The Epidemic of Meaninglessness and the Rising Cases of Suicide in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Recent reports suggest that suicide is on the increase in Nigeria. Although governmental and private organisations are making efforts to address the menace with mental health awareness campaigns and the push to decriminalise suicide attempts, these efforts seem oblivious to a critical aspect of the problem, that is, the crisis of meaninglessness that potentially leads to suicidal ideation. This paper highlighted the link between existential meaninglessness and suicidal ideation. It then demonstrated how some of the recent changes in Nigeria's social landscape could be triggering subjective experiences of existential meaninglessness and despair, thereby leading to higher rates of psychopathology and resulting in deaths by suicide. The following societal factors were identified: Changing family values and structures, shrinking human connections, decline in religion, social media inauthenticity, and poverty and economic frustration. Evidence-based pathways to meaning in life, such as religion, social connectedness, and self-connectedness, were also reviewed and recommended for preventing or reducing the experience of meaninglessness and suicidal thoughts. The paper concluded that suicide prevention efforts in the country and suicide-specific psychotherapeutic interventions could be more effective if they go beyond mental health awareness creation to involve strategies that could promote a subjective sense of meaning in life despite the changing social realities in the country. Future research could focus on measures of meaning in life to determine the extent to which Nigerians feel their lives are significant, purposeful, and coherent amidst external social factors. Findings from such research could point the suicide prevention efforts in the right direction.

Keywords: Meaninglessness, Meaning in Life, Suicide, Social change, Religion, Social Connectedness, Self-Connectedness

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a complex public health problem that has been traced to multiple bio-psycho-social causative factors across the world (Fazel & Runeson, 2020). Based on a recent estimate of 800,000 deaths by suicide worldwide every year (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021), suicide represents a significant burden of disease for all societies. In 2020, the global age-standardized suicide mortality rate per population was 9.0/100,000, with a higher rate in men (12.6) than in women (5.4) (Ilic & Ilic, 2022). Although a few countries have observed a minimal decrease in deaths by suicide, data from most parts of the world show an increasing trend in suicide mortality. In 2021, Nigeria was reported to have one of the highest rates of reported suicide cases among African countries (WHO, 2021). Indeed, the Nigerian national statistics show increasing cases of suicide as people continue to jump off bridges into lagoons, hang or set themselves ablaze, or ingest fatally poisonous substances like 'Sniper,' a disinfectant and multi-purpose cleaner which has become a popular and easily available poison (Oladeji et al., 2021). This situation in Nigeria is, indeed, symptomatic of a crisis, but a crisis of what kind?

Some experts have pointed to Nigeria's dismally low psychiatrist-to-population ratio (1:800,000) as an aspect of the problem (Fedele et al., 2024). Some others have called for the repealing or amendment of Section 327 of the Criminal Code Act, which criminalises attempted suicide in Nigeria, arguing that what suicidal people need is not punishment but effective treatment, counselling, and assistance to face their demons (Obinna, 2024). In addition, several governmental and non-governmental agencies have been involved in broad efforts

to create mental health awareness in Nigeria, calling on the government to declare a state of emergency on mental health care and provide budgetary allocations accordingly (Wada et al., 2021). However, as laudable as these efforts are, they seem to be oblivious to a critical aspect of the problem that needs examination the crisis of meaninglessness.

As a priest and psychologist whose daily work involves encountering help-seekers and responding to their basic psycho-spiritual and social needs, including the hunger for meaning, I am convinced that the rising cases of suicide in Nigeria are traceable in part to a crisis of meaninglessness. Indeed, existential psychologists have long asserted that every human has an innate tendency to pursue meaning in life and that an inability to find or create meaning can provoke existential anxiety (Frankl, 1959; Maslow, 1966; Yalom, 1980). For Yalom (1980), existential meaninglessness is the absence of existential meaning. Building on Yalom's definition, Kim et al. (2014) conceptualised meaninglessness as resulting "from the absence of purpose, [the absence of] personal significance, and [the absence of] coherence in life" (p. 4).

