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Where Emerging Adults in the United States Find Meaning in Life

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We explored the most important sources of meaning among emerging adults and whether time spent on social media had an effect on life meaning dimensions. Results showed that the majority of emerging adults mentioned family and friends when asked in an open-ended question about things that make their life meaningful.

Keywords: meaning in life, purpose in life, search for meaning, emerging adulthood, social media

The term *emerging adulthood* describes the period of life between ages 18 and 29 years (Arnett et al., 2014). Although meaning in life and purpose in life have been studied extensively at various developmental stages, their presence among emerging adults has been gaining increasing attention (Hill et al., 2016; Lavigne et al., 2013; Mayseless & Keren, 2014; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016; Vela et al., 2015). Previous research has found that finding meaning in life is one of the main features of emerging adulthood (Steger et al., 2009). In Western industrialized countries, finding meaning in life is considered an important developmental task in emerging adulthood (García-Alandete et al., 2018; Mayseless & Keren, 2014). In addition, meaning and purpose in life have been found to predict well-being at various developmental stages across the life span (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016; Steger, 2009), including emerging adulthood (Hill et al., 2016). Although finding meaning in life may be especially important during emerging adulthood, previous research has indicated that people might spend a lot of time and energy on social media if they cannot find purpose in life (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). In the present study, we aimed to shed light on the association between the time spent on social media and the presence of meaning in life among emerging adults.

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The words "purpose" and "meaning" are strongly correlated and often used interchangeably (George & Park, 2013; Hooker et al., 2018; Martela & Steger, 2016; Reker & Peacock, 1981). *Meaning in life* is about goal directedness or purposefulness (Ryff & Singer, 1998), whereas *purpose in life* is associated with "future-oriented aims and goals that give direction to life" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). Because meaning in life and purpose in life do not represent fundamentally different ways of understanding what we mean by the meaning of life, we use these two terms to refer to a general sense of meaning in life. However, according to Frankl (1946/2006), defining the meaning of life in a general sense is not an easy task because "the meaning of life differs from man to man, and from moment to moment" (p. 108). Bundick (2011) suggested that

> the question has little to do with what the purpose of life is; instead, the focus is more on what each person understands the purpose of his or her own life to be and how this understanding and the pursuit of one's purpose affect and are affected by other psychological and behavioral constructs. (p. 89)

It is important to understand that this study focuses on the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment rather than defining life's meaning in a more general way (Frankl, 1946/2006). Not only does the meaning of life differ from one person to another, but people may have different life purposes at each stage of life. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore sources of meaning during emerging adulthood.

Where do emerging adults find meaning in their life? According to Frankl (1946/2006), life is primarily a quest for meaning, and people find meaning through different sources, such as through love and work (see Mayseless & Keren, 2014). Emerging adulthood is described as a period of exploration (Arnett, 2000) during which emerging adults search for what would bring them meaning in life. The search for meaning is an active and ongoing process (Steger, 2013), and research indicates that experiencing meaning in life is an important contributor to well-being (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Mayseless & Keren, 2014; Park et al., 2010). Emerging adults may face obstacles in their efforts to achieve a meaningful life because of challenges related to their career development due to a lack of enduring role obligation and a highly unstable job market (Arnett, 2000; Mayseless & Keren, 2014). Similarly, emerging adults may have difficulty progressing into satisfying relationships (love) because of the prevalence of alternative temporary romantic relationships (e.g., cohabitation, hookups; see Berger, 2017; Cohen et al., 2003; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Meaning in life reflects a variety of factors that may vary based on one's developmental stage.

