

Ego Identity Status and Life Satisfaction: A comparative study of alcohol consumers and abstainers

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Abstract

Identity development plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's self-concept and sense of purpose. Rooted in Erikson's and Marcia's theories, this research investigates whether ego identity status and life satisfaction among young adults in India are affected by lifestyle choices.

This study aimed to compare ego identity status (achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion) between alcohol abstainers (never consumed alcohol) and alcohol consumers (reported alcohol use at least once in the past 12 months). We also compared life satisfaction scores for alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers.

A quantitative approach was adopted with 180 participants (18–25 years), comparing alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers using the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Chi-square tests indicated no statistical differences in identity status, though higher identity achievement was found among abstainers, whereas diffusion was more prevalent among consumers. Independent samples t-tests indicated that abstainers showed significantly greater life satisfaction compared to consumers.

These findings suggest that while alcohol consumption may not directly influence ego identity development, alcohol abstinence is associated with higher life satisfaction. The results highlight the potential psychological benefits of alcohol abstinence, emphasizing the role of self-determined lifestyle choices in fostering autonomy and well-being in young adults.

Keywords: Alcohol Abstinence, Alcohol Consumption, Ego Identity, Identity Development, Life Satisfaction.

Introduction

Identity development is a crucial psychological process that shapes an individual's sense of self and overall well-being. Erik Erikson (1959) conceptualized ego identity development as the gradual acquisition of a coherent and stable self-concept, emphasizing its role in personality formation. Expanding on Erikson's work, Marcia (1966) proposed that ego identity development involves exploration and commitment, leading to different identity statuses which are diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Since identity development involves exploration and commitment, lifestyle choices—such as substance use or abstinence—can serve as a reflection of an individual's self-concept and values.

Research has consistently highlighted the role of identity formation in overall well-being. Life satisfaction refers to an individual's cognitive evaluation of their overall quality of life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Life satisfaction is particularly relevant in young adulthood, a period characterized by significant life transitions. Deshmukh (2020) reported that identity achievement is strongly correlated with higher life satisfaction, while identity diffusion and foreclosure are associated with poorer well-being.

In today's world, lifestyle choices play a pivotal role in shaping individuality and life satisfaction. Individuals who actively explore their environment before committing to a lifestyle may experience different levels of fulfilment compared to those who adopt behaviours due to peer pressure or societal norms. Among various lifestyle choices, alcohol consumption is particularly relevant, as it is often influenced by personal values, societal expectations, and identity-related decision-making. Whether individuals choose to consume alcohol or abstain from it, both groups exist in nearly equal numbers in society. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), alcohol abstainers are categorized into two types: lifetime abstainers, defined as individuals aged 15 and older who have never consumed alcohol in their lifetime, and past 12-month abstainers, referring to those aged 15 and older who have not consumed alcohol in the past 12 months. In contrast, alcohol consumers exhibit varied drinking patterns, ranging from casual drinking to frequent consumption (PubMed). To better understand the alcohol consumption trends, Balhara et al. (2021) provided insights into alcohol consumption trends in India over the past two decades, noting a significant decline in the proportion of alcohol users. This decline was attributed to policy interventions, public awareness campaigns, and shifting cultural attitudes toward health-conscious behaviours.

The motivations behind these choices vary from person to person. Some make decisions based on personal values and self-exploration, while others engage in behaviours primarily due to external influences.

A longitudinal study by De Moor et al. (2020) found that low commitment to identity (e.g., moratorium or diffusion status) was associated with higher substance use. Conversely, individuals with progressive identity development reported lower alcohol consumption, suggesting that identity formation plays a crucial role in lifestyle choices.

Alcohol consumption is a widely studied behavioural factor in identity formation. Bishop et al. (2005) examined the relationship between alcohol use and identity development among first-year college students which suggested that an inverse relationship exists between identity sophistication and alcohol consumption, with individuals in achieved and moratorium statuses drinking less than those in foreclosed and diffused statuses. These findings highlight the complex interplay between identity processes and alcohol use behaviours.

