



# Beyond Despair, How Nihilism Can Motivate Us For Radical Systems Change

By Nirvana Garreffa

# Beyond Despair, How Nihilism Can Motivate Us For Radical Systems Change

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# Abstract

Nihilism is perhaps most popularly understood as a belief in nothing, and that life is meaningless. But of course, it is more nuanced than this.

Nihilism is not a belief that life is meaningless. It is discovering that the life you are living within the current cultural conditions does not feel meaningful to you. As a result, you go on living your life in ways that either try to evade reality or change it (Gertz, 2019). For years, I have noticed increasingly nihilistic sentiments online; nihilists dismissing activists for their ongoing attempts to organise, and even popular meme accounts based on nihilistic content; like “@cheerful\_nihilism” which has almost 200k followers on Instagram as of writing this.

The goal of this research is to explore the prevalence and sources of nihilism today. I then want to look at how it relates to myself and other aspiring change-makers, as well as how we may channel our feelings of nihilism for radical systems change.

There are many interpretations of nihilism, so this research will begin by looking at how white western philosophers discussed concepts of nihilism, and then contextualising those ideas for considerations of privilege. I then go on to make a systems analysis of daily life under Western colonial capitalism, and argue that nihilism is a product of this system. In an attempt to determine if nihilism is becoming more prevalent, a netnographic scan will show some of the ways nihilism is rising in mainstream discourse online.

This paper goes on to synthesise the research, and discuss how it is relevant to aspiring changemakers. Since the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University is a microcosm of changemakers, I survey and interview my peers to see if there are shared feelings of nihilism amongst them.

To conclude, I look at how nihilism can inspire us to create radical systems change; with perspectives from non-white, Queer, Indigenous, Disabled, and revolutionary activists. In undoing aspects of colonial capitalism ingrained in us, such as toxic individualism, the commodification of everything, and the belief that capitalism is the only way - we may begin to create a world we can live more meaningfully in.

# Acknowledgments

*“Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to “decolonize our schools,” or use “decolonizing methods,” or, “decolonize student thinking”, turns decolonization into a metaphor.”*

-Decolonization is Not a Metaphor by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang.

**A college or university’s decolonization efforts are meaningless when they continue to invest in their real estate portfolios and oil pipelines. Give the land back.**

## Thank you

To Suzanne Stein for advising on the writing of this paper, and to those of the SFI cohort who graciously volunteered their time to partake in research.

Thank you to my partner, friends, and family close to me for their moral support.

And thank you to my neighbour’s cat “Fupa” who kept me company while writing.

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# Introduction

When I ask people if they would consider themselves a nihilist, most say no or that they're not sure.

I would say this is partially because there isn't a clear understanding of what nihilism is. There are misconceptions of it being a sort of dwelling in despair over the meaninglessness of things, or a belief in nothing. Both of which, can be interpreted fairly negatively.

The idea of nihilism has also become convoluted from years of debate within academic circles, and doesn't often come up in casual conversation. However that seems to be changing, especially in pop culture, given the increasingly turbulent state of the world.

Every day, we are bombarded with news of climate catastrophe, worsening disparity, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, speculation of a possible World War 3, racial reckoning, the tensions between calls for decolonization and the driving forces of colonial capitalism. And despite all this, we are expected to go on with our daily lives.

This paper looks at the cultural systems we live within, and the impacts of nihilism on people interested in change-making.

## Research Questions:

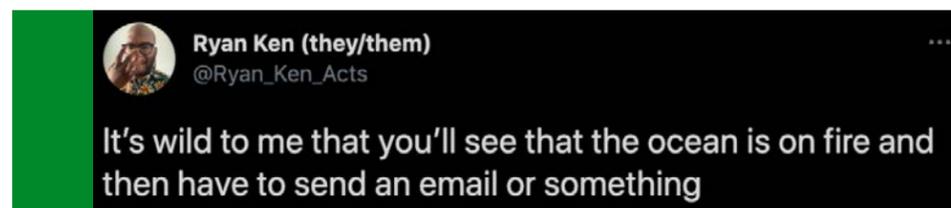
### **Primary Question:**

How might we channel our feelings of nihilism for radical systems change if at all?

### **Secondary Questions:**

How do I and other aspiring change-makers relate to nihilism?

What might be the sources of our nihilism, and is it becoming more prevalent?



*A tweet posted by @Ryan\_Ken\_Acts, 2021.*

# Overview of Sections

## Understanding Nihilism

What is nihilism, and why does it matter? As mentioned, there does not seem to be a clear universal understanding of nihilism, but the idea is said to have emerged from 18th century Europe (ter Borg, Meerten B., 1988). With a quick online search, you may find that Wikipedia introduces nihilism as a belief that “human values are baseless, that life is meaningless, that knowledge is impossible (n.d. 2022).” From my literature review, I would say this definition is broadly in line with the ideas discussed by many European philosophers, but it does not convey the depth of the concept even slightly. It is missing any suggestion for cause or subtext that may lead people to such beliefs. Because this description of nihilism is so vague, it allows for it to be easily misinterpreted; as it often is.

## Definitions

For this research paper I have adapted a definition of nihilism from multiple sources, which aim to capture more of the nuance behind the concept, and its relevance to present day:

- Nihilism is not a belief that life is meaningless. It is discovering that the life you are living within the current cultural systems do not feel meaningful to you. (Gertz, N., 2019).
- Similar to above, it is a realisation that your inherent wants and values do not match how the world operates in reality (Michels, S. 2004).
- Nihilism can manifest as escapism, and a way of coping with the above realisations about life and the world (Gertz, N., 2019).
- Alternatively, nihilism can challenge us to act, and create the world we want to see (No Wing, 2019).

The idea of “life within the current cultural systems” from the definition above is key to understanding why nihilism happens. We might come to believe life is meaningless, when we are forced to live in a way that feels unnatural to us. Living in the West, culture has become synonymous with colonial capitalist culture where we are taught that nearly everything in life, no matter how abstract, is somehow tied to a dollar value. As a result, daily life does not allow us to fulfil many of our inherent needs. Colonial capitalist culture dictates our relationship to time and forces us to work the majority of our waking hours on strict schedules, leaving little time for friends, family, leisure, and rest.

Many of us are detached from nature and our natural environments (Pruitt-Young, S., 2022), and believe in the commodification, exploitation, and ownership of nature as if it is another product for consumption. We are taught competition, toxic individualism, and our living spaces are designed to alienate us from finding community (Papanek, V, 1988). Media villainizes identities and different ways of looking or being in the name of profit (V Menon, A. 2021). Bureaucracy disempowers people while enforcing policies that intentionally marginalises members of society based on race, gender, age, and ability.

We live under such unfulfilling conditions not because we want to, but because we are not given a clear choice otherwise, which I and many other writers would argue is the primary source of our nihilism and belief in meaninglessness. All the manufactured hardships keep us busy; too busy to think or act with impactful intention. Indigenous poet and activist John Trudell once said “**In order for this predatory system, this disease to work, we must not be able to use our minds in a clear, coherent manner, because if we could... we would not accept the unacceptable... it lives and travels through the mind, through generations (Niall B., 2012).**”

Throughout my research, I found that Indigenous activists like John Trudell, and others of oppressed groups had generally more critical views of nihilistic concepts than the typical white male European philosophers who discussed it. This led me to question the relationship between nihilism and privilege.

When “time is money” in Western capitalist society, having time for personal reflection to realise your own personal nihilism is a luxury not afforded by everyone. Those who benefit from the colonial capitalistic system and live in relative middle class comfort also have the privilege of choosing how to confront their nihilism. They can reflect and choose to focus on their goals for a more successful career, nicer housing, assets, starting a family, etc, and evade the harsh realities experienced by the rest of the world. Or they can be motivated towards radical optimism and choose to search for deeper meaning that may be missing from their lives, create change they want to see in the world, and stand for higher goals that benefit communities of people and generations beyond them.

With that said, many nihilists will not challenge the status quo, which allows colonial capitalism to thrive. It is more likely someone who is middle class would seek the escapism of passive nihilism, because reacting otherwise would require challenging colonial cultural systems and potentially compromising their own comfort, privileges, or social status. For communities who are oppressed by the overarching colonial capitalist systems, responding passively is not an option. There is often less to lose, and more to gain by responding actively and optimistically to challenging the systems. As Angela Davis wrote in Freedom is a Constant Struggle: “**I don’t think we have any alternative other than remaining optimistic. Optimism is an absolute necessity, even if it’s only optimism of the will (Davis, A. 2016).**”

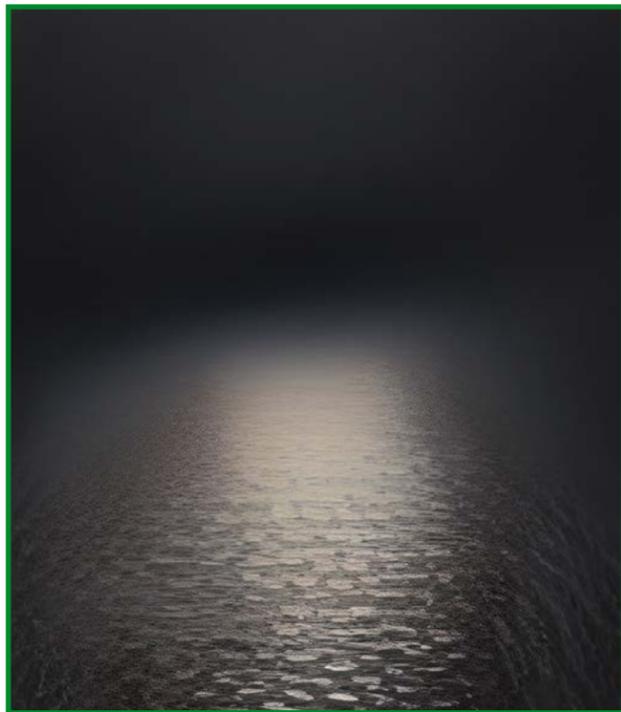


Photo created using an AI text-to image generator with the prompt “nihilism” in the style of “HD.” Access the generator at [app.wombo.art](https://www.wombo.art).

## Is nihilism prevalent?

In this section of the paper, I attempt to determine if nihilism is becoming increasingly prevalent online, and amongst my peers interested in change-making from the Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI) Program. The research conducted here includes a netnographic scan of social media, as well as surveys and interviews with members of the SFI cohort.

From my scan of social media, I found a few different patterns in content related to my search. There were posts which presented themselves as nihilistic in nature but light hearted, there were people sharing personal reflections or criticisms of nihilism, posts relating nihilism and capitalism, and public

exchanges where nihilists attempted to dismiss things said by activists and organisers.

Since my netnographic scan could only take place over the last year, I also looked at Google Trends and WolframAlpha for more data about nihilism online. Looking as far back as the tool would allow, I found that interest in searching for nihilism fluctuated relatively consistently from 2004 to present day, and was most popular in Western colonised countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Interestingly though, while searching for this data, Google had suggested “optimistic nihilism” as a related search. When looking at the graph for popularity in searches for the term “optimistic nihilism” during the same time period, it appears to have hardly been searched from 2004 onward, but in July 2017 it had suddenly peaked and began being searched regularly. The term “optimistic nihilism” was most searched in countries such as the Philippines, Ireland, and Singapore.

The surveys and interviews with SFI students were key to understanding how nihilism might be experienced in professional communities interested in change-making. These interviews delivered some interesting insights. Although there was a small sample of 7 survey respondents (30% of cohort), and 5 interviewees (20% of cohort), there were still patterns in sentiments shared by people. Almost all had some but not a clear understanding of what nihilism was. Most identified relating to aspects of nihilism, such as “feeling things have become meaningless” or “a disconnect between what they wanted in

life and how the world operates.” However the majority of those respondents also said they believed they did not experience nihilism, or were not sure.

People who responded that they related to feeling nihilism in the surveys were contacted for semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, all respondents said they did not have a clear definition of nihilism, yet were able to discuss personal experiences which aligned with my working definition almost perfectly; many mentioned discovering aspects of life within the systems we live in which did not feel meaningful to them, and how the reality of the world did not meet their inherent needs or desires. What this suggests to me is that people are experiencing nihilism without having the language to identify or discuss it.

From the interviews, I found most people had similar ways of coping with their feelings of nihilism. This was often in the form of scaling down their expectations of themselves and their efforts to something more tangible, embracing escapism from thought, and continuing their search for meaning. Almost all interviewees saw nihilism as having the potential to be both positive and negative; positive in that it could motivate people for change, and negative in that people could become overwhelmed or paralyzed in their realisations.

## Where do we go from here?

Should people interested in change-making be concerned about nihilism? I would argue yes, that it is something important

to understand conceptually, especially to encourage discussion and self awareness in our work. Reflecting on our nihilism, the sources of it, how it manifests, and how it may potentially impact our outlook of the future are all critical for understanding what change we want to create in the world and who that change benefits. Understanding the concept of nihilism also helps us identify it around us. We better understand who is working from a place of passive nihilism and maintaining status quos, and who is inspired by their nihilism to create radical and often difficult change.

Although the realisation of our own nihilism can sometimes be difficult or uncomfortable, it can also be channelled in really profound ways. From my netnographic scan, I found several activists discussing how they redirect their nihilism. Some have shifted it toward radical optimism, organising, mutual aid, community building with like-minded people, rest/leisure/non-commodified activities, a scaling back of efforts, and living more authentically to themselves.

In writing this paper, I hope to inspire readers and other aspiring change-makers to self-reflect, and continue having ambitious visions of a brighter future; “Let’s begin our abolitionist journey not with the question “What do we have now and how can we make it better?” Instead, let’s ask, ‘What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?’ If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us (Kaba, M., 2020).”

# Research Methodology

A number of methods were used to put together this research paper including a literature review, netnography scan, and primary research methods such as surveys and interviews. I have also reflected on my own positionality before writing, and conceived of ways to help mitigate bias throughout. Read on for more details.

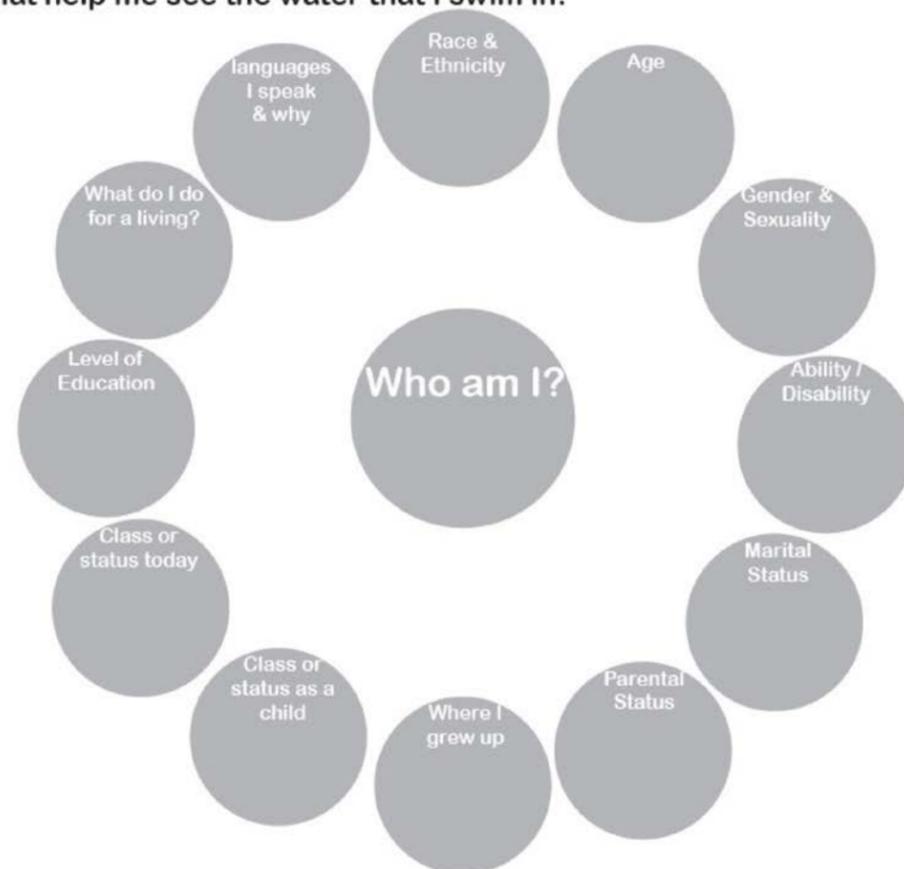
## Positionality Worksheet

### 12 things about me that help me see the water that I swim in!

A positionality or reflexivity statement can help you understand who you are. These characteristics can be both strengths and weaknesses as they offer insights that others cannot see, or they can cause you to make assumptions that are not true.

Greater self-awareness can help you to maximise strengths and minimize weaknesses.

Research is not objective, because researchers are not objective. Your background frames how you conduct research.



Lesley-Ann Noel Carl A. Grant Lecture Series 2019 University of Wisconsin, Madison

Additional reading:  
Hamby, S., PhD. (2018, May 22). Know Thyself: How to Write a Reflexivity Statement. Retrieved March 22, 2019, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-web-violence/201805/know-thyself-how-write-reflexivity-statement>

Figure 1. Lesley-Ann Noel's Positionality Wheel Worksheet (Noel, Lesley-Ann, 2019).

## Positionality of Author

As a starting point, it is important to understand my personal biases which inform the ideas in this paper. Before writing, I completed the Positionality Wheel Worksheet (See previous page) developed by Dr. Lesley-Ann Noel, an Assistant Professor of Design Studies at North Carolina State University, who works in emancipatory research, community-led research, design-based learning and foresight.

This exercise prompts people to reflect on aspects of positionality like race and ethnicity, age, economic class, education, gender and sexuality, relationship with parents, and places lived.

Completing this worksheet helped remind me of aspects of my identity and how it has changed over time. I am a queer person of colour from a low income family who is now working class, and believes in the abolition of colonialism and all its systems. This makes me a minority in typical academic spaces.

Understanding our identities and how they intersect can help us better understand what is meaningful to us, where our privilege is, and our relationships to nihilism. The Positionality Worksheet can be done alone or as a group to determine the level of diversity of that group, and is available for free download from her [personal website](#) (Noel, Lesley-Ann, 2019).

## Mitigating Bias of the Author

This paper is partially a personal exploration of my own relationship to nihilism. Like many who enrolled in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI) program at OCAD University, I had an interest in change-making for a better future. However, as I became more familiar with the industry, other strategists and designers, and bureaucratic barriers to change; especially amidst the state of emergency throughout the COVID-19 pandemic - I found myself moving through feelings of nihilism.

Since I am on a personal journey while writing this, I am mindful of my positionality and that what I produce may be prone to bias. The positionality exercise in the previous section was a useful tool for understanding what makes up my lens, so that I may be aware of it. I hope this transparency is helpful for those reading as well. Here are a few more ways I am trying to mitigate bias in my research methods:

- Covering a range of secondary sources, from authors of different positionalities.
- Cross-referencing my netnographic scan with comparatively more broad data of a wider range. This is especially important since a lot of what I have sourced from social media is filtered through algorithms catered to me.
- Interviewing peers in my program who are of different demographics than me (age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class), and taking into account their perspectives on the subject matter.

## Research Methods by Section

The following paper is written using mixed research methods, which vary by section. I would like to emphasise that through my research, I realise that core topics discussed such as nihilism and capitalism are subjects dominated by mostly white male academics who do not have a lens oriented for social justice. Many of which are problematic; for example Heidegger supported Nazis (Farias, V., 1989), Nietzsche is speculated to have defended slavery (Ruehl, M. A., 2018), and Karl Marx believed in racial superiority (Williams, W.E., 2017). I have made efforts to not source from people like this because I do not believe in continuing to add to their credibility or centrality.



Photo created using an AI text-to image generator with the prompt "doing research" in the style of "HD." You can access the generator at [app.wombo.art](https://www.wombo.art).

This paper is organised according to three sections, each with its own research methods:

- Section 1, "Understanding Nihilism," offers an introduction and definitions of the topic based on a **literature review**.
- Section 2, "Is Nihilism Prevalent?" looks to understand how people experience nihilism through a **netnography scan as well as surveys and semi-structured interviews** with peers of the SFI program at OCAD University.
- The final section, "Where do we go From Here" looks at activism and tangible ways to channel feelings of nihilism into radical systems change. **Literature review and another netnography scan** were used for this section.

The next pages outline more details about the above research methods and their purposes.

## Methods Used in Section 1: Understanding Nihilism

This first section is an introduction into how nihilism is discussed both in philosophy and popular culture online. These ideas are then condensed into a working definition of nihilism that is used throughout the rest of this paper.

### Literature Review:

A literature review was conducted to gather definitions, and a deeper understanding of the subject matter before approaching a systems analysis. Much of the literature review included secondary sources from current or recent philosophy professors, so as to avoid citing philosophers I have found to be problematic. Books such as Nihilism by Nolan Gertz, an Assistant Professor of Applied Philosophy at the University of Twente, were especially useful.

## Methods Used in Section 2: Is Nihilism Prevalent?

The goal of this section is to gauge if nihilism is becoming more prevalent online and amongst my peers in the SFI program at OCAD University. It will also look at how my peers and people online are experiencing nihilism, what they think about nihilism, and how they are coping.

### Netnography Scan:

Netnography is a research method developed in 1995 by Robert Kozinets, and involves a scan of social media to gather data about cultures, interactions, personal narratives,

and trends (Kozinets, 2006). A netnography scan was conducted to attempt to determine the prevalence and forms of nihilism online, mostly on social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit.

The majority of posts sourced for this section are from Tik Tok, because the nature of this platform encourages people to talk and share longer stories or thoughts, which was especially useful for the research.

Because the posts sourced from the netnography scan are filtered through algorithms catered to my own interests, I have cross referenced the data from the scan to more broad data from Google Trends and Wolfram Alpha. These two sources offered data collected worldwide, and across much broader time periods.

### Primary Research: Survey

A survey was sent to peers of my cohort in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University, a graduate program which focuses on complex problem solving and sustainable future thinking. The goal of this survey was to generate some quantitative data, and help determine the prevalence of nihilism amongst this small group of aspiring change-makers.

### Primary Research: Semi-Structured Interviews

Those from my SFI cohort who responded to the survey indicating that they had experienced feelings of nihilism shared their email addresses so that they may be contacted for semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method for this research because they allow for reciprocity and follow-up questions throughout the conversation (Barriball, K. L., & While, A., 1994); something particularly useful for this subject matter because it deals with asking about individuals' opinions and experiences.

The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of their personal experiences of nihilism, how they viewed nihilism, how they coped with nihilism, and if they thought it could have a potential impact on the future.

Each conversation lasted between 30-60 minutes, and helped bring a range of different views into this paper; those who participated were of different ages, genders, faiths, ethnicity, and professions from myself.

### Methods Used in Section 3: Where do we go From Here?

This final section synthesises the definitions and experiences of nihilism, as well as revisits nihilism's role in systems change. Tangible ideas about how to channel nihilism into radical systems change are presented from several Queer, POC, Indigenous, Disability activists and creators online.

#### Literature Review:

More literature review took place to gather ideas on how to channel nihilism from queer, racialized, Indigenous, and disability activists. Most of these activists did not speak explicitly of nihilism, but did so in ways which were relevant to the subject matter

discussed in this paper. I am speculating that it was difficult to find activists who spoke on nihilism directly because conceptually it can be counter-intuitive to activism.

#### Netnography:

I revisit doing a netnography scan to see how activists have responded to nihilism online, and how they confront or channel feelings of nihilism. This followed naturally from the last netnographic scan, since content around "Nihilistic Optimism" was often a related search to nihilism.

## Research Limitations

For my netnography, what I view online is specific to my algorithms, and therefore not an objective view of social media. To try to counter this, I've cross-referenced my netnographic scan with comparatively broad data from Google Trends and WolframAlpha.

There is not a broad, consistent understanding of what nihilism is among philosophers, people online, and people in the SFI program. This impacts the results of my literature review, netnographic scan, survey, and interviews as people are not always explicitly using the term "nihilism," to describe what they are talking about. As a result, I have had to make judgements to determine if what people are discussing matches my working definition of nihilism.

Nihilism could be a taboo, and people may be reluctant to self-identify as nihilist. I believe this was the case with the interviews with SFI students.

Researching Amongst SFI peers was a very narrow scope for this subject, however it was most fitting for the amount of time set to complete the paper.

My positionality as discussed in previously has definitely influenced my writing, especially in terms of class, race, and political views. I am a person of colour from a low income family, who is also queer, and believes in the abolition of colonialism and all its systems; which makes me a minority in typical academic spaces.

# Section 1: Understanding Nihilism, Defining Nihilism

*“The first nihilistic aphorism that comes to mind is “Don’t worry, be happy.” It’s pretty hard to disagree with, until you start asking people what they mean by ‘happy.’”*

-Nolan Gertz in an interview with 032c magazine. (032c, 2020).

## What to expect in this section:

- Definitions of Nihilism in Western Philosophy
- Nihilism in Everyday Usage
- A Working Definition of Nihilism
- The Source of our Nihilism
- A Causal Layered Analysis of the Source of Our Nihilism

## Nihilism in White Western Philosophy

Since the term “nihilism” originated in 18th century Europe, the first definitions of this section will look at how white Western philosophy has discussed the concept.

### Disclaimer

As I mentioned in my methodology section, I will not be referencing several white European philosophers despite their relevance to the subject matter. This includes:

- Nietzsche who appears to have defended slavery, however there is some speculation that his writing was altered after his death, before publishing. (Ruehl, M. A., 2018).
- Heidegger who supported the Nazis (Farias, V., 1989).
- Karl Marx who believed in racial superiority (Williams, W.E., 2017).

Other philosophers excluded from research:

- Jacques Derrida who has claimed humanity is not capable of overcoming racism (Orenhammerquist, 2015).
- Jean Baudrillard whose work has been found to express hostility towards minorities, sexism and racism (Almond, 2007), (McLaverty-Robinson, A., 2013).
- Hannah Arendt who’s writing had anti-Black subtext (Burroughs, 2015).
- Raoul Vaneigem who has used racial slurs in his writing.

I have intentionally excluded all of these philosophers and more from my research because I do not believe in continuing to centre their work and adding to their credibility. I believe they had important ideas and criticisms of Western culture as it was developing, however these thinkers are often cited without any mention of their problematic beliefs, allowing them to remain glorified.

In the time that has passed since these philosophers’ writing, their ideas have survived and been elaborated on extensively; there are plenty of other writers worth citing.

That said, this approach was challenging and did take substantially more time to complete, something I’d imagine would deter a lot of other writers. Those philosophers that I have chosen to reference in this paper have not been found to be controversial at the time of writing.



Photo created using an AI text-to image generator with the prompt “philosopher” in “Surreal” style. It appears the AI may have been trained with images of white male philosophers, resembling Aristotle or Nietzsche. Access the generator at [app.wombo.art](http://app.wombo.art).

## The Confusion Around Nihilism

When people are asked what they think nihilism is, they usually say they don't know or that they need to look it up. When people do look it up, they may still be confused because the first definitions to appear in online searches don't convey much of the depth behind the concept, they are often vague and simply say that nihilism is a belief that life is meaningless. Dictionary.com has a somewhat different definition, emphasising nothingness and anarchy in relation to nihilism (dictionary.com, n.d.).

These sources are not wrong, but they don't paint a complete picture or explain why someone might believe in these things. In addition, the ambiguity of these definitions leave nihilism open for interpretation, "[putting] it in danger of becoming a catch-all for everything bad (Tartaglia, 2020)."

The perplexity around nihilism exists even amongst the academics and philosophers writing about it. Throughout my research, a number of philosophers have introduced the topic with statements like "nihilism is vague" or "nihilism is misunderstood." Bernard Reginsterr, a philosophy professor at Brown University attributes this to fragmented primary texts, and confusing language used in early discussions of the topic. Specifically, using a number of different terms interchangeably with "nihilism" (Reginsterr, B. 2009). I would add to this by saying, the topic of life's meaning is also incredibly subjective; there is no way to create an objectively true definition of what a "meaningful life" is.

## Interpretations of Existential Nihilism

There are a number of different forms of nihilism; including political (no blind faith in authority), moral (there is no such thing as "good" or "bad"), epistemological (there is no true objective knowledge), cosmic (the universe is meaningless) and existential (there is no meaning to life) (Crosby, D.A., 1988).

Existential nihilism tends to be the most discussed, and has become practically synonymous with nihilism in general, which is why it will be the focus of this research. For clarity, "nihilism" will refer to existential nihilism for the remainder of this section.

In a general sense, to say that nihilism is the "belief that life is meaningless" accurately reflects what many philosophers have discussed about it. However there are still discrepancies about what this actually means from philosopher to philosopher. The scale at which different people describe nihilism often differs, and some discuss meaningfulness as if it is an unavoidable aspect of the universe, while others speak of meaning as a social construct. What this results in, is discourse where "cosmic nihilism" and "existential nihilism" are spoken about interchangeably. For example, British philosopher James Tartaglia, offers this interpretation of nihilism from his book A Defence of Nihilism:

*"Suppose there is nothing of cosmic significance going on at all. We are just people going in and out of rooms, sending electronic messages, falling in love, eating apples, signing nuclear*

*non-proliferation treaties, and so on. All these things go on, some of them are really important to us, but they don't add up to anything in the cosmic scheme of things, for the simple reason that there isn't a cosmic scheme of things...What you are being asked to suppose is the truth of nihilism (Tartaglia, 2020)."*

How Tartaglia is describing the cosmos and his understanding here seems more in line with cosmic nihilism, even though it is being presented as just nihilism. Donald A. Crosby, theologian and Professor of philosophy at Colorado State University also offers a definition of nihilism, this time scaled down to a personal level. However like Tartaglia, his account still seems to reference an undeniable meaningfulness that is greater than humanity:

*"The existential nihilist judges human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous, in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to live. Those who claim to find meaning in their lives are either dishonest or deluded. (Crosby, D.A. 1988)."*

Both philosophers seem dismissive of the possibility of socially constructed meaning; Tartaglia does so by saying things might be important to us but are meaningless in the cosmic scheme of things, and Crosby does so by saying those who think they have found meaning are delusional.

Bernard Reginsterr is another philosopher who speaks of nihilism at the personal level, however he introduces nihilism as a reaction

to something. In his book The Affirmation of Life, he says:

*"Nihilism is the belief that existence is meaningless...life is worth living only if there are inspiring goals... Nihilism, then, may have two sources: a devaluation of the goals in the realisation of which our life has hitherto found its meaning, or the conviction that these goals are unrealizable (Reginsterr, B. 2009)."*

Although it is not said explicitly, Reginsterr's explanation of nihilism suggests the possibility that nihilism is provoked by disappointment; specifically disappointment in not being able to realise goals. Unlike the other definitions, Reginsterr's implies that meaning can be constructed by people.

I can go on listing and commenting on different philosophers' definitions, but many of them are vague, and fairly unsatisfying. However I have found an explanation that appears more thorough yet concise in Nolan Gertz' book titled, Nihilism. Gertz is an Assistant Professor of Applied Philosophy at the University of Twente, and his book outlines a number of philosophers' takes on nihilism throughout history. Perhaps the most comprehensive of those is this one:

*"The meaningfulness of life is due not to the nature of the universe, but to the nature of our culture. Life is meaningful, but only if we live.*

*But to live meaningfully - to live as humans, to live in accordance with our own values rather than those that have been imposed on us - would endanger our culture and would endanger those*

*who are powerful because of our culture.*

*So to protect our society, those in power have led us to believe there is only one way to be moral, that to be moral is to achieve self-control. We learn to control our urges, our desires, our instincts, and go about our daily lives as civilised adults.*

*We do this not because we want to live such lives, but because we have been raised to believe we should want such lives (Gertz, N. 2019)."*

Gertz' take on nihilism here differs from others, in that it suggests that life is actually inherently meaningful and that our nihilism is not only socially constructed, but intentionally imposed on us. A few people in power have weaponized culture to maintain their power, which leaves us feeling nihilistic. There is significantly more clarity with this definition, and it aligns quite well with the Causal Layered Analysis of nihilism I will be discussing in the next section.

## Passive and Active Nihilism

Gertz' definition of nihilism prompts us to think of how we might react to our nihilism; either passively or actively. Although Gertz has not specifically defined passive and active nihilism, he does allude to the concepts of them in an interview with O32c magazine: "Nihilists evade reality either by trying to destroy it or by trying to ignore it (O32c, 2020)." To "destroy" requires taking action, and having an active reaction. To "try to ignore" implies a passive reaction, possibly in the form of distraction.

