

## Identity Styles of Young Adults in Greece of Crisis: Impact on Perceived Social Support and Affect<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Previous research has shown that identity processing styles are associated both with perceived social support as well as with affect. Based on Berzonsky's model (1988), there are three identity processing styles (namely, informational, normative and diffuse/avoidant) derived from the socio-cognitive strategies that a person tends to employ when processing issues related to identity formation. As far as perceived social support is concerned, it is regarded as being the self-appraisal of the behavioural support of significant others. Affect is a person's general emotional state and is assessed as positive or negative considering his experienced feelings. The present study aimed to examine the identity styles of young adults who live in crisis-stricken Greece and the extent to which these styles impact their perceived social support and affect. For this purpose, a questionnaire –which was constructed based on a combination of the Identity Style Inventory Revised (ISI3; Berzonsky, 1992), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegan, 1988)– was completed by a sample of 164 undergraduate students in the Department of Primary Education of the University of Patras. The collected data was quantitative and was analysed by constructing regression models. The current study explored the possibility that each identity processing style of young adults has a distinct impact on their perceived social support and affect, examined in Greece of crisis.

### Keywords

Identity Styles, Perceived Social Support, Affect, Young Adults, Society of Crisis

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## **Introduction**

Over the last two decades a substantial body of research has shown that identity processing style is an important factor having an impact on young adults' behaviour, emotional state and well-being (Berzonsky, 2003; Gfeller & Córdoba, 2011; Good, Grand, Newby-Clark & Adams, 2008; Kuiper, Kirsh & Maiolino, 2016; Vleioras & Bosma, 2005). Specifically, the three identity styles of Berzonsky's theoretical model (1988), their relation with maladjustment during emerging adulthood as well as with the Big Five personality dimensions have been investigated (Adams, Munro, Doherty-Poirer, Munro, Petersen & Edwards, 2001; Dunkel, Papini & Berzonsky, 2008; Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005). Such studies show the significant role of identity styles during the formation of self in the early stage of adulthood. Of particular interest is the study of Bosch, Segrin and Curran (2012) which demonstrated the effect of young adults' identity processing styles on psychosocial outcomes (namely, perceived social support and affect).

Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, no studies examining young adults' identity styles with respect to their affect and perceived social support have been carried out to date under circumstances of intense insecurity and uncertainty. As other researchers have mentioned, these concepts have not been examined in young adults facing extremely stressful circumstances during this crucial period of identity formation and emerging adulthood (Bosch & Card, 2012; Bosch et al., 2012; Kunnen & Bosma, 2003). It has been hypothesized that, when studied in a society under a long-lasting crisis where young adults experience stress and oppression due to economic and safety concerns, differentiated findings might emerge concerning the relations of identity styles with problem solving socio-cognitive strategies, affect and perceived support of significant others (Beaumont, 2011).

The present study attempted to contribute to research discourse since identity processing styles have not been examined in societies under continuing crisis, when simultaneously taking into account the socio-cultural characteristics of an eastern European society (Beaumont, 2011; Bosch & Card, 2012; Crocetti, Rubini, Berzonsky & Meeus, 2009; Szabo, Ward & Fletcher, 2016; Whitbourne, Sneed & Skultety, 2002). Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the identity styles of young adults who live in crisis-stricken Greece and, also, the extent to which these styles impact their perceived social support and affect.

## **Literature Review**

### **Identity Styles**

Erikson's psychosocial theory –proposed in 1968– has indeed shed new light on identity research, which describes eight stages of development including the stage of an individual's identity formation (Kuiper et al., 2016; Schwartz, 2001). According to Erikson, subjective reality is the basis on which identity is

formed, because each person perceives and interprets environmental stimuli uniquely and actively. Aspects of self may be processed in indirect and unconscious ways, so it is possible that identity is partly developed without consciousness (Berzonsky, 1988, 2004; Schwartz, 2001).

Based on Erikson's theory, in 1988 Berzonsky suggested a model about *identity processing styles*. Berzonsky identified three identity styles with regard to the socio-cognitive strategies that individuals tend to employ when processing issues relevant to identity formation (Berzonsky, 1988; Bosch & Card, 2012; Waterman, 2015). These identity styles are namely: *informational*, *normative* and *diffuse/avoidant*.

