both contexts, youth narratives are not reducible to a simple reproduction of a nihilistic gesture

of refusal. Rather, they capture a movement from naïve faith in stable foundations -through the experience of radical disappointment and emptiness -toward the search for new forms of meaning-making that are more modest, local, but often more honest and existentially saturated. Alienation and nihilism appear not only as a dead end but also as forms of negative work, a kind of “clearing of the ground” from dead symbols, on whose place new configurations of freedom, responsibility, and community can emerge. Thus, the results and their discussion show that post-Soviet and postmodern youth narratives, despite their differences, testify to a shared condition of the late-modern subject, deprived of guaranteed meanings yet not having relinquished the need for meaning itself. Contemporary young people, positioned between outdated ideological constructions and as yet unformed alternatives, construct their own worlds from fragments of culture, memory, media, and personal experience. In these fragile, sometimes contradictory practices, one can see not only signs of crisis but also the beginnings of a new existential and ethical sensibility, capable of rethinking the relationship of the human being to self, others, and the world under conditions where old supports are lost, and new ones are only starting to take shape.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how alienation, nihilism, and the search for meaning are experienced and articulated in the narratives of post-Soviet and postmodern youth. Approaching these issues through a comparative philosophical lens, it sought to bring into dialogue two different yet intersecting cultural-historical contexts, in order to understand both their specificities and their shared existential horizons. The analysis of theoretical literature, cultural texts, and autobiographical and digital narratives has demonstrated that contemporary youth inhabit a world marked by the erosion of stable value systems, the weakening of traditional institutions, and the fragmentation of collective identities. Yet within this world, they persistently continue to ask fundamental questions about meaning, freedom, belonging, and the possibility of an authentic life. One of the central conclusions of the research is that alienation among young people today cannot be adequately understood in purely economic, political, or sociological terms. In both post-Soviet and postmodern contexts, it assumes a deeply existential dimension. In the former, alienation is closely tied to the legacy of a collapsed ideological project, to unresolved historical trauma, and to a pervasive distrust of official narratives and institutions. In the latter, it is linked to the logic of late capitalism, digital hyper-connectivity, and the commodification of attention and identity. Despite these differences, both contexts reveal a common sense of superfluosity, invisibility, and precariousness: young people experience themselves as subjects whose presence in the world is not supported by any unquestioned foundations.

The analysis of nihilism also showed that we are not dealing simply with a repetition of classical philosophical forms. Contemporary youth nihilism is often ambivalent and internally contradictory. In the post-Soviet space, it emerges as a defensive refusal to believe in “great ideas” after the discrediting of past utopias; in postmodern environments, it appears as ironic distancing, as an inability or unwillingness to take anything entirely seriously in a world perceived as a field of simulations and performances. In both cases, however, nihilism rarely functions as a final position. It is better understood as an intermediate state: a phase of negative work in

which inherited meanings are dismantled and tested, while the need for meaning itself does not disappear. The intensity with which emptiness, absurdity, and meaninglessness are described often reveals not indifference, but a heightened sensitivity to the absence of convincing answers.

Equally important is the conclusion that youth responses to alienation and nihilism are not limited to resignation or passive adaptation. The study has shown multiple strategies of meaning-making in both contexts. Creativity – literary, musical, visual, digital – emerges as a key resource for articulating difficult experiences and for building small communities of recognition and solidarity. Post-Soviet youth often work with local spaces and memories, transforming ruins, peripheral neighborhoods, and family histories into materials for reflection and re-appropriation. Postmodern youth experiment with style, genre, and performance, inventing new languages and visual codes by which to assert their presence in a world where no overarching narrative is taken for granted. A further common tendency is the shift of meaning from the domain of “grand narratives” and large-scale projects to everyday practices and micro-communities. Friendships, creative circles, volunteer groups, online communities, activist initiatives all become places where meaning is experienced as something co-created in shared action and mutual care, rather than received from above. This tendency is visible in the growing importance of discussions around mental health, vulnerability, and emotional labor: by speaking openly about anxiety, burnout, and depression, young people not only describe their suffering but also outline a new ethical sensitivity based on mutual support and recognition of fragility.

At the same time, the study has highlighted the ambivalence of these strategies. Aestheticization of alienation, ironic play with identities, withdrawal into small worlds and digital refuges can help individuals survive and resist oppressive structures, but they can also reinforce chronic distance, cynicism, and political disengagement. In the post-Soviet context, the focus on private trajectories and local projects can obscure systemic issues and reduce them to an unchangeable background. In the postmodern context, the tendency to treat any collective action as another performance may weaken the capacity to commit to long-term, transformative projects. These tensions do not invalidate youth strategies of meaning-making, but they do underline the need for further critical reflection on their possibilities and limits. Methodologically, the study has demonstrated the value of combining hermeneutic, narrative, existential, phenomenological, and critical approaches in the analysis of youth cultures. Such a combination makes it possible to read youth narratives not merely as sociological data or as cultural symptoms, but as forms of “everyday philosophy,” in which fundamental questions about being, freedom, justice, and community are posed and negotiated in concrete, lived terms. This perspective invites researchers, educators, and policymakers to treat the voices of young people not as raw material to be interpreted from above, but as partners in a shared effort to think through the conditions of life in late modernity. Of course, the study has its limitations. The analysis focused primarily on Russian-language post-Soviet and English-language or translated Western sources, leaving many other linguistic and regional variations outside the scope. The rapidly changing nature of digital environments makes it impossible to capture the full range of youth narratives; any corpus will remain partial. Moreover, the qualitative and interpretive character of the research emphasizes depth over breadth, offering typological rather than statistically representative conclusions. These limitations, however, do not negate the heuristic value of the findings; instead, they point to directions for future work – including studies of other regions, languages,

and marginalized youth groups, as well as closer examination of gender, class, ethnicity, and religion within the patterns identified here.

