## Identity Complexity and Integration in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Heterosexual Adolescents and Emerging Adults: Implications for Clinical Practice

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### Abstract

The present study aimed at assessing whether differences exist in identity complexity and integration between 31 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) and 33 heterosexual youths (mean age 21.47, *SD* = 3.27), both Italian and US. Participants completed a newly created questionnaire, the Identity Labels and Life Contexts Questionnaire (ILLCQ), which assesses the interplay between identity dimensions and life contexts. The ILLCQ assesses identity integration on three levels: (a) integration among the different domains of identity in their intersection with the various life contexts (assessed through salience and centrality); (b) integration between an individual's self-definition and the definition of self made by others (perceived self-recognition); and (c) the integration between how the person perceives her/himself to be and the way she/he shows her/himself to others. Results suggest that identity salience varies significantly across life contexts for both LGB and heterosexual youths. The only significant difference between the LGB and heterosexual groups was higher salience and centrality of the sexual orientation domain for LGB youths. Sexuality represents a core identity domain for LGB participants, and perhaps less so for heterosexual participants. LGB youths reported lower general identity recognition from other people. Implications for clinical practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Identity complexity entails a multifaceted conception of identity, considered as encompassing several identity components that interrelate with one another in reciprocal and complex ways (Farrelly et al., 2017). This conception of identity derives from Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), which considers identity dimensions as socially constructed and recognizes that identity dimensions cannot be fully understood in isolation. We build on this assumption in proposing a wider and more expansive conception of identity integration.

In particular, in the present study we examine identity complexity and integration in both Italian and US heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youths, with the aim of verifying whether differences exist in the interplay of identity elements between the two groups. Our research hypothesis is that LGB youths still feel conditioned by social opinion and prejudices in the way they live and express their sexual orientation and, for this reason, the assignment of salience and centrality among the various aspect of Self differs from that expressed by their heterosexual counterparts.

In the following paragraphs, we briefly present our theoretical framework about identity. Next, we specify our conception of identity complexity and explicate the unique characteristics of identity integration for sexual minorities. From there, we describe the study and discuss the results, also focusing on implications for future research and clinical practice.

**1.1 Identity: A Theoretical Framework**

The concept of identity has been assigned multiple meanings in the literature, and its development has been studied from various points of view and through different methodologies – which are often highly divergent from each other (Schwartz, 2001; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Following Erikson's epigenetic model (1950)— where identity development was conceived as a dynamic process of interaction between the individual and the environment, and between identity *synthesis* and identity *confusion*—many other approaches have been developed, each focusing on specific aspects of identity. Among them, Marcia's identity status model (1966) has inspired the greatest number of theoretical and empirical publications (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Marcia conceptualized identity as based on the dimensions of *exploration* (considering potential life alternatives) and *commitment* (selecting one or more of the alternatives considered). This model has been extended and expanded by diverse authors (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Meeus, 2011). Marcia also proposed the concept of identity *domains* (Farrelly et al., 2017; Grotevant, 1993; Marcia, 1993; Schwartz, 2001; Waterman, 1985), assuming that "identity may operate differently across domains and differently within individual domains than at the overall level" (Schwartz, 2001, p. 13).

Most of the literature, however, has studied the various domains separately, whereas the interconnections among them have rarely been considered. The intersectionality paradigm has provided a significant contribution in this field, studying the interaction of multiple stigmatized identities among minority group members (Crenshaw 1989, 1993; Cole, 2008). We extend the intersectionality paradigm further, as detailed in the next paragraph.

Expanding the conception of identity as an interplay of components, we assume that identity may be considered a *bridging construct* (Floyd, Cornelissen, Wright, & Delios, 2011), which is a larger whole that encompasses multiple dimensions and components that intersect and interact with one another, and with environmental factors (Farrelly et al., 2017).

This model, defined as the Cross-Contexts-Domains-Model (CCDM), extends Erikson's concept of identity *synthesis* by assuming (a) that identity develops along the lifespan through a process of integration among various aspects of self-elicited experiences and (b) that each domain of identity is expressed differently across the diverse life contexts.

## 1.2 The MMDI and the CCDM

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI; Jones & McEwen, 2000) describes identity development in terms of dynamic and continuous exchanges between the various identity dimensions and the social context. These authors stress how the different identity components vary in salience depending on the specific contexts of interaction. They also introduce the concept of meaning-making capacity, which is viewed as a filter between social influences and the individual's subjective perception of such influences. Jones and McEwen identify three levels of meaning-making capacity, which go from an unconscious influence from the environment to a major consciousness of the reciprocal relationships among identity domains and the external influences.

The CCDM adapts from Jones and McEwen's model the fundamental principles of reciprocal and complex relationships among identity domains, and of each domain's variable salience across life contexts. The CCDM also proposes that individuals form their self-image, not only from their inner self-perceptions, but also from social feedback from important others. Especially in adolescence, individuals are interested in—and worried about—what others think of them, often adjusting their self-image and behavior to match others' expectations (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Harter, 2012; Leary, 2007). Put another way, individuals evidence diverse aspects of self (Harter, Bresnick, Bouchey, & Whitesell, 1997; Transue, 2007), and assign variable salience to the different identity domains (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), depending on the specific features elicited by the context where one finds oneself at a given moment (Farrelly et al., 2017). The integration between self-perceptions and self-image (Settineri, Merlo, Turiaco, & Mento, 2018) mirrored by others may occur in more or less harmonious fashion. For example, it might be difficult for a woman to reconcile her identity of mother with her identity of worker, member of a religious faith, or follower of a political orientation, especially when important others do not recognize one or more fundamental aspects of her identity or believe that her various roles can "go together."

Extending the intersectionality paradigm and Jones and McEwen (2000), we contend that all people can experience aspects of their identities as being in conflict with another—such as work-family conflicts, friend-family conflicts, family-partner conflicts, and so on—and that resolutions to these conflicts may be more or less adaptive and may prevent or foster psychological distress, especially in adolescents and emerging adults (who are most susceptible to peer pressure).