A person mainly employing an *informational style* tends to rely on information in order to answer issues of identity formation by assessing them actively and critically (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011). As for *normative style*, it pertains to relying heavily on determined norms, conforming to the expectations of significant others (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011). Contrarily, an individual who prefers a *diffuse/avoidant style* hesitates and avoids facing identity relevant issues and making decisions about identity, and each time he/she relies on situational demands (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009; Bosch et al., 2012; Wheeler, Adams & Keating, 2001).

It has been demonstrated that these three identity styles are structured and integrated in differing degrees, with informational and normative styles being characterized by strong commitment to identity (Berzonsky, 2003). It also seems that individuals employing the same identity style rely on similar self-elements regardless their socio-cultural background (Berzonsky, Macek & Nurmi, 2003). In fact, it is noticeable that Berzonsky's model provides an alternative explanation on how individuals solve problems and make decisions related to identity, forming theories about self usually in automatic and unconscious way (Berzonsky, 2004; Johnson & Nozick, 2011; Waterman, 2015).

A considerable pile of research has examined the pre-mentioned identity styles, in most occasions focusing on the period of emerging adulthood – which is between 18 and 25 years of age–, as this is the pivotal period of identity formation (Berzonsky, 1988; Whitbourne et al., 2002). In a series of related studies exploring the relation of identity styles with forms of adjustment and coping with stressful situations, it was found that informational style is positively related to positive adjustment (Seaton & Beaumont, 2008), to personal wisdom, self-actualization and self-transcendence (Beaumont, 2009), to mindfulness and savoring (Beaumont, 2011), to mature defense style (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011), as well as to beneficial coping strategies (Beaumont & Seaton, 2011). Nonetheless, Berzonsky, Branje and Meeus (2007) inferred that employing a normative style seems to be more functional and adaptive during emerging adulthood for effective communication.

Furthermore, identity styles are associated with academic possible selves and in turn they influence academic outcomes (Saint-Eloi Cadely, Pittman, Kerpelman & Adler-Baeder, 2011). It has been shown that the role of family is decisive in identity formation, as identity styles are affected by family functioning (Dunkel et al., 2008) and family communication patterns (Bosch et al., 2012). In addition, Bosch et al. (2012) indicated that identity styles predict social and emotional outcomes of young adults, having an impact on their perceived social support and affect.

### **Perceived Social Support**

*Perceived social support* is an individual's self-appraisal of the behavioural support of significant others (Zimet et. al, 1988; Clara, Cox, Enns, Murray & Torgrudc, 2010). Specifically, it is defined as a person's subjective evaluation of the supportive behaviour of those considered important by him/her, like family members, friends, colleagues and professors.

It has been found that perceived social support, which is influenced by an individual's identity style (Bosch et al., 2012), is related to supportive social interactions (Duru, 2007). Moreover, the protective function of perceived social support against stress is acknowledgeable (Çivitci, 2015) as well as depressive symptoms (Laurence, Williams & Eiland, 2010). So, it becomes apparent that the self-perception of the support of significant others is correlated to emotional factors too.

### **Affect**

*Affect* is an individual's general emotional state assessed either as positive or negative, and, in fact, it is regarded as the total sum of his/her experienced feelings (Watson et al., 1988; Strayer, 2002).

As mentioned above, it is argued that identity processing styles have an impact on affect (Bosch et al., 2012). Other researchers have deduced that positive affect predicts a person's perception about the presence of "meaning in life" (Işık & Üzbe, 2015) as well as his/her assessment of social interactions quality to be more pleasant, easy-going and close (Berry & Hansen, 1996). Therefore, clearly there is an association between an individual's social and emotional characteristics.

## **The Present Study**

Despite the fact that a countable number of studies have examined identity styles during emerging adulthood, hardly any has addressed their effect on perceived social support and affect under circumstances which provoke insecurity, uncertainty and oppression, as occurs in a continuing economic and social crisis

(Beaumont, 2009; Beaumont & Seaton, 2011; Berzonsky & Luyckx, 2008; Seaton & Beaumont, 2011). Hence, the aim of the present study investigates the identity styles of young adults who live in a crisis-stricken Greece and the extent to which these styles impact their perceived social support and affect.

