



Perceived Overprotective Parenting and Identity Synthesis and Confusion in Georgian Emerging Adults: The Intervening Role of Goal Engagement and Disengagement

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Abstract

Overprotective parenting refers to parents' provision of developmentally inappropriate protection and is associated with dysfunctional developmental processes and outcomes in adolescence and emerging adulthood. In the present study, we examined whether perceived overprotective parenting is potentially associated with identity synthesis and identity confusion, as the development of a coherent sense of identity is conceived as one of the primary goals of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Thereby, we also tested whether developmentally regulatory strategies of goal engagement and disengagement are intervening variables in the association between overprotective parenting and identity. Participants were 318 Georgian emerging adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.41$, 58% female). Path analyses indicated that perceived overprotective parenting was directly associated with less identity synthesis and more identity confusion. It was found that overprotection was unrelated to goal engagement, but was associated with more goal disengagement. Goal engagement, in turn, was positively associated with identity synthesis and negatively associated with identity confusion, whereas goal disengagement was positively associated with identity confusion. These results suggest that overprotective parenting creates a family context that is negatively associated with the successful resolution of the identity formation task. Goal disengagement, a relatively passive, avoidant developmental strategy, particularly played an intervening role in this association between overprotection and identity confusion.

Keywords Identity formation · Overprotective parenting · Goal engagement · Goal disengagement

Introduction

Overprotective parenting refers to parents' overinvolvement and the provision of developmentally inappropriate protection (Holmbeck et al., 2002). Past research has shown that overprotective parenting is associated with psychosocial difficulties in adolescents and emerging adults, including a higher risk for internalizing and externalizing problems and psychological need frustration (e.g., Love et al., 2022; Van Petegem et al., 2020). We suggest that overprotective parenting also may be associated with difficulties in terms of identity formation, that is, finding an answer to the question "who am I," which is a central task of adolescence and

emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2018; Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1950) viewed identity in terms of synthesis and confusion. Identity synthesis refers to a sense of self-definition and a feeling that one's life has direction. Identity confusion refers to a feeling of being "mixed up" and an inability to form clear life goals. Overprotective parenting may hamper emerging adults' development toward synthesized identity through different mechanisms.

Research suggests that overprotection may be particularly detrimental because it is associated with difficulties in terms self-regulation (e.g., self-control, Hong & Cui, 2020). Herein, we examined whether the processes of developmental regulation (in terms of goal engagement and disengagement) might play an intervening role in the link between overprotective parenting and identity synthesis and confusion. As overprotective parenting is expected to hamper emerging adults' engagement in active developmental regulation strategies (Wen et al., 2023), based on previous empirical findings (Skhirtladze et al., 2021), emerging adults would be set at risk for having difficulties committing to

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identity-related choices. Therefore, the purpose of our study is (1) to examine whether perceived overprotective parenting is associated with emerging adults' identity (in terms of identity synthesis and identity confusion) and (2) to test whether goal engagement and disengagement function as intervening variables in the association between overprotective parenting and identity. Unlike most previous research on parenting and identity, we focused on the specific cultural context of Georgia, which is a post-Soviet country that has undergone dramatic changes during the past three decades on the political, economic, cultural, and social level (Gugushvili, 2017; Mestvirishvili & Mestvirishvili, 2014).

Identity During Emerging Adulthood

Identity formation is often studied in terms of identity synthesis vs. identity confusion (e.g., Bogaert et al., 2021). Identity synthesis represents the integration of different identity elements (i.e., various commitments in different life domains important for one's self-definition) into a coherent whole, which offers a sense of direction in life. Identity confusion refers to a poorly developed and integrated sense of self, which often is accompanied with a sense of lack of direction and purpose (Erikson, 1950, 1968). In other words, whereas identity synthesis refers to feelings of clarity about *who one is*, identity confusion rather refers to feeling mixed up and being unable to commit to life alternatives. Past research has shown that identity confusion is associated with several negative adjustment outcomes, such as high levels of internalizing symptoms and high levels of risk behavior engagement, whereas identity synthesis was associated with more favorable developmental outcomes (for a review, see Schwartz et al., 2015).