The concepts of active and passive nihilism seem to have a particular relevance to anarchy; which in the most general sense is a disapproval and desire to abolish all institutions and governing systems in favour of a more free, equal society (Rooum, 1995). In an entry titled Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences, by a writer who goes by the alias "Aragorn!" they share an insightful summation of what passive and active nihilism look like:

*"If the future is unknowable we are confronted with a choice. When all we know is terror many stop making choices...The passive nihilist no longer has hope that their participation is necessary for the world to keep spinning."*

And then go on to explain active nihilism as:

*"The active nihilist sees in the unknown future and despair at our current situation, a call to arms. An active nihilist finds energy, a will to act, in the hopelessness of the conforming, rigid, asphyxiation of our society. Meaning is found in approaching the void rather than in the false knowledge of what is on the other side of it (Aragorn!, n.d.)."*

Aragorn!'s account of passive and active nihilism seems relevant beyond just anarchy. Their description of passive nihilism suggests that passivism perpetuates the systems that create nihilism, while active nihilists are motivated to change these systems. This account could also be applicable in describing people drawn to grassroots activism, mutual aid, and community-led organising.

This sequence of nihilism, and the passive or active reactions to it is reminiscent of a causal loop archetype within Systems Theory, called Shifting the Burden. This archetype is one of eight that have been developed to help us understand recurring patterns within a system (Braun, W., 2002).

The Shifting the Burden archetype shows us what happens when you attempt to solve a problem by either remedying the symptoms, or trying to find a solution at the root of the problem. By remedying the symptom, we either perpetuate the original problem, or delay coming to an actual solution (Braun, W., 2002). In the case of nihilism; passive nihilism and distraction are how we address the symptoms of nihilism, but active nihilism is how we may potentially solve it. This is illustrated in the graphic below.

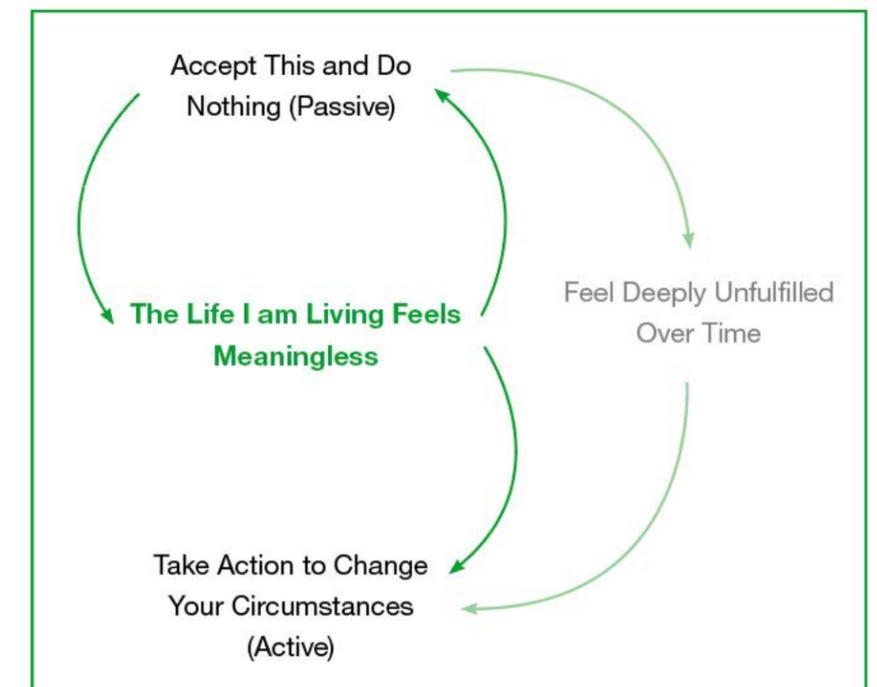


Figure 2. Shifting the Burden. A demonstration of how nihilism, as well as passive and active nihilism fit the "Shifting the Burden" system archetype, as described by William Braun (Braun, W., 2002).

## Nihilism in Everyday Usage

The term nihilism is much more common among academic circles and philosophers than it is in everyday conversation or online. That's not to say that people don't regularly discuss or display nihilism. They do, but typically in other ways, and usually with a focus on passive nihilism where people want to escape reality.

In recent years, the term "doomer" has become increasingly popular online. It describes a type of person who has become utterly defeated in reaction to ongoing world issues like climate change. As a result, they have given up and withdrawn from society. Doomers are the type to try to dismiss arguments by saying things like "the world is going to end anyway, so why bother?" This is their attempt to make conversation seem meaningless. I hadn't realised until recently, that "doomer" is just a more popularised way of saying someone is a nihilist; or more specifically, a passive nihilist.

There is also an entire subculture of humour dedicated to the idea of "smooth brain," a brain that is perfectly smooth, with no thoughts and is therefore never sad. An article by Wired Magazine explained the meme as:

*"No thoughts head empty" isn't a worldview. It's somewhere between idle escapism and gallows humour. It's some people saying, 'Wouldn't this be great? Too bad it's not real,'" says Milner. "If someone takes it as 'I'm going to pull away and disconnect and not think through important issues,' that's someone who has the luxury to do so (D'Anastasio, C. 2020)."*



Doomer behaviour on Twitter. (@msdanifernandez, 2021.)



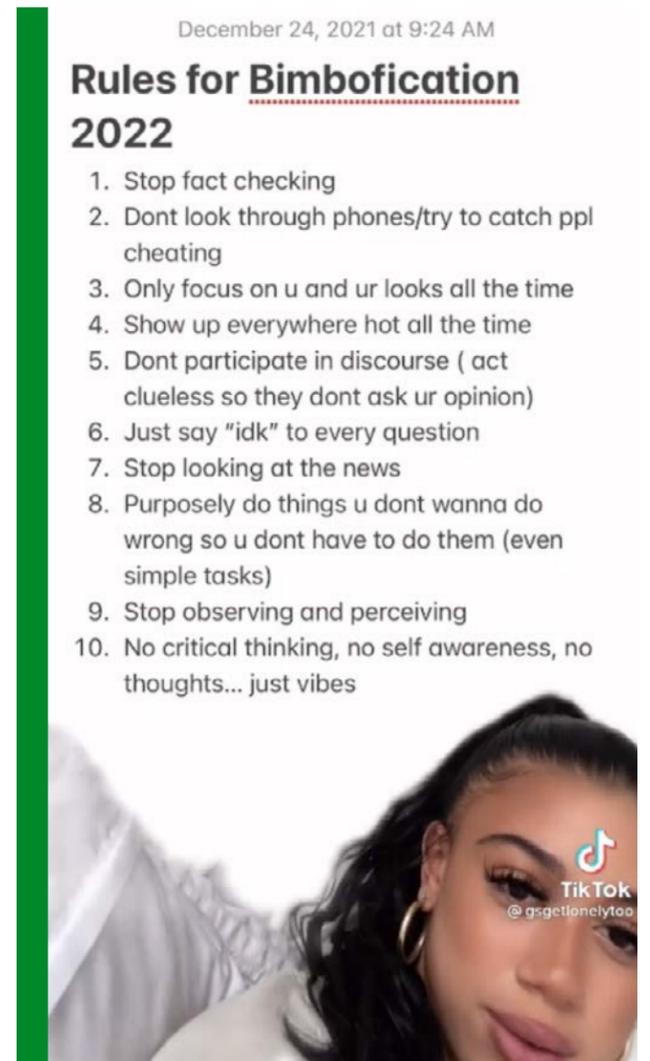
The "Smooth Brain" meme (Ellis, 2020).

The "smooth brain" meme is another concept that closely resembles passive nihilism, and has become especially popular since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the onslaught of bad news that has bombarded the public since.

Similar to this, there is also a rise in the idea of voluntary "bimbofication," which is focusing on being attractive, having fun, and being happily oblivious of reality. In the Tik Tok video linked below, the creator says one of their rules for bimbofication is to

*"stop watching the news, I don't want to know about the harsh realities of the world, I'd rather pretend we live in a euphoric society (@gsgetlonelytoo, 2022)."*

These are just a few ways nihilism gets discussed or presented in pop culture, likely because they are more accessible, relatable, enjoyable, and easier to understand. More of how nihilism exists online and in popular culture will be explored in the coming Netnography section of this paper.



Rules for Bimbofication (@gsgetlonelytoo, 2022). [Link to watch.](#)

## Working Definition of Nihilism

In an effort to combine philosophy's definition of nihilism, and popular culture's understanding of it, I have created a working definition for this paper.

- Nihilism is not a belief that life is meaningless. It is discovering that the life you are living within the current cultural systems do not feel meaningful to you. (Gertz, N., 2019).
- Similar to above, it is a realisation that your inherent wants and values do not match how the world operates in reality (Michels, S. 2004).

### Nihilism may be generative of two reactions:

- Passive nihilism; a form of complacency and escapism, as a way of coping with the above realisations about life and the world (Gertz, N., 2019). Such realisations can also result in more clinical cases of anxiety or depression in people who cannot cope with these realisations (Donahue, Dr C., 2022).
- Active Nihilism; where our realisations challenge us to act, and create the world we want to see (No Wing, 2019).



A tweet suggesting the meaning of life is to simply exist as we are (@melatoninlau, 2021).

## What is a Meaningful Life?

Part of what makes nihilism so hard to define and discuss is that it has to do with “the meaning of life;” which there is no single objective answer for. Some common themes for what constitutes a meaningful life from my literature review include a sense of being able to live freely, having basic needs met, and the pursuit of higher goals that benefit humanity. Some other philosophers have said the meaning of life has to do with transcendent experiences that are beyond our senses. I would interpret this to be things like feeling of love or gratification when spending time with friends, or family. These are still abstract ideas, however they suggest that a meaningful life is not found in superficial aspirations - such as acquiring status, more wealth, or luxury items.

When encountering the phrase “meaningful life” or “meaning” throughout this paper, please keep the above in mind, in addition to what your own interpretation may be.

## Is Your Life Meaningful? Could You be a Nihilist?

As seen in the netnography scan and interviews later, a lot of people may experience nihilistic thoughts but not self-identify as a nihilist. This may partially be because of the negative assumptions attached to it, or not understanding what nihilism really is. If you have not questioned whether or not your life feels meaningful, or what your relationship to nihilism may be, I encourage you to ask yourself a few questions:

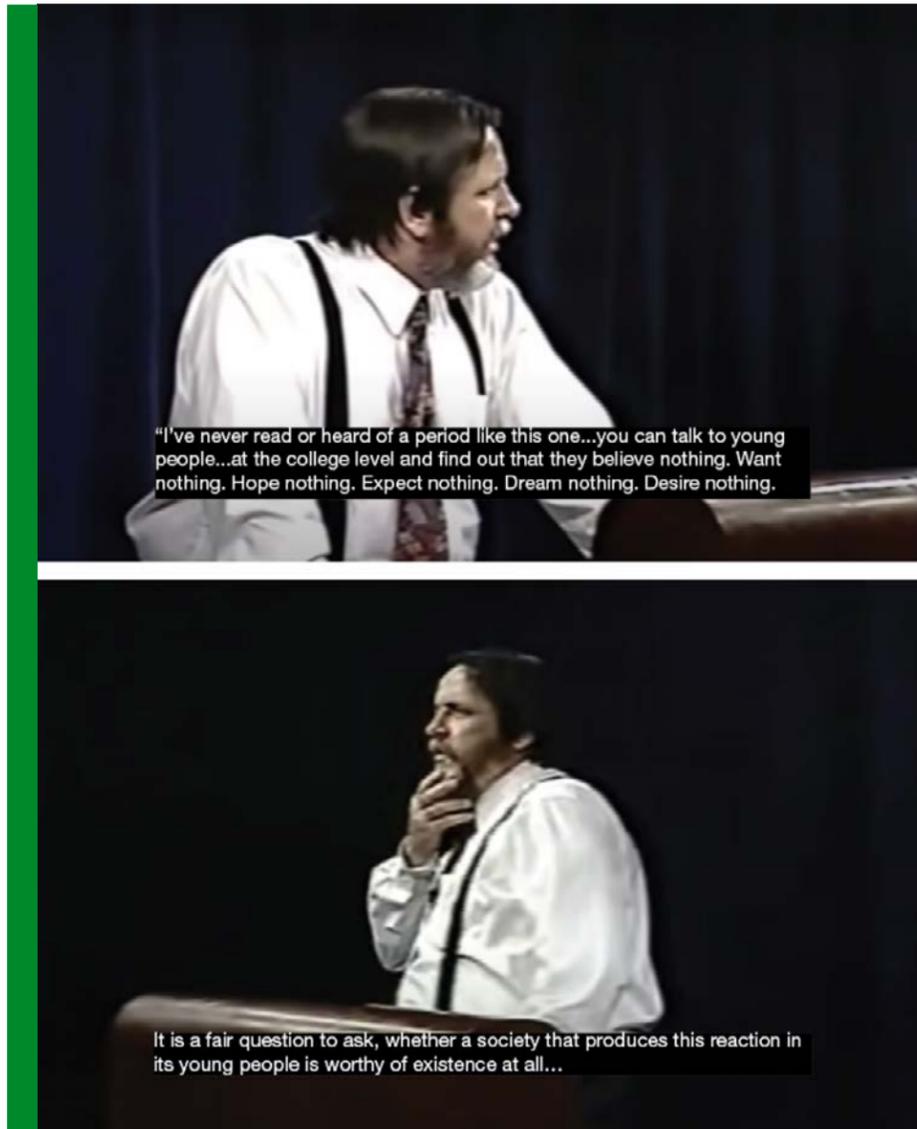
- Do you think that if you were not working, and had no money, that your needs and wants in life could be met?
- Do you have time and resources in your life to explore what your interests are outside of work? Do you have hobbies, or are you limited in what you can pursue?
- Do you feel as though you can live freely? If you wanted to wear sweat pants to an office job, could you? This is meant to be a silly scenario, but it is intended to show the limits of social construction. For many racialized or queer people, they cannot dress or present as freely as they want in most professional spaces; either for reasons of safety or prejudice. White cis-gendered people also live under social constructions that limit freedom of expression, which is why it is inappropriate to do things like wear sweat pants to an office. There are expectations for everyone to look a certain way in most public spaces, and this is just one of many ways people cannot live freely within our cultural systems.

- When you take time off or a vacation, do you feel relaxed and more fulfilled? Do you wish you could feel that way more often in life, and dread going back to work? Setting aside the idea that “everyone needs to work or else nothing will get done,” every person deserves to feel relaxed and fulfilled throughout their life. Labour should not consume people to the point where we feel burnt out, and in need of a vacation, just so we can return to work “refreshed.”
- Outside of work, are you able to contribute to a community? Do you think you are doing anything for the greater good of others? In a way that could be direct action, meaningful time spent with people in community, creating things for others to enjoy, sharing resources or sharing knowledge etc.

These questions were written in direct response to my working definition of nihilism. I would argue that under our colonial capitalist culture, all of us experience nihilism to some degree, as all of us are expected to conform to the cultural systems in order to live and survive.

Ideally, everyone deserves to live freely and meaningfully. Everyone should be entitled to pursue things that might have a greater contribution to humanity. Everyone deserves to have their basic human wants and needs met without relying on money. We are the only species on this planet that has created a system that requires us to pay to live here.

# Understanding Nihilism, Nihilism and Western Colonial Capitalist Society



Screenshots from Rick Roderick's lecture at Duke University, discussing society, young people, and banalization. [Link to watch.](#)

## The Source of our Nihilism

Revisiting Nolan Gertz' explanation of nihilism, life feels meaningless because of the culture we live in. He goes on to explain that this culture has been designed by a few people in power, and this culture expects us to conform to its strict set of values in order for those people to maintain their power (Gertz, N., 2019).

In a lecture by Rick Roderick, professor of philosophy at Duke University, he shares similar ideas about a passively nihilistic society that has become a product of Western culture. He does not refer to this as passive nihilism, although what he is speaking of sounds similar. Earlier in the lecture he refers to it as banalization, cynicism, and scepticism that is the result of people not wanting to think about complex realities (Partially Examined Life, 2012). He goes on to explain:

*"I've never read or heard of a period like this one. And I've read about many historical periods, but not one in which you can talk to young people the way you can at the college level and find out that they believe nothing. Want nothing. Hope nothing. Expect nothing. Dream nothing. Desire nothing. Push them far enough, and they'll say, yeah, I got to get a job, I spent a lot of money at Duke. That's not what I'm talking about here. And it is a fair question to ask, whether a society that produces this reaction in its young people is worthy of existence at all..."*

*Remember, I'm talking about the young I've encountered at Duke. These are privileged youth...mostly white, mostly upper to mid upper class...Now imagine what the attitudes are*

*like in the streets of DC. If you're from another race or another social class (The Partially Examined Life, 2012)."*

Both Roderick and Gertz discuss nihilism in relation to culture and society, but neither explicitly say who created this culture. There are some references to industrialization, and capitalism in their thinking, but I would argue that there is a more clear source of our nihilism.

Our North American cultural systems have been created by white, abled-bodied, cis male, heterosexual, capitalist, colonial settlers who continue to dominate the culture in North America today. We feel nihilistic because this colonial capitalist culture they've created demands that we match their identity, when it is impossible for the majority of the population to do so.

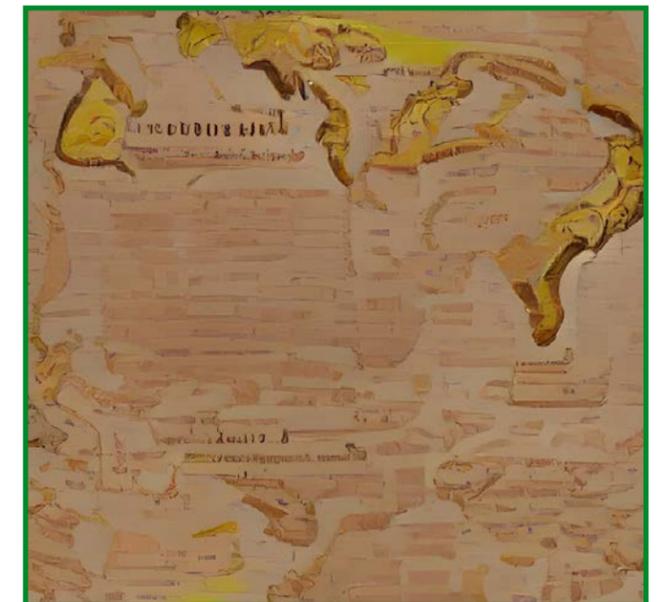


Photo created using an AI text-to image generator with the prompt "colonial capitalism." The image produced resembles historical documents, possibly treaties. Access the generator at [app.wombo.art](http://app.wombo.art).

## The Source of our Nihilism (Continued)

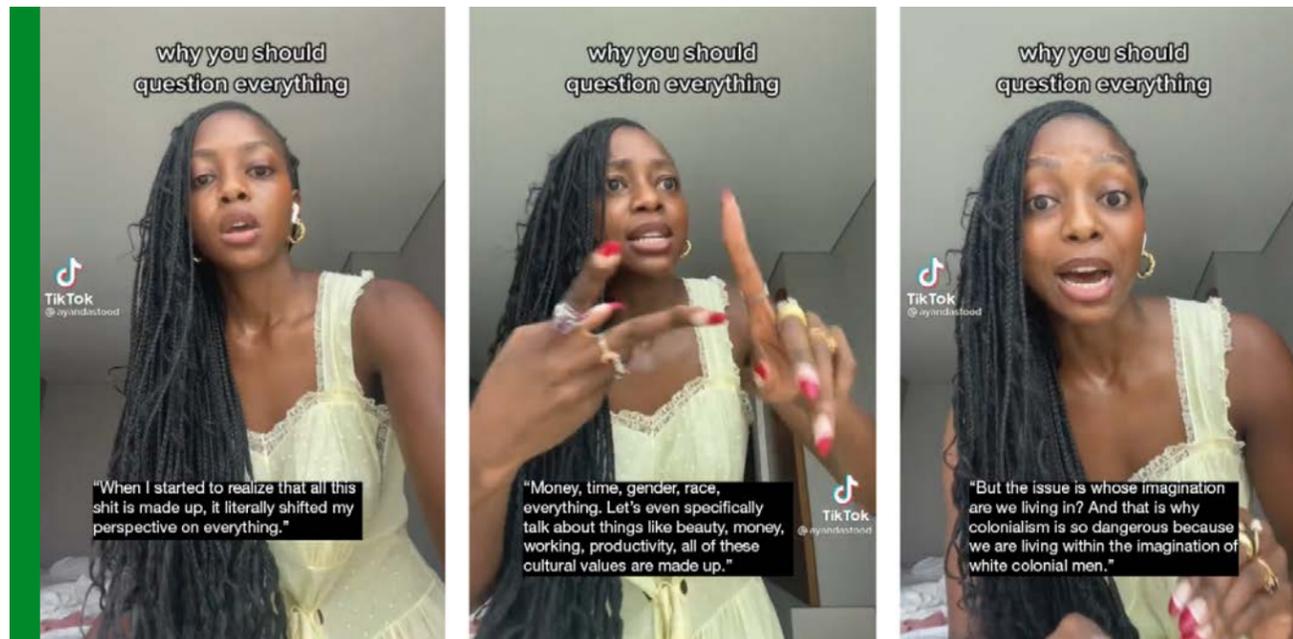
A Tik Tok creator under the alias Ayandastood, recently shared a viral video with over 3 million views echoing the same sentiment. They frame this idea as “Who’s imagination do we live in?” In their video, they say:

*“When I started to realize that all this shit is made up, it literally shifted my perspective on everything. Money, time, gender, race, everything. Let’s even specifically talk about things like beauty, money, working, productivity, all of these cultural values are made up.”*

*But the issue is whose imagination are we living in? And that is why colonialism is so dangerous because we are living within the imagination of white colonial men who decided what it means to be beautiful, what it means to be worthy, what it means to be productive. Why is productivity even a value that we have, who does that benefit?*

*When you realize that everything is made up, it shifts your whole worldview. Look, what they did with daylight savings, time is made up, weekends, weekdays, what the fuck? ...And the issue is the marginalized people who have radical imagination never actually have the power to make that imagination come true. And that is why liberation movements are so important. Okay. The end (@ayandastood, 2022).”*

Ayandastood’s video makes a point that everything about our culture is socially constructed by white colonial men, and that it affects our entire worldview. This type of system is oppressive of people and their identities, and it’s this oppression that continues to reinforce the status quo leaving us feeling nihilistic. In the next section, I use Causal Layered Analysis to illustrate more details of this oppressive system we live in.



Screenshots from @Ayandastood’s Tik Tok video (@ayandastood, 2022).” [Link to watch.](#)

## Causal Layered Analysis of Colonial Capitalist Culture and Nihilism

Up until this point, I’ve identified nihilism as a realisation that life can feel meaningless within our current cultural systems; and that these current cultural systems have been designed by and for white, abled-bodied, cis male, heterosexual, capitalist, colonial settlers; an identity impossible for most people to fit into or benefit from. **For simplicity, this will be referred to as “colonial capitalist culture” for the rest of the paper.**

To elaborate on this, I have used Causal Layered Analysis to show that **many aspects of colonial capitalist culture make life feel meaningless, and have resulted in nihilistic attitudes.** The Causal Layered Analysis or CLA is a research tool developed by Futures Studies professor Sohail Inayatullah who currently teaches at Tamkang University in Taiwan. The CLA is used to model past and present knowledge to inform thinking of an alternative future (Inayatullah, S. 2004).

The Causal Layered Analysis tool looks at 4 specific levels of a system; Litany, Systemic, Worldview, and Myth/Metaphor

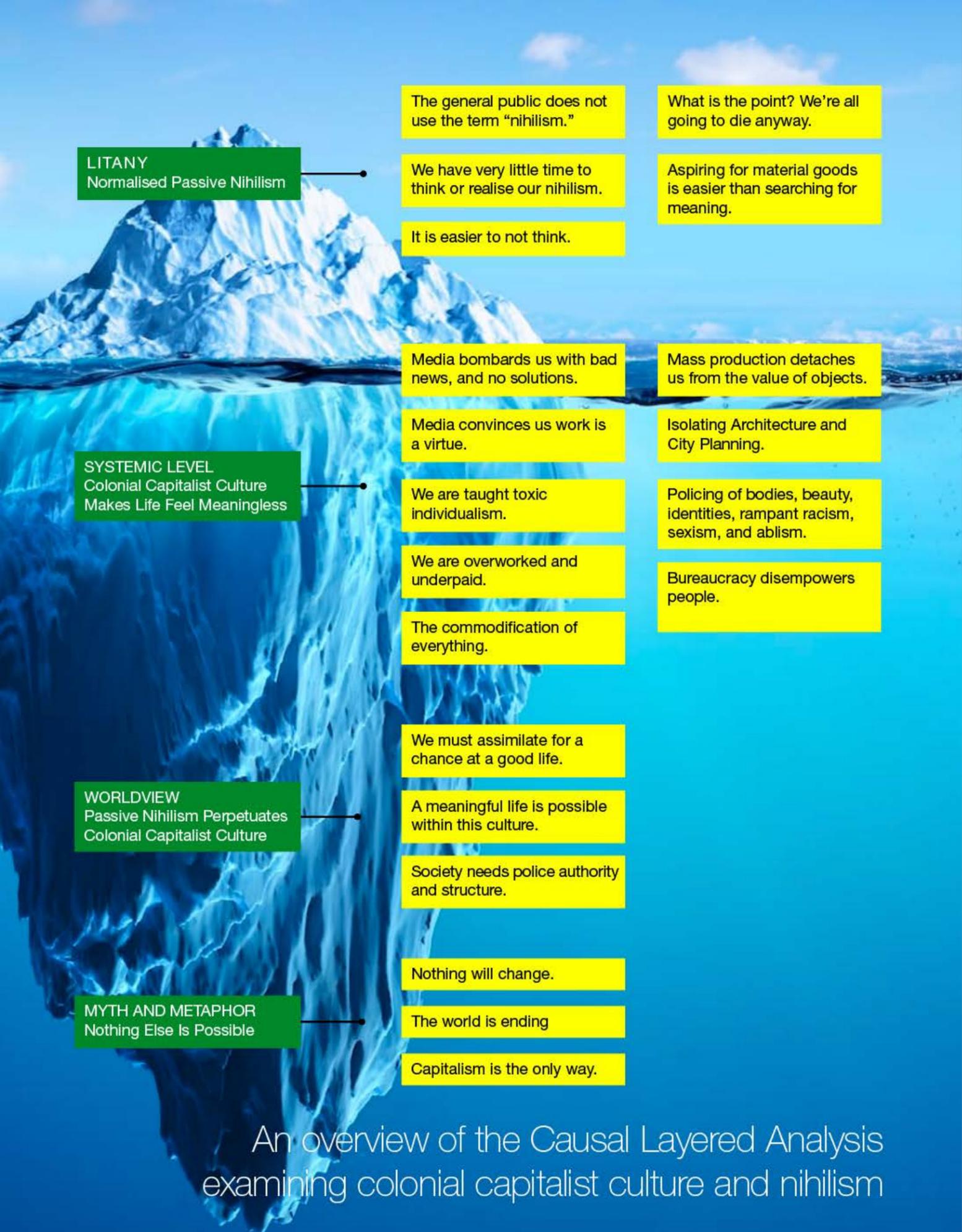
**Litany:** The most visible level which looks at day-to-day life, news, trends, and attitudes. (Inayatullah, S. 2004).

**Systemic:** This level looks at “systemic causes including social, technological, economic, environmental, political, and historical factors (Inayatullah, S. 2004).”

**Worldview:** Worldview is concerned with looking at the system on a deeper level. It analyses how discourse, ideologies, and worldviews are the causes or perpetrators of an issue (Inayatullah, S. 2004).

**Myth/Metaphor:** These are the deepest level causes of the issues. This level explores more of the collective “gut feelings” and unconscious beliefs of society. (Inayatullah, S. 2004).

Although the Causal Layered Analysis is typically used in foresight thinking, my use of it below is intended to show some of our relationships to the different layers of colonial capitalist culture. This CLA analysis was formed through a combination of desk research where there are references, personal observations, as well as insights from my netnography scan which is in the next section.

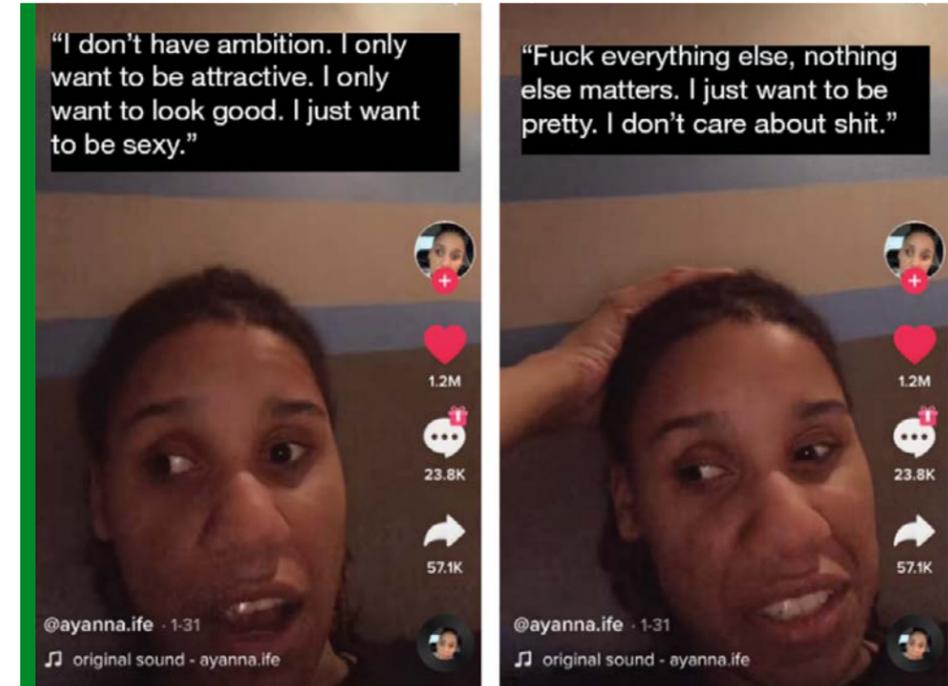


An overview of the Causal Layered Analysis examining colonial capitalist culture and nihilism

Figure 3. Causal Layered Analysis (Opposite page). A Causal Layered Analysis examining colonial capitalist culture and nihilism.

### Level 1 Litany: Normalised Passive Nihilism

As previously mentioned, this level looks at day-to-day life, news, trends, and attitudes (Inayatullah, S. 2004). This includes the following:



A Tik Tok about wanting to be hot, and not caring about anything; a sentiment of passive nihilism. This video received over 1M likes. (@ayanna.ife, 2022).

The general public does not use the term nihilism to talk about nihilism.

Nihilism is not a term that is widely understood beyond philosophy circles, however people still describe their feelings of nihilism or identify it using other words or phrases. This includes "doomerism," "smooth brain," "defeatism," "bimbofication," "no thoughts, head empty," and more.

Aspiring for material goods is easier than searching for meaning.

It is common and easier for people to aspire for material goods, or status because there is a clear "way" to achieve those things - by working. In an interview with 032c magazine, Richard Turley who is known to have led

creative at MTV and Bloomberg was asked what he considers to be "radical," in the present day. His response actually addressed the nihilism he has observed in Western culture:

*"Social nihilism...up close we are deathly boring creatures. A bunch of sub-robotic robots following each other. Round and Round. Round and Round. We stand for very little anymore whilst successfully convincing ourselves that we pursue higher goals. The reality is those goals are so meager. A better house, a better job, a better pair of shoes, a jumper that fits better, a better phone that lets us share better pictures of better selves (032c, 2016)."*

## Level 1 Litany (Continued): Normalised Passive Nihilism

### It's easier to not think.

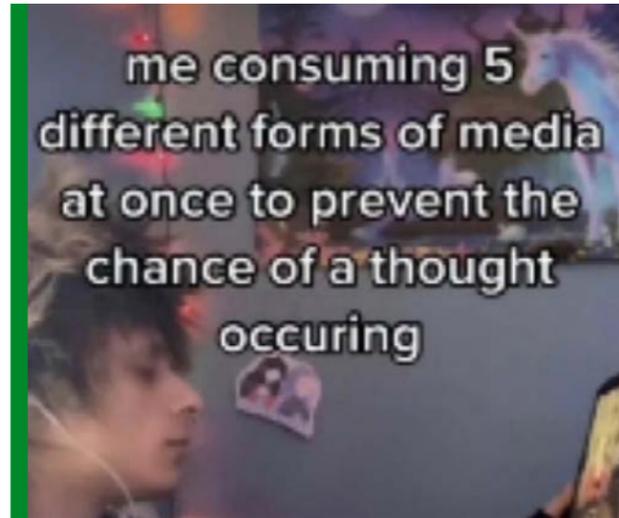
The ideas of “Smooth Brain” or “No Thoughts” have become prevalent, because thinking about the burdens of the world has become too overwhelming. People are then drawn to distractions to cope. As a result, we avoid discussing difficult subject matter.

### We have very little time to think, or realise our nihilism. Nihilism is a privilege.

People are too busy (usually with work) to pay attention to how they're feeling, and to reflect on matters in their lives and the world around them.

### What's the point, we're all going to die anyway.

“Doomerism” and difficulty imagining the future has gained prevalence. It is becoming more common to see people express sentiments like “we're all going to die in 20 years so what does it matter?” It's easier to believe in this, than to think deeply about what can be done to improve things.



