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The Interplay of Psychological Entitlement, Age, and Gender in Meaning Making: An Experimental Study

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ABSTRACT

This experimental study explores the role of meaning-making processes, focusing on the interplay between psychological entitlement, age, and gender. By conceptualizing self-enhancement and social bonding as distinct meaning-making frameworks, the study examines their impact on ideological and worldview constructs (consistency, neoliberalism, self-continuity, and existential concerns). A sample of 457 participants randomly assigned to experimental conditions evaluated life scenarios representing either self-enhancement or social bonding, revealing significant demographic differences. Results indicate that social bonding was consistently perceived as the more desirable life scenario, reflecting its positive valuation across both relational and ideological dimensions. Gender and age affected participants' evaluations, with women favoring social bonding and younger individuals favoring self-enhancement, whereas older participants exhibited greater self-continuity and existential understanding. Psychological entitlement moderated the effects of both gender and age on attitudes toward consistency, neoliberalism, self-continuity, and existential concerns. These findings underscore the complex intersections between demographic factors, entitlement, and meaning making, and highlight the dual role of social bonding as both an aspirational ideal and a source of ambivalence. The present study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse on meaning-making in social psychology by exploring how individual differences shape broader perspectives on human existence, worldview, and ideological constructs.

1 | Introduction

Since the early twentieth century and the rise of existentialism, the meaning of life has become a central focus in psychological science, serving as a foundational concept in various philosophical inquiries, psychotherapeutic approaches, and socio-psychological schools of thought (Costin and Vignoles 2020; Deconchy 2000; Hill et al. 2015; King and Hicks 2021; Martela and Steger 2022). Although the concept of the meaning of life is a complex and multifaceted theoretical construct that has been extensively studied across various literature and is open to multiple frameworks (e.g., Costin and Vignoles 2020; Heintzelman et al. 2013; King and Hicks 2021; Martela and

Steger 2022; Matera et al. 2019), the interplay between self-enhancement (e.g., Costin and Vignoles 2020; Grouden and Jose 2014; King and Hicks 2021; Ryan and Deci 2001) and social bonding (e.g., Baumeister and Leary 1995; Berscheid and Regan 2016; Matera et al. 2019) serves as a key organizing principle for its exploration and understanding (for an overview, see Tsitseli et al. 2025).

According to extant literature, psychological entitlement, as a significant intra-individual variable, is interrelated with the two major demographic variables, gender and age (e.g., Grubbs et al. 2019; Ney and Fischweicher 2020; Stronge et al. 2017; Stronge and Sibley 2021), as well as with the meaning of life and

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related concepts (e.g., Grouden and Jose 2015; Steger et al. 2009; Zitek and Schlund 2021). In contrast to previous designs, where the meaning of life has been treated as a dependent variable, in the present experimental study the self-enhancement—social bonding dichotomy is utilized as an independent variable. The goal is to investigate how meaning-making processes, based on these variables, influence multidimensional ideological and worldview constructs.

1.1 | Psychological Entitlement, Age-Related and Gender Differences, and Meaning of Life

Psychological entitlement, as a persistent expectation of special treatment, has been closely associated with narcissism (Emmons 1984; Golec de Zavala et al. 2019; Howell et al. 2023; Morf and Rhodewalt 2001), though it is not synonymous with it (Ackerman and Donnellan 2013; Campbell, Goodie, and Foster 2004). Research has also shown correlations with individualistic (Campbell, Goodie, and Foster 2004), hostile (Moeller et al. 2009; Neville and Fisk 2018), conflict-prone (P. Harvey and Martinko 2009), and impatient attitudes (E. H. O'Brien et al. 2011), as well as a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction (Byrne et al. 2010) and an unwillingness to take personal responsibility (Exline et al. 2004).

When examining the interaction between this intra-individual trait and broader social and demographic factors, its dynamics become especially relevant when analyzed through two key dimensions of identity formation in contemporary society: gender and age. Both variables are central to the social sciences as ideologically charged constructs. Gender identities, along with their associated socially constructed roles, and the generational gap—which manifests in different ways across historical periods—raise critical questions about their normative influence and broader social implications. This underscores the need to integrate multiple levels of analysis to better understand their role in shaping entitlement-related attitudes.

An exploration of the interconnections between these factors reveals that, in line with the normative imperatives of masculine identity (Grijalva et al. 2015; Mozahem et al. 2020), men perceive themselves as entitled to special treatment and privileges (Grijalva et al. 2015; Klein and Conley 2021; Major 1994; L. T. O'Brien et al. 2012), often displaying assertive negotiation behaviors (Koenig and Eagly 2014), particularly in academic (e.g., Ciani et al. 2008; Kinne et al. 2022; Pilotti et al. 2021) and workplace contexts (e.g., Bylsma and Major 1994; Jewkes et al. 2015; Major 1989; Grijalva et al. 2015; L. T. O'Brien et al. 2012; O'Leary-Kelly et al. 2017). This relationship is mediated by their justification of the system (L. T. O'Brien et al. 2012).

Psychological entitlement also appears to be relevant to age, though the literature on this topic presents a fragmented picture. Stronge et al. (2019) argued that age generally reduces demands for preferential treatment, noting that individuals over the age of 65 showed a slight increase over time. At the same time, the literature suggests that emerging adults reluctantly acknowledge that social perceptions attribute to them the traits

associated with increased entitlement. However, empirical data do not support the notion of a heightened subjective sense of entitlement among younger individuals (Grubbs et al. 2019).

