

Adolescent Nihilism as a Factor of Social Maladaptation

Підлітковий нігілізм як чинник соціальної дезадаптації

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research. *The study aims to examine the relationship between adolescent nihilism and psychological well-being.*

Methods of the Research. *The research applied theoretical (analysis, generalization, systematization) and empirical methods. A cross-sectional design involved 31 adolescents aged 12-18 years. Psychodiagnostic tools included the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and two author-developed questionnaires assessing nihilistic manifestations in the educational environment and attitudes toward life, rules, and the future. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation were used for data analysis.*

Research Results. *Theoretical analysis highlighted nihilism as a complex psychosocial phenomenon emerging during adolescence. Empirical findings showed that most adolescents exhibit moderate psychological well-being, with emotional instability manifested in mood fluctuations, energy levels, and interest in daily activities. A significant correlation was found between psychological well-being and adolescent nihilism in the educational context ($r = 0.505$; $p < 0.01$), indicating that lower psychological well-being may enhance adolescent nihilism, including negative attitudes toward social norms, learning, and future expectations.*

Conclusions. *Adolescent nihilism reflects the interaction between emotional state, value orientations, and the social environment. Enhancing psychological well-being can serve as a preventive factor against destructive nihilistic attitudes. These findings provide a foundation for developing targeted psycho-educational and corrective programs.*

Key words: *adolescent nihilism, psychological well-being, adolescence, emotional state, social norms, value orientations.*

Introduction

The phenomenon of nihilism has a long history and originates in antiquity. Throughout different historical periods, it has transformed and acquired new forms of manifestation. Initially, nihilism developed as a philosophical concept; over time, it has also been examined in a psychological context. Modern nihilism gained particular prominence during the Enlightenment,

when scientific knowledge gradually began to replace religious dogmas. In situations where traditional values lose stability and truth ceases to be perceived as self-evident, nihilism intensifies. The term "nihilism" comes from the Latin nihil and means "nothing," and in general refers to the rejection of existing norms, authorities, rules, and values in society. Its roots can be traced to skeptical philosophical schools of antiquity, though as a structured phenomenon, it emerges much later in modern Europe (Cunningham, 2002).

In postmodern culture, described in Baudrillard's work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, reality is often substituted with something false, and truth becomes merely a reflection of a particular idea rather than reality as a whole. In such a context, an internal protest emerges: "If everything is relative, then nothing matters" (Baudrillard, 2004). Thus, nihilism gradually moves from philosophical reflection into psychological analysis, where it is considered a response to the loss of meaning and a crisis of values in the contemporary world.

In modern society, the problem of nihilism is particularly relevant in the context of adolescent psychological development. The study of adolescent nihilism has become particularly acute amid the prolonged military conflict in Ukraine. According to the large-scale study "Impact of the Russian Invasion on Mental Health of Adolescents in Ukraine", published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (Osokina et al., 2023), Ukrainian adolescents are facing unprecedented levels of cumulative trauma and daily stressors associated with the disruption of social ties, diminished well-being, and future uncertainty.

Rapid social transformations, information overload, and social instability create conditions in which adolescents face difficulties in forming their own system of values and life orientations. The constant flow of information often undermines a sense of stability, which may lead to feelings of sadness, depression, reduced emotional state, and the formation of skeptical or

nihilistic attitudes toward social norms. Consequently, adolescent nihilism is not a random phenomenon but a consistent psychosocial reaction to identity crises, information overload, and social challenges.

A crucial aspect of understanding adolescent nihilism is the concept of emotional complexity. As it is highlighted by N. Bailen and colleagues (Bailen et al., 2019) in their study “Understanding emotion in adolescents: A review of emotional frequency, intensity, instability, and clarity”, published in the journal *Emotion*, the adolescent emotional sphere is characterized by high variability and complexity of experiences, which often leads to passivity and abrupt mood swings. The authors argue that a deficit in emotional regulation strategies during this period can trigger defensive reactions. In this context, nihilistic attitudes can be viewed as an attempt by the individual to simplify the excessive cognitive and emotional pressure arising from social instability and an identity crisis.