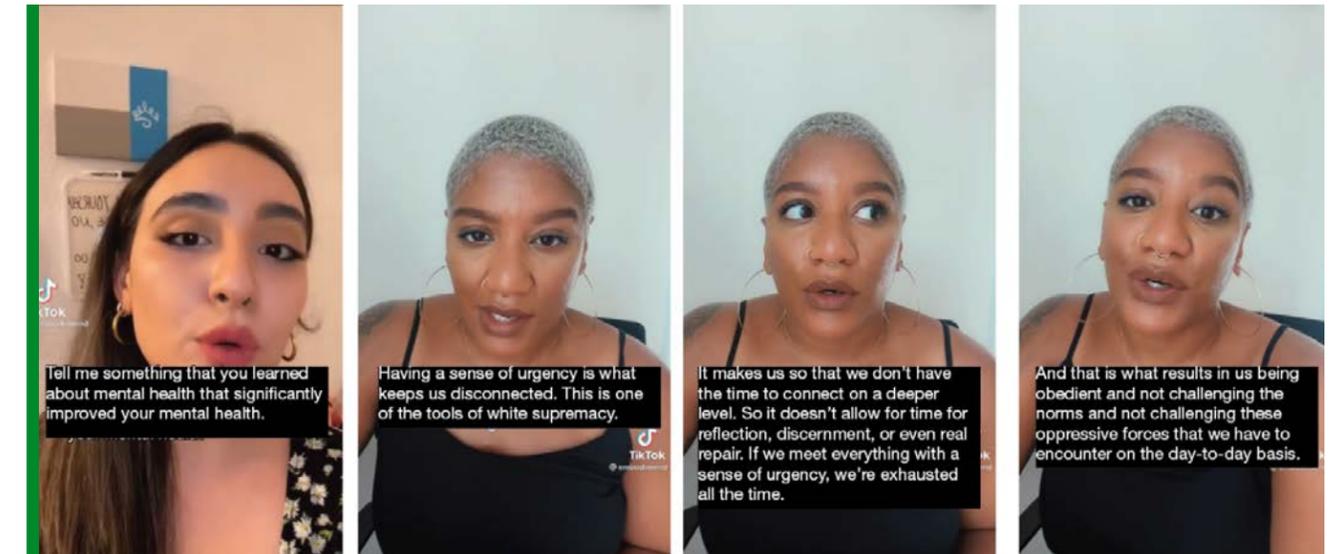
A screenshot posted online that reflects many people's desire to distract rather than think deeply (@godofbones, 2021).



An example of “doomerist” attitudes shared on Instagram (@gobblemeswallowme422, 2022).

## Level 2 Systemic: Colonial Capitalism Makes Life Feel Meaningless

The social, technological, economic, environmental, political, and historical factors causing the issue (Inayatullah, S. 2004). This includes the following:



A therapist takes to Tik Tok to discuss the issues with having a sense of constant urgency, and how this keeps us from challenging oppression (@embodimend, 2021). [Watch here](#).

### Media bombards us with bad news, and no solutions.

Journalists have been sharing increasingly controversial, devastating, and shocking news over time, both domestically and internationally, as a tactic to keep people engaged and clicking into their articles (Frampton, B., 2015). Keeping people coming back or clicking helps platforms justify charging more for ad space on their channels or websites. This approach to news generates a constant sense of urgency, which affects our worldview, ability to think critically, and emotionally exhausts us (Pinker, S., 2018). Many things shared on the news are also beyond our scope of individual action, and leave us feeling hopeless.

### We are taught toxic individualism.

We are taught to be competitive in school, so we can become competitive in workplaces later. We are also taught that major events in history are credited to individuals and not collectives; for example, how Steve Jobs is the face of Apple innovation as opposed to the entire team of people he worked with. Angela Davis wrote about this in Freedom is a Constant Struggle, explaining that:

*“It is essential to resist the depiction of history as the work of heroic individuals in order for people today to recognize their potential agency as a part of an ever-expanding community of struggle (Davis, A. Y., 2016).”*

## Level 2 Systemic (Continued): Colonial Capitalism Makes Life Feel Meaningless

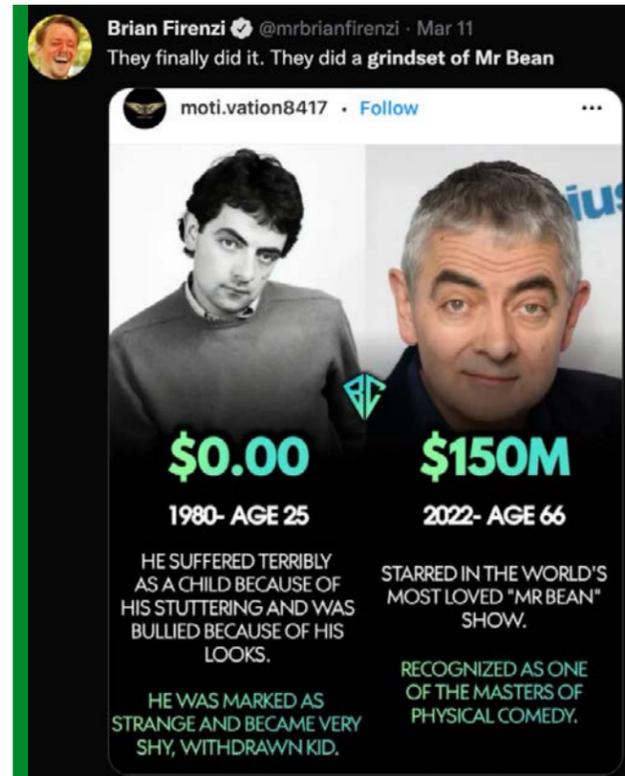
This makes us feel disappointed and powerless when our efforts are not successful to the degree we would like them to be. It also discourages us from collaborating, or joining movements, because we are taught to seek out recognition for our individual efforts. We may be discouraged from finding community, because being a unique individual is seen as more desirable than “blending into a crowd.”

### Media convinces us work is a virtue.

Advertising, social media, film, tv, etc has shaped our wants and needs towards material things instead of meaningful life experiences. Media teaches us to be complacent with the status quo, and pushes work ethic as a virtue with “girl boss” or “grindset” culture. To be a “girlboss” is to be femme and aspiring for success and profit. “Grindset” is a more masculine mindset of doing whatever it takes to be successful. With the spread of these ideas, we are expected to form our identities around our work and spend our time searching for “meaningful work.”

### Overworked and underpaid.

In his book, *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber says: “We have become a civilization based on work—not even “productive work” but work as an end and meaning in itself (Graeber, D., 2018).” Productivity has gone up over the last several decades as technology has advanced, and yet our pay rate has stayed relatively the same, and living expenses are inflated (Economic Policy Institute, 2021).



Work is a virtue, our culture glorifies career success. An example of “grindset,” tweeted by @mrbrianfirenzi (@mrbrianfirenzi, 2022).

We are often working to live, and simply aspiring for comfort. Those who are privileged to have this comfort or work to achieve it often become unwilling to sacrifice it, even at the expense of others.

### Mass production detaches us from the value of objects.

With industrialization, we adopted an “assembly line” mindset to not only our work, but everything we consume. With our work, we rarely create something from nothing, and see it through to completion; instead we are responsible for one aspect of it. We apply this model to nearly everything; the food we eat, clothes we wear, medicine we take, products



An Instagram post about the paradox of joy in getting a new job because we are overworked and underpaid for our time. (@casual.nihilism., 2022)

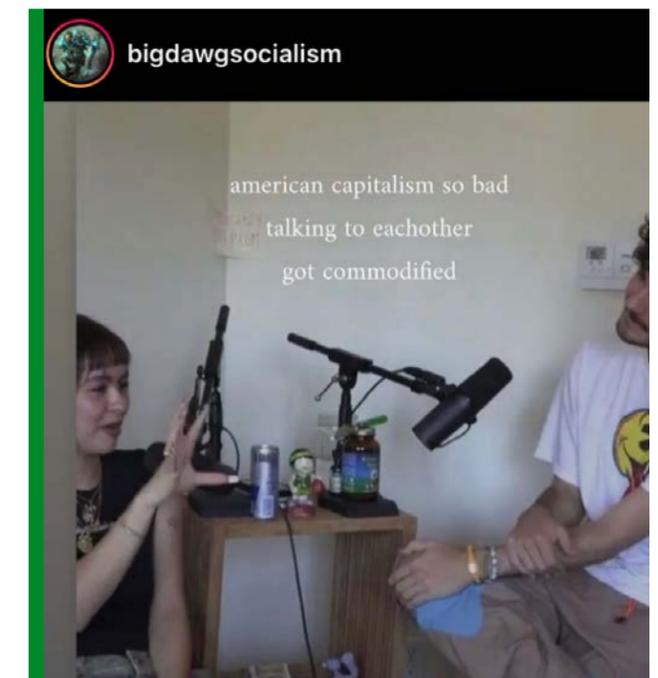
we buy, etc. As a result, we are detached from the people, places, and effort that would add meaning to these things we consume (Gertz, 2019). Angela Davis has written about this as well, in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*:

*“The food we eat masks so much cruelty. The fact that we can sit down and eat a piece of chicken without thinking about the horrendous conditions under which chickens are industrially bred in this country is a sign of the dangers of capitalism, how capitalism has colonized our minds. The fact that we look no further than the commodity itself, the fact that we refuse to understand the relationships that underlie the commodities that we use on a daily basis. And so food is like that (Davis, A.Y., 2016).”*

### The commodification of everything.

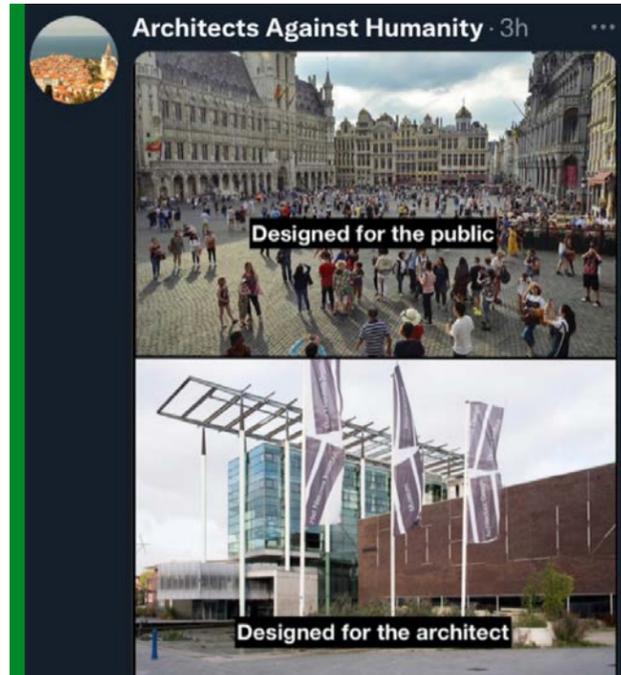
Everything we need to live under colonial capitalist culture has been ascribed a dollar value. This affects our thinking, and leads to us commodifying abstract aspects of our lives; we look for the value of friendships, favours for favours, commodifying basic needs like healthcare and housing etc.

We have even commodified nature, creating systems of land ownership after having stolen land from Indigenous people, while continuing to exploit naturally occurring resources for the sake of colonial capitalism (Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. 2021).



An Instagram post about how capitalism commodified talking to each other, through the creation of podcasts (@bigdawgsocialism, 2022).

## Level 2 Systemic (Continued): Colonial Capitalism Makes Life Feel Meaningless



A tweet by @Arch\_crimes about the difference between designing for design's sake or designing for people. (@Arch\_crimes, 2022).

### Isolating Architecture and City Planning.

In an article called *The Future Isn't What It Used to Be* written by designer and teacher, Victor Papanek, he says:

*"Cities, towns, villages, and groups of communities designed hundreds of years ago obviously are based upon the basic purpose of living that eludes current designers. Previous ages possessed one great advantage, a precise moral aim that gave meaning and direction to all planning and design. Classical antiquity pursued harmony; the middle ages strove for mystic fulfilment; the Renaissance, the elegance of proportions; recent times, the enlightenment of humanism. The people of the period knew exactly what they wanted. What then is the purpose of contemporary? (Papanek, V., 1988)"*

Papanek goes on to say the purpose of contemporary city planning is catering to tastes, however I would say it is to serve colonial capitalist culture.

This culture thrives on isolation, productivity, and consumption. We see it in how streets are optimised for cars, and how shopping is prioritised over public gathering or leisure. We see it in how housing has become mass produced condos and templated suburban homes designed specifically for commodification. Even in the layout of our neighbourhoods, which are divided by race, or "redlined," to keep wealthy predominantly white people from having to see or interact with poverty and People of Colour.

In addition, 67% of Canadians reside in car-dependant suburban areas (Taylor, P.S. 2018), which have been found to support racial segregation, isolation, and overall reduction in quality of life (Allen, B., 2022). Colonial capitalist culture benefits from isolating architecture and city planning because people are disempowered when they are alone or distracted. Isolated people are less likely to seek change compared to when they are connected in communities.



Screenshots from a Tik Tok discussing lack of community and colonial capitalist culture (@yourlocalkitchenwitch, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

### Difficulty in Finding Community.

How people connect with one another and form communities is a huge aspect of any culture. In a Tik Tok posted by @yourlocalkitchenwitch, they discuss how white people have invented a system of competitive hierarchies that erode people's sense of community, and how this has since upheld white supremacy or colonial capitalist culture (@yourlocalkitchenwitch, 2021).

What the Tik Tok creator is discussing not only affects white people within the colonial capitalist system, it affects everyone forced to assimilate. In Bell Hooks' book *All About Love*, she discusses how our culture has created a widespread sense of loneliness:

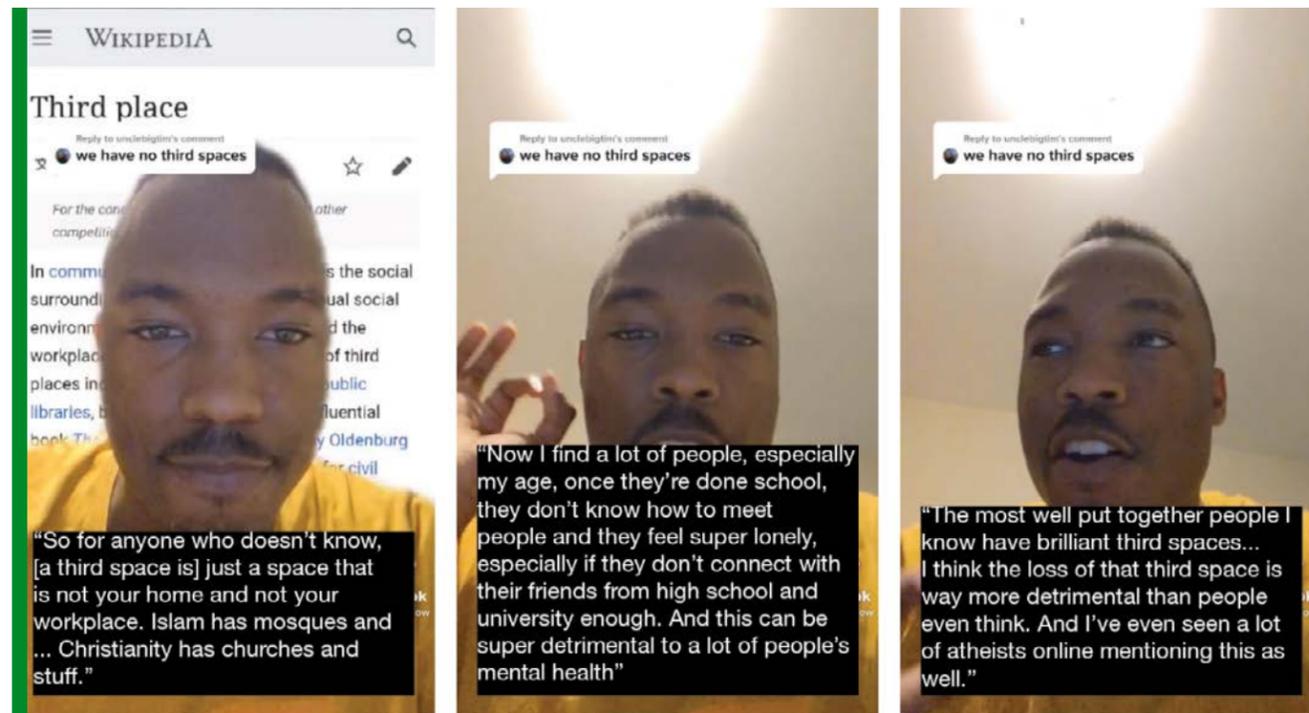
*"Although we live in close contact with neighbors, masses of people in our society feel alienated, cut-off, alone. Isolation and loneliness are central causes of depression and despair. Yet they are the outcome of life in a culture where things matter more than people. Materialism creates a world of*

*narcissism in which the focus of life is solely on acquisition and consumption (Hooks, B, 2001)."*

Many people also struggle to make friends because the cultural system has made it difficult to do so outside of institutions like work and school. This is partially due to the shortage of social spaces beyond these places; known as third places. Third places can be places of worship, public libraries, social clubs, sports teams, and more (Oldenburg, R., 1989). Some of these third places have evolved into online spaces, but the physical ones continue to decline, because our culture does not prioritise leisure unless it is profitable.

In a Tik Tok posted by @h\_idknow shown below, they discuss their accounts of third places and how important they are for mental health; echoing Bell Hooks' point in saying that people their age tend to feel very lonely and disconnected.

## Level 2 Systemic: Colonial Capitalism Makes Life Feel Meaningless



A Tik Tok posted by @i\_dknow about missing third spaces, and the resulting difficulty in making new friends or finding community outside of school or work. (@h\_idknow, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

### Policing of bodies, beauty, identities, rampant racism, sexism, and ableism.

Our colonial capitalist culture was founded by white, wealthy, abled-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered men. Policing identities that do not fit or serve this colonial capitalist archetype asserts their dominance over other identities and ensures that this group maintains its power. We see this in workplaces where people who do not fit the colonial capitalist archetype are commonly discriminated against for not being “professional” or “qualified” enough based on clothes, hairstyles, and even ability. Villainizing identities, ethnicities, physical ability, and appearance are also ways people in power can distract from real systemic

issues and maintain their status quo. Queer and trans advocate, Alok V. Menon discussed this in a podcast recently, saying:

*“We’re facing over 500,000 people plus who have died from the Coronavirus in this country alone. We’re facing massive economic recession, people struggling with houselessness, poverty, we’re facing a coordinated orchestrated backlash against the emergence of Black and Indigenous people in racial justice movements. And I began to realise this is all part of a calculation, that the gender binary works as a strategy to reorganise people’s legitimate anxieties, fears, into fearing and villainizing a small vulnerable minority, rather than working together to demand the conditions that challenge the largest crises of our time, like the climate apocalypse (V Menon, A., 2021).”*

The policing and villainising of identities not only distracts the public from systemic issues as Alok V. Menon says, but also ensures that the people who hold power within colonial capitalist culture continue to do so. Pushing for heteronormativity as well as eugenics against People of Colour and People with Disabilities works to create more white nuclear families. As long as there is a high population of white nuclear families, this group can remain dominant within colonial capitalism, and ensure there will always be enough white labourers to sustain its economy, and benefit from it enough that they will not want to dismantle it.



A tweet posted by @SorayaMcDonald, 2022 in regards to the recent abortion bans in the U.S. resembling slavery.

Needing to sustain the dominant group and its workforce can be said to be part of the motivations behind the recent news of the U.S. banning abortions, since the number of white births has dropped below other races since 2020 (Hamilton, et al, 2022). The intention is evident, especially in instances like conservative member of the U.S. Supreme Court, Samuel Alito referring to children as a “domestic supply of infants” in a 98 page draft opinion about abortions (Lithwick, D., 2022).

When people in positions of power do not see the lives of the public as meaningful, but as commodities, the systems in which we must navigate living are also not meaningful. Capital has become the utmost priority.

### Bureaucracy Disempowers People.

The west prides itself for being a democracy, where people vote in political leaders to represent their needs. However, in reality, our democracy is under the influence of “stealth politics” where corporations and billionaires who fund political campaigns push for conservative policies in their favour (Kapoor, I., 2016) (Schleifer, T., 2020). Those who are the biggest proponents of colonial capitalist culture benefit from it the most, and use politics to sustain it. In addition, the bureaucracy of politics is complicated and not understood by all. As a result, the average person without substantial wealth or knowledge is left out, with little say in new policies or processes that could benefit them. This leaves people feeling disempowered and incapable of influencing change to create a more meaningful life for themselves.



A tweet posted shortly after Texas had put forth a new law, which would deem caretakers who provide gender affirming healthcare for their children as abusive. This could result in the separation of children from their caretakers, as well as punishment for caretakers (James, E.S., 2022) (@ItsDeeNB, 2022). This is just one of many examples of how bureaucracy has made it difficult for people to live meaningfully.

### Level 3 Worldview: Passive Nihilism Perpetuates Colonial Capitalist Culture

Worldview looks at the system on a deeper level. It analyses how discourse, ideologies, and worldviews are the causes or perpetrators of an issue (Inayatullah, S. 2004). This includes the following:

#### We must assimilate for a chance at a good life.

There is a widespread belief that if we work hard enough, follow the rules of the system, we can improve ourselves for a chance at a “better life.” If someone is homeless, they must not have worked hard enough. If someone becomes a wealthy celebrity or a glorified entrepreneur in the media, it’s because they earned it.

These types of public figures reinforce this worldview of “getting what you put in” by motivating people to keep participating in the colonial capitalist culture that oppresses them. For example, Kim Kardashian recently sparked controversy in an interview with Variety, when she said: “I have the best advice for women and business. Get your fucking ass up and work. It seems like nobody wants to work these days (Variety, 2022).” In reality, no amount of work is likely to grant someone the same level of wealth or perceived success as her or any celebrity.

This type of messaging and worldview places all responsibilities on the individual rather than the cultural systems we live within, allowing these system to continue.

### A meaningful life is possible within this colonial capitalist culture.

Although it is extremely unlikely many of us will become celebrities, many people believe it is possible to find meaning in a career, material goods, vacations, a conventional nuclear family, etc.; when these are goals that have been ingrained in us by colonial capitalist culture to make us feel useful.



An Instagram post suggesting those who believe a meaningful and fulfilling life is possible within our current cultural systems are clowns (@patiasfantasyworld, 2022).



Heavily armed federal police sent to arrest the Land Defenders, and protect pipeline construction (@aptnews, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

### Society needs police authority and structure.

The general public believes government and police are necessary to keep us safe, and functioning within society. Many believe it would be chaos if we were to govern ourselves. In reality, police enforce culture at the systemic level, and inflict generational trauma and fear in people in order to sustain systems of colonial capitalist culture. For example, protests to stop the gas pipeline being built through Wet’suwet’en territory without the consent of Hereditary Chiefs has posed a threat to colonial capitalism by compromising access to a profitable resource. As a result, armed federal police have been sent to arrest Land Defenders who want to protect the local ecosystems and exercise Treaty rights (@aptnews, 2021).

We also see authority choose when to assert itself. This was especially evident in how police reacted to different protests

over the last several years. In 2020, police used military tactics and excessive force, injuring numerous people participating in the initially peaceful Black Lives Matters protests in Minneapolis (Kobie, N. 2020). This was an incredibly violent reaction compared to that of the Capitol Hill protest, where police were caught on camera taking selfies with the white alt-right protesters (Chavez, N. 2021). The police reacted drastically more peacefully to the Capitol Hill protests because the values of the alt-right align with those of colonial capitalist culture. The ongoing hypocrisy of police actions demonstrates how organisations of authority exist to maintain the interests of colonial capitalist culture.

Embracing the need for authority as a worldview allows this culture to continue, and continues to restrict people from fighting for things which are meaningful to them.

## Level 4 Myths and Metaphors: Nothing Else is Possible

These are the deepest level causes of the issues. This level explores more of the collective “gut feelings” and unconscious beliefs of society. (Inayatullah, S. 2004). This includes the following:

### Nothing will change.

As a result we try to find ways to cope, ways to change ourselves, or become defeated because we believe we cannot change our society or culture. We go on accepting things as they are in the system.

### The world is ending.

So why change anything? We're here for a good time, not for a long time.

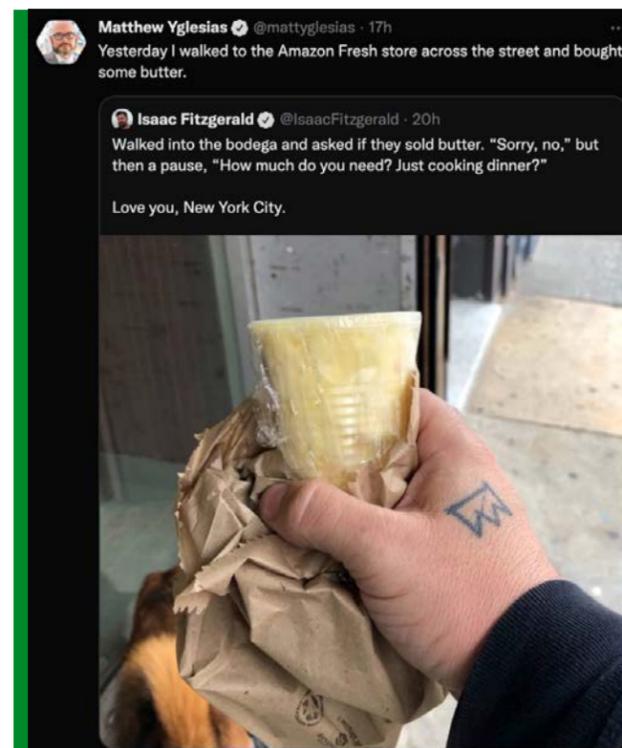
### Capitalism is the only way. We have no choice if we want to survive.

In an article by Frederic Jameson, he writes, “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson, F., 2003).” Capitalism is so ingrained in every part of our lives that many of us cannot imagine another way of structuring society.

This may leave us feeling like there is no alternative for survival, and that human nature is inherently selfish. This deeply ingrained sense of capitalism reinforces individualism and can also discourage people from seeking out or participating in other ways of living; such as mutual aid or non-monetary based economies.



A tweet posted by (@kellynotbrecht, 2022). “Self care” has become a profitable industry created by colonial capitalist culture, as a way to cope with colonial capitalist culture.



Many people's beliefs in capitalism are so deeply rooted, they cannot even accept seeing random acts of kindness (@mattyglesias, 2022).



A graphic shared on Twitter that captures passive and active nihilism (awdummy, 2021).

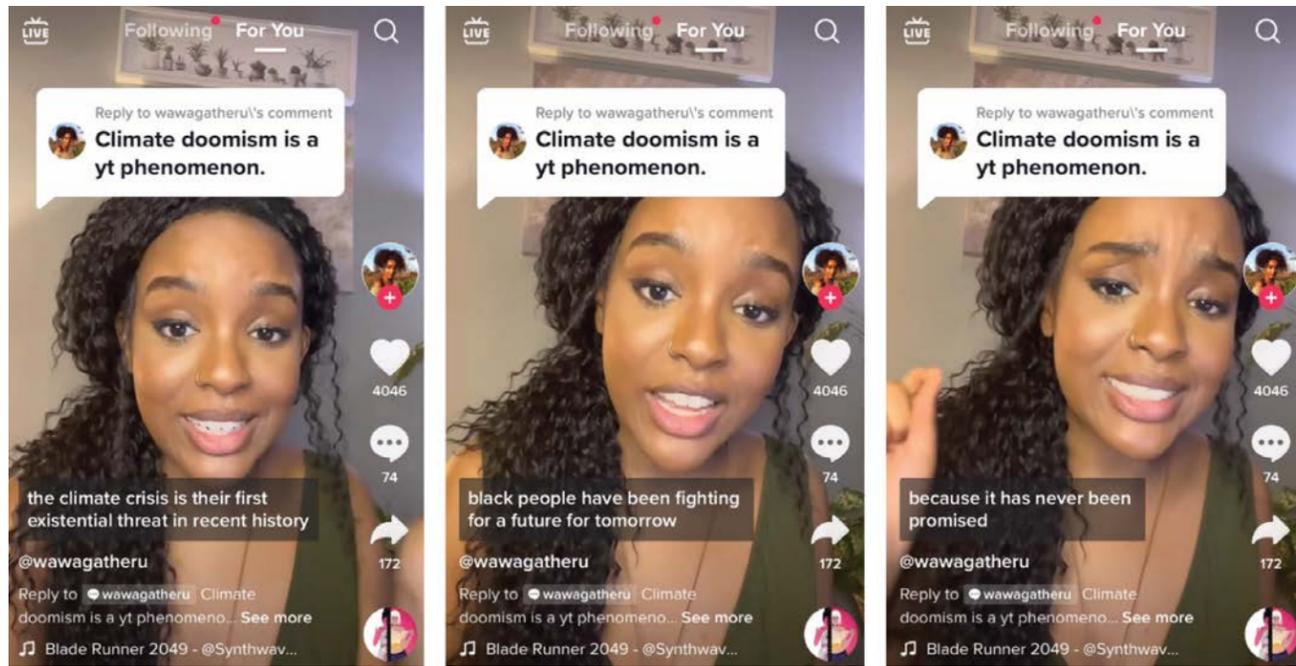
## Summary of Causal Layered Analysis:

It seems the main nihilistic narrative in popular culture today is “the world is ending, and there’s nothing we can do, so what’s the point?” It leaves people feeling hopeless, defeated, and paralyzed from taking action.

However, in addition to the idea that “the world is ending,” there are many other ways that colonial capitalist culture has removed a sense of meaning and purpose from our daily lives. The nature of this culture is to commodify everything possible and make everyone dependent on it for survival in order to sustain power for those who benefit from the culture most; which is white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, abled-bodied men

who are descendents of colonial settlers in North America.

The CLA is not meant to be exhaustive, but all aspects of it are products of the colonial capitalist cultural system designed by these settlers. When people feel like they cannot have basic human needs met, cannot live truly or freely according to their identities, have no choice but to live in this oppressive system that was not designed for them; a nihilistic society emerges where people find it difficult to live a meaningful life. Realising this can go either two ways; escapism or depression in reaction to a life within this culture, or motivation to create change for a world you want to live in. In other words, passive or active nihilism as mentioned before.



A Tik Tok posted by @wawagatheru discusses how “climate doomerism,” which is a form of nihilism, is a white phenomenon. Their argument is that as a privileged group of people who were always promised the future, this is the first time their future has been threatened. Whereas Black, Indigenous, People of Colour have always had to fight for a future (@wawagatheru, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

## The Privilege of Passive Nihilism

While going through the process of researching this paper, I found that nihilism as a topic was primarily discussed by white philosophers, while things like change-making and advocacy was discussed by a mix of people. This isn't surprising, considering marginalised groups have had to advocate for themselves throughout history. What this suggested to me, was that there was a relationship between how people experience nihilism and their privilege.

Anyone can reflect deeply about their life and realise they might be feeling nihilistic; that the way they are living does not feel fulfilling for them or meet their needs as a

person. However, choosing to take action to change how you and others experience certain aspects life can require time and resources. In our colonial capitalist culture, “time is money,” and having time can be a luxury. Many are too busy working, or too tired from working to seek out ways to create meaningful change. Nolan Gertz reminds us that this was the case during the Russian revolution and the assassination of the Tsar in 1881. Middle-class nihilists were compelled to revolt against their oppressive and traditional system on behalf of the serfs who were too busy working to take action themselves (032c, 2020).

One the other hand, someone who is privileged can realise their nihilism, and then choose how they want to react to it; either passively or actively. To react actively is to be moved

towards radical optimism, compelled to create positive change in the world, and stand for higher goals that benefit communities of people and generations beyond just themselves. Reacting passively can take form in a few different ways. It can manifest as avoiding reality and trying to live in blissful ignorance. It can be wallowing in despair at the harsh realities of the world without any desire to change anything. Passive nihilism can also be choosing to find meaning in the superficial aspects of the current cultural systems despite reality; this includes things like aspiring for status, a bigger house, a better phone, nicer clothes, and more.

A Tik Tok creator under the alias @wawagatheru posted a video recently which also discussed the privilege of nihilism, but its correlation to white culture. In their video, they explained that many white people are experiencing “climate doomerism,” a form of passive nihilism, because this is the first time they have experienced an existential threat. They were promised a bright future throughout their lives, and now that it is at risk, they adopt a defeatist attitude. Meanwhile Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour have always been marginalised (@wawagatheru, 2022) by colonial capitalist culture, and have always had to defend themselves against its systems.

Not mentioned, but among these groups are also Queer and Trans People, as well as People with Disabilities. These groups have always had to fight for their future. However, identifying with any of these groups doesn't

automatically mean someone cannot be a nihilist, but that they may potentially be more interested in structural change to the systems of their oppression. For communities that have been oppressed by the overarching colonial capitalist culture, there is often less to lose, and more to gain by responding actively to challenging the cultural systems. As Angela Davis wrote in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*: “I don't think we have any alternative other than remaining optimistic. Optimism is an absolute necessity, even if it's only optimism of the will (Davis, A. 2016).”