At the same time, the interaction between the meaning of life, self-entitlement and demographic variables emerges as a particularly prominent area of research interest, as evidenced by existing literature. The association of psychological entitlement with related concepts corresponding to meaning, such as life satisfaction and well-being, has been extensively researched; however, its direct relationship with the meaning of life remains to be explored. Individuals with high levels of psychological entitlement are characterized by a limited ability to express gratitude, as they perceive benefits and privileges as self-evident and fair. This negatively affects their subjective sense of well-being and reduces their sense of meaning and purpose in life (Confino et al. 2023). Increased interpersonal conflict, resulting from unrealistic expectations of others, has been shown to reinforce feelings of isolation and destabilize relationships (Campbell, Bonacci, et al. 2004; Stillman et al. 2009). This isolation can result in a fragile sense of purpose and meaning in life, which is directly tied on external feedback (Campbell, Bonacci, et al. 2004).

In relation to gender-related differences, well-being and relatedness are considered to be of utmost importance for women, while self-enhancement tends to be more closely associated with masculinity (e.g., Grouden and Jose 2014; Schnell 2009). These differences reflect socially constructed gender expectations that shape perceptions and priorities, influencing gender-specific values in meaning-making. Simultaneously, age differences reveal an inverse relationship in meaning-making preferences. A notable contrast is observed between the commitment of younger adults to self-enhancing meaning-making patterns and the focus of older adults on fostering and maintaining harmonious relationships with their community members (Grouden and Jose 2014; Steger et al. 2009).

In this context, demographic variables appear to function not merely as differentiating factors of expectations and priorities, but as key parameters in shaping identities and psychosocial processes. In this sense, they highlight the complex meaning-making processes in which the social subject chooses to engage, and on which intra-individual differences interact with contemporary social reality and the spirit of our times. This experimental design operationalizes the values of self-enhancement and social bonds as individual life scenarios, thereby exploring multiple readings of the consistency norm, self-continuity, neoliberalism and existential concerns related to the purpose, matter and understanding of existence. The objective is to emphasize the interactions, contradictions and alienations of the perception of the social system as a result of the generation gap, gendered self-orientations and the normativity of entitlement.

To comprehensively assess the impact of self-enhancement and social bonding on individuals' broader worldviews and existential well-being, we focused on four key ideological and psychological constructs: consistency norm, neoliberalism, future self-continuity, and existential concerns. Each of these variables offers a distinct lens through which to understand how

meaning-making processes might shape our beliefs about the self and society.

1.2 | Consistency Norm

The inclusion of consistency as a central concept in the present research reflects its critical role as an ideological norm, socio-psychological construct, and social value (Festinger 1957; Heider 1946, 1958; Newcomb 1953; Tsitseli and Prodromitis 2023). Consistency underpins self-regulation and social attitudes, fostering both personal and collective harmony, and predictability (Papastamou and Prodromitis 2010). The concept is subject to multiple interpretations. Positive perception of consistency norm is associated with continuity, reliability, and stability, while negative perception of consistency norm is linked to dogmatism and intolerance. Conversely, positive perceptions of inconsistency emphasize flexibility and adaptability, whereas negative perceptions highlight unreliability and abrasiveness. Despite its conceptual richness, the relationship between perceptions of consistency and the meaning of life remains underexplored. Preliminary findings suggest a link between negative views of consistency and social bonding as a meaning-making concept (Tsitseli et al. 2025), yet the influence of gender, age, and psychological entitlement on these interpretations remains to be explored. Further research is necessary to clarify how these factors shape the perception of consistency within the broader context of meaning-making.

1.3 | Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an ideology that promotes individualism, self-regulation, and market-based logic across all domains of life, framing individuals as autonomous, entrepreneurial agents (e.g., Azevedo et al. 2019; Binkley 2011a; D. Harvey 2007). It emphasizes personal responsibility and the pursuit of happiness, often at the expense of collective values and social interdependence (Adams et al. 2019; Binkley 2011b). As with other system-justifying beliefs, neoliberalism may enhance contentment with life circumstances (Girerd et al. 2021; Jost 2020). It also reinforces gender inequalities by privileging traits traditionally associated with masculinity, such as autonomy and competitiveness, while devaluing communal roles typically associated with femininity (Gill 2007; Rottenberg 2014). Younger generations, more likely to internalize neoliberal ideals, show heightened self-entitlement and narcissism (Twenge and Campbell 2009). Moreover, neoliberalism's focus on individual achievement may undermine existential fulfillment by weakening social bonds and shared narratives (Schwartz 2010; Adams et al. 2019). Given these associations, it is crucial to examine the specific dimensions of neoliberal ideology that are activated when individuals engage in meaning-making processes.

1.4 | Future Self-Continuity

Research shows that higher future self-continuity is associated with greater meaning in life by fostering authenticity and long-

term orientation (e.g., Hong et al. 2024; Xue et al. 2024). Age-related differences have been consistently observed, with older adults typically reporting higher levels of continuity, likely due to greater life stability and a stronger focus on identity maintenance (Rutt and Löckenhoff 2016; Löckenhoff 2011; Löckenhoff and Rutt 2017). Although current evidence suggests no significant gender differences in future self-continuity, domain-specific variations remain an open area for future research (Rutt and Löckenhoff 2016). Moreover, while direct empirical links are limited, theories of temporal discounting propose that lower future self-continuity fosters present-focused, entitled decision-making (Hershfield et al. 2012; Bartels and Rips 2010). To date, gender differences within this relationship have not been systematically examined, highlighting a critical gap for future investigation.

1.5 | Existential Concerns

Existential concerns are fundamental to understanding how individuals construct meaning in life and are typically addressed through three subdimensions: comprehension, purpose, and mattering (George and Park 2016; King et al. 2006; Martela and Steger 2016; Reker and Wong 1988; Steger 2012). Purpose refers to the subjective sense of being guided by meaningful life goals (McKnight and Kashdan 2009; Battista and Almond 1973), with higher levels linked to stronger motivation and direction, and lower levels associated with aimlessness. Mattering is defined as the perception that one's life holds significance and value (King et al. 2006), while comprehension reflects the extent to which individuals view their lives as coherent and understandable (Baumeister 1991; Reker and Wong 1988). High levels of mattering and comprehension are associated with perceptions of impact and coherence, whereas low levels indicate feelings of insignificance and fragmentation.

