# Mediating Role of Sense of Belonging between Diffusive Identity Style and Personal Accountability: Moderation by Friends' Support in Pakistan

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### Abstract

The present study purposed moderating the role of friends' support for the direct and indirect effect of diffusive identity style on personal accountability mediated thorough a sense of belonging. The sample included 500 university students (Male = 244 and Female = 256), age ranging from 18-25 years (M $\pm$ SD = 20.35 $\pm$ 1.54) from different Pakistani universities including Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Mandi Bahauddin. Data was collected on Identity Styles (Berzonsky, 2013), Sense of Belonging (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995), Sense of Responsibility (Mergler, 2016) and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) along with a detailed demographic sheet. The purposed mediated moderation was tested using *Process Macro* (Hayes, 2013). The results showed that the effect of diffusive identity style on personal accountability is mediated through sense of belonging-psychological measures. Additionally, results showed that an indirect effect through a mediator is moderated by friends' support. With low level of friends' support, the effect of diffusive identity style through a sense of belonging is non-significant but as friends' support increases, diffusive identity contributes towards a sense of belongingpsychological measures resulting in decreased personal accountability. It is recommended that any intervention involving friends support shall be accounted for individuals' own identity style.

Keywords: sense of belonging, diffusive identity style, personal accountability, friends' support, adolescents, and young adults

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## Introduction

Identity development is a major challenge for early adolescents to negotiate. Erikson (1968) theorized that social and pubertal changes instigate the psychosocial crisis of identity development and identity confusion. Marcia (1983) postulated that the identity formation of an individual during late adolescence is influenced by how they adopt the self-respective approach in early adolescents. As societal role changes, a committed and coherent sense of self-identity stipulate adolescents to develop a personal standpoint for decision making, resolving conflicts, and enabling them to become more responsible and autonomous in their lives. Identity styles play a major role in how an individual develops, maintains, and revises commitments, and how they regulate life (Berzonsky, 2004).

Identity style implies the differences in cognitive-social strategies and the process involved in decision making, the processing of self-relevant information, and the formation of identity commitments. The adolescent with a normative identity style will deal with and form commitments through internalizing and adopting prescriptions. The adolescent with an information style processes relevant information before dealing with identity conflicts and forming commitment. Adolescents with avoidant/diffusive identity styles delay and procrastinate in dealing with personal conflicts, and identity conflicts; their behaviour is influenced by consequences and external demands. An individual readily reacts to situational influences, however these accommodations tend to be temporary behavioural acts or verbal compliance rather than stable revisions in the structure of their self or sense of identity (Berzonsky, 1990; 1994).

The development of identity is linked with psychosocial resources which provide a purpose of committed sense, personal will, and ability to regulate one's life effectively. The identity commitment serves as a guide for decision-making and problem-solving (Berzonsky, 2003). Self-regulatory resources of an individual are associated with adaptability, a sense of belonging, personal effectiveness, and a multiplicity of required outcomes, including adjustment, interpersonal effectiveness, academic achievement, less problematic behaviors, and pathology (Baumeister, Vohs & Tice, 2007). Numerous studies suggested that late adolescents with a normative identity style are committed, conscientious, goal-directed, and function in a socially structured and conforming way (Berzonsky, 2003, 2004; Jakubowski & Dembo, 2004; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez & Goossens, 2005). Adolescents with an informational style are open-minded, self-regulated, autonomous, and highly committed (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005; Jakubowski & Dembo, 2004; Soenens, Berzonsky, Vansteenkiste, Beyers & Goossens, 2005).

Belongingness is the intrinsic desire to develop and maintain a positive, durable, and noteworthy interpersonal relationship with another human being. To fulfill this intrinsic desire, a person may require periodic and constant pleasant interactions with a particular individual or group of people. Over time these interactions become frequent, and stable, and promote continuous care for each other's welfare. A sense of belonging is an experience of personal involvement in a system or environment to becoming an integral part of that system or environment (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne & Early, 1996). It is a rational and unique phenomenon that includes attributes, precursors, and consequences. Considerable research suggested that the avoidant/diffuse identity style has

been found to be negatively associated with autonomy, commitment, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, and personal accountability (Karkani, 2016; Soenens, Berzonsky, et al., 2005).