With all that said, many who are privileged and realise their nihilism are more likely to respond passively. By doing nothing, they maintain their relatively comfortable life of privilege. Responding otherwise would require challenging the current cultural systems, and potentially compromising their social status, comfort, wealth, and privilege afforded by that system. This is perhaps why passive nihilism is nearly synonymous with the term “nihilism” today, giving it a bad reputation. It is much easier to be a passive nihilist than an active nihilist who wants to create real change.

## Section 2: Is Nihilism Prevalent?

*“What an age! Everyone is dying, everything is dying, and the earth is dying also, eaten up by the sun and the wind. I don’t know where I get the courage to keep on living in the midst of these ruins. Let us love each other to the end. You write me very little, I am worried about you.”*

-George Sand in a letter to Gustave Flaubert, June 27, 1870 (Flaubert, 1870).

What to expect in this section:

- Results of a netnography scan
- Analysis of Google Trends and WolframAlpha data
- Survey results
- Interview insights

## How Can We Tell if Nihilism is Becoming More Prevalent?

It is difficult to gauge just how popular nihilism has become. Someone like Nolan Gertz who is close to the subject has said in an interview that he’s noticed an increase of nihilism online in recent years, especially in people’s reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (O32c, 2020). But what everyone sees online is different. Our feeds are biased with algorithms catering to our interests. So how accurate is it to say nihilism is becoming more popular?

In this next section, I will use several research methods to show how nihilism is present online, and how it is experienced by my peers in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University; a graduate program which focuses on complex problem solving and sustainable future thinking.



Photo created using an AI text-to-image generator with the prompt “nihilism.” Access the generator at [app.wombo.art](https://app.wombo.art).

## Nihilism Online

The research methods looked to gather data in two ways: online and within the SFI cohort.

The online portion includes a netnography scan which is divided into 3 themes. Because the netnography scan was conducted over the period of only one year and is not broad enough to begin to determine nihilism's prevalence, the netnography data is cross-referenced with data found on Google Trends and WolframAlpha.

### Netnography Scan

Over the last year, I have collected posts relating to themes of nihilism that I've come across in my netnography scan. Netnography is a research method developed in 1995 by Robert Kozinets, and involves a scan of social media to gather data about cultures, interactions, personal narratives, and trends (Kozinets, 2006).

The netnography scan will include posts from social media sites such as Tik Tok, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit. The majority of posts sourced are from Tik Tok, because the nature of this platform encourages people to talk and share longer stories or thoughts. Twitter is the next most-sourced platform, since the nature of it also encourages discussion between users. Reddit was found to have a lot of content, but because threads of conversation are very long, there are not as many Reddit posts featured in my research. Unlike other platforms, Instagram tends to be less encouraging of dialogue between people, however it is a good source for memes that capture people's sentiments. Facebook was not included, because nothing related to my research came up in my newsfeed.

Because my netnography scan is subject to the algorithms tailored to me, I did try to make new accounts and "train" the algorithms to have the opposite interests as me. However this was too mentally exhausting and unsuccessful. To address the subjectivity of my scan and the relatively short time frame, I have cross-referenced

my findings with data I could find on Google Trends and WolframAlpha.

Later in this section, I will share findings of research I did outside of social media, which includes a survey I had conducted amongst peers in my program at OCAD University, as well as interviews with some who expressed feeling nihilistic.

### Themes of Netnography Scan

As I mentioned earlier, the general public does not typically talk about nihilism using the word "nihilism." Throughout the netnography scan, people would share stories or thoughts that resembled nihilism, or created content around ideas I consider synonymous with nihilism. This includes "doomerism," "bimbofication," "smooth brain," "no thoughts, head empty," etc. as previously discussed.

The following content is a partial representation of the complete scan since there was too much to include. Those shown have been organised into three groups based on themes to emerge during the scan:

- Posts About Experiencing and Reacting to Nihilism
- People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism
- Nihilism in Relation to Colonial-Capitalist Culture

### Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism

This first theme explores people's experiences and reactions to nihilism, which vary from funny to critical, to even suicidal. This suggests that everyone experiences and copes with their nihilism quite differently.

Considering that the feeling of nihilism, specifically passive nihilism, can resemble a sense of defeat, hopelessness, and despair; it is almost counter-intuitive that it would become such a focal point for online humour. However in an article called Laughing Away the Pain published by European Journal of Pain, researchers suggest that humour serves multiple practical purposes in relation to pain; it has an analgesic effect, helps to distract a person, and helps the brain reassess a stressful event or experience. Humour also has the potential to create relatability and social bonds between people, therefore creating a support system to help cope with the pain (Pérez-Aranda, A., et al., 2019). If this is the case, reacting to the harsh realities of nihilism with humour makes sense as a way of coping; it allows people to soothe, distract, and find others who are feeling the same way.

For many others though, nihilism is not a laughing matter, and creators have taken to online platforms to post about mental breakdowns, their frustration, and thoughts of suicide to escape what feels like an inescapably difficult life under colonial capitalist culture.

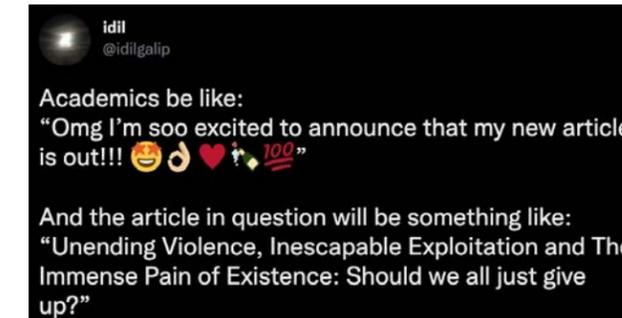
The posts on the following pages have been included because they capture the below aspects of nihilism from my working definition:

- A realisation that life does not feel meaningful within our cultural systems (colonial capitalism)
- A realisation that inherent wants, needs, or values do not match how the world operates in reality (needing a livable and healthy environment when we are experiencing human-made climate catastrophe is an example of this)
- A passive, escapist, or defeatist reaction to either of the above realities, as a way of coping. There is no interest in changing the circumstances. This includes the "doomers," "bimbos," etc.

### Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



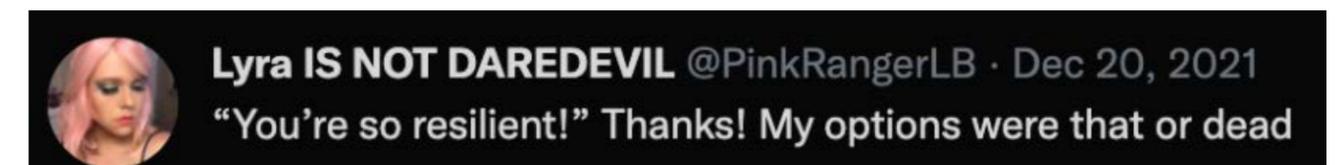
Tweet posted by @juliashiplett, 2021.



Tweet posted by @idilgalip, 2021.



Tweet posted by @jil\_slander, 2021.



Tweet posted by @PinkRangerLB, 2021.

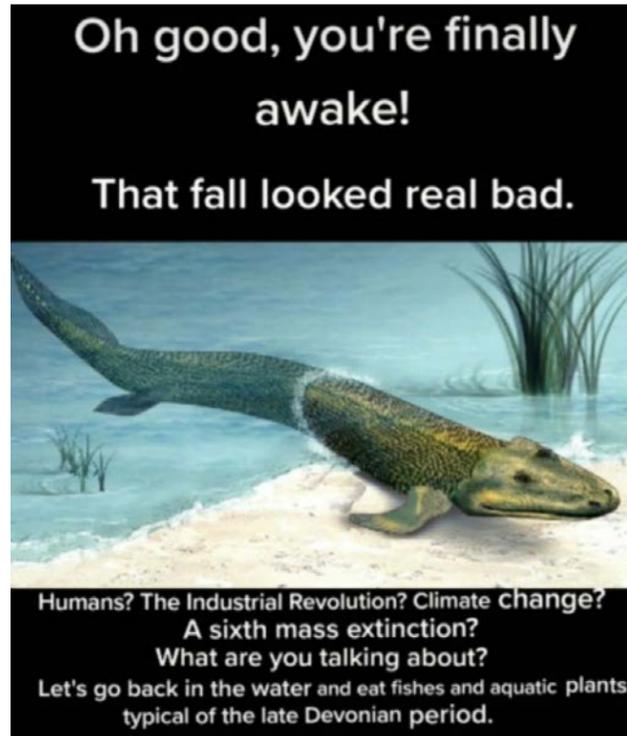


Tweet posted by @mercentury, 2021.



Tweet posted by @dkulchar, 2021.

Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



(Know Your Meme, 2021).



(@reactjpg, 2021)



Tweet posted by @kurtrusfanclub, 2021.



Tweet posted by @erikinternet, 2021.



Tweet posted by @David\_Moscrop, 2022.

Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



Screenshot of a Tik Tok posted by @avocadoandshark, 2022. [Watch Here.](#)



Screenshot of a Tik Tok posted by @valerivonseen, 2022.



Screenshot of a Tik Tok posted by @James\_wbu, 2022.

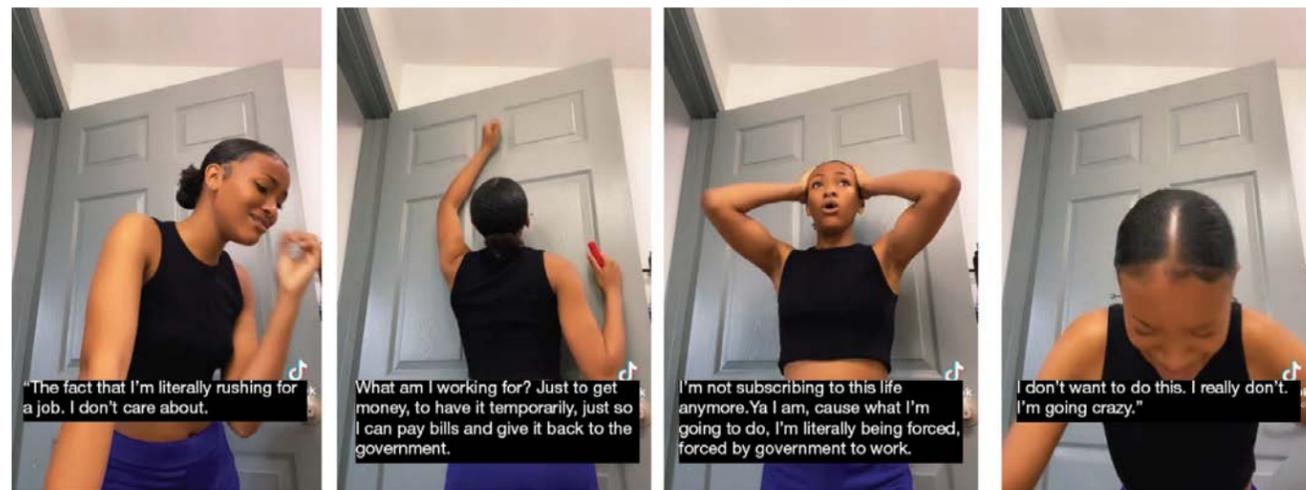


A Screenshot from The Onion's Article "What Not to Say to Someone Having a Panic Attack (The Onion, 2022).

Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



Tik Tok Posted by @itsninarivera, 2022. [Watch here.](#)



Tik Tok posted by @\_cirxci\_, 2022. [Watch here.](#)

**Transcription:** You know, what's really blowing me. The fact that I'm literally rushing for a job. I don't care about. I got five minutes. What am I working for? Just to get money, to have it temporarily, just so I can pay bills and give it back to the government.

I could really quit. I'm done. I'm not subscribing to this life anymore. Ya I am, cause what I'm going to do, I'm literally being forced, forced by government to work.

I don't want to do this. I really don't. I'm going crazy. Like I have a half a mind to be like, yo, I'm out. Like I'm done. I'm not coming in today, but you know what? I need a place to stay. Homelessness is not comfortable. I don't know if you knew that. I ain't got no clothes on. I gotta put jeans on. I hate jeans. I love jeans, but like.

Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by Robdwalks, 2022. [Watch here.](#)



Tik Tok posted by @Lolellakoundji, 2021. [Watch here.](#)



Tik Tok posted by @Shaleemajb, 2021. [Watch here.](#)

Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by (@toiletjokes, 2021). [Watch here.](#)



Tik Tok posted by (@cowbabyzee, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by (@retro\_waves, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

**Transcription:**

**Speaker 1:** I don't trust you. If you're sane. I don't trust you at all, that means you don't give a fuck. What's going on in the world. You don't give a fuck that we are being fucked over everyday. You just, you just submit to daddy Capitalism.

**Speaker 2:** This completely reminds me of my wife's sister, right? She's like a big proponent of capitalism. I brought up to her maybe once or twice, and I know that this is not a topic that I want to discuss with her, but she recently left Amazon. And before she left, she would always talk about how she would have panic attacks before she went into work. And in order to manage those panic attacks, what she did is, she was prescribed medicine in order to suppress that anxiety. She would talk to my wife about it all the time, and she said that she was taking the medicine because she wanted to feel like a normal person. Now, let me preface what I'm about to say by saying that I'm not an expert in mental health. So if you're needing any

sort of medication, please get it. But the simple fact that she thinks that in order to be a normal functioning human being in this society means that you have to take some sort of medication to suppress your feelings, speaks fucking volumes to the type of society that we live in.

She knew what the root cause of her anxiety was. And instead of seeing it as a flaw in the system that she loves so much, she'd rather suppress those feelings, the feelings that she had every day before she went to work, that is what makes you a normal human being. The response that your body has given you to this unnatural system is fucking normal. Like your body is trying to tell you that humans are supposed to live this way. Again, I cannot stress this enough. If you are needing medication to live in this fucking hell hole that we call a society, please get it. But, but don't confuse that with being a normal person while you suppress those feelings, the natural response that your body is having that as what's fucking normal. All right.

Trigger Warning: Suicide

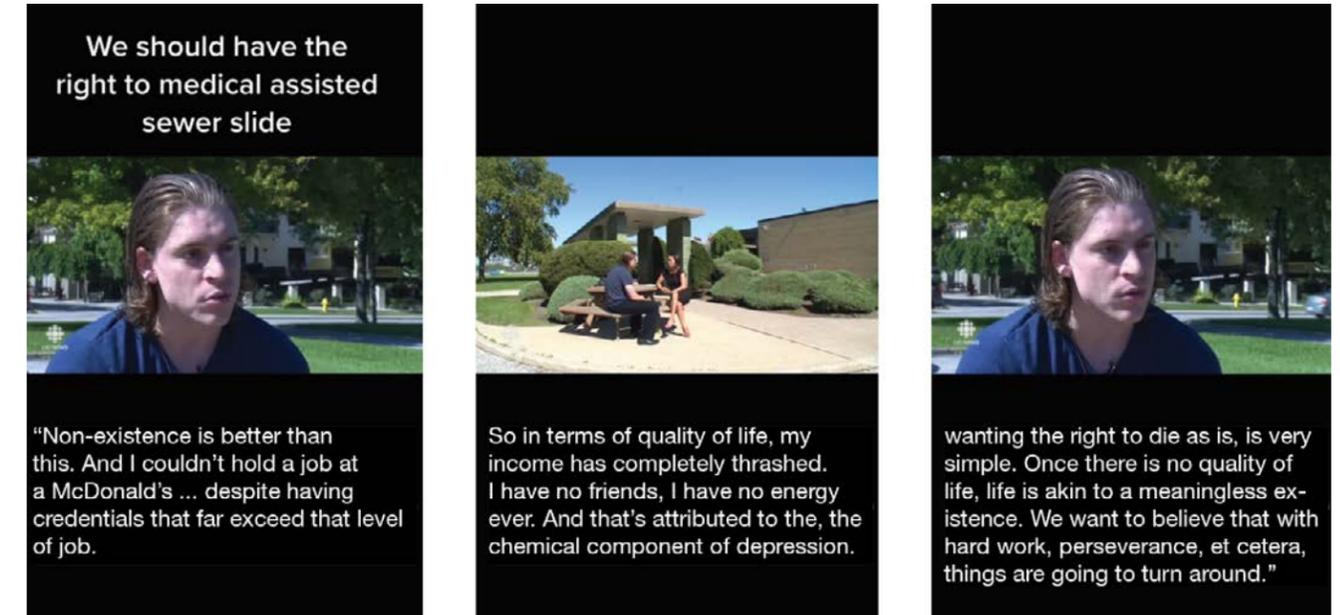


Tik Tok posted by (@kristofpissedoff, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

Transcription:

You know, what's literally insane. Is that being a human being costs so much money, but then they tell us that we're worth these like miserable, like measly wages. Like that's so backwards to me, that's so fucking out the asshole. And that makes just no sense to me. I don't understand why everyone doesn't want to kill themselves. Like what the fuck. Every time I try to do something, the government puts a wall in front of me. I'm like, I'm not surprised that I want to kill myself all the time. Like you, the world tells you that they don't want you alive. I can't help myself. I don't have enough money to keep myself healthy, to keep myself fed. You know, They want you dead.

Trigger Warning: Suicide



Tik Tok posted by @goddessrisingcreations, 2021. [Watch original video here.](#)

Transcription:

**Speaker 1:** Why are you fighting for the right to a doctor assisted death?

**Speaker 2:** Non-existence is better than this. And I couldn't hold a job at a McDonald's or burger king, despite having credentials that far exceed that level of job. So in terms of quality of life, my income has completely thrashed. I have no friends, I have no energy ever. And that's attributed to the chemical component of depression. And my father has to do it for me. I barely have enough energy to do the dishes, et cetera. Sometimes I can't even get out of bed. The real reason for someone like myself, wanting the right to die as is, is very simple. Once there is no quality of life, life is akin to a meaningless existence. We want to believe that with hard work, perseverance, et cetera, things are going to

turn around. We want to believe where there is a will. There is a way it sounds so nice.

And wouldn't it be so nice if that were the case someone's suffering for years and years and years like myself, then what are you protecting them from? If they've done so much therapy, you're not protecting them. You're just confining them to pain. It's very sad. And of course, I personally love life. I don't want to leave. If I could snap my fingers and all these illnesses would be cured, then we wouldn't be sitting here today. If I can't live the life, I want to live the quality of, and I can't have the quality of life I want to have. If I'm going to suffer every single day, I'm going to leave, just taking my own life and inducing the cessation of the suffering on my own accord.

## Netnography Scan Theme 1: Posts About Experiencing or Reacting to Nihilism

↑ Posted by u/\_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_- 4 days ago 

**161** **Is there a point in reading criticism of capitalism or modern society if there isn't much I can do to change it or even my individual conditions?**

Flaired Users Only

Now obviously there literally are things I can do such as vote, treat people better, limit my usage of certain things but I hope you can understand what I'm saying here. I can't really see a way to fundamentally change the human condition I live under

It worries me that many theorists such as Fisher or Debord have met untimely ends.

 37 Comments  Share  Save  Hide  Report  Tip 92% Upvoted

Reddit posted by @ u/\_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_- 2022. [Read thread here.](#)

↑ Posted by u/Old\_Navy 3 days ago  

**96** **Is it fair/right to retreat from the sociopolitical world of your era to focus on self fulfillment?**

While current affairs make for an easy argument in support of withdrawing from worrying/engaging with government due to how limited of an impact the individual can have with basic/average effort (voting, let's say) living in any era of history: is it a mistake to intentionally avoid the stress of politics and government? By not reading/watching any news or media and instead focusing on the day to day fulfillment (working a job you enjoy, hanging with friends, covering basics like food/water/shelter) and investing in your hobbies, interests, and travel, while refusing to care about either local or national political issues, it can be said that you are doing a disservice to those around you by not being a vigilant citizen. At the same time, I can easily see focusing on self-fulfillment resulting in a healthier and overall better life, but is there an argument to be made that you cannot be fulfilled without active participation in the society around you. It is easy to say "no matter where you are you are living in a society", that is not the short minded answer I am looking for as obviously you will see the news on the TV at your local cafe or wherever. I mean actively giving a thought as to how you can take steps to improve your town/country vs. enjoying every day for what it is and focusing on whatever comes to mind and what you can impact with a reasonable amount of effort, stoic style.

 43 Comments  Share  Save  Hide  Report  Tip 96% Upvoted

Reddit Posted by @u/Old\_Navy, 2022. [Read thread here.](#)

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## Netnography Scan Theme 2: People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism

The following posts demonstrate how some people online have become aware of nihilism, have reflected on it or learned about it, and are now discussing it. Among the people posting are those interested in activism who have taken a more serious tone to the matter.

Although these discussions about nihilism are more serious, they are still drastically different from those of philosophers and academics seen in the definitions section of this paper. These online creators know they are catering to people leisurely scrolling through social media content, and are able to discuss nihilism in a way that is not overly complex, so as to appeal to and be understood by a wider audience. This style of communication inadvertently serves another purpose; in the book *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval examines Roland Barthes' theories of semiotics and meaning-making, explaining:

*“Dominant classes hide the structures that ensure their domination— even from themselves—thereby producing ideology, Barthes asserts, the speech of the oppressed “announces itself openly,” as must revolutionary language, thereby abolishing the blinding life of ideology (Sandoval, 2013).”*

Colonial capitalist culture is not explicit in how it functions, making it difficult for many to understand or question how it makes us feel nihilistic. For example, it is not obvious that building suburbs for people to live in could create isolation, until it is observed later

that the lack of shared space discourages any meaningful community building, which could leave people feeling nihilistic. This hidden function allows colonial capitalist culture to repeat over time, however speaking about it openly in plain language begins to counteract this, as people can begin to understand what is happening.

This is the significance of social activists speaking about nihilism on platforms like Tik Tok, they help people begin to understand more critically something that they may be experiencing. On the next pages are a few examples of this.

## Netnography Scan Theme 2: People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by (deveehant\_dudawanup, 2022) [Watch here](#).

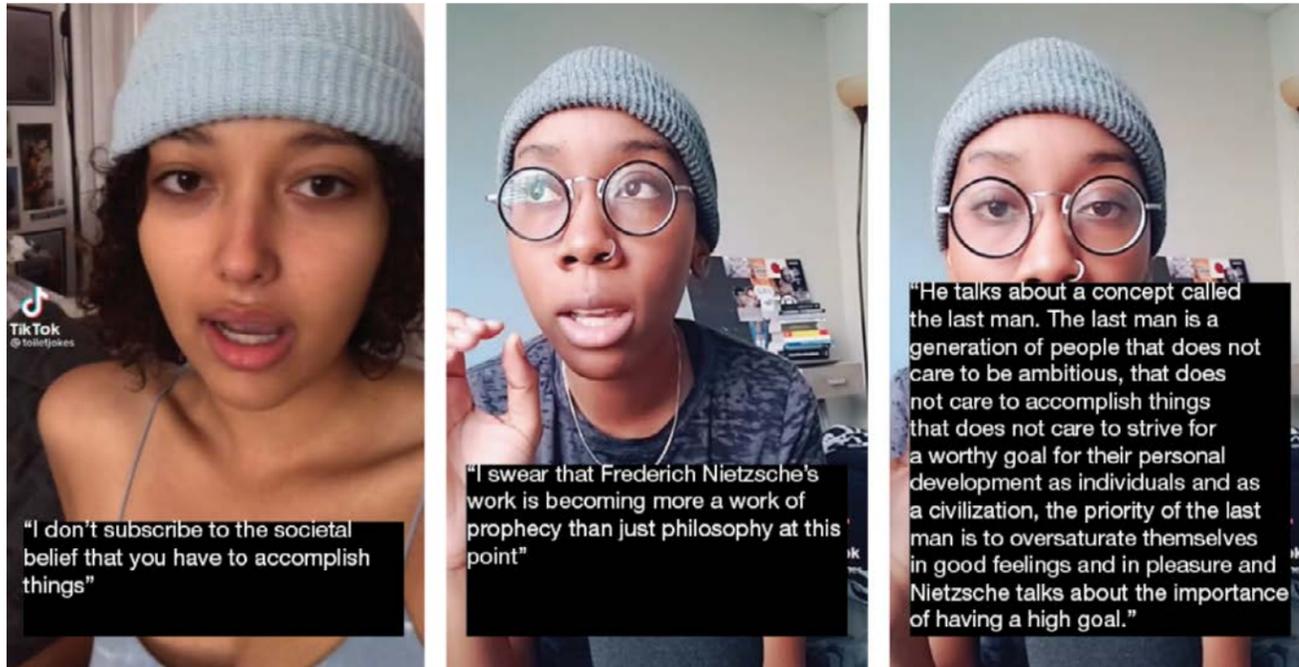
### Transcription:

You know, there are two groups of people in this generation. The first one is those who go and do the work to fix the issues that we are facing. God bless those people because those are the ones who are going to change the world. And then the other group of people do absolutely nothing. They think the world is crashing and burning, and this is it, this is the end of humanity and they do nothing about it. And they just sit there and complain and complain and complain. And they watch, they doom scroll on this app. Nihilism helps nobody. It doesn't help you. It don't help me. It don't help my parents,

don't help your parents. It helps nobody. So why think that way? Go out there and do something.

I know many of you might disagree with me, but humanity has gotten a lot better since the fifth century. If you had Tik Tok in the fifth century and you recorded all the events that happened, you would think that was the end of the world. You know, we see all these bad things every single day, because that is what media corporations do. They sell you fear when the world has gotten a lot better. If the world ends it is because people have become nihilistic.

## Netnography Scan Theme 2: People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by (@theibissociety, 2021). [Watch here](#).

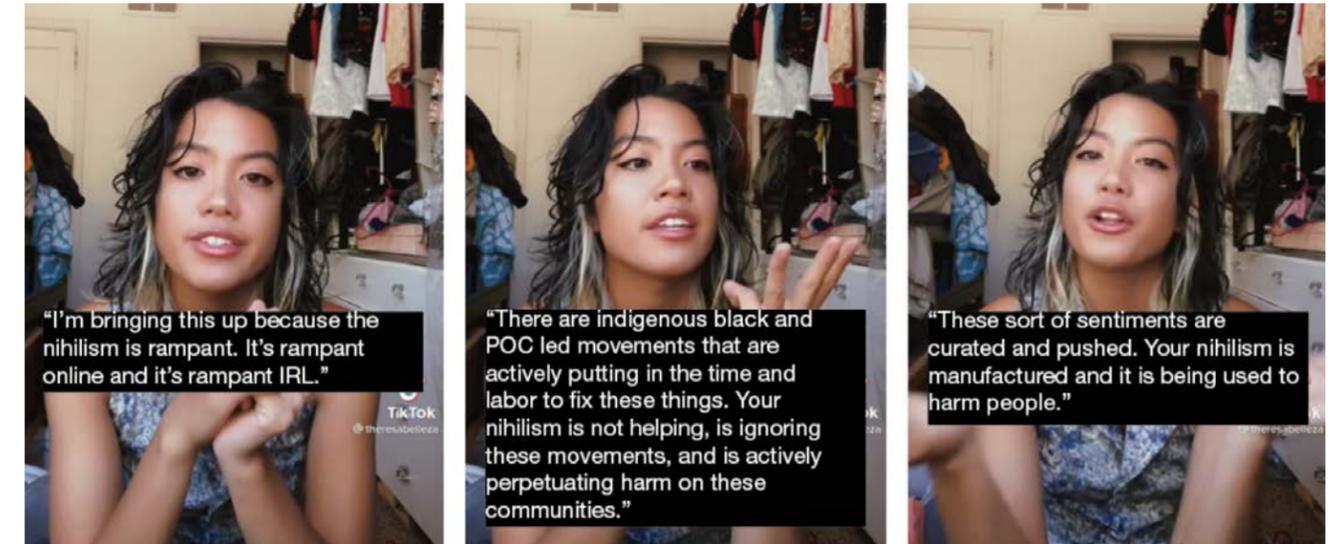
### Transcription:

**Speaker 1:** I don't subscribe to the societal belief that you have to accomplish things.

**Speaker 2:** I swear that Frederich Nietzsche's work is becoming more a work of prophecy than just philosophy at this point, because, and his book Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he talks about a concept called the last man. The last man is a generation of people that does not care to be ambitious, that does not care to accomplish things that does not care to strive for a worthy goal for their personal development as individuals and as a civilization, the priority of the last man is to oversaturate themselves in good feelings and in pleasure and Nietzsche talks about the importance of having a high goal. He

talks about the importance of the climb of life and the, and everything that comes with the climb of life, being important for human development. And when I see videos like this, where people are talking about wanting to do the bare minimum, wanting to skate by in life, wanting to just chill and just have fun and not try, it does not fare well for them because the human brain is not wired to do the bare minimum. The brain needs a worthy aim to shoot for. If it does not have a worthy aim, a problem to solve, it will create its own problems. So when I see videos like this, it just makes me think that we are in the age of the last man that Frederich Nietzsche talked about. And it is a very disturbing trend.

## Netnography Scan Theme 2: People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by (@teaa.beaa, 2021). [Watch here](#).

### Transcription:

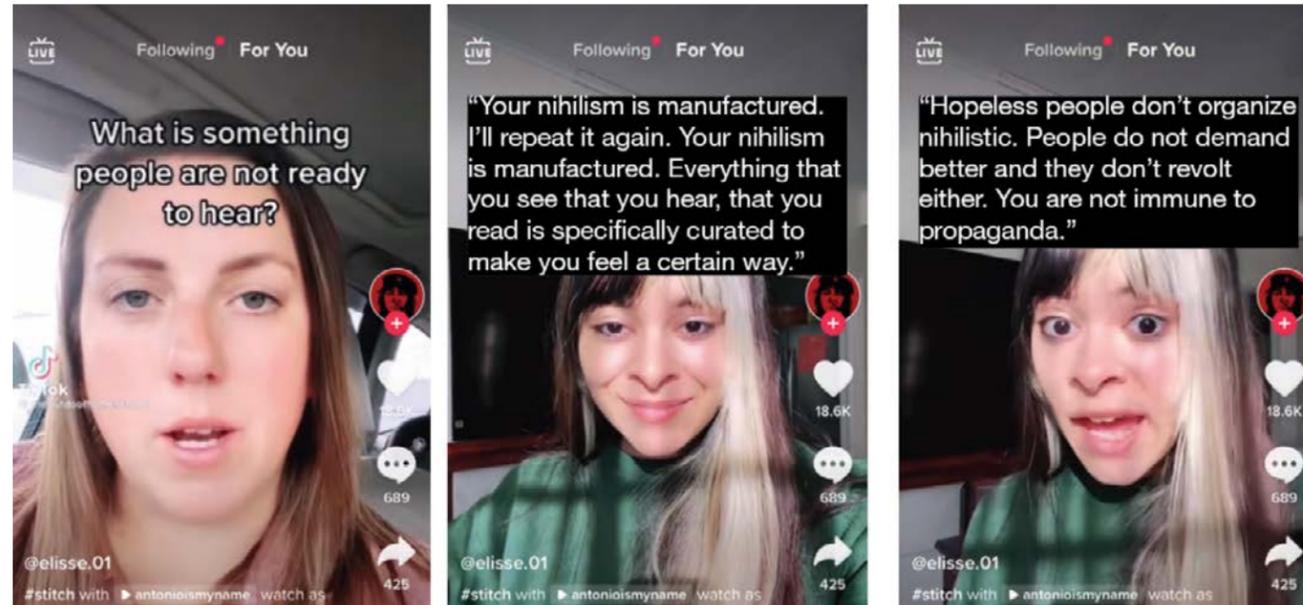
I'm bringing this up because the nihilism is rampant. It's rampant online and it's rampant IRL. Here's the thing, your apathy toward political movements against climate change against the systems that put us here is absolutely harmful. And I'm saying this because I got called out on it too. There are indigenous black and POC led movements that are actively putting in the time and labor to fix these things. Your nihilism is not helping, is ignoring these movements, and is actively perpetuating harm on these communities.

Newsflash, the things that you are afraid will happen to you have already been happening to our most marginalized and vulnerable communities, and they have had no choice,

but to care about fixing these issues. And they have had no choice, but to rely on people, to help them. If you don't care, it is because you are privileged enough to do so.

And if you think that all humans are bad, humanity is not worth saving one another, newsflash. The oppressive bullshit that we are living under is only due to a small percentage of humans. It is due to economic systems that are controlled by relatively a few people. It is due to policy decisions that are enacted and enforced by a few people. There are more of us than there are of them. It is not completely your fault though. These sorts of sentiments are curated and pushed. Your nihilism is manufactured and it is being used to harm people.

