Identity Styles and Identity Distress Among University Students: Role of Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

University life represents a critical developmental period characterized by significant academic, social, and personal transitions, all of which influence identity formation. This study investigates the relationship between identity styles informational, normative, and diffuse avoidant, identity distress, and the moderating role of coping strategies among university students. Grounded in Berzonsky's Identity Style Theory. A quantitative correlational design was employed, utilizing standardized instruments: Berzonsky's Identity Style Inventory (ISI-5), the Identity Distress Survey (IDS), and a multidimensional Coping Scale. A diverse sample of university students was selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using SPSS and PROCESS Macro to conduct correlation, regression, and moderation analyses. Findings revealed that students with a diffuse-avoidant identity style reported significantly higher identity distress, highlighting their tendency to avoid or delay identity-related decisions. Conversely, individuals with an informational identity style also experienced identity distress. The normative style was associated with moderate levels of distress, as students adhering to societal and familial expectations experienced reduced internal conflict but limited personal growth. Importantly, coping strategies moderated the relationship between identity styles and identity distress. Coping buffered the effects of distress, particularly among diffuse-avoidant individuals. The results underscore the importance of fostering self-reflective identity processing and promoting adaptive coping strategies through targeted mental health interventions. This research contributes to the broader understanding of identity development, resilience, and student psychological adjustment, with practical implications for university counselling services and developmental programming.

Keywords: Identity Styles, Coping Strategies and Identity Distress

INTRODUCTION

In the shifting paradigm of higher education, university students face a many of challenges as they navigate their academic pursuits, social interactions, and individual identity development. Recent research has

underscored the significance of understanding the complex relationship among identity styles, identity distress and coping strategies amid students in contemporary university settings. Studies have delved into the multifaceted nature of identity investigation, recognizing its dynamic evolution and its convergence with various aspects of social identity, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation (García-Vázquez et al., 2021). Furthermore, study says university students face various academic, social, and individual challenges that demand effective coping mechanisms. These stressors can stem from academic pressures, transitioning to adulthood, financial issues, and interpersonal relationships (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Moreover, contemporary studies have emphasized that Identity distress is relatively common among university students due to the transitional nature of this life stage, which contains significant individual, social, and academic changes (Schwartz et al., 2011). Building upon these insights, this particular research aims to discover the dynamic associations between identity styles, identity distress and coping strategies amid university students, with an emphasis on understanding the controlling role of coping strategies among the link between identity styles and identity distress. By integrating recent empirical findings, this research pursues to donate to a comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes underlying university students' adaptation and flexibility in the modern university context.

Young adults who attend university face a variety of experiences, obstacles, and growth possibilities, making it a crucial time for their social and individual development. During this time, there is a greater focus on identity development, as people actively identify and commit to their own goals, values, and beliefs. Forming a solid and cohesive sense of self requires successfully completing these identities related tasks. However, this process can be difficult and upsetting for a lot of college students, especially when they have to coping conflicting social expectations, academic demands, and the move to maturity (Zimmermann et al., 2021).Berzonsky's identity styles framework confers a useful prism through which to view how college students coping these difficulties. The framework classifies people according to how they interpret identity related information cognitively plus behaviorally. The informative, normative, and diffuse avoidant identity styles are somehow these tactics, which are also known as identity styles. Every style has an impact on students' overall psychological health as well as how they find and commit to their identities (Berzonsky, 1989). The behavioral and cognitive techniques people employ to address identity-related problems and choices are known as identity styles. There are three main identity styles (Berzonsky, 1990).

The informational identity style is marked by a deliberate and open-ended investigation of various identity alternatives, leading to well-informed and flexible identity assurance (Berzonsky, 1990). Informational learners actively seek out and critically assess knowledge, taking an openminded attitude to identity-related assignments. By encouraging self-awareness and flexibility, this method enables students to make well-informed choices on their goals and values. However, this style's incessant inquiry and investigation can occasionally result in increased identity distress, especially when students find it difficult to draw firm conclusions (Berzonsky & Papini, 2019). For example, students exploring career options may experience anxiety if they are unable to align their academic paths with their evolving individual interests.

The normative identity style reflects a reliance on the expectations and norms of significant others, resulting in an assurance to identity choices that are socially prescribed and conventional (Berzonsky, 1990). Adapting to the values and expectations of important people, such as family, peers, or cultural norms, is a component of the normative style. Because they match their goals with outside norms, this method frequently gives individuals a feeling of safty and lowers ambiguity. But, it can restrict individual progress as well, which could result in rigidity or make it harder to adapt to new situations and viewpoints (Luyckx et al., 2019). For instance, a student following a predetermined career path due to family expectations may experience low identity distress in the short term but struggle with dissatisfaction or conflict later in life if individual principles were neglected.

The diffuse-avoidant identity style is typified by procrastination and avoidance in coping identity conflicts, leading to an unstable and reactive pattern of identity assurance (Berzonsky, 1990). Procrastination and avoiding decisions pertaining to individual's identity are traits of the diffuse avoidant style. This type of student frequently puts off completing important developmental tasks, which causes their self-concepts to become fragmented and their identity discomfort to increase (Berzonsky, 2020). For example, a student who avoids selecting a major or pledging to a long-term plan may experience feelings of instability and uncertainty, which can delay their academic and individual growth. The impact of identity styles on numerous facets of university students' psychological health and adjustment has been further explored in recent studies. People with diffuse or foreclosed style of identity, for instance, maybe more likely to feel identity related anxiety and interpersonal interaction issues, according to studies (Luyckx et al., 2018).

