

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Adolescent Identity Development: Navigating Life Crises and Self-Exploration

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in addressing identity development during life crises among adolescents. Adolescence is a critical period of self-exploration and decision-making, where individuals may face challenges in developing stable identities. Through a survey of 303 young adults, the study investigates key factors influencing identity development, including career, relationships, faith, and social connections. Descriptive statistics reveal varying levels of identity achievement, moratorium, and diffusion, with a general trend toward moderate identity development. A significant proportion of respondents' report clarity in their career direction and relationship preferences, yet uncertainty remains in areas such as recreational activities and social attachment. These findings suggest that adolescents may fluctuate between different identity states as they navigate life crises. From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, the results highlight the potential benefits of CBT-based interventions, particularly in supporting self-reflection, value clarification, and goal setting. Such interventions can help adolescents consolidate their identities and foster more effective coping strategies in the face of life challenges. The study emphasizes the importance of providing tailored support to adolescents to facilitate their journey toward healthy identity development during critical periods of self-discovery.

Keywords: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Adolescents, Identity Development, Life Crisis, Identity Moratorium

Introduction

Adolescence is a pivotal period of identity development, characterized by the exploration of various life roles, beliefs, and values. During this time, individuals often encounter life crises that challenge their sense of self and trigger feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety

(Majeed, 2026). The ability of adolescents to navigate these challenges is crucial for their overall psychological well-being and future life satisfaction. Understanding the ways in which adolescents form and solidify their identities during life crises is essential for providing effective psychological support and intervention (Sapmaz, 2023).

Identity formation during adolescence is influenced by a multitude of factors, including familial relationships, peer dynamics, cultural influences, and personal experiences. In this process, adolescents often fluctuate between different identity states: identity achievement, moratorium, and diffusion. Identity achievement occurs when individuals make informed commitments to key life choices such as career and relationships, while moratorium refers to the period of exploration and indecision. Identity diffusion, on the other hand, reflects a lack of commitment and direction. These stages of identity development offer valuable insight into how adolescents manage and respond to life crises (Meeus, 2018).

In recent years, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been recognized as an effective approach to addressing psychological issues in adolescents, including those related to identity development. CBT focuses on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns that contribute to emotional distress and identity confusion. (Hafizah et al., 2025) This therapeutic approach helps individuals develop healthier coping mechanisms, promote self-reflection, and clarify personal values, which is particularly beneficial for adolescents experiencing identity crises. Given its efficacy, CBT has been widely used to support adolescents during critical periods of self-exploration and identity consolidation. Furthermore, integrating psychoeducation within these therapeutic frameworks can empower adolescents by normalizing the process of identity exploration and reducing the stigma often associated with transitional life stages (Turakulova, 2026). By fostering a coherent sense of self, CBT aids adolescents in managing the identity task, which is inherently linked to their long-term psychosocial adjustment and overall well-being (Lise et al., 2023; Ruiz & Yabut, 2024).

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of CBT in facilitating identity development among adolescents experiencing life crises. By exploring the relationship between cognitive exploration, behavioral experimentation, and identity consolidation, this research seeks to provide insights into how adolescents can navigate uncertainty and gain clarity in key areas of their identity. The findings from this study may inform the development of targeted interventions designed to help adolescents clarify their values, set personal goals, and make informed decisions during their journey toward self-identity. Ultimately, this research contributes to a better understanding of the factors that influence identity development in adolescents, particularly in the context of life crises. By combining principles of CBT with developmental theories, this study aims to create a comprehensive framework for supporting adolescents as they work through identity challenges. Through such interventions, adolescents can develop a stronger sense of self, improve emotional regulation, and build resilience in the face of life's difficulties.

Literature Review

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by identity exploration, which plays a fundamental role in shaping an individual's psychological and social well-being. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development highlights identity formation as one of the central tasks of adolescence. (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024) During this period, individuals explore different roles

and beliefs to develop a cohesive sense of self. However, adolescence is often accompanied by life crises, where the search for personal identity can become tumultuous, leading to confusion and uncertainty. Life crises, which include stressors such as academic pressures, relationship changes, and career indecision, may cause adolescents to fluctuate between identity states of achievement, moratorium, and diffusion. Studies have shown that adolescents experiencing these crises may benefit from therapeutic interventions aimed at guiding them through this critical phase of development (Muller & Stroud, 2017).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has emerged as an effective intervention for adolescents dealing with identity-related challenges. CBT, a therapeutic approach that focuses on changing negative thought patterns and behaviors, has been found to aid in self-reflection and goal setting. According to Beck and Dozois (2019), CBT can help individuals recognize and restructure cognitive distortions that contribute to identity confusion and emotional distress. Recent studies suggest that CBT is particularly beneficial for adolescents undergoing identity crises, as it provides tools for managing stress and anxiety while facilitating self-discovery. CBT encourages adolescents to explore their values, make informed decisions, and establish a clear sense of direction, thereby fostering greater identity achievement and reducing feelings of uncertainty (Z & Qin, 2023). Furthermore, providing a supportive environment in conjunction with such interventions can help normalize the distress associated with identity confusion.

