



# Exploring the Relationship between Negative Life Events, Resilience and Self-Transcendence among Youth in Hong Kong

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the relationship between negative life events, resilience, and self-transcendence, as well as the moderating effect of self-transcendence on the impact of negative life events on resilience. The questionnaire was distributed to youth aged 18-24 through the online platform Qualtrics from December 2024 to March 2025. One hundred seventy-nine samples were collected. There were 60.3% of males and 39.7% of females. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 24, with a mean age of 21.37. Self-transcendence plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between negative life events and resilience. Negative life events will not impact the resilience of youth with moderate to high levels of self-transcendence, indicating a protective role of self-transcendence. This study found that negative life events are negatively related to resilience for respondents with low levels of self-transcendence. However, their relationships are not significant for those with medium or high levels of self-transcendence. Social workers should promote personalised, meaning-focused interventions to strengthen youth resilience in Hong Kong.

**Keywords.** Negative Life Events, Resilience, Self-Transcendence, Youth.

## 1 Introduction

Youth is a critical period of transition from childhood to adulthood, marked by rapid physical, psychological, and social changes that significantly influence personality, behaviour, and future health (Solans et al., 2008). Youth often face adverse life events such as interpersonal conflicts and academic pressures, which are known risk factors that can adversely affect their development (Liu et al., 2019). Negative life events (NLEs) are significant, often unexpected, stress-inducing occurrences that disrupt an individual's normal psychological or social functioning. These events include, but are not limited to, experiences such as family conflict, academic failure, serious illness, bereavement, financial hardship, and interpersonal problems. These challenges impact various psychological and social outcomes, making youths' mental health vulnerable to multiple influences. NLEs has been found to hinder emotional regulation, academic performance, and social relationships, thereby playing a critical role in shaping long-term mental health outcomes (Compas et al., 2017).

Negative life events can reduce individual resilience, which is a critical personal quality that enables individuals to cope and even thrive when faced with adversity (Tang et al., 2022). Resilient individuals often display optimism, effective coping strategies, and mental hardiness, which help them maintain better mental and physical health (Tang et al., 2022). The mechanisms underlying resilience involve several key components, including emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and social support. Emotional regulation enables individuals to manage distressing emotions in a way that doesn't impair their functioning, while cognitive flexibility allows them to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth (Bornstein et al., 2013). A fundamental aspect of resilience is a sense of hope and confidence in the future, which bolsters an individual's capacity to overcome difficulties (Garbarino, 2011). Deficits in resilience may affect the youth's well-being.

Self-transcendence is one of the internal resources, which is the inner capacity that enables people to find new purpose and meaning in life and is positively related to resilience (Er et al., 2022). It often entails a shift in focus from self-centredness to a broader perspective that encompasses spiritual and existential elements, resulting in a reduction of self-centred concerns and an enhanced sense of connectedness with others, nature, or the divine (Levenson et al., 2005). By shifting focus away from immediate gratification, self-transcendence encourages healthier coping strategies. Experiences associated with self-transcendence, such as awe, flow, and compassion, can mitigate the intensity of negative emotions like fear, despair, and depression, enabling individuals to manage suffering in a more constructive manner. Self-transcendence is a powerful psychological and spiritual tool for coping with adversity. It helps individuals reduce negative emotions, find meaning, and foster positive motivational changes. Self-transcendence enables individuals to transform stressful events into healing experiences. Self-transcendence also fosters prosocial behaviours, which can integrate individuals into networks of social support, a crucial resource for dealing with negative life experiences (Ge & Yang, 2023). Previous study confirms the moderating role of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence enhances the effects of meditation on psychological resilience (Dorais & Gutierrez, 2021). A meta-analysis of 13 studies has revealed that self-transcendence is strongly related to meaning in life and resilience among older adults (Haugan et al., 2022). Self-transcendence is expected to be related to youth resilience and to moderate the negative impacts of adverse life experiences.

Based on the above findings from previous studies, it is recognised that nurturing resilience and self-transcendence from adolescence into adulthood is essential for positive social adjustment and the promotion of overall mental health. Interventions that focus on building resilience through self-transcendence play a crucial role in supporting adolescents during critical developmental stages, particularly those facing adverse circumstances. However, there is a lack of studies exploring the relationship between negative life events, resilience and self-transcendence. The recent study examines the relationship between these three variables to offer more insights into this area. Self-transcendence was considered a moderator of the negative impact of negative life events on resilience.