In the literature, various aspects of adolescent nihilism have been examined by multiple researchers. Erikson considered adolescence as a stage of identity crisis, accompanied by doubt and the search for life meaning. Subsequent studies were conducted by representatives of existential psychology and philosophy, including V. Frankl and J. Baudrillard. Modern neuropsychological studies refine Erikson’s perspectives, indicating that nihilistic attitudes may be linked to the uneven development of the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. Specifically, Spear in the article “Adolescent neurodevelopment”, notes that adolescent impulsivity and emotional reactivity provide a foundation for the radical rejection of authority as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance (Spear, 2013). Furthermore, Denissen and colleagues, in their longitudinal personality development research “Self-regulation underlies temperament and personality: An integrative developmental framework”, demonstrate that personality traits during this period are highly plastic. Nihilism often emerges as a temporary stage of re-evaluating the “Big Five”

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traits, particularly conscientiousness and agreeableness (Denissen et al., 2013).

In Ukrainian psychology, the development of adolescent personality, crisis processes, and deviant manifestations were studied by I. Bekh, M. Savchyn, R. Pavelkiv, and others. In psychological research, nihilism is often associated with concepts like "character neurosis", "skepticism", and "negativism". Erikson emphasized that adolescence is a period of identity crisis, when youth actively search for meaning and test life values, whereas existential psychologists such as V. Frankl and J. Baudrillard considered nihilism a reaction to the loss of meaning and crisis of values in the modern world. Analyzing the transformation of nihilistic attitudes in the digital age requires accounting for the factor of an adolescent's constant immersion in the online environment. In a foundational review by C. Odgers and M. Jensen, published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, it is demonstrated that the digital environment not only provides new opportunities for socialization but also acts as a potent source of specific stress (Odgers, & Jensen, 2020).

The authors emphasize the mechanism of "social comparison", which takes on hypertrophied forms in digital spaces. The constant broadcasting of others' success and the perceived inadequacy of one's own life compared to these virtual standards provoke a sense of futility regarding one's efforts. In a psychological context, this transforms into a classic nihilistic worldview, where the rejection of social norms and values serves as a defense mechanism against feelings of inferiority. Thus, modern adolescent nihilism is significantly fueled by information overload and the fragmentation of digital experience, which complicates the formation of a cohesive identity and a stable system of life meanings (Odgers, & Jensen, 2020).

Adolescence itself is a critical developmental stage. Erikson, in *Childhood and Society*, defined it as a phase of identity exploration, with the main conflict being the opposition between "identity" and "role confusion." If society does not provide clear

meanings and inner experiences don't have outlet, the formation of nihilistic attitudes may act as a defense mechanism. Instead of the complex question "Who am I?" a simpler assertion arises: "Nothing has meaning – so it does not matter who I am or who I should be" (Erikson, 1995). Therefore, adolescent nihilism can be seen as a complex psychological mechanism combining emotional reactivity, identity crisis, and the search for internal autonomy.

Modern studies of Ukrainian researchers including "Impact of the Russian Invasion on Mental Health of Adolescents in Ukraine" (Osokina et al., 2023), "Psychological factors of social maladaptation in adolescents" (Hrys et al., 2016), "Factors of socio-psychological maladaptation in individuals with deviant behavior" (Kikbaiev, 2025), and "Social deprivation as a risk factor for mental maladaptation among the younger generation of Ukrainians" (Rusina et al., 2023) confirm that adolescence is not merely a biological or social stage. Rather, it is a complex process characterized by the collision between an internal striving for autonomy and external societal expectations.

In this context, nihilism is considered a form of psychological defense that allows temporarily "pausing" existing values to enable the construction of new ones. Developmental psychologists note that rule rejection is not pathological; in a healthy context, it is a temporary phenomenon inherent in the crisis of adolescent development and may positively reflect conscious choice through critical thinking (Frankl, 2016; Savchyn, 2020).

Thus, adolescent nihilism is neither random nor a fashionable trend. It is a reaction to the cultural and contemporary context of the era: acceleration of reality, fragmentation of meanings, information overload, destruction of traditional structures, and negative emotional states. Where stability is absent, a void emerges, and if it is not filled with new meanings, it is occupied by nihilism. Within this study, adolescent nihilism is considered not as an isolated worldview but as a set of attitudes and experiences related to emotional state, well-being, and the search for life meaning.

The aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between manifestations of adolescent nihilism and the psychological well-being of adolescents.

The problems of the study are as follows:

1. To analyze theoretical approaches to the study of nihilism and its manifestations during adolescence.
2. To determine the level of psychological well-being of adolescents.
3. To study manifestations of adolescent nihilism in the educational environment using author-developed questionnaires.
4. To analyze the relationship between adolescents' emotional state and their attitudes toward social norms, learning, and future prospects.

Methods of the research

The study employed a cross-sectional design with a one-time psychodiagnostic assessment. The sample included 31 adolescents aged 12–18 years, participants of a Telegram channel. Online surveys via Google Forms ensured voluntary participation, anonymity, and psychological comfort.

Tools for assessing psychological well-being and manifestations of nihilism included:

- WHO-5 – Well-Being Index (developed by the World Health Organization), comprising 5 positively formulated statements scored on a 6-point scale.
- Author-developed Questionnaire 1 “Manifestations of Adolescent Nihilism in the Educational Environment”, 14 statements scored on a 10-point scale.
- Author-developed Questionnaire 2 “Attitudes toward Life, Rules, and the Future”, 7 statements scored on a 10-point scale.

Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. Reliability of the questionnaires was confirmed with high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.848$ for Questionnaire 1; $\alpha = 0.747$ for Questionnaire 2).

Results and their discussion

The study of adolescents' well-being as a potential factor in the formation and manifestation of nihilistic tendencies was conducted in January 2026. The sample consisted of 31 adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years, including 16 girls and 15 boys. All respondents were Ukrainian-speaking, as the survey was conducted in the Ukrainian language. The survey was administered remotely using the online tool Google Forms, ensuring convenience and anonymity for participants.

To assess the subjective psychological well-being of adolescents, the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (World Health Organization-5) was utilized. The selection of the WHO-5 index is justified by its high sensitivity in detecting depressive states and emotional discomfort, as confirmed in the extensive systematic review by Topp and colleagues (Topp et al., 2015). The use of this instrument allows for the objectification of the correlation between subjective well-being and a predisposition toward the nihilistic rejection of social values. The scale consists of five statements designed to evaluate emotional state, level of psychological comfort, and overall sense of well-being. Response options are presented on a six-point scale, ranging from "All of the time" (5 points) to "At no time" (0 points).

First, the general characteristics of the sample according to the WHO-5 scale are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Quantitative Indicators of Psychological Well-Being in the Sample

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Total WHO5	31	4	20	13.16	4.1

According to the data presented in Table 1, the mean WHO-5 score in the sample was 13.16 points. According to the WHO-5 interpretation criteria, this score corresponds to a moderate level of subjective psychological well-being (13–18 points). This

indicates that most adolescents demonstrate a moderate level of emotional stability and life satisfaction, although the presence of external or internal stressors limits a full sense of well-being.

At the same time, the minimum score in the sample was 4 points, which falls within the low well-being range (0–12 points) and is considered an indicator of psychological distress and an increased risk of emotional difficulties. Such a score clearly suggests that a portion of respondents may experience emotional exhaustion, low mood, or a diminished sense of life satisfaction, which, according to theoretical assumptions, may foster the development of critical or detached attitudes toward social norms and their future.

The maximum score (20 points) corresponds to a high level of psychological well-being, indicating effective emotional regulation in certain respondents. Overall, the results demonstrate a predominantly moderate level of well-being, with the presence of a risk group, emphasizing the need for targeted psycho-preventive and corrective measures to reduce nihilistic tendencies among adolescents.

Analysis of the responses revealed a relatively positive, yet insufficiently stable, emotional state in most adolescents. For instance, in response to the statement "I felt cheerful and in good spirits", 35.5% of respondents indicated experiencing this state "most of the time", and 32.3% – "more than half of the time". Meanwhile, 19.4% reported feeling cheerful "less than half of the time", and 12.9% – only "some of the time", indicating some instability in the emotional background of part of the sample.