Empirical evidence suggests that women may report greater purpose in life compared to men, although no significant gender differences have been found in mattering (Xi et al. 2018). Age differences consistently favor older adults, who often experience greater meaning and life understanding, likely as a result of accumulated experiences (Steger et al. 2009). Moreover, individuals high in psychological entitlement may face difficulties in developing a strong sense of purpose, due to their heightened focus on self-interest (Confino et al. 2023). However, the relationships between psychological entitlement and the constructs of mattering and comprehension remain underexplored, underscoring the need for further research, particularly across age and gender groups.

1.6 | Present Study

The present experimental study investigates the elaboration of meaning-making processes by examining the interplay between psychological entitlement, age, and gender. Specifically, it conceptualizes self-enhancement and social bonding as distinct meaning-making frameworks, operationalized through individual life plans, and explores their influence on ideological and worldview constructs, namely consistency norm, neoliberalism,

future self-continuity, and existential concerns. The aim of the present study is twofold: first, to assess the evaluation of these frameworks at ideological, value-based, and relational levels; and second, to examine the underlying mechanisms that validate each meaning-making pattern as successful and meaningful. In addition, the study explores the extent to which the interaction between demographic variables (age and gender) and psychological entitlement predicts variations across the dependent variables, through participants' processing and evaluation of the life scenarios—presented with sequence orders within each experimental condition. Within this framework, the study explores how demographic parameters and psychological entitlement jointly shape individuals' multidimensional views over broader societal constructs. The aim is to elucidate the reasoning processes activated by exposure to each life scenario, accounting for variation across age, gender, and levels of psychological entitlement.

1.7 | Hypotheses

The present study formulates several hypotheses regarding the evaluation of meaning-making frameworks. First, it is hypothesized that the social bonding scenario will receive greater endorsement both at the ideological-value level and at the interpersonal-relational level. This expectation is grounded in extensive research underscoring the centrality of social relationships to human flourishing and perceived life meaning (e.g., Berscheid and Regan 2016; Matera et al. 2019). Second, it is expected that the individual described in the social bonding scenario will be perceived as experiencing greater happiness and a deeper sense of life meaning compared to the individual in the self-enhancement scenario. This aligns with evidence suggesting that prosocial and communal goals are more strongly associated with subjective well-being and meaningfulness than self-focused or agentic ones (e.g., Campbell, Bonacci, et al. 2004; Confino et al. 2023; Martela and Steger 2016). Third, gender and age are anticipated to activate distinct reasoning pathways through which participants validate successful meaning-making within each experimental condition. Prior research indicates that age and gender influence motivational orientations and value systems, thereby shaping how individuals evaluate different sources of meaning (Grouden and Jose 2014; Schnell 2009; Steger et al. 2009). Additionally, it is hypothesized that the interaction between each demographic variable (age and gender) and psychological entitlement will differentially predict aspects of the dependent variables, as reflected in participants' processing and evaluation of the life scenarios, presented with varying sequences within each condition. This hypothesis is grounded in empirical evidence showing that psychological entitlement interacts with both gender (Stronge et al. 2019) and age (e.g., Grijalva et al. 2015; Mozahem et al. 2020), and, to some extent, that their combined influence can shape evaluations across multiple outcome dimensions, as previously discussed. Due to the lack of prior research investigating these constructs experimentally or specifically within the frameworks of social bonding and self-enhancement, it was not possible to formulate more specific and detailed experimental predictions. Notably, this focus—exploring how demographic factors and psychological entitlement interact with distinct meaning-making patterns—

constitutes a central novelty of the present study and extends current understanding of the socio-psychological processes underlying meaning-making.

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants

Four hundred and fifty-seven participants ($N = 457$) joined the study in November–December 2024 in Greece. A total of 246 women (55.8%), 191 men (43.3%), and nine self-identified participants (0.9%) responded. Participants ($n = 9$) who self-identified constituting a small subgroup were excluded from the analyses due to insufficient statistical power to reliably assess this group. Participants were between 18 and 87 years, with a mean of age of 38.15 ($SD = 15.16$).

2.2 | Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaires in Greek, using versions validated in this language and were approached individually by researchers. After answering questions aimed at exploring levels of psychological entitlement (SE), participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (between-subject design). Following the pre-measurement of SE, during the experimental phase, participants were asked to carefully read the description of the conditions, choices, and the general perspective on an individual's life. They were then asked to evaluate the described way of life ideologically—on a value-based level and relational—interpersonally and subsequently assess the extent to which they believed the meaning of life was successfully found. Finally, specific perspectives on the dominant ideology, the sense of self-continuity, different interpretations of the consistency norm, and particular reflections on the purpose, significance, and understanding of existence were measured.

2.3 | Stimulus Materials

The experimental stimuli were developed based on established theoretical constructs in the psychological literature. Self-enhancement was operationalized through dimensions such as career achievement, productivity, autonomy, pleasure-seeking behaviors (e.g., recreational activities, sexual satisfaction), and romantic love (Costin and Vignoles 2020; Grouden and Jose 2014; King and Hicks 2021; Tsitseli et al. 2025). In contrast, social bonding was conceptualized through attributes including gratitude, sharing, personal fulfillment, inner peace, spirituality, and a sense of belonging (Berscheid and Regan 2016; Matera et al. 2019; Tsitseli et al. 2025).

To examine these constructs experimentally, we developed two detailed vignettes portraying contrasting life paths for a hypothetical individual ("Individual X"). The self-enhancement condition depicted a life plan centered on personal ambition, individual achievement, and hedonic experiences. The social bonding condition depicted a life plan oriented toward

community values, meaningful interpersonal relationships, and existential fulfillment. The vignettes were designed to offer internally coherent representations of each orientation, based on the understanding that meaning making is deeply intertwined with identity: individuals construct meaning in life largely through narratives about who they are, their values, life choices, and relationships with others. Full vignette texts are provided in Appendix A.