Identity distress is a psychological disorder characterized by significant discomfort or difficulty in establishing a stable sense of identity. It often manifests during critical developmental periods, such as adolescence and early adulthood, and can be exacerbated by various social, cultural, and individual factors. Identity distress, defined as psychological disorder related to identity investigation and assurance, has gained attention as a significant challenge for university students. University life demands a transition to independence, academic achievement, and career preparation, all of which can heighten identity-related stress. The transitional nature of university life exacerbates identity distress, as students frequently face choices that require them to pledge to a defined sense of self (Adam & Marshall, 2020).

This is particularly prominent among those with a diffuse-avoidant identity style, who may feel overwhelmed by the choices they must make but lack the proactive method to coping these stressors (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2020). The impacts of identity distress are profound, as they often coincide with psychological problems such as anxiety, low self-esteem and depression. A research reported that high levels of identity distress in university students correlate with poorer mental health and lower academic performance, emphasizing the need for interferences that address the emotional and psychological components of identity development (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2019)

A longitudinal study examined the impact of identity styles on identity distress and life satisfaction over time. The research found that students with an informational identity style experienced decreasing levels of identity distress and increasing life satisfaction over the course of their university education (Crocetti et al., 2018). Identity distress, defined as psychological discomfort stemming from challenges in identity formation, is particularly common among university students, who face various transitions and expectations (Adams & Marshall, 2020).

Identity distress has been associated with mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression, which can hinder academic success and lower self-esteem (Adams, 2020; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2019). Identity distress often correlates with unclear objectives and the absence of a supportive social network, further underscoring the need for targeted interferences in university settings (Luyckx et al., 2019). Research on the interactions between identity styles and identity distress demonstrates that students who adopt a diffuse avoidant style are especially prone to identity distress, given their tendency to avoid identity defining choices (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Conversely, those with an informational style may experience temporary distress during periods of intense investigation, although this style is often associated with a clearer, more coherent identity over time (Berzonsky & Papini, 2019). Recent research has recognized numerous factors that can exacerbate identity distress among young adults. The transition to university often intensifies self-investigation, as students encounter diverse ideologies, value systems, and peer influences, which may conflict with pre-existing beliefs (Vannucci et al., 2020). Social comparison, particularly in the context of social media, can also

heighten identity distress by fostering self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy when individuals perceive themselves as falling short of idealized standards presented online (Gioia et al., 2019). Moreover, studies demonstrate that family expectations and cultural influences play a significant role in shaping identity development and can either buffer or intensify identity distress depending on the degree of familial support or pressure (Adams & Marshall, 2020). Students from collectivist cultures may experience additional challenges due to cultural expectations that prioritize family or community principles over individual autonomy, which can lead to heightened distress when individual aspirations diverge from these norms (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2020).

Coping strategies play a crucial role in managing stress, identity distress, and emotional well-being among university students. A study categorized coping into problem-emphasized coping or active problem-solving and emotion emphasized coping or managing emotional responses. Research has discovered how students employ these strategies in academic, social, and psychological contexts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem emphasized coping, such as time management and seeking social support, is more effective in reducing stress and improving academic performance (Misra & Castillo, 2004). In contrast, maladaptive coping mechanisms, containing avoidance and rumination, have been associated to increased identity distress, anxiety, and depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011).

Despite the documentation of more than 400 coping strategies (Skinner et al., 2003), they can be broadly divided into two categories: evasive or disengagement methods and aggressive strategies. In order to change the problem's primary control or the negative emotions connected to it secondary control, method strategies use cognitive and behavioral mechanisms to make an active reaction to the stressor. This category contains tactics such as planning, taking particular action, seeking support instrumental and emotional, positive evaluation of the circumstance, or acceptance. Evasive methods include behavioral and cognitive techniques including denial, wishful thinking, and distraction that are employed to avoid the stressful circumstance. There is widespread agreement that effective method techniques are linked to positive academic, physical, and psychological adjustment based on this classification (Clarke, 2006; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 201; Syed, 2015), whereas evasive strategies usually mean maladaptive consequences for the students (Deasy et al., 2014; Skinner et al., 2016; Tran and Lumley, 2019; Tavolacci et al., 2013).

People have created and used a wide variety of coping mechanisms—also known as coping strategies to deal with and manage these stressful situations. Any strategy, whether emotional or physical, that is employed to help oneself navigate a difficult circumstance that is thought to be endangering a sense of stability is referred to as coping. Coping mechanisms, however, can also be employed to prevent future threats to that stability (Blum et al., 2012).

Accepting a circumstance, facing a stressor, denial, reinterpretation, repression, or resorting to comedy, religion, or social support are just a few examples of the many different coping mechanisms (Blum et al., 2012). Overall, studies have shown that these coping mechanisms fall into three different categories: avoidant coping, problem emphasized coping, and emotion emphasized coping. One definition of problem-emphasized coping is a proactive approach to managing stress. As a result, it aims to resolve the current problem or alter the circumstances in order to cope with the source. Conversely, emotion-centered coping attempts to lessen or manage the emotional suffering brought on by the stressful circumstance (Carver et al., 1989). Avoidant coping is characterized by activities or cognitive strategies used in a deliberate attempt to disengage from stressful situations" (Smith et al., 2015).

The study has revealed conflicting findings about the relationship between coping mechanisms, stress, and mental health. It has been discovered that problem-emphasized coping helps lessen perceived threat and the tension that follows (Rodríguez et al., 2014). Additionally, this coping mechanism shows adaptability

in terms of mental health (Rabenu et al., 2016). According to research, it has a good correlation with wellbeing and a negative correlation with loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Rodríguez et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2022). Problem emphasized coping seems to be more effective in increasing one's mental wellbeing than emotion emphasized coping (Rabenu et al., 2016). It has been found that emotion emphasized coping can have differing effects on mental wellbeing. Some studies have exposed that this form of coping is associated to a lower mental wellbeing (Fierro & Jiménez 2002; Rodríguez et al., 2014).