According to the Pew Research Center (2018a), adults under age 30 are more likely to experience meaning in life than older adults. The source of meaning also was found to differ based on age. Adults under age 30 are more

likely to find meaning in education and learning and less likely to find meaning in religion compared with older adults. Whereas younger and older adults can find meaning in different things, there are substantial social media usage differences, and research indicates that social media usage influences meaning or purpose in life (see Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). The growth of social media usage among emerging adults opens up new opportunities for gaining insight into meaning in life. Therefore, we aimed to investigate younger adults' social media usage (Perrin & Anderson, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018a) in relation to meaning in life.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Social media plays an integral role in the lives of many emerging adults in the 21st century. In the United States, about seven of 10 emerging adults use social media for various reasons, such as connecting with one another, engaging with news content, sharing information, and entertaining themselves (Perrin & Anderson, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018a). In addition, social media engagement provides some opportunities for identity formation, social bonding, connections, communication, and enhanced self-esteem (Bekalu et al., 2019; Ellison et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2012). However, a growing body of research suggests there is a negative relationship between social media use and well-being among young adults (Kross et al., 2013; Pantic, 2014; Primack et al., 2017; Shakya & Christakis, 2017). Similarly, studies have found that frequent social media use is associated with lower levels of life satisfaction (Stieger, 2019; Tromholt, 2016). These findings indicate that social media affects emerging adults in multiple ways.

Because of the diverse findings and the paucity of existing literature, it may be useful to better understand the relationship between *the time spent* on social media and the presence of or search for meaning of life during emerging adulthood given the absence of research that explores the relation between social media usage and the importance of meaning and purpose (Bundick, 2011; García-Alandete et al., 2018; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Mayseless & Keren, 2014; Steger et al., 2009) during an especially salient period of life for emerging adults. There is some research related to purpose and social media. For example, Burrow and Rainone (2017) found a negative relationship between higher levels of purpose and sensitivity to social media feedback, which provided insights into the relationship between social media usage and purpose in life. In another study, Schippers and Ziegler (2019) indicated that people without purpose in life are more likely to spend time and energy on social media. However, the relation between the time spent on social media and meaning in life has not been explored. The present study was designed to determine whether the time spent on social media affects meaning in life dimensions among emerging adults and to explore the sources of meaning for emerging adults. Therefore, the present study addressed the following two research questions:

> *Research Question 1*: Is there a relation between the amount of time spent on social media and the search for meaning in life, presence of meaning in life, and sense of purpose in life among emerging adults?
>
> *Research Question 2*: Where do emerging adults find meaning in life?

METHOD

In this mixed-methods study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from students at a regional public university in a rural area of the midwestern United States. Although survey design was used as the main avenue for collecting data, the qualitative data were gathered from a single open-ended response item within the survey. Qualtrics, an online survey software system (https://qualtrics.com), was used to create an electronic version of the survey, which contained the demographic form, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006), and the Sense of Purpose in Life, a subscale of Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989). Demographic items included age, gender, level of education, race, and average time spent on social media daily. Participants were asked to describe the three most meaningful things in their lives.

Participants

The population for this study included students currently enrolled in a university in the U.S. Midwest. In spring 2019, both undergraduate and graduate students were invited to complete an online survey in return for a chance to win a $50 gift certificate. Data were collected from 366 students who ranged in age from 18 to 29 years. Potential participants were recruited using convenience sampling methods and via a forwarded email link to the online survey. Also, we used the snowball method to recruit faculty colleagues to forward the recruitment email to their students who met the study criteria. The only requirement for participation was that respondents must be between 18 and 29 years old, the defined age range for the period of emerging adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014). As shown in Table 1, most of the participants were female (66.4%) and undergraduates (88.5%). The mean age of participants was 20.8 years (*SD* = 2.8), with the majority (91.4%) between ages 18 and 24.

Measures

As mentioned, in this study we used the MLQ (Steger et al., 2006) and the Sense of Purpose in Life subscale of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989). An online survey that included traditional measures of meaning and purpose in life was administered. Participants rated the 10 items of the MLQ (Steger et al., 2006) and seven items of the Sense of Purpose in Life on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The MLQ measures the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. Whereas the presence of meaning in life refers to the degree to which individuals

TABLE 1

Demographic Data of the Study Population

Demographic	*n*	%
Age		
18–24 years	335	91.4
25–29 years	31	8.6
Level of education		
Undergraduate	324	88.5
Graduate	42	11.5
Gender[a]		
Female	243	66.4
Male	121	33.1

Note. N = 366.
[a]Two respondents chose "prefer not to answer" to this question.

perceive their lives as significant and meaningful, the search for meaning in life refers to the degree to which people are engaged in a search for meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006). The sense of purpose in life refers to the extent to which respondents were oriented toward their future and generally goal directed. Sample items include "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose" (the presence of meaning in life), "I am always looking to find my life's purpose" (the search for meaning in life), and "I do not have a good sense of what it is I am trying to accomplish in life" (the sense of purpose in life).