Wills et al. (2015) found that self-perception, peer influence, and cultural identity shape alcohol consumption patterns, impacting identity formation. However, little research explores whether abstainers experience distinct developmental trajectories shaped by personal values and environmental factors. While research has examined the relationship between alcohol use and identity development, less attention has been given to how abstainers navigate their identity formation. Additionally, there is limited understanding of how lifestyle choices, such as alcohol abstinence, influence life satisfaction compared to alcohol consumers. Most studies have focused on the effects of substance use on well-being, but few have explored the psychological impact of actively choosing abstinence as a lifestyle.

Comparing ego identity statuses and life satisfaction between alcohol abstainers and consumers is crucial, as previous studies have primarily focused on substance users, particularly those who engage in frequent or problematic alcohol consumption overlooking how individuals who abstain from alcohol develop a coherent sense of self and reflect on their life satisfaction. As an increasing number of young adults actively reject traditional drinking norms, understanding how this lifestyle choice affects their psychological well-being is crucial. This study explores how ego identity status and life satisfaction differ between alcohol consumers and abstainers, shedding light on the psychological impact of these lifestyle choices.

In a large-scale study by Bennett et al. (2021) it was reported that a growing number of young adults are rejecting traditional drinking norms in India, Mexico, and Nigeria. This pattern aligns with the increasing normalization of non-drinking as a socially acceptable choice.

The act of making a lifestyle choice, whether after careful exploration or direct commitment, raises an important question; Are individuals truly satisfied with their decision about a particular lifestyle choice? Research on alcohol consumption and life satisfaction has yielded mixed findings. Tartaglia, Gattino, and Fedi (2017) reported that moderate alcohol consumption was associated with higher life satisfaction compared to both abstinence and heavy drinking.

However, Glozah et al. (2015) argued that the effects of alcohol consumption on life satisfaction depend not only on the level of drinking but also on the underlying drinking motives. Their study revealed that while men who drank for social reasons experienced mixed outcomes, women who drank for coping reasons had lower life satisfaction. Thus, while moderate consumption may enhance well-being, the reasons behind drinking play a crucial role in determining its impact on life satisfaction.

In an investigation on relationship between alcohol consumption and mental well-being in university students by Beuningen et al. (2024) the findings suggest that moderate drinking may sometimes be associated with higher well-being, whereas excessive drinking contributes to psychological distress.

The aim of this research is to explore how following a particular lifestyle—such as being a casual drinker or an abstainer—affects an individual's ego identity status and life satisfaction. Understanding these relationships can shed light on how lifestyle choices contribute to a clearer sense of self and overall well-being. Lifestyle choices and how individuals present themselves socially play a crucial role in determining who they are and how contented they feel with their lives. By exploring the psychological impact of alcohol consumption and abstinence, this study seeks to provide insights into the deeper relationship between lifestyle, identity, and well-being.

Methodology

Selection Criteria for participants

The inclusion criteria included young adults aged 18–25 years with a mean age of 21.88 and (SD = 1.59) (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The participants were grouped into two categories: alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers. Alcohol abstainers were defined as those who had never consumed alcohol in last 12 months or lifetime, while alcohol consumers were those who reported alcohol use at least once in the past 12 months. Participants were required to provide informed consent. The exclusion criteria included individuals below 18 or above 25 years of age and those with a clinical diagnosis of severe mental health or neurodevelopmental disorders. After the exclusion, N= 99 females, N=81 males remained. Most participants were from urban area (92.7% within the sample), and the rest belonged to suburban (5.5%) and rural area (1.6%).

Study Design and Sample Size

A quantitative study was conducted to evaluate whether these groups differ significantly in terms of ego identity status and life satisfaction among young adults. The study was ethically

approved by the Ethical Committee of Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida. Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods from universities, corporate organizations, and social networks. The sample size consisted of 180 participants. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in this study.