When employed as a temporary stress reduction strategy, avoidance coping has been shown to be successful, nevertheless, it is ineffective over the long term. This coping strategy is generally connected with a decline in mental wellness and displays further association with discomfort or depressed symptoms (Balmores, 2018). Thus, they can be described as maladaptive for mental wellbeing over time (Wang et al., 2022). A study including high functioning high school students revealed that coping methods had a moderating effect on stress and mental wellbeing in relation to the relationship between these three variables (Suldo et al., 2008).

The relationship between identity distress and identity styles is a critical area of investigation, particularly during the university years when individuals experience significant individual and social changes. Identity distress, often characterized by confusion, uncertainty, and emotional discomfort regarding one's principles, objectives, and sense of self, can impede the development of a coherent identity. During this time, coping strategies the cognitive and behavioral methods used to manage stress and emotional turmoil play a vital role in moderating the impact of identity distress on the formation and stability of identity. The ways in which individuals cope with distress can significantly influence whether they adopt a normative, information oriented, or diffuse avoidant identity style. By examining how coping strategies act as moderators, it becomes evident that effective coping mechanisms can reduce the negative effects of identity distress and foster a more cohesive identity, while maladaptive coping may exacerbate distress, leading to identity confusion and delayed development. This review discovers how various coping strategies problem emphasized, emotion emphasized, and avoidant interact with identity distress to shape the identity development process among university students.

The process of identity formation is one of the most pivotal developmental tasks of adolescence and young adulthood. For university students, this developmental task is particularly salient as they navigate complex academic, social, and individual challenges while simultaneously striving to construct a coherent sense of self. Identity distress, characterized by emotional discomfort and confusion about one's identity, is a common experience during this phase, as students grapple with questions about their principles, objectives, and role in society. Understanding the relationship between identity distress and identity styles, and how coping strategies moderate this relationship, is crucial for conferring insights into how university students can better navigate these identity-related challenges. University students are at a critical juncture where their identity development is not only influenced by internal factors (such as self-reflection and investigation) but also by external factors (e.g., academic pressures, societal expectations). Identity distress becomes more obvious when students experience conflicts or confusion regarding their objectives, principles, and life roles, which may hinder their ability to pledge to any one identity style. Research supports the idea that adaptive coping strategies (e.g., problem-emphasized coping) can help individuals resolve identity-related conflicts and reduce identity distress, whereas maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., avoidance) can prolong identity confusion and contribute to a diffuse-avoidant identity style (Luyckx et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2001).

University students illustrate a unique population in the study of identity development, as they undergo a period of intense social, academic, and psychological growth. The emerging adulthood period, as described by Arnett, is characterized by investigation and experimentation with different aspects of life, containing

relationships, career choices, and individual principles. The stressors associated with university life academic demands, social pressure, and career uncertainty can heighten identity distress, particularly when students are uncertain about their roles in the world or their future aspirations (Arnett, 2000). Moreover, university students often experience significant transitions, such as moving away from home, forming new social networks, and encountering diverse perspectives. This can create both opportunities and challenges for identity investigation, which may either promote or hinder identity development depending on the coping mechanisms employed (Tian et al., 2021).

While the relationship between identity distress and identity styles has been well discovered, much less attention has been given to understanding how coping strategies moderate this relationship. Existing research has primarily emphasized on the direct effects of identity distress on identity styles or on the role of coping strategies in other domains of psychological functioning (e.g., academic stress, mental health). A more nuanced understanding of how coping strategies influence the relationship between identity distress and identity styles is essential, particularly for university students facing complex, multifaceted challenges during this developmental period. Moreover, there is limited research on the interaction between identity distress and coping strategies in a longitudinal context. Most studies in this area have been cross-sectional, limiting our understanding of how coping strategies evolve over time and how they might buffer or exacerbate identity distress across different stages of university life.

METHOD

Objectives

Following are the objectives of the study;

1. To examine the relationship between different identity styles (Informational, Normative & Diffuse-avoidant), coping strategies and identity distress among university students.
2. To examine the role of coping strategies in the relationship between identity styles (Informational, Normative & Diffuse-avoidant) and identity distress among university students.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a positive relationship between the normative identity style, diffuse-avoidant identity styles, coping strategies and identity distress among university students.

2. There will be negative relationship between the informative identity style and identity distress among university students.

3. Identity styles (Informational, Normative & Diffuse-avoidant) will predict the identity distress among university students.

4. Coping Strategies will moderate the relationship between identity styles (Normative, Informational & Diffuse-avoidant) and identity distress among university students.

Research Design

Quantitative research method, purposive sampling technique and correlational and cross-sectional study design was used.

Sample

The sample (*N*=450) comprised of university students between age range 18 to 30 years. The sample of the study was nominated by using convenient sampling technique. The sample included university student of different universities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad e.g. Islamic International University IIUI, Riphah International University RIU, National University of Modern Languages NUML, Bahria University and Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University.

Inclusion criteria

The participants must be university students and between the age range of 18-30 and participants must not be physically or psychologically ill.

Exclusion criteria

Participants who are university students but not between the age range of 18-30. Participants who have any physical or psychological illness. Participants who provide incomplete or inconsistent responses on survey calculates omitted from the analysis to ensure data quality and reliability.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the present study was taken from Riphah International University before conducting the research. Permission for data collection was granted from universities authorities and students through consent form. Permission for using the respective scales was taken from the respective authors. The study was conducted by approaching students individually. They were provided the complete booklet and briefed about the objectives of study and assured about the confidentiality of their opinions and beliefs. They were, then, requested to fill the questionnaires including Berzonsky's Revised Identity Style Inventory (ISI-5), The Coping Scale and The Identity Distress Survey. The Participants were informed of their ethical right to withdraw anytime in between the study. They were also told about the use of their data and informed about privacy and confidentiality of their responses. All their queries were addressed at the time and they were encouraged to deliver as accurate information as they can. Finally, questionnaires were collected, and students were thanked for their cooperative and nice behaviour. After data collection, all instruments were scored and data will be coded and entered into statistical software, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). By using SPSS, relevant statistics was applied to test the hypotheses. Correlation analysis was used to test the relationship properties.