A similar pattern was observed for feelings of calmness and relaxation. The largest proportion of respondents (41.9%) reported feeling calm "more than half of the time", while 19.4% felt calm "most of the time" and 3.2% – "all the time". Conversely, 35.5% of adolescents experienced calmness only occasionally or rarely, suggesting increased tension and emotional instability.

The analysis of the vitality indicator also revealed heterogeneous results. Most respondents (41.9%) felt active and ener-

getic “more than half of the time”, 29% – “most of the time”, while a portion of adolescents reported low energy levels: 16.1% felt energetic “less than half of the time”, and 3.2% did not experience such feelings at all.

Special attention was drawn to the measure of recovery after sleep. Only a small portion of adolescents (6.45%) reported waking up feeling rested “all the time”, whereas a significant share of respondents reported unstable feelings of alertness: 25.81% experienced it “more than half of the time”, another 25.81% – “some of the time”, and 22.58% rarely or almost never felt rested, indicating insufficient recovery and emotional tension.

Analysis of the statement “Things happen to me every day that I find interesting” showed varying levels of engagement in daily events. About half of the adolescents reported a relatively stable sense of interest in life (7% – “all the time”, 15% – “most of the time”, 30% – “more than half of the time”). The other part of the sample demonstrated a reduced or unstable level of interest: 25% felt interested only “some of the time”, 20% – “less than half of the time”, and 3% reported no interest in daily events at all.

Overall, the results indicate heterogeneity in adolescents’ psychological well-being. Alongside a relatively positive emotional state in a significant portion of the sample, there were fluctuations in mood, reduced vitality, instability in post-sleep recovery, and varying levels of interest in daily life. These features of psychological well-being may create conditions for the development of critical or nihilistic attitudes toward social norms, academic activities, and personal life prospects.

In general, the study of adolescents’ well-being revealed that their emotional and psychological state is characterized by considerable instability. Although most respondents reported a positive mood, calmness, energy, and interest in daily events “more than half of the time”, a significant portion of adolescents experienced periods of reduced indicators. This is especially relevant for the stability of the emotional background and the

sense of recovery after sleep, which manifests in fluctuations of mood, activity, and motivation for daily tasks.

Such fluctuations in subjective well-being may act as a factor increasing the risk of developing nihilistic tendencies, as emotional instability, decreased interest, and insufficient mental recovery provide a fertile ground for skeptical or dismissive attitudes toward social norms, values, and personal life goals.

Quantitative results of the sample according to the Author's Questionnaire 1: Manifestations of Adolescent Nihilism in the Educational Environment are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

**Quantitative Indicators of Adolescent Nihilism
in the Educational Environment**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Total, Author's Questionnaire 1	31	37	122	73.84	20.404

According to the data presented in Table 2, the quantitative indicators of adolescent nihilism in the educational environment, measured using Author's Questionnaire 1, range from 37 to 122 points, indicating the presence of respondents with varying degrees of nihilistic tendencies. The mean score is 73.48, with a standard deviation of 20.404, reflecting considerable variability within the sample.

The obtained mean corresponds to a moderate level of adolescent nihilism (70–84 points), suggesting an ambivalent attitude among respondents toward the educational environment, partial devaluation of academic activity, and instability in value orientations. At the same time, the presence of minimum scores corresponding to a low level of nihilism (14–56 points) indicates that some adolescents maintain a positive or neutral attitude toward learning and social surroundings. Maximum scores, reaching 122 points and falling within the high level of nihilism (98–140 points), indicate the presence of respondents who exhibit pro-

nounced devaluation of academic activity, social connections, and a pessimistic outlook on the future. Overall, the results demonstrate sample heterogeneity and varying levels of adolescent nihilism.

The Author's Questionnaire was used as a supplementary tool for the quantitative assessment of adolescent nihilism. The main focus of the study was on testing the research objectives using standardized methods; therefore, a detailed analysis of the internal structure of the questionnaire was not conducted.

