

Research Paper

## Gender Differences in Perceived Social Support and Existential Nihilism in Depressive Disorder

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Depression is frequently accompanied by existential distress, including feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness. Existential nihilism, a belief that life lacks inherent purpose, represents an important yet underexamined dimension of depressive experience. Perceived social support, conversely, is known to buffer psychological distress and may protect against existential despair. However, the relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism among individuals with depression has not been adequately explored, nor have the associated gender differences. **Objective:** This study aims to examine gender differences in perceived social support and existential nihilism, and to assess the relationship between these variables among individuals diagnosed with depression. **Methods:** A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design was adopted. The study included 60 participants (30 males, 30 females), aged 18–45 years, diagnosed with depressive disorder as per ICD-11 criteria. Perceived social support was assessed using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), while existential nihilism was measured with the Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS). Data were collected individually and analysed using the Mann–Whitney U test for gender comparisons and Spearman’s rank-order correlation for examining the association between the two constructs. **Results:** Females reported significantly higher levels of perceived social support compared to males ( $U = 236.00, p = .002$ ). In contrast, males demonstrated significantly higher levels of existential nihilism ( $U = 279.00, p = .011$ ). A strong, negative correlation was found between perceived social support and existential nihilism ( $\rho = -.870, p < .001$ ), indicating that individuals with higher perceived social support experienced markedly lower levels of existential despair. **Conclusion:** Findings highlight the significant protective role of perceived social support against existential nihilism in depression. Gender-based patterns suggest that women benefit from stronger support systems, whereas men may be more vulnerable to existential concerns. These results underscore the importance of integrating social support enhancement and existentially informed approaches into therapeutic interventions for depression.

**Keywords:** *Depression, Perceived Social Support, Existential Nihilism, Gender Differences, Meaning-Making, Psychological Distress*

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## Gender Differences in Perceived Social Support and Existential Nihilism in Depressive Disorder

Depression remains one of the most prevalent and disabling psychiatric conditions worldwide, affecting more than 264 million people and contributing significantly to the global burden of disease (World Health Organisation, 2020). While the etiology of depression is complex and multifactorial, involving biological, cognitive, and social dimensions, there is growing interest in the existential aspects of depressive experiences, particularly feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, and hopelessness that extend beyond traditional symptom clusters (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Existential nihilism, broadly defined as the belief that life lacks intrinsic meaning or purpose, has been discussed extensively in existential psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 1985). Although empirical research specifically focused on existential nihilism in clinical populations is limited, studies have documented how existential distress, such as loss of meaning and purpose, can exacerbate depressive symptoms and interfere with psychological recovery (Costanza et al., 2021; Schnell, 2009). These existential concerns often manifest in chronic, treatment-resistant depression and are particularly relevant in individuals who report persistent hopelessness and disconnection.

In contrast, perceived social support, the subjective belief in the availability of reliable emotional and instrumental support, has consistently been associated with better mental health outcomes, including lower depression severity and improved coping (Zimet et al., 1988; Santini et al., 2015; Uchino, 2009). High levels of perceived support are thought to buffer the effects of psychological stress and may help counteract existential isolation by reinforcing belonging and purpose (Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

Notably, gender differences have been observed in both constructs. Women tend to report higher levels of perceived social support, possibly due to more emotionally expressive and interpersonally oriented coping strategies (Tamres et al., 2002; Rueger et al., 2016). Some research also suggests men may be more vulnerable to existential concerns due to social norms around emotional restriction and identity-related pressures, although empirical evidence remains limited and largely indirect (Mahalik et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2017).

Despite theoretical relevance, the relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism remains underexplored, particularly in clinical populations with depression. Moreover, the influence of gender in shaping these experiences has received limited empirical attention. The present study aims to investigate the correlation between perceived social support and existential nihilism in individuals diagnosed with depression, while also exploring potential gender-based differences. By using a quantitative design, this study seeks to provide much-needed empirical data on the existential dimensions of depression and contribute to more individualized, integrative treatment strategies.

### ***Rationale of the study***

While the role of perceived social support in reducing depressive symptoms is well established, its relationship with existential nihilism, the belief that life lacks meaning or purpose, remains underexplored. Given that existential distress is a core feature of many depressive experiences, understanding this link could offer deeper insights into how social factors influence meaning-making in depression.