Like other organisms, humans have a strong natural orientation to live (Levering, 2008). We are in the survival game; we naturally avoid whatever threatens our lives. Nevertheless, the neurological capacity that helps us survive also renders us typically pensive (Fromm, 1958). Because we have the capacity to reflect on ourselves, to think about the past and the future, and to engage in abstract thought, we have access to some uncomfortable and unchangeable truths: We know that we and everyone we care about will age, become frailer, and die. We recognise that life is impermanent and uncertain and that many life situations often worsen rather than get better. We realise that we have no control over the forces of nature. We understand that pain and sorrow are part of our destiny. So, we ask: What is the point of it all? What is the meaning of life? What difference does it make to be alive instead of dead?

Asking questions of this sort is not abnormal for a species gifted with the capacity to think and reflect. However, these very questions trigger existential anxiety a feeling of dread or panic that arises from confronting the limitations of our existence (Frankl, 1959). So, to fend off existential anxiety, we must find and maintain perceptions of our lives as meaningful coherent, purposeful, and significant – for we must strive not only for survival but also for significance (George & Park, 2016). As a species, we want to live lives that matter, not just to ourselves but also to others, and we feel a sense of meaning when we appraise our lives as coherent, significant, directed, and belonging (Martela & Steger, 2016).

However, meaninglessness can set in when our sense of feeling significant and valued by others becomes non-existent (Kings & Hicks, 2021). Life can lose its meaning when there is a lack of purpose, personal significance, and coherence. More so, it is when people are unable to find and maintain meaning in life that they mostly become psychologically vulnerable (George & Park, 2016). Because of the void occasioned by a lack of meaning, an individual's existence becomes threatened, and this results in the experience of psychopathology as the individual struggles to cope, defend, or search for meaning (Hazell, 1984).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper was to highlight how some of the recent changes in Nigeria's social landscape could be triggering experiences of existential meaninglessness and despair, thereby leading to higher rates of psychopathology and resulting in deaths by suicide. The paper was not intended to discount the research evidence that impulses and crises which provoke or are associated with suicide are primarily subjective. Rather, it was to draw attention to the societal forces that could trigger or condition such subjective impulses and crises. Thus, this paper discussed the phenomenon of suicide more from a rational than from a pathological perspective.

The paper was organized into five sections as follows. Section one presents a general introduction, including the purpose of the paper. Section two contains a brief review of related works establishing the links between existential meaninglessness and suicidal ideation. Section three discusses some of the current social changes in Nigeria as factors that seem to promote the experience of existential meaninglessness among Nigerians. Section four reviews and recommends three evidence-based pathways to experiencing meaning in life and reducing suicidal ideation. The last section (five) is the conclusion.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholars have consistently documented the connection between existential meaninglessness and suicide or suicidal ideation. Reflecting on the phenomenon of meaninglessness in life, Frankl (1967), a renowned Australian neurologist, psychiatrist, and holocaust survivor, observed that finding meaning in life is the primary motivating force for any individual, such that if individuals do not pursue meaning, they may experience an existential vacuum, existential suffering, or meaninglessness. Similarly, Yalom (1980) believed that living without meaning, goals, values, or ideals provokes considerable distress, and in severe form, it may lead to the decision to end one's life. Heisel and Flett (2016) also noted that people who fail to discover meaning in life may be prone to existential despair and suicide risk, and human life without existential meaning can result in major depression. For Fu et al. (2023), the meaninglessness and emptiness of life are at the heart of suicidal ideation. In other words, meaninglessness could lead to intense mental pain and result in suicide (Lew et al., 2020). Thus, a sense of meaninglessness in life is considered a factor that significantly predisposes individuals to suicide (Fu et al., 2023).