The conducted research attempted to answer three research questions:

- Among undergraduate students from the Department of Primary Education of the University of Patras, what ratio tends to employ an informational identity style, what ratio tends to employ a normative style and what ratio a diffuse/avoidant style?
- Is there an effect of those young adults' identity styles on their perceived social support?
- Is there an impact of those young adults' identity styles on their affect?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The present research had a sample of 164 undergraduate university students of the Department of Primary Education at the University of Patras, 144 women (87.8%) and 20 men (12.2%). Participants were in the period of emerging adulthood, whose age ranged between 18 to 23 years ( $M = 20.2$ ;  $SD = 1.8$ ).

### **Measures**

The research tool employed was a questionnaire, which was based on the following questionnaires: the Identity Style Inventory Revised (ISI3; Berzonsky, 1992), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). These include five-point Likert-scale items and for the purposes of this study they were adjusted and translated into Greek.

#### ***Identity Style Inventory – Revised (ISI3)***

Berzonsky's questionnaire (1992) was used for identity processing styles to be measured. *Identity Style Inventory – Revised* consists of 40 items, although due to the needs of the combined questionnaire –which was constructed for the conducted research– only 18 representative items were used (six for each of the three identity styles). Participants completed the adjusted ISI3 by rating each item from one (not at all) to five (very much) according to the degree it characterized them. As Berzonsky (1992) reported, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the informational, normative and diffuse/avoidant subscales were .70, .64 and .76, respectively. However, in the present study alpha coefficient for those

items measuring informational style was .63, for normative style was .61 and for diffuse/avoidant style .59 (with an overall alpha coefficient of .64). These reliability measures seem to be quite satisfactory since they resulted from just six items per identity style, while it is noticeable that these alpha coefficients were also computed in a previous research examining identity styles conducted in Greece (Vleioras & Bosma, 2005).

### ***Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)***

In order to assess the self-perception of social support, the *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) was used. It should be mentioned though that the three different subscales of this questionnaire were unified into one general scale measuring the perceived social support of significant others (i.e., family, friends and the rest) and ending up with a total of six items from the original twelve. These items were completed by choosing from one (not at all) to five (very much) reliant on the degree of agreement with each. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the adjusted scale was found to be .93, while for the original MSPSS was .88 (Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000; Zimet et al., 1988).

### ***Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)***

The measurement of affect was carried out by using the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). This questionnaire consists of 20 items of which ten represent positive feelings and the remaining ten refer to negative feelings, indicating positive and negative affect, respectively. Respondents noted from one (not at all) to five (very much) the extent to which they had been experiencing each item's feeling during that week. The questionnaire's developers documented alpha coefficients of .88 and .87 for the positive and negative affect subscales, respectively (Watson et al., 1988). The reliability measures in the current research were similar to those with alpha coefficient of .84 for the positive affect subscale and of .83 for the negative affect subscale (with an overall alpha coefficient of .77).

## **Procedure**

A pilot study was carried out in order to test the constructed combined questionnaire, which was used as the research instrument. According to the results of the pilot testing, no need for instrument modifications arose, since its internal reliability was satisfactory and no ambiguities in items' wording were

reported. 30 undergraduate university students participated in the conducted pilot study, who were not included in the main research sample.

The present study took place at the University of Patras in Greece and data was collected during a two-week period in March 2017. Participants completed the combined questionnaire, which was distributed during university classes. It is worth mentioning that all participants were informed in advance about the research objectives and their anonymity was ensured.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for identity styles, perceived social support and affect were conducted and their valid percentages among the 164 study participants are presented in Table 1. In particular, this shows the percentages of sample's young adults employing each identity style, reporting more or less positive perceived social support and experiencing positive or negative affect. As noticed, there were 14.7% of the participants who tend to employ both informational and normative styles alike. Also, it needs to be stated that perceived social support was divided into more and less positive, on the basis of being greater or lower/equal than the mean point, respectively.