The internal consistency of the three dimensions was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Cronbach's alpha indicated that each of the two dimensions assessed by the MLQ demonstrated relatively high internal consistency (search for meaning in life, $\alpha = .89$; presence of meaning in life, $\alpha = .92$). The Cronbach's alpha for the sense of purpose in life was $\alpha = .75$, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The validity of the Sense of Purpose in Life subscale has been supported in several studies (Ryff, 1989, 1995; Ryff et al., 1994; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008), and the validity of the MLQ has been supported within meaning in life research (Steger at al., 2006; Steger & Kashdan, 2007). For example, in a recent study (Naghiyaee et al., 2020), the confirmatory factor analysis supported the original two-factor model of the MLQ, comprised of the presence of meaning (five items) and the search for meaning (five items). In another study (Pezirkianidis et al., 2016), the MLQ factorial structure was examined through exploratory factor analysis. Overall, the exploratory factor analysis revealed two principal factors matching the original validation's factorial structure, and all items had good psychometric properties.

Data Analyses

We analyzed the results using SPSS (Version 24). Frequencies, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and a manual method of coding were used. A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the relation between time spent

on social media (0–60 minutes, 1–2 hours, and more than 2 hours) and the three dimensions of life meaning (the presence of meaning in life, the search for meaning in life, and the sense of purpose in life).

To answer the second research question, we placed an open-ended question near the end of the survey. This question allowed emerging adults to describe the sources of meaning in their lives. Participants were asked to limit their responses to one or two words. Of the 366 participants, only seven participants chose not to provide an answer to this open-ended question. To identify the themes within the open-ended responses, we coded the responses manually. We used categories from the Pew Research Center (2018b). The Appendix includes a list of keywords we used as indicators of each specific theme. For example, participants' responses were coded as having mentioned "faith and spirituality" if they included the words "God," "faith," "Christianity," or "Jesus." The most frequently reported themes were family, friends, faith or spirituality, education/career, activities/hobbies, contributing to community/society, happiness, and health. The least reported responses were grouped into a single "other" category.

RESULTS

The scores from the three measures were used to answer Research Question 1. Participants were asked to rate how much meaning they draw from each of the 17 possible sources for the three measures. We used the scores from the presence of meaning in life, search for meaning in life, and sense of purpose in life dimensions, and the time spent on social media, to address this research question. Participants were classified into three groups based on the time spent on social media: 0–60 minutes per day ($n = 95$), between 1 and 2 hours per day ($n = 115$), and more than 2 hours per day ($n = 156$). Before the statistical analyses, it was important to check the following assumptions in addition to the populations having a common variance and each group being drawn from a normally distributed population. First, Levene's test revealed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met for the search for meaning in life ($p = .129$) and the sense of purpose in life ($p = .292$). However, Levene's test showed that the variances in the presence of meaning in life were not equal, $F(2, 362) = 4.68$, $p = .010$, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity variance was not met. On the other hand, the test for normality—examining standardized skewness and the Shapiro-Wilks test—indicated all three of the meaning in life scores were statistically nonnormal ($p < .05$ for each). Because ANOVAs are generally regarded as very robust to violate the normality assumption, and because transforming nonnormal variables makes their interpretation more difficult, the scores were not transformed.

As shown in Table 2, the group means were statistically significantly different in their levels of search for meaning in life, $F(2, 361) = 6.51$, $p = .02$. However, the group means were not statistically different for the presence of meaning in life, $F(2, 362) = 4.83$, $p = .08$, or for the sense of purpose in life,

TABLE 2

One-Way Analysis of Variance for the Meaning in Life Dimensions

Dimension	SS	df	MS	F	p
Presence of meaning in life				4.83	.08
Between groups	15.20	2	7.60		
Within groups	569.23	362	1.57		
Total	584.42	364			
Search for meaning in life				6.51	.02
Between groups	20.49	2	10.25		
Within groups	567.96	361	1.57		
Total	588.45	363			
Sense of purpose in life				2.39	.93
Between groups	3.49	2	1.74		
Within groups	264.89	363	0.73		
Total	268.38	365			

Note. SS = sum of squares; *MS* = mean squares.