Tools

Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ)

The EIPQ is a well-established measure for the assessment of identity exploration and commitment. It contains 32 items, which are scored on a 6-point Likert scale, that evaluate the four identity statuses as described by Marcia's theory: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. The EIPQ demonstrates moderately high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 for exploration and 0.86 for commitment. Test-retest reliability coefficients are 0.90 (commitment) and 0.76 (exploration).

For validity, the Kappa coefficient of 0.76 indicates strong expert agreement on item categorization. The scale also shows good construct and concurrent validity, aligning with Marcia's identity status model and related personality measures.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) The Satisfaction with Life Scale, developed by Diener et al. (1985), is a 5-item measure assessing overall life satisfaction. Participants rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 7 indicates "strongly agree." The scale demonstrates strong internal consistency, ranging from 0.79 to 0.89, and excellent test-retest reliability with a correlation of 0.84. It is highly versatile, applicable across different age groups, and efficiently administered in a short time.

A self-developed questionnaire was used to gather information on participants' alcohol consumption status and patterns, distinguishing between alcohol consumers and abstainers.

Data Collection

Data was collected through an online survey using Google Forms, distributed via social media platforms and email.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and distributional properties, were computed for all study variables. The Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to assess the normality. Results indicated that life satisfaction scores were normally distributed in both groups. Hence,

independent t-test to compare life satisfaction between alcohol consumers and abstainers. Chi square test was conducted to examine significant differences in ego identity statuses between alcohol abstainers and consumers since both of them are categorical variables. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were conducted using Jamovi (Version 2.6), and chi-square tests were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20).

Results

The research was conducted on 180 young adults aged between 18 to 25 years in India. Out of them, 99 (55%) were females and 81 (45%) were males. Among them, 90 participants (50%) were categorized as alcohol abstainers, while 90 participants (50%) were alcohol consumers. The descriptive statistics indicate that alcohol abstainers had a higher mean life satisfaction score ($M = 21.51$, $SD = 6.26$) compared to alcohol consumers ($M = 19.67$, $SD = 6.05$). Similarly, the mean identity status score was slightly higher for abstainers ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.11$) than for consumers ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.14$). Median values suggest a similar trend, with abstainers scoring higher in both variables. (See table 1).

Table. 1 Descriptives for Identity Status and Life Satisfaction among Alcohol consumers and abstainers.

	ALCOHOL COUNSUMERS OR NOT	N	Missing	Mean	Median	SD
AGE	0	90	0	22.11	22.00	1.56
	1	90	0	21.64	22.00	1.60
IDENTITY STATUS	0	90	0	2.37	2.00	1.14
	1	90	0	2.53	3.00	1.11
SWLS-SCORE	0	90	0	19.67	20.00	6.05
	1	90	0	21.51	22.00	6.26

Note. *N*, number of participants per group; *M*, mean; *x*, Median; *SD*, standard deviation. Alcohol consumers are coded as 0, and abstainers as 1.

To check H1 (There will be a significant difference in ego identity statuses between alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers). A chi-square test was conducted (See table 2 and table 3).

Table 2. Comparison of ego identity status among alcohol consumers and alcohol abstainers

			Identity status				Total
			1	2	3	4	
Alcohol consumers or not	0	Count	28	20	23	19	90
		Expected Count	26.0	17.0	27.5	19.5	90.0
	1	Count	24	14	32	20	90
		Expected Count	26.0	17.0	27.5	19.5	90.0
	Total	Count	52	34	55	39	180
		Expected Count	52.0	34.0	55.0	39.0	180.0

Note. Table presents the crosstabulation between alcohol consumption status (abstainers vs. consumers) and identity status categories (1 = Identity Achievement, 2 = Moratorium, 3 = Foreclosure, 4 = Diffusion).