2.4 | Power Analysis

A power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al. 2007) to determine the adequacy of the sample size for an independent *t*-test with two conditions. The analysis was based on a medium effect size (Cohen's *d* = 0.50), an alpha level of 0.05, and a total sample size of 457 participants. The results indicated that the study had high statistical power ($1 - \beta = 0.9996$), ensuring a very low probability of Type II error.

2.5 | Measures

Unless otherwise stated, all variables were measured using a seven-point Likert scale with higher numbers indicating higher values on a given measure.

2.5.1 | Pre-Test

2.5.1.1 | Psychological Entitlement. The nine items of this scale (PES; Campbell, Goodie, and Foster 2004) form a single index of *Psychological Entitlement* (e.g., "I demand the best because I deserve it," $\alpha = 0.80$).

2.5.2 | Stimulus Processing and Evaluation

2.5.2.1 | Life Scenario Evaluation. The current study developed a novel scale to assess evaluations of life plans across two distinct but theoretically interrelated levels: ideological-value evaluation and interpersonal-relational evaluation. This hierarchical structure draws upon Doise's (1980) framework of sociopsychological analysis, which conceptualizes social phenomena as operating across multiple levels, from macro-level ideological systems to micro-level interpersonal dynamics. The indexes are outlined below: *Ideological-Value Evaluation* (three sentences, e.g., "Person X's values match your values." $\alpha = 0.91$) and *Interpersonal-Relational Evaluation* (three sentences, e.g., "You like person X." $\alpha = 0.90$).

2.5.2.2 | Achievement of Life's Meaning. This scale was constructed for the purposes of the current research study, to explore the extent to which participants evaluated the described person as being happy and having successfully found meaning in life: *Achievement of Life's Meaning* (two sentences, "Person X is happy" and "Person X has found life meaning." $r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$).

2.5.3 | Dependent Variable

2.5.3.1 | Neoliberal Orientation Questionnaire. Three out of four indexes of the Neoliberal Orientation Questionnaire (Girerd et al. 2023) were used. *Individual Self-Regulation* (11 items, e.g., "It is mainly by working on ourselves that we can change the circumstances of our lives." $\alpha = 0.84$) and *Relational Detachment* (six items, e.g., "It is important not to depend on other people." $\alpha = 0.70$) and *Competitiveness* (four items, e.g., "Competition is the best way to encourage us to do our best." $\alpha = 0.81$).

2.5.3.2 | Consistency Norm. The short version of the Consistency Norm Scale (Tsitseli and Prodromitis 2023) was used. The endorsement of each perception was measured with two items: *Positive Perception of Consistency* (e.g., "To be consistent and stable, one needs one's actions to always agree with one's ideas and principles," $r = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), *Negative Perception of Consistency* (e.g., "When one always behaves according to one's ideas and opinions, it is a manifestation of rigidity and inability to adapt to the changing world," $r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$), *Positive Perception of Inconsistency* (e.g., "To behave in a way that does not always agree with one's ideas shows an ability to be flexible and adapt to circumstances," $r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), and *Negative Perception of Inconsistency* (e.g., "When a person's actions are not consistent with his previous actions, that person has an unstable personality," $r = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$).

2.5.3.3 | Future Self-Continuity. Future Self-Continuity Questionnaire was used (FSCQ; Sokol and Serper 2019): *Similarity to Future Self* (four items, e.g., "How similar are you now to what you will be like 10 years from now?" $\alpha = 0.78$), *Vividness of Future Self* (four items, e.g., "How vividly can you imagine what you will look like in 10 years from now?" $\alpha = 0.83$), and *Positive Affect to Future Self* (four items, e.g., "Do you like what you will be like 10 years from now?" $\alpha = 0.88$).

2.5.3.4 | Existential Concerns. Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS; George and Park 2016) was used. The three indexes of this scale were formed as follows: *Purpose* (five items, e.g., "I have aims in my life that are worth striving for." $\alpha = 0.91$), *Comprehension* (five items, e.g., "I know what my life is about," $\alpha = 0.97$), and *Mattering* (five items, e.g., "I am certain that my life is of importance," $\alpha = 0.81$).

2.6 | Baseline Measures

Participants self-reported demographic characteristics (age, gender).

3 | Results

3.1 | Analytical Strategy

Initially, a randomization check was performed concerning psychological entitlement and the two primary demographic variables: gender and age. Subsequently, an analysis was

conducted to assess the mean differences between the two conditions regarding stimulus processing (ideological-value evaluation, relational-interpersonal evaluation, and message validation). Then, the sequential mediating role of ideological-value acceptance and relational-interpersonal acceptance in the relationship between the demographic variables and the message evaluation was tested, by condition. This sequence was theoretically grounded in the notion that individuals process meaning from macro to micro levels—that is, beginning with broader ideological-value congruence and moving toward immediate interpersonal resonance. This conceptualization is consistent with Doise's (1980) levels of analysis, which propose that social psychological phenomena are ranging from ideological and societal frameworks to relational and interpersonal experiences. Finally, a moderated serial mediation analysis was conducted for each condition to explore the relationship between the demographic variables (gender, age) and the dimensions of neoliberalism, the consistency norm, the sense of self-continuity, and specific existential concerns. In this analysis, psychological entitlement acted as the moderator and the dimensions of stimulus processing served as serial mediators.

