Identity Development and Well-being: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

According to Erikson, identity development is a crucial psychosocial task. This study set out to systematically review the literature on identity development and well-being, to better understand the relationship between well-being and identity processes. A systematic review was performed according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. Searches were conducted across Web of Knowledge, Proquest, Scopus, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, and reference lists of the included studies (1990–2024). Independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts and conducted full-text assessment. A number of 10 studies met the predetermined inclusion criteria. Analysis of findings from the systematic literature review revealed that high identity commitment is related to identity development. Inconsistent findings with in-depth exploration are reported, but empirical research in this area is limited. The links between identity development and well-being are not completely clear. The possible intermediate factors that could determine the relationship between identity development and well-being are discussed. Further empirical research is needed in this area.

Keywords: identity development, identity processes, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Having a personal sense of identity means having a sense of who one is and the process by obtaining one's identity is known as identity development. Identity development is considered to be the primary psychosocial task of adolescence (Crocetti, 2017; Erikson, 1950). Identity development is characterized by exploring opportunities with the purpose of making long-standing commitments (Crocetti et al., 2008). While identity development remains a concern across the lifespan, the specific developmental processes of identity become urgent in adolescence (Crocetti, 2017; Erikson, 1950).

In his theory on psychosocial development, Erikson (1968) describes identity formation as the defining crisis for adolescents. He proposes that by selectively discovering, accepting and rejecting childhood identification the adolescent obtains their identity (1950). Marcia expanded Erikson's identity theory which allowed for the development of among the first empirical model for identity development.

Marcia's model proposes that identity is a self-structure with two key processes: exploration and commitment (1966). Specifically, he proposes that exploration allows for the probing and exploring of different identity paths and when someone is clear about their values beliefs and goals, a firm choice can be made under the form of commitment about an identity domain and actively pursuing that decision. Using this conceptualization, Marcia et al. (1993) describe four different potential identity statuses for adolescents: Identity Achievement (committed identity after exploration), Moratorium (committed identity without exploration), Foreclosure (exploring identity) and Diffusion (neither exploring, nor committing to an identity). Based on Marcia's identity status paradigm, many theoretical models have been proposed in an attempt to expand upon the work of Erikson (1950) and Marcia (1966) and in order to better capture the nuances of the identity development process (Luyckx et al., 2025).

The three-factor model

One of the most frequently used approaches in the literature is the three-factor model proposed by Crocetti et al. (2008). Their proposed model argues that one's identity is formed and changed through the continuous interplay between the following three critical identity dimensions: commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment. However, the three-factor model proposes a differentiation between two exploratory dimensions: in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment, an approach different from the one proposed by Marcia (1966) who only considered one form of exploration. In-depth exploration indicates the period when someone deliberately thinks about, and searches supplementary information about, their current commitments, while reconsideration of commitment requires comparing existing commitments with other options. This model follows the dual-cycle identity models and offers the opportunity to

understand that exploration and commitment take place in interrelated cycles (Branje et al., 2021). By emphasizing the processes through which an individual obtains and consolidates their identity and not identity in itself, this approach is considered neo-Eriksonian (Hatano et al, 2022). Crocetti et al. (2008) three-factor model further expands on the neo-Eriksonian identity field by showing that the identity statuses can be empirically obtained from continuous measures of identity processes (Crocetti et al., 2023).

Correlates of the three-factor model

Identity processes have been investigated in connection to several variables both in cross- sectional and longitudinal studies. Specifically, links between salient characteristics, such as personality trait development and identity formation have been investigated. While adolescents are making significant changes toward adulthood, changes in their personalities as a result to identity processes can be observed, but authenticity, environmental control, and expectation consistency across contexts have been positively associated to adaptive personality changes (Klimstra, 2013). Also across contexts, looking at how identity uncertainty carries over from adolescence to emerging adulthood, it seems that for those struggling with uncertainty and identity confusion in adolescence it remains similar in emerging adulthood (Becht et al., 2021).