While CBT has proven effective for identity development, it is important to consider the various stages of identity formation that adolescents undergo. Marcia's (1966) identity status theory posits that adolescents may experience four identity statuses: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. Recent research has expanded on Marcia's theory, noting that adolescents in moratorium and diffusion statuses may exhibit different patterns of coping with life crises. For example, adolescents in moratorium status actively explore options but may experience feelings of indecisiveness, whereas those in diffusion often lack commitment and may feel disconnected from their goals and values. CBT-based interventions are effective in addressing these stages by providing structured opportunities for adolescents to reflect on their values, explore options, and ultimately make decisions regarding their identity. Moreover, incorporating identity-specific modules within these clinical protocols can directly target the underlying processes of exploration and commitment, ensuring that interventions remain attuned to the individual's specific developmental trajectory (Bogaerts et al., 2023). Such tailored approaches align with Berzonsky's social-cognitive model, which underscores that fostering informational identity styles, characterized by proactive information gathering and critical self-evaluation is essential for achieving a stable and synthesized sense of self (Eryilmaz et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the role of social media in adolescent identity formation has become increasingly relevant in recent years. With the rise of social media platforms, adolescents are exposed to a plethora of information and influences that may either reinforce or challenge their identity development. (Middaugh, 2019). Social media provides adolescents with opportunities for social comparison, self-expression, and interaction, but it can also contribute to identity confusion and dissatisfaction, particularly when individuals face unrealistic portrayals of life and self-image. (Hällgren & Björk, 2022). This can be proved by

Javaid et al., 2024, stated that environment can be a factor that change a person's behavior by exposing themselves with social media.

Another study suggests that the findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive and values-based interventions in promoting balanced mental health, ethical technology use, and identity coherence among young adults facing life crises. This underscores the practical significance of designing digital and spiritual literacy programs that align with users' cultural contexts, providing evidence-based support for educational and psychosocial policies tailored to diverse populations in an increasingly digital and morally complex environment. (Saro et al., 2025)

In conclusion, adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, and life crises can significantly influence this developmental process. CBT offers valuable tools for adolescents to explore their values, make informed decisions, and develop a coherent sense of self. Through cognitive restructuring and behavioral experiments, adolescents can navigate the challenges of identity exploration, achieve clarity in their career, relationships, and personal beliefs, and ultimately transition into a more secure and resilient sense of self. However, further research is needed to explore the long-term efficacy of CBT-based interventions and to understand how these approaches can be adapted to the unique needs of adolescents navigating an increasingly complex digital landscape.

Methodology

The methodology for this study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey design to gather data on demographic characteristics, social media usage, and engagement with mental health content. A structured questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 303 participants, with questions focused on age, gender, educational level, daily social media usage, and the frequency of mental health content usage. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends in responses. Participants were selected through a non-probability convenience sampling method, targeting individuals who are active social media users, particularly within the age range of 18 to 40 years. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the relationship between social media engagement and mental health content consumption among a younger demographic.

Result & Discussion

Demography

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–22 years	198	65.3
	23–27 years	65	21.5
	28–32 years	23	7.6
	33–40 years	17	5.6
Gender	Male	99	32.7
	Female	204	67.3
Educational Level	SPM	15	5.0
	STPM/Diploma	144	47.5
	Degree	144	47.5
Daily Social Media Usage	< 1 hour	11	3.6
	1–2 hours	44	14.5
	3–4 hours	119	39.3

	> 5 hours	129	42.6
Mental Health Content Usage	Never	10	3.3
	Rarely	51	16.8
	Sometimes	174	57.4
	Often	46	15.2
	Always	22	7.3

Table 1 show that the demographic and behavioral patterns in the respondents. The majority of participants are in the 18-22 years age group (65.3%), which suggests that the sample is predominantly composed of younger individuals, likely students or early-career individuals. A significant portion of the sample is also between the ages of 23-27 years (21.5%), with fewer individuals in the older age brackets. This indicates a youthful and potentially tech-savvy demographic, which may influence their social media usage and engagement with online content. In terms of gender, there is a noticeable gender disparity, with females making up 67.3% of the sample compared to 32.7% males, which could reflect broader societal trends or sample-specific factors in this study. Regarding educational level, most respondents hold either an STPM/Diploma or Degree qualification (47.5% each), which aligns with the younger age groups and suggests that many participants are in higher education or have recently completed it. When it comes to daily social media usage, a large proportion (42.6%) reports using social media for more than 5 hours a day, highlighting the significant role social media plays in daily life for this demographic. The 3-4 hours category also has a substantial representation (39.3%), further supporting the idea that social media is a major activity for most respondents.