Research shows that women often report higher levels of perceived social support, likely due to greater reliance on interpersonal coping strategies and emotional expressiveness (Tamres et al., 2002; Rueger et al., 2016). Although some theoretical and clinical literature has

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suggested that men may experience existential concerns differently, often internalizing distress and showing less emotional help-seeking (Yalom, 1980), empirical studies directly linking gender and existential nihilism are limited. Nonetheless, exploring these gender-based patterns in the context of depression may provide valuable insight into how social support and existential beliefs interact across individuals.

Existing studies on existential nihilism have largely relied on qualitative methods, with limited quantitative evidence. This study addresses this gap by using a correlational design to examine the association between perceived social support and existential nihilism, while also exploring gender differences. Findings may contribute to the development of more holistic, gender-sensitive interventions that address both emotional and existential aspects of depression.

### ***Research Objectives***

1. To explore gender differences in perceived social support and existential nihilism among individuals with depression.
2. To examine the relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism among individuals with depression.

### ***Research Questions***

1. Are there any gender differences in perceived social support and existential nihilism among individuals with depression?
2. Is there a significant relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism among individuals with depression?

### ***Hypotheses***

1. There will be significant gender differences in perceived social support among individuals with depression.
2. There will be significant gender differences in existential nihilism among individuals with depression.
3. There will be a significant correlation between perceived social support and existential nihilism among individuals with depression.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Design***

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design. Data were collected through standardised psychological questionnaires administered both online and offline. This design enabled simultaneous exploration of gender-based group differences and the correlation between perceived social support and existential nihilism.

### ***Participants and Sampling***

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit a minimum of 60 participants from the outpatient psychiatric services of a Mental Health Institute (MHI), S.C.B. Medical College and Hospital, Cuttack. This method ensured the selection of individuals meeting specific clinical and demographic criteria relevant to the study's aims.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

- Clinical diagnosis of depressive disorder as per the International Classification of Diseases – 11th Revision (ICD-11).
- Duration of illness of at least two years.

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- Age range between 18 and 45 years.
- Minimum educational qualification of 10th standard (secondary education) to ensure understanding of study materials.

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

- Presence of comorbid psychiatric conditions such as psychotic disorders or substance use disorders.
- Individuals with acute suicidal ideation requiring immediate clinical intervention were excluded to ensure participant safety and ethical compliance.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.

### ***Measures***

#### **Perceived Social Support**

Perceived social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). This 12-item self-report questionnaire assesses perceived support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). The MSPSS has shown excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .88 to .92, and has been validated across various clinical populations.

#### **Existential Nihilism**

Existential nihilism was assessed using the Existential Nihilism Scale (ENS; Jeremy et al., 2023). This 8-item scale measures the extent of existential despair and perceived meaninglessness in life. Participants respond using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores reflect higher levels of existential nihilism. The ENS demonstrates high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .85 to .92.

#### **Sociodemographic and Clinical Information**

Data on age, gender, educational level, marital status, occupation, and duration of illness were collected using a structured sociodemographic questionnaire designed for the study.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were referred by treating psychiatrists at the MHI, S.C.B. Medical College and Hospital, Cuttack, based on preliminary eligibility screening. The researcher verified inclusion and exclusion criteria by reviewing medical records and consulting with clinical staff. Eligible participants were provided with detailed information about the study, including its objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before their inclusion.

All assessments were conducted individually in a private clinical setting to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. The MSPSS and ENS were administered in a single session lasting approximately 20 minutes. In addition to calculating total scores, the overall

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MSPSS score was correlated with existential nihilism scores to examine the association between perceived social support and existential nihilism.

### RESULT

**Table 1 Mann–Whitney U Test Results for Perceived social Support**

Variable	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	U	P
Perceived Social Support	Female	30	37.63	1129.00	236.000	.002
	Male	30	23.37	701.00		

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine whether there were differences in perceived social support between males and females. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in perceived support scores between males and females,  $U = 236.00$ ,  $Z = -3.16$ ,  $p = .002$ .