Identity development, specifically identity confusion, has also been associated with depression, anxiety and eating disorder symptoms, highlighting how difficulties in achieving one's identity impacts psychosocial functioning (Potterton et al., 2021).

In regard to the processes of identity development, two statuses of identity development, ruminative exploration, and reconsideration of commitment undermine optimal identity development (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016). However, identity commitment can be a buffer against substance use and identity exploration a buffer against general deviancy in pressuring peer groups (Dumas et al., 2012). Additionally, developing one's identity with the help of firm commitments and active exploration is linked to increased positive well-being relationships between identity and well-being in Italian, Polish, and Romanian emerging adults (Karaś et al., 2015) which contradicts the theorized negative influence of in-depth exploration.

Another element of importance when considering identity development in adolescence is related to life transitions and events which are considered to provide the context for identity exploration or commitment, but at the same time, changes that come with salient transitional periods could potentially impact well-being (Branje et al., 2021). For example, for college adaptation, commitment is associated with adjustment and students with a high difuse-avoidant styles were struggling to adapt effectively with this change (Berzonsky, & Kuk, 2022).

As indicated above, there is a growing, but disparate body of empirical evidence on the relationship between well-being and different identity statuses. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the relationship between well-being and identity processes. Despite their importance both from a theoretical and from a practical standpoint, to the authors's knowledge, no systematic review has addressed the relationship between these concepts so far. The review will focus on studies from the perspectives of the dual-cycle models of identity development (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2006). This will allow the possibility of exploring the underlying processes of identity development and their potential interplays with well-being.

2. METHOD

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies will be selected based on five criteria. Firstly, studies with samples including adolescents (14-18 years old) and emerging adults (18-29 years old) will be included. Secondly, studies should report the level of well-being, either as a global score, or any of its constituents. Thirdly, studies must include a measure of identity statuses. Thus, research articles reporting on general measures of identity development will be excluded.

Search Strategies

Complementary approaches were used to identify relevant articles. Targeted keywords (e.g., identity status, identity and Marcia, ego identity, well- being) will be included in the search string: ("identity" OR "identity status" OR "domain- specific identity") AND ("well-being" OR "PERMA Model" OR "self- esteem" OR "life satisfaction") AND ("adolescents" OR "adolescence" OR "emerging adults" OR "emerging adulthood").

An electronic systematic search was conducted on: Web of Knowledge, Proquest, Scopus, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. We also conducted a legacy search by using references mentioned in key articles. Databases were searched for unpublished research (i.e., dissertations), in order to minimize the potential impact of publication bias.