Although Erikson (1968) conceived identity formation as the central developmental task of adolescence, contemporary scholars stress that identity development is also central during emerging adulthood—a life stage lasting roughly from 18 to 29 years, which offers opportunities for extended identity explorations across many life domains, including love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2018). These identity explorations are sometimes facilitated by physically distancing from parents as, in many societies, emerging adults leave the parental home and start living independently throughout this life stage (Kins & Beyers, 2010). Relatedly, parents' involvement in their offspring's lives seems to diminish as they leave the parental home (Kins et al., 2011). As has been argued by Koepke and Dennissen (2012), the degree to which this process of individuation and separation from their parents is successful would be of critical importance for emerging adults' identity development and adjustment. However, some parents may have difficulties in facing these changes (Brenning et al., 2017; Wuyts et al., 2017), and may

engage in overprotective parenting in order to try and keep their child close.

Parental Overprotection

Overprotective parenting refers to a degree of parental protection that is developmentally inappropriate; that is, it would exceed the developmental needs of increasing autonomy in adolescence or emerging adulthood (Thomasgard et al., 1995). Overprotective parenting practices include leaving little room for the child's autonomous functioning, expressing concerns and protecting the child at all costs from anything that could involve risk or danger, solving the child's problems before they arise, and intruding into the child's private space (Brenning et al., 2017; Chevrier et al., 2023).

Further, considerable research illustrated that overprotective parenting (and related constructs) is associated with maladjustment during adolescence and young adulthood. Indeed, past research has shown that overprotection is positively associated with, for instance, depressive symptoms (Darlow et al., 2017; Schiffrin et al., 2014), anxiety (Kouros et al., 2017; Segrin et al., 2013; Van Petegem et al., 2022), feelings of entitlement and narcissism (Segrin et al., 2013), social anxiety (Mathijs et al., 2023), and difficulties in social relationships (McGinley, 2018; Willoughby et al., 2015). As we argue below, overprotective parenting may also be associated with difficulties in terms of identity formation during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Overprotective Parenting and Identity

According to the dynamic developmental perspective of identity formation (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), intra-personal identity processes in children are triggered by micro-social transactions. Hence, parental relationships may be especially important from this perspective, as these interactions would particularly shape the identity formation process (see, e.g., Schachter & Ventura, 2008). The study of Van Petegem et al. (2020) indicated that when adolescents experience parental overprotection, they feel more pressured and coerced to act in ways that are externally imposed and are less attuned to their personally meaningful goals, values, and interests. On the other hand, a sense of autonomy is positively associated with emerging adults' sense of identity (e.g., Luyckx, et al., 2009; Skhirtladze et al., 2019). Autonomy-thwarting parenting may be particularly inappropriate during the life stage of emerging adulthood, when individuals take important steps toward adult life and further construct their identity (Schwartz et al., 2013). This is illustrated in the study of Lindell et al. (2017), who found that overparenting is predictive of weaker vocational identity during the transition to adulthood.

Thus, self-relevant feedback from parents might serve as an initiator of developmental processes of identity formation (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Apart from autonomy thwarting, overprotective parenting involves premature solving of child's problems that may carry a message implying the child's incompetence, which might be detrimental for the child's sense of identity. Indeed, it may raise self-doubt in children and make them inclined to have difficulties in active engagement in important life goals that represent one of the central domains of identity formation (Vignoles et al., 2011). It was found that emerging adult children's report of maternal helicopter parenting was positively related to avoidance goals (Schiffrin & Liss, 2017) and overprotective parenting was associated with avoidant coping strategies such as internalizing (e.g., getting mad at oneself) and distancing (e.g., refusing to think about a problem) (Segrin et al., 2013).

