

IDENTITY CRISIS AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the level of identity crisis among students in the first and second cycles at Sidi Rouhou Middle School in Ouargla, as well as to examine differences in the level of identity crisis according to gender and educational stage. The descriptive research method was employed, as it is appropriate for describing the phenomenon both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The study was conducted on a sample of 300 male and female students enrolled in the first and second cycles of middle education at Sidi Rouhou Middle School in Ouargla. The Identity Crisis Scale was used as the main research instrument.

The results revealed a low level of identity crisis among students in both the first and second cycles. Furthermore, no statistically significant differences were found in the level of identity crisis attributable to gender or educational stage.

Keywords: Identity crisis, middle school students, first and second cycles of middle education.

Introduction

Adolescence is considered one of the most critical stages in an individual's development, as it possesses distinct characteristics that set it apart from both childhood and adulthood. Numerous scholars and researchers have studied this stage and acknowledged its complexity, given the range of features that distinguish adolescents from children and adults alike. These characteristics significantly influence adolescents' personality formation, attitudes, tendencies, emotional responses, and value systems.

Adolescence represents a transitional phase during which the individual moves from immaturity toward maturity, engaging in an internal struggle to achieve psychological and social stability. Situated between childhood and full maturity, this stage marks the beginning of a new phase of life characterized by profound changes in physical development, personality traits, social standards, desires, intellectual orientations, and interests.

Moreover, adolescence is often marked by internal conflicts, as well as tensions between the individual and others. Stability is typically achieved only upon progressing to adulthood. One of the most challenging tasks adolescents face during this period is the development of a stable sense of self-identity. Adolescents often oscillate between their own perceptions and the expectations and viewpoints of others, giving rise to internal conflict with both the self and society. Within this complex and contradictory context, what is commonly referred to as an identity crisis emerges.

1. Research Problem

In psychology, adolescence refers to the transitional stage through which the individual moves from childhood toward subsequent stages of development, during which preparation for adulthood takes place. It is therefore considered a critical and decisive phase from both psychological and social

perspectives, as individuals begin to assume roles and responsibilities as members of society (Abdel Rahman Al-Wafi, 2011). Adolescence is regarded as one of the most sensitive stages of human development due to the rapid and profound changes it entails, which are reflected across physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth domains (Ashoul, 1984).

As a result of these transformations, adolescents of both genders often experience a range of emotional and social difficulties associated with the rapid transition from childhood to adolescence (Adas & Touq, 1995). Consequently, adolescence has attracted considerable attention from psychologists and researchers, whose perspectives on this stage have varied. Some scholars have described it as a “second birth” of the individual, while others—such as Freud, Hall, and Sullivan—have characterized it as a turbulent and emotionally charged period (Asaad & Makhoul, 1982). Stanley Hall, in particular, described adolescence as a stage marked by psychological crises, suffering, frustration, conflict, anxiety, behavioral problems, and difficulties in adjustment (Vander Zanden, 1989).

Many people view adolescence as a crisis phase in which adolescents experience distress due to several factors, including feelings of inadequacy, diminished self-worth, unmet basic needs, family and social pressures, as well as intense internal psychological conflicts. These conflicts may manifest in several forms, such as:

- The conflict between the attractions of childhood and the demands and expectations of adulthood, as the individual is no longer a child yet not fully an adult.
- The conflict between heightened self-awareness and a strong need for belonging to a social group.
- The conflict between the desire for independence and continued dependence on parents, or between striving for autonomy and the authority of the family.
- The conflict between reality and the adolescent’s idealistic aspirations.
- The cultural conflict between the adolescent’s generation and previous generations.

Such multifaceted psychological conflicts may significantly influence adolescents’ behavior and personality, often leading to mood fluctuations accompanied by fear and anxiety regarding their future. Hall viewed adolescence as a life stage characterized by intense emotions, heightened affectivity, and severe tension. Similarly, Mead argued that the tensions and psychological conflicts experienced by adolescents may stem from frustrating experiences encountered in daily life, particularly within the family and school contexts (Abdel Rahman Al-Wafi, 2011).