In total, 10 articles were included in the systematic review. More information on the search procedure can be found in the PRISMA flowchart, available in Figure 1. Data about participants' age was extracted. Different methods of identity development and well-being were used across the included studies, therefore meta-analytic calculations were not performed. The main characteristics of the 10 studies are presented in Table 1.
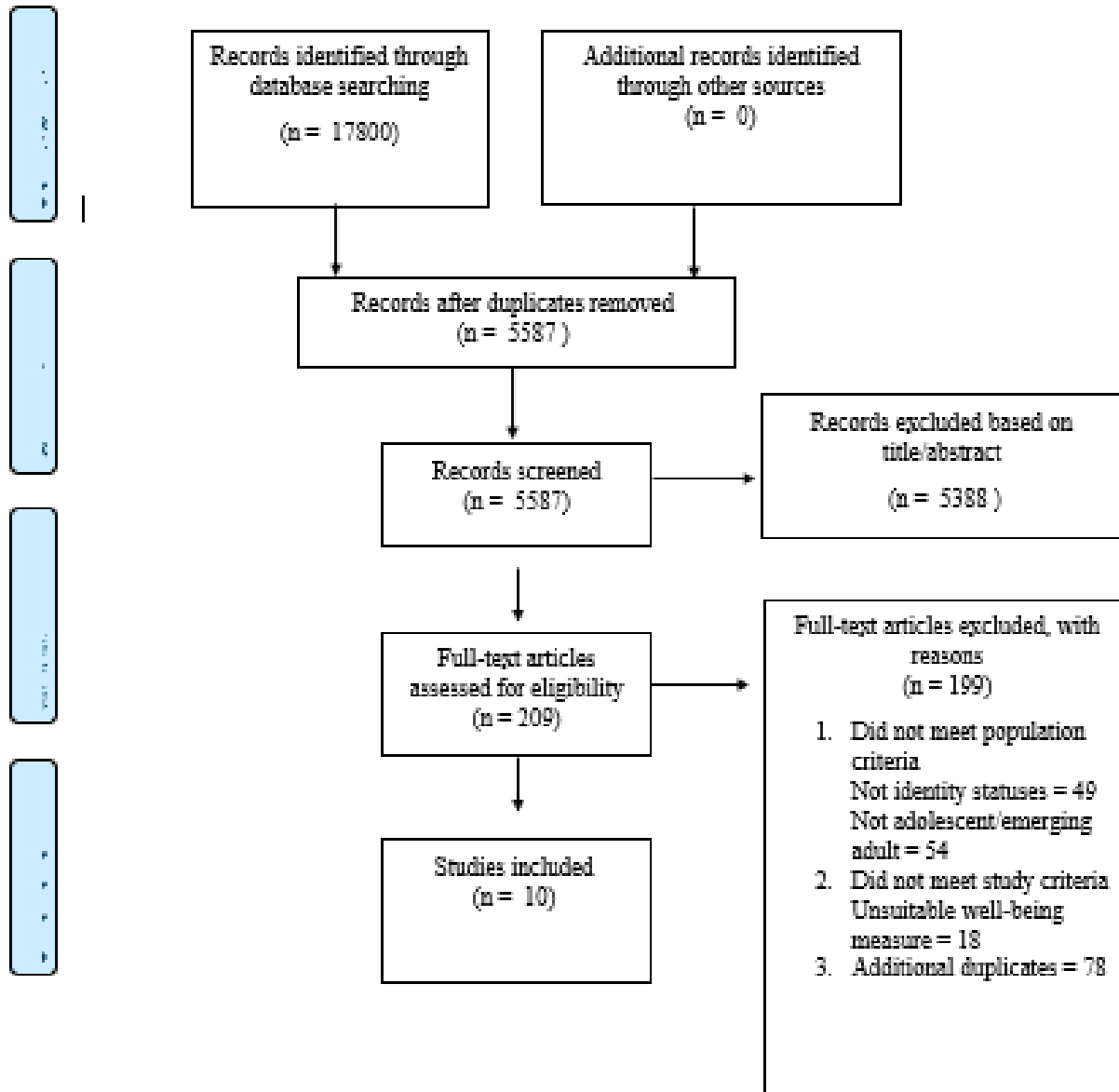
3. RESULTS