Similarly, overprotective parenting was related to emerging adults' difficulties in terms of self-control, which refers to one's capacity to resist immediate gratification that conflicts with long-term adjustment goals (Hong & Cui, 2020) and was also negatively related to grit (Howard et al., 2019). Overall, these findings suggest that overprotective parenting may be detrimental for children's capacities to maintain persistence for achieving important life goals. As we argue below, processes of developmental regulation may be particularly disturbed, explaining why overprotective parenting may relate to difficulties in terms of identity formation.

Developmental Regulation: Goal Engagement and Goal Disengagement

The basis of identity formation involves choosing personally meaningful goals to which an individual feels committed and taking responsibility for their enactment in face of challenges (e.g., Vignoles et al., 2011). For this reason, we suggest that regulation processes of goal engagement and goal disengagement are important to consider in relation with overprotective parenting and identity. As synthesized in a review of the literature by Heckhausen et al. (2010), goal engagement refers to the active involvement and persistence during goal attainment, whereas goal disengagement refers to abandoning goals when they seem too difficult or impossible to achieve. More specifically, when using goal engagement strategies, an individual invests time and energy in pursuing a goal, avoids possible distractions, imagines positive incentives after goal attainment, seeks help when obstacles arise, and/or tries to find alternative ways for goal attainment (Heckhausen, 1997). Examples of engagement strategies include working hard before an important sport competition and imagining oneself as an athlete with a higher rank.

On the other hand, when using goal disengagement strategies, an individual moves away from the goals that

he/she was pursuing, makes self-protective causal attributions, focuses on success in other life domains, and/or uses downward social comparison. Examples of goal disengagement strategies may include giving up a sport career after an unsuccessful competition, attributing failure to an unfair judge and changing career plans to business instead of sports (Heckhausen & Wrosch, 2016).

Both goal engagement and goal disengagement may be adaptive processes considering the goal-opportunity match, where individuals flexibly move from one strategy to another, depending on an individual's opportunities, resources and challenges in a given social ecology, and may be even used in conjunction (Heckhausen & Wrosch, 2016). Thereby, goal engagement is particularly adaptive when there are enough opportunities for goal attainment, whereas goal disengagement is appropriate when the goals are very hard to reach (Heckhausen et al., 2010). At the same time, research findings indicate that goal engagement is particularly beneficial in young age, whereas goal disengagement becomes especially adaptive in older age (Haase et al., 2013). For example, goal engagement is found to predict career success in young adults (Körner et al., 2015), and goal disengagement is found to be associated with less life satisfaction in 16–42-year-olds (Pinquart et al., 2009). On the contrary, goal disengagement is found to have adaptive value for managing life regrets in older adults (Wrosch et al., 2005).

Overall, goal engagement represents an agentic approach expressed in persistent goal striving and an optimistic stance toward overcoming setbacks and therefore may be particularly beneficial at a younger age. Goal disengagement, although adaptive when goals are impossible to achieve, is most seemingly detrimental when used prematurely (Haase et al., 2013). We suggest that overprotective parenting may be associated with emerging adults' tendency to use disengagement strategies predominantly. Indeed, as overprotective parents are overly worried and tend to solve their child's problems without allowing them to try and solve their problem first (e.g., Flamant et al., 2022; Kins & Soenens, 2013), they leave very few opportunities for their child to face and overcome challenging life situations and experience a sense of agency. For this reason, they might express less perseverance when pursuing life goals and be more inclined to prematurely abandon their goals when difficulties arise. In line with this, Wen et al. (2023) found that overparenting was positively associated with disengagement from career exploration.

As life goals represent an important domain of personal identity formation (Vignoles et al., 2011), it can be expected that a person's reliance upon goal engagement strategies may be linked with identity synthesis, that is, one may be more likely to experience a sense of life direction and self-acceptance. On the other hand, the chronic tendency to rely

upon goal disengagement strategies might be associated with a lack of direction and self-doubts (i.e., identity confusion). Although scarce, there is previous research that goal engagement positively predicted identity processes of commitment and proactive exploration in the domains of future goals and lifestyle, whereas goal disengagement predicted the reconsideration of identity commitments (Skhirtladze et al., 2021). Based on these findings, we expected that goal engagement will be positively associated with identity synthesis, whereas disengagement will be positively linked with identity confusion.