However, as previous research suggests (Clément, Noels, & Deneault, 2001), adjustment may be especially difficult for youth who belong to minority groups in one or more identity domains (ethnic, sexual, religious, etc.). In the field of cultural and ethnic identity, for example, many studies have highlighted the challenges that immigrants and ethnic minority group members face—including inadequate educational resources, marginalization into low socioeconomic and underresourced communities, and institutional discrimination—which may influence the development of their identities (e.g., Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Phillips & Pittman, 2003; Yoder, 2000). Other studies have focused on sexual minority groups because of the difficulties that youth in these groups may encounter in their identity development because of social stigma and discrimination (e.g., Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Meyer, 2003).

### 1.3 Identity in LGB Youths

Although some authors have recently criticized the research paradigm that tends to view LGB youths as a population at risk rather than as a resilient population, and have argued that homophobia is significantly declining (e.g., McCormack, 2012), a significant amount of research has shown that LGB youths, as well as the transgender population, still suffer from social stigma and violence due to their minority status (e.g., Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Scandurra et al., 2019a; Scandurra, Braucci, Bochicchio, Valerio, & Amodeo 2019b; Settineri, Frisone, & Merlo, 2018; Vitelli et al., 2017), and that this stigmatization negatively affects mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Bochicchio et al., 2019; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Scandurra et al., 2018a; Vita, Settineri, Liotta, Benvenga, & Trimarchi, 2018). Thus, LGB youths represent a vulnerable population, stigmatized within different and multiple social environments such as home, school, and community settings (e.g., Lingiardi et al., 2016).

Furthermore, several studies have also demonstrated that the LGB population suffers from serious health disparities compared to the heterosexual population (McCrone, 2018). For instance, LGB youths are more likely than heterosexual youths to ideate or attempt suicide (Halpert, 2002; McDaniel, Purcell, & D'Augelli, 2001; Russell & Joyner, 2001).

It is important to note that these higher levels of distress and suicidality are not associated with identity itself, but rather with the social stigma attached to these identities (Kelleher, 2009; Scandurra et al., 2019a). Finally, these social stigmatizations may lead LGB youths to internalize negative societal attitudes and develop internalized homophobia (e.g., Meyer, 2003; Williamson, 2000) that, as demonstrated by Igartua, Gill, and Montoro (2003), might affect mental health.

On the basis of this brief review, it seems clear that LGB youths experience specific challenges in their identity development, as their wellbeing and mental health might be affected by social rejection. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that a gay boy might find it harder to integrate the sexual dimension of his identity into his overall sense of self if his family does not recognize and accept his sexual orientation (Elizur & Ziv, 2001).

The domains of sexuality and religion may clash when individuals from highly religious backgrounds wish to engage in sexual relationships and behaviors that are frowned upon within the specific religious tradition to which they belong (Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013). Further, it is plausible to hypothesize that the intersection of religion and sexuality may be experienced differently within the family context than when spending time with peers or with one's romantic partner.

**1.4 Identity Salience and Integration**

When referring to the importance of specific identity domains across contexts, the concept of *salience* must be introduced. Salience is derived from Sellers and colleagues' (1998) Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), which assumes that "identities are situationally influenced as well as being stable properties of the person" (p. 23).

That is, identity is composed of various domain-specific processes that intersect in complex ways, and these intersections may differ depending on the context in which they occur. In this model, Sellers et al. differentiate between racial *centrality* and *salience*. Indeed, "racial centrality refers to the extent to which a person normatively defines himself or herself with regard to race" (Sellers et al., 1998, p. 25), and it is stable across contexts; whereas racial salience "refers to the extent to which one's race is a relevant part of one's self-concept at a particular moment or in a particular situation" (p. 24). In CCDM, we (Farrell et al., 2017) suggested that centrality and salience are applicable to all identity domains and, specifically, we believe that studying the shifts of salience across the various life contexts provides a measure of one's identity integration.

Within the CCDM, identity integration carries a similar meaning as Erikson's (1950) identity synthesis, which refers to a coherent and internally consistent sense of self over time and across

situations. In the present study, identity integration is considered through three factors that refer, respectively, to:

1.  *The extent to which the salience of each identity domain is stable across the different life contexts*. In other words, when a specific identity domain has a fairly stable salience attributed to it across the various contexts of life, it is possible to surmise that it is a solid aspect of identity regardless of the context being considered. Nevertheless, if the salience of a specific identity domain does not differ across the various contexts, we can surmise that the individual might not be responsive to external influences and may experience difficulties in adapting to the social context. Thus, we may say that a balance in variability versus flexibility is needed to maintain a flexible but coherent sense of self;

2.  *The level of social recognition of self*. This dimension refers to the degree to which individuals feel that their identity configurations are recognized by important others. In this case, following the self-verification theory (Swann, 2012) identity integration concerns the correspondence between "how I feel I am" and "how the others see me." When the grade of concordance is high, one may have a more harmonious sense of self; on the contrary, when the concordance between the two points of view is low, individuals might experience more conflicts in their identity development and definition, especially when the discordance concerns central aspects of one's identity (Harter & Monsour, 1992);

3.  *The quality of the influence of social contexts on identity*. External pressures may foster or prevent the development and the expression of positive and authentic personal characteristics. From this point of view, identity integration refers to the coherence perceived by the individuals in terms of how they perceive themselves to be and how they show themselves to others (Leary, 1995).

**1.5 The Current Study**

The current study aimed at examining whether differences exist in identity integration between Italian and US heterosexual and LGB adolescents and young adults. The study was a pilot investigation using a novel methodology, based on the ILLCQ (Farrelly et al., 2017). This measure assesses the interplay between identity dimensions and life contexts, considering these two aspects of identity development as closely intertwined.

On the basis of previous empirical evidence (for a review, see Bilodeau & Renn, 2005), the main hypothesis was that LGB participants would report greater shifts in identity dimension salience across contexts, as an expression of weaker identity integration, assumedly because of difficult social acceptance and internalized stigmatization. As a consequence, it was expected that they

would report lower levels of perceived self-recognition by others and greater environmental obstacles in self-definition and identity expression.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The sample included 64 participants: 31 who identified themselves as LGB and 33 who identified themselves as heterosexual.