Table 1

Assessment of study quality and data extraction

Authors, year of publication	Sample size	Age of participants	Measures used
1. Schwartz et al., 2010	9,034 (73% female)	18-25 years M=19.76 years, SD = .61	Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (Luyckx et al. 2008) Self-Esteem Scale Rosenberg, 1965) Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot and Diener, 1993) Eudaimonic Well-Being (Waterman et al., 2010)
2. Berzonsky & Cieciuh, 2014	654 (60.6% female)	18-22 years M = 20.4, SD = .9	Identity Commitment from Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky et al. 2013); Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff and Keyes 1995)
3. Karaś et al., 2015	1086 (60.6% female)	20-24 years old Sample 1: M = 21.04, SD = 1.73 Sample 2: M = 21.76, SD = 1.78 Sample 3: M = 22.2, SD = 1.72	Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Crocetti et al. 2008); The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985); Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff and Keyes 1995); Social Well-Being Scale (Keyes 1998)
4. Morsunbul et al., 2016	1201 (59.6% females)	12 - 24 years M = 17.53 years, SD = 3.25	Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Crocetti et al. 2008); Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985)
5. Alonso-Stuyck, Zacarés, & Ferreres, 2018	567 (52.2.% boys)	12-18 years M = 14.48 and SD = 1.69	Occupational, and Ideological Identity Commitment scales (Ruiz-Alfonso, 2014); Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
6. Karaś & Cieciuch, 2018	1329 (77.7% women)	19-35 years M = 22.77, SD = 3.64	Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being (Waterman et al., 2010); Warsaw-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Karaś & Cieciuch, 2015)
7. Dimitrova et al., 2018	1860 participants	12–19 years	Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Crocetti et al. 2008); Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener et al. 1985);
8. Villani et al., 2019	267 (59.9% females)	18-77 years M = 36.68; SD = 15.13	Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Crocetti et al. 2008); Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener et al. 1985); Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988)
9. Crocetti, Benish-Weisman, & McDonald, 2020	770 (54.7% females)	12-15 years M = 13.79, SD = 0.51	Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (Crocetti et al. 2008); Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
10. De Lise, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2024	1396 (49.93% females)	Adolescents M = 15.73, SD = 1.23	Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS, Crocetti et al., 2008) Mental Health Continuum –Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2005)

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram

Records identified through
database searching
(n = 17800)

Additional records identified
through other sources
(n = 0)

Records after duplicates removed
(n = 5587)

Records screened
(n = 5587)

Records excluded based on
title/abstract
(n = 5388)

Full-text articles
assessed for eligibility
(n = 209)

Full-text articles excluded, with
reasons
(n = 199)

1. Did not meet population
   criteria
   Not identity statuses = 49
   Not adolescent/emerging
   adult = 54
2. Did not meet study criteria
   Unsuitable well-being
   measure = 18
3. Additional duplicates = 78

Studies included
(n = 10)

There were different methodologies used in assessing adolescent identity development and well-being. Well-being was measured using a single measure (6 studies out of 10, #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #9) or as a composite variable from several measures (4 studies, #1, #2, #7, #10). The composite variable was based on satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, and social well-being, or cognitive and emotional dimension of the SWB (#1, #2, #7, #10). In the studies where the reliability coefficients of the measures were reported, met a proposed threshold indicating suitability for use in psychological research for group comparisons (i.e., Cronbach α > .05) (Streiner & Norman, 2008).

Findings from the included studies are summarized in Table 2. In all of the included studies, there are statistically significant links between identity development and well-being. More specifically, high identity commitment was positively linked to well-being and high identity reconsideration was negatively linked to well-being. In contrast, mixed findings were reported on in-depth consideration. In particular, in-depth exploration of identity has been found to be linked both with high levels of well-being and with low levels.

Table 2

Summary of links between identity development and well-being from studies identified in the systematic literature review

Authors, year of publication	Analyzed aspects of well-being	Methods of data analysis	Results (statistical significance)
1. Schwartz et al., 2010	Self-esteem, satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, eudaimonic well-being	MANOVA	Identity achievement is associated with the highest on all of the positive psychosocial functioning indices
2. Berzonsky & Cieciuh, 2014	psychological well-being	structural equation modeling approach	identity commitment plays a role in psychological well-being
3. Karaś et al., 2015	satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, and social well-being	structural equation modeling approach	well-being was consistently associated with high commitment, high in-depth exploration, and low reconsideration of commitment
4. Morsunbul et al., 2016	satisfaction with life	Multivariate Analyses of Variance	individuals in the achievement status (high level of commitment) reported high levels of well-being
5. Alonso-Stuyck, Zacarés, & Ferreres, 2018	self-esteem	Factorial MANOVA	occupational and ideological-domain commitments are related to greater emotional well-being
6. Karaś & Cieciuch, 2018	eudemonic well-being	structural equation modeling approach	The role of commitment, which leads to increases in well-being, appeared to be the strongest variable in all domains In-depth exploration appeared to be a significant predictor of well-being in some, but not all, domains
7. Dimitrova et al., 2018	life satisfaction	structural equation modeling approach	life satisfaction was consistently associated with high commitment, high in-depth exploration, and low reconsideration of commitment in the educational identity domain
8. Villani et al., 2019	cognitive and emotional dimension of the SWB	structural equation modeling approach	having a commitment towards a particular religion worldview helps both religious and uncertain to feel positive emotions; identity commitment only increases the life satisfaction in religious individuals
9. Crocetti, Benish-Weisman, & McDonald, 2020	self-esteem	structural equation modeling approach	commitment was positively related to self-esteem; in-depth exploration was negatively related to self-esteem
10. De Lise, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2024	three sub-components of well-being, that is subjective, psychological, and social well-being	cross-lagged panel model	commitment was positively associated with all well-being dimensions over time