Erikson (1968) proposed that individuals experience a psychological crisis at the onset of adolescence, which he termed the identity crisis. This crisis revolves around the formation of personal identity and may extend into early adulthood. It involves a process through which adolescents explore and attempt to understand their sense of self, including values, beliefs, and behaviors. This process of self-exploration is often accompanied by emotional instability and an evaluation of multiple potential alternatives concerning self-definition. Through exploration and evaluation, individuals gradually integrate new values, beliefs, and goals into their self-concept, ultimately committing to a more coherent sense of identity (Al-Badareen & Ghaith, 2003).

During this stage, adolescents seek answers to several fundamental questions that contribute to identity formation, such as: Who am I? What is my role within society? What career do I aspire to pursue in the future? Which values and beliefs guide my life? What lifestyle do I prefer? And which social group do I choose to belong to and interact with? (Abu Jadu, 2010). At this critical juncture, adolescents stand at a crossroads: either they succeed in finding clear answers and commit to them, thereby achieving identity formation, or they experience confusion and fragmentation of identity, resulting from failure to define roles and clarify self-perceptions (Al-Abadi, 2013).

Feelings of identity crisis among adolescents may stem from inadequate understanding of surrounding realities and limited ability to cope with societal demands, leading to internal conflict due to contradictory expectations regarding responsibilities and obligations imposed by parents, peers, and educators. This may result in dependency, confusion, and a sense of disorientation regarding what one should believe or do. Such experiences represent a developmental pathway that may either lead to identity achievement or, conversely, to increased internal disintegration, role confusion, or identity diffusion (Role Confusion) (Abdel Rahman, 2001). In some cases, this may evolve into the adoption of a negative identity (Negative Identity), associated with heightened feelings of internal fragmentation.

The negative consequences of identity crisis extend beyond difficulties in defining stable goals or achieving satisfaction with social roles, as they may exert more detrimental effects on an individual's life. These include engagement in socially unacceptable behaviors such as delinquency and substance abuse (Abdel Rahman, 1988). From this perspective, the issue of identity crisis among adolescents emerges as a critical psychological and social concern that warrants systematic investigation.

Accordingly, the research problem is defined as identifying the level of identity crisis among middle school students.

2. Research Questions

1. What is the level of identity crisis among first- and second-cycle students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School?
2. Are there differences in the level of identity crisis among first- and second-cycle students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School according to gender?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in the level of identity crisis among first- and second-cycle students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School according to educational stage?

3. Research Hypotheses

- It is expected that there will be a high level of identity crisis among first- and second-cycle students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School.
- There are no differences in the level of identity crisis among first- and second-cycle students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School attributable to gender.
- There are no statistically significant differences in the level of identity crisis among first- and second-cycle students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School attributable to educational stage.

4. Study Objectives

- To identify the level of identity crisis among middle school students.
- To examine the differences in the level of identity crisis among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School, considering gender and academic level.

5. Significance of the Study

- The age group addressed in this study ranges from 11 to 14 years, focusing on first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School in Ouargla. The significance of this study lies in its focus on the issue of identity crisis, a challenge faced by most adolescents. This stage, also referred to as early adolescence, marks the transition from childhood to adolescence. During this period, intense emotions often emerge, which adolescents generally find difficult to control due to emotional fluctuations and internal contradictions. Adolescents strive to achieve emotional independence to shape their future personality; however, they may experience feelings of shyness or guilt due to low self-confidence.
- Additionally, the study's importance lies in enriching the academic library with research on the topic of identity crisis.

6. Scope of the Study

The study was defined within the following domains:

- **Human domain:** This study involved a sample of first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School.
- **Spatial domain:** The study was conducted at Sidi Rouhou Middle School in Ouargla.
- **Temporal domain:** The study was carried out during the 2018/2019 academic year.