Emerging Adulthood in Georgia

The overall aim of the present study was to test whether overprotective parenting is associated with emerging adults' identity formation, thereby focusing specifically on the sociocultural context of Georgia—a former Soviet republic. According to a recent nationwide study of emerging adults in Georgia aged 18–29 years, 65% live at home with their parents (Shubladez et al., 2023). Georgia is a country of instable social policy (Asatiani & Verulava, 2017) and young people are to a large extent supported by their families in times of financial troubles.

We focused specifically on emerging adulthood, which is a life period when youth make the transition to adult roles and responsibilities. One of the key aspects of acquiring an adult identity is finding a place in the adult society (Côté, 2016) which, along with personality characteristics, is closely related with contextual factors such as job market opportunities. Scarcity of jobs may be associated with uncertainty regarding emerging adults' future prospects for finding their place in society. In Georgia, where the current study was conducted, the threat of unemployment is quite realistic for emerging adults. The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) is high (26.0% in 2019; European Training Foundation, 2020).

Scholars indicate that general economic strains that are associated with job market opportunities may elicit overinvolved parenting (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019), as parents attempt to protect and guarantee emerging adults' "safe future." We suggest that these characteristics of the Georgian socioeconomic context along with cultural norms underling familism and obedience (Schwartz, 2006; Yakhnich, 2016) might incline Georgian parents to be more overprotective, hence potentially hampering the identity formation process. For example, a recent study with Georgian emerging adults revealed that in some cases emerging adults feel pressure to choose and stick to parent-approved career goals, which eventually may create serious barrier to the identity formation process (Skhirtladze et al., 2022). The same study also indicated that physical distancing from parents when starting tertiary education, which is typically associated with a

decrease in parental influence, appears to set the stage for experimentation and finding oneself.

The Present Study

The present study was guided by three general objectives. First, we sought to investigate the link between overprotective parenting and identity synthesis and identity confusion. We hypothesized that overprotective parenting would be positively associated with identity confusion (H1) and negatively associated with identity synthesis (H2). Second, we aimed to examine the intervening role of goal engagement and disengagement in the association between overprotective parenting and identity synthesis and confusion. We expected that young people who perceive their parents as overprotective are likely to engage less often in goal engagement (H3) and more often in goal disengagement strategies (H4), which in turn would relate to less identity synthesis (H5), through goal engagement, (H6) through goal disengagement) and more identity confusion (H7), through goal engagement, (H8) through goal disengagement).

Finally, given that our study sample was composed of emerging adults living independently and emerging adults living with their parents, our third goal was to explore whether participants' living arrangement would moderate these associations between overprotective parenting and identity synthesis and confusion. Past research indicated that higher levels of perceived parental overprotection was associated with a higher likelihood of staying in the parental home (Brenning et al., 2017). Moreover, previous research has found that the relation between overprotective parenting and maladjustment was stronger among young adults living with their parents, compared to those living away from their parents (Hong & Cui, 2020). For these reasons, we also examined whether living arrangement played a moderation role. We expected that association of overprotective parenting with identity synthesis and confusion would be pronounced strongly among the young adults still living with their parents (H10).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 318 Georgian emerging adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.4$ years, ranging from 18 to 29 years, 58% female). 60% of the participants were living with their parents, whereas 40% reported living apart from parents. Further, 97 participants (31%) reported being student and working at the same time, 81 participants (26%) were students but did not work, 114 participants (37%) reported to be working and not studying, whereas 20 participants (6%) reported they

were neither studying nor working. 47 participants (15%) reported to be married. Data were gathered electronically, using a snowball sampling procedure. No modification to the initial recruitment plan had taken place. The questionnaire was available for 4 weeks. All participants completed self-report online questionnaires on a voluntary basis and confidential treatment of the data was guaranteed. No incentives were offered for participation.