Substantial research has examined cognitive, psychosocial, and personality dimensions associated with identity styles with relatively less attention has been devoted to factors such as sense of belonging that may contribute to individual differences in personal accountability. Personal responsibility or accountability is the ability to regulate one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, along with the willingness to hold oneself accountable for the choices made, and social and personal outcomes generated (Mergler & Shield, 2016). It is essential for adolescents to understand that they are making deliberate choices. Until they do understand; they will be less likely to accept responsibility for their decisions and outcomes (Mergler & Patton, 2007). Literature suggested that a sense of belonging is associated with adolescents' success in academic activities, personal accountability, and psychological adjustment (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Moreover, studies have shown that the positive quality of relatedness (belongingness) was associated with adolescents' greater level to take responsibility regarding school-related activities (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). The present study is designed to understand the mediating role of sense of belonging in the association between avoidant/diffusive identity style and personal accountability.

Furthermore, the present study aims to shed light on the moderating role of friends' support for the direct and indirect effect of avoidant/diffusive identity style on personal accountability mediated thorough a sense of belonging in late adolescence. As social networks play a vital role in the development of identity and responsibility, an identity is formed through social interactions, and they also provide support to individuals when they face these challenges. Individuals develop trustful and secure relationships when they perceive social support. Moreover, it is bilateral aid that helps the individual to develop a positive perception of self and self-worth which enables a person to reach a level of self-actualization.

### Method

## Participants and Procedure

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. These procedures were approved by the IRB of the authors' university before any data collection took place. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The sample of the present study included 500 adolescents and young adults, age ranging from 18 to 25 years. The mean age of participants was 20.35, and SD = 1.54 years. The sample included both male (n = 244) and female (n = 256) university students from different cities of Pakistan (Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Mandi Bahauddin). A total of 183 (36.6%) students were residing in hostel/dormitories whereas

the remaining 317 (63.4%) were living with families. Participants belonging to a joint family system constituted 42.2% of the sample and the remaining 57.4% were from a nuclear family system. The mean for mothers' and fathers' education is 10.55 and 12.95 years of formal schooling, respectively. Further, the average monthly family income of participants was 81.25 thousand rupees.

### Measurements

*Identity Styles Inventory (ISI-V)* 

A revised version of identity style inventory was used (Berzonsky et al., 2013). Identity style inventory consisted of four dimensions of identity styles including normative, informative, diffusive/avoidant identity style, and commitment consisting of nine items each. Four items of the scale are reversed coded. A high score on each of the dimensions suggested more endorsement of a particular identity style. The author of the scale recommends relying on the first three dimensions due to the instability of the commitment dimension. The instrument has good alpha reliability for informative, normative, and diffusive/avoidant identity style i.e.,  $\alpha = .74$ , .79, .83 respectively (Berzonsky et al., 2013).

Sense of Belonging (SOBI)

Sense of belonging was measured using the sense of belonging questionnaire (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). There are two components of the instrument. First, the sense of belonging-psychological measure was used to analyze the perceived level of sense of belonging while the second, sense of belonging-antecedents, measured the precursor of sense of belonging. Both dimensions consisted of fourteen items each and responses were collected on a four-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Cronbach's alpha reliability of SOBI-P is  $\alpha = .93$  and SOBI-A is  $\alpha = .76$  (Hagerty et al., 1996). In the present study, the psychological component of sense of belonging was used as the study outcome.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

Perceived social support was measured by using a multidimensional scale of perceived social support (Hagerty et al., 1996). The scale consisted of three subscales which include the significant others' subscale, the family subscale, and the friend's subscale. Each subscale is measured with four items on a 7-point rating scale ranging from very strongly disagree (1) to very

strongly agree (7). Reliability for all subscales i.e. family support, friends support and significant others support is  $\alpha = .86$ , .86, and .88 respectively (Bruwer, Emsley, Kidd, Lochner, & Seedat, 2008). In the present study, the family support component of the scale was used.

## Sense of Responsibility

A sense of responsibility has three subscales developed by Mergler and Shield (2016). The subscale of personal accountability includes items from 1 to 7. The subscale of behavioural and emotional control includes items 8 to 11. The subscale of cognitive control includes items from 12 to 15. The scale is a four-point rating scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Item numbers 8 to 11 are to be reversed. Reliability for all subscales i.e., personal accountability, behavioral and emotional control and cognitive control was .81, .81, and .71 respectively (Mergler & Shield, 2016). In the present study personal accountability component of the scale was used.

## Data Analysis

Pearson product bivariate analysis was conducted to test the association between demographics and study variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate the reliability of instruments used in the present study. To estimate the mean differences among study variables an independent sample t-test was used. The purposed mediated moderation analysis was tested using *Process Macro* model 59 (Hayes, 2013).