$F(2, 363) = 2.39$, $p = .93$. Tukey's post hoc tests were conducted to test for group mean differences in each pairwise comparison in their levels of search for meaning in life. These analyses revealed that the mean difference between students who spent between 0 and 60 minutes ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.36$) and students who spent more than 2 hours per day ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.18$) was statistically significant ($p = .02$). However, no other group differences were statistically significant.

The analyses reported here were based on the participants who completed the open-ended question, which asked participants to list the three highest sources of meaning in their lives. Among the key findings from the survey was that the family (83.8%) was the most frequently reported source of meaning in life for emerging adults, followed by friends (57.4%). Education, learning, and career (40.9%) were the third most frequently reported source of meaning. The fourth most frequently reported source of meaning was faith/spirituality, with nearly a third (32.9%) noting these in their responses. Additional sources of meaning included activities and hobbies (20.1%) and contributing to community/society (11.7%). Sources of meaning reported by fewer than 10% of the respondents included happiness, health, pets, financial security, and freedom, among others (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

This study focused on emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage in which achieving life meaning is an important developmental task (García-Alandete et al., 2018; Mayseless & Keren, 2014). We predicted that the time spent on social media would affect multiple dimensions of life meaning for emerging adults. The study's findings suggest that emerging adults who spend more time on social media have higher levels of the search for meaning than those who spend less time on social media. More specifically, in our study, emerging adults who spent more than 2 hours per day were more likely to experience
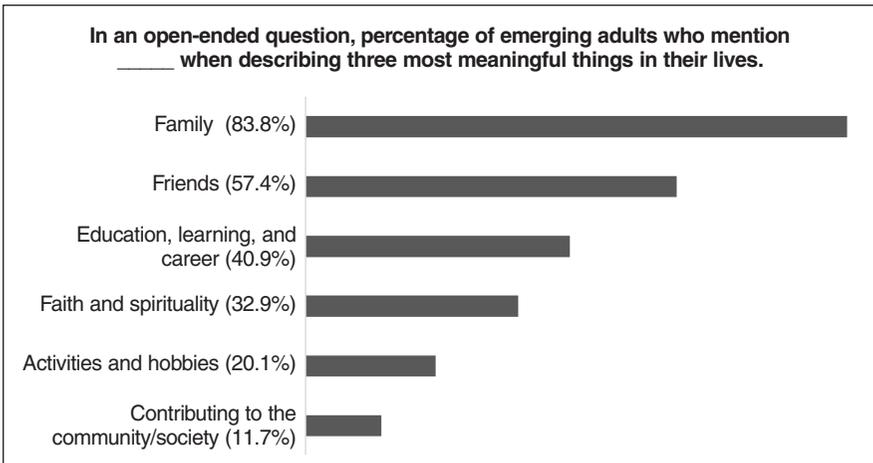
FIGURE 1

Participants' Main Sources of Meaning

search for meaning than those who spent between 0 and 60 minutes per day on social media. Our findings also showed that the time spent on social media did not affect the presence of meaning in life. In other words, frequent use of social media is not a strong predictor of the presence of meaning in life during emerging adulthood. These results are limited, but they are suggestive that future research should continue to address whether daily social media duration is indicative of the presence of meaning in life. The findings also suggest that the time spent on social media does not affect the sense of purpose in life. We acknowledge that the current study did not conceptualize the word "purpose" but used a rather simple implication of purpose and defined it as a dimension of meaning in life. Future studies might test whether the sense of purpose in life has different implications than searching for meaning and presence of meaning in life, especially in the context of emerging adulthood.