Measures

Overprotective parenting. Perceived maternal overprotective parenting was measured using the short version of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (Chevrier et al., 2023; Kins & Soenens, 2013). The subscale of anxious overprotection, consisting of ten items, was used to assess maternal overprotection (e.g., “My mother immediately sees danger whenever I want to do something new,” $\alpha = 0.86$, McDonald’s $\omega = 0.87$). We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model and the results revealed acceptable fit indices (CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07). Past research provides evidence for the reliability and validity in different languages, including in Georgian (Chevrier et al., 2023).

Identity Synthesis and Confusion

We assessed identity synthesis and confusion using the Identity subscale of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; Rosenthal et al., 1981). The scale was validated in Georgian and disposes of good psychometric properties. The identity synthesis subscale consists of 5 items (e.g., “I know what kind of person I am,” $\alpha = 0.71$, McDonald’s $\omega = 0.73$), whereas the identity confusion subscale is composed of 5 items (e.g., “I feel mixed up,” $\alpha = 0.73$, McDonald’s $\omega = 0.70$). We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model and the results revealed acceptable fit indices (CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.08). Further validity information of the EPSI is provided by Schwartz et al. (2009).

Goal Engagement and Disengagement

We used the Georgian translation (Skhirtladze et al., 2021) of the Optimization in Primary and Secondary Control scale (OPS; Heckhausen et al., 1998). Specifically, 14 items measure goal engagement (e.g., “When I have set my mind on something, I put it before everything else,” $\alpha = 0.91$, McDonald’s $\omega = 0.85$) and 6 items measure goal disengagement (e.g., “When I do not reach a goal, I often tell myself that it wasn’t my fault,” $\alpha = 0.74$, McDonald’s $\omega = 0.75$). We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model. These results yielded acceptable fit indices (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.05). Heckhausen (1997) provides further validity information of the OPS.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables. Overprotective parenting was related negatively to identity synthesis and goal engagement and was positively related to identity confusion and goal disengagement. Identity synthesis was positively associated with goal engagement and negatively associated with goal disengagement. Identity confusion was positively related to goal disengagement and was negatively related to identity synthesis.

Main Analyses

Path analysis with structural equation modeling, conducted in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), was used to test our central hypotheses. Following the recommendations of Holmbeck (1997), three models were tested: (1) a direct effects model including overprotective parenting as the predictor of identity synthesis and confusion, where overprotection is expected to predict less identity synthesis and more confusion; (2) a full mediation model in which overprotective parenting was indirectly related to identity synthesis and confusion through goal engagement and goal

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Study variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4	5	6
1. Overprotective parenting	2.09	0.91	– .18**	.29***	– .12*	.28***	– .02
2. Identity synthesis	3.88	0.76		– .44***	.55***	– .02	– .04
3. Identity confusion	2.51	1.00			– .24***	.30***	.02
4. Goal engagement	4.15	0.62				– .06	– .07
5. Goal disengagement	2.60	0.97					.02
6. Age	23.5	3.00					

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

disengagement, where overprotection is hypothesized to predict less goal engagement and more disengagement, with engagement in turn predicting more synthesis and less confusion, and disengagement predicting less synthesis and more confusion; and (3) a partial mediation model including the direct paths from overprotective parenting to identity as well as the indirect paths through goal engagement and disengagement. Full mediation is demonstrated when the addition of direct paths does not improve model fit. We used the ΔCFI -statistic and the $\Delta RMSEA$ -statistic to examine whether the more parsimonious model (i.e., the full mediation model, without the direct paths) fitted the data equally well as the partial mediation model. When $\Delta CFI < 0.01$ and $\Delta RMSEA < 0.02$, there is no significant difference in terms of model fit, in which case the more parsimonious model (i.e., the full mediation model) should be retained (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). The BOOTSTRAP option (with 1000 iterations) was used to estimate the indirect effects. We used robust ML estimation (MLR) to deal with non-normality observed in some of our variables (Finney & DiStefano, 2006), except for the bootstrapping analyses.