The two subgroups were comparable for age ($M_{lgb}$ = 21.47, $DS$ = 3.27; $M_{heterosexual}$ = 21.24, $DS$ = 3.25; $t$ (62) = -.178, $p$ = .859), gender (20 lesbian women and 11 gay men; 20 heterosexual women and 13 heterosexual men; $\chi^2$ (1) = .104, $p$ = .747), nationality (12 Italian and 19 US LGB participants; 16 Italian and 17 US heterosexual participants; $\chi^2$ (1) = .621, $p$ = .421), and ethnicity (only Caucasians in both groups).

### 2.2 Procedures

The ILLCQ was administered online as part of a wider battery of identity measures, and through a secure gateway accessible only to the principal investigator. Respondents were identifiable only by IP address, which was removed by the PI before sharing the data with the other researchers. Participants were recruited both in Italy and in the USA, through different channels.

In Italy, the study was advertised through social networks, mailing lists (comprising high schools), and through the university listserv (called CSI) at the University of Naples Federico II. Youth from different regions of Italy had access to the questionnaire.

The original Italian sample consisted of 551 participants (73% females and 27% males), ranging in age from 14 to 29 ($M$ = 20.75 years, $SD$ = 4.07), attending both high school and university. For minor participants, informed consent was asked according to the rules of each institution.

The subsample ($N$ = 64) used in the present study was drawn from the whole sample according to characteristics comparable to the US sample, so as to make the two subsamples comparable.

The US sample was gathered from Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, whose student population is heavily minority (about 85% of students are nonwhite) and immigrant (about 70% are first- or second-generation immigrants), but minority students were not included in this study because the Italian sample did not present the same ethnic diversity and the data would not have been comparable.

The study was posted onto the psychology student pool using the SONA Systems website. Participants received two hours of credit toward a research requirement (where a total of five research hours is required to pass the introductory psychology course).

It is plausible to believe that, due to the credit reward, FIU participants were more motivated to answer the questionnaire than Italian participants were.

The original FIU sample consisted of 417 participants (81% females and 19% males), ages 18 to 29 ($M$ = 21.17 years, $SD$ = 2.36).

At both sites, the study was approved by the site's Institutional Review Board.

Participants included in the present study were the only ones who identified themselves as lesbian women or gay men. From the whole US subsample, as reported above, the non-Caucasian participants were excluded.

**2.3 Measures**

The ILLCQ was inspired by qualitative methodology developed by Narváez and colleagues (Narváez, Meyer, Kertzner, Ouellette, & Gordon, 2009) to study the intersections among sexual, ethnic/racial, and gender identities of people belonging to minority groups and how these identities interact with different sociocultural contexts and over time.

The ILLCQ transforms this methodology into a quantitative measure and assesses the interplay between identity dimensions and life contexts, considering these two aspects of identity development as closely intertwined (see Farrelly et al., 2017 for a comprehensive view of the ILLCQ).

The ILLCQ consists of three parts, which respectively assess the three above-mentioned dimensions of identity integration.

Part 1—*How I define myself*—consists of a 13x7 table, where the salience assigned to 13 identity dimensions—specifically, *Gender*, *Stage of Life*, *Socioeconomic Status*, *Race*, *Sexual Orientation*, *School Success*, *Physical Appearance*, *Look*, *Youth Subcultures*, *Political Orientation*, *Religious Faith*, and *Music and Sport*—across seven life contexts— specifically, *Family*, *School/Job*, *Neighborhood*, *Peer Group*, *Leisure Contexts*, *Religion Places*, and *Dating*— is assessed. Respondents are asked to rate from 1 to 5 how important each identity aspect is in each life context. Thus, each participant rates 91 (13x7) domain/context intersections.

The second part—*How others see me*—presents a 4x13 table, assessing the perceived recognition of self-definition in each above-mentioned life context by important others in life—specifically, *Parents*, *Friends*, *Romantic Partners*, and *Teachers*.

In this case, participants are asked to rate from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree) how much those important others would agree with their self-definition in each life context. Finally, the third part—*How others affect my way of being*—assesses what kind of influence the seven above-mentioned life contexts have upon identity development and expression. Respondents can choose among "positive," "negative," or "neutral" influence.   In addition, some closed and open-ended questions are asked, among which are whether there are some specific aspects of self that the person feels are not recognized by others, what they are, and if so, by whom; and whether there are some aspects of self that the respondent tries to hide from others, what they are, and especially in what circumstances.

## 2.4 Preliminary and Statistical Analyses

Before testing hypotheses, some preliminary analyses were performed. Specifically, outliers were identified through a standardized score greater than 3.29 or smaller than -3.29 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), but no outliers were found. Similarly, it was not necessary to replace missing values, because the online questionnaire did not permit participants to skip answers. Finally, the data were normalized following the recommendations by Templeton (2011).

For Part 1 of the questionnaire, a mixed- and repeated-measures ANOVA was performed to identify whether differences exist between LGB and heterosexual participants in the shifts of identity domain salience across contexts.  For each identity domain, the seven intersections with life contexts were considered as repeated measures of the same variable and their fluctuations were analyzed through both within- and between-subjects differences. When the sphericity assumption was violated, Greenhouse-Geisser statistics were used and reported. For clarity, raw (non-normalized) means were reported in the tables.

These analyses allowed us to verify whether the shifts in salience across contexts were significant both in the LGB and in the heterosexual group, and whether such fluctuations worked differently in these two groups. Means plots both for LGB and heterosexual participants were also examined. Identity centrality was evaluated by summing the all the salience scores given for a single identity domain across the seven life contexts. The comparison of identity centrality between LGB and heterosexual participants was then evaluated using independent-samples t-tests.  With regard to Part 2, a repeated-measures ANOVA was again used to analyze within- and between-subjects differences in the levels of perceived recognition by others.

In this case, the values for concordance between the self-definition and the recognition at the different identity domains given by each of the important others (friends, parents, partner, and teachers) were considered as repeated measures of the same variable. Also in this case, a means plot was used to illustrate the findings.