3.2 | Group Mean Comparisons

A *t*-test for independent samples was conducted to compare the mean scores between the Self-Enhancement and Social Bonding conditions for each of the two dimensions of life scenario evaluation and participants' assessment of successful life meaning finding (see Table 1). The results indicated statistically significant differences between the conditions in both ideological-value evaluation, $t(455) = -21.0$, $p < 0.001$, and relational-interpersonal evaluation, $t(455) = -18.5$, $p < 0.001$, as well as in the evaluation of successful life meaning finding, $t(455) = -17.2$, $p < 0.001$. The Social Bonding condition emerged as the more popular condition, with participants expressing greater acceptance of this life scenario at both ideological and interpersonal levels, evaluating it as the most successful.

3.3 | Serial Mediation Analysis

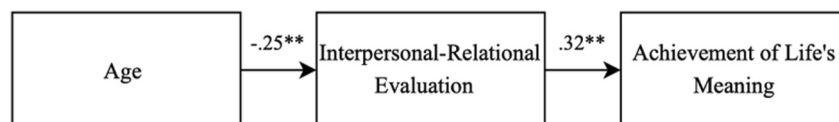
To test the serially mediating role of life scenario evaluation at the ideological-value and interpersonal-relational levels in the relationship between the two main demographic variables (gender and age) and the assessment of successful life meaning finding, a serial mediation analysis was conducted by condition (Self-enhancement, Social Bonding) using the PROCESS Macro (Model 6) for SPSS (Hayes 2018). Percentile-based, bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrap samples. Figures display only significant paths to streamline interpretation, but all paths were tested. This aligns with methodological recommendations for reporting complex models (Hayes 2018). All reported regression weights are unstandardized coefficients based on variables' original metrics. Simple effects were probed at ± 1 standard deviation following the guidelines of Aiken and West (1991). It should be noted that no median splits were employed at any stage of the analyses. In our analyses, gender did not show a significant effect in the Self-Enhancement (SE) condition, and similarly, age did not have a significant effect in the Social Bonding (SB) condition. This suggests demographic influences are context-dependent, varying by activated psychological processes.

Based on the analyses, in the Self-Enhancement condition (see Figure 1), younger participants, compared to older ones, evaluated the described individual as having successfully found life meaning through positive evaluation of the life scenario at the interpersonal and relational level ($b = -0.25$, $p < 0.01$), with the indirect effect of life meaning finding being significant ($b = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$; Indirect Effect = -0.08 , SE = 0.05 , 95% CI [-0.20 , -0.006]).

According to the results, in the Social Bonding condition (see Figure 2), women, through the positive evaluation of the life scenario, first at the ideological-value level ($b = 0.48$, $p < 0.005$), and subsequently at the interpersonal-relational level ($b = 0.73$,

TABLE 1 | Independent samples *t*-test analysis for the dimensions of life scenario evaluation and achievement of life's meaning.

	Condition	N	Mean (SD)	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Ideological-value evaluation	Self-enhancement	211	2.52 (1.34)	0.092	-21.0	455	< 0.001	-1.97
	Social bonding	246	5.12 (1.30)	0.083				
Relational-interpersonal evaluation	Self-enhancement	211	3.07 (1.33)	0.091	-18.5	455	< 0.001	-1.62
	Social bonding	246	5.25 (1.19)	0.076				
Achievement of life's meaning	Self-enhancement	211	2.78 (1.37)	0.094	-17.2	455	< 0.001	-1.74
	Social bonding	246	5.02 (1.39)	0.089				



Note: Levels of the Independent Variable: 1 = 18-40 years old, 2 = 41+ years old
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

FIGURE 1 | Serial mediation analysis for the effect of age on the assessment of successful life meaning finding through the dimensions of life scenario evaluation in the self-enhancement condition (Model 6, Hayes 2018).

$p < 0.0001$), evaluated the described individual as having successfully found life meaning ($b = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$; $IE = 0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.22]).

3.4 | Moderated Serial Mediation Analysis

A moderated serial mediation analysis was conducted for each condition to explore the relationship between the different demographic variables (gender, age) and the dimensions of neoliberalism, the consistency norm, the sense of self-continuity, and specific existential concerns, with psychological entitlement acting as the moderator and the dimensions of stimulus processing as serial mediators using the PROCESS Macro (Model 85) for SPSS (Hayes 2018). Percentile-based, bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrap samples. According to the results, no statistically significant moderated serial mediation was found in either of the two conditions. However, statistically significant effects of gender and age on the dimensions of the dependent variables, based on the levels of psychological entitlement, were found in both the self-enhancement and social bonding conditions. Figures display only significant paths to streamline interpretation, but all paths were tested. This aligns with methodological recommendations for reporting complex models (Hayes 2018). All reported regression weights are unstandardized coefficients based on variables' original metrics. Simple effects were probed at ± 1 standard deviation (Aiken and West 1991). It should be noted that no median splits were employed at any stage of the analyses.

In the self-enhancement condition, statistically significant effects of both primary variables (gender, age) were observed on specific dimensions of self-continuity, different interpretations of the consistency norm, and existential concerns. Conversely,

no effects were evident on the three dimensions of neoliberalism. Specifically, with regard to the effects of gender (see Table 2a), it appeared that men with low psychological entitlement (PE) were more likely to positively perceive the consistency norm, $B = -0.47$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.83, -0.11], while those with high PE were more likely to interpret the consistency norm negatively, $B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.0009$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.99].

Examining the effect of age (see Table 2b), regarding the sense of self-continuity, older participants with low psychological entitlement (PE) appeared to express a comparatively higher sense of similarity to their future self, $B = 0.48$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.86], as well as a greater ability to vividly imagine themselves in the future, $B = 0.69$, $SE = 0.22$, $p < 0.002$, 95% CI [0.24, 1.14]. Furthermore, age in those with high PE increased the understanding of the essence of existence, $B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.0007$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.97] and promoted the negative framing of the consistency norm, $B = 0.41$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.02$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.77].