Table 3. Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.865 ^a	3	.413
Likelihood Ratio	2.877	3	.411
Linear-by-Linear Association	.988	1	.320
N	180		

Note. This table presents the Chi-Square test results for the association between alcohol consumption status (abstainers vs. consumers) and identity status. a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 17.00. The Pearson Chi-Square value ($\chi^2 = 2.865$, $p = .413$) indicates that the relationship between alcohol consumption and identity status is not statistically significant ($p > .05$). Similarly, the Likelihood Ratio test ($\chi^2 = 2.877$, $p = .411$) and the Linear-by-Linear Association test ($\chi^2 = .988$, $p = .320$) further confirm the lack of a significant association. These results suggest that identity status does not significantly differ between alcohol abstainers and consumers.

The Chi-square test revealed no significant association between alcohol consumption status and identity status, $\chi^2 (3, N = 180) = 2.865, p = .413$, suggesting that identity status does not significantly differ between the two groups. For H2 (There will be a significant difference in life satisfaction between alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers) an independent samples t-test was used (See table 4), which reported a significant difference in life satisfaction, $t (178) = -2.011, p = .046$, with abstainers reporting higher life satisfaction than consumers (*Mean Difference* = -1.844, *SE* = 0.917).

Table 4. Independent Samples T-Test output for comparison of life satisfaction among alcohol consumers and alcohol abstainers

		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference
SWLS-SCORE	Student's t	-2.01	178	0.023	-1.84	0.917

Note. $H_a \mu_0 > \mu_1$. The t-test result ($t = -2.011, p = 0.046$) suggests a statistically significant difference in life satisfaction scores between the two groups, with alcohol abstainers reporting higher life satisfaction on average compared to alcohol consumers (Mean Difference = -1.844). * $p < .05$.

Discussion

This study focused on examining and comparing ego identity statuses and life satisfaction among alcohol consumers and alcohol abstainers. The research highlights the influence of lifestyle choices like alcohol consumption or abstinence in shaping self-concept and life satisfaction.

Through the study of the psychological effect of drinking and abstinence from alcohol on self, the study provided a perspective on how lifestyle, identity, and global satisfaction are interconnected.

Contrary to hypothesis 1, no significant difference was found in ego identity statuses between alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers ($\chi^2 (3) = 2.865, p = .413$). The cross-tabulation show that distribution of identity statuses across both groups was relatively similar, indicating that alcohol consumption may not play a significant role in ego identity development. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis, there is no significant difference in ego identity statuses between alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers. Although the overall difference was not

significant but the distribution of identity statuses shows some variation between the groups. Among abstainers, 28 individuals (31.1%) were in the identity achievement status, 20 (22.2%) in moratorium, 23 (25.6%) in foreclosure, and 19 (21.1%) in diffusion. Similarly, among alcohol consumers, 24 individuals (26.7%) were in identity achievement, 14 (15.6%) in moratorium, 32 (35.6%) in foreclosure, and 20 (22.2%) in diffusion. While more abstainers were in identity achievement and moratorium, a slightly higher number of alcohol consumers fell into foreclosure and diffusion. But these were not statistically significant, which means that factors other than alcohol consumption might be contributing more to ego identity status. But more abstainers in identity achievement and more alcohol consumers in diffusion can be an indication of a trend. Those who abstain from alcohol might be more confident in their values and life choices, leading to a clearer sense of identity (achievement). Conversely, some alcohol consumers may still be uncertain or experimenting with their sense of self (diffusion). However, because these differences are not strong enough to reach significance, it is not possible to conclude that alcohol consumption alone drives one's identity status. It's more likely that a combination of personal, social, and cultural influences contributes to these observed distributions.

Previous researches have often linked identity formation with alcohol consumption with some studies suggesting that individuals with lower identity achievement may engage in alcohol use as a form of exploration (Bishop et al., 2005). However, the present findings do not support this association, aligning with studies that emphasize the multifaceted nature of identity development. This discrepancy could be due to cultural, social, or personal factors that influence both drinking behaviours and identity formation independently.

The results support Hypothesis 2, indicating a significant difference in life satisfaction between alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers ($t(178) = -2.011, p = .046$). The negative t-value suggests that alcohol abstainers report higher life satisfaction compared to alcohol consumers. The mean difference of -1.844 indicates that the abstainers scored approximately 1.84 points higher on the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) than consumers. Therefore, we accept the alternative hypothesis, there is a significant difference in life satisfaction between alcohol abstainers and alcohol consumers, with abstainers reporting higher life satisfaction.

