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Predicting Identity Formation in Adolescents based on Emotional Capital and Moral Disengagement Factors

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current investigation was undertaken with the objective of forecasting identity formation among adolescents, predicated upon the variables of emotional capital and moral disengagement.

Methods: The methodology utilized in this inquiry is both descriptive and correlational in nature. The statistical population comprised all adolescents residing in Tehran during the year 2023, and a sample of 300 individuals was drawn utilizing a convenience sampling technique. Participants engaged with the research instruments provided. To facilitate data analysis, multiple linear regression analysis and Pearson's correlation coefficient test were employed through the application of SPSS version 26.

Results: The results indicated that the constructs of emotional capital and moral disengagement possess the capacity to predict identity formation in adolescents. Specifically, the components of emotional capital, which include positive emotions, feelings of vitality, and happiness, were found to significantly and positively predict identity formation among adolescents. Furthermore, the factors associated with moral disengagement also demonstrated the capacity to inversely and significantly predict identity formation in this demographic.

Conclusions: These findings, while affirming the critical influence of emotional capital and moral disengagement on the identity formation processes of adolescents, warrant consideration by stakeholders involved in the education and development of young individuals.

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Introduction

A comprehensive examination of theoretical frameworks and empirical research indicates that the process of identity formation is essential for the optimal growth of individual metrics and the overall quality of life (Shakeri Nasab et al., 2021) and is intricately linked to various indicators of mental health and personal accountability (Mousavi et al., 2023; Shahshahani & Safara, 2022), as well as to proclivities towards adverse and hazardous behaviors (Garavand, 2023). Zhu and Shek (2020) elucidated that positive developmental trajectory during adolescence, successful identity resolution, and psychological competencies are interrelated and contribute to a reduction in negative affect. Berzonsky et al. (2011) posits that within the continuum of adolescent identity formation, three distinct identity styles can be identified: informational, normative, and chaotic. The successful acquisition of identity can serve a protective function against tendencies towards social detriment while concurrently fortifying mental health (Berzonsky et al., 2013). Numerous sociologists assert that identity possesses two critical attributes: firstly, it delineates the distinction between "I" and "we" as well as "other" and "others," and secondly, it serves as the primary source for the recognition of emotions, sentiments, and the organization of collective and individual actions within the surrounding community. Jenkins (2014) asserts that identity encompasses two dimensions: "external" and "internal," which are in a perpetual state of interaction with one another. Individual identity is predicated upon the differentiation and distinction among individuals based on their affiliation with specific groups or social classes (Sedighi Arfaee et al., 2021). Erikson (1994) conceptualizes identity as a sense of connectedness to the past coupled with a predisposition towards the future, whereby an individual is tasked with synthesizing the learning and competencies acquired from previous phases along with historical identifications to forge a distinct identity for themselves.

A multitude of factors has the potential to shape identity during adolescence, and the present study assessed the influences of emotional and moral dimensions. Among the factors associated with emotions, emotional capital is recognized as a pivotal element in alleviating psychological stress and anxiety; theoretically, emotional capital constitutes the capacity to transmute circumstances into new functional, behavioral, and cognitive abilities, which are universally accessible to individuals. Emotional capital comprises three integral components: positive affect, a sense of vitality, and happiness. Through a strategic focus, emotional capital possesses the potential to exert

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a relatively enduring influence on human conduct and decision-making, while simultaneously enhancing capacity and skill sets and fostering mental health and psychological well-being among individuals (Golparvar & Enayati, 2018). Furthermore, emotional capital, by promoting self-awareness and cohesion and facilitating open and trust-based interpersonal relationships, contributes to the development of more robust social capital (Rahnamaee et al., 2024).