## Netnography Scan Theme 2: People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism



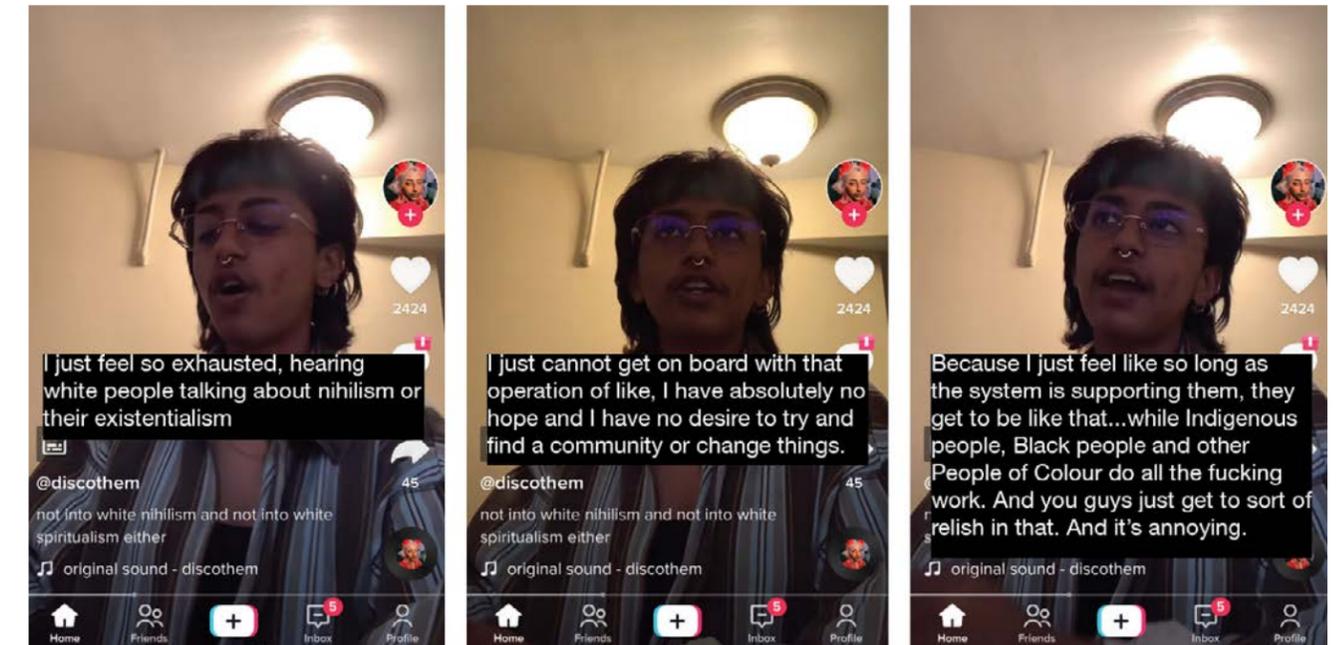
Tik Tok posted by (@elisse.01, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

### Transcription:

**Person 1:** What is something people are not ready to hear?

**Person 2:** Your nihilism is manufactured. I'll repeat it again. Your nihilism is manufactured. Everything that you see that you hear, that you read is specifically curated to make you feel a certain way. Hopeless people don't organise. Nihilistic people do not demand better and they don't revolt either. You are not immune to propaganda.

## Netnography Scan Theme 2: People Discussing or Criticising Nihilism



Tik Tok posted by (@discothem). [Watch here.](#)

### Transcription:

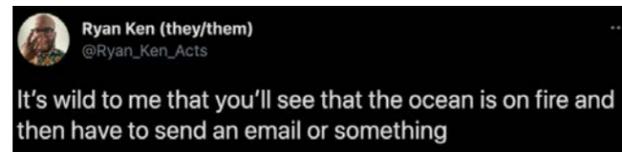
I just feel so exhausted, hearing white people talking about nihilism or their existentialism sometimes. I just cannot get on board with that operation of like, I have absolutely no hope and I have no desire to try and find a community or change things. Because I just feel like so long as the system is supporting them, they get to be like that. Like they get to sit around hopeless while Indigenous people, Black people and other People of Colour do all the fucking work. And you guys just get to sort of relish in that. And it's annoying. It's really annoying.

### Netnography Scan Theme 3: Nihilism in Relation to Colonial-Capitalist Culture

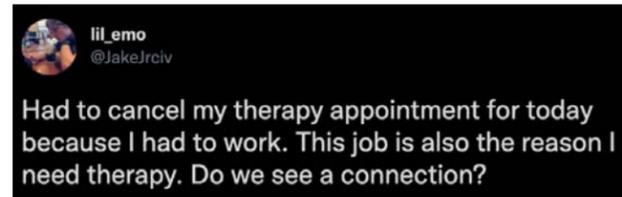
Posts featured in this section are from people who have discussed nihilism in relation to aspects of colonial capitalist culture like work, climate catastrophe, self care, socialising, and activism. Some of these posts are criticisms, some are observations, some are people making use of humour.

Perhaps the most commonly shared message across this collection of posts is that the way we are living under colonial capitalist culture feels unnatural, and unintuitive. It feels unnatural to have to work 40 of our waking hours per week, it feels unintuitive to have to keep going to work even when it feels like there is catastrophe around us, it feels unintuitive to have to strategically make time for exercise or self preservation because we are so busy working.

The posts found in the following pages show that people have an awareness and understanding of what aspects of colonial capitalist culture are intentionally impacting their lives. As a result, some creators have expressed feeling tired, exhausted emotionally, and ready for action.



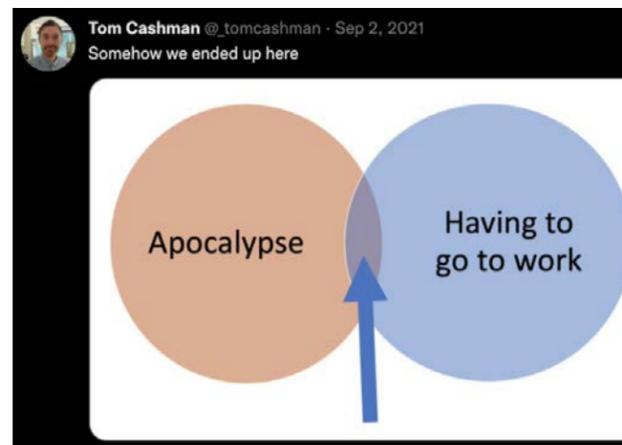
Tweet posted by @Ryan\_Ken\_Acts, 2021.



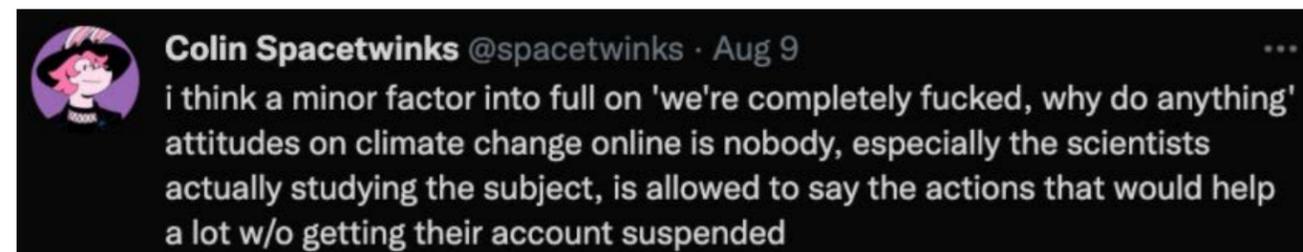
Tweet posted by @JakeJrciv, 2021.



Tweet posted by @CBCPitchBot, 2021.



Tweet posted by @\_tomcashman, 2021.



Tweet posted by @spacetwinks, 2021.

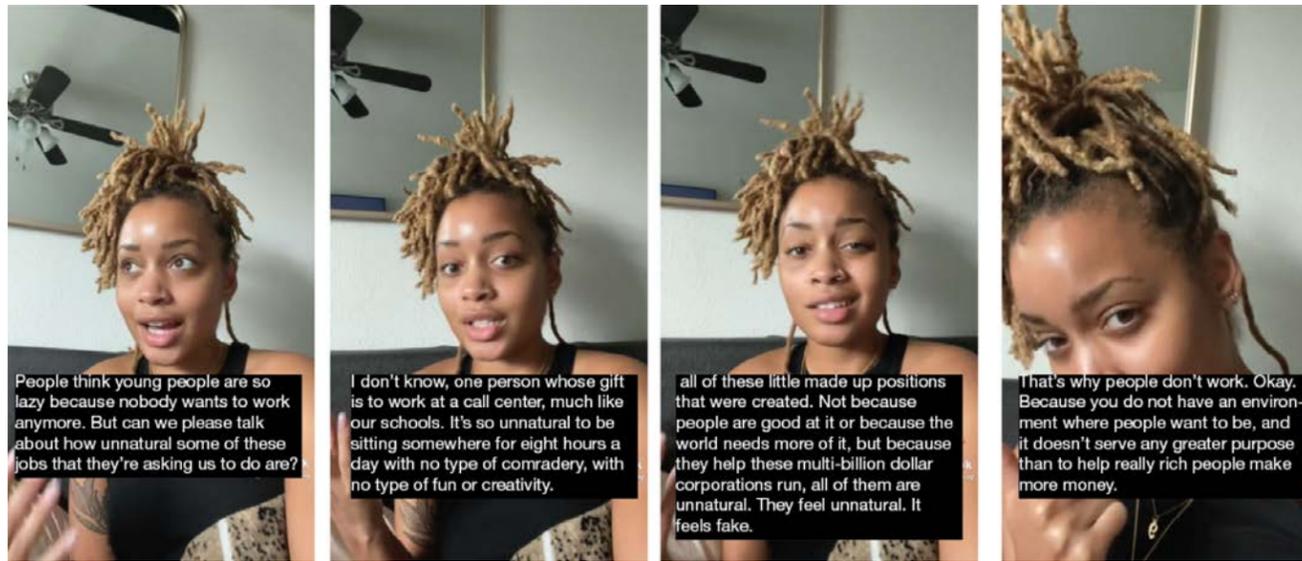
### Netnography Scan Theme 3: Nihilism in Relation to Colonial-Capitalist Culture



Tik Tok posted by (@24.clairtgold, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

#### Transcription:

There's wildfires all over the globe. There's flooding all over the globe. Literally the effects of climate change that they've been talking about happening for the past 50 years are happening now before our eyes, are you guys excited? Let's go back to work. Let's keep working, keep working, keep fucking going to your fucking job. Keep going to your job that you hate. Keep fucking going to your job that you hate. Keep making money for us. Keep going to work, work until you fucking die. I don't care if you starve it out. I don't care if you're...

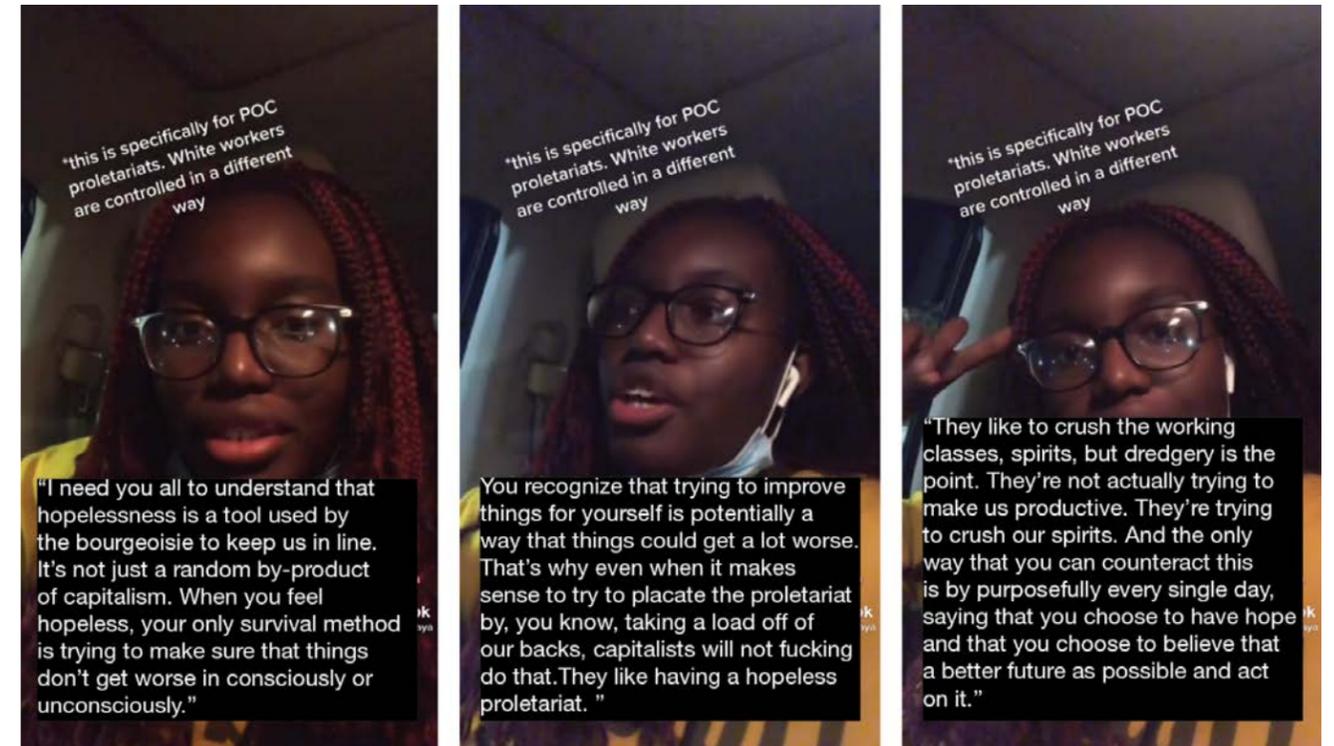


Tik Tok posted by (@westindieray, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

**Transcription:**

People think young people are so lazy because nobody wants to work anymore. But can we please talk about how unnatural some of these jobs that they're asking us to do are? I don't know one person whose gift is to work at a call centre. Much like our schools, it's so unnatural to be sitting somewhere for eight hours a day with no type of comradery, with no type of fun or creativity. Not to mention the fact that there really is no moving up in these entry level positions these days, like I'm going to move from what data entry one, a data entry to

specialist. No, all of these little made up positions that were created. Not because people are good at it or because the world needs more of it, but because they help these multi-billion dollar corporations run, all of them are unnatural. They feel unnatural. It feels fake. When you walk in there and you feel fake for being in there, you feel like you gotta be fake to everybody. That's why people don't work. Okay. Because you do not have an environment where people want to be, and it doesn't serve any greater purpose than to help really rich people make more money.



Tik Tok posted by (@ArguablySomaya, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

**Transcription:**

I need you all to understand that hopelessness is a tool used by the bourgeoisie to keep us in line. It's not just a random by-product of capitalism. When you feel hopeless, your only survival method is trying to make sure that things don't get worse consciously or unconsciously. You recognize that trying to improve things for yourself is potentially a way that things could get a lot worse. That's why even when it makes sense to try to placate the proletariat

by, you know, taking a load off of our backs, capitalists will not fucking do that. They like having a hopeless proletariat. They like to crush the working classes, spirits, but dredgery is the point. They're not actually trying to make us productive. They're trying to crush our spirits. And the only way that you can counteract this is by purposefully every single day, saying that you choose to have hope and that you choose to believe that a better future as possible and act on it.

Netnography Scan Theme 3: Nihilism in Relation to Colonial-Capitalist Culture



Tik Tok posted by (@futurepods\_, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

**Transcription:**

**Speaker 1:** Let's talk about the walking path. It is such a game changer for getting your steps in. For context, this is my home office. It's literally,

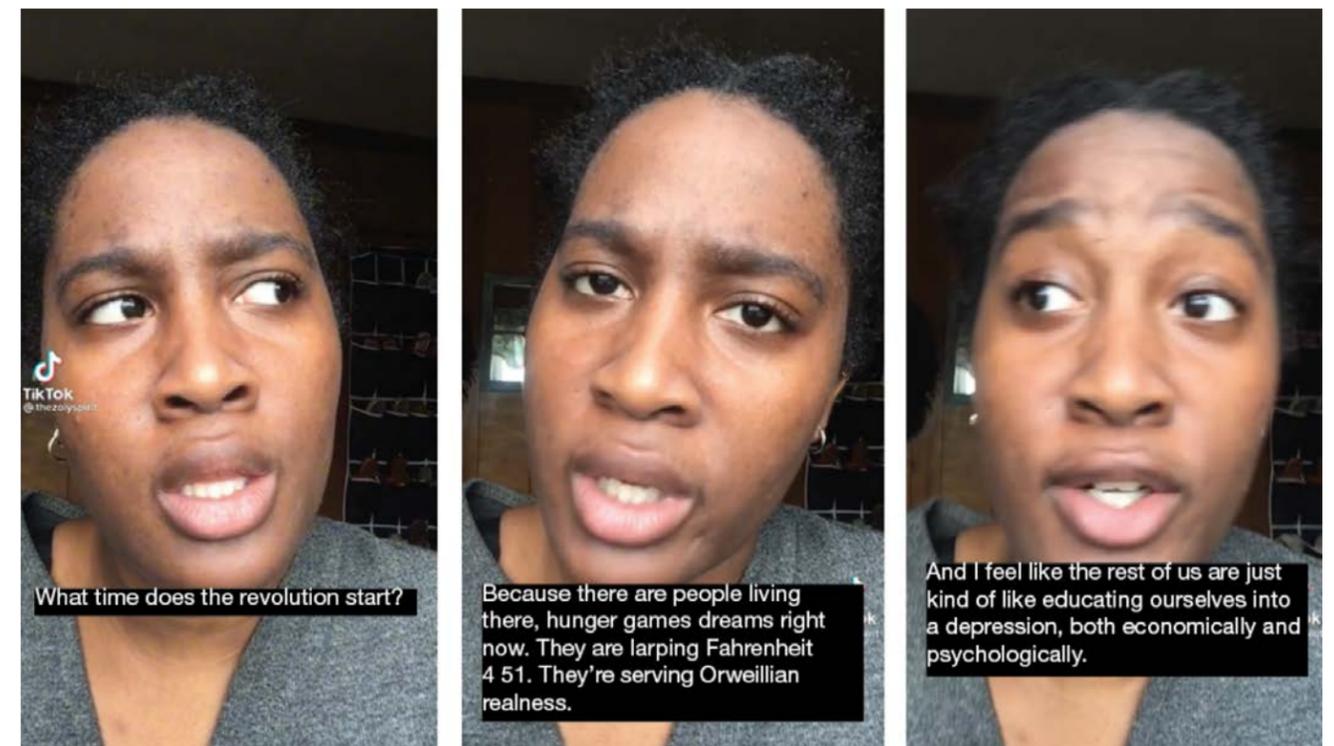
**Speaker 2:** I do not mean any hate to this creator whatsoever, but this is so fucking dystopian. Oh my God. Like where did we go wrong as a human species where we are all now working out our desks, getting our little fucking pity patties in, on a walking pad. So we can still continue to be engaged in capitalism as we do our little walkie walkie.

I don't know. I don't know. I just, I see videos like this and all I can think of is we are so fucking far removed from what we should be doing as people like it keeps getting worse. It literally keeps getting worse. All you need now is an automatic feeder that feeds you water as you walk. So you can still be on your computer and you'll be a real life hamster.

Netnography Scan Theme 3: Nihilism in Relation to Colonial-Capitalist Culture

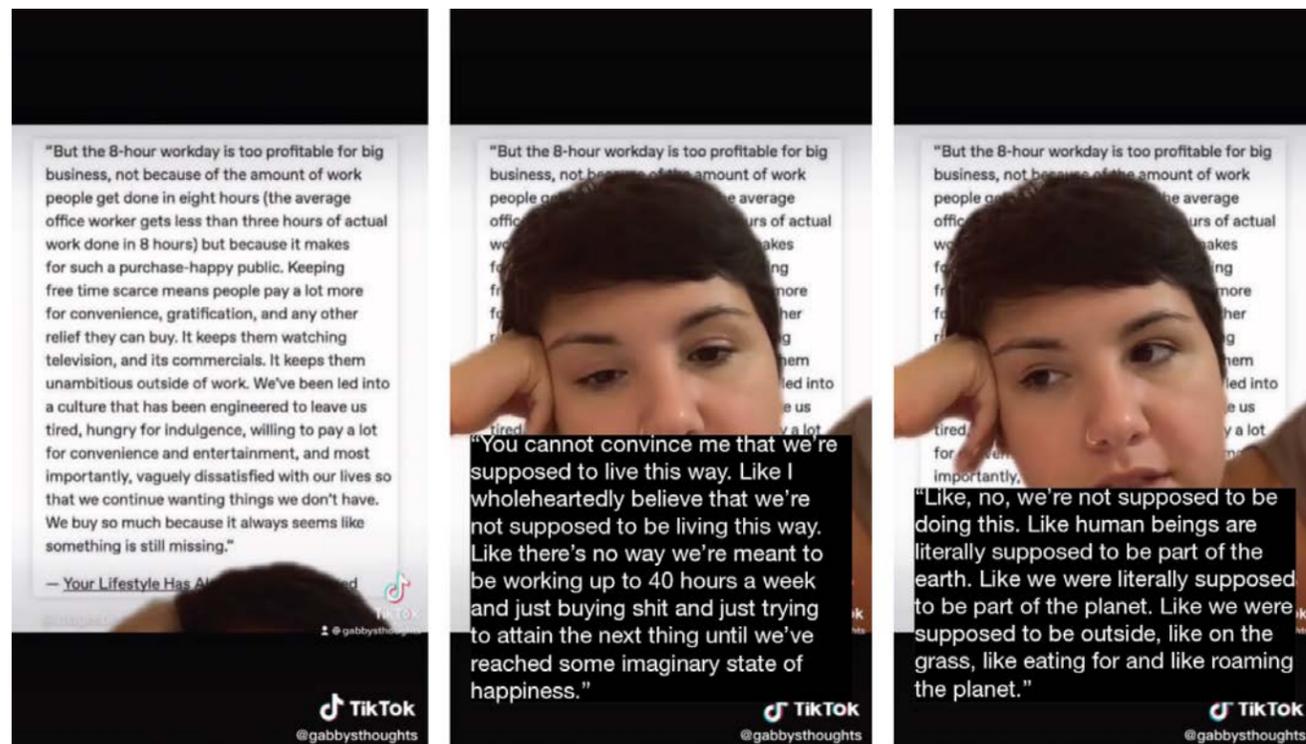


Tik Tok posted by (@lolellakoundji, 2022). [Watch here.](#)



Tik Tok posted by (@thezolyspirit, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

### Netnography Scan Theme 3: Nihilism in Relation to Colonial-Capitalist Culture



Tik Tok posted by (@gabbysthoughts, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

#### Transcription:

People still don't understand what's going on. But the eight hour work day is too profitable for big business. Not because the amount of work people get done in eight hours. The average office worker gets less than three hours of actual work done in eight hours. But because it makes for such a purchase-happy public, keeping free time scarce means people pay a lot more for convenience, gratification and any relief they can buy. It keeps them watching television and its commercials. It keeps them unambitious. Outside of work. We've been led into a culture that has been engineered to leave us tired, hungry, and for indulgence, willing to pay a lot for convenience and entertainment. And most importantly, vaguely dissatisfied with our lives so that we

continue wanting things we don't have. We buy so much because it always seems like something is still missing.

You cannot convince me that we're supposed to live this way. Like I wholeheartedly believe that we're not supposed to be living this way. Like there's no way we're meant to be working up to 40 hours a week and just buying shit and just trying to attain the next thing until we've reached some imaginary state of happiness. Like, no, we're not supposed to be doing this. Like human beings are literally supposed to be part of the earth. Like we were literally supposed to be part of the planet. Like we were supposed to be outside, like on the grass, like eating for and like roaming the planet.

#### Summary of Netnography Scan

The netnography scan revealed a number of different relationships people have to nihilism online. Overall, three main themes emerged during the netnography scan; people experiencing or reacting to nihilism, people discussing or criticising nihilism, and nihilism in relation to colonial capitalist culture.

In the first theme which explored people's experiences of nihilism, people's posts ranged from funny, to critical, and even suicidal in a couple instances. What this suggests is that a lot of people are coping with their nihilism in different ways; some may be recognizing that they feel unfulfilled but are unsure as to why, while others are aware of how their life feels unfulfilling and are either trying to disassociate to cope, laugh about it, or publicise their breakdowns. Several others were found to have sunken deep into defeat and despair, unsure that there was anything within their capability that they could do to change how they were feeling.

The next theme looked at people discussing or criticising nihilism, specifically passive nihilism although they had all referred to it as simply "nihilism." These creators had a clear idea of what nihilism is, and the tone of the posts in this theme were overall much more serious. Most people in this theme seemed to be interested in grassroots activism, and warned that the widespread feelings of nihilism are manufactured to discourage people from organising, "if the world ends, it's because people have become nihilistic (@deveehant\_dudawanup, 2022)."

The final theme featured posts about nihilism in relation to colonial capitalism. This included both serious and sarcastic commentary about people's observations, experiences, and criticisms of trying to navigate a culture that prioritises work and profits above all else. Many people seem to feel as though we are being forced to work through "the apocalypse," and have a sense that we are not meant to live the way that we are under colonial capitalist culture.

Because Tik Tok was the dominant platform in the netnography scan, it's important to reiterate that the majority of content from this scan was heavily filtered through an algorithm catering to myself. As a result, the posts I found were from relatively younger creators, other People of Colour, and other people who shared similar interests to me. This definitely limits the scope of the scan in these ways.

Overall, the Netnography scan would suggest that nihilism, especially passive nihilism, is common amongst younger people online. There was a lot of content to support this, and the posts featured in this section were only a fraction of which were saved from the scan. However, to get a better sense of whether or not nihilism is actually becoming more prevalent, I will also be looking at the popularity of nihilism in worldwide searches over a longer period of time in the next part of this section.

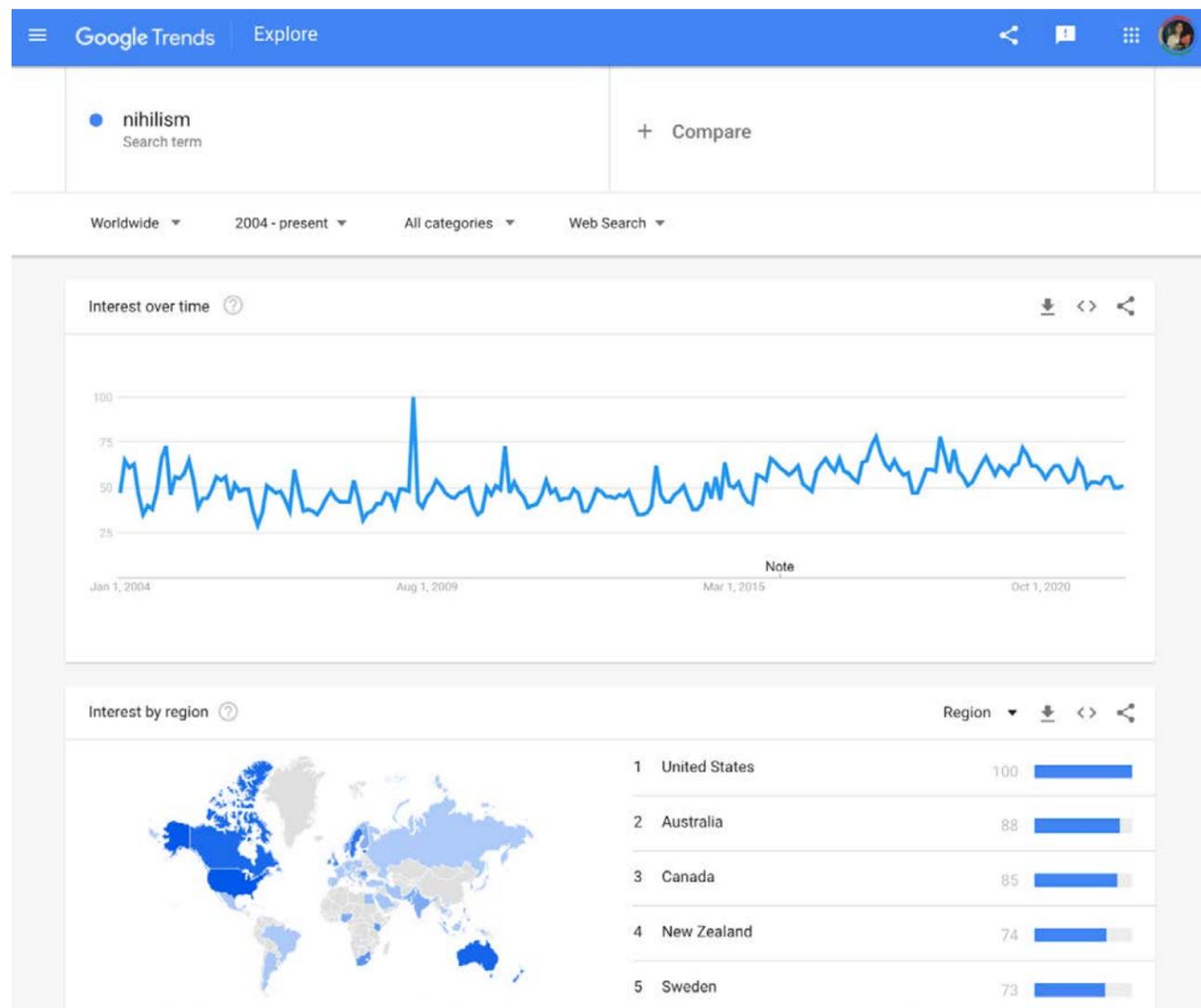


Figure 4. A screenshot of Google Trends data, showing the popularity of the word “nihilism” being searched from 2004 to present day, and which countries had the most searches (Google Trends, n.d.).

### Comparing Netnography Scan to Online Trends Data

The Netnography scan conducted was limited in ways due to algorithm filtering and the relatively short period of time it took place which was less than 1 year. As a result, it made it difficult to determine if nihilism is becoming more prevalent. To get a broader sense of nihilism’s prevalence over the years, I have looked to Google Trends and WolframAlpha. Both of these tools look at data worldwide, and provide a longer range

of time; Google Trends offers from 2004 - present day, WolframAlpha seems to span all of time.

Google Trends was able to provide data on how often the term “nihilism” was searched worldwide from 2004 to present day. The results show that Western countries including the United States, Australia, and Canada were amongst the top searchers; each of which operate under similar colonial-capitalist cultures. As for the popularity of

“nihilism” being searched, it seems to have fluctuated fairly consistently since 2004, with a significant spike in 2009; possibly related to the aftermath of the 2008 stock market crash (Amadeo, K., 2022).

There is a note in Google Trends, stating that there was an improvement to data collection in 2016. Before this date, searches for nihilism seemed to fluctuate between 25%-50% with occasional spikes higher than that. After 2016, searches for nihilism slightly increased, and they began to regularly fluctuate between 50% and 75%. This suggests two possibilities; searches for nihilism increased after 2016, or searches for nihilism could have been higher prior to 2016 and the data collection update Google made.

To summarise, according to Google Trends, searches for the term “nihilism,” are either constantly fluctuating around 50%, or fluctuating but also increasing in recent years.

To contrast Google Trends with WolframAlpha, WolframAlpha was able to provide data for a much broader range,

however the metric that it is measuring, “word frequency” is more ambiguous. It is not clear if “word frequency” refers to literature, media, culture etc. or if it includes digital media and search engines. It also does not specify location, but worldwide is implied.

According to Wolfram Alpha’s graph, the term nihilism has been steadily increasing throughout history. There was a substantial spike around the year 2000, which I’d speculate is in relation to the Y2K apocalyptic frenzie. However, unlike Google Trends’ data, WolframAlpha suggests that nihilism has steadily decreased in popularity since 2000. Overall, both data sets are quite different, making it difficult to gauge if “nihilism” has become more prevalent as a concept.

My original intention to cross reference this quantitative data from Google Trends and WolframAlpha with the more qualitative data of the netnography scan was to gain a better sense of nihilism’s prevalence, however that does not seem concretely possible due to the discrepancies between each.

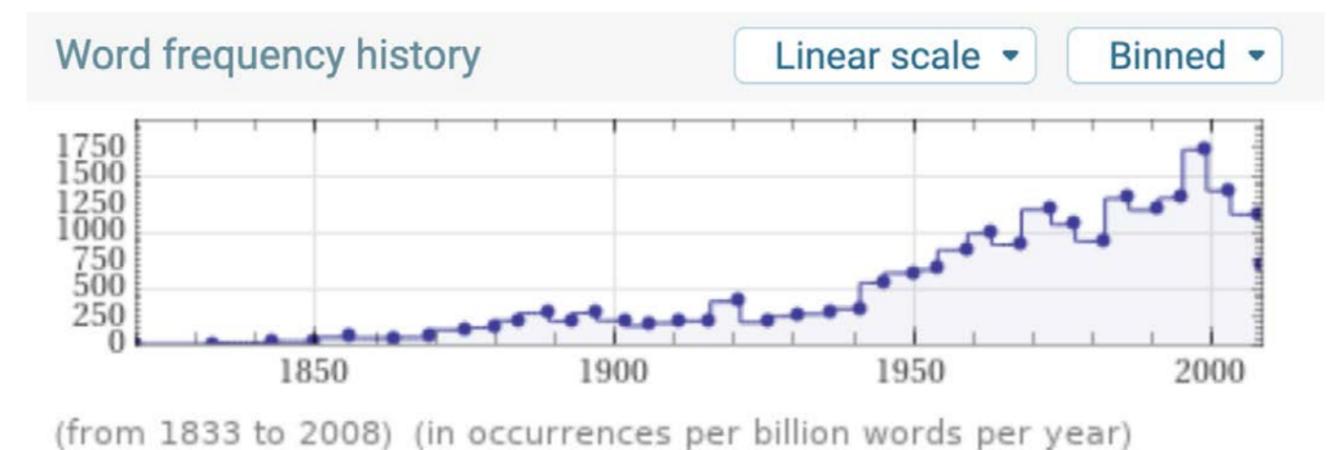


Figure 5. A screenshot of WolframAlpha’s data on the popularity of nihilism, spanning all of time (WolframAlpha,n.d.).