Instruments

Berzonsky's Identity Style Inventory (ISI) Revised identity style inventory (ISI-5) is a 27 items self-report questionnaire aimed to assess individual's identity styles based on Marcia's identity statuses. It consists of items evaluating exploration and commitment in identity domains, classifying individuals into three identity styles: Informational Style (9 items) (3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24 & 17), Normative Style (9 items) (1 , 4 , 7 , 10 , 13 , 16 , 19 , 22 & 25) and Diffuse-Avoidant Style (9 items) (2 , 5 , 8 , 11 , 14 , 17 , 20 , 23 & 26). It is a 4 likert-point scale ranges from 1 (Not all like me) to 4 (Very much like me). High score on each sub-scale will indicate that individual have that identity style. The reliabilities (α) of the scores on the ISI-5 style scales as Informational, .79, Normative, .79 and Diffuse-avoidant, .83 (Berzonsky et al., 2013).

Coping Scale (CS) The Coping Scale (CS) is a self-report calculate aimed to assesses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural ways and means of dealing with problems. This scale has 13 items and uses a 4point Likert scale ranging from "1 - Not true about me" to "4 - Mostly true about me." The coping scale calculates personal attitudes and has shown excellent reliability ($\alpha > 0.91$) across diverse populations. The scoring can be calculated either through a summation of scores or a mean of the scores. A higher score reflects a higher level of coping. (Grych et al., 2015)

Identity Distress Survey (IDS) The Identity Distress Survey (IDS) is a self-report calculate aimed to assess identity-related distress in individuals. A 10 items questionnaire, it assesses various aspects of identity formation and the psychological discomfort related with identity issues. The IDS include items that reflect different domains of identity distress such as role confusion, future uncertainty, interpersonal conflict, lack of cohesion, existential concerns, affirmation, and self-consistency. Each item on the IDS is rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score is calculated by summing the responses to all items. Higher total scores indicate greater levels of identity distress. The IDS has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging from 0.80 to 0.90, indicating that the items are measuring a cohesive.

RESULTS

Table 1: *Correlation between the Identity styles, Coping strategies & Identity distress among university students (N=450)*

	Variables	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1	ISI Norm	-	.52[**]	.49[**]	.27[**]	.31[**]
2	ISI DifAvo		-	.24[**]	.38[**]	.34[**]
3	ISI Info			-	.07	.20[**]
4	CS				-	.25[**]
5	IDS					-

Note. ISI-5= Revised identity styles inventory, Info= informational identity style, Norm= normative identity style, DifAvo= diffuse-avoidant identity style, CS= the coping scale and IDS= identity distress survey. *p< .05, **p<.01 Table 5 shows the correlation analysis examines the relationships between identity styles

(normative, diffuse-avoidant, informational), coping strategies (CS), and identity distress (IDS).

The results indicate numerous significant correlations (p < .01), providing insight into how these variables interact. Normative identity style (ISI Norm) is positively correlated with diffuse-avoidant identity style (r = .52), informational identity style (r = .49), coping strategies (r = .27), and identity distress (r = .31). This suggests that individuals who conform to societal norms are also somewhat likely to engage in identity exploration (informational style) and identity avoidance (diffuse-avoidant style). Additionally, they tend to use coping strategies and experience higher identity distress, possibly due to the pressure of adhering to external expectations. Diffuse-avoidant identity style (ISI DifAvo) is significantly related with coping strategies (r = .38) and identity distress (r = .34). This shows that individuals who avoid making identity related decisions are more likely to experience higher distress. They also engage in coping strategies, but since diffuse-avoidant individuals tend to use maladaptive coping mechanisms (e.g., avoidance, denial), this may not effectively reduce distress. Informational identity style (ISI Info) shows weaker correlations compared to other identity styles. While it is positively correlated with identity distress (r = .20, p < .01), its correlation with coping strategies (r = .07) is not significant. This suggests that active identity exploration

does not necessarily lead to better coping strategies but may still contribute to some level of identity distress, possibly due to uncertainty in decision-making. Coping strategies (CS) are positively correlated with identity distress (r = .25, p < .01). This suggests that individuals who actively use coping mechanisms still experience some level of distress, possibly because they rely on emotion-focused rather than problem-focused coping strategies.

Table 2: Regression analysis of Identity styles and Identity distress among university students (N=450)

Models	Variables	Identity Distress			
		B	R²	F	95% CI
1	Constant				[8.98, 14.65]
	Normative	.12	.07	35.58	[.20, .39]
2	Constant				[6.04, 12.84]
	Informational	-.08	.16	27.24	[-.18, .02]
3	Constant				[5.19, 11.08]
	Diffuse Avoidant	.29	.15	39.62	[.22, .42]

Note. Identity distress= dependent variable, normative, informational & diffuse-avoidant= independent variable (subscales of Identity styles inventory).