The first step involved estimating the direct effects model. Results indicated that perceived overprotective parenting predicted less identity synthesis and more identity confusion. Then, we examined the intervening role of goal engagement and disengagement in this association, by testing a full mediation model and a partial mediation model. When comparing model fit between these two models, it was found that the partial mediation model had a better

model fit than the full mediation model ($\Delta CFI = 0.05$, $\Delta RMSEA = 0.11$). The final, partial model fitted the data perfectly ($CFI = 1.00$, $RMSEA = 0.00$), because the model was fully saturated.

The partial mediation model is depicted in Fig. 1. The results indicated that overprotective parenting positively predicted goal disengagement, whereas the relation with goal engagement was not significant. Goal disengagement, in turn, positively predicted identity confusion; the relation between goal disengagement and identity synthesis was not significant. Goal engagement, on the other hand, positively predicted identity synthesis and negatively predicted identity confusion. Further, overprotective parenting also directly predicted less identity synthesis and more confusion. We found evidence for one significant indirect effect: goal disengagement partially mediated the link between overprotective parenting to identity confusion (see Table 2 for a summary of all indirect effects). The partial mediation model accounted for 32% of variance in identity synthesis and 17% of variance in identity confusion.

Then, we performed multigroup comparison analyses to test whether the partial mediation model would differ as a function of emerging adults' living arrangement (emerging adults living with their parents vs. living independently from their parents). Specifically, a constrained model, with all paths set equal across the two groups, was compared with an unconstrained model, where all paths were allowed to vary across two groups. Both models fit equally well across the two groups ($\Delta CFI = 0.00$, $\Delta RMSEA = 0.00$), indicating

Fig. 1 Final partial mediation model. All coefficients are standardized. Coefficients between parentheses represent the coefficients from the direct effects model. Nonsignificant relations are depicted with dashed line. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

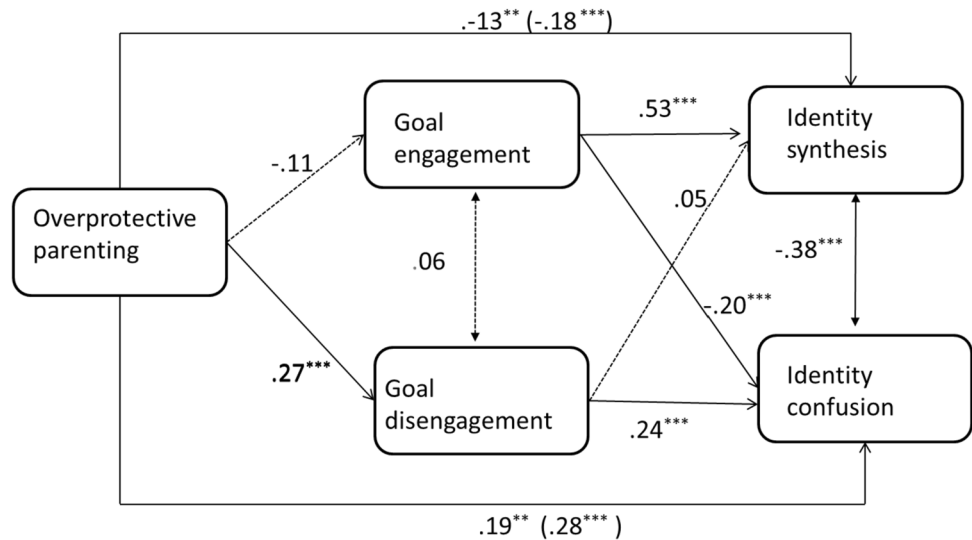


Table 2 Summary of indirect effects

Independent variable	Mediator variable	Dependent variable	Point estimate	S.E	95% CI
Overprotection	Goal disengagement	Identity synthesis	.002	.016	[-.017, .020]
Overprotection	Goal disengagement	Identity confusion	.090	.028	[.048, .137]

that emerging adults' living arrangement did not play a moderating role.