# Nihilism in SFI

To complement the other research methods, I have conducted surveys and interviews with my peers in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University.

This is a graduate level program with a focus on complex problem solving and sustainable future thinking; those enrolled in it are typically interested in learning about change-making. As people who are interested in creating positive change in the world, it is useful to reflect on personal relationships to nihilism. Does nihilism motivate people to seek change and find meaning? Does working on complex problem solving make people feel nihilistic? What happens when more people who care about change become passive nihilists?

## Primary Research: Surveying Strategic Foresight & Innovation Students

There were three main goals to doing surveys with my peers: to gauge how many of them experienced nihilism, see how they defined nihilism, and recruit those who expressed feeling nihilistic for semi-structured interviews. exhausting and unsuccessful. To address the subjectivity of my scan and the relatively short time frame, I have cross-referenced

### Method

To qualify for participation in the anonymous survey, people needed to be enrolled in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at the time. To ensure the survey only reached the target audience, it was distributed through the program's private Slack channel.

If someone's answers to the survey suggested they experienced nihilism, they were invited to share their email address to be contacted for in-depth interviews. If someone's answers suggested they had not experienced nihilism, the survey ended for them.

## Findings

### Low Engagement

The survey did produce some repeating themes, but it did not reach saturation due to low engagement; 8 out of 25, or 32% of my peers had responded. Direct recruitment could have produced better engagement.

### Everyone has Felt an Aspect of Nihilism in the Last Year

When asked if they had experienced feelings more directly related to nihilism such as believing some things have become meaningless, lacking purpose, or feeling a disconnect between personal needs and the reality of the world; all respondents selected at least one option.

The most popular response was "a sense of disconnect between personal needs and the reality of the world." No one had selected the option "none of the above," which implies everyone has knowing or unknowingly experienced an aspect of nihilism according to my working definition.

### Some People May Not Identify as Nihilists despite Experiencing it

Although all respondents indicated feeling some aspect of nihilism in the past year, only 2 of the 7 said they believed they experienced nihilism. I am speculating there are a few reasons for this; misunderstanding of the survey question, people may not have a clear idea of what nihilism is to say with certainty that they've experienced it, or they could have a negative association to nihilism and not want to self-identify as a nihilist.

### There are Repeating Themes in how People Define Nihilism

When asked how the respondents would define nihilism, a few common ideas had been repeated: a sense of hopelessness, a feeling that nothing they do matter, and that life is meaningless. Generally, these responses mostly fit with aspects of nihilism from my working definition.

### Outcome of Surveys

Although there was low engagement to the survey, 4 respondents moved on to semi-structured interviews which provided sufficient qualitative data.

5. Have you found yourself feeling any of the following in the last year (select all that apply):

[More Details](#)

- some things have become meaningless 3
- you feel a lack of purpose 3
- a disconnect between what you want in life and how the world operates 5
- none of the above 0



Figure 6. Survey question to see if people had felt aspects of nihilism, without explicitly labelling them as nihilism. These were not explicitly labelled as nihilism to avoid any potentially negative connotations of it.

## Primary Research: Semi-Structured Interviews With Students of Strategic Foresight & Innovation

The goals of these interviews were to gain a deeper understanding of what SFI students understood nihilism to be, their experiences of it, their observations of nihilism around them, and their thoughts on nihilism in relation to change-making and the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program we were all enrolled in.

### Method

The 4 survey respondents who indicated they may have experienced feelings of nihilism were contacted for semi-structured one-on-one interviews. There was an exception of 1 additional participant who was recruited by direct message.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method for this research because they allow for reciprocity and follow-up questions throughout the conversation (Barriball, K. L., & While, A., 1994); something particularly useful for this subject matter because it deals with asking about individuals' opinions and experiences. Participants were invited to Zoom interviews via email, and gave verbal consent to be recorded and included in the research at the start of each interview. Each interview was expected to last about a half hour, however most people had a lot to say and conversations lasted up to an hour. Participants reviewed and agreed to having their quotes included in this paper.

## Findings

### Finding 1: People's description of nihilism differed in conversation compared to surveys.

For the most part, everyone kept their survey answers brief, and focused on what could be seen as more negative aspects of nihilism; hopelessness, their actions being meaningless, or having lack of purpose. In conversation however, as people talked through the idea of nihilism and how it manifests in real life, they came to a deeper understanding of it. Here are a few descriptions from the interviews:

*"I think nihilism is a kind of grief. It's the result of having had dreams crushed many, many times, and there's a cumulative factor. So when that happens, what is the point of this? What is the value anymore?"*

*"I consider nihilism to be this idea that nothing matters...You can very quickly get lost and it's almost depressive in a sense...Nihilism may exist in the sense of trying to find meaning as opposed to knowing the meaning beforehand. It may be as much about the discovery and trying to do something tangible in order to fill that void."*

*"[I see nihilism as] Traditional values and beliefs are unfounded...what's the point of all of this anyways? And why am I even here? ... Sometimes I believe that you have to feel there's no defined purpose so strongly that you try to go out into the world and prove that there isn't any. Then you can actually find the purpose, and maybe the search becomes a purpose of its own."*

*"My understanding of nihilism is it's this feeling that nothing matters*

*which maybe comes from having a negative outlook on the present, and diminishing returns for the future. If things are not getting better, then why bother doing anything?"*

*understand sometimes that life is very much beyond you. But I still struggle every now and then with the point of any traditional values or beliefs that we have."*

### Finding 2: Everyone's experience of nihilism is unique to them. 3 out of 5 self-identified as having experienced nihilism.

One interviewee discusses how seeing the products of their work have real life application is beneficial to them, but they still ask "why am I doing this?"

*"Most of my work is real in the sense that we build stuff. I can drive to cities and see projects that I worked on and I can see how my influence on a project actually translated to the physical built environment. So there's a certain element of realism there...I don't think that the physical element is a prerequisite, but it helps...as much as I talked about having a tangible impact..., I've struggled with why am I doing this? Because a lot of it feels like busy work to a certain extent."*

Another interviewee discusses their nihilism and faith, and how it has changed over time.

*"So I'm Muslim...and there's a part where you need to have a leap of faith that some things that you're asked to do, if you do them, you'll find the purpose of why you're told to do them. I think where I experience [nihilism] is in the definition that says traditional values and beliefs are unfounded. I'm always in that mode of asking, "but why? what's the point of all of this anyways?" That was something I felt more in my youth, but ever since I had kids, that part dropped. It makes you*

A different person did not consider themselves a nihilist at all, but instead a pragmatic realist; "someone who accepts and deals with things as they are (Merriam-Webster, 2022)." This is different from the nihilist who is either disappointed or motivated by the truth of humanity because they believe in a more idealised world where all their needs for fulfilment and meaning are met.

*"I don't think I identify as being nihilistic. I am a pragmatic realist. On the one hand, I feel like things could be better, but it likely won't happen. Capitalism, for example, we can talk about all the issues of capitalism, but I don't feel hopeful that there's going to be an alternate model in my lifetime. So I feel like capitalism will always be there and we will always be governed under this concept of value creation and that things always need to become more and more at the expense of our livelihood and our quality of life."*

Another interviewee spoke about their experience with nihilism, and how it motivated them to take action.

*"I think that nihilism will rob you of the will to make change. I can't speak for what the young people are thinking of. But I remember when I was in the late eighties, as a teenager, the threat of nuclear war was so great that most of the people I knew legitimately thought that the world was gonna end within 10 years and it kept them from doing anything. Whereas for me, it*

*made me really afraid. And so that's how I started my first protest against nuclear subs."*

### **Finding 3: Just as people's experiences of nihilism are unique to them, so are their sources of it**

One person talks about nihilism in relation to ADD, and the need for stimulation, not just for them but everyone.

*"I think that one of the reasons why a lot of the people are feeling nihilistic is that they've been misled to believe that the consequences of their actions are immediate. We're all looking for these dopamine hits, be it through tech, talk or whatever it is that we do. I have ADD, so I think about stimming (self-stimulation) a lot. And I think we have to think about that in terms of our activism and our hope for social change. We can't stim ourselves that way. It's going to be long and it's going to be really fucking boring."*

Another discusses nihilism as a result of trauma related to their queer identity throughout their life.

*"I experienced nihilism, I think from being queer and having had a really hard time and a lot of trauma around queerness...to never feel comfortable in a heteronormative environment, like a workplace. I should be able to just be, everyone should be able to be themselves...I also think nihilism becomes a vessel for identity politics, our anger and our hate, everything else that doesn't 'fit in.' I presented as a woman until I was 12, And I had it beaten out of me, not physically, but more through misogyny."*

A different person discusses nihilism and their faith with regards to how people dismiss the harsh realities of the world due to faith. Although this is a different context than the scope of this paper (the West), there are similarities to how nihilism is discussed. In a Western context, people who point out harsh realities are often dismissed for other reasons; but this evasion of reality is essentially nihilism.

*"I always thought about nihilism and where I come from, Middle Eastern culture and whatnot, and how tough life is. How are so many things senseless and why are people dying? Why are people not being seen? There's so many injustices. Then this idea is forced on you, that "you can't think that way, because God is here and God is powerful and greater than all this." And it's stupid, you want to tell people in their face to stop it, you're lying to me. And I think that's where some religious extremist tendencies come in."*

The same person also mentioned a quote from the Qur'an which they paraphrased below. They suggested that it explains what every prophet in the Qur'an had to go through, they had to challenge existing values, and those who do not, perpetuate harmful practices. The idea of challenging existing values to create change is relevant to nihilism in the West as well; people may justify passive nihilism because it is all they know, or challenge it and create change:

*"People that cause harm on earth, are the people who will say this is what we*

*have grown up to see our parents and grandparents do (Abdel-Maguid, T. E., 2014)."*

Read more about [this quote here](#).

### **Finding 4: People cope with nihilism in different ways**

One person talked about their experience of realising ideas about how the systems in place are not sustainable for civilisation, and having to make a choice of "living in delusion" to cope with reality; which sounds similar to choosing passive nihilism:

*"There's a really good book called 'the problem of civilization'...very controversial because he proposes that the only way to save the planet is to dismantle civilization. He doesn't call himself an anarchist, but looking back, it looks very much like that...I believed a lot of what he was saying...I came to a point where I had to decide whether or not I was someone who would continue believing that civilization was doomed. But I just had to let go of it all. I had to accept that I didn't have it in me to join any kind of cause like that. I wasn't brave enough...And so I could continue to make friends in that circle, but I would never actualize those ideas. So I feel like for me, nihilism is always there. Living is a conscious choice of living in a certain amount of delusion and just kind of keeping myself busy until I die."*

Another talks about how scaling their thinking to extremely far in the future, and continuing their search for value helps them cope.

*"I think that's where I struggle, my mind just naturally goes to thinking of the different levels. Sometimes I think,*

*'well, it's horrible here [present day], but it's fine up here [extremely far into the future].'* And how do you reconcile that? Because you can feel optimistic and pessimistic at the same time, which is weird.

*The way that I'm coping is I still am trying to find something that has value. You know, even though in my heart, it feels like I might not get there."*

A different interviewee talked about how scaling down their efforts to help people around them helped counter feeling nihilistic.

*"I've been doing a lot of that kind of stuff [caretaking, dog sitting, grocery shopping for neighbours] because these people really don't have anyone. And that's one of the things that helps me not feel nihilistic. They're not grand things that I'm changing the world, but I really like doing little things that I can see the actual benefit for people. That has always been something that's been really good for my heart."*

In a similar sentiment, the same interviewee shared a paraphrased idea often attributed to the Torah which they said serves as a motivating reminder for them:

*"It is not your job to fix all the problems in the world, nor is it your privilege to ignore them."*

Read more about [this quote here](#).

**Finding 5: 4 out of 5 people interviewed thought nihilism can be both a positive and negative concept. It could be something of concern but it could also be liberating and motivate people towards change. These people had a grasp of passive and active nihilism without having**

heard those terms before, which suggests that these are even lesser known ideas of nihilism.

*“I think nihilism is a big word and it’s sort of a scary thing, but it’s also somewhat liberating in the sense that, if there is no fundamental truth or basis to any sort of moral or epistemic frame, then we get to posit one. Right. And that can be empowering, in the sense that we get to decide what this all means.”*

*“The connotation of nihilism right now in my mind is negative. But I think it is necessary now to make the world a better place. You cannot seek to right all the wrongs that make the world, without being able to first see the problems of it. And I think it motivates you.”*

*“That general feeling [of nihilism] is very dangerous for the future, because we have to start taking action on so many things if life is going to be sustainable for us and others. But at the same time, I think that feeling is sometimes useful to move you, as long as there are mechanisms, and facilitators that help channel it towards being more proactive. You don’t want a lot of people that are just sitting around and passively watching life go by seeing people die. You want people who question a lot and are able to change things. Change is life, if you don’t have people who are always seeking change, life itself is not sustainable.”*

*“One of the things I thought was really interesting with Trump was, some people became incredibly nihilistic. For other people it was incredibly motivational. I think people can use [nihilism] as a way to resign or they can use it as a way to sort of rethink how they’re engaging with the world.”*

**Finding 6: Many people entered into the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program to seek meaning and create change. Some found it, others did not.**

One interviewee discusses how enrolling in the program could have been a way to seek meaning.

*“Taking an SFI master’s program, maybe what we’re observing is there is a need to fill a void of some kind. The need to feel like you have to do something and then take tangible steps. And that might be evidence of an idealistic viewpoint that we need to fill the void, or find meaning.”*

Another person found the type of change that the program taught was not effective enough compared to people-led initiative.

*“SFI did not fucking help. All it did was reveal the complexity of civilization, and now that complexity is less of a mystery. So I feel like I have some tools where I might, you know, start to explore systemic problems. The problem is that I did not see any evidence in that program of anyone making any real change, just a lot of studies and a lot of talking about making change and a lot of understanding problems in a new way, but no one showed me something that made a difference that wasn’t made from a grassroots initiative from the people.”*

A different person found that being surrounded by like-minded people helped them realise purpose and meaning.

*“SFI validated so many things for me, it actually made me lose nihilism in*

*a couple of things because I used to always feel like I’m too weird for the way I thought about things. But I actually found out in SFI that maybe I am that way for a purpose. My only down points with SFI comes from just process frustrations, with how they do things. But I think that the essence of the program itself was actually really helpful.”*

In another interview, someone had talked about how they sought out SFI to remedy their nihilism, but was disappointed afterwards.

*“I came to SFI from a nihilistic sense of how academia was working. SFI seemed to have a great promise of utility. So it seemed like a remedy for my, “everything is pointless” kind of nihilism, which was definitely where I was post-journalism, post-doctorate, and, being a middle-aged person who’s not really clinging to gender these days. But what really frustrated me was, as the pandemic started to shut the world down, and class went on, I just thought we should be focusing on almost nothing but the pandemic. There’s all sorts of ways we could have developed our skills, maybe it could have had a little bit of utility. And I don’t know, I thought that there would be a stronger community. They say, a pessimist is just a disappointed optimist. And that is very much me.”*

**Finding 7: 3 of the 5 interviewees were able to give an answer to whether or not they noticed nihilism was becoming more prevalent around them.**

Two people said they had noticed nihilism more prevalent online, on social media, and on dating apps. One person had mentioned noticing it more in workplaces. Another mentioned noticing it amongst the majority of their small friend group. One of the people who could not answer said it was because they did not have a sense of it increasing or decreasing, but did notice a shift in how people view work and meaning.

## Summary of Interview Findings

Although this is an extremely small sample size, it may still be indicative of the relationship between nihilism and people who are interested in working in professions related to change-making. This includes researchers, designers, strategists, foresight practitioners and more. People working in these professions are often afforded a certain level of power and privilege through their work; power in that they are in positions to offer expertise to change systems, and privilege in that these professions may offer middle to upper-middle class salaries.

As a group with access to power and privilege, it would be important for this group to self-reflect on its relationship to nihilism, and whether they are channelling nihilism passively or actively. How nihilism is being channelled would determine the quality and degree of change being sought after; someone who is passive may reinforce status quos and avoid compromising their own comforts or privilege, someone who is active may recognise the needs for more radical systems change. This will be discussed in more depth in a later section.

To begin self reflecting on nihilism, it is important to have some understanding of the concept even if it is not being referred to by the word “nihilism.” During the interviews, almost all SFI participants said they had some, but not a clear understanding of what nihilism was beforehand. However they did all manage to discuss many of the same aspects of nihilism explored in this paper. Many were able to come to their own conclusions that there were both negative and positive aspects to nihilism; unknowingly they were describing passive and

active nihilism. What this suggests is that they already knew of these concepts, but were not using the word “nihilism,” to talk about them outside of the interview. If this is reflective of people more broadly, this may imply that people do not have a word to discuss something they are feeling.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that everyone’s possible experience of nihilism was unique to them and their personal identities; but all expressed searching for meaning, and questioning overarching systems of work, faith, academia, gender/sexuality. Self-reflection on nihilism had taken place, however, only 3 out of 5 self-identified as having experienced feelings of nihilism.

All but one of the interviewees had previously completed the survey, and had noted on the survey that they were interested in creating positive change. This is likely a motivating factor to enrolling in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University. When asked about their experience of nihilism in relation to the SFI program and being in an environment concerned with change-making, 1 mentioned that people generally approached the program to search for meaning to remedy their nihilism, 2 noted feeling more nihilistic after the program, 1 said the program helped ease their nihilism, and 1 chose to omit their response. What this suggests is that there can be varying degrees of nihilism to navigate in an environment like the SFI which is concerned with change-making. Though this is a small group, it may have some relevance to the prevalence of nihilism in strategy and foresight industries more generally.

## Is Nihilism Prevalent?

At the beginning of this section, I included a quote from a letter sent by French novelist George Sand in 1870; “What an age! Everyone is dying, everything is dying, and the earth is dying also...I don’t know where I get the courage to keep on living...(Flaubert, 1870)” That was 152 years ago.

In a recent interview with The New Statesman, 93-year old philosopher Noam Chomsky recalled being in elementary school and writing about the fall of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Barcelona in 1939 at the start of World War 2. He referred to it as “a grim cloud of fascism,” and goes on to say, he hasn’t changed his opinion since, even though it’s been 83 years. He claims “We’re approaching the most dangerous point in human history... We are now facing the prospect of destruction of organised human life on Earth (Eaton, G., 2022).”

Two quotes would not accurately reflect the last couple centuries, but given recent history, it seems the state of the west has been bleak for quite a while. It would be surprising if people did not feel nihilistic throughout these times. But are people really becoming more nihilistic?

Although I have used several research methods in an attempt to gauge if nihilism has become more prevalent in the West, I am still working from small samples and data filtered through algorithms and targeted geolocation, so it is difficult to say accurately. However the netnography and comparison

to Google Trends/Wolfram Alpha data would suggest that people’s discussions of nihilism are becoming more popular, and the surveys and interviews would suggest experiencing aspects of nihilism is common amongst my peers in the SFI program.

With nihilism prevalent both online and amongst my peers interested in change-making, there were some key differences to note. It was more common for grassroots activists from the netnography scan to have reflected on nihilism, criticise it, and address issues with it publicly. Whereas interviewees from the SFI program were not as familiar with the concept of nihilism, nor had they reflected on it much prior to the interviews. This may be due to grassroots activists experiencing nihilism more directly and more frequently within their online communities, as many of them have nihilists dismissing their work in the comments of their Tik Tok videos, or replies on Twitter.

Based on the netnography scan and the SFI interviews, it seemed that both groups have a minority of people interested in creating radical systems change to dismantle systems of colonial capitalist culture, although this cannot be said with certainty because of the small sample sizes.

If nihilism has become more prevalent, then what implications might this have for people interested in creating positive change? This will be explored in the next section, with an analysis of nihilism and the Shifting the Burden systems archetype.

## Section 3: Where Do We Go From Here?

### Section 3: Where do we go From Here?

*“A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization (Césaire, A., 1972).”*

-Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism

### What to expect in this section:

- Active Nihilism to Enable Radical Systems Change
- Importance of Self-Reflecting on Nihilism as Aspiring Change-Makers
- Choosing Active Nihilism for Radical Change

## Active Nihilism to Enable Radical Systems Change

As discussed previously, the relationship between realising nihilism and reacting either passively or actively is an example of the system archetype; “Shifting the Burden (Braun, W., 2002).” This is where you realise a problem, and react in one of three ways:

1. You take actions towards a solution that is going to attempt to solve the issue for good.
2. You adopt a temporary solution or “quick fix,” which alleviates symptoms of the problem, but the problem still exists. You shift the burden.
3. You adopt a temporary solution, but over time realise this is not good enough and you need to solve the actual problem. More time and more effort is spent with this approach.

Temporary solutions are extremely common, often perpetuating the problem, and eventually creating new ones. We can observe this everywhere on nearly every scale. For example; placing a bucket under a leaky pipe instead of fixing it, leading to even more structural damage later. An understaffed company overworking its employees instead of hiring more, just to experience full turnover of burnt out staff months later. Governments that implement shelter systems for houseless populations which are more expensive than simply providing guaranteed housing for all (Plymouth Housing, 2022), not to mention the shelter approach is less safe and undignifying.

Unlike the examples above, action to take us out of the “Shifting the Burden” loops require radical systems change, or dismantling systems, which is why it may

Figure 7. Shifting the Burden. A demonstration of how nihilism, as well as passive and active nihilism fit the “Shifting the Burden” system archetype, as described by William Braun (Braun, W., 2002).



be less common. Huey P. Newton, who founded the Black Panther Party (a political party for Black nationalism), indirectly spoke about the importance of this level of system change in his book, *To Die for the People*. He said:

*“Any action which does not mobilise the community toward the goal is not a revolutionary action. The action might be a marvellous statement of courage, but if it does not mobilise people toward the goal of a higher manifestation of freedom, it is not making a political statement and could be counter-revolutionary (Newton, P. H., 2020).”*

What Huey P. Newton has written decades ago still has relevance today. It speaks to the performativity of working towards goals that do not produce real change, and how these types of goals may actually allow for systemic problems to get worse.

In the case of our colonial capitalist culture; to create better, long term-solutions that foster substantial change, we need to move away from passive nihilism that soothes our symptoms of life under the colonial capitalist systems. Instead we need to move toward active nihilism, where we may rebuild our cultural systems in ways that will support everyone in living more meaningfully; across all races, classes, genders, sexualities, ages, and abilities. Anything short of trying to break down the colonial capitalist culture that makes us feel nihilistic, will likely be counter-revolutionary and allow the culture to continue.

For this reason, active nihilism as I've described can be associated with revolutionary activism, abolition, and even some anarchist movements which share similar goals of dismantling oppressive systems. In a post on the Anarchist Library by a writer under the alias No Wing, they discuss nihilism and motivation, explaining:

*“Nihilism ... encourages action, and moves people to both negate which oppresses them, while creating their desires. Far from being a passive rejection of life, nihilism stands tall as an active celebration of life, of our ability to create and destroy (No Wing, 2019).”*

What is a key to these movements is the need to break down systems of oppression and create new structures. This is distinctly different from other social movements that might call for “inclusion,” which often allow systems of oppression to continue. As Derecka Purnell writes in *Becoming Abolitionists*, “The systems responsible for our oppression cannot be the same systems responsible for our liberation.”

## Importance of Self-Reflecting on Nihilism as Aspiring Change-Makers

Myself, and all Strategic Foresight and Innovation participants of my research had identified as people who are interested in creating positive change in the world. All of us had also experienced nihilistic thoughts over the past year; realising that what we want or need in life does not match the reality of how the world works, or a lost sense of meaning or purpose.

It is critical to be aware of nihilism, especially passive nihilism because it may affect our motivations to create change and allow for status quos to go unchecked. Below are a few considerations to think about in relation to potential experiences of nihilism.

### Positionality

Earlier in this paper, I discussed the relationship between privilege and nihilism. To reiterate, it is easier for someone from a place of privilege to be a passive nihilist uninterested in the changes needed to confront the systems of colonial capitalist culture, because for them life will continue to be relatively comfortable, regardless.

As designers, strategic thinkers, and foresight practitioners, who often have the privilege of attaining a post-secondary education and working relatively well-paying jobs; it is important to reflect on positionality and how it may impact the work we do.

Class affects our worldview, and there are limits to how much we can empathise beyond our own lived experiences; we cannot empathy map our way out of a privileged lens. Living amongst the middle working class also physically distances us from lower-income earners and marginalised communities. Consider how redlining in cities separates neighbourhoods according to race by restricting apartment rentals from People of Colour in certain areas. Not interacting with people of other classes, races, sexualities, gender identities, ages, and abilities makes it easier to overlook the realities of colonial capitalist culture and how it oppresses people other than ourselves. In other words, it is easy to become a passive nihilist. With this in mind, it would be beneficial for designers, strategic thinkers, and foresight practitioners to use privilege in ways to support those without. Similar to how middle-class nihilists revolted on behalf of serfs who were too busy working during the Russian revolution of the 1800s (032c, 2020).

As a starting point, it is important to understand our personal biases which inform the ideas we put forward. Dr. Lesley-Ann Noel, Assistant Professor of Design Studies at North Carolina State University, who works in emancipatory research, community-led research, design-based learning and foresight has developed a tool to help identify personal biases and positionality. Dr. Noel's “Who Am I Positionality Wheel,” is an exercise that can be done alone or as a group, and is available for free download from [her personal website](#) (Noel, Lesley-Ann, 2019).

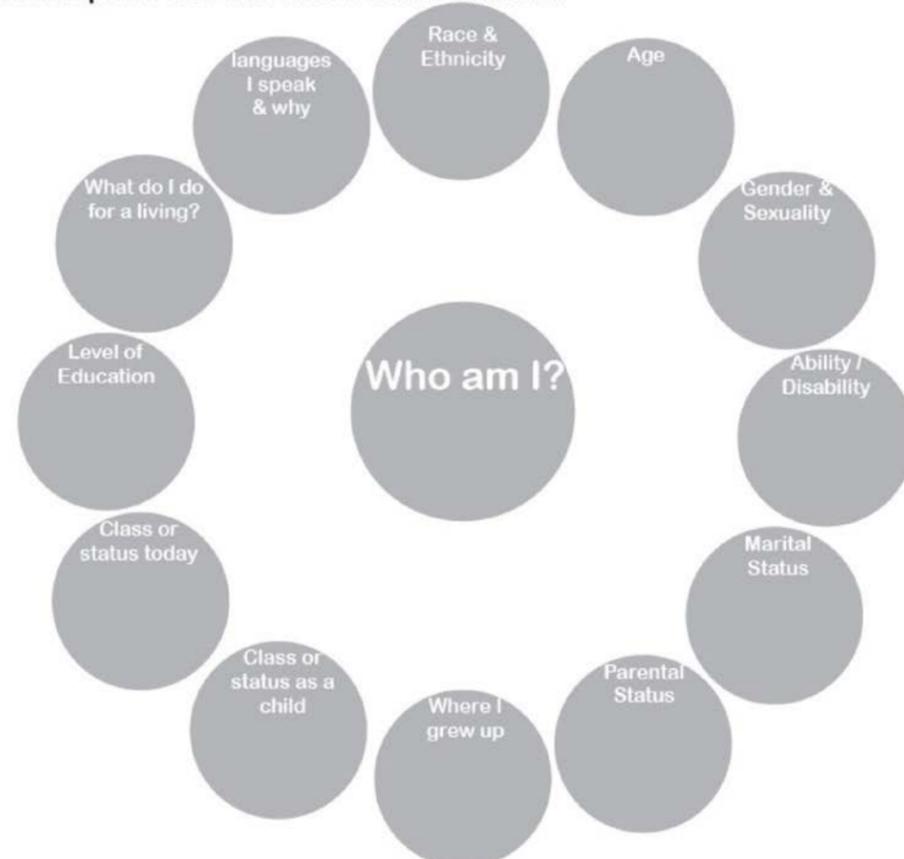
## Positionality Worksheet

### 12 things about me that help me see the water that I swim in!

A positionality or reflexivity statement can help you understand who you are. These characteristics can be both strengths and weaknesses as they offer insights that others cannot see, or they can cause you to make assumptions that are not true.

Greater self-awareness can help you to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses.

Research is not objective, because researchers are not objective. Your background frames how you conduct research.



Lesley-Ann Noel  
Carl A. Grant Lecture Series 2019  
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Additional reading:  
Hamby, S., PhD. (2018, May 22). Know Thyself: How to Write a Reflexivity Statement. Retrieved March 22, 2019, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-web-violence/201805/know-thyself-how-write-reflexivity-statement>

Figure 8. Lesley-Ann Noel's Positionality Wheel Worksheet (Noel, Lesley-Ann, 2019).

It is an exercise I did before writing this paper that helped remind me of aspects of my identity and how it has changed over time. Understanding our identities and how they intersect can help us better understand what is meaningful to us, where our privilege is, and our relationships to nihilism.

### Nihilism and a Sense of Foreshortened Future

"Foreshortened future," is a concept in psychology that has to do with trauma. Therapist Simone Saunders discusses this [in a video](#), explaining that a sense of

a foreshortened future is a sense that you may not live that long, or you will not reach certain life milestones like going to school, having children, getting married, etc. This occurs when a foundational assumption we have about the world gets disrupted by a traumatic experience. For example, someone might assume that people are good and trustworthy, then experience a traumatic event like having something stolen from them, then go on to believe that people are actually bad and hurtful. Simone goes on to explain that this sense of foreshortened future varies in severity for different people, and

that the traumatic experience is also unique to each individual person and their nervous system; however trauma is more common amongst marginalised communities, those with chronic illnesses, or people who have experienced childhood trauma. (@thecognitivecorner, 2021)."

PRE-TRAUMA ASSUMPTIONS	POST-TRAUMA ASSUMPTIONS
I'm safe, that won't happen to me	I'm <u>not</u> safe, that will happen again
I'm in control	I'm <u>not</u> in control
People are good and trustworthy	People are bad and hurtful
If I'm cautious I can prevent disaster	What I do doesn't matter

@thecognitivecorner

Figure 9. Examples of how our assumptions of the world can change upon experiencing trauma (@thecognitivecorner, 2020).

Although this concept originated in psychology, it has relevance to people more broadly today, especially since some have called the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic "a collective trauma (Turmaud, R.D. 2020)." Some of the post-trauma assumptions in the graphic above are aligned with common nihilistic sentiments found during my netnography scan. Many people may feel as though they are not in control or that nothing they do matters, because they believe irreversible climate change is taking place. Others might think that people are inherently bad, because they see world leaders and other people in positions of

power prioritising corporate interests over the peoples' well-being.

For designers, strategists, and foresight practitioners interested in change-making, experiences in workplaces in addition to world events can incite these thoughts. For example, the structure of most workplaces tends to be very hierarchical, at times authoritative, and also heavily bureaucratic leaving employees feeling as though they are not in control of projects that have meaning to them. In other cases, important ideas can get lost because they do not cater to the priorities of external funders, which may make some feel as though nothing they do matters and they have no impact on the future, even outside of work.

I believe it is important to be aware of these thoughts and what experiences lead us to them, as they may potentially lead us on a path of passive nihilism.

### Cognitive Dissonance and Hypocrisy

Cognitive dissonance and hypocrisy are common concepts also discussed in psychology. Though similar, they differ very slightly. Cognitive dissonance is the uneasy feeling when someone's actions do not reflect a core belief they have. Hypocrisy is when someone says they believe in something, and their actions contradict them (Psychology Today, n.d.). Frantz Fanon, a French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher has written more deeply about the idea of cognitive dissonance and change, explaining:



**RCMP arrest 14, clear road on Wet'suwet'en territory in ongoing dispute over land rights, pipeline**



Hereditary chief issues 11th-hour call for talks around title and rights with prime minister and B.C. premier

Jorge Barrera - CBC News - Posted: Nov 18, 2021 2:30 PM PT | Last Updated: November 20, 2021



RCMP Emergency Response Team members stand watch as other officers make arrests during raid on barricades blocking construction of a multi-billion dollar natural gas pipeline on Wet'suwet'en territory in British Columbia Thursday. (Submitted by Dan Loan)

A sponsored Instagram ad from Environment and Climate Change Canada, and CBC news coverage about the RCMP clearing Indigenous Land Defenders (@canenvironment, 2022) (Barrera, J., 2021).