In **table 2** the regression analysis shows how identity styles predict identity distress, revealing that normative and diffuse-avoidant identity styles significantly contribute to distress, while informational identity style does not have a significant effect. Normative identity style (B = 0.12, R² = .07, p < .05) showed a positive association with distress, suggesting that adhering to societal norms may create internal conflicts and stress. Diffuse-avoidant identity style (B = 0.29, R² = .15, p < .05) emerged as the strongest predictor of distress, indicating that procrastination and avoidance in identity-related decisions significantly increase psychological discomfort. Conversely, informational identity style (B = -0.08, R² = .16, p = .54) showed a weak negative relationship with distress, but the effect was not statistically significant, suggesting that active identity exploration alone may not strongly reduce distress. The findings highlight that students with a diffuse-avoidant style are at the highest risk for identity distress, whereas those with a normative style may also experience stress due to rigid external expectations. These results suggest that interventions should focus on reducing identity avoidance, promoting active decision-making, and helping individuals manage societal pressures to minimize identity distress.

Table 3: *Moderation analysis of coping strategies in the relationship between informational identity style and identity distress among university students (N=450)*

Predictor	Identity distress			
			95% CI	
	B	p	LL	UL
Model 1 Constant	20.16	.00	19.61	20.70
Info	0.03	.54	-0.07	0.12
CS	0.20	.00	0.12	0.28
Interaction (Info × CS)	0.01	.01	0.00	0.03
R²	.08			

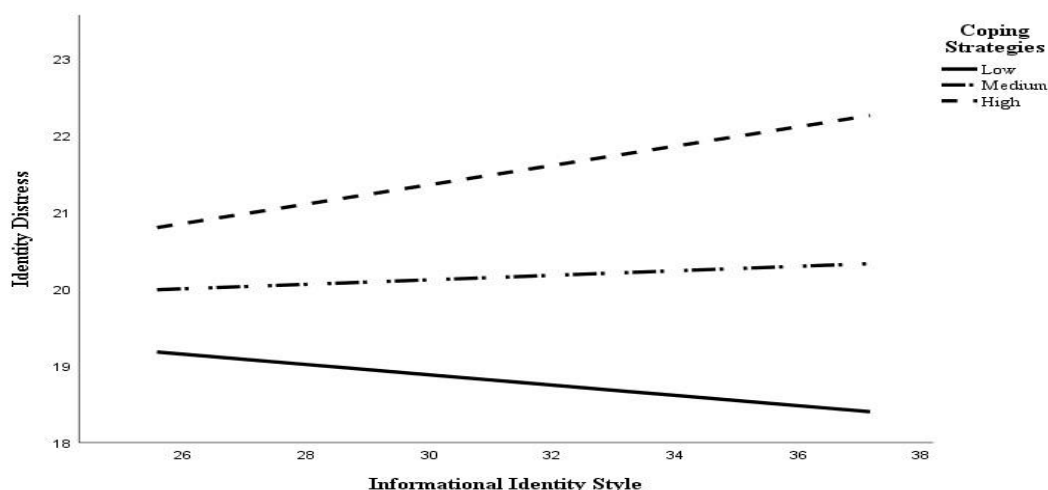|				
ΔR²	.01			
F	6.18*			

Note. Identity distress= dependent variable, (info= informational identity style) = independent variable (subscales of Identity styles inventory).

Table 3 shows that informational identity style is not a significant predictor of identity distress (B = 0.03, p = .54), meaning that this identity style does not strongly influence distress levels. Coping strategies significantly predict distress (B = 0.20, p < .001), reinforcing the idea that coping plays an essential role in managing identity distress. The interaction term (Info × CS) is weak but significant (B = 0.01, p = .01), indicating a small moderation effect. The overall model explains less variance (ΔR² = .01, R² = .08) compared to Models 1 and 2, suggesting that coping strategies play a much smaller role in moderating identity distress for students with an informational identity style. Students with an informational identity style tend to actively explore identity-related decisions, which may inherently protect them from severe distress. As a result, coping strategies do not strongly influence distress levels for this group. This suggests that identity distress is less problematic for students who are open to self-exploration and critical thinking about their identity.

Figure 1

Graphical representation of Moderation analysis of coping strategies in the relationship between informational identity style and identity distress among university students (N=450)

The graph describes the relationship between Informational Identity Style and Identity Distress, with Coping Strategies as a moderating variable. The three lines illustrate different levels of coping strategies: low (solid line), medium (dashed line), and high (dash-dot line). The trend suggests that for individuals with low coping strategies, an increase in informational identity style is associated with a decrease in identity distress. However, for individuals with medium and high coping strategies, identity distress rises as informational identity style rises. This indicates that coping strategies may influence how identity style affects distress, with lower coping strategies showing a different trend compared to higher levels.