5. DISCUSSIONS

Identity development remains a core developmental task both in adolescence, emerging adulthood and adulthood. However, based on this systematic review there is an overall lack of studies analyzing links between well-being and identity development using neo-Eriksonian theory of psychosocial development as studies have focused on the absence of well-being (Kroger & Marcia, 2011).

Results of the systematic literature review found that identity, specifically identity statuses can be of significant importance for well-being. More specifically, identity commitment was positively associated with well-being, while reconsideration of commitment was negatively related to well-being. It seems as if commitment of identity offers a sense of stability that boosts well-being, whereas reconsideration of commitment brings a sense of instability that decreased well-being. However, the results obtained are not as clear with in-depth exploration.

Identity in-depth exploration refers to the amount to which an individual will actively engage with commitments by reflecting on them, by looking for new information and talking to others about their commitments. Results from included studies showed that in-depth exploration is both associated with positive and negative contributing factors to well-being. These findings further support the distinction proposed by the Positive Psychology Movement (e.g., Seligman, 2002) between positive well-being and mental health problems. Consequently, well-being can't be measured simply by the lack of mental health problems (e.g., anxiety and depressive symptoms), but there's also a dimension of positive well-being and adaptive functioning in psychological and social domains. This brings to attention the two philosophical conceptualizations for well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic. Hedonic well-being refers to the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, while eudaimonic well-being is seen as human flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Under this conceptualization, studies included in this systematic review focused mainly on hedonic well-being.

Another point of interest is that while it is well known that identity development shows robust variations across domains as they are domain-specific, articles have focused mainly on two domains: romantic relationship and education. This highlights the importance of researchers carefully considering their decision of including a specific domain in their study.

Despite identifying links between identity development and well-being from the literature review, some theoretical ambiguities remain.

Firstly, the longitudinal directionality of relations between identity and well-being is not considered. It might be that identity and well-being support each other. More specifically, having a firm identity commitment helps improve well-being, but it's unclear whether having a solid social, psychological, subjective, and/or physical well-being could represent the prerequisites for a safe identity exploration which in turn could potentially lead to making a firm identity commitment. Thus, it is important to better understand this association over time.

Secondly, most studies included only one identity domain in each group. However, attaining identity in one domain doesn't automatically guarantee developing identity in another, as Luyckx and his collaborators (2004) show. Consequently, more studies considering more domains are needed. It could also be beneficial to inform us on different domain loading in different substages of adolescence and emerging adulthood as practitioners could benefit from a better understanding of specific developmental needs that could impact well-being.

Thirdly, not all studies controlled for the effects of other factors (e.g., income level, parental support) that could be significant contributors to well-being as predictors. Therefore, it is with caution that their results should be interpreted. More studies investigating these factors and identity development are needed to draw a firmer conclusion on the contribution of each of the three identity processes to well-being.

Conclusion

Summing up, the findings of this systematic review indicate that achieving one's identity with the help of firm commitments leads to increased positive well-being, but more research is needed on validating the identity statuses to non-salient correlates..

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