Conversely, the general suicide literature suggests that meaning in life is a strong protective factor (Kings & Hicks, 2021; Kleiman & Beaver, 2013), and defines meaning in life as the ability to perceive oneself and the world as worthwhile and determine a valued life purpose. According to Steger (2012), meaning refers to "the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future" (p. 165). In other words, meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. Research has shown that meaning in life is a mediator (or a buffer, suppressor) between depression, self-derogation**,** and suicide ideation. In a study that investigated the relationship between lack of purpose in life and suicidal ideation, Harlow et al. (1986) found that lack of purpose in life mediated the relations between self-derogation and substance abuse, as well as the relations between depression and suicidal thoughts. In a sample of older adults with problems in physical health and functioning, Almeida et al. found that the perception and awareness of meaning in life had positive effects on suicidal ideation and decreased depression symptoms (Almeida et al., 2012). Similarly, Kleiman et al. (2013) found meaning in life was a mediator between gratitude, grit, and suicidal ideation among the study participants, which explains the buffering effect of these constructs on suicidal thoughts. Meaning in life has also been found to be a mediator between reasons for living and suicidal ideation among older adults from a community sample, which decreases the likelihood of contemplating suicide (Heisel et al., 2016). Conceptualising meaning in life as a sense of coherence, Edwards and Holden (2001) also found meaning in life to be a moderator between emotion-oriented coping, avoidance-distraction coping, and suicidal manifestations in a sample of college students.

Based on the existing literature reviewed above, meaning in life and existential meaninglessness are opposite ends of the continuum of meaning (Li et al., 2022). Whereas meaning in life acts as a buffer against suicidal manifestations, meaninglessness in life is a significant predictor of suicidal thoughts and behaviours. The studies suggest that without a sense of meaning in life, individuals may feel lost without bearing (Miller & Prinstein, 2019), and that when people experience life-altering events like the loss of loved ones, extreme violence, or terminal illness, those who are best able to cope and recover from distress are people who believe that their lives have a purpose (Akbari et al., 2022; Frankl, 1988). Besides, the studies also suggest that a felt lack of meaning in an individual's life predisposes the individual to painful mental conditions like anxiety, depression, and suicide (Abari et al., 2022; King & Merchant, 2008). The next section discusses how social change in Nigeria might be undermining some critical pathways to meaning in life and tacitly predisposing individuals to experience existential meaninglessness.

CHANGES IN NIGERIA'S SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

Social change can be described as a permanent feature of every human society, often leading to significant alterations in a people's sociocultural values, norms, structures, and institutions. According to Olagbeju (2015), social change is often characterised by shakeups in the cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organisation, or value systems of a people (Solaja, 2020). Social change could be due to internal or external

forces, and it could have far-reaching positive or negative impacts on human societies. The Nigerian society is not immune to the impacts of social change, and against the backdrop of this paper's focus, the following subsections present some areas of drastic changes in the country's social landscape and highlight how these recent changes could be increasing the risk of existential meaninglessness or despair and contributing to the higher rates of psychopathology resulting in suicide.

Family Values and Structures

Social change affects not only individuals in society but also the structures and units of society, including the family (Alabi & Olonade, 2022). In the traditional Nigerian setting, marriage was regarded as the acceptable or approved medium that brought two consenting heterosexual adults and their families together to begin a family, and such a decision was usually premised on socio-cultural and religious values (Alabi & Olonade, 2022). Families were often made up of parents, children, and other members related through kinship, residence, or close emotional attachments, and based on this extended family system, the social life of the members was organized. People lived together sharing their worries and challenges about life; they supported one another emotionally and survived by sharing their labours and economic resources (Ajayi & Owumi, 2013).

Additionally, traditional family members were guided by collective values, and each member was conscious that what he/she did would affect everyone else (Murove, 2020). Family heads gained social significance by living up to their responsibilities to their families and the larger society. In other words, being responsible to one's family was not a matter of individual choice, it was fundamental to the stability and tranquillity of the family and the social and emotional well-being of the individual. Children benefitted from collective family values – they learned, experienced, practised, and shared socio-cultural and religious values and virtues that prepared them for wholesome adult life; they learned life's philosophy, acquired principles by which to live and relate to others, and developed meaningful views about self, life, and the world (Ajayi & Owumi, 2013).