Table 4: *Moderation analysis of coping strategies in the relationship between normative identity style and identity distress among university students (N=450)*
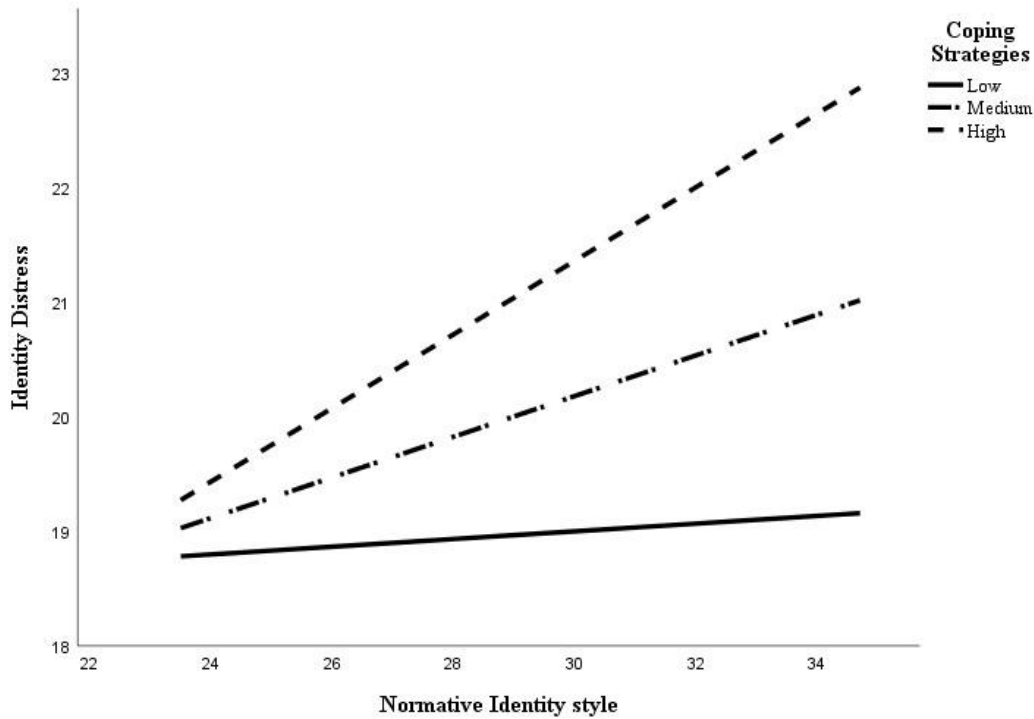
Predictor	Identity distress			
	B	**P**	95% CI	
			LL	*UL*
Model 2 Constant	20.02	.00	19.48	20.55
Norm	0.18	.00	0.08	0.28
CS	0.15	.00	0.07	0.24
Int_1 (Norm × CS)	0.02	.00	0.01	0.03
R²	.13			
ΔR²	.03			
F	14.52**			

*Note.*Identity distress= dependent variable, (norm= normative identity style) = independent variable (subscales of Identity styles inventory).

Table 4 shows normative identity style significantly predicts identity distress (B = 0.18, p < .001), meaning that individuals with a stronger normative orientation (who conform to societal and familial expectations) tend to experience higher identity distress. Coping strategies also significantly predict identity distress (B = 0.15, p < .001), suggesting that the way students manage stress influences their distress levels. The interaction term (Norm × CS) is significant (B = 0.02, p < .001), indicating that coping strategies moderate the relationship between normative identity style and identity distress. This means that students with a high normative identity style experience different levels of distress depending on their coping mechanisms. The moderation effect is small (ΔR² = .03) but suggests that better coping strategies can slightly buffer the distress related with a normative identity style. Students with a normative identity style may experience higher distress due to societal and family expectations, but effective coping strategies (e.g., problem-solving, emotional regulation) can help reduce this distress. However, the effect size suggests that coping alone is not enough to completely mitigate distress.

Figure 2

Graphical representation of Moderation analysis of coping strategies in the relationship between normative identity style and identity distress among university students (N=450)

The graph describes the relationship between Normative Identity Style and Identity Distress, with Coping Strategies as a moderating factor. The three lines illustrate different levels of coping strategies: low (solid line), medium (dashed line), and high (dash-dot line). The trend shows that as normative identity style rises, identity distress also rises, especially for individuals with medium and high coping strategies. The effect is more pronounced for those with high coping strategies, indicating that individuals who rely more on coping strategies experience greater distress when following a normative identity style. Conversely, for individuals with low coping strategies, the increase in identity distress is minimal.

Table 5: *Moderation analysis of coping strategies in the relationship between diffuse- identity style and identity distress among university students (N=450)*
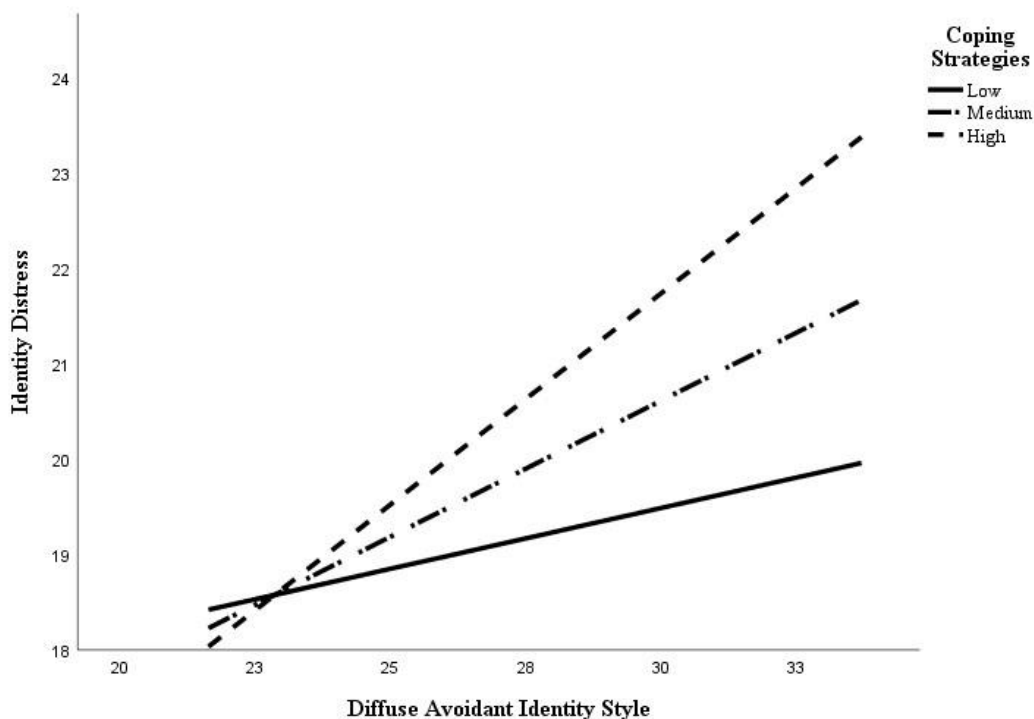
		Identity distress			
Predictor	*B*	*P*		*95% CI*	
				LL	*UL*
Model 3 Constant	19.95	.00		19.43	20.46
DifAvo	0.29	.00		0.20	0.37
CS	0.11	.01		0.03	0.19
Interaction (DifAvo × CS)	0.02	.00		0.01	0.03
R²	.20				
ΔR²	.04				
F	23.13**				

Note. Identity distress= dependent variable, (DifAvo= diffuse-avoidant identity style) = independent variable (subscales of Identity styles inventory).