*“Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalise, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief.”*

Cognitive dissonance and hypocrisy can be observed on a regular basis, and I believe it is because they are related to privilege and passive nihilism. People in positions of power are not willing to compromise privilege to create systems change, but would like to appear as though they are contributing to change. This is why we have the

performativity of companies celebrating Black History Month and Women's Day on social media, despite all of them having significant pay gaps for these groups (@paygapapp, 2022). This is why banks are sponsors of Pride Parade, despite having no queer or trans people in their senior leadership. It is part of the reason why Environment Canada posts on social media about the importance of planting trees, despite federal police being sent to arrest Indigenous Land Defenders. Those in positions of power may superficially advocate for change in ways which do not compromise their power, resulting in gestures of hypocrisy or cognitive dissonance.

Instances of cognitive dissonance or hypocrisy happen on the individual level as well, and are common in spaces related

to design, strategy and foresight. I once encountered someone who taught systems theory, and expressed an interest in the housing crisis in Toronto, yet listed an apartment they owned for \$800 CAD over the already high market value. When I had discussed it with them, they said that creating pathways to affordable housing was important to them, but they never lowered the price of the apartment to make it accessible to more people. I can't say whether this was cognitive dissonance or hypocrisy because I do not know what their true beliefs are, but this type of disconnect between said belief and action allows status quos to go unchanged, and often comes from a place of unrecognised privilege and passive nihilism.

It is not always possible to avoid cognitive dissonance or hypocrisy though, sometimes we are not given a choice. For example people can care about the environment, but not be able to afford anything other than fast fashion. An instance like this is not an individual's fault, but the complex system of colonial capitalism which often leaves people with no other choice. However, when there is a choice, we need to work harder to avoid cognitive dissonance and hypocrisy wherever possible, within our means.

## To Summarise

It is important for designers, strategists, foresight practitioners, and people who are interested in creating meaningful change to engage in self-reflection. We must reflect on ourselves, our positionality, how we navigate our thoughts, emotions, opinions, and ways of making sense of the world. All of these are relevant to our relationships to nihilism, and how we approach change-making in our actions.

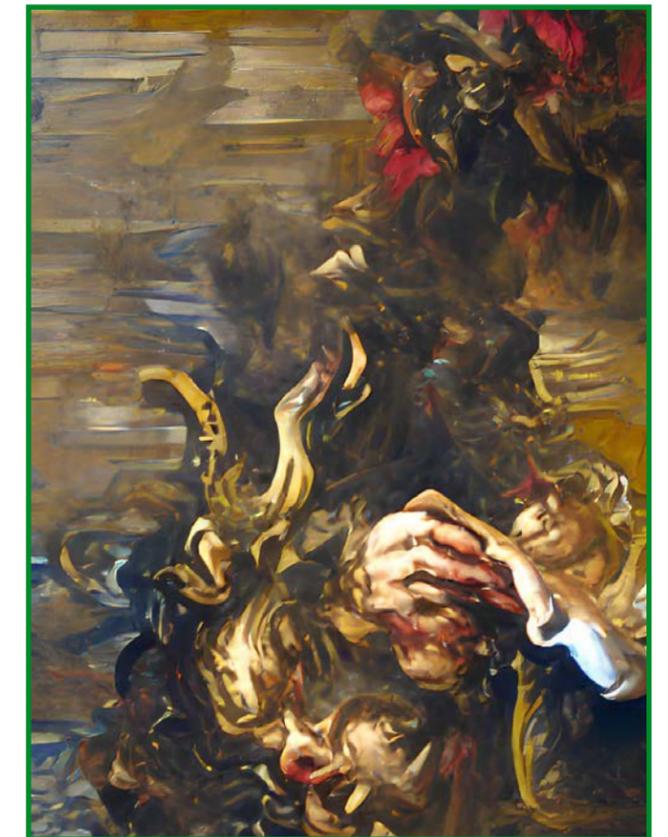


Photo created using an AI text-to image generator with the prompt "cognitive dissonance" in Baroque style. Access the generator at [app.wombo.art](http://app.wombo.art).

## Choosing Active Nihilism for Radical Change

*“First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.*

*I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action...”*

*Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection (King Jr, M. L. 1992).”*

-Martin Luther King Jr., in a letter written from Birmingham prison.

Based on the working definition of nihilism; that it is a realisation that the life we must live does not feel meaningful under the current cultural system of colonial capitalism, I would argue that all of us are nihilists to a degree. This is a system which does not allow people to live freely, meaningfully, or pursue higher goals without relying on money. As a result, every person regardless of class, race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability, is expected to conform to this culture for survival.

Those who conform and do well in this system are privileged and likely to become passive nihilists who ignore the realities of life’s difficulties for others, perpetuate status quos, and adopt moderate politics. The passive nihilist does nothing substantial to change the cultural systems; they would rather maintain the comforts of their privilege, believing that they had earned their place.

For people who are privileged, becoming an active nihilist who is motivated to dismantle the oppressive systems of colonial capitalist culture is a conscious choice. For those who are not privileged, being an active nihilist is a matter of survival.

On the next several pages are ways we can become active nihilists on our journeys of creating meaningful change. A lot of these ideas are rooted in undoing aspects of our colonial capitalist system as explored in the Causal Layered Analysis in an earlier section; such as toxic individualism, commodification of everything, and believing capitalism is the only way. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but a starting point.

## Imagine Yourself in the Future

Aspects of passive nihilism like wallowing in despair and defeat can make it difficult to imagine yourself in the future. For example, it has become an increasingly popular sentiment online, to not want to have children because of the possibility of impending climate crisis. This could be a contributing factor to declining birth rates across the world seen in the graphic below (macrotrends, 2022).

One way to counteract this sense of doom and defeat, is to continue imagining the future we want to see, and seeing ourselves in it. We do this by understanding the systemic issues of today, and imagining all the potential versions of our world that do not currently seem impossible. Abolition activist Mariame Kaba discusses the power of imagination for creating change, and how to begin imagining in a Medium article she had shared:

*“Changing everything might sound daunting, but it also means there are many places to start, infinite opportunities to collaborate, and endless imaginative interventions and experiments to create. Let’s begin our abolitionist journey not with the question “What do we have now and how can we make it better?” Instead, let’s ask, “What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?” If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us (Kaba, M. 2020).”*

Another way to encourage our imaginations is to expose ourselves to stories or media that show people who resemble us living in the future. In the screenshots below, a Tik Tok user who goes by the alias @jupiterbaal discusses the importance of authors like Octavia Butler and films like Wakanda for helping Black communities see themselves depicted in futuristic stories. They emphasise that the first step to making something a reality, is to imagine it.

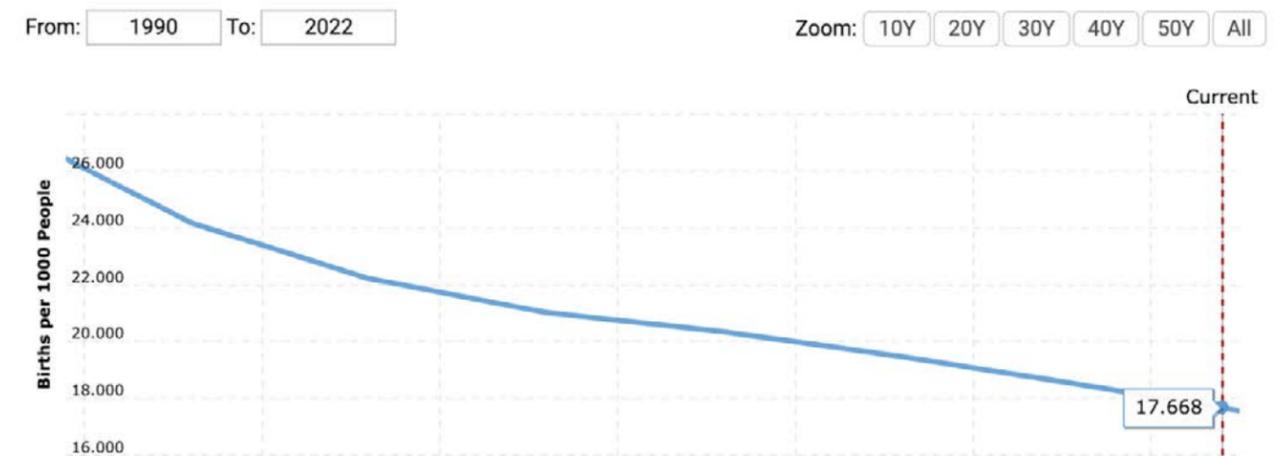


Figure 10. A graph showing how birth rates across the world have decreased from 26 per 1000 in the year 1990, to 17.668 per 1000 currently (macrotrends, 2022).

## Imagine Yourself in the Future (Continued)



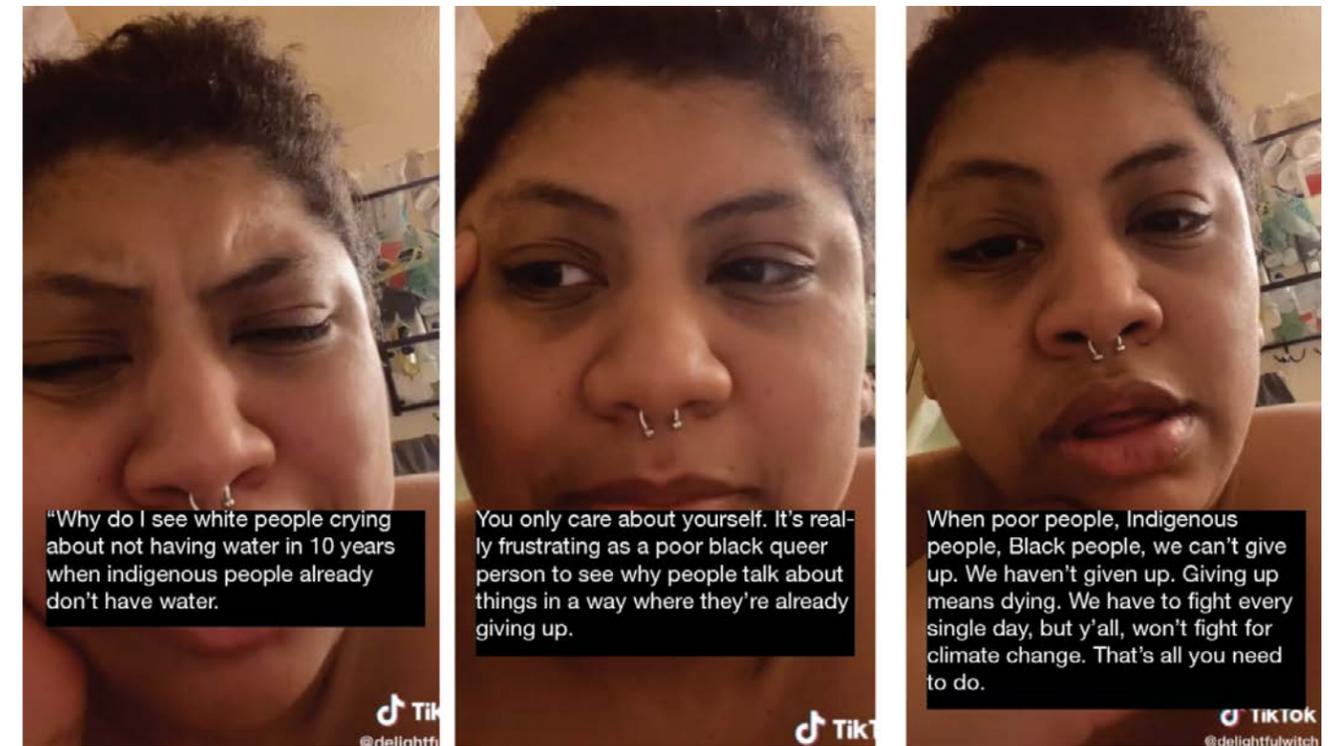
Tik Tok posted by (@jupiterbaal, 2022). [Watch here.](#)



Tik Tok posted by (@sterlingmadex, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

Another Tik Tok user under the alias @sterlingmadex posted a video talking about their vision for the future that they are actively trying to build. One where people experience less trauma, and have the creativity and energy of children, motivated in their actions.

As we reflect on the change we'd like to make in the world, it is important to keep a clear vision of the ideal future we want to help inform the actions we need to take to get there.



Tik Tok posted by (@delightfulwitch, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

## Realising Today's Problems Are Not New

There are many problems with the colonial capitalist systems we live within, and as a result, there are many reasons for us to feel nihilistic. No matter where we are in our process of confronting our personal nihilism, it is helpful to remember that these problems are not new, and have likely been experienced by other marginalised groups for quite a long time. If systemic problems like racism or climate change feel especially urgent or overwhelming lately, it may be useful to reflect on positionality, and privilege in relation to those issues. Regardless, people have been, and will continue to work for systemic change.

### Transcription of above video:

*Why do I see white people crying about not having water in 10 years when indigenous people already don't have water, Ya'll don't fucking care, y'all don't fucking care. You're so full of shit. You're full of shit. You don't fucking care. You only care about yourself. You only care about yourself. It's really frustrating as a poor black queer person to see why people talk about things in a way where they're already giving up. When poor people, indigenous people, black people, we can't give up. We haven't given up, giving up means dying. We have to fight every single day, but y'all, won't fight for climate change. That's all you need to do.*



Tik Tok posted by (@coffeeandpedagogy, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

## Accept That Change Takes Time

During one of the interviews with my SFI peers, one person had made a point that people can become nihilistic because they expect change to be immediate, and the reality is that change can take a very long time. Real systemic change on a larger scale requires having a vision, and the intention and planning to achieve that vision. In many cases, the change we want to see may not happen in our lifetimes, especially with issues like climate change. This may discourage people, but it does not mean that the change we are seeking is any less possible or necessary. One of the key aspects of active nihilism is wanting to create a world that not only we want to live in, but others and future generations.

An activist who goes by the alias

@coffeeandpedagogy frequently talks about mutual aid and organising online. In a recent video series they posted, they discussed the importance of time and principled action in their work. They emphasised that a lot of people are not in a frame of mind where they are ready to confront change. But to achieve our goals, we need to start by helping people have their basic needs met. They mentioned that they had regularly helped provide food to someone, and one day that person returned to say **“You do really good work. And because of that, I promise if anybody needs help, I will help them.”** In helping someone have their basic needs met, that person was able to be more open to learning and helping others, which is a huge step in shifting how we live within the colonial capitalist systems in place.

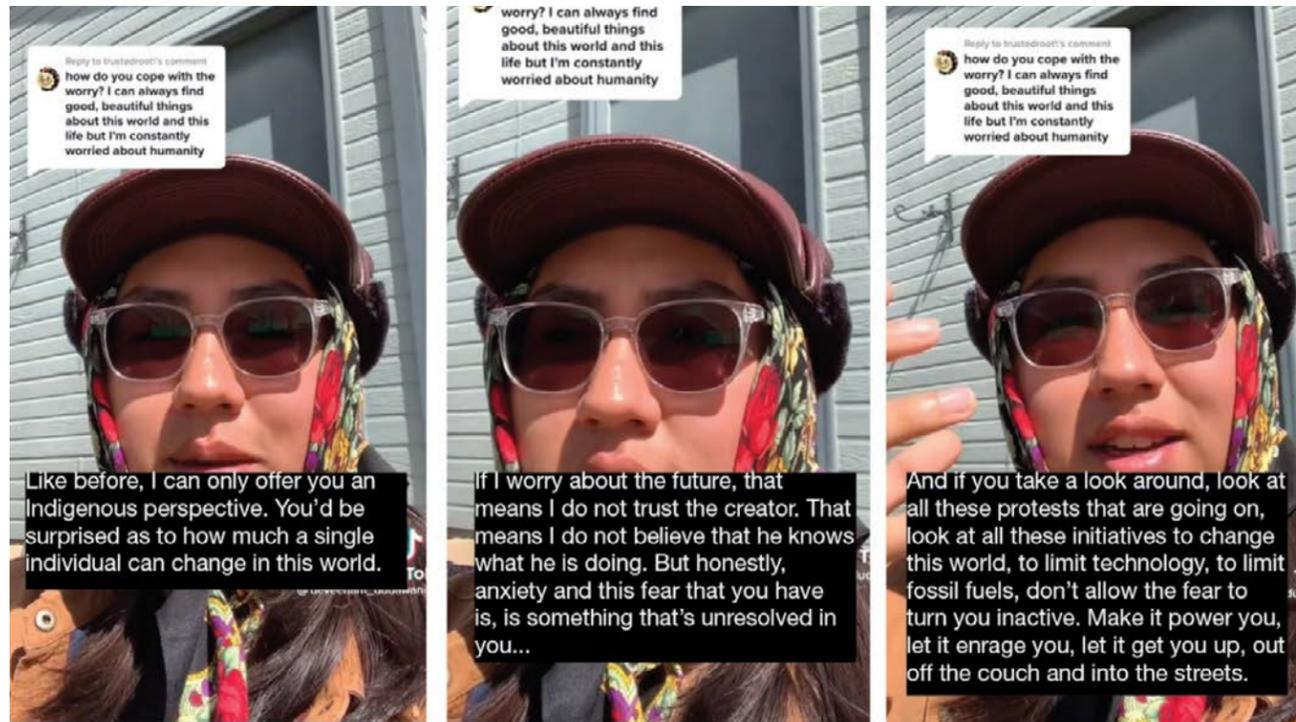
### Transcription of video on previous page:

*Let's talk revolutionary optimism and Marxists organizing. And I specify Marxist organizing because it is different. And I'll preface that with a reading, from, to die for the people by Huey P Newton. And it reads any action which does not mobilize a community towards the goal is not a revolutionary action. The action might be a marvelous statement of courage, but it does not mobilize the people towards a Goal of higher Manifestation of freedom. It is not making a political statement and could even be kind of revolutionary. This process moves in a dialectical manner, and we understand the struggle of the opposites based on their unity. Many times people say that our 10 point program is reformist, but they ignore the fact that revolution is a process.*

*So a key tenant of Marxists organizing is being dialectical. The reality is the vast majority of people in America are not ready for revolution or are not interested in it at all. In a system where capitalism is so propagandized people are very cutthroat. People are very individualist. Some people simply care about themselves, and some people don't have any choice, but to care for themselves because they have to live. Therefore it's better to organize, to help meet people's material needs before thinking about even mentioning revolution to them, this is the main difference between principled and unprincipled direct action or organizing in general. When you make it easier for people live, then they're going to have more of a capacity to learn about radical education.*

*Otherwise, to give you an anecdotal example, there's a guy irregular who comes into all power all of the time, always help him out, get him some food, et cetera. We've never overtly mentioned communism to him because we are simply doing direct aid. One day, he comes to us and he goes, you know, you guys are doing really good work. And because of that, I promise if anybody needs help, I will help them. So there we see that we helped someone and now they're willing to turn around and help somebody else, which is, you know, can't be said about the vast majority of people. Then we have an open door for a higher manifestation of education and revolution. And of course that's an incredibly heartwarming thing to do because we never overtly mentioned communism to him. Even though we are communists, of course, the purpose of all power is to expand communist thought and left culture. But we aren't like helping people and being like, oh, by the way, we do this because we're communists. It's something that, you know, is a process, is something that people learn.*

*And a lot of people are all power. Like our neighbors really, really love us. And of course that grants us so much revolutionary optimism. But I will say when I was organizing without principles, I almost fell into nihilism because when you're doing unprincipled action, you're going out and you're getting injured and you're getting arrested, et cetera. And while I think agitation and boots on the ground, direct action is very important. If we don't have a larger end goal in mind, that's actually practical. You're going to fall into a hole of this is never going to get better. We are doing this for no reason by being dialectical in nature and recognizing that this is a process and that you have to meet material needs before you can even reach revolution. You're granted a lot more optimism.*



Tik Tok posted by Indigenous activist Darius Amaré Tillman (@deveehant\_dudawanup, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

## Allow Your Fear and Anger to Empower You

There is a common misconception that emotions which feel bad, are bad; for example fear, sadness, anger, or frustration. These are normal feelings and we need to allow ourselves to experience them. Especially considering all the things happening in the world right now. In allowing ourselves to experience these difficult feelings, they may motivate us to create change. Audre Lorde speaks on this, specifically in her article *The Uses of Anger, Women Responding to Racism*. She says:

*“Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision of our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who*

*are our genuine enemies (Lorde, A., 1997).”*

Audre Lorde also mentions that in addition to inciting action, our anger allows us to find allies who likely share similar experiences. This is especially important in activism, where power is in numbers and community is key.

An Indigenous spiritual creator on Tik Tok, Darius Amaré Tillman (Eastern Shoshone & Northern Arapaho), also discusses what it means to be consumed by worry, and the importance of anger. From an Indigenous perspective, they say worrying about the future means not having trust in the Creator, and that our anxiety represents something which is unresolved within us. They suggest letting our fear enrage us, and power us to take to the streets (@deveehant\_dudawanup, 2022).

### Transcription of video on previous page:

You know, there are two groups of people in this generation. The first one are those who go and do the work to fix the issues that we are facing. God bless those people because those are the ones who are going to change the world. And then the other group of people do absolutely nothing. They, think the world is crashing and burning, and this is it, this is the end of humanity and they do nothing about it. And they just sit there and complain and complain and complain. And they watch, they doom scroll on this app. Nihilism helps nobody. It doesn't help you. It don't help me. It don't help my parents don't help your parents. It helps nobody. So why think that way? Go out there and do something.

*I know many of you might disagree with me, but humanity has gotten a lot better since the fifth century. If you had Tik Tok in the fifth century and you recorded all the events that happened, you would think that was the end of the world. You know, we see all these bad things every single day, because that is what media corporations do. They, sell you fear and the world has gotten a lot better if the world ends it is because people have become nihilistic.*

## Shifting Blame From Individuals to Systems

Colonial capitalist culture is extremely individualistic and will have us believe that we are solely responsible for the quality of our lives. In reality, we live as best we can according to the cultural systems in place. As a result of this ingrained individualistic thinking, we may blame ourselves for the injustices we experience instead of the cultural systems. Activist and sex therapist Dr Chris, discusses the need to recognize the fault of systems, and how to react to them:

*“There’s a lot going on in the world where it’s very reasonable, that some people are struggling and feeling the ways they’re feeling, and the problem is systems and what’s going on in the world. And you can’t just sit at home and fix that. So maybe you need to also get involved in some larger level activism and be a part of making that change, so as to not feel so victimized by it. Some people need to build community and they need to step out into action to feel like they’re actively dismantling these systems that they’re harmed by. Sometimes you need to take a couple days to sleep and centre pleasure to restore and anchor ourselves (Donahue, Dr.C., 2022).”*

As a side effect of people blaming themselves instead of systems, perpetrators of the colonial capitalist system like the media, workplaces, and governing bodies have also pushed for superficial remedies. This has resulted in the wellness industry, suicide hotlines, and encouragement for people to seek expensive talk therapy treatment or medication.

This shifts the burdens of the system onto the individual instead of trying to correct the root causes, because addressing the roots would require dismantling the system and all of its inequity. Tik Tok creator, @simransoul shared a video as seen in the screenshots on the next page, which highlights the contradictions of the colonial capitalist systems placing the responsibility of wellness onto individuals.

In addition to unlearning to blame ourselves or want to fix ourselves, we must move away from blaming other individuals as well. According to abolition activist Mariame Kaba, doing so will help us better identify the systems which oppress us. She discusses this in more detail in a podcast with The Intercept:

*“While an individual police officer might be brought to trial, and even less likely might end up being incarcerated, this really does nothing at all to shift, change, uproot the systems and structures that are actually responsible for the killings, and the harassment, and the injury done to particular populations by the institution of policing. We devolve to the individual so often because the structural and systemic feels so daunting, and how are we going to actually shift and change that? Also, because it feels so good to enact vengeance on people who’ve harmed us (Kaba, M., 2021).”*

Placing blame on individuals, whether others or ourselves, is a normalised practice that needs to be unlearned to help us identify our systems of oppression. In being able to identify the systems, we can begin to understand them and change them.



A Tik Tok posted by (@simransoul, 2022). Watch here.

### Transcription of video above:

**Speaker 1:** And then I just got to push through and make it to the weekend. And I just got to push through and make it till the fucking weekend until my heart does me a favor and stops beating

**Speaker 2:** Say it with me, dear governing bodies, bureaucracies, and greedy corporations. You cannot advocate for the priority of our mental, physical health, wellness, and suicide prevention when capitalism and neo-liberalism continue to stop on us. You cannot set up sick daily intervention groups for mental health support and disability rights when capitalist and you'll liberal systems are traumatizing. And re-traumatizing us. You cannot disguise processes of healing while also simultaneously having systems of oppression co-exist because if there is one thing we understand about capitalism and neo-liberalism, it will work us to our very graves. It will work us beyond your toxic performatively incentivise systems of oppression.



A Tweet posted by Dr. Devon Price, a writer and social psychologist who advocates for autism and trans visibility. Dr. Devon Price makes a point that a lot of things being promoted by the self care industry are basic necessities we need to survive and live (@drdevonprice, 2021).

## See Good in People Again

To complement our unlearning individualistic tendencies taught by colonial capitalism, rebuilding a sense of trust and goodness in other people will also be important for building community to enact change. In an online editorial published by The Red Nation discussing Indigenous communism, and queer feminism, they mention reaching future goals will take steps, and that reconstructing our humanity will be key to the process:

*“Socialism is the first step in reclaiming a sense of humanity as well as a love for humanity. Grace Lee Boggs, echoing Frantz Fanon, wrote that revolution is the process of becoming more-human human beings. Through socialism, we begin the process of reclaiming our humanity (The Red Nation, 2020).”*

Alok V Menon, a Queer and Trans activist shared a similar sentiment about rebuilding humanity. In a podcast, they discussed their experience with how the Queer and Disability communities taught them about the vulnerability of learning to see goodness in strangers, by asking people for help while walking alone, something which can be very dangerous for Queer and Trans people:

*“I think the potential of queerness is that it actually taught me in a physical and embodied way, “Okay, you’re being followed home right now. No one is here to protect you. So ask for help.” So I had to learn how to ask for help. I had to learn how to take random people on the street as potential best friends. I had to learn to clue people in “Hey, I’m getting harassed right*

*now, I need you.” And this is I think the beauty of Trans and Disability Justice is that we had to break up with the mythology of Western individualism because we needed to create economies of care in order to get through the day. And so what I found in all of that is actually strangers are my potential friends, and what I found in all of that, is that actually, the economy of care is as big as there are people in the world (V Menon, A., 2021).”*

As we learn to undo individualistic behaviours taught to us by colonial capitalism, we are able to see good in one another, and begin working together to create change. We can see more people shift into this thinking in some of the posts online shared below.



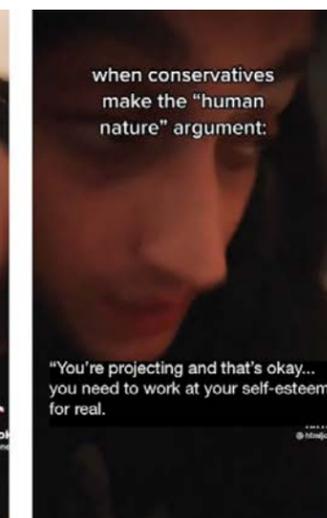
*“I challenge you.” Screenshot from a Tik Tok by (@oaxacanprincesss, 2022). [Watch here.](#)*



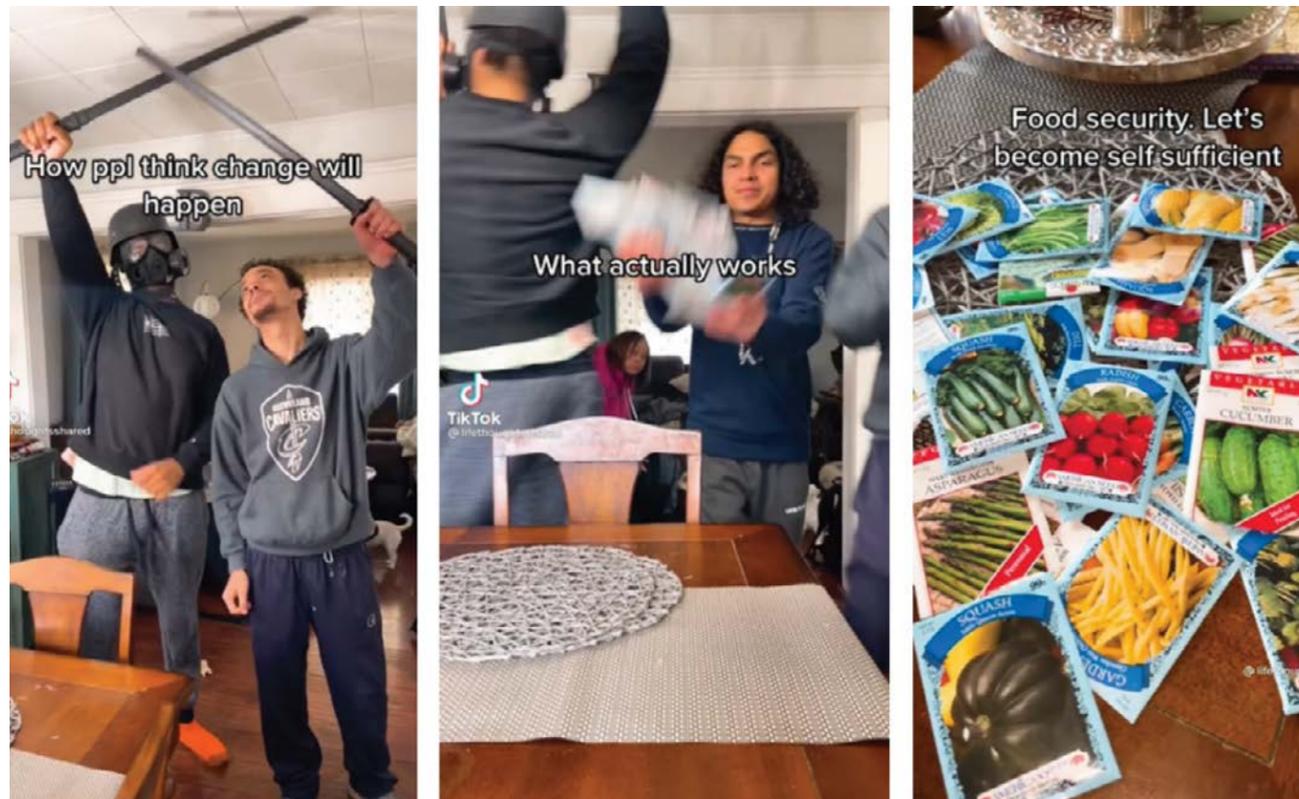
*Screenshots from a Tik Tok posted by (@disgracist, 2021). [Watch here.](#)*



*Although many people cannot imagine life outside of capitalism, Tik Tok user @izuagbe points out that people inherently are not capitalistic when playing Minecraft; an online world-building game. (@izuagbe, 2021) [Watch here.](#)*



*A Tik Tok by @htmljones showing a possible re-enactment of a conversation with someone who believes human nature is inherently bad (@htmljones, 2022). [Watch here.](#)*



Tik Tok posted by (@lifethoughtsshared, 2022). [Watch here.](#)

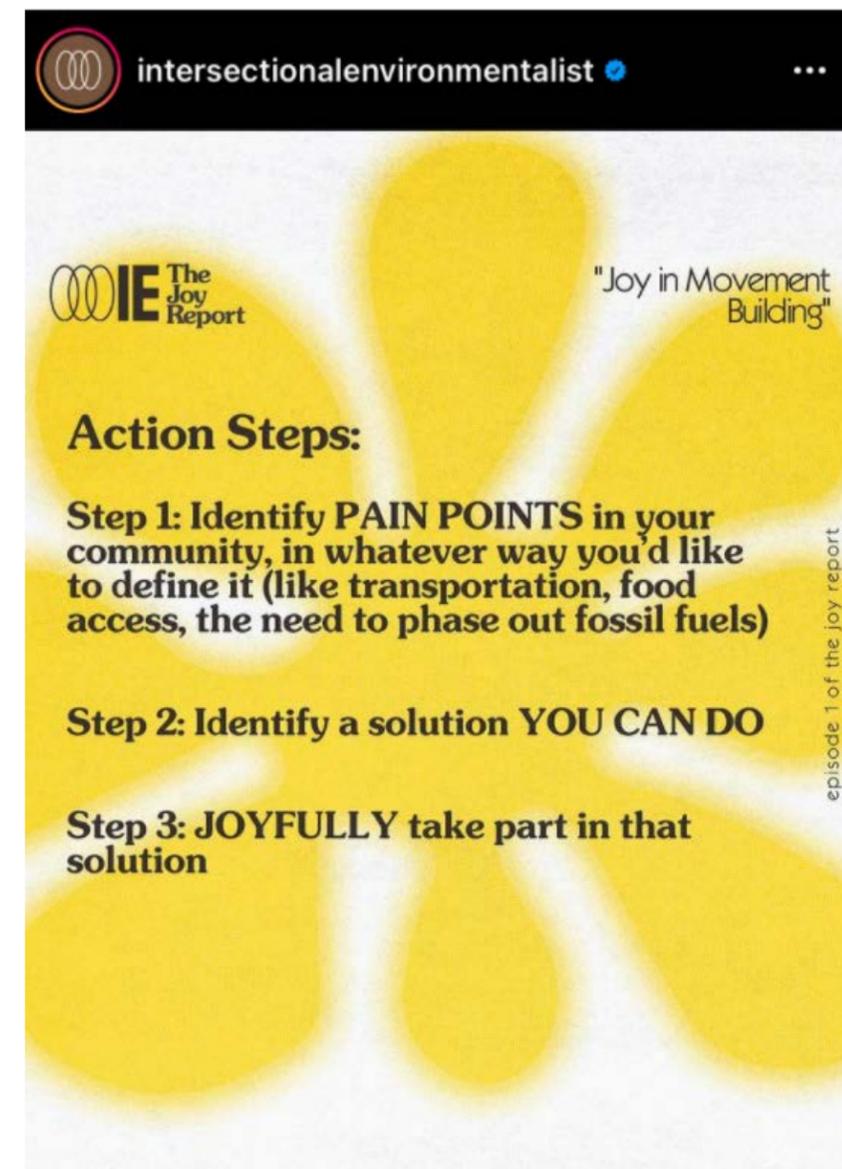
## Scaling Expectations for Tangible Outcomes

In a couple interviews with my SFI peers, people had mentioned that a sense of realism in their efforts helped them to not feel nihilistic. One had mentioned working in engineering and water systems, and that knowing people relied on accessing the tap water they worked on everyday felt meaningful to them. Another had mentioned helping their elderly neighbours walk their dog or get groceries during the pandemic, something they could see the benefits of immediately and felt meaningful to them.