Unfortunately, contemporary Nigerian society is witnessing staggering changes across social institutions, including the family. The combined influence of both local and global cultural, social, political, and economic forces is reshaping family life in all its forms, structures, and functions (Alabi & Olonade, 2022). For instance, marriage, which used to be considered both a vital sacred ritual and a foundational component in the formation of a family, has become less rigidly defined as conjugal relationships and procreation, hitherto conceived to be strictly within the confines of marriage, are now seen and even encouraged outside marriage (Alabi & Olonade, 2022). More so, several other relational formations and family structures in contemporary Nigeria, such as single parenting, baby-daddy and baby-mama arrangements, and the covert practice of homosexual relationships, among others, have emerged and are threatening the traditional sense of marriage and the family which have been integral forces in the development of an individual's selfhood.

The contemporary world seems to consider this departure from traditional family life and values as a sign of civilisation, a sign of freedom and individual autonomy. However, because of the exercise of this newfound freedom, family relationships that gave meaning to people's lives are vanishing: families (single-parent, nuclear, and extended) are becoming smaller, and family members are having fewer relations with whom to connect and by whom to be supported (Alabi & Olonade, 2022). In addition to these are the phenomena of late marriages, lower levels of fertility, and higher rates of divorce, all of which are weakening traditional family ties. Therefore, notwithstanding the hedonistic or utilitarian interpretations of the ongoing changes to the family unit, from the standpoint of psychological science, these changes pose serious threats to a life of meaning, which, in turn, tend to increase suicide risk.

Shrinking Human Connection

Closely related to changing family structures is the shrinking human connection. The newfound freedom and autonomy have also contributed to an increasing decline in neighbourliness – people hardly know or interact with their neighbours (Powell, 2024), and are becoming less trustful of others in whom to confide in times of trouble, a development that is negatively impacting people's ability to acquire broader social capital. We are social beings. We need the companionship of others to thrive in life, and the strength of our extra-familial

social ties has a huge impact on our mental health and happiness (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Our connection to others provides a buffer against stress, anxiety, and depression; it boosts self-worth, prevents loneliness, and assures us of the support and comfort of others in our down moments (Powell, 2024). Conversely, lacking strong social/human connections can pose a serious risk to our mental well-being (Mann et al., 2022).

Lamentably, one of the downsides of our heavy reliance on social media platforms today is the vanishing of human connection. More and more people opt to find and connect with others on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, TikTok, etcetera. While these platforms have their respective benefits, it is vitally important to note that social media connections can never replace real-life human connections. The emotional and expressional interactions required to trigger the hormones that alleviate stress and generate happy, healthy, and positive feelings can only occur through real-life human connections (Bonsaksen, 2023). Although these platforms were designed to bring people closer together, too much engagement with social media ironically leaves people lonelier and more isolated. As people invest more of their time into staying in touch with or being influenced or entertained by faceless/impersonal others from across the globe, they are further disconnected from significant others in their lives, disconnected from those who can provide real-life human support when the need arises (Bonsaksen, 2023). Such isolation from the real world might worsen mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. No doubt, social media has led to an increase in communication. However, it does not seem to have excelled in establishing strong trustworthy human relationships.

Decline in Religion

From the very beginning, as human beings began to ask existential questions, religion has provided the institutional and social framework for finding meaning in life (Park & Hale, 2014). In religion, people have found the strength to brave horrendous life experiences through their belief in and conscious connection to the transcendent God, the Supreme Object of worship whose omnipotence assures religious adherents of better days to come, despite their crippling experiences of mortal frailty (Bennett, 2011). Their belief in the afterlife, a world beyond time where the fleeting pleasures of this world and the suffering of lack will cease to define the quality of life, is a major source of hope for practitioners of religion. In other words, because of a belief in the afterlife, a person who suffers may endure adversity without becoming hopeless, which is a prime risk factor for suicide. So, religiosity or religious affiliation provides some protection against suicidal ideation because of the hope it offers.