Regarding Research Question 2, the present study found that family was the most popular source of meaning for emerging adults. This finding is consistent with the Pew Research Center (2018a) report showing that family is the key source of meaning and fulfillment for many people. The present study also indicated that friends were the second most frequently mentioned source of meaning for emerging adults. Given the many transitions (e.g., education, romantic relationships) that emerging adults typically experience, it is not surprising that our participants cited friends as an important source of meaning in life. Although friends are a vital source of support for emerging adults (Barry et al., 2016; Berger, 2017), it is also clear that they provide a significant source of meaning as well. In the present study, emerging adults also found meaning in education, learning, and career. This finding may be particularly attributable to

the participants' student status and is consistent with the Pew Research Center's finding that adults under age 30 are more likely to find meaning in education and learning compared with older adults.

According to the Pew Research Center (2018a), only one in 10 U.S. adults under age 30 mention religion as a source of meaning. Surprisingly, in the current study, nearly a quarter of emerging adults found meaning in religion. This might be due to the geographical location of our study, as our participants resided in a small rural area, and previous studies have suggested that rural Americans are slightly more religious than nonrural Americans (Dillon & Savage, 2006; Peach, 2003). One in five emerging adults in our study noted that they found meaning in their activities and hobbies. This finding seems to provide additional support for the findings of Celen-Demirtas et al. (2015), who suggested that spending time in enjoyable leisure activities can have positive effects for well-being during emerging adulthood. Lastly, contributing to the community/society—noted by 10% of our participants—was somewhat more frequently mentioned than health and financial security. This likely reflects the tendency for college students to spend a significant amount of time in social activities while being less concerned about health issues because of their age and life stage.

Interestingly, in contrast to individuals 30 years and older (Arnett, 2014), our sample of emerging adults did not consider financial security and money as significant sources of meaning or purpose. The emerging adults in our study mentioned doing good and making a difference more than they mentioned money. One possible explanation for this may be that emerging adults do not focus on financial security because they have fewer obligations and are financially dependent on their parents during their college years (Sorgente & Lanz, 2017). In summary, this study's findings provide insights into the sources of meaning among emerging adults and the effect of time spent on social media on meaning in life.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides a glimpse into where emerging adults find meaning in life and whether the time spent on social media is related to the search for meaning, the presence of meaning, and the sense of purpose in life. The overall conclusion is that family and friends appear paramount as sources of meaning in life during emerging adulthood. The field of counseling can benefit from this study because it confirms the value of social support systems as a source of meaning for individuals in this life stage. Counselors are encouraged to assess for adequate social support, both from family and friends, and to help clients develop skills to strengthen their support systems if they are inadequate for client needs. Counselors can help clients identify ways to integrate support from a variety of support systems as emerging adults seek to build a meaningful life and find purpose. During periods of required social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic, clients can be encouraged to connect virtually with family

and friends across generations. For clients who struggle with connecting with family or friends, determining what other aspects of their life (e.g., learning, religion, engaging with activities/hobbies) are meaningful to them can be an important step toward finding meaning in life.

This study also investigated whether the amount of time spent on social media is related to meaning in life. Professionals who work with the emerging adult population should pay attention to how social media use influences the search for and presence of meaning in life. The current study represents a starting point in this promising line of inquiry. Future investigation is encouraged as a path toward understanding emerging adults' social media use from a broader perspective by using a more specific data collection method and a more refined research design. For example, in addition to examining the time spent on social media, future researchers could adopt a more specific approach to explore whether different social media platforms (e.g., Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter) are associated with the search for meaning and the presence of meaning in life among emerging adults. The present study has provided some crucial insights into the sources of meaning for emerging adults and how social media use can affect meaning in life.

One major limitation of this study is the use of college students as a homogeneous sample of emerging adults. College students do not necessarily represent the emerging adult population who do not go to college. Furthermore, college samples are likely to be disproportionately female and younger, as was the case in the present study (most of our participants were between ages 18 and 24). Because the present sample was not nationally representative, the results should be viewed as tentative. Therefore, the nature of the sample can limit the generalization that can be drawn. An important step could be to replicate findings with gender- and age-balanced samples.