Finally, for the analysis of Part 3, we compared through a chi-square test ($\chi^2$) whether differences existed between LGB and heterosexual participants in the number of contexts identified as having positive, negative, or neutral influences upon identity development and expression.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Part 1. Salience and Centrality of Identity Domains

The mixed-design ANOVA with identity salience across contexts as within-subjects and between-subjects (LGB, heterosexual) factors indicated that all identity domains presented significant within-subjects differences both for LGB participants (see Table 1) and for their heterosexual counterparts (see Table 2), suggesting that the salience attributed to identity domains varies significantly across life contexts for both groups. These results suggest that people assign variable importance to a given self-aspect compared to the others depending on the elicitations from the context where they act in a given moment. The shifts of salience across the life contexts are displayed in the mean plot (see Figure 1 and 2).

Between-subjects differences showed no significant results, except for *sexual orientation*, which presented a greater variability in LGB participants $F(1, 61) = 5.7$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2_p = .085$.

This result was also confirmed by the analysis of identity centrality. Results indicated that sexual orientation represented the only significant difference between groups, being more central to the identity of LGB participants ($M = 23.61$) compared heterosexual participants ($M = 19.41$), $t = -2.39$, $p = .020$, $d = .59$.

**Figure 1.** Mean Plot of Part 1 (Identity Domains within Contexts) for LGB Participants (n = 31)
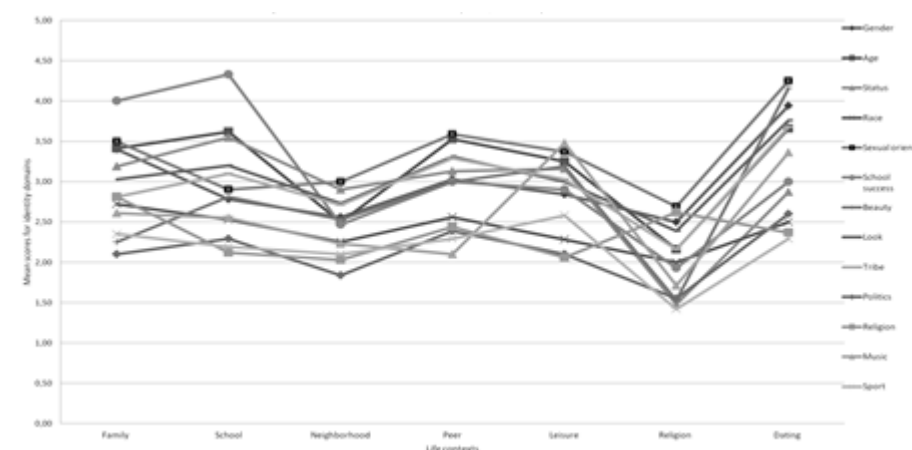
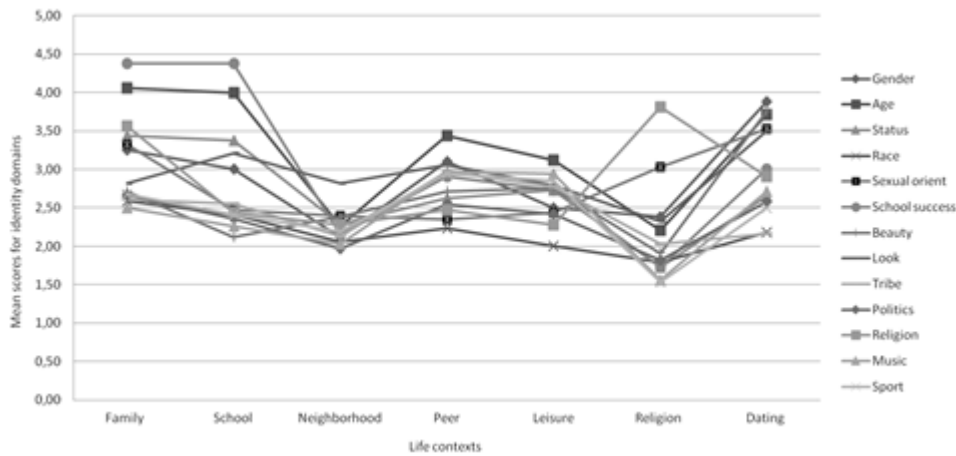**Figure 2.** Mean Plot of Part 1 (Identity Domains within Contexts) for Heterosexual Participants (n = 33)



**Table 1.** Within-Subjects Identity Domains Effects in LGB Participants (n = 31)

| *Domains* | Family M(SD) | School/Job M(SD) | Neighbor M(SD) | Peer Group M(SD) | Leisure M(SD) | Religion M(SD) | Dating M(SD) | F | df | $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | *Life Contexts* | | | | | | |
| Gender | 3.40(1.27) | 2.77(1.38) | 2.60(1.43) | 3.00(1.39) | 2.87(1.41) | 2.53(1.59) | 3.9(1.21) | 5.10*** | 3.80 | .15 |
| Age | 3.35(1.23) | 3.61(1.31) | 2.52(1.36) | 3.55(1.29) | 3.26(1.49) | 2.19(1.49) | 3.65(1.2) | 9.18*** | 3.46 | .23 |
| Status | 3.17(1.26) | 3.53(1.22) | 2.87(1.20) | 3.13(1.04) | 3.13(1.38) | 1.50(1.04) | 2.80(1.24) | 13.75*** | 6 | .32 |
| Sexual orientation | 3.52(1.50) | 2.97(1.60) | 3.06(1.65) | 3.64(1.08) | 3.42(1.43) | 2.74(1.79) | 4.26(1.12) | 7.95*** | 6 | .18 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 2.48(1.68) | 2.27(1.37) | 1.94(1.06) | 2.03(1.38) | 1.84(1.09) | 1.76(1.22) | 2.09(1.28) | 2.36 | 3.91 | .07 |
| School success | 3.97(0.98) | 4.31(1.07) | 2.48(1.50) | 3.03(1.27) | 2.90(0.18) | 2.00(1.35) | 3.00(1.46) | 21.34*** | 3.74 | .43 |
| Appearance | 2.23(1.31) | 2.84(1.46) | 2.55(1.31) | 3.00(1.21) | 3.19(1.08) | 1.55(0.89) | 4.13(0.96) | 21.03*** | 6 | .41 |
| Look | 2.80(1.40) | 3.13(1.48) | 2.73(1.41) | 3.30(1.29) | 3.03(1.45) | 2.20(1.40) | 3.67(1.32) | 7.42*** | 4.32 | .20 |
| Sub-culture | 2.40(1.50) | 2.83(1.53) | 2.43(1.43) | 3.37(1.22) | 3.10(1.42) | 2.10(1.40) | 3.10(1.40) | 6.77*** | 6 | .19 |
| Politics | 2.76(1.27) | 2.42(1.17) | 2.00(0.97) | 2.51(1.32) | 2.12(1.24) | 1.81(1.10) | 2.51(1.25) | 4.53** | 4.18 | .13 |
| Religion | 3.54(1.14) | 2.39(1.30) | 2.15(1.23) | 2.39(1.22) | 2.18(0.95) | 3.79(1.61) | 2.79(1.34) | 3.23*** | 3.29 | .10 |
| Music | 2.36(1.32) | 2.06(1.30) | 1.94(1.17) | 2.91(1.23) | 2.88(1.44) | 1.58(1.15) | 2.70(1.24) | 11.68*** | 4.19 | .29 |
| Sport | 2.58(1.34) | 1.30(1.29) | 2.09(1.20) | 2.82(1.24) | 2.76(1.32) | 1.45(0.90) | 2.33(1.19) | 5.28*** | 4.19 | .15 |