To address the rising cases of suicide, therefore, the prevailing global steep decline in religion, especially among young people, must be considered a critical part of the problem because, as research has shown, the sense of hope and meaningfulness offered by religion is not easily replicable in the nonreligious options available to those who reject religion (Bennett, 2011). However, in the Nigerian context, one must acknowledge that the problem is of a different kind. Unlike in many parts of the world where the decline in religion is easily seen in peoples' increasing abandonment of traditional houses of worship (Inglehart, 2021), in Nigeria, this tragedy is rather seen in the large membership of churches and mosques without a corresponding moral uprightness. The Nigerian case is not about the number of those who identify as religious, nor is it about the number of churches and mosques which can be found on almost every street across the country. The Nigerian problem is not about the relevance of religion. No. Rather, it appears to be about the exploitation, manipulation, and bastardisation of the relevance of religion.

The practice of religion in Nigeria is largely devoid of sensitivity to sin and overly focused on satisfying temporal appetites (Smith, 2021). Without disregarding the efforts of many silent adherents and a few but steady voices of truth that are standing up for and preaching religious purity and righteousness, one must acknowledge that the Nigerian public space is saturated by the voices of impostor preachers of religion whose messages stoke the human instinctual desires for revenge or destruction of enemies, greed, selfishness, and instant gratification. Such practice of religion which prioritises the arrogance of temporal prosperity over the spiritual values of sacrifice, compassion, generosity, gratitude, endurance, humility, and surrender cannot provide the practitioners with the anchor for braving through the howling winds of existential meaninglessness. Meaninglessness reflects religious poverty (Dupré, 1998; Lancer, 2019). Therefore, it is

hardly surprising that an increasing suicide rate is one of the demons fighting against a nation that is usually touted as 'religious.'

The Web of Lies: Social Media Inauthenticity

The often inauthentic or fake lifestyles of many social media influencers could also be considered culpable for stoking existential crises today (Appel et al., 2016). Several of these social media influencers or 'idols' use curated photographs and posts to portray their lives in a positive light. They want to be seen as wealthy and having a happy relationship, a thriving career, gifted children, adventurous hobbies, or the world's cutest baby. Many of their gullible followers are endlessly inundated with messages that one could summarise as follows: The measure of your self-worth is directly equal to the measure of your material success or wealth. Their followers and friends are often left feeling insignificant or with a strong desire for the lives they falsely believe their influencers have.

Worse still, negative psychological feelings could arise in their followers who realise that their own realities and circumstances do not permit the luxurious lifestyle they believe their social media idols have. Such negative feelings, including frustration, dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, powerlessness, and depression often encourage or accompany suicidal ideation in individuals who feel empty, lack a clear conception of what they want with their life, have no long-term goals around which to structure their days, and feel powerless to positively influence their situation (Fu et al., 2023; Santacruz et al., 2024; Khatami & Khodabakhshi-Koolaee, 2021). Regrettably, from my working experience, and perhaps, due to social media falsities, there seems to be an increasing number of young Nigerian adults who feel empty and tend to drift through life passively. They go through the motions of living in a disconnected, mechanical manner. They follow the path of least resistance and are often crippled by existential doubts. Such emptiness and the resultant dissociation from oneself can lead to depression and suicide (Santacruz et al., 2024).

It is imperative to add that despite seeming to have everything, many of those who have become global social media idols and role models who lead their followers to chase after emptiness have themselves ended their wild goose chase in deaths by suicide (Cheng et al., 2017; Park et al., 2016; Ganesh et al., 2020). Perhaps, the saying, 'not all that glitters is gold,' is applicable here. When people are hollow, disconnected and alienated from their authentic selves, their hunger for meaning could be expressed in some of the most piteous, infantile behaviours. For instance, going by traditional standards in Nigeria, the cyclic preoccupation with and audacious announcement and celebration of extramarital affairs, divorce, and remarriage by some Nigerian pop celebrities (Medeme, 2022; News Agency of Nigeria, 2022), is not indicative of grown-ups whose lives are well integrated. Rather, it reveals their inner emptiness and their compulsive obsession with filling the void with never-satisfying fantasies. Such behaviours are not suggestive of character strength which helps to manage and overcome problems, improve relationships, and protect against the onset of mental health problems (Niemiec, 2023). Instead, such behaviour seems to portray their weakness. It seems to be a way to avoid the anguish of facing their meaninglessness, and an attempt to numb their inner discomfort with themselves.