Table 1. Valid percentages for main study variables

	Valid %
Informational Style	41.7%
Normative Style	39.3%
Diffuse/Avoidant Style	4.3%
Informational – Normative Styles	14.7%
More Positive Perceived Social Support	89%
Less Positive Perceived Social Support	11%
Positive Affect	87.8%
Negative Affect	12.2%

Preliminary analyses included confirmatory factor analyses for checking construct validity of each study variable, as well as multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) for examining sex and age differences in the main variables. Sex differences were found in perceived social support ( $F = 4.68$ ,  $p = .032$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ) and negative affect ( $F = 5.88$ ,  $p = .016$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ) and age differences were found in positive affect ( $F = 4.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .19$ ).

Furthermore, correlation analysis among all study variables was conducted, the results of which are shown in Table 2. It seems that there is temporal precedence of identity styles over perceived social support and affect (Bosch et al., 2012), while covariation between these variables was confirmed through correlation analysis. So, it becomes feasible to investigate possible causality in their relations, by controlling plausible alternative explanations (*ceteris paribus*).

### Identity Styles of Young Adults

In order to answer the first research question regarding the identity styles of undergraduate students from the Department of Primary Education at the University of Patras in crisis-stricken Greece, confidence intervals were computed. Among those young adults, 34.1% to 49.3% tend to employ an informational identity style, those who have a normative orientation are 31.8% to 46.8%, while 1.2% to 7.4% are diffuse/avoiders. It was also revealed that 9.3% to 20.1% of them tend to employ both informational and normative processing styles equally, without showing preference between the two.

Table 2. Correlations between all study variables

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Sex	-.04	-.02	.05	-.01	.17*	.05	-.05	-.19*
2. Age		.09	.11	-.03	-.01	-.05	.39**	.05
3. Informational Style			.36**	-.03	.23**	.23**	.23**	-.01
4. Normative Style				.10	.36**	.19*	.18*	-.08
5. Diffuse/Avoidant Style					-.04	-.15	-.17*	.04
6. Perceived Social Support						1**	.17*	-.27**
7. More Positive Perceived Social Support							.13	-.22**
8. Positive Affect								-.07
9. Negative Affect								

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

### Impact of Identity Styles on Perceived Social Support and Affect

The second and third research questions pertained to the impact of identity styles of the targeted young adults on their perceived social support and affect, respectively. For this purpose, multiple linear regression analyses were carried out, where four different regression models were constructed. In all four models, the same five independent variables were inserted (namely, informational style, normative style, diffuse/avoidant style, sex and age). As for the dependent variables, these were perceived social support, more positive perceived social support, positive affect and negative affect –one for each of the four regression models.

With respect to the regression models' significance, three of them were statistically significant, whilst non-statistical significance was found in the model, which had the negative affect as a dependent variable. Specifically, the first regression model with perceived social support as the outcome variable explained the 16.7% of total variance ( $R^2 = .167$ ,  $F = 6.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas the second model that had as the more positive perceived social support as a dependent variable which explained the 10.9% of total variance ( $R^2 = .109$ ,  $F = 3.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the third model where positive affect was the dependent variable, 22.3% of the total variance was explained ( $R^2 = .223$ ,  $F = 9.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 3 summarizes the results of all conducted regression analyses, displaying the effects of the independent variables on each of the four outcome variables.

Table 3. Unstandardized betas and significance level of the four multiple linear regression analyses for each outcome variable

Independent Variables	Perceived Social Support		More Positive Perceived Social Support		Positive Affect		Negative Affect	
	b	p	b	p	b	p	b	p
Informational Style	.19	.110	.21	.016	.37	.044	.03	.852
Normative Style	.47	.000	.18	.056	.25	.168	-.18	.320
Diffuse/ Avoidant Style	-.08	.356	-.13	.036	-.32	.018	.09	.515
Sex	2.17	.040	.83	.315	-1.02	.524	-3.59	.022
Age	-.15	.443	-.13	.359	1.47	.000	.18	.522

As pictured in the above table, normative style and sex have a significant effect on perceived social support, while in contrast more positive perceived social support is influenced by informational and diffuse/avoidant styles. In addition, it seems that informational and diffuse/avoidant styles as well as age have an impact on positive affect. The exported results from the regression

analyses regarding the effects of all independent variables on perceived social support, more positive perceived social support and positive affect are graphically depicted in Figure 1.