Ultimately, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the condition of the contemporary subject. Post-Soviet and postmodern youth narratives, taken together, portray a generation living after the collapse of certainties, surrounded by competing demands, images, and possibilities, yet still refusing to abandon the search for meaning, connection, and a livable future. Their stories document the breakdown of inherited frameworks, but they also disclose tentative experiments in building new ones in art, in relationships, in small acts of solidarity, in fragile yet persistent forms of hope. To take these narratives seriously is to recognize that the question of meaning has not disappeared in late modernity; it has simply changed its form and locus. It no longer resides in overarching ideologies or institutional promises, but in the everyday work of individuals and small groups who, amid alienation and nihilism, continue to ask: how can one live, and live humanly, here and now? By tracing how young people in different contexts pose and attempt to answer this question, the present study does not offer ready-made solutions. Instead, it invites us to listen more attentively to those whose voices most clearly register both the crisis of the present and the possibility of another, as yet unnamed, configuration of human existence.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 176 p. URL: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9904>. [in English]
- Bauman, Z. (2000). Living in the Era of Liquid Modernity. *Cambridge Anthropology*, 22(2), 1-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23818779> [in English]
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity (Vol. 17)*. sage. [in English]
- Boym, S. (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 432 p. [in English]
- Camus, A. (1996). The myth of Sisyphus. BrightSummaries. com. URL: <https://mirror.anarhija.net/usa.anarchistlibraries.net/mirror/a/ac/albert-camus-the-myth-of-sisyphus.pdf>. [in English]
- Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from Freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart, 305 p. [in English]
- Goffman, E. (1949). Presentation of self in everyday life. *American Journal of Sociology*, 55(1), 6-7. URL: http://educ333b.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/53313682/goffman_intro.pdf. [in English]
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and time*. SUNY Press. 482 p. ISBN 1438432763, 9781438432762 [in English]
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2023). The German ideology. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 123-127). Routledge. URL: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003320609-16/german-ideology-karl-marx-friedrich-engels>. [in English]
- Nietzsche, F. (2016). *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Xist Publishing. ISBN 978-1-68195-051-8 [in English]
- Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness*. Philosophical Library. Inc., New York, 956. [in English]
- Turner, V. W. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual (Vol. 101)*. Cornell University Press. [in English]
- Yurchak, A. (2006). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013 - 352 p. URL: <http://digital.casalini.it/9781400849109> [in English]

Authors' Contributions

Bolatbekova Nazgul established the conceptual foundations of the study and developed the philosophical framework of alienation and nihilism. The ideas of Marx, Nietzsche, and the existentialist tradition were adapted to the contemporary context, thereby determining the methodological orientation of the article.

Adayeva Gulnar examined the specific characteristics of the post-Soviet space and analysed the historical trauma and ideological freedom of the generation that emerged after the Soviet period. Artistic works and online writings of local youth were collected and analysed in order to explain the reasons for their distancing from the state and the historical past.

Mualla Uydu Yücel conducted the analysis of Western postmodernism and digital reality. Particular attention was given to the influence of global information flows, consumer culture, and irony on the consciousness of young people, and a comparative interpretation of the shared features of Western and Eastern cultural contexts was developed.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no relevant conflicts of interest.

Information about authors/ Авторлардың үлесі/ Информация об авторах

Nazgul Bolatbekova – PhD student, Department of Philosophy, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, 2 Satbaev st., Astana, Kazakhstan. nazgul.zholamanovna@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6595-2296>

Назгуль Болатбекова – PhD докторанты, философия кафедрасы, Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті, Сәтбаев к., Астана, Қазақстан. nazgul.zholamanovna@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6595-2296>

Назгуль Болатбекова – PhD-докторант кафедры философии, Евразийский национальный университет имени Л.Н. Гумилева, ул. Сатпаева 2, Астана, Казахстан. zholamanovna@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6595-2296>, nazgul.

Gulnar Adayeva – Candidate of Philosophical Sciences, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. 2 Satbaev Street, Astana, Kazakhstan. kumaen@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8537-3567>

Гульнар Адаева – философия ғылымдарының кандидаты, философия кафедрасының қауымдастырылған профессоры, Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті Сәтбаев к., Астана, Қазақстан. kumaen@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8537-3567>

Гульнар Адаева – кандидат философских наук, ассоциированный профессор кафедры философии, Евразийского национального университета имени Л. Н. Гумилёва, Сатпаева 2, Астана, Казахстан, kumaen@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8537-3567>

Mualla Uydu Yücel – Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of History, Division of General Turkic History, Istanbul, Turkey. muallauyduyucel@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-2106>

Mualla Uydu Yücel – Стамбул университеті, Әдебиет факультеті, Тарих кафедрасы, Жалпы түркі тарихы бөлімі, Стамбул, Түркия. muallauyduyucel@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-2106>

Mualla Uydu Yücel – Стамбульский университет, факультет литературы, кафедра истории, отделение общей тюркской истории, Стамбул, Турция. muallauyduyucel@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-2106>

Мақала туралы ақпарат / Информация о статье / Information about the article.

Редакцияға түсті / Поступила в редакцию / Entered the editorial office: 03.02.2026

Рецензенттер мақұлдаған / Одобрено рецензентами / Approved by reviewers: 18.02.2026

Жариялауға қабылданды / Принята к публикации / Accepted for publication: 14.03.2026