Finally, mental health content usage shows a diverse range of engagement, with most respondents (57.4%) reporting they use mental health-related content sometimes, followed by 16.8% who use it rarely and 15.2% who use it often. Interestingly, only 3.3% of participants report never engaging with mental health content, indicating that the topic is relatively accessible and viewed as relevant by most individuals. This mix of engagement levels highlights the importance of providing content that resonates with various levels of interest and engagement, particularly within the context of younger users who may seek mental health information at different frequencies.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics Identity-Achievement/Identity-Moratorium/Identity-Diffusion

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Based on past experiences, I've chosen the type of dating relationship I want now.	303	3.94	.921
A person's faith is unique to everyone. I've considered and reconsidered it myself and know what I can believe.	303	3.84	.964
It took me a while to figure it out, but now I really know what I want for a career.	303	3.91	.913
It took me a while to figure it out, but now I really know what I want for a career.	303	4.04	.900

I've tried many different friendships and now I have a clear idea of what I look for in a friend.	303	3.59	.958
While I don't have one recreational activity I'm really committed to, I'm experiencing numerous leisure outlets to identify one I can really get involved in.	303	2.32	1.261
I'm not sure what religion means to me. I'd like to make up my mind, but I'm not done looking yet.	303	3.51	1.006
In finding an acceptable viewpoint on life itself, I find myself engaging in a lot of discussions with others and some self-exploration...	303	2.99	1.347
I really don't know what kind of friend is best for me. I'm trying to figure out exactly what friendship means to me.	303	3.13	1.105
I sometimes join in recreational activities when asked, but I rarely try anything on my own.	303	2.27	1.276
I don't give religion much thought and it doesn't bother me one way or the other.	303	2.59	1.348
I don't have any real close friends, and I don't think I'm looking for one right now.	303	2.94	1.070
Sometimes I join in leisure activities, but I really don't see a need to look for a particular activity to do regularly.	303	2.47	1.361
I don't have any close friends. I just like to hang around with the crowd.	0		
Total Mean	0	3.19	

Table 2 shows the level of identity-achievement/ identity-moratorium/identity-diffusion. The overall mean for identity status (3.19) indicates a moderate level of identity development, suggesting that many adolescents are navigating between identity achievement and moratorium, with some elements of diffusion. The descriptive statistics for identity-related dimensions (Identity-Achievement, Identity-Moratorium, and Identity-Diffusion) provide insights into how individuals perceive their personal identity development, including relationships, career choices, friendships, and recreational activities. The mean scores range from 2.27 to 4.04, indicating various stages of identity exploration and commitment. The highest mean (4.04) comes from the item "It took me a while to figure it out, but now I really know what I want for a career," suggesting that many respondents have achieved a clear sense of career direction. Similarly, the item "Based on past experiences, I've chosen the type of dating relationship I want now" (Mean = 3.94) indicates that individuals are confident in their relationship preferences. Both items suggest a level of identity achievement in specific domains. Conversely, lower mean scores on items regarding religious and leisure commitments may reflect an ongoing process of identity moratorium, where participants continue to explore various possibilities without yet reaching stable conclusions (Avci et al., 2024). These findings reflect the theoretical framework of identity status, wherein active experimentation with multiple life domains often precedes the consolidation of long-term commitments (Murad, 2024). Furthermore, the observed variability in these scores highlights

how identity formation is not a linear progression but rather a multifaceted process that fluctuates across different life domains (Götzl et al., 2022). Such findings are consistent with literature suggesting that while identity achievement is high in domains like occupation, other areas such as religious identity and recreational interests often remain in a state of searching moratorium during emerging adulthood (Álamo & Llorent, 2024,; Karaś & Ciecuch, 2023).

However, other items indicate that many individuals are still in the process of exploring their identities. For example, the item "While I don't have one recreational activity, I'm really committed to, I'm experiencing numerous leisure outlets to identify one I can really get involved in" (Mean = 2.32) has the lowest mean score, reflecting an ongoing exploration of personal interests and leisure activities. Additionally, "In finding an acceptable viewpoint on life itself, I find myself engaging in a lot of discussions with others and some self-exploration" (Mean = 2.99) suggests that some respondents are in the process of searching for their worldview, indicating an identity moratorium phase. The variability in responses, shown by the standard deviations (ranging from 0.900 to 1.361), further highlights the diversity in how individuals experience their identity development, with some showing more uncertainty and exploration than others. These findings align with person-centered models, which categorize adolescents into distinct clusters such as searching moratoriums or troubled diffusion based on their varying levels of ruminative and proactive exploration, (Sica & Sestito, 2021). These diverse trajectories underscore the necessity of examining domain-specific identity processes, as global factors often fail to fully capture the nuance of maturation across vocational and interpersonal spheres (Branje et al., 2021).