Discussion

Empirical evidence regarding the detrimental effects of overprotective parenting for emerging adults' adjustment and well-being is growing (e.g., Kwon et al., 2016; Schiffrin et al., 2019), but little is known about its association with their personal identity structure and the role of their developmental regulation strategies in this association. Our study contributes to the existing literature by revealing that perceived overprotective parenting is linked with identity synthesis and confusion. Further, this association is partially explained by emerging adults' disengagement from their life goals.

Our findings reveal that the more parents are solving their children's problems without help being requested, being excessively preoccupied with their safety, and intruding their personal space (Van Petegem et al., 2020), the less certain and the more confused emerging adults feel regarding their life direction and their purpose, and their personal values and life goals. These findings confirmed our first and second hypothesis (H1 and H2). This is particularly relevant as the developmental context of emerging adulthood implies exercising individual agency, exploration of different identity opportunities, and taking some responsibilities for independent life (Arnett, 2018). At the same time, emerging adults in Georgia, as in other parts of the world, are often not yet fully independent from their parents, and parents' overprotectiveness may be detrimental for their identity. Overprotective parents, through their excessive involvement and pressure, seem to leave little room for their adult children to act upon personally meaningful values and interests, as may be reflected in their difficulties during their identity formation process. This may eventually put them at risk for not finding their place in the adult society (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Skhirtladze et al., 2019).

Further, emerging adulthood is considered a life period characterized by a heightened tendency for exploration and experimentation, which usually involves certain risks. Although experimentation and risk-taking is adaptive to some degree, risk-behaviors that are taken to extremes may carry serious dangers. Such activities may include risky sexual behavior, substance use, or risky driving (Schwartz, 2016). As overprotective parents are overly sensitive for cues about potential dangers (Kalomiris & Kiel, 2016), emerging adults' risk-containing explorations may especially alert overprotective parents and may prompt them to safeguard their children from possible dangers. This may conflict with developmentally relevant identity explorations (Arnett, 2018; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), as emerging adults

experiencing parental overprotection are likely to dispose of less opportunities to explore and experiment with different interests, lifestyles and relationships. In our study, we relied upon the identity model that focuses on identity structure, that is, in terms of identity synthesis vs. confusion. Previous studies found positive associations of the exploration processes with identity synthesis and negative association with identity confusion (Bogaerts et al., 2019). An important avenue for future studies, therefore, is to explore the links between overprotective parenting with identity processes, and with exploration processes in particular as these are crucial during the emerging adulthood life stage.

It should be noted that we did not find any association of participants' age with parental overprotection or identity synthesis and confusion. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 29 years and one might expect that older participants would perceive less overprotection from parents, and score lower on identity confusion and higher on identity synthesis. However, a recent nationwide survey among Georgian youth aged 24–29 revealed that 46% of the participants still live with their mother and that one third of the participants indicate that they live with their parents because this is the most comfortable solution (Shubladze et al., 2023). Relatedly, an earlier study found that in half of the sample, parents influence the decisions made by their 18–29-year-old children in important ways (Omanadze et al., 2017). These findings reflect the specific socioeconomic and cultural conditions in Georgia where economic situations very often do not allow young adults to separate from their parents, and where close connections with the family is a culturally shared value (Schwartz, 2006). For these reasons, youth may continue to experience parental overprotection quite intensively during the later years of emerging adulthood as well. Further, as suggested by Arnett (2018), the developmental task identity formation is salient during the whole period of emerging adulthood, and therefore, more stability in terms of identity structure could be expected after this life period, although future research among older participants is needed to examine this hypothesis explicitly.