These findings align with previous research indicating that alcohol consumption, particularly hazardous or frequent drinking, is associated with lower life satisfaction and increased mental health concerns (Sæther et al., 2019). Studies have shown that while alcohol use may initially serve as a coping mechanism or social enhancer, it can lead to long-term dissatisfaction due to its detrimental influence on well-being, relationships, and mental health (Albert, 2013). However, some studies argue that moderate alcohol consumption does not necessarily decrease

life satisfaction and may even be associated with positive social interactions (Peele & Brodsky, 2000). The present study adds to this discussion by suggesting that on average, alcohol abstainers experience slightly higher life satisfaction.

The Hedonic Treadmill Theory suggests that while external changes or experiences such as alcohol consumption may temporarily boost one's mood, people generally adapt and return to a stable baseline of happiness (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). In understanding the relationship between alcohol consumption, life satisfaction, and ego identity status, this theory provides a crucial perspective. While alcohol consumption may offer short-term pleasure and social bonding, individuals eventually return to a baseline level of happiness, which might explain why abstainers report higher long-term life satisfaction. This could be attributed to their self-determined choices, free from social validation or peer pressure, fostering a stronger sense of autonomy and identity clarity. In contrast, alcohol consumers, particularly those who drink in social settings or under compulsion or due to emotional reasons may experience short-lived spikes but face long-term dissatisfaction if their consumption is externally motivated rather than intrinsically fulfilling.

The findings highlight the complex relationship between alcohol consumption, ego identity status, and life satisfaction. Although the findings were not statistically significant in comparing ego identity statuses between abstainers and consumers, the trends suggest that abstainers may have greater decision-making autonomy, potentially leading to stronger identity. The difference in life satisfaction between the two groups suggests that abstainers tend to report higher well-being, possibly due to their intrinsic decision-making, reduced external pressures, and long-term stability in happiness, as explained by the Hedonic Treadmill Theory.

Additionally, cultural and social contexts play a crucial role in shaping these relationships. In settings where alcohol consumption is prevalent, it may temporarily enhance social belonging and happiness, while in societies where it is rare, consumers might experience psychological distress, lowering overall satisfaction. Furthermore, the influence of peer pressure and validation-seeking behaviours may impact the life satisfaction of consumers, while abstainers might benefit from stronger self-assuredness in their choices.

The research emphasises on the importance of understanding individual motivations for alcohol use rather than just its presence or absence. Future research could explore additional factors such as personality traits, coping strategies, and socio-cultural differences to deepen our understanding of how alcohol-related behaviours interact with identity and life satisfaction. Ultimately, fostering self-awareness and autonomy in decision-making may be key to enhancing overall life satisfaction.

Conclusion

Alcohol consumption alone does not significantly impact ego identity statuses, as alcohol abstainers and consumers show no major differences. However, the notable difference in life satisfaction indicating abstainers reporting higher scores underscores the importance of lifestyle choices in shaping overall life satisfaction.

While the findings indicate no statistically significant difference in identity statuses between abstainers and consumers, the trends show more abstainers in achievement and more consumers in diffusion illustrating the complexity of identity formation and lifestyle choices. Importantly, life satisfaction differs significantly, with abstainers reporting higher well-being, suggesting that self-determined decisions and freedom from external pressures may foster a more enduring sense of contentment. By showing that freedom from external validation and self-determined decisions can foster higher life satisfaction, this study stresses on the crucial role of personal values and autonomy in shaping well-being.

Future researches can explore how identity and life satisfaction evolve over time, considering cultural, social, and psychological factors like motivation for alcohol use, personality traits, and peer influence. Understanding the impact of autonomy and personal values on overall satisfaction can promote a coherent and stable self. Encouraging self-reflection, fostering supportive environments can contribute to healthier identity development in young adults.

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