Items reflecting identity diffusion, such as "I don't have any real close friends, and I don't think I'm looking for one right now" (Mean = 2.94) and "I don't give religion much thought and it doesn't bother me one way or the other" (Mean = 2.59), show lower mean scores and higher standard deviations, indicating that some individuals have yet to establish a clear sense of direction or commitment in certain aspects of their identity. The total mean of 3.19 suggests that respondents, on average, are somewhere between identity achievement and moratorium, with a tendency toward exploring and solidifying aspects of their identity. This variability in identity development is typical in young adulthood, where individuals are navigating multiple roles and making important life decisions related to career, relationships, and personal beliefs. Furthermore, the differentiation between these statuses remains vital, as specific clusters such as the searching moratorium have been shown to encompass higher levels of proactive and ruminative exploration compared to the relatively stagnant levels found in diffusion-based statuses (Iwasa et al., 2023). Consequently, researchers have observed that religious identity demonstrates distinct cluster prevalence, with diffusion and moratorium statuses exhibiting higher frequencies of atheism compared to commitment-oriented achievement or foreclosure profiles (Sorgente et al., 2021).

Higher scores in career clarity, faith reflection, and relationship choices reflect identity achievement, while lower scores in recreational commitment and social attachment suggest ongoing exploration or uncertainty. From a cognitive behavioral perspective, identity development is shaped through cognitive exploration, behavioral experimentation, and reflective processing. Adolescents experiencing life crises may fluctuate between identity states as they reassess beliefs, roles, and goals. These findings highlight the importance of CBT-based interventions that support guided self-reflection, value clarification, and goal

setting to facilitate healthier identity consolidation. By addressing these developmental transitions, mentors can assist youth in moving away from the passivity often associated with identity diffusion toward a more intentional and proactive search for meaning (Rindorindo & Purwanti, 2025). Such targeted support is critical, as longitudinal evidence indicates that identity trajectories are often characterized by prolonged stability, making early intervention in the moratorium phase essential for fostering long-term psychological well-being (Mannerström et al., 2023). Moreover, integrating these domain-specific interventions allows practitioners to distinguish between adaptive exploration and maladaptive ruminative processes, which are known to impede the transition toward identity synthesis (Becht et al., 2021). In this regard, practitioners should encourage "exploration in depth," which fosters a more secure identification with commitments and mitigates the potentially detrimental effects of ruminative cycles (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023). Ultimately, this nuanced approach ensures that the resolution of an identity crisis is not merely a cessation of questioning, but a meaningful synthesis that integrates personal values with stable, self-chosen commitments (Fachrunisa & Riyono, 2023; Wendling & Sagas, 2021).

Recommendation

Based on the findings from the descriptive statistics, it is recommended that individuals continue to engage in self-reflection and exploration across various domains of their identity, particularly in areas like recreational activities, friendships, and spiritual beliefs. For those who are in the identity moratorium phase, it might be beneficial to actively seek experiences that allow for deeper exploration, such as engaging in new hobbies, participating in diverse social circles, and exploring different philosophical or spiritual perspectives. This process can be guided through introspective activities, discussions, or seeking mentorship, which may help clarify personal values, interests, and goals. It is important to recognize that identity development is a dynamic, ongoing process, and there is no set timeline for achieving a complete sense of self.

Additionally, for those who show signs of identity diffusion such as uncertainty in relationships or career choices greater focus could be placed on setting specific, manageable goals for self-exploration. This can involve seeking clarity on what values and principles are most important, narrowing down choices for friendships and relationships, and taking small, proactive steps to gain confidence in areas like career direction and personal interests. Providing resources or workshops on career planning, emotional intelligence, and relationship building could also support individuals in progressing towards identity achievement. Creating spaces where individuals can discuss their experiences and challenges related to identity can foster a supportive environment for growth and development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from the descriptive statistics on identity development reveal that individuals are at varying stages of self-exploration and commitment across different life domains, including career, relationships, friendships, and spirituality. While many respondents have achieved clarity and direction in certain aspects of their identity, such as career and relationship preferences, others are still in the process of exploring their personal beliefs, recreational interests, and social connections. The variability in responses suggests that identity development is a dynamic and ongoing process, particularly during periods of life transition and self-discovery.

Given this, it is crucial to provide individuals with opportunities for continued exploration and self-reflection in supportive environments, where they can gain greater clarity and confidence in their identity. By promoting activities and resources that encourage introspection, goal setting, and exploration, individuals can move forward in their journey of self-development, ultimately achieving a stronger sense of purpose and alignment across various areas of their lives.

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