### Results

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the avoidant/diffusive identity style, sense of belonging, personal accountability, and friends' support are .72, .87, .70, .82, respectively. The result of Pearson product bivariate correlations between all variables i.e., demographics and study variables, indicates that there is a negative association between avoidant/diffusive identity style, sense of belonging and friends' support (r = -.39, p < .01 for sense of belonging, r = -.24, p < .01 for friends' support). There is a significant positive association between personal accountability, sense of belonging, and friends support (r = .16, p < .01, for sense of belonging, r = .13, p < .01 for friends' support). Furthermore, sense of belonging is positively associated with friends' support (r = .49, p < .01 for friends' support).

For demographic variables, age is found to be negatively correlated with avoidant/diffusive identity style of the adolescents (r = -.09, p < .05) and significantly positively correlated with sense of belonging (r = .19, p < .01). Mothers' education found to be positively correlated with monthly

income, personal accountability, sense of belonging and friend's support (r = .30, p < .01) for monthly income, r = .12, p < .01 for personal accountability, r = .11, p < .05 for sense of belonging, r = .10, p < .05 for friends' support) and negatively associated with avoidant/diffusive identity style (r = -.11, p < .05). Moreover, monthly income found to be negatively correlated with avoidant/diffusive identity style (r = -.12, p < .01) and positively associated with sense of belonging (r = .09, p < .05). To rule out the influence of these variables, they were controlled for the moderation analysis. (Refer to Table 1.)

The result of t-tests shows that there are significant gender differences on avoidant/diffusive identity style (t = -3.68, p < .01) and sense of belonging-psychological measure (t = 2.30, p < .05) while no gender differences are found on personal accountability and friends' support. The result illustrates that females score higher than their male counterparts on diffusive identity style and males score higher than their female counterparts on sense of belonging-psychological measure. (Refer to Table 2.)

Table 3 shows the result of moderated mediation analysis when using the psychological component of sense of belonging as mediator, and friends' support as moderator, in the relationship between diffusive/avoidant identity style and personal accountability. The result shows that interaction between diffusive/avoidant identity style and friends' support is significant for the psychological component of sense of belonging ( $\beta$  = -.03, p < .01) but is non-significant for personal accountability. Interaction between the psychological component of sense of belonging and friend's support is significant ( $\beta$  =.01, p < .05) The significant interactions suggest that effect is moderated at both levels i.e., predictor to mediator and mediator to outcome.

The Bootstrapped Confidence interval (CI, 95%) of conditional indirect effect confirmed an indirect effect of diffusive/avoidant identity style on personal accountability though the sense of belonging psychological component is significant with a high level of moderator (LLCI: -.06, ULCI: -.01). More specifically, the conditional indirect effect of diffusive/avoidant identity style on personal accountability via the sense of belonging psychological component differed depending on the level of moderator.

## Discussion

The present study examined diffusive/avoidant identity style as a predictor, the psychological component of sense of belonging as mediator, and the sense of responsibility as an outcome. The mediated path was moderated by social support by friends among late adolescents and emerging adults in the Pakistani context.

The diffusive/avoidant identity style is negatively correlated with the psychological component of sense of belonging because an individual with diffusive identity style does not perceive themselves as an integral part of the system as they avoid personal conflicts and identity-related problems. Literature also suggested that diffusive/avoidant identity style has a negative association with the psychological component of sense of belonging. Research suggested that identity styles of an individual predict sense of belonging and diffusive identity style is negatively correlated with development of sense of belonging (Karkani, 2016).

The diffusive/avoidant identity style is negatively correlated with friends' support as when an individual receives friends' support, one is less likely to develop a diffusive/avoidant identity style. Literature suggested that individual will receive friends' support while dealing with different life situations and through their support, they are less likely to avoid the situation in which they must make a difficult decision (Majdi, Ramezani, & Azimi Hashemi, 2016; Mergler & Patton, 2007).

The psychological component of sense of belonging positively correlates with a sense of responsibility. When an individual is perceived as an integral part of society, then he automatically develops a sense of responsibility. Literature suggested that a sense of belonging has a connection with the success of an individual in academic activities, responsibility, and psychological adjustment (Freeman et al., 2007). A sense of belonging is positively correlated with friends' support. When an individual receives support from friends, they feel that they are an integral part of society and they develop sense of belonging. Personal accountability (responsibility) is positively correlated with friends' support. When an individual perceives behavioural support and collaboration from friends, it helps them to develop responsibility. Furthermore, literature suggested that a higher level of social support from family, significant others' support, and friends' support leads to higher levels of responsibility (Majdi et al., 2016).