In the Social Bonding condition, the effects of gender were initially found (see Table 3a) across all three dimensions of neoliberalism. Specifically, women with low psychological entitlement (PE) appeared to adopt both individual self-regulation, $B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.03$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.46], and relational disconnection, $B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.005$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.72], as life choices. Meanwhile, men with low PE were those showing the greatest acceptance of individual competitiveness, $B = -0.40$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.74, -0.07]. Additionally, women with low PE seemed to recognize the greater mattering of existence, $B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < 0.02$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.80].

Regarding the effects of age (see Table 3b), younger participants with high PE were more positively inclined toward their future self, $B = -0.57$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < 0.003$, 95% CI [-0.95, -0.19].

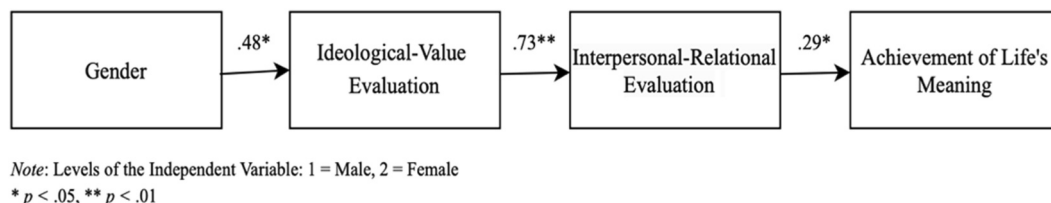


FIGURE 2 | Serial mediation analysis for the effect of age on the assessment of successful life meaning finding through the dimensions of life scenario evaluation in the social bonding condition (Model 6, Hayes 2018).

TABLE 2a | Gender effects on the dimensions of dependent variables based on levels of psychological entitlement in the self-enhancement condition.

X → Y	Psychological entitlement	B	SE	p	95% Confidence intervals
Gender → positive perception of consistency	Low	-0.47	0.18	0.01**	[-0.83, -0.11]
Gender → positive perception of consistency	High	0.02	0.19	0.89	[-0.35, 40]
Gender → negative perception of consistency	Low	-0.17	0.17	0.33	[-0.52, 0.18]
Gender → negative perception of consistency	High	0.62	0.18	0.0009***	[0.26, 0.99]

Note: Levels of the independent variable: 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2b | Age effects on the dimensions of dependent variables based on levels of psychological entitlement in the self-enhancement condition.

X → Y	Psychological entitlement	B	SE	p	95% Confidence intervals
Age → similarity to future self	Low	0.48	0.20	0.01**	[0.09, 0.86]
Age → similarity to future self	High	0.30	0.19	0.13	[−0.08, 0.68]
Age → vividness of future self	Low	0.69	0.22	0.002	[0.24, 1.14]
Age → vividness of future self	High	0.31	0.23	0.17	[−0.14, 0.76]
Age → comprehension	Low	0.31	0.17	0.07	[−0.03, 0.66]
Age → comprehension	High	0.61	0.17	0.0007***	[0.26, 0.97]
Age → negative perception of consistency	Low	0.05	0.18	0.77	[−0.30, 0.41]
Age → negative perception of consistency	High	0.41	0.18	0.02*	[0.04, 0.77]

Note: Levels of the independent variable: 1 = 18–40 years old, 2 = 41+ years old.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3a | Gender effects on the dimensions of dependent variables based on levels of psychological entitlement in the social bonding condition.

X → Y	Psychological entitlement	B	SE	p	95% Confidence intervals
Gender → individual self-regulation	Low	0.24	0.11	0.03*	[0.02, 0.46]
Gender → individual self-regulation	High	0.16	0.11	0.15	[−0.06, 0.38]
Gender → competitiveness	Low	−0.40	0.17	0.01**	[−0.74, −0.07]
Gender → competitiveness	High	−0.01	0.17	0.92	[−0.35, 0.31]
Gender → relational detachment	Low	0.42	0.15	0.005**	[0.12, 0.72]
Gender → relational detachment	High	0.20	0.15	0.19	[−0.10, 0.49]
Gender → mattering	Low	0.43	0.19	0.02*	[0.07, 0.80]
Gender → mattering	High	0.23	0.19	0.22	[−0.14, 0.60]

Note: Levels of the independent variable: 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3b | Age effects on the dimensions of dependent variables based on levels of psychological entitlement in the social bonding condition.

X → Y	Psychological entitlement	B	SE	p	95% Confidence intervals
Age → positive affect to future self	Low	−0.18	0.19	0.35	[−0.56, 0.20]
Age → positive affect to future self	High	−0.57	0.19	0.003**	[−0.95, −0.19]
Age → positive perception of inconsistency	Low	−0.44	0.16	0.006***	[−0.75, −0.12]
Age → positive perception of inconsistency	High	−0.06	0.16	0.68	[−0.37, 0.24]
Age → negative perception of inconsistency	Low	−0.35	0.14	0.01	[−0.63, −0.07]
Age → negative perception of inconsistency	High	0.01	0.14	0.92	[−0.27, 0.29]

Note: Levels of the independent variable: 1 = 18–40 years old, 2 = 41+ years old.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Finally, younger individuals with low PE seemed to favor both the positive, $B = -0.44$, $SE = 0.16$, $p < 0.006$, 95% CI [−0.75, −0.12], and negative, $B = -0.35$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.63, −0.07], interpretation of inconsistency.

4 | Discussion

The present study experimentally manipulated self-enhancement and social bonding as distinct meaning-making

life scenarios to explore how they influence the interplay between psychological entitlement, age, and gender in shaping ideological functioning and existential reflection. Our findings extend current theoretical understandings by showing that these frameworks serve as interpretive lenses rather than neutral constructs through which individuals engage with social structures in distinctly gendered and generationally specific ways.