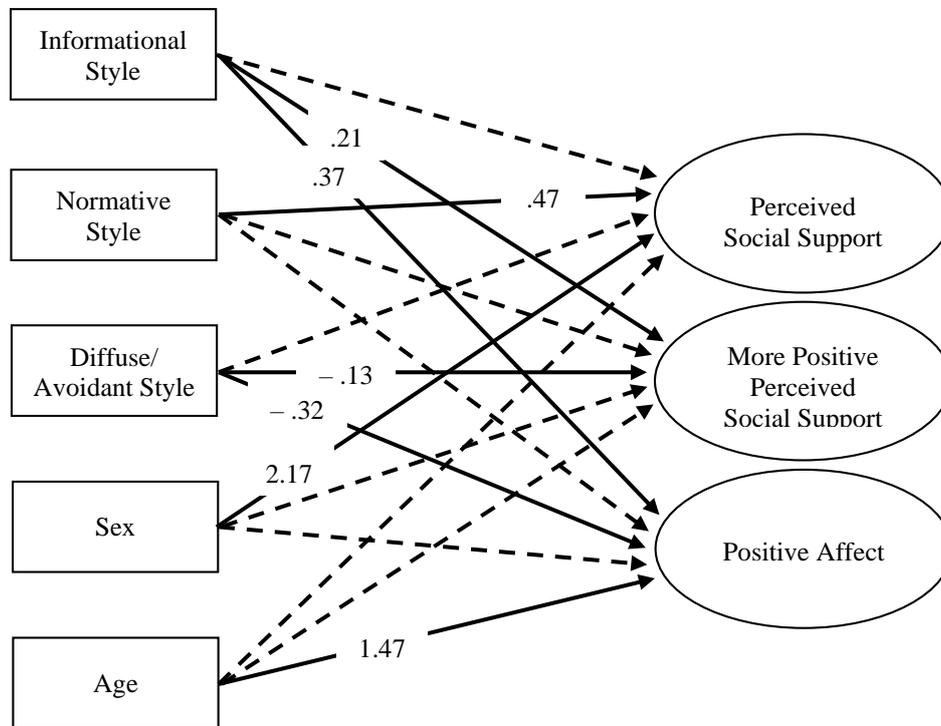


Figure 1. Effects on perceived social support, more positive perceived social support and positive affect

## Discussion

The present study investigated the identity styles of young adults who live in crisis-stricken Greece as well as the extent to which these styles impact their perceived social support and affect. As far as the first research question is concerned, the ratio of undergraduate students from the Department of Primary Education of the University of Patras who tend to employ an informational, normative or diffuse/avoidant identity style was examined.

The results obtained from the conducted analyses indicate that about eight out of 20 of these students employ an informational identity style, while about seven out of 20 tend to use a normative style. The young adults who have a normative orientation would not have been anticipated to be almost as many as those with an informational orientation, who typically constitute the majority among individuals in emerging adulthood (Berzonsky, 1988). The observed higher ratio of young adults employing a normative style might be due to the collective characteristics and strong family bonds of the Greek society which together lead to complying with determined norms. That argument has been also supported by findings of previous studies carried out in different cultural environments

(Beaumont, 2011; Bosch et al., 2012; Hofer, Kärtner, Chasiotis, Busch & Kiessling, 2007; Whitbourne et al., 2002; Szabo et al., 2016; Vleioras & Bosma, 2005).

On the other hand, among undergraduate students from the Department of Primary Education of the University of Patras it seems that only one out of 20 use a diffuse/avoidant style. The low ratio of diffuse/avoiders is consonant with Erikson's theory and Berzonsky's model, which denote that in emerging adulthood most young adults have been moved away from the least functional diffuse/avoidant orientation to one of the other two (Berzonsky & Luyckx, 2008; Bosch et al., 2012; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003).