SD= Standard deviation; Df=Degree of freedom; F (significance coefficient); $\eta^2$= eta squared

**Table 2.** Within-Subjects Identity Domains Effects in Heterosexual participants (n = 33)

| Domains | Family M(SD) | School/Job M(SD) | Neighbor M(SD) | Peer Group M(SD) | Leisure M(SD) | Religion M(SD) | Dating M(SD) | F | df | $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | *Life Contexts* | | | | | | |
| Gender | 3.25(1.39) | 3.03(1.42) | 2.16(1.17) | 3.09(1.17) | 2.41(1.29) | 2.37(1.45) | 3.94(1.29) | 9.03*** | 6 | .23 |
| Age | 4.03(0.88) | 3.91(1.07) | 2.18(1.18) | 3.33(1.13) | 2.91(1.21) | 2.12(1.45) | 3.67(1.34) | 9.18*** | 6 | .23 |
| Status | 3.36(1.27) | 3.18(1.53) | 2.21(1.08) | 2.48(1.12) | 2.64(1.22) | 1.70(1.16) | 2.61(1.22) | 12.63*** | 6 | .22 |
| Sexual orientation | 3.28(1.40) | 2.34(1.45) | 2.38(1.43) | 2.34(1.40) | 2.28(1.35) | 3.19(1.71) | 3.53(1.66) | 6.17*** | 4.14 | .17 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 2.71(1.49) | 2.55(1.57) | 2.29(1.30) | 2.58(1.41) | 2.32(1.49) | 2.03(1.20) | 2.52(1.31) | 2.78* | 6 | .08 |
| School success | 4.33(0.88) | 4.27(1.10) | 2.09(1.18) | 2.91(1.18) | 2.64(1.32) | 1.73(1.10) | 2.85(1.52) | 34.31*** | 4.12 | .52 |
| Appearance | 2.61(1.22) | 3.03(1.29) | 2.30(1.18) | 2.73(1.15) | 2.70(1.36) | 1.94(1.32) | 3.73(0.98) | 10.05*** | 6 | .24 |
| Look | 2.76(1.54) | 3.12(1.47) | 2.79(1.45) | 3.06(1.34) | 2.73(1.50) | 2.36(1.47) | 3.54(1.23) | 5.46*** | 6 | .15 |
| Sub-culture | 2.50(1.34) | 2.50(1.22) | 2.00(1.16) | 2.90(1.40) | 2.66(1.43) | 1.87(1.37) | 3.03(1.33) | 6.69*** | 4.47 | .18 |
| Politic | 2.03(1.32) | 2.42(1.17) | 1.94(0.97) | 2.51(1.32) | 2.21(1.24) | 1.82(1.10) | 2.51(1.25) | 4.95** | 6 | .13 |
| Religion | 2.84(1.41) | 2.13(1.31) | 2.03(1.14) | 2.45(1.41) | 2.06(1.29) | 2.64(1.54) | 2.39(1.41) | 12.44*** | 3.05 | .28 |
| Music | 2.57(1.50) | 2.57(1.48) | 2.23(1.30) | 3.07(1.26) | 3.47(1.38) | 1.73(1.23) | 3.33(1.34) | 9.28*** | 4.05 | .22 |
| Sport | 2.33(1.28) | 2.20(1.52) | 2.10(1.24) | 2.30(1.32) | 2.60(1.50) | 1.43(0.93) | 2.27(1.26) | 9.89*** | 4.35 | .24 |

SD= Standard deviation; Df=Degree of freedom; F (significance coefficient); $\eta^2$= eta squared

### 3.2 Part 2. Recognition of Self-Definition by Others

The mixed-design ANOVA revealed that within-subjects differences existed, suggesting that both LGB (see Table 3) and heterosexual participants (see Table 4) perceive themselves as recognized to different extents in the various identity domains by important others (friends, parents, partners, and teachers). This means, as an example, that they can feel highly recognized in a specific identity domains by parents, but not by friends, or vice versa.

Nevertheless, there are some differences in which identity domains LGB and heterosexual participants perceive less homogenous recognition by others. Indeed, for the LGB group, the domains where they feel less recognized include sexual orientation, look, music, and sport; in contrast, the less homogenous domains for heterosexual participants appeared to be status, look, tribe, and music. These results are graphically reported and supported by the mean plots in the Figures 3 and 4.