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APPENDIX

Theme Identification

This Appendix shows the topics/themes analyzed and specific phrases or actual words used to determine whether a particular response mentioned each topic or theme. Although a total of six topics or themes were analyzed, a few themes (e.g., happiness, health, financial stability, pets) within the category of "other" were not included in the study because of their low frequency compared with the six main topics or themes. In creating the themes within open-ended responses, we relied on the Pew Research Center (2018b) categorization.

1. **Family** (all references)
   Family, mother, mom, father, sibling, brother, sister, niece, nephew, dad, aunt, uncle, elderly parent, sister law, husband, wife, marriage, married, partner, spouse, girlfriend, boyfriend, romantic, sex, romance, fiancé, child, children, kid, grandchild, son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, baby, born, adopted, parenting, grandbabies, pregnant, offspring, grandpa, grandma, grandbaby, stepson, stepdaughter, girls, stepchild, grandchildren, boys, kids, stepkid, stepchildren, grandkid

2. **Friends** (all references)
   Friend, friendship, neighbor, colleague, coworker, relationship(s), loved one, neighbors, loved ones

3. **Faith and spirituality** (all references)
   Spiritual, spiritually, meditation, mindfulness, reflection, mindful, meditate, spiritual life, God, faith, Jesus, Christ, lord, Christian, belief, religion, religious, savior, Bible, heaven, worship, Catholic, creator, Christianity, Jehovah, higher power, Allah, Buddhist, holy, Muslim, Torah, Holy Spirit, Mormon, Hindu, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism

4. **Education, learning, and career** (all references)
   School, college, learning, education, learn, degree, knowledge, study, graduate, university, science, intellectually, new experience, intellectual, research, wisdom, educated, curiosity, graduated, curious, academic, trying new, grad, experiencing new, philosophy, graduation, mind active, PhD, experience new, literature, a new hobby, try new, investigating, academia, new hobbies, new experiences, studies, educations, better understand, work, job, working, career, business, company, professional, employed, profession, employment, employee, professionally, internship

5. **Activities and hobbies** (all references)
   Activity, hobby, fun, read, reading, music, art, book, play, creative, playing, watch, write, writing, writer, practice, passion, skill, game, movie, leisure, leisure time, golf, cook, cooking, sport, television, tv, relax, relaxing, relaxation, artist, listening, wine, craft, crafting, library, paint, painting, sporting, tennis, knitting, creative outlet, piano, band, performing, concert, sew, creativity, puzzle, sing, dance, dancing, musical, soccer, recreation, entertainment, play game, museum, musician, video, guitar, film, opera, beer, pastime, literature, football, experimenting, draw, compose, hockey, baseball, netflix, basketball, banjo, artistic, having fun, saxophone, unwind, hang out, designing, sculpt, sculpture, shows, drums, play instrument, jam, interest, chill, hobbies, violin, pasttime, song, travel, traveling, vacation, trip, adventure, visiting, new place, explore world, overseas, nature, garden, gardening, outdoor, natural, yard, park, mountain, hike, hiking, wood, camp, camping, beach, farm, fishing, bike, biking, boat, hunting, enjoy nature, bird, national park, work outside, ski, skiing, landscape, forest, sunshine, daylight, sunlight, climbing, exercise, walking, running, gym, fitness, yoga, diet, swim, swimming, healthy fit, cycling, aerobic, better shape, lift weight, lose weight, work out, crossfit, jog, jogging

6. **Contributing to community/society/doing good/making a difference** (all references)
   Volunteer, volunteering, helping others, helping community, help world, society, contribute, contribution, difference, make difference, world better, better world, better place, make world, charity, positive difference, serve others, serve people, serve humanity, serve community, non profit, positive impact, serving community, nonprofit, activism, care others, social justice, donating, serving humanity, habitat humanity, humanity benefit, benefit humanity, giving back, attend, organization, participate, club, team, membership, communities

(Continued)

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APPENDIX (*Continued*)

Theme Identification

7. Other common themes (lower frequency)
Health, happiness, pets, dog, cat, money, financial security/stability, drugs, sobriety, honesty, freedom, peace

Note. From Pew Research Center (2018b).