The conditional indirect effect of diffusive/avoidant identity style on personal accountability through a sense of belonging was significant with high levels of social support by friends. Moreover, a conditional indirect effect showed that a diffusive avoidant identity style has a negative effect on personal accountability via the psychological component of sense of belonging. This negative effect increases when a perceived individual receives support from friends. An individual with a diffusive/avoidant identity style procrastinates while making decisions and friends supporting the diffusive style may result in decrease responsibility (personal accountability).

# **Limitations and Suggestions**

The present study has some limitations in methodology which could affect the results. At first, all the scales were self-report measures. When we collect subjective information from participants, it may cause problems of self-presentational bias. Secondly, the sample is selected from four cities of Pakistan so data is not representative of all Pakistani adolescents, therefore, findings cannot be generalized. Thirdly, correlational research restricts causal inferences which can be drawn from results regarding developmental trends of relatedness and identity. Therefore, it is suggested that future research conduct longitudinal studies on participants from early adolescence to emerging adulthood.

# *Implications*

The present study has some important implications. Based on present research findings, different intervention programs can be designed to help adolescents during this transition. Interventions can also be designed for parents so that they develop different techniques and increase their awareness when dealing with adolescents.

Various instructional and educational programs related to the parenting of adolescents and young adults should be conducted to give guidance. Findings will also be helpful for family therapists. Providing parents with increased awareness about the psychological needs of individuals will allow them to encourage their adolescents to take the initiative and encourage their performance.

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 $Table\ 1$  Internal Consistency and Pearson Product Bivariate Correlation among Study Variables and Demographics (N = 500)

S. No.	Variables	а	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Age	-	-	.05	.05	.09	09*	01	.19**	.05
2	Mother formal education (in years)	-		-	.54**	.30**	11*	.12**	.11*	.10*
3	Father formal education (in years)	-			-	.28**	02	.05	.02	.02
4	Monthly income (in 10000)	-				-	12**	01	.09*	.06
5	Avoidant/diffusive style	.72					-	05	39**	24**
6	Personal accountability	.70						-	.16**	.13**
7	Sense of belonging	.87							-	.49**
8	Friends support	.82								-

<sup>\*\*</sup>p < .01, \*p < .05. a =Cronbach Alpha.

 $\label{eq:mean_standard} Table \, 2$  Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-values for Males and Females across Demographics and Study Variables (N = 500)

Variables	Male (n = 244)		Female (n = 256)		t	P	95% <i>CI</i>		Cohen's
	M	SD	M	SD		- ,	LL	UL	d
Avoidant/diffusive identity style	24.68	8.14	27.13	6.58	-3.68	0.01	-3.75	-1.13	-2.45
Personal accountability	23.05	2.89	22.83	3.05	0.83	0.41	-0.30	0.74	0.22
Sense of belonging- psychological measure	51.38	9.37	49.53	8.76	2.30	0.02	0.27	3.45	1.85
Friends support	21.93	5.28	21.10	5.34	1.78	0.08	-0.09	1.77	0.83

Table 3

Conditional Direct and Indirect Effect of Diffusive/Avoidant Identity Style on Personal Accountability through Sense of Belonging:
Psychological Measures Moderated by Friends' Support (N = 500)

		N	<b>Mediator</b>		Dependent PA			
Predictor	Moderator FR		SBP					
riedictor	Moderator TK		959	% CI	95% CI			
		В	LL	UL	В	LL	UL	
Constant		8.19	-6.23	22.62	21.89**	12.94	30.83	
Age		0.84**	0.42	1.27	-0.03	-0.21	0.13	
Gender		0.15**	-1.19	1.48	-0.11	-0.64	0.42	
Mother formal education (in years)		0.07	-0.09	0.23	0.07*	0.01	0.13	
Father formal education (in years)		-0.07	-0.27	0.12	-0.01	-0.08	0.07	
Monthly income (in 10000)		0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	
Avoidant/diffusive identity style		0.33	-0.07	0.72	0.08	-0.09	0.25	
Friends support		1.50**	1.03	1.97	-0.06	-0.45	0.32	
SBP		-0.04	-0.15	0.08	-0.04	-0.15	0.08	
DIS*FR		-0.03**	-0.05	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	
SBP*FR					0.01	-0.01	0.01	
Conditional Indirect	Low				-0.01	-0.01	0.01	
	Medium				-0.02	-0.04	-0.01	
	High				-0.03	-0.05	-0.01	
$\mathbb{R}^2$		0.36			0.05			
F		33.87**			5.39**			
$\Delta R^2$		0.24			0.17			

<sup>\*</sup> *p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01

Note: DIS = Diffusive/Avoidant Identity Style, FR = Friends Support, SBP = Sense of Belonging-psychological measures.