Sadly, the use of distractions when faced with existential anxiety is particularly harmful because it prevents people from taking the necessary steps to address their lack of purpose or meaning in life (Lancer, 2019). According to May (2009), "The human being cannot live in a condition of emptiness for very long: if he is not growing toward something, he does not merely stagnate; the pent-up potentialities turn into morbidity and despair, and eventually into destructive activities, [including suicidal activities]" (p. 25). In other words, because hollow people are often disconnected from their inner source of vitality, their attempts to find comfort in fleeting or momentary distractions can lead to further discontentment and depression, which, in turn, can lead to the point where 'ending it all' is considered the only way out.

Poverty and Economic Frustration

There is a large and growing body of research linking contracting economies and suicide mortality risk. According to Kaplan et al. (2015), economic contraction and the resulting joblessness or loss of housing or health security can threaten individual identity, leading to unmet expectations, barriers to attaining desired

roles, and social and economic exclusion. Poverty could induce various feelings, including anxiety, regret, anger, hopelessness, powerlessness, demotivation, isolation, and depression that can lead to suicide (Khatami & Khodabakhshi-Koolaee, 2021; Economou, 2014). In Nigeria today, the worsening economic conditions have most definitely exacerbated the problem of meaninglessness, especially for many heads of families. Indeed, the economic frustration experienced in Nigeria has disproportionately adverse effects on those who should be the breadwinners for their families. For many such people whose social identity, self-worth, and fulfilment culturally derive from their ability to provide for their dependents, long-term goals lose their meaning as they barely survive each day.

The older generations of Nigerians have often talked of the 'good old days,' a period in the history of the country when people could access necessities. Even if they had to struggle to find a deeper meaning to their lives, at least, people could develop an adequate sense of self by building a stable career, owning a home, and raising a family (Church Times Nigeria, 2022). But today, millions of Nigerians do not have the luxury of this dream, and the confluence of all these forces might be responsible for the increasing number of hollow men and women in Nigeria who are finding their way out of their inner anguish through suicide.

RETRACING EVIDENCE-BASED PATHWAYS TO MEANING IN LIFE

Although modern societal changes suggest a departure from the traditional sources of meaning in life as discussed above, recent research reiterates that such antecedent values are intrinsic to the experience of meaning in life. Given the prevailing social realities in Nigeria, and to prevent or counter the experience of suicidal ideation, this section revisits, reviews, and recommends three evidence-based viable pathways to eliciting a subjective sense of meaning in life

Religion

Despite the prevailing decline in religion, recent research finds religion and religiosity to be positively related to meaning in life among people of diverse age ranges (Dar & Iqbal, 2019; Davis & Hicks, 2013), and even in places where religious faith is not normative (Shiah et al., 2015). According to Park (2005), religion engenders meaning in life because it helps people make sense of pain and suffering, and the inevitable end of life. Religion provides the answers to questions about life's meaning and offers guidelines for living according to God's plan (Park, 2005). As Tolstoy (1983) put it, "Whatever answers faith gives, regardless of which faith, or to whom the answers are given, such answers always give an infinite meaning to the finite existence of man; a meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation or death" (1983, p. 24). Religious doctrines help people connect their thoughts and behaviours to a much larger context, often leading to a strong sense of identity and providing a clear sense of purpose (Park, 2005). More so, religiosity facilitates coherence by providing structure and routine a regularity to life (Heintzelman & King, 2019), a shared sense of reality through doctrine and ritual (Norton & Gino, 2014), and an opportunity to develop strong interpersonal bonds not only with a deity but also with fellow ingroup members (Kings & Hicks, 2021). Thus, as research demonstrates, individuals experience other aspects of well-being because of the meaning in life that religion engenders (Dar & Iqbal, 2019; Womick et al., 2019; You & Lim, 2019). Therefore, because religion helps people make sense of their existence, including their experience of pain, suffering, deprivation, and frustration, authentic religious adherents are not likely to see their lives as incomprehensible, purposeless, and insignificant. In contrast, to be irreligious is to lose out on religion's irreplaceable offer of meaning in life and be potentially disposed to experience suicidal ideation when existential meaninglessness sets in.