Quantitative results from Author's Questionnaire 2, "Attitudes toward Life, Rules, and the Future," are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

**Quantitative indicators of adolescent nihilism
in attitudes toward life, rules, and the future**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Total, Author's Questionnaire 2	31	18	57	37	9.518

According to the data presented in Table 3, the scores in the sample range from 18 to 57 points, with a mean value of 37 and a standard deviation of 9.518. This variability indicates a moderate heterogeneity in adolescents' attitudes toward social rules, authorities, academic activities, and perceptions of their own future, which is typical for adolescence as a stage of active re-evaluation of social norms and values.

The obtained mean corresponds to a mixed profile of nihilistic attitudes, reflecting a combination of critical perception of certain social demands and educational norms with partial retention of trust in basic values and life prospects. This profile may be influenced by age-related developmental features, particularly the processes of autonomy formation, identity search, and the desire to independently define life orientations.

The presence of both minimum and maximum values in the sample indicates that adolescents are at different stages of form-

ing worldview attitudes, which explains the varying degrees of expression of nihilistic tendencies. Thus, the results point to the multifactorial nature of adolescent nihilism and highlight the role of individual and socio-psychological factors in its formation.

It is important to note that the questionnaire is not a diagnostic tool; its results serve as a general assessment of trends in the sample and allow for a description of adolescents' attitudes toward life, rules, and the future at the level of an overall profile.

To test the proposed hypothesis regarding the relationship between the level of subjective psychological well-being and the expression of nihilistic tendencies in adolescents, a correlation analysis was conducted. Specifically, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to identify the nature and strength of relationships between the WHO-5 scores and the results of the Author's Questionnaires, allowing for the assessment of linear associations between quantitative variables. Correlations were examined separately for each Author's Questionnaire. The correlation between the WHO-5 scores and Author's Questionnaire 1, "Manifestations of Adolescent Nihilism in the Educational Environment," is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Correlation between subjective psychological well-being (WHO-5) and the level of nihilistic tendencies according to Author's Questionnaire 1

		Total WHO-5	Total Auth. Q.1
Total WHO-5	Pearson correlation	1	0.505
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.004
	N	31	31
Total Auth. Q.1	Pearson correlation	0.505	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.004	
	N	31	31

The Pearson correlation analysis presented in Table 4 revealed a moderately positive relationship between the respondents' well-being (WHO-5) and the results of Author Questionnaire 1 assessing adolescent nihilism:

- Correlation coefficient $r = 0.505$
- Two-tailed significance $p = 0.004$

The obtained coefficient indicates a statistically significant association: the higher the level of well-being, the lower the level of adolescent nihilistic manifestations, and vice versa.

Among adolescents a high level of well-being is associated with a more stable emotional sphere and effective stress-coping strategies. Developmental psychology research shows that emotional stability during adolescence promotes the formation of a more adaptive attitude toward social norms, authority, and future plans (Favini, 2025). In other words, positive well-being acts as a protective factor, limiting the expression of nihilistic tendencies.

Thus, the correlation results from Author Questionnaire 1, “Manifestations of Adolescent Nihilism in the Educational Environment”, confirm that adolescents' emotional stability is linked to lower levels of nihilistic manifestations in the school setting and to a more adaptive attitude toward social norms and authority.

The correlation between WHO-5 scores and Author Questionnaire 2, “Attitudes toward Life, Rules, and the Future,” is presented in Table 5.

The Pearson correlation analysis between respondents' well-being (WHO-5) and the results of Author Questionnaire 2, presented in Table 5, showed the following:

- Correlation coefficient $r = 0.422$
- Two-tailed significance $p = 0.18$

The obtained r value indicates a moderate positive trend: generally, respondents with higher well-being tend to show lower levels of nihilistic tendencies according to Questionnaire 2. However, since the level of statistical significance does not

reach the standard threshold ($p > 0.05$), this relationship is not statistically confirmed and should be interpreted as indicative.