## 2 Methods

To achieve the project's aims and answer the research questions, a questionnaire survey was conducted online using the Qualtrics platform. One hundred seventy-nine samples of youth were collected with a mean age of 21.37 and a standard deviation of 2.8. 60.3% were males and 39.7% were females. The majority of respondents in this study hold a bachelor's degree (86.0%), with a smaller proportion having a higher diploma or associate degree (6.7%) or a master's degree or higher (3.4%). Christianity (58.7%) is the most prevalent, followed by non-religious respondents (33.0%).

## 3 Methods

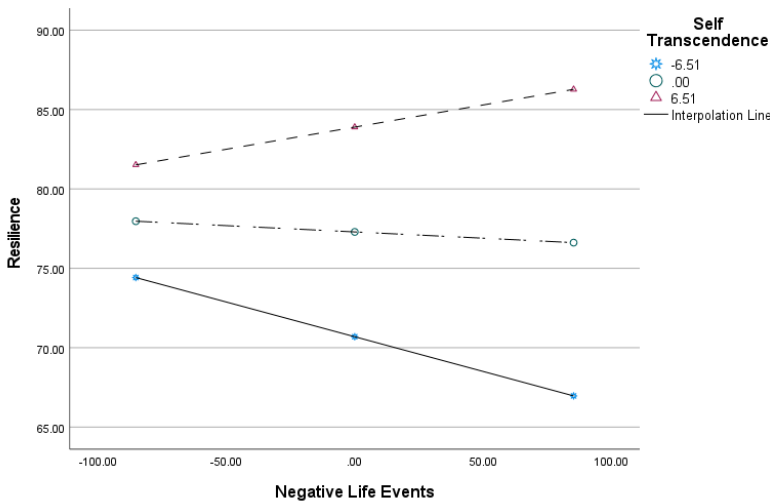
The questionnaire used in this study comprises three validated scales that measure key variables. Participants need to provide their basic information, including age and sex, and complete the questionnaire. The Negative Life Events Scale (Kowal et al., 2007) was used to ask respondents to identify the stressful life events they have experienced in the past two years, assigning each event a stress score (for example, death of a close family member = 63, change in health of family member = 44, change in financial state = 38, beginning or end of school = 26, change in social activities = 18, change in eating habits = 16). The Negative Life Events Scale has an acceptable internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

The 14-Item Resilience Scale (RS-14) (Damásio et al., 2011) was used to assess participants' personal strength and coping ability, using a 7-point Likert scale to rate items such as "I usually manage one way or another" and "My belief in myself gets me through hard times." The Resilience Scale has an excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). The Self-Transcendence Scale (Haugan et al., 2011) was used to measure the existential awareness and self-transcendence of participants through 15 items rated on a 4-point scale, including statements such as "Finding meaning in my past experiences" and "Helping others in some way." The Self-Transcendence Scale has a good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

## 4 Summary of the Moderation Analysis

The PROCESS Macro for SPSS v4.2 Model 1 was used to examine the relationship between the three study variables. The results concluded that self-transcendence and resilience are negatively related to negative life events ( $\beta = -.17, p = .03$ ;  $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ) while self-transcendence and resilience are positively related ( $\beta = .54, p < .001$ ). To study the moderation effect, respondents were categorised into three levels of self-transcendence to examine the relationship between negative life events and resilience across different levels. The low group included those scoring below one standard deviation of the mean ( $< -1$  SD); the medium group included those scoring within one standard deviation above and below the mean ( $\geq -1$  SD and  $\leq +1$  SD); and the high group comprised those scoring above one standard deviation of the mean ( $> +1$  SD). Negative life events are negatively related to resilience among respondents with low levels of self-transcendence ( $p < .001$ ). Youth with low levels of self-transcendence

who encounter more negative life events tend to exhibit lower levels of resilience (see Figure 1). At the same time, the relationship between negative life events and resilience is not significant for those with medium or high levels of self-transcendence ( $p = .65$ ;  $p = .67$ ). The level of resilience remains unaffected by exposure to negative life events for those with medium and high levels of self-transcendence. These findings imply that self-transcendence plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between negative life events and resilience. Negative life events will not impact the resilience of youth with moderate to high levels of self-transcendence, indicating a protective role of self-transcendence.