Table 5 shows Diffuse-Avoidant identity style is a strong predictor of identity distress (B = 0.29, p < .001), indicating that students who avoid identity exploration and decision-making tend to experience higher distress. Coping strategies significantly predict distress (B = 0.11, p = .01), showing that how students handle stress affects their distress levels. The interaction term (DifAvo × CS) is significant (B = 0.02, p < .001), suggesting that coping strategies moderate the relationship between diffuse-avoidant identity style and distress. The moderation effect is slightly stronger (ΔR^2 = .04) compared to Model 1, meaning that coping strategies have a slightly greater buffering effect for individuals with a diffuse-avoidant identity style. Students with a diffuse-avoidant identity style experience high identity distress due to indecisiveness and avoidance of identity commitments. However, adaptive coping strategies can help reduce distress. This suggests that teaching students better coping mechanisms could be beneficial in reducing distress related with identity confusion and procrastination.

Figure 3

Graphical representation of Moderation analysis of coping strategies in the relationship between diffuse-avoidant identity style and identity distress among university students (N=450)

 The graph describes the relationship between Diffuse Avoidant Identity Style and Identity Distress, moderated by Coping Strategies. The three lines illustrate different levels of coping strategies: low (solid line), medium (dashed line), and high (dash-dot line). The trend indicates that as diffuse avoidant identity style rises, identity distress also rises, with a stronger effect for individuals with higher coping strategies. Those with high coping strategies experience the steepest rise in identity distress, followed by medium and low coping strategy groups. This suggests that individuals with a diffuse avoidant identity style are more

vulnerable to identity distress, and even strong coping strategies do not buffer this effect; rather, distress is exacerbated as coping attempts increase.

DISCUSSION

The present study targeted to examine the relationship between identity styles, identity distress, and coping strategies among university students, with a particular focus on the role of coping strategies in this relationship. Drawing upon Berzonsky's Identity Style Theory (1990), the study provided insights into how different identity processing styles contribute to identity distress and how coping mechanisms influence this relationship. The findings highlight the significance of identity formation during emerging adulthood, particularly in the context of university life, where students face academic, social, and personal challenges that shape their identity development.

For hypothesis 1. There will be a positive relationship between the normative identity style, diffuse-avoidant identity styles, coping strategies and identity distress among university students. The findings confirmed significant correlations between identity styles, coping strategies and identity distress. Similarly, diffuse-avoidant identity style was positively related with identity distress ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), indicating that individuals who avoid making identity-related decisions tend to experience higher distress, consistent with previous studies (Schwartz et al., 2011)., implying that active identity exploration may contribute to some level of uncertainty and distress, aligning with past findings (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005). Normative identity style (ISI Norm) is positively correlated with diffuse-avoidant identity style ($r = .52$), coping strategies ($r = .27$), and identity distress ($r = .31$). This suggests that individuals who conform to societal norms are also somewhat likely to engage in identity exploration (informational style) and identity avoidance (diffuse-avoidant style). Additionally, they tend to use coping strategies and experience higher identity distress, possibly due to the pressure of adhering to external expectations. Coping strategies shows positively correlation with identity distress ($r = .25$, $p < .01$). This suggests that individuals who actively use coping mechanisms still experience some level of distress, possibly because they rely on emotion-focused rather than problem-focused coping strategies. Diffuseavoidant identity style (ISI DifAvo) is significantly related with coping strategies ($r = .38$) and identity distress ($r = .34$). This shows that individuals who avoid making identity-related decisions are more likely to experience higher distress. They also engage in coping strategies, but since diffuse-avoidant individuals tend to use maladaptive coping mechanisms (e.g., avoidance, denial), this may not effectively reduce distress (see table 1).

It was hypothesized that there will be the negative relationship between the informational identity style and identity distress among university students (H2), results finds that informational identity style was positively correlated with identity distress ($r = .20$, $p < .01$) leading to the rejection of this hypothesis, in this study, a significantly positive relationship was found between informational identity style and identity distress, which is different from what most previous research shows. Normally, students who explore their identity actively (informational style) tend to feel less distress. However, in this case, many students scored high on informational identity style, as shown by the slight negative skew (-0.31). This means most students were already using this identity style, leaving little variation in scores. When most people are similar in one variable, it becomes harder to see a clear pattern or relationship with another variable, like distress. Also, students who are in the early stages of exploring their identity might feel more confused or stressed, even though they are using a healthy style. This could be why a positive relationship appeared in the data, even if it wasn't strong or significant.

To test hypothesis 3, which assumed that identity styles would predict identity distress, regression analysis was conducted. The results indicate that diffuse-avoidant identity style was the strongest predictor of identity distress ($B = .29$, $p < .001$), followed by normative identity style ($B = .12$, $p < .05$). Informational

identity style did not significantly predict identity distress (B = -.08, p = .54) (see table 2). These findings suggest that individuals who delay identity-related decisions are more likely to experience distress, while those conforming to societal norms also face distress due to external pressures. The results are consistent with previous literature, which highlights the role of avoidance and societal expectations in contributing to psychological distress (Berzonsky, 2010).