**Figure 3.** Mean Plot of Part 2 (Identity Domains X Recognitions by Others) for LGB Participants (n = 31)
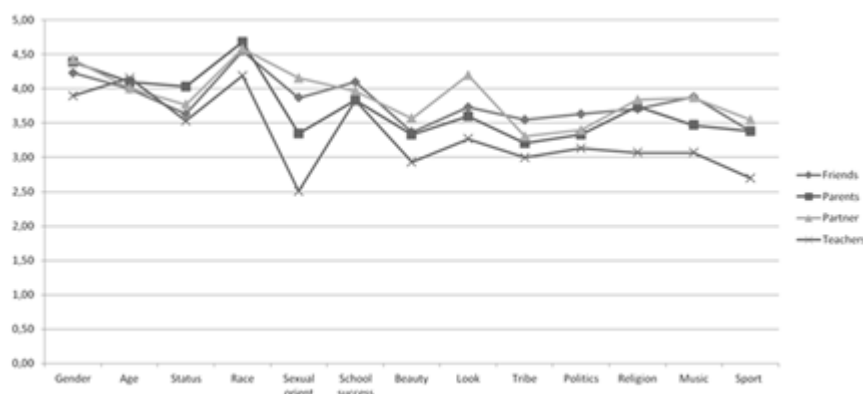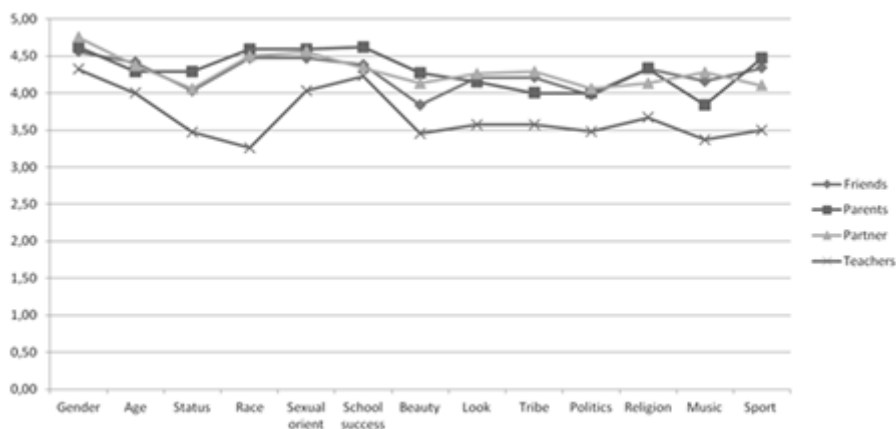


**Figure 4.** Mean Plot of Part 2 (Identity Domains X Recognitions by Others) for Heterosexual Participants (n = 33)



Similarly to Part 1, between-subjects difference tests yielded significant results only for *sexual orientation*, which had greater variability among LGB participants, $F (1, 60) = 13.4$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .182$.

**Table 3.** Within-Subjects Identity Recognition by Others Effects in LGB Participants (n = 31)

| Domains | Important others | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Friends M(SD) | Parents M(SD) | Partner M(SD) | Teachers M(SD) | F | df | $\eta^2$ |
| Gender | 4.23(1.17) | 4.39(1.00) | 4.42(0.96) | 3.90(1.40) | 3.30* | 3 | 1.00 |
| Age | 4.00(1.15) | 4.10(0.98) | 4.10(1.11) | 4.16(1.13) | .23 | 2.28 | .01 |
| Status | 3.63(1.16) | 4.03(1.03) | 3.77(0.90) | 3.53(1.22) | 2.92* | 2.40 | .91 |
| Sexual orientation | 3.87(1.09) | 3.35(1.38) | 4.16(1.18) | 2.52(1.12) | 15.07*** | 2.53 | .33 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 4.55(0.99) | 4.68(0.79) | 4.58(0.81) | 4.19(1.11) | 4.33* | 1.98 | .13 |
| School success | 4.10(0.98) | 3.83(1.31) | 3.97(1.08) | 3.83 (1.17) | 1.08 | 3 | .04 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Appearance | 3.37(1.16) | 3.33(1.56) | 3.57(1.47) | 2.93(0.90) | 2.16 | 2.20 | .07 |
| Look | 3.73 (1.54) | 3.60(1.25) | 4.20(0.96) | 3.27(1.04) | 7.23*** | 3 | .20 |
| Sub-culture | 3.55(1.15) | 3.21(1.11) | 3.31(1.00) | 3.00(1.13) | 2.45 | 2.31 | .08 |
| Politic | 3.63(1.27) | 3.33(1.18) | 3.40(1.28) | 3.13(1.20) | 2.02 | 2.71 | .07 |
| Religion | 3.71(1.32) | 3.74(1.36) | 3.84(1.16) | 3.06(1.12) | 4.33* | 2.03 | .13 |
| Music | 3.87(1.33) | 3.47(1.36) | 3.87(1.33) | 3.07(1.11) | 6.98*** | 3 | .19 |
| Sport | 3.38(1.35) | 3.38(1.21) | 3.55(1.18) | 2.69(0.97) | 8.90*** | 3 | .24 |

SD = Standard deviation; df =Degree of freedom; F (significance coefficient); $\eta^2$= eta squared.

**Table 4.** Within-Subjects Identity Recognition by Others Effects in Heterosexual Participants (n = 33)

| | *Important others* | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Friends | Parents | Partner | Teachers | | | |
| *Domains* | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) | *F* | *df* | *$\eta^2$* |
| Gender | 4.39(1.11) | 4.84(0.96) | 4.71(0.64) | 4.26(1.29) | 2.45 | 1.90 | .08 |
| Age | 4.26(1.04) | 4.13(1.18) | 4.32(0.98) | 3.90(1.22) | 3.47* | 2.27 | .10 |
| Status | 3.97(1.14) | 4.23(1.06) | 3.97(0.91) | 3.88(0.96) | 7.76*** | 3 | .20 |
| Sexual orientation | 4.32(1.10) | 4.48(0.96) | 4.45(0.96) | 3.93(1.34) | 5.22* | 2.10 | .15 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 4.33(1.27) | 4.57(0.90) | 4.43(1.04) | 4.33(1.09) | 1.19 | 2.10 | .04 |
| School success | 4.10(0.98) | 3.83(1.31) | 3.97(1.03) | 3.43 (1.19) | 6.00** | 3 | .17 |
| Appearance | 3.73(1.08) | 4.17(1.05) | 3.97(1.47) | 2.93(0.90) | 2.16 | 2.20 | .07 |
| Look | 3.73 (1.54) | 3.60(1.25) | 4.20(0.96) | 3.27(1.04) | 7.23*** | 3 | .20 |
| Sub-culture | 4.19(0.97) | 4.06(0.96) | 4.29(0.86) | 3.55(0.96) | 8.85*** | 2.11 | .23 |
| Politic | 3.78(1.24) | 3.87(1.18) | 3.97(1.12) | 3.40(1.01) | 3.48* | 3 | .10 |
| Religion | 4.16(1.26) | 4.19(1.22) | 4.00(1.18) | 3.67(1.16) | 2.51 | 2.17 | .07 |
| Music | 3.70(1.26) | 3.62(1.21) | 4.12(1.00) | 3.25(1.08) | 7.87*** | 3 | .20 |
| Sport | 4.20(1.24) | 4.41(1.05) | 3.93(1.30) | 3.52(1.05) | 6.32** | 3 | .18 |

df = Degree of freedom; F (significance coefficient); $\eta^2$= eta squared.