Research has indicated that the emotional empowerment of individuals positively influences the enhancement of their identity foundation, familial relationships, and mental well-being (Brehl et al., 2021; Riaz et al., 2021; Söğütlü et al., 2021; Tyra et al., 2021). Furthermore, Seaton and Beaumont (2011) established that emotional intelligence is significantly associated with identity styles. Conversely, during the developmental stage of adolescence, one critical moral factor influencing their identification is the phenomenon of moral dissociation among adolescents. Bandura (2016) characterized moral disengagement as the act of inflicting harm on others while lacking any sense of remorse. In essence, moral disengagement comprises a series of psychological mechanisms that enable adolescents to rationalize their unethical actions, thereby alleviating the impact of negative self-sanctions, such as guilt and shame, that typically accompany immoral conduct (Obermann, 2011). Research focused on moral disengagement in youth has demonstrated that hostile, aggressive, and bullying interactions within educational settings are positively correlated with moral disengagement among adolescents (Newman et al., 2020). Bandura (1999) delineated eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, categorized into four overarching dimensions that facilitate the release of moral self-regulation. These mechanisms encompass: cognitive restructuring (e.g., theft is comparatively less harmful than murder); minimizing the perpetrator's role (e.g., I was not the only individual involved in this act); neglecting or distorting the consequences (e.g., I did not genuinely harm him; he is fine); dehumanizing the victim or attributing blame (e.g., He is subhuman and deserves the treatment I meted out to him) (Bandura, 2002). Consequently, given that no existing research has comprehensively examined the interplay between emotional capital and moral disengagement factors in predicting adolescent identification, the principal inquiry of the current study sought to determine whether adolescent identification can be forecasted based on emotional capital and moral disengagement elements.

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Material and Methods

The methodological framework of the research is characterized as both descriptive and correlational in nature. The statistical population under investigation in this study comprised all adolescents residing in Tehran during the summer season of the year 2023, from which a sample of 300 participants was drawn utilizing a convenience sampling technique, all of whom properly completed the research instruments.

To evaluate identity formation, the self-report instrument titled the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) was employed, as developed by Mastrotheodoros and Motti-Stefanidi (2017). This instrument is composed of 25 items, which include 5 items assessing deep explorations, 5 items evaluating broad explorations, 5 items measuring intellectual explorations, 5 items focused on commitment-building, and 5 items pertaining to identification with commitment, with each item rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree = 5, strongly disagree = 1). The scoring range for each subscale varies from 5 to 25, and the aggregate of the total scores across each scale results in a comprehensive score for identification, which is determined through cluster analysis. The reliability coefficient, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, for the commitment subscale was established at 0.86, for Identification with Commitment at 0.86, for Exploration in Breadth at 0.81, for Exploration in Depth at 0.79, and for the Intellectual Exploration subscale at 0.86. Moreover, to evaluate the construct validity, the continuity of the Identity Status Survey along with the scores derived from the Life Satisfaction Scale was scrutinized.

For the assessment of Emotional Capital, the Golparvar Emotional Capital Questionnaire (Golparvar & Enayati, 2018) was utilized. This questionnaire is structured into three subscales: positive affect (10 items), feeling of energy (5 items), and happiness (5 items), with responses measured on a five-point scale ranging from never = 1 to always = 5. The validity of this instrument was assessed utilizing exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation, and the construct validity of the questionnaire was reaffirmed, with Cronbach's alpha reported at 0.90. Additionally, the scores obtained from Cronbach's alpha for positive affect, feeling of energy, happiness, and overall emotional capital in Golparvar's research were reported as 0.98, 0.97, 0.97, and 0.99, respectively (Golparvar & Enayati, 2018). Furthermore, another instrument employed in the current research was the Moral Disengagement Questionnaire developed by Thornberg et al. (2015). This scale comprises 18 items and is designed to measure moral dissociation. Each item is evaluated using a

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seven-point response scale ranging from 1, indicating disagreement, to 7, indicating agreement. The reliability of this questionnaire was determined to be 0.90 in the study conducted by Thornberg et al. (2015). This instrument evaluates moral dissociation through various dimensions, including moral justification, labeling without malice, benefit comparison, transfer of responsibility, distribution of responsibility, severity of consequences, and attribution of bullying behavior to the victim. The reliability of this instrument was calculated as 0.86 in the research conducted by Hatami and Tabatabaeinejad (2023) employing the Cronbach's alpha method. The validity of this assessment tool was substantiated through face and content validity in the study by Thornberg et al. (2015) and further corroborated in the research conducted by Masoumi et al. Hatami and Tabatabaeinejad (2023).