For hypothesis 4, it was assumed that coping strategies would moderate the relationship between identity styles and identity distress. The moderation analysis revealed that coping strategies significantly moderated the effect of normative identity style (B = 0.02, p < .001) and diffuse-avoidant identity style (B = 0.02, p < .001) on identity distress. However, the moderation effect was weak for informational identity style (B = 0.01, p = .01) (see table 3, 4 & 5). These results suggest that while coping strategies help buffer distress, they are more effective for individuals with a diffuse-avoidant or normative identity style rather than those with an informational style (Pancer et al., 2013).

The graph describes the relationship between Informational Identity Style and Identity Distress, with Coping Strategies as a moderator (see figure 1). The three lines illustrate different levels of coping strategies: low (solid line), medium (dashed line), and high (dash-dot line). The trend suggests that for individuals with low coping strategies, an increase in informational identity style is associated with a decrease in identity distress. However, for individuals with medium and high coping strategies, identity distress rises as informational identity style rises. This indicates that coping strategies may influence how identity style affects distress, with lower coping strategies showing a different trend compared to higher levels.

The graph describes the relationship between Normative Identity Style and Identity Distress, with Coping Strategies as a moderating variable (see figure 2). The three lines illustrate different levels of coping strategies: low (solid line), medium (dashed line), and high (dash-dot line). The trend shows that as normative identity style rises, identity distress also rises, especially for individuals with medium and high coping strategies. The effect is more pronounced for those with high coping strategies, indicating that individuals who rely more on coping strategies experience greater distress when following a normative identity style. Conversely, for individuals with low coping strategies, the increase in identity distress is minimal.

The graph describes the relationship between Diffuse Avoidant Identity Style and Identity Distress, moderated by Coping Strategies (see figure 3). The three lines illustrate different levels of coping strategies: low (solid line), medium (dashed line), and high (dash-dot line). The trend indicates that as diffuse avoidant identity style rises, identity distress also rises, with a stronger effect for individuals with higher coping strategies. Those with high coping strategies experience the steepest rise in identity distress, followed by medium and low coping strategy groups. This suggests that individuals with a diffuse avoidant identity style are more vulnerable to identity distress, and even strong coping strategies do not buffer this effect; rather, distress is exacerbated as coping attempts rises.

The findings of the study highlight the role of identity styles in shaping identity distress and the moderating effect of coping strategies. Diffuse-avoidant identity style emerged as the strongest predictor of distress, while coping strategies provided some buffering effects. Gender differences were minimal, indicating that identity development processes may be similar for male and female university students. These results contribute to the understanding of identity formation and stress management in young adults, emphasizing the importance of interventions that promote adaptive identity exploration and coping mechanisms.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Although the study's findings were comprehensive but still there are some limitations and suggestions.

1. This study uses a cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time. As a result, it limits the ability to establish causality between identity styles, identity distress, and coping strategies. A longitudinal study would be more effective in examining these relationships over time.

2. Since the study is conducted in Pakistan, cultural factors that influence identity formation and coping strategies may differ from other countries. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to populations in other cultural settings.

3. Contestants' current psychological state (e.g., exam stress or personal challenges) may influence their responses, potentially leading to overstated or understated levels of identity distress and reliance on coping strategies.

4. The study does not account for all potential confounding variables, such as socioeconomic status, parental education, or mental health conditions, which may also play a role in the relationship between identity styles, identity distress, and coping strategies.

5. While the study explores coping strategies in general, a more detailed examination of specific coping styles (e.g., religious coping, social support, or substance use) could provide deeper insights into their moderating role.

IMPLICATIONS

1. This study expands on theory of identity styles by demonstrating how coping strategies moderate the relationship between identity styles and identity distress. It provides further insights into the interplay between identity development and stress management. By examining the relationship in the Pakistani context, the study contributes to a more culturally nuanced understanding of identity formation and coping mechanisms, which may differ from Western-based theories.

2. The study's findings can help university counselling centres and mental health professionals design tailored interventions to reduce identity distress by promoting effective coping strategies. University programs can incorporate workshops or counselling sessions to foster positive identity exploration and promote adaptive coping strategies, reducing psychological distress among students. Family support plays a crucial role in identity development. Parents and guardians can be educated on the impact of different family structures and cultural expectations on identity formation and distress levels.

3. Future research can build on this study to explore the impact of different cultural backgrounds and family systems on identity styles, distress, and coping strategies in various regions of Pakistan and globally. Intervention-based research could explore the effectiveness of specific coping strategy training programs in reducing identity distress and promoting healthy identity exploration.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the relationships between identity styles, identity distress, and coping strategies among university students. The findings highlight that different identity styles significantly influence identity distress, with diffuse-avoidant identity style being the strongest predictor of distress due to its association with procrastination and avoidance of identity-related decisions. On the contrary, students with an informational identity style experience lower distress levels as they actively seek self-relevant information and engage in identity exploration. Coping strategies play a moderating role in this relationship. Furthermore, demographic factors such as age, cultural upbringing, family system, gender, and residence influence identity distress and coping mechanisms. Urban students, individuals from collectivist cultures, and those experiencing greater social pressures reported higher identity distress. These insights underscore the importance of mental health interventions and support programs tailored to students' diverse identity development needs. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on identity formation, psychological well-being, and stress management in university settings. Future research should explore longitudinal trends in identity development, the effect of digital influences on identity distress, and the effectiveness of targeted coping interventions. By fostering adaptive identity exploration and strengthening coping mechanisms, universities can play a critical role in promoting students' psychological resilience, academic success, and overall well-being.

Authors Contribution

Farah Aymen (First Author): Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, and Visualization.

Dr.Ayesha Saeed: Supervision, Project Administration, and Writing - Review & Editing.

 Ayiza Asif: Assisted in reviewing the manuscript and provided feedback on drafts.

Marzia Batool: Contributed to literature review support and manuscript refinement

Muhammad Sarram Hassan: Data collection

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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