Table 5

Correlation between subjective psychological well-being (WHO-5) and the level of nihilistic manifestations according to Author Questionnaire 2

		Total WHO-5	Total Auth. Q.1
Total WHO-5	Pearson correlation	1	0.422
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.018
	N	31	31
Total Auth. Q.1	Pearson correlation	0.422	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.018	
	N	31	31

Questionnaire 2 assesses a deeper, worldview-level dimension of adolescent nihilism, related to attitudes toward rules, authority, and future prospects, which may explain the lack of statistically significant correlations for this instrument. Developmental psychology research indicates that certain forms of adolescent nihilism appear episodically and are influenced more by external events than by a stable state of emotional well-being (Cynthia Vinney, 2024).

Although no statistically significant relationship was detected using Questionnaire 2, the trend toward a positive correlation ($r = 0.422$) may suggest a potential link between well-being and worldview manifestations of adolescent nihilism, including a pessimistic attitude toward social norms, authority, education, and personal future expectations.

Thus, the results illustrate the complex and multidimensional nature of adolescent nihilism, where some manifestations are directly associated with well-being, while others are more situational and do not always correlate with overall emotional stability.

These findings served as the basis for developing a recommendation-based rehabilitative and corrective training program “*Improve Your Well-Being*”. The program focuses not on directly reducing nihilistic attitudes but on enhancing adolescents’ subjective psychological well-being, fostering emotional awareness, self-acceptance, and self-regulation skills.

The program is theoretically grounded and aligned with the results of the empirical study. Considering the observed correlation between psychological well-being and manifestations of nihilism ($r = 0.505$; $p < 0.01$), developing these psychological resources may indirectly contribute to reducing the expression of nihilistic tendencies during adolescence.

Conclusions

The study confirmed the relevance of investigating adolescent nihilism as a complex psychosocial phenomenon. Theoretical analysis demonstrated that nihilism has deep philosophical roots and gradually acquired psychological significance, especially in the context of developmental crises.

Empirical results revealed a relationship between adolescents’ psychological well-being and the manifestation of nihilistic attitudes. A decrease in well-being may contribute to stronger nihilistic tendencies, including negative attitudes toward social norms, educational activities, and personal future prospects.

At the same time, adolescent nihilism is not exclusively destructive. Under certain conditions, it may represent an important stage in the development of critical thinking, autonomy, and personal identity.

Future research directions include expanding the sample size, investigating social and educational factors influencing nihilism, and evaluating the effectiveness of psychological programs aimed at enhancing adolescent well-being and preventing destructive forms of nihilistic attitudes.

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Акатова Ольга, Харченко Вікторія. Підлітковий нігілізм як чинник соціальної дезадаптації.

Мета. Дослідження спрямоване на вивчення взаємозв'язку між підлітковим нігілізмом та психологічним благополуччям підлітків.

Методи. Використано теоретичні (аналіз, узагальнення, систематизація) та емпіричні методи. Крос-секційне дослідження охопило

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31 підлітка віком 12-18 років. Психодіагностичні інструменти включали WHO-5 та дві авторські анкети, що оцінювали прояви підліткового нігілізму в освітньому середовищі та ставлення до життя, правил і майбутнього. Для обробки даних застосовано описову статистику та кореляційний аналіз за Пірсоном.

Результати. Теоретичний аналіз показав, що нігілізм є складним психосоціальним явищем, що проявляється у підлітковому віці. Емпіричні результати свідчать, що більшість підлітків демонструють помірний рівень психологічного благополуччя, водночас спостерігається нестійкість емоційного стану, коливання настрою, життєвої енергії та зацікавленості у повсякденних подіях. Встановлено статистично значущий кореляційний зв'язок між психологічним благополуччям та підлітковим нігілізмом в освітньому середовищі ($r = 0,505$; $p < 0,01$), що свідчить про потенційне посилення нігілістичних тенденцій при зниженому рівні благополуччя, включно з негативним ставленням до соціальних норм, освітньої діяльності та власного майбутнього.

Висновки. Підлітковий нігілізм проявляється через взаємодію емоційного стану, ціннісних орієнтацій та соціального оточення. Підвищення рівня психологічного благополуччя може виступати превентивним фактором проти деструктивних форм нігілізму та слугувати підґрунтям для розробки психопрофілактичних і корекційних програм.

Ключові слова: підлітковий нігілізм, психологічне благополуччя, підлітковий вік, емоційний стан, соціальні норми, ціннісні орієнтації.

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