Given the above evidence-based description of religion as a meaning-giving phenomenon, a nation like Nigeria, which has over 95% of its population identifying as religious (McKinnon, 2021), should ordinarily rank among the countries with the lowest rates of depression and suicide. The increasing rate of suicide in Nigeria, despite its mostly religious population, therefore, raises questions not necessarily about the potential of religion to buffer against existential meaninglessness but about the authenticity of religion as practised in Nigeria. Perhaps, a sincere reappraisal (both at individual and group levels) of what pure religion means is necessary for finding the meaning in life that authentic religion provides. Perhaps, the practice of religion in Nigeria should focus more on promoting in adherents the spiritual values of acceptance, gratitude, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, humility, and honesty – these values have been variously reported to reduce stress,

engender supportive religious communities, and increase well-being (Park & Hale, 2014; Bennett, 2011; Dar & Iqbal, 2019). Perhaps, the practice of religion in Nigeria should be such that helps adherents realise that the human longing for meaning cannot be satisfied from the outside. Schopenhauer (1966) described this inner longing as the "bottomless abyss of the heart," and added that no worldly satisfaction could fill its infinite cravings (p. 573.). So, if religion is sold and practised in such a manner that fixates people on the illusion that their inner void could be filled, eradicated, or avoided by clinging to material satisfaction (as appears to be the case in Nigeria today), then people can spend their entire 'religious' lives perpetuating endless internal emptiness.

Social Connectedness

The idea that our social relationships directly influence subjective existential meaningfulness is incontrovertible. Empirical research overwhelmingly supports the fact that a sense of belonging, anticipated social support, and received emotional support are all positively associated with meaning in life (Machielse, 2024; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016), while social exclusion often leads to loss of meaning (Chen et al., 2020). In other words, our experience of meaning can be found or shaped through interdependence with others. Even though culture may provide us with a shared reality that could help us to make sense of the world, our specific social relationships are most relevant to subjective feelings of meaning (Gold et al., 2024). For instance, our perception that we matter often depends on our belief that our actions have helped make the world a better place for others (Costin & Vignoles, 2020).

Moreover, our close relationships also help us restore meaning during tumultuous times. When life challenges us, we often turn to close others to make sense of the situation. Talking or sharing stories with others, in turn, helps us reappraise the situation more positively and understand ourselves more broadly (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Numerous cross-sectional and daily diary studies show that feelings of belonging or other positive social interactions predict reports of meaning in life above other covariates (Hicks & King, 2009; Lambert et al., 2013; Zang et al., 2019).

Therefore, the need for individuals to build real social connections cannot be overemphasised, especially in the face of the ironies of our social media age, one of which is that people appear to be more connected, whereas, in reality, the seemingly wider connection and networks often translate into a sense of isolation and depression. Rather than nurturing genuine, supportive, and meaningful relationships, social media platforms usually create an illusion of connection while fostering a deeper sense of loneliness (Smith et al., 2021). Our obsessive pursuit of digital likes and validation today means that our self-esteem depends heavily on the quantity and quality of feedback we get from impersonal sources, and the euphoric highs we get often leave us with tethered self-worth because they are fleeting. One way out of the danger of depression and suicide, based on overwhelming evidence, is to build real and supportive social connections.