Preliminary analyses of the comprehensive ideological and value-based evaluation of the depicted lifestyle in each scenario,

in conjunction with its subsequent interpersonal-relational assessment, revealed the pronounced predominance of the social bonding pole. Furthermore, the way participants elaborated the experimental stimuli, as influenced by gender and age, revealed cognitive patterns that illustrate how each scenario is interpreted and evaluated through both ideological and relational dimensions.

The interpretation of the self-enhancement scenario is influenced by age, with younger participants demonstrating a stronger commitment to the principles of autonomy and self-reliance, a finding that is, consistent with existing literature (Grouden and Jose 2014; Steger et al. 2009). The potentially adverse consequences of this scenario, as emphasized in the comparative analysis of popularity, are regarded as essential prerequisites for individual advancement and development. This resulted in a deficiency of ideological acceptance and the validation of successful meaning-making primarily through positive interpersonal assessments. In contrast, the social bonding scenario, which typically involves negotiations around gender roles and identities, revealed gender as the key variable shaping the interpretation of this pattern. As expected, women, through both ideological-value and relational validation of the message, provided a more positive evaluation of meaning-making centered on relationality (e.g., Grouden and Jose 2014; Schnell 2009). This suggests how demographic influences are context-dependent, manifesting through the psychological processes most salient to the scenario at hand.

The dependent variables of the study were meticulously chosen to encompass both ideological functioning and the existential dimensions of selfhood, reflecting the persistent tension between individual autonomy and societal expectations in the construction of the self. Within this theoretical framework, neoliberal ideology—defined by self-regulation, competitiveness, and relational disengagement—manifested in distinct ways across meaning-making conditions. It is noteworthy that under the self-enhancement condition, these ideological tenets appeared to be normalized, suggesting their internalization as part of a prevailing individualistic narrative. However, in social bonding context, a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics emerged. Specifically, low-entitled women engaged with the scenario in a self-reflective way, potentially reconciling relational ideals with subtle assertions of distinctiveness. This response aligns with perspectives that view neoliberalism not just as an external structure but as an adaptive, subjective logic employed to navigate personal and social constraints (Gill 2007; Girerd et al. 2023). In contrast, men with low sense of entitlement responded to secure bonding scenarios with enhanced competitiveness, thereby reinforcing traditional masculine norms (Gill 2007; Rottenberg 2014). This gendered bifurcation, under minimal entitlement conditions, reveals how neoliberal subjectivity is differentially appropriated—as protective armor for women versus performative validation for men.

The sense of self-continuity—a central concern in theories of identity development and temporal self-concept—was closely associated with age, aligning with prior research (Rutt and Löckenhoff 2016; Löckenhoff and Rutt 2017). Individuals younger and higher in psychological entitlement exhibited elevated levels of intra-individual confidence, a disposition that

was further reinforced by the relational security imparted by the social bonding condition. This perception of continuity has been suggested to foster reflective coherence across time, thereby potentially contributing to the stabilization of younger individuals' self-concepts within secure relational contexts. In contrast, older individuals with lower entitlement demonstrated a future-oriented identification within the self-enhancement condition. This finding suggests a compensatory mechanism in which personal continuity is achieved through alignment with aspirational self-projects. Taken together, these findings illustrate how different age groups draw on distinct meaning-making strategies to construct self-continuity—either through interpersonal grounding or future-directed rationalization—while introducing entitlement as a novel moderating variable in aging identity processes.

The experience of existential meaning—defined here as a sense of mattering, purpose, and comprehension of one's existence—was shaped in different ways by the interplay of age, gender, and psychological entitlement within each meaning-making framework. In the context of self-enhancement, older participants who reported high entitlement showed stronger existential clarity, indicative of a self-assured worldview that may serve as a buffer against ontological uncertainty. This finding aligns with theories of aging and self-concept stability, which propose that accumulated life experience fosters a coherent sense of meaning (e.g., Steger et al. 2009). Conversely, in the context of social bonding, women with low entitlement derived existential significance primarily through relational connections. This finding is consistent with feminist existential frameworks (e.g., Jost 2020), which emphasize the centrality of relationality to women's self-conception. These patterns support theoretical distinctions between agentic and communal sources of existential affirmation. They also suggest that entitlement acts as a moderating mechanism through which individuals either reinforce self-contained security or seek purpose in relational connections.

Regarding consistency as a socio-psychological concept, social value, and practice, effects were observed across all four dimensions. Specifically, women with a high sense of psychological entitlement appeared to view consistency negatively when faced with the challenge of individual progress and development (self-enhancement condition), aligning with neoliberal pressures that associate stability with constraint. In turn, men with low entitlement appeared to value consistency as essential to self-development. Older adults with high entitlement favored inconsistency (“anything goes”), reflecting generational adaptation to postmodern fluidity. On the other hand, within the social bonding framework, young individuals with high psychological entitlement resisted consistency, perhaps viewing it as incompatible with autonomy in relational contexts. Meanwhile, those with lower entitlement expressed ambivalence, embracing both the constraints and freedoms of inconsistency. This mirrors the concept of the “liquid self” in late modernity (Bauman 2005), in which adaptability serves as a survival strategy and a source of existential tension. This ambiguity suggests a generational negotiation with the concept of commitment, oscillating between relational openness and opportunistic flexibility. These findings reveal that consistency is not merely a personal trait but also a culturally charged value influenced by ideological context and entitlement orientation.

The findings portray social bonding as a complex and ambivalent condition, rather than a straightforward ideal. Although social bonding is generally considered desirable and meaningful, responses revealed tension regarding the commitment it requires, particularly in terms of consistency and self-regulation. This ambivalence emerged across three key dimensions: consistency, as individuals sought relational stability while resisting rigid norms; continuity, marked by struggles to maintain lasting connections amidst increasingly fluid self-concepts; and self-regulation, characterized by competing needs for intimacy and independence.