**Table-2 Mann–Whitney U Test Results for Existential Nihilism**

Variable	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	U	P
Existential Nihilism	Female	30	24.80	744.00	279.000	.011
	Male	30	36.20	1086.00		

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare perceived social support between females and males. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups,  $U = 284.00$ ,  $p = .014$ , with males (Mean Rank = 36.03) reporting significantly higher levels of perceived social support than females (Mean Rank = 24.97).

**Table-3 Correlation Between Perceived Social Support and Existential Nihilism**

Variables	N	$\rho$ (rho)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Perceived Social Support Existential Nihilism	60	-.870**	.000

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism. The analysis revealed a strong, negative correlation,  $\rho(60) = -.865$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that higher levels of perceived social support were associated with lower levels of existential nihilism. This correlation was statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Hypotheses Testing

These results highlight the interdependent nature of social and existential domains in depression. While prior research has emphasised the buffering effect of support on general psychological symptoms (Uchino, 2009), this study extends those findings to more existential dimensions, offering empirical support for the integration of meaning-oriented and interpersonal treatment strategies.

HYPOTHESES	Test Used	Result	p-value	Outcome
H1: Gender differences in perceived social support	Mann–Whitney	$U=236.00$	.002	Accepted
H2: Gender differences in existential nihilism	Mann–Whitney	$U=279.00$	.011	Accepted
H3: Relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism	Spearman Correlation	$\rho = -.870$	$\rho = -.870$	Accepted

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between perceived social support and existential nihilism in individuals diagnosed with depression, with attention to potential gender-based differences. Findings offer key insights into how existential dimensions intersect with interpersonal factors in depressive experiences.

A strong, statistically significant negative correlation was observed between perceived social support and existential nihilism ( $\rho = -.870, p < .001$ ), suggesting that individuals with higher levels of perceived support are significantly less likely to experience feelings of existential meaninglessness. This supports theoretical frameworks that emphasize the protective function of interpersonal bonds in combating existential despair (Frankl, 1985; Yalom, 1980). Social support may enhance a sense of belonging and emotional security, thereby mitigating the alienation and purposelessness that often characterize existential nihilism.

Further, gender differences emerged in both constructs. Female participants reported significantly higher levels of perceived social support ( $U = 236.00, p = .002$ ), consistent with previous literature on women's emotional expressiveness and relational coping (Tamres et al., 2002). In contrast, male participants demonstrated significantly higher levels of existential nihilism ( $U = 279.00, p = .011$ ), aligning with studies suggesting men may suppress emotional needs and internalize existential concerns due to gender role expectations (Mahalik et al., 2003). These differences underscore the need for gender-sensitive therapeutic approaches that account for varied existential and interpersonal experiences across men and women.

## CONCLUSION

This study provided empirical evidence that higher perceived social support is significantly associated with lower levels of existential nihilism in individuals with depression. Additionally, women reported greater social support, while men reported more existential despair, reflecting gendered patterns of emotional expression and existential engagement. These findings suggest that existential nihilism is not merely a philosophical stance but a clinically relevant experience, particularly in chronic depression. Addressing existential despair alongside emotional and relational concerns may enhance treatment outcomes and help reduce persistent symptoms of hopelessness and meaninglessness.

### *Limitations*

- The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single clinical setting, restricting external validity.
- Causality cannot be inferred. Future longitudinal research is needed to assess how changes in support influence the development of existential nihilism over time.
- Responses may be subject to social desirability and recall biases.
- Important contextual factors such as depression severity, trauma history, and socio-economic status were not controlled for.
- The use of purposive sampling, while suitable for selecting clinically relevant participants, restricts broader generalisation and may not fully capture population variability.

### *Future Directions*

- Future studies could incorporate qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or thematic analysis, to explore the subjective experiences of existential nihilism beyond what quantitative tools can capture.

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- Replicating the study with a larger and more demographically diverse sample across multiple clinical and non-clinical settings would improve generalizability.
- Exploring related factors such as trauma history, coping mechanisms, socio-economic status, and religious or spiritual beliefs could offer a more comprehensive understanding.
- A mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative insights could enrich interpretations and bridge the gap between numerical trends and lived experiences.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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