### 3.3 Part 3. Influence of Life Contexts on Identity Development and Expression

Finally, analysis of the third part of the ILLCQ indicated that LGB and heterosexual participants do not differ in the influence they attribute to differing life contexts upon their identity development and expression. As reported in Table 5, the comparison of frequencies of LGB and heterosexual participants who attributed positive, negative, or neutral influence to diverse life contexts indicates no significant differences between the two groups.

**Table 5.** Comparisons of Frequencies of Positive, Negative, or Neutral Attributions to Life Contexts Between LGB (n = 31) and Heterosexual Participants (n = 33)

| | LGB | Heterosexual | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | N (%) | N (%) | $\chi^2$ |
| Family | | | .288 |
| Positive | 18 (62.1%) | 26 (78.8%) | |
| Negative | 8 (27.6%) | 6 (18.2%) | |
| Neutral | 3 (10.3%) | 1 (3%) | |
| School/University | | | .211 |
| Positive | 17 (58.6%) | 26 (78.8%) | |
| Negative | 8 (27.6%) | 4 (12.1%) | |
| Neutral | 4 (13.8%9 | 3 (9.1%) | |
| Neighborhood | | | .448 |
| Positive | 3 (10.3%) | 1 (3%) | |
| Negative | 8 (24.2%) | 8 (27.6%) | |
| Neutral | 18 (62.1%) | 24 (72.7%) | |
| Peer Group | | | .285 |
| Positive | 22 (75.9%) | 29 (87.9%) | |
| Negative | 4 (13.8%) | 1 (3%) | |
| Neutral | 3 (10.3%) | 3 (9.1%) | |
| Leisure contexts | | | .351 |
| Positive | 19 (65.5%) | 20 (60.6%) | |
| Negative | 3 (10.3%) | 1 (3%) | |
| Neutral | 7 (24.1%) | 12 (36.4%) | |
| Religious places | | | .686 |
| Positive | 7 (24.1%) | 11 (33.3%) | |
| Negative | 6 (20.7%) | 5 (15.2%) | |
| Neutral | 16 (55.2%) | 17 (51.5%) | |
| Dating | | | .238 |
| Positive | 20 (69%) | 19 (57.6%) | |
| Negative | 6 (20.7%) | 5 (15.2%) | |
| Neutral | 3 (10.3%) | 9 (27.3%) | |

Nevertheless, some important differences emerge from the analysis of the closed and open-ended questions at the end of Part 3 of the ILLCQ, which are in line with what also emerges from the analysis on the centrality in Part 1.

Indeed, for the question "Is there any aspect of your identity that you feel as not recognized by others?," whereas heterosexual participants present diverse kind of responses, referring to diverse aspects of self, as for example, "My skills," "Shyness and uncertainty," or "Nervousness and fear," and never referring to sexuality, 53% of LGB participants who answered this question (8 out of 15) focused on issues regarding sexual orientation and gender identity, as for example, "My sexuality," "My sexual orientation," or "My gender identity." Similarly, for the question "Is there any aspect of your identity that you try to hide from others?," 31% of LGB participants who answered this question (4 out of 13) referred to sexual orientation, whereas heterosexual participants presented diverse kind of aspects, such as "Emotional distress," "My disbelief of religion," or "Sensitivity." These results suggest again that the issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity have higher centrality for LGB participants compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

## 4. Discussion

This pilot study was designed to explore how identity integration varies between small groups of heterosexual and LGB participants. Identity integration was evaluated on the basis of three aspects that the individual has to reconcile in the identity development process. Specifically, we considered the integration among the different domains of identity in their intersection with various life contexts (assessed through salience and centrality), the integration between individuals' self-definition and the ways in which others perceive the person (perceived self-recognition), and the integration between how individuals perceive themselves to be and the way they show themselves to others.

With regard to variations in identity integration across contexts, we found that, for both LGB and heterosexual participants, there was significant variability in the salience attributed to different identity domains across various life contexts. This means that both samples tend to attribute different levels of importance to their identity aspects according to what the contexts appear to elicit. We know that this issue is important for individuals' adjustment to social contexts (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001) and is particularly prominent in adolescence (Harter, 2012). Nevertheless, contrary to our hypothesis, our results indicated that variability in identity salience is not higher for LGB youth compared to heterosexual participants. Indeed, we expected that, due to social stigmatization and difficulties encountered in some social contexts, LGB youth might try to adapt the expression and the development of their identity depending on the context of interaction, or rather they might tend to show compliant aspects of self in order to gain acceptance from others. As a consequence, we expected to find lower integration among

identity domains—observed in terms of greater shifts in salience attributed to the diverse identity domains—and a less coherent sense of self. In contrast, our results indicated that LGB participants do not present less a integrated identity compared to their heterosexual counterparts; on the contrary, LGB participants attributed more consistent salience across life contexts to the sexual domain, showing that this identity domain is more stable in LGB than in heterosexual participants. This pattern may be explainable through the evidence that homophobia has recently and significantly been declining thanks to the important advances that have been made in terms of LGBT equality (e.g., McCormack, 2012), but it may also be explained through higher self-awareness and self-affirmation on the part of sexual minority groups.

The analysis of identity centrality indicated that, again, the only significant difference between heterosexual and LGB participants is in the domain of sexual orientation. Results, indeed, suggest that this domain is more central to LGB youth's identity, compared to their heterosexual counterparts, apart from the religious context. In the religious context, indeed, heterosexual participants reported higher salience of sexual orientation, compared to LGB participants, who may expect to receive higher rejection and stigmatization. The higher centrality of the sexual domain confirms previous findings suggesting that identity centrality is higher within socially stigmatized identity domains (e.g., Meyer, 2003).