Self-Connectedness

One of the ways people generally seek to cope with feelings of emptiness and loneliness is to regard such feelings as distinct from themselves and cling to the illusion that their inner void could be avoided, eradicated, or filled with distraction. Unfortunately, seeking relief from emptiness through distraction, addiction, and externalisation provides only a temporary solution and can further alienate an individual from him/herself (Lancer, 2019). In other words, when the passion or the addictive highs diminish, the dreaded feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and depression return. As Lancer (2019) put it, externalising our feelings of meaninglessness or emptiness only perpetuates our internal conflict until we discover that we cannot run or hide from ourselves or our feelings.

Instead of employing escapist strategies that only create false identities and worsen our experience of an existential void, a more profitable way out is to connect with the real self. Research supports the idea that being connected with one's self can lead to meaningful living. Self-connection is the process of discovering, embracing, and nurturing one's authentic, true self (Schlegel et al., 2009). It is a process that begins with the realisation that emptiness is unfillable from the outside. Self-connection could be a tortuous process because it involves not only relishing the feel-good aspects of our lives but also acknowledging and accepting the reality

of our human condition, together with all its failures, weaknesses, and uncertainties. As Klussman and colleagues conceptualised it, self-connection involves (a) self-awareness (i.e., knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions), (b) self-acceptance (i.e., a complete acceptance of one's internal states, preference, resources, and intuitions), and (c) self-alignment (i.e., acting or behaving in ways that are consistent with one's true self) (Klussman et al., 2022).

It is important to emphasise that self-connection as a path to finding meaning in life is not synonymous with the injunction to "just be yourself." While the latter could be a complicated path to well-being, especially for individuals whose existential crises already impair their capacity to make sense of life's purpose (Ryan & Ryan, 2019), the former refers to discovering one's true self, which Winnicott (1960) describes as the original, authentic, and real self with no contradictions, and devoid of defensive façade or falsity. In other words, whereas 'be yourself' could give free reins to an individual's expression of his or her unwholesome, socially distasteful feelings and passions, self-connection is a journey from the false to the true self, from the circumference to the centre and core of an individual's life (Merton, 1960).

Several techniques have been proposed to help facilitate self-connection, including mindfulness, introspection, self-examination, and self-regulation. Although each of these techniques relates to looking inward to understand the self, self-connection goes beyond self-understanding to evaluating one's values, goals, and life's purpose in relation to the world around us and our desired ultimate end (Merton, 1960). Hence self-connection results in clear action plans for change, improvement, and growth. Adler et al. (2016) suggested that autobiographical memories could be potent in helping individuals connect with themselves and find meaning and coherence in their lives because "[autobiography] is psychologically integrative, weaving the event into a broader web of meaning, and in doing so, it supports a sense of purpose and fosters a sense of unity" (p. 165). In other words, a strong connection to oneself often goes hand in hand with an overarching sense of purpose because it helps to identify what one ought to do and be, and motivates one to chart a course towards achieving these purposeful goals (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Thus, in an otherwise meaningless world, living authentically, becoming one's true self, and assuming responsibility could provide meaning to life.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the link between existential meaninglessness and suicide ideation and demonstrated that certain aspects of the social changes in Nigeria could be triggering subjective experiences of existential meaninglessness and despair, thereby leading to higher rates of psychopathology, and resulting in deaths by suicide in the country. Given the overwhelming research evidence supporting the association between meaning in life and lower suicidal thoughts, it becomes imperative that suicide prevention efforts in Nigeria go beyond mental health awareness creation to involve strategies that could promote a subjective sense of meaning in life in ways that might influence positive adaptive cognition and behaviour despite the changing social realities in the country. Additionally, given the critical role of meaning or its absence in the overall well-being of individuals, it might be beneficial for suicide therapists and counsellors to employ an integration of psychotherapeutic interventions, such as cognitive behaviour therapy, psychoanalysis, spiritual direction and counselling, and other approaches used to treat depression, shame, and feelings of emptiness, to help clients with suicidal thoughts. Further research is also needed with a focus on measures of meaning in life to determine the extent to which Nigerians feel their lives are significant, purposeful, and coherent amidst external social factors. Findings from such research could point the suicide prevention efforts in the right direction.

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