In addressing the ethical implications, the participants were guaranteed that the inquiries posed were exclusively pertinent to the research and did not necessitate the disclosure of their personal identifiers. Conversely, the involvement of the participants in the study was entirely voluntary, with no form of coercion present. Furthermore, the participants were reassured that they possessed the autonomy to withdraw from the training sessions at their discretion.

Results

Table 1 presents a descriptive analysis of the findings.

Table 1. Descriptive Findings

Variable	mean	SD
Deep exploration	14.79	4.27
Exploration in breadth	12.80	3.31
Intellectual exploration	16.30	3.03
Commitment	17.47	5.40
Identification with commitment	14.27	3.29
Positive emotion	31.86	6.70
Feeling of energy	15.19	4.63
Happiness	14.79	5.57
Moral disengagement	49.10	8.32

These findings show that in the moral disengagement variable, participants scored lower than average (10.49) and these scores indicate that the adolescent participants in the study have low scores in terms of moral disengagement. Also, participants scored average in the emotional capital variable. Regression analysis was used for inferential analysis of the data, but before performing

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the regression analysis, statistical assumptions were examined. The assumption of normality of the univariate distribution was evaluated by examining the skewness and kurtosis values for the dependent variables, and the skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were obtained between +2 and -2. Also, in this analysis, no deviation from the assumption of linear multicollinearity was observed in any of the values of tolerance and variance inflation statistics calculated for the predictor variables. In order to examine the independence of errors, the Durbin-Watson statistic was also used, and the results showed that the assumption of independence for the predictor variables was valid (DW=2.19).

Table 2. Results of the analysis of variance test for predicting identity formation

Variable	Model	SS	DF	MS	F	P	R	R^2
Deep explorations	Regression	591.98	4	147.99	8.49	0.001	0.321	0.103
Explorations in breadth	Regression	997.43	4	249.35	32.06	0.001	0.550	0.303
Intellectual explorations	Regression	501.92	4	125.48	16.44	0.001	0.427	0.182
Commitment formation	Regression	564.30	4	141.07	14.30	0.001	0.394	0.164
Identification with commitment	Regression	715.12	4	178.78	22.86	0.001	0.486	0.237

According to the results:

- At least one of the predictor variables, including emotional capital and moral disengagement, is a significant predictor for explaining deep explorations in adolescents and explains a total of 10.3% of the variance of deep explorations.
- At least one of the predictor variables including emotional capital and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining explorations in breadth in adolescents and together explain 30.3% of the variance in explorations in breadth.
- At least one of the predictor variables including emotional capital and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining intellectual explorations in adolescents and together explain 18.2% of the variance in intellectual explorations.
- At least one of the predictor variables including emotional capital and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining commitment formation in adolescents and together explain 16.4% of the variance in commitment formation.
- At least one of the predictor variables, including emotional capital and moral disengagement, is a significant predictor for explaining identification with commitment in adolescents and explains 23.7% of the variance of identification with commitment in total.

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Table 3. Results of multiple regression coefficient for predicting identify formation

Criterion variable	Predictor variables	B	SE	B	T	P
Deep exploration	Positive emotion	0.210	0.064	0.206	3.25	0.001
	Feeling of energy	0.051	0.092	0.035	0.55	0.580
	Happiness	0.224	0.105	0.132	2.13	0.031
	Moral disengagement	-0.081	0.024	-0.191	-3.38	0.001
Explorations in breadth	Positive emotion	0.186	0.42	0.24	4.47	0.001
	Feeling of energy	0.344	0.060	0.308	5.76	0.001
	Happiness	0.220	0.070	0.171	3.12	0.002
	Moral disconnection	-0.085	-0.018	-0.263	-4.73	0.001
Intellectual explorations	Positive emotion	0.091	0.043	0.129	2.13	0.033
	Feeling of energy	0.207	0.061	0.203	3.41	0.001
	Happiness	0.245	0.067	0.229	4.02	0.001
	Moral disengagement	-0.095	0.016	-0.321	-5.85	0.001
Commitment formation	Positive emotion	0.206	0.049	0.259	4.24	0.001
	Feeling of energy	0.171	0.069	0.149	2.47	0.014
	Happiness	0.060	0.079	0.045	0.75	0.45
	Moral disengagement	-0.096	0.018	-0.290	-5.23	0.001
Identification with commitment	Positive emotion	0.238	0.042	0.320	5.66	0.001
	Feeling of energy	0.175	0.063	0.163	2.77	0.006
	Happiness	0.24	0.070	0.194	3.41	0.001
	Moral disengagement	-0.131	0.016	-0.426	-8.12	0.001