Further, our findings suggest that, when parents are perceived as overprotective, children are more inclined to abandon goals prematurely when goal achievement becomes more complicated, relying upon compensatory strategies such as replacing their initial goals with other ones (H4). However, as our results suggest, this chronic tendency toward goal disengagement may put them at risk for identity confusion and "feeling lost in life" (H8), which is consistent with previous research showing that goal disengagement is predictive of emerging adults' reconsideration of identity commitment over time (Skhirtladze et al., 2021), which tends to be detrimental for youth's sense of self and life direction. This may be particularly problematic in emerging adulthood, as youth are exposed to a new array of roles and

responsibilities in the context of higher education, job market, and social relationships (Arnett, 2000). These exposures often are associated with different challenges, and more generally, it has been argued that developmental regulation is more challenging during transitional periods (Heckhausen & Wrosch, 2016).

Paradoxically, the well-meant strategies of overprotective parents may further complicate emerging adults' transition to adulthood, as it makes them prone to particularly disengage from important life goals as soon as they are facing difficulties, putting them at risk for difficulties in their identity formation. It should be noted, though, that we expected that overprotective parenting would be negatively associated with goal engagement (H3), but we did not find evidence for this hypothesis. Potentially, positive parenting dimensions, such as autonomy-supportive parenting, may be particularly relevant in the prediction of goal engagement. In line with this, past research found that autonomy-supportive parenting is predictive of self-regulation and persistence (Pelletier et al., 2001), although future research is needed to examine associations with goal engagement specifically.

It should be noted that goal disengagement only partially intervened the link between overprotective parenting and identity confusion. Other explaining mechanisms may involve emerging adults' (lack of) identity distinctiveness, that is, seeing the self as unique and distinct from others, which is recognized to be one of the core components of personal identity (van Doeselaar et al., 2018). One feature of overprotective parenting involves parental intrusiveness in the child's personal space, which is also often observed in enmeshed family relationships, where members violate personal boundaries and show little respect to each other's psychological individuality (Munich & Munich, 2009; Scabini & Manzi, 2011). Overprotective parents, through their excessive involvement in their child's life, might hamper their child's identity distinctiveness (Manzi et al., 2006). However, more research is needed to test such hypotheses explicitly.

Limitations

There are several limitations in our study that restrict the conclusions that can be drawn from these findings. First, the cross-sectional design of this study precludes the possibility to make conclusions regarding the causal ordering of the variables. Future research should involve longitudinal studies to examine the direction of the associations between parenting, goal disengagement, and identity. For instance, it may be possible that identity confusion would predict increases in overprotective parenting, that is, young adults who have an unstable identity structure, lacking direction in life and prone to goal disengagement may elicit overprotective parenting practices from their parents (cf. Becht et al.,

2017). Further, goal engagement and disengagement also can be predicted by identity synthesis and confusion. For example, more stability in identity structure (i.e., more synthesis) may predict more goal engagement and less disengagement. Future studies may want to examine these reciprocal associations. Second, we administered the overprotective parenting scale only for mothers and do not have information about fathers' parenting. Third, we only relied upon self-report information from emerging adults that could have inflated associations between the study variables. Future research should include multiple perspectives—that is, the parents and their emerging adult children. A multi-informant design also would allow examining discrepancies between different informants, as past research indicated that incongruence in parents' vs. adolescents' reports of overprotective parenting significantly predicted more developmental difficulties (Van Petegem et al., 2020; Wang & Hawk, 2023).

Conclusion

Although a growing body of research indicates that overprotective parenting is associated with maladaptive problems in adolescence and young adulthood, few studies examined the link with identity in emerging adulthood. The present research extends our understanding about the link between overprotective parenting and emerging adults' identity synthesis and confusion. Further, it identifies goal disengagement as one of the mechanisms partially explaining the link between overprotective parenting and identity confusion.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval This research was done following the ethical, methodological, and privacy standards of the code of conduct for research at Ilia State University, Georgia. Participants completed informed consent prior to participation and were informed of their rights to leave the study at any time. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review board at Ilia State University.

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