Said differently, we may affirm that sexual orientation constitutes a sort of "core identity" around which LGB youth organize their overall identity, such that some authors have spoken about a sexual orientation identity (e.g., Floyd & Stein, 2002). This identity domain may significantly contribute to maintaining a coherent sense of self across contexts and against stigmatization. This point leads one to wonder whether, for heterosexual youth, there is an identity domain that functions similarly to help maintain identity cohesion. Means plots for Part 1 (Figure 1 and Figure 2), though without significant statistical indices, help us to better understand the different articulation of identity domains' salience and centrality, and suggest that heterosexual participants do not present a similar "core identity," as the sexual domain appears to be for LGB counterparts. Indeed, generally speaking, heterosexual youth present a less "centralized" identity.

This disconfirms our first hypothesis, but allows us to think about an important cohesive function of stigmatized aspects of identity. On the other hand, we consider it important to highlight that, when the concentration of identity around sexual orientation domain becomes very strong, it may prevent LGB youths from exploring other identity domains.

With regard to the second aspect of identity integration, or rather the integration between the way the individual perceives her/himself and the image mirrored by others, inspecting the means plots for Part 2 of the ILLCQ (Figure 3 and Figure 4) suggests that LGB participants perceive highly variable recognition of self-definition across identity domains and across life contexts. Heterosexual participants, instead, report variable—and lower—levels of recognition only with regard to teachers, and they report feeling recognized rather uniformly in all identity domains by other important people in their lives.

In other words, we may say that LGB participants perceive more obstacles to being socially recognized for what they are and to expressing their identity, and may find it harder to integrate inner and external images of self. In this sense, the greater consistency in identity salience across contexts may thus be seen as LGB participants' attempt to strengthen their inner identity against environmental threats. In addition, it appears noteworthy that teachers are perceived as the social others who provide the lowest self-recognition for almost all identity domains, both for LGB and for heterosexual youths. This suggests that it may be important to work with teachers to promote identity reinforcement in both high school and college contexts (Scandurra, Picariello, Valerio, & Amodeo 2017).

Results from Part 3 also disconfirmed our expectations that LGB youth would perceive more negative influence on identity expression from the social environment. Indeed, they did not differ significantly from heterosexual participants, even though answers to open-ended questions in this part highlighted differences in line with results from Part 1. Indeed, LGB participants reported that the aspects of self that they tend to keep hidden or that they feel are not recognized by others mainly concern aspects of identity connected to sexual orientation.

In other words, even though we cannot speak of statistical significance, we may say that, from this point of view as well, the domain of sexual orientation seems to be central in the lives and identities of LGB youths. The experience reported by heterosexual participants appears more diversified, and their answers make reference to diverse identity domains and other aspects of life than sexual orientation. Again, we can affirm that LGB participants present a strong core identity that catalyzes their overall identity organization and development.

## 5. Limitations

Although our results obtained provide significant suggestions for future research and clinical practice, the present study is characterized by some important limitations. The first limitation concerns the limited number of participants included in the sample. A second limitation concerns the use of a college student sample to represent young adults in general. This is the

reason why we propose these findings as a pilot for future research, which should include more numerous and diversified samples.

Furthermore, in a larger and wider sample it would be possible and interesting to compare samples from different cultural backgrounds, which we have not addressed due to the small sample size of non-White participants in the Italian sample.

Another limitation refers to the cross-sectional design of the study, which does not allow for analyzing changes over time and thus for studying the processes of identity development across different stages of life and in conjunction with important life events.

Finally, we believe that comparing results from the ILLCQ with data obtained from the use of other identity questionnaires or tools may improve the validity of results and widen the area of study.

## 6. Implications for Clinical Practice

This study was aimed at assessing how and whether identity complexity and integration vary in LGB and heterosexual adolescents and young adults. The concept of integration presented in this contribution highlights the importance of studying, for both clinical and educational practice, the relationships among the various identity domains, and also the interactions between the individual and the environment in which one is embedded, which can foster or prevent the harmonious development of one's identity.

The results of this pilot study, though they cannot be generalized, may represent starting points for further research aimed at examining processes implied in identity development of LGB and heterosexual people, but also preventing LGB youths' distress. In particular, it is possible to imagine interventions for LGB youths focused on fostering their exploration in other domains as well, in order to develop a more complex and articulated identity, rather than focus exclusively on maintaining commitments in the sexual orientation domain. In this sense, interventions can help others in their lives, especially adults, to recognize the various aspects of youths' identity, thereby facilitating their authentic expression and, thus, integration (Amodeo, Picariello, Valerio, Bochicchio, & Scandurra, 2017; Scandurra et al., 2018b). Clinicians may play a similar function in clinical practice with LGB youth clients, mirroring them in their subjective identity in the various domains and fostering an integrative identity process (e.g., Amodeo, Picariello, Valerio, & Scandurra, 2018).

On the other hand, the idea that heterosexual people in our sample did not present a "core identity" and that the integration among their identity domains appeared somehow weak may guide clinical interventions aimed at reinforcing identity commitment for heterosexual youths,

who tend to dwell in long social moratoria (Côté, 2000) or in the so-called "postponed identity" (Sica & Aleni Sestito, 2010). This definition has been used to describe a particular configuration of Italian youths, who tend to procrastinate commitments and postpone consolidation of identity (Aleni Sestito, Sica, & Ragozzini, 2011; Crocetti, Rabaglietti, & Sica, 2012), and it may be interesting to investigate whether this extended moratorium is true also for the US subsample, and how the ILLCQ may serve this purpose.

It appears noteworthy that teachers are perceived as the individuals who do not adequately recognize some aspects of youths' identity. We can hypothesize that it may be partly depend on the short time teachers spend with students and on the high number of students, which do not allow close relationships with teachers. Nevertheless, this information may be useful to keep in mind when working within high-school contexts to design focused interventions.

More generally, our results suggest that, within the study of identity, it is important to understand how the various identity domains intersect with one other and that we must attend to the influence that life contexts and other people have on the development of identity.

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