In stark contrast, the self-enhancement condition reconfigured identity as an optimization project, redefining consistency and structure as double-edged tools that are valuable for self-mastery yet potentially limiting for personal reinvention. This dynamic reflects the core contradiction of neoliberalism, where ideological values such as autonomy and competitiveness act as both liberating forces and systemic barriers, depending on one's social status (Gill 2007; Rottenberg 2014). These findings highlight how contemporary meaning-making occurs within what we might call a “dialectic of constraint,” where the frameworks that promise liberation impose their own limitations. This reveals how individuals navigate the promises and burdens of social ideals.

Methodologically, this research advances beyond correlational approaches by demonstrating through experimentation how meaning-making frameworks actively construct, rather than merely reflect, ideological outcomes. Identifying psychological entitlement as a consistent moderator across analyses provides a novel means of understanding individual differences in ideological susceptibility. By operationalizing self-enhancement and social bonding as life choices, the study reveals that abstract ideals, such as autonomy and relationality, are not only personal values, but also are embedded within and reinforce broader ideological structures. These findings challenge the reductive individualism/collectivism framework, revealing that meaning making is a contested terrain where social structures are absorbed, reinterpreted, and experienced at the macro and micro levels. The observed age- and gender-based asymmetries in neoliberal adaptation highlight its uneven psychological impact, offering critical insights for psychology, social policy, and therapeutic practice.

4.1 | Potential Practical Implications

The examination of key demographic variables through the lens of socio-psychological theory contributes meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on interdisciplinarity within psychology. This approach highlights the practical applicability of a socio-psychological perspective both within therapeutic contexts and in broader societal domains, thereby expanding the scope and relevance of psychological inquiry. It establishes a basis for applied research and the development of intervention strategies across diverse fields such as counseling, education, and social policy. In accordance with the interdisciplinary emphasis on translating theoretical insights into practice, the initial stages of psychotherapeutic engagement—particularly the client's self-

presentation during history-taking—can be effectively analyzed through the analytical framework proposed in this study.

4.2 | Limitations and Future Directions

While the present study focuses on several meaningful antecedents by offering a contextually rich investigation of the role of meaning-making processes—particularly the interplay between psychological entitlement, age, and gender—some limitations inherent in our research are acknowledged. First, given that the study was conducted within a single-country context (Greece), future research would benefit from cross-cultural comparisons to examine the influence of cultural factors on meaning-making processes. Nonetheless, we contend that our findings are not strictly culture- or country-specific, as the constructs we investigated (e.g., neoliberalism, future self-continuity) are not inherent to any particular cultural or national context.

In light of the multifaceted character of the present research, future experimental designs may consider expanding the operationalization of the four levels by incorporating dependent variables related to both individual and social life choices (e.g., self-regulation, coping strategies) as well as specific relational practices. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to examine how varying framing conditions, such as individual withdrawal versus active participation, might influence the processing of meaning-making poles. In the context of all future investigations, it is imperative that a fundamental objective be to further explore the intricate relationship between the individual and society. This exploration should encompass both the interpersonal dynamics and the internalized reproduction or critical resistance to social order.

4.3 | Conclusion

This study provides a new perspective on meaning-making as a dynamic negotiation between personal agency and structural forces. Rather than functioning as a singular ideological system, neoliberal subjectivity emerges as a contested and malleable resource, strategically appropriated by marginalized groups to navigate and resist dominant norms. Generational differences in temporal self-conception further highlight how late capitalism distributes existential security unevenly, making younger individuals particularly susceptible to future-related concerns. Meanwhile, gendered patterns of meaning-making emerge not as reflections of innate psychological differences but as performative adaptations to the intersecting constraints of patriarchal and capitalist systems. The present experimental approach offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating how abstract social forces are internalized and become lived reality. This conceptual framework possesses critical implications for the development of interventions that engage both subjective meaning and broader socio-structural realities. In essence, we are proposing a reorientation of identity in late modernity—not as a stable personal attribute, but rather as an ongoing, adaptive, and frequently ambivalent engagement with complex social

structures. These findings reposition meaning making as a politically infused, psychologically grounded, and socially embedded process, offering a robust lens for understanding how individuals construct purpose and coherence in conditions of systemic uncertainty.

Author Contributions

Antonia Tsitseli: conceptualization, methodology, data analysis and interpretation, writing – original draft. **Gerasimos Prodromitis:** conceptualization, supervision, writing – review and editing.

Ethics Statement

The study reported in this article received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the author's university. The study is original and have been performed according to APA ethical standards for the treatment of the human subjects.

Consent

We confirm that this research has been conducted with full adherence to ethical guidelines. Participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study before providing their voluntary consent. All individuals involved in this research participated willingly and had the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study in accordance with ethical standards.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Appendix A: Experimental Vignettes

Below are the full texts of the experimental vignettes used in the study.

Experimental Condition I—Self-Enhancement

Person X works as an employee for a private company that pays a decent wage. Although the work environment is hostile and competitive, and management often seems distant and unfair, there are plenty of opportunities for career growth, which Person X values above all things. Person X has a small social network consisting of a few relatives and friends with whom they have mostly occasional, formal contact. Most of Person X's free time is spent at work, to increase productivity. Person X enjoys being independent and values sexual satisfaction more than

building deep personal relationships. For Person X, the meaning of life revolves around personal achievement and growth, career advancement, and having fun.

Experimental Condition II—Social Bonding

Person X works as an employee for a private company that pays a decent wage. Although there are limited opportunities for career development, the positive and cooperative working environment among colleagues and the fair and supportive approach adopted by management are what Person X values above all things. Person X has an extensive social network of close relatives and good friends, with whom they share a warm relationship and communicate on a daily basis. Most of Person X's free time is spent doing activities with beloved people and being involved in community activities. Person X shows gratitude toward loved ones and feels a sense of fulfillment with what has been accomplished. For Person X, the meaning of life revolves around making meaningful connections, sharing moments, and giving back to others.