Another example of scaling actions for

change can be seen in the recent wave of activists promoting food security. There is an understanding that we are dependent on the colonial capitalist system because we must work in order to buy food and survive. However if we teach more people how to grow food, we can become more self-sufficient. It is a smaller step towards potentially greater change.

Instead of expecting ourselves to be responsible for huge systems change, we can think of how we might take meaningful and reasonably tangible steps that will help us eventually achieve the large scale systems change we want, even if it is not in our lifetime.



An Instagram post from about approaching steps for action (@intersectionalenvironmentalist, 2022).



A screenshot from a Tik Tok posted by @gabbysauvage, 2022).

## There is Power in Community and Mutual Aid

Mutual aid works to help people in times of crisis, when our colonial capitalist systems cannot provide for our basic needs. It manifests as communities coming together to pool resources or time to address a problem (Spade, D., 2020), for example starting GoFundMe campaigns has been a common form of mutual aid withing Queer, Trans, and Disabled communities to raise money for housing, shelter, gender affirming care, or assistive devices. However mutual aid is not to be confused with charity. Dean Spade, an organiser, writer and teacher, explains the difference between the two:

*“Mutual aid projects provide direct aid as part of radical movements trying to get to the root causes of problems and charity or social service organizations provide direct aid in ways that often supplement, stabilize, or sustain violent and coercive hierarchies (Spade, 2019).*”

Participating in mutual aid also helps us interact with more like-minded people in a community with common goals and common interests. In turn, this helps us feel more optimistic and counter the feelings of nihilism and despair we may have.

As collectives, we are also more capable than we are as individuals, which is partially why the colonial capitalist system we live in encourages self-sufficiency, and shames us for asking for help. In a Tik Tok posted by @elisjoshi, they share an example of this, explaining how a group of tenants in an expensive city in California organised a successful rent strike against a corporate landlord. Tenants were promised rent relief by the rental company, but instead were being forced to pay while also incurring secondary debt for missed payments, as well as a rent increase for the next year. By coming together to protest for 5 months, they achieved full rent cancellation, debt cancellation, and had the rent increase waived.

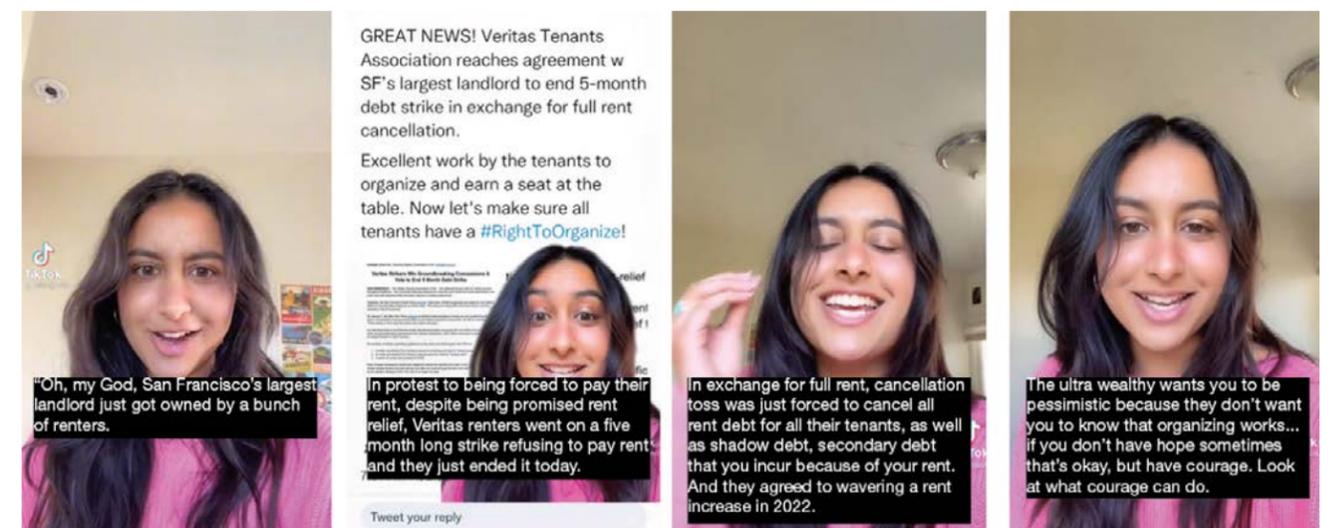
It is important to unlearn the individualism we hold on to, so that we may form communities by talking to neighbours or talking to coworkers. Through talking we can realise the ways in which people are being mistreated, and what people’s needs are. From there, we can begin to work together to set goals and make plans of action, or organise protest.



A Tik Tok posted by @coffeenpedagogy, 2021. They discuss how engaging in community aid and getting to interact with like-minded people helped them feel optimistic instead of nihilistic. [Watch here.](#)



A Tik Tok posted by @vanillaabstract which talks about the importance of talking to people to form a community or union(@vanillaabstract, 2022). [Watch here.](#)



A Tik Tok posted by @elisjoshi talking, 2022. [Watch here.](#)

## Rest and Self Preservation

Excessive productivity has been ingrained in us by colonial capitalist culture, to the point where in addition to our full time jobs, it has become normalised and often necessary to also have a start-up, “side hustle,” or freelance project to get by. In reaction to this, we are seeing activist movements centred around rest, like the Nap Ministry. Artist and theologian Tricia Hersey started the Nap Ministry in 2016, as an exploration of Black liberation, spirituality, and a resistance to colonial capitalism. The movement has nearly 500k followers on its [Instagram page](#), and serves as a reminder that rest is important and a profound act of defiance in a culture which glorifies being busy.

Adopting active nihilism is also a lot of work. It can be exhausting to unlearn and develop new practices, to defend your efforts, and be met with resistance from people who do not share the same goals. As with anything else, we must manage our time and capacity so as to not become burnt out. With that said, it is okay to go through phases of being very active, then indulging in passiveness. It does not have to mean you do not care about changing things, but you can indulge in taking breaks when you need to.

Rest is also important for keeping a clear mind, so that we may think clearly and critically about the systems we live within. In a documentary about the Indigenous Activist and poet, John Trudell (Santee Dakota), there is a clip of him speaking about how not having a clear mind allows for problems to continue:

*“In order for this predatory system, this disease to work, we must not be able to use our minds in a clear, coherent manner, because if we could use our minds in a clear, coherent manner, we would not accept the unacceptable. But it’s a disease, it lives and travels through the mind, through generations (Niall B., 2012).” [Watch here.](#)*

Aside from being an absolute necessity for survival, rest is a revolutionary act within a system that demands productivity. Rest helps us gain clarity and stay energised in our change efforts.



An Instagram post from (@Thenapministry, 2022).



A Tik Tok posted by @retro\_waves, who discusses feeling overwhelmed by activism, and need to take time for themselves (@retro\_waves, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

### Transcription of video:

*I have been intentionally distracting myself. As aware as I have been being lately, I just decided to turn it off. And I hate myself for saying that because it is an extremely privileged position for me to just focus my attention on something else and not be concerned with the state of the world. I know me as an individual can do nothing by myself. So for me to be extremely weighed down by all of this, it's very taxing. And you do have to take some time for yourself. That does not mean that my views have changed. It doesn't mean that I've lost focus. I've just redirected it, I guess, to preserve my sanity. If you want to say that, but there's just something nagging me in the back of my head. I'm like how selfish of you to focus your attention on yourself when there's other people out here suffering? I don't know how to get over that.*



A screenshot from a Tik Tok posted by @baaleau about experiencing joy (@bahhleu, 2022).

## Find Humour, Joy, and Leisure

Working towards creating systemic change is serious work, but it should also be something people can find joy, humour, and even leisure in. If the process is enjoyable, people may be more likely to stay engaged and stay energised about the goals at hand.

Humour in particular is important for social movements. Vine Deloria Jr, an Indigenous (Sioux) author, theologian, historian, and activist for Native American rights wrote about Indigenous humour's role in Indigenous culture, explaining:

*“Humor has come to occupy such a prominent place in national Indian affairs that any kind of movement is impossible without it. Tribes are being*

*brought together by sharing humor of the past. Columbus jokes gain great sympathy among all tribes, yet there are no tribes extant who had anything to do with Columbus. But the fact of white invasion from which all tribes have suffered has created a common bond in relation to Columbus jokes that gives a solid feeling of unity and purpose to the tribes...*

*The more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it. Satirical remarks often circumscribe problems so that possible solutions are drawn from the circumstances that would not make sense if presented in other than a humorous form. Often people are awakened and brought to a militant edge through funny remarks (Deloria J.V., 1969).”*

[Read the full essay, Indian Humor here.](#)

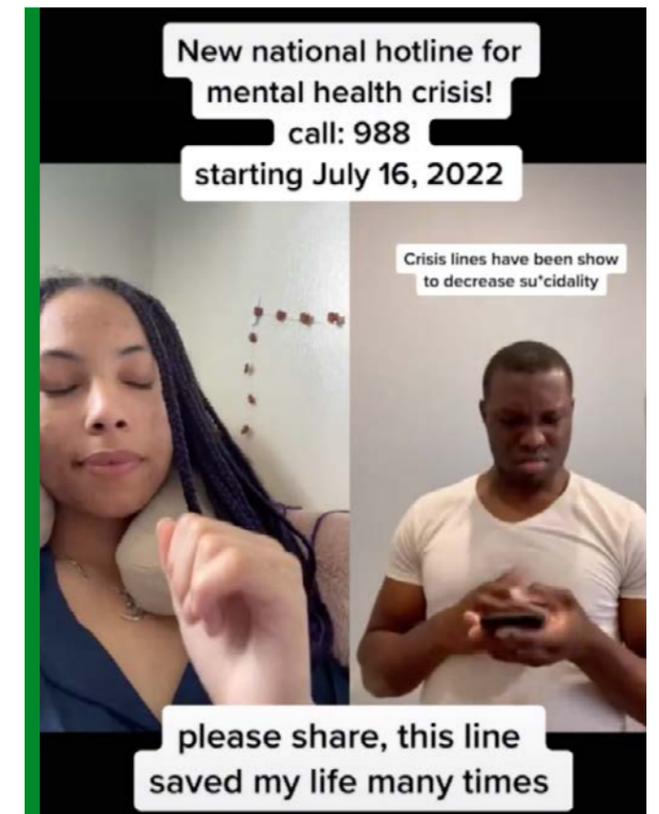
What is particularly interesting is that according to Vine Deloria Jr, Indigenous people are able to find creative solutions to complex problems by joking about unrealistic scenarios; which is a great example of how humour can be conducive to not only helping us relate to one another, but also find joy while working to create change.

Joy is also important to social movements. Simply experiencing joy despite living within an oppressive system that benefits from people being unhappy, and unfulfilled is a radical act. And even more so, when we are able to spread joy to other people.

Finding joy in how you participate in change making or activism can also attract more people to engage in it with you. This is an

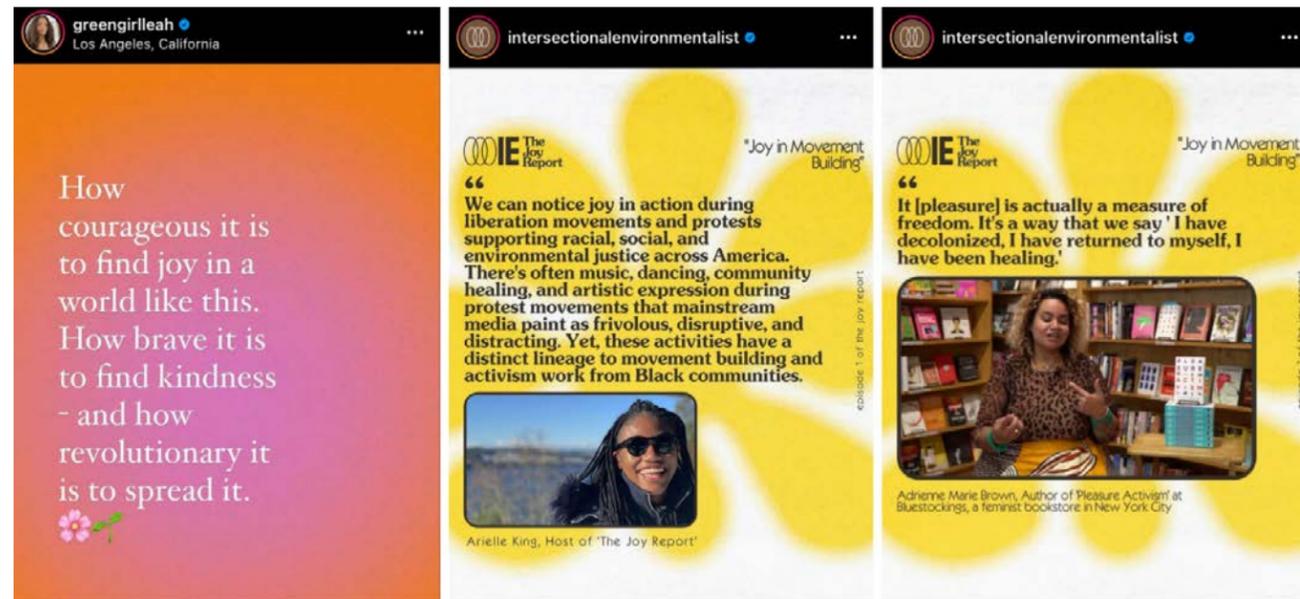
approach that has come naturally for some activists such as Mya Pol, who advocates for disability rights. She has always loved dancing, and often shares videos of herself dancing in her wheelchair while simultaneously fundraising or dispelling myths about disability (Osterheldt, J., 2021). As a result, her advocacy work has become enjoyable and she has come to reach a significant audience of nearly 500k on Tik Tok as of writing.

Leisure is an important aspect of social movements as well. A Tik Tok user with the alias @aamirazh discusses this in a video, making a point that having leisure activities shows we are reclaiming our time for something meaningful outside of the productivity that is expected of us (@aamirazh, 2022). Indulging in leisure activities like reading, writing, watching movies, or other hobbies also stimulates our creativity; which is ultimately going to help us think of more creative forms of action. We will have inspiration and ideas to pull from different places into our activism.



A screenshot from a recent post by Mya Pol on her Tik Tok page, where she is often seen answering questions or fundraising while dancing from her wheelchair (@immarollwithit, 2022). [Watch here.](#) See her [full page here.](#)

## Find Humour, Joy, and Leisure (Continued)



An Instagram post shared by Leah Thomas, author of the book *Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*. As part of her activism, she has promoted the importance of joy in organising, and has started a Joy Report podcast dedicated to sharing stories in the same sentiment (@greengirlleah, 2022), (@intersectionalenvironmentalist, 2022). Listen to the [Joy Report Podcast here](#).

## Find Humour, Joy, and Leisure (Continued)



A Tik Tok posted by @aamirazh about the importance of leisure activities like reading or embroidery (@aamirazh, 2022). [Watch here](#).

### Transcription of video:

**Speaker 1:** You are allowed to read books that are not about how to become a millionaire or self-help.

**Speaker 2:** I'm going to add onto this and say that we should be doing more useless shit, but specifically use the shit that is not easy. Like, we talk a lot about how capitalism makes us internalize productivity, but we don't talk that much about how capitalism has changed our conception of leisure too. Like if all you're doing after work is just turning your brain off and relaxing, your life is essentially just recuperating from labor stuff. Like reading is a great example of how you get what you put in, because you're essentially just like staring at scribbles on a paper

and hallucinating it all in your brain. So it's doing all the work. That's also what makes it interesting because it's a creative process. And because you're essentially making something, it ends up being pretty fulfilling. So like, yeah, fuck the productivity call. But that doesn't mean that we should be doing nothing at all. We just be doing things that are meaningful to us rather than what the market determines is valuable. So like, yeah. Challenge yourself like embroidery or something. Watch a film that you normally wouldn't watch or read a book or anything. Obviously this is easier said than done until like capitalism falls or at least we get like a three-day work week. But if you manage to make the time and energy for it, it's worth it. And it's fulfilling.

## Celebrate Positive News

It is easy to be consumed by the swell of bad news all around us. It is also easy to become unmotivated when modes of action do not go as planned and disappoint us. Both of these experiences can leave us feeling defeated and nihilistic, however it is important to prioritise the good news that is often overlooked by the media, or seems to be less noticeable.

In 2021, plans for a mass work strike expected to take place on October 15 were being shared on social media. The strike called for people to either not show up to work, or to walk out that day. When the day arrived and no one was seen walking out of their jobs, a lot of people were disappointed and shared this disappointment on social media. In a Tik Tok posted by @OnyxBlue, they respond to someone who felt let down by the strike, by reminding them that the strike is still happening, just not in the way they are expecting. They go on to talk about how people are beginning to realise their power, and the “Great Resignation” is a sign of that, and that we must stay positive (@OnyxBlue, 2021).

No matter what degree of commitment or involvement someone has to a movement, there is always room to become discouraged, it is a feeling that will likely come and go over time. A Tik Tok user that has been working in climate change movements posted a video to discuss how even those who have been involved in activism for a very long time can become defeated. However they mentioned

the importance of being able to “zoom out” to see the momentum of the movement, because sometimes it is difficult if you are too close to it. They also point out that despite what many people are saying about climate change being irreversible, we are not at the point of no return, simply because of people’s hard work over the last several years; they estimate that we have gone from needing to reduce global temperatures from about 8 degrees Celsius, to now having to reduce them by about 3 degrees (@thebeesknees, 2022).

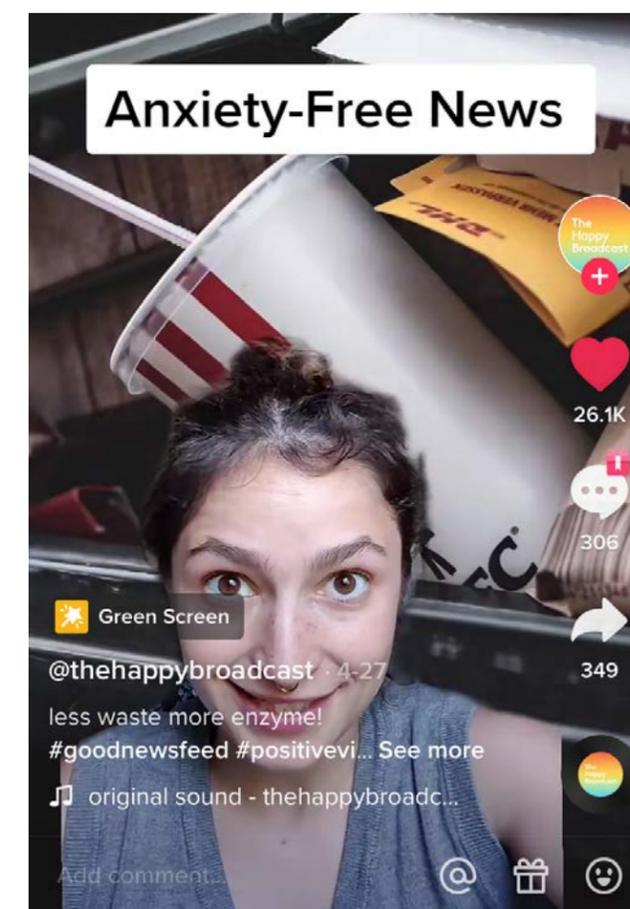
Whether you are new to a social movement or have been involved for a very long time, it is useful to have a sense of realism, while also centering good news. Seeing the results of actions taken, even if small, may help keep you motivated.



Screenshots from a Tik Tok posted by @OnyxBlue, responding to someone disappointed about the failed work strike of 2021 (@OnyxBlue, 2021). [Watch here.](#)

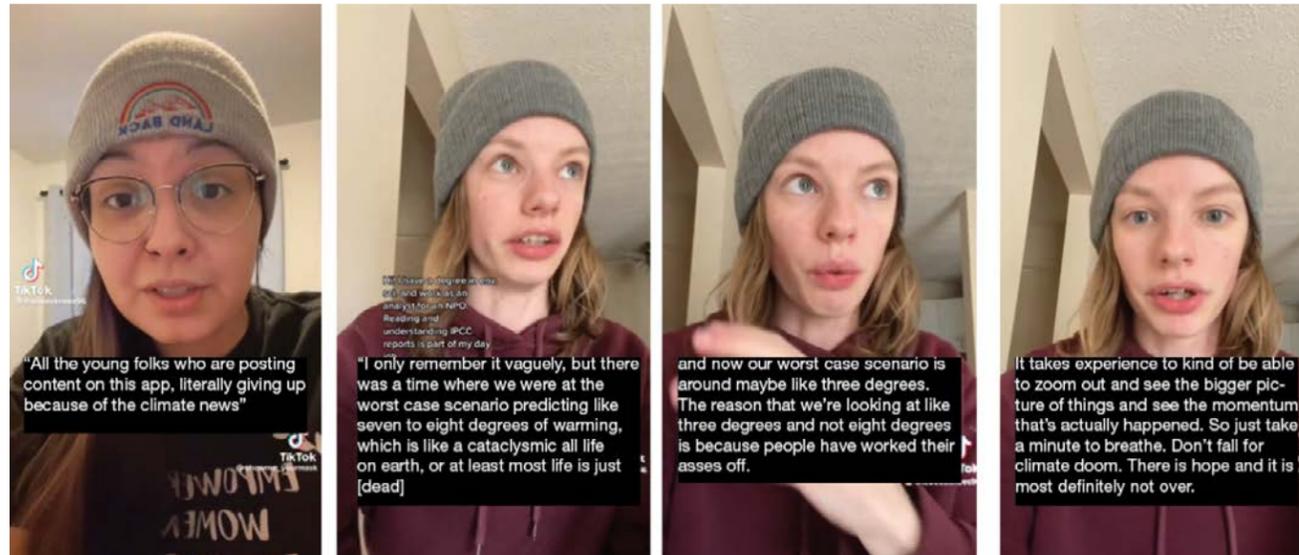
### Transcription of above video:

Can we like stop the Doomerism seriously? Like, do you not realize what's going on? Sure. The general strike didn't exactly happen the way we expected, but believe it or not, it's still happening. Instead of it just being like a one day thing. We have people who are quitting their jobs in mass. I mean, what the fuck are they really going to do? They can't force you to go to work. They can't, you know, force you to go to these shit jobs that don't pay. So the fact is we do have the power and people are starting to realize that, and they're using that power. Kellogg's, John Deere, all these others, have you not been paying attention? I know things suck, but you can't just have a defeatist attitude and expect to get far because one of the most radical things to do is to stay positive. Even when times seem now darker.



A Tik Tok account called @thehappybroadcast which is dedicated to “anxiety free news,” and dedicates posts to positive news less people hear less about (@thehappybroadcast 2022). [See the channel here.](#)

## Celebrate Positive News (Continued)



A Tik Tok posted by @thebeesknees discussing the importance of “zooming out” to see the progress of a movement. (@thebeesknees, 2022). [Watch here](#).

### Transcription of video:

**Speaker 1:** All the young folks who are posting content on this app, literally giving up because of the climate news

**Speaker 2:** I only remember it vaguely, but there was a time where we were at the worst case scenario predicting like seven to eight degrees of warming, which is like a cataclysmic all life on earth, or at least most life is just [dead], and now our worst case scenario is around maybe like three degrees, ish, or reason that we're looking at like three degrees and not eight degrees is because people have worked their asses off. I swear, I'm not saying this to be patronizing, but like when you work in this field, the older you get, the more of an appreciation you have for all the positive momentum that's happening and it just doesn't get covered as much. And it doesn't stick with us as much because, you know, first of all, we're biased towards negative information anyways,

as human beings, but also climate doom benefits, the people who are destroying this planet.

So of course, it's going to get more coverage when you become a part of a collective movement, it can become really hard to see the motion within that movement because you're inside it, you're inside the collective and it takes, you know, time it takes broadening. It takes experience to kind of be able to zoom out and see the bigger picture of things and see the momentum that's actually happened. And also you have to be really careful about who you're listening to on the internet, because there's people who have degrees scientific degrees who are spreading misinformation about climate change. Time is going to go on no matter what the future looks like by 2100 and the human beings who were on earth at the time are still going to have to deal with that. So just take a minute to breathe. Don't fall for climate doom. There is hope and it is most definitely not over.

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Revisiting the CLA analysis,  
comparing present day with an ideal future

Figure 11. Causal Layered Analysis Revisited (Opposite page). A Causal Layered Analysis comparing colonial capitalist culture and nihilism and an ideal future.

## To Summarise

Frederic Jameson, wrote “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson, F., 2003).” However we can imagine it. In an ideal future, active nihilism is the norm when necessary, the culture we live within does not make us feel nihilistic, everyone believes they are born entitled to a meaningful life without needing to earn it, and such a world is sustained through community. This future simply describes the exact opposite of present-day life under colonial capitalist culture as outlined in the Causal Layered Analysis earlier in this paper and shown on the previous page.

Though this vision of the future may be difficult to imagine, it is not impossible. It existed before the arrival of colonial capitalist settlers in the West. In the book *Civilised to Death* by Christopher Ryan, he shares an excerpt of a letter Christopher Columbus wrote to the King and Queen of Spain describing the Indigenous people he met:

*“They are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all they have, none of them refusing anything he may possess when he is asked for it. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves...They are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest—without knowledge of what is evil—nor do they murder or steal... they love their neighbors as themselves and they have the sweetest talk in the world... always laughing...They would make fine servants. With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want (Ryan, C. 2019).”*

This excerpt reminds us of how a meaningful Indigenous way of living was violently replaced by colonial capitalist culture. To return may be possible through incremental efforts to undo critical aspects of the oppressive cultural system, by unlearning toxic individualism, eliminating the need to commodify everything, and believing that another system is possible. The change we want to see may not happen in our lifetime, but is still a worthy cause to actively work towards. We can only begin to initiate positive change if we allow our nihilism under the current systems to motivate us rather than paralyse us.

# Conclusion

This paper began as a somewhat personal exploration of how people interested in change-making experienced nihilism. Were people interested in creating positive change because they were searching for meaning? Could working on complex problems make people feel nihilistic about the state of the world? What implications are there when people who care about change become nihilistic?

As I got into the research, I realised my initial assumptions about nihilism were not quite accurate. Nihilism was not simply dwelling in despair over the meaninglessness of things, it was according to Nolan Gertz, a realisation that the life we must live within our current cultural systems does not feel meaningful to us (Gertz, N., 2019), or meet our inherent wants or needs as people, (Michels, S. 2004). If we were to consider Gertz' definition, "our current cultural systems" would refer to colonial capitalist culture since we are in a Western context.

Nihilism could also motivate people to become active nihilists who would strive to create a world they want to live in (No Wing, 2019), or passive nihilists who would accept defeat and choose to escape the harsh realities of the world (Gertz, N., 2019). This definition of nihilism offered more context than most, and prompted what became the primary research question for this paper: **How might we channel our feelings of nihilism for radical systems change, if at all?**

In an attempt to answer this question, a netnography scan was conducted to see how people online and grassroots activists experienced nihilism. Surveys and interviews with peers in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation or SFI program at OCAD University also took place. Speaking with people from the SFI program was important for this research because it offered some insight into how nihilism might exist in professional communities concerned with change-making.

Looking at the netnography scan as well as the Google Trends and WolframAlpha data, it would appear nihilism is quite prevalent on social media, and has been increasingly popular in online searches and overall discussions around the world; especially Western countries. The scope of the netnography was quite narrow, spanning about a year, and only a few social media platforms; however it would be interesting to do further research into the relationship of nihilism and specific social movements, especially outside of a Western context to see if there were similarities.

There were ideas which came up during the research which seemed similar to nihilism, but not labelled "nihilism" in other countries. For example, the idea of "hypernormalisation," a term coined by Alexei Yurchak to describe how people felt during the fall of Soviet Russia; people could see the systems around them collapsing, but because they were so embedded in these systems, they could not imagine anything else and had to continue

participating (Sam Johnson, 2018). This is very specific to this historical context, but it suggests that similar to nihilism, people living within hypernormalisation could not live meaningfully or true to their wants and needs, within the unpredictably unstable cultural systems of the time.

There was another idea which resembled nihilism from Korea; the concept of Han, which I came across in an art piece called "Song" by Canadian-Korean artist Sammy Lee. The piece was a video essay exploring K-Pop culture and post-war trauma in a global narrative. The concept of Han was said to not be directly translatable, but suggests "a psychological state of deep sorrow and helplessness, mixed with hope (Sammy Lee, 2020)." After the Korean War, the idea of Han was used to create solidarity of shared suffering, because people did not feel in control of their own lives. External forces seemed more powerful. It was an idea reinforced by state schools, families, scholars, and media. However the word originated from Japan, as it was initially used to describe the sorrow of Korean people who were oppressed during the period of Japanese colonization (Sammy Lee, 2020). This tension between a desire for autonomy in the face of a greater force is something which sounds similar to nihilism in concept, but would require much more in-depth research to understand the cultural nuances.

In terms of the primary research; the surveys and interviews with SFI peers, a community interested in change-making; it appeared that everyone had some, but

not a clear understanding of what nihilism was, and they reflected on it much prior to the interview. Whereas it was more common for grassroots activists from the netnography, to discuss and criticise nihilism in their posts. This is likely because they had frequent confrontations with nihilists dismissing their work in the comments of their Tik Tok videos or Twitter replies. Like the grassroots activists, having a clear and critical understanding of nihilism is useful for anyone interested in creating positive change. By understanding and having awareness of our relationship to nihilism and the nihilism around us, we are then able to navigate it to design for more effective systems change.

To reflect on our relationships to nihilism also requires a reflection on our relationship to privilege. Many people, especially those in the SFI program who are interested in change-making, may enter careers in consulting, design, strategy, and foresight. These are professions which often require post-secondary education and offer middle to upper-middle class incomes; which are important aspects of privilege that affect the type of nihilists we may become, and the degree of change we are willing to work towards.

Those of such privilege are more likely to become passive nihilists who appear interested in change, but end up reinforcing status quos that allow oppressive systems to continue existing as they are. The reason being; advocating for more radical systems change that benefits marginalised

people requires dismantling systems of colonial capitalist cultures, and potentially compromising the wealth, comforts, and privilege provided by that colonial capitalist culture. In other words, why change a system that you benefit from? This is partially why we can observe instances of cognitive dissonance or hypocrisy in people who say they care about creating change.

For example, someone who expresses interest in creating pathways to things like accessible housing for all, might also be a landlord renting units well over market value, and inadvertently be contributing to local housing crisis.

Of course, hypocrisies to a degree are inevitable, but whether we are passive nihilists exercising privilege or active nihilists seeking radical systems change seems to come down to a conscious decision. If we choose the path of active nihilism, there are a number of things to keep in mind to help us in the process. Among these are: practising imagining ourselves in the future, realising today's problems are not new, accepting that change takes time, allowing fear and anger to motivate us, moving away from individualistic thinking, finding and forming community with like-minded people, seeing good and trustworthiness in people again, scaling our expectations for change, seeking rest, finding joy and humour in our effort, and making sure to celebrate positive news. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of ways we may channel our nihilism, more research would be needed to uncover more.

Change for a more meaningful future is possible, it is just a matter of taking the steps to get there, and not allowing our nihilism to stifle us. In putting together this paper, my hope is that more people may feel empowered in their ability to create radical systems change, at what appears to be a critical time in history.

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