The results showed:

- The variables of positive affect, happiness and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining deep exploration in adolescents and at a significance level of 0.01, they predict deep exploration in adolescents with beta coefficients of 0.20, 0.13 and -0.19, respectively, but the variable of feeling of energy did not have the ability to predict deep exploration in adolescents.

- The variables positive affect, feeling of energy, happiness and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining explorations in breadth in adolescents and at a significance level of 0.01, they predict explorations in breadth in adolescents with beta coefficients of 0.24, 0.30, 0.17 and -0.26, respectively.

- The variables positive affect, feeling of energy, happiness and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining intellectual explorations in adolescents and at a significance level of 0.01, they predict intellectual explorations in adolescents with beta coefficients of 0.12, 0.20, 0.22 and -0.32, respectively.

- The variables of positive affect, feeling of energy and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining commitment formation in adolescents and at a significance level of 0.01, they predict commitment formation in adolescents with beta coefficients of 0.25, 0.14 and -0.29,

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respectively, but the coefficients of the happiness variable were not significant in explaining commitment formation.

- The variables of positive affect, feeling of energy, happiness and moral disengagement are significant predictors for explaining identification with commitment in adolescents and at a significance level of 0.01, they predict identification with commitment in adolescents with beta coefficients of 0.32, 0.16, 0.19 and -0.42, respectively.

Discussion

The outcomes derived from the statistical investigation revealed that emotional capital dimensions, encompassing positive affect, vitality, and happiness, were capable of predicting identity in adolescents in a positive and statistically significant manner. Furthermore, the variable of moral disengagement was also found to inversely and significantly forecast identity among adolescents. The results of this inquiry align with prior research findings (Sedighi Arfaee et al., 2021; Tyra et al., 2021). Identity may be correlated with the degree of positive emotional and psychological competencies, as individuals develop the ability to regulate their actions, behaviors, and emotional responses throughout maturation; thus, possessing emotional skills enhances the potential for attaining a profound and successful identity. Adolescents who exhibit the capacity to manage and govern their emotions tend to demonstrate superior identity outcomes and possess enhanced psychological and interpersonal abilities.

Individuals' adept at emotional regulation garner favorable attention and exhibit adaptability. They also cultivate constructive social relationships and manifest elevated cognitive and socio-emotional competencies. Empirical studies indicate that emotional, moral, and social attributes can significantly influence the formation of individual identities, often referred to as protective factors. Protective personal attributes encompass problem-solving capabilities, foresight, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and emotional as well as social competence and empowerment, whereas protective environmental factors comprise positive and ethical relationships with others.

The findings endorse the notion that diverse moral, belief, and communication frameworks can assume a protective function in fortifying identity development. For instance, families whose belief systems and moral frameworks emphasize constructive attitudes and prioritize positive emotional growth and development tend to achieve higher levels of success, positive progress, and

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the cultivation of favorable psychological and communicative traits in their offspring, thereby facilitating their ability to effectively establish their identities. Emotional capital, conceptualized as an approach that accentuates advantageous characteristics and focuses primarily on capabilities, strengths, and positive individual and emotional traits, posits that individuals should strive for an effective and affirmative identity and organization, with efforts directed toward the attainment of positive psychological attributes, can influence the enhancement of identity. Within this framework, dimensions such as social, emotional, cognitive, and moral competence, along with a sense of identity, self-efficacy, and the facilitation of opportunities for social engagement are underscored.

The current study, however, was subject to limitations. Specifically, the statistical samples were not evaluated across diverse cultural contexts, as the study exclusively included adolescents from Tehran, and it should also be noted that the subjects in this research were solely male. Consequently, it is recommended that additional samples be utilized to elucidate the process of identification grounded in emotional capital and emotional detachment.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Aras International Campus, University of Tehran. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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