An unexpected finding was that about four out of 20 of those undergraduate students tend to employ both informational and normative styles alike, without signs of preference between the two. Although this has not been documented from prior researches, it finds theoretical justification in Berzonsky's model. It is possible that these young adults are at the critical point of switching from the less functional normative style –which pertains to following norms of the familiar environment– to informational identity style that can lead to self-actualization (Berzonsky, 1988). Additionally, it could be the case that, during this transitional period of emerging adulthood, a combination between informational and normative orientations turns out to be quite functional for some young adults.

Addressing the second research question, the impact of young adults' identity styles on their perceived social support was investigated. It was found that employing a normative style seems to affect the self-perception of social support, since those who adopt the norms of significant others tend to presume that they have their unreserved support (Berzonsky, 1988; Bosch et al., 2012). It is also remarkable that the use of an informational processing style predicts experiencing more positive perceived social support. A possible explanation is that young adults who have an informational orientation form (based on information) a more complete and realistic view (Berzonsky, 1988; Kunnen & Bosma, 2003) and so they are more confident about the support they receive from significant others. Moreover, it was revealed that a diffuse/avoidant style has a negative causal relationship with more positive perceived social support. This is perhaps attributed to the hesitation and vacillation of diffuse/avoiders due to which they might be uncertain about the received behavioural support (Berzonsky, 1988; Bosch et al., 2012).

As indicated by the results of the current study, perceived social support seems to depend on young adults' sex. In particular, findings suggest that compared to men, women tend to have greater self-perception of the support of significant others. It is noticeable, though, that there is uncertainty in the literature about the existence of sex differences in perceived social support, since in some studies such differences have been reported (Duru, 2007; Zimet et al., 1988) while in others they have not been found (Edwards, 2004).

Finally, the third research question referred to the impact of young adults' identity styles on their affect, which was revealed to be influenced by informational as well as diffuse/avoidant style. According to this study's results, it appears that informational processing style positively impacts positive affect, which could be attributed to the fact that young adults with an informational orientation have greater self-actualization, self-awareness and self-acceptance (Beaumont, 2009, 2011), and, therefore, they tend to experience positive affect. On the other hand, diffuse/avoidant style has a negative impact on positive affect, probably because diffuse/avoiders are almost constantly in a state of uncertainty and falling short in fulfilment of their obligations (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009) so that the experience of positive affect is compromised. It is also noticed that young adults' age seems to be a factor differentiating affect, since within the spectrum of emerging adulthood older individuals tend to have greater positive affect.

### **Limitations, Suggestions for Future Research and Conclusions**

The limitations of the present study could not be overlooked. The results of this study regarding the impact of young adults' identity styles on their perceived social support and affect –already been discussed– were derived from multiple linear regression analyses, which though did not explain a high proportion of total variance. Nonetheless, the constructed regression models were evaluated as quite satisfactory, because it needs to be taken into account that they addressed only identity styles' effect on perceived social support and affect, not measuring factors related to situational circumstances. In addition, it is important to note that, due to lack of results, the current study cannot draw conclusions with respect to identity styles' impact on negative affect.

The findings of this study outline some directions for future research. As it seems that some young adults employ both informational and normative identity styles mutually without showing preference between the two, future research could be directed to examining whether the aforementioned processing styles are being used simultaneously or alternatively in order for them to respond to situational demands. Another suggestion for future research would be for longitudinal studies to be carried out providing empirical data about stability or change in identity orientation as well as each identity style's impact on perceived social support and affect. It could also be worthwhile for future research to investigate these effects in other societies under crisis.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that informational and normative styles predict greater perceived social support, while the former also predicts the experience of positive affect. On the other hand, the use of a diffuse/avoidant style negatively impacts perceived social support and positive affect. A point of interest is that, in Greece of continuing social and economical crisis, perceived social support and affect of young adults do not seem to have been afflicted. Above all, the present study adds to the body of literature by demonstrating

identity processing styles' impact on psychosocial outcomes in a society in crisis, which has various implications concerning the citizenship of young adults.

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