**Figure 1:** Results for the Moderating Role of Self-Transcendence to the Relationship between Negative Life Events and Resilience

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

The significant finding of a positive relationship between self-transcendence and resilience in this study reinforces growing scholarly recognition of the role that meaning-making and a broader life perspective play in psychological well-being. Self-transcendence refers to the capacity to move beyond self-centred concerns and connect with values, purposes, or entities beyond the self, whether through spirituality, service to others, nature, or existential reflection (Reed, 2008). This capacity often enables individuals to derive meaning from adversity and to reframe challenges in a way that fosters emotional resilience. Research has consistently shown that individuals who cultivate a self-transcendent mindset tend to exhibit higher life satisfaction, lower levels of depression, and a more optimistic worldview (Coward & Reed, 1996). In the context

of Hong Kong youth navigating academic pressure and societal expectations, self-transcendence may function as a psychological anchor that facilitates internal stability.

Furthermore, self-transcendence has been positively linked to prosocial behaviours and emotional maturity, both of which are protective factors for mental health. Self-transcendence fosters compassionate action, enhances existential fulfillment, and facilitates the integration of suffering into a coherent life narrative (Wong, 2016). These processes are especially relevant during emerging adulthood, a stage often marked by identity exploration, vulnerability to stress, and the search for purpose (Arnett, 2014). By shifting focus beyond self-interests, individuals are more likely to engage in community service, develop stronger interpersonal relationships, and regulate emotions through value-driven behavior, all of which are beneficial to mental health.

Additionally, the results of the current study confirmed that self-transcendence buffers the impact of NLE on resilience by promoting existential resilience, a form of coping that emphasises acceptance, spiritual insight, and the search for meaning even in adversity. In the context of this study's findings, Hong Kong youth who scored higher in self-transcendence are likely better equipped to reinterpret challenges through a meaningful lens, thereby reducing psychological distress and enhancing emotional stability. These results suggest that the therapeutic value of self-transcendence is significant for Hong Kong youth. Other research also highlights that meaning-making processes can help individuals constructively reframe their suffering. Therapies that incorporate mindfulness, existential reflection, or spiritual elements may help youth explore self-transcendence in healthier, more adaptive ways (Haugan et al., 2016). Such approaches could be particularly useful when integrated with cognitive-behavioural interventions. Self-transcendence can also be cultivated through life review, maintaining diaries, pursuing peer counselling, and participating in support groups to explore one's spirituality (Er et al., 2022). Mindfulness and meditation workshops can be organised to teach young people the practice of self-transcendence, thereby mitigating the negative effects of adverse life events on their resilience and well-being.

This study may have several limitations. Convenience sampling can introduce systematic error and bias. Since participants are selected based on their availability rather than through a rigorous random process, the resulting sample might share common characteristics that skew the results, thereby weakening the inferential power of the study (Elfil & Negida, 2017). Finally, although convenience samples can sometimes be homogeneous, this lack of diversity further restricts the variability that can be captured in the data. Additionally, there is a large spread of negative life event scores among participants, with a standard deviation of 85.4. This suggests that some individuals experienced significantly more negative life events than others, which may have influenced the findings. The wide range of scores could lead to greater variability in responses, making it more challenging to identify consistent patterns in the relationship between negative life events and other psychological variables.

Additionally, as this research relies on self-reported data from participants, there is a potential for response bias, as participants may overestimate or underestimate their resilience or self-transcendence. Furthermore, the gender ratio imbalance of males to females (6:4) may create a response bias that favours males. Another limitation is the specific age range (18-24) and cultural context in Hong Kong, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other age groups or cultural settings.

Future research should explore the interaction effects and potential moderating variables that influence mental health outcomes in different demographic groups. Future research should also investigate potential mediating or moderating variables, such as coping strategies, social support, personality traits, or cultural beliefs, that may influence the relationship between NLE and mental health. These contextual factors may explain why some individuals benefit from strengths like resilience and character, while others do not (Cosco et al., 2016).

In conclusion, this research revealed a significant positive association between self-transcendence and resilience, as well as the moderating role of self-transcendence on the impact of negative life events. Specifically, individuals who scored higher in self-transcendence reported higher resilience. This indicates the importance of meaning-making, value-driven behavior, and existential resilience in promoting well-being among Hong Kong youth. Therefore, social workers and counsellors can explore the deeper meanings behind their distress, facilitate narrative and meaning-making approaches, and identify the protective role of self-transcendence for youth.

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