1. Concept of Identity Crisis

1.1 Crisis

Linguistically, the term "crisis" denotes severity or a critical situation. It originally refers to a narrow passage or a decisive point between two obstacles. The term crisis (Crisis) is derived from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning "to decide" or "to make a judgment."

1.2 Crisis in Psychological Terms

In psychological terminology, a crisis is defined as "a state of tension and a turning point that requires a decision, resulting in new positive or negative conditions affecting the relevant entities."

Identity

The term "identity" in contemporary literature corresponds to the concept of Identity, reflecting the notion of self-consistency or correspondence with one's own essence or with similar entities. Modern dictionaries align with this understanding, defining identity as the absolute essence of a person or object, encompassing intrinsic characteristics that distinguish it from others. Identity also refers to self-unity, including personal uniqueness, self-consistency, and the qualities, values, and attributes that differentiate an individual or a community from others (Balghith, 2015).

2. Identity Crisis

2.1 Definition of Identity Crisis

Identity crisis is a social and developmental concept referring to the adolescent's efforts to achieve general developmental goals. During this period, adolescents focus on forming personal goals and values, developing autonomy, and exploring their abilities and willpower to guide their future (Romano, 2004). This process involves peer relationships, sexual identity development, differentiation, acceptance by adults, and establishing value systems regarding life. Meeting these developmental tasks may lead to a crisis requiring solutions, guided by social support and the adolescent's belief in their ability to interact effectively with the external world, thereby fostering a positive sense of identity (Hamoud, 2011).

A critical issue in adolescence is the identity crisis, which most adolescents experience at some point. It manifests as a lack of clarity about oneself, uncertainty about the present or future self, and feelings of confusion, dependence, or incompetence. This developmental challenge can either facilitate a stable sense of identity or lead to role confusion and identity diffusion. Adolescents facing identity diffusion often struggle with career choice, continuing education, and personal organization. Some may adopt a negative identity opposing parental or peer expectations, which can explain certain deviant behaviors (Abdulrahman, 2001).

According to Tarshaoui (2002), identity crisis involves the struggle adolescents undergo to achieve a sense of secure and confident selfhood. Failure to establish a clear identity results in role confusion, goal ambiguity, social withdrawal, and weakened social relationships.

Freud conceptualized identity formation in terms of two primary instincts governing human behavior: the life instinct (sexual drive) and the death instinct (aggression). The life instinct motivates positive actions for survival, while the death instinct may manifest in destructive behaviors. Sexual energy, part of the libido, develops with the individual and requires appropriate outlets for expression.

Hormones influence sexual readiness but do not determine behavior type (Isawi, 1989; Al-Dabbagh, 1982).

Paul Goodman emphasized that identity emerges when youth experience a sense of confusion in a society that fails to help them understand themselves, define their roles, or provide opportunities to affirm their social value (Al-Hijazi, 1984).

Erikson's theory posits that personality, specifically ego development, progresses through stages of growth shaped by interactions among biological, social, and personal factors. Each developmental stage presents a crisis or conflict requiring resolution, and the surrounding environment or culture may either support or hinder the adolescent's success in resolving these crises (Zahrani, 2008; Al-Shaibani, 2000).

2.2 Elements of Identity Formation

Erikson identified three fundamental elements essential for identity formation (Jaber, 1990):

1. **Self-continuity:** Individuals must recognize their internal continuity over time, perceiving themselves as the same person in the present as in the past.
2. **Social recognition:** Individuals need acknowledgment from others within their social environment regarding their internal continuity. Adolescents' emerging sense of identity can be disrupted if they experience doubt, confusion, or indifference about their self-concepts and social roles.
3. **Confidence in consistency:** Individuals require assurance that their perceptions of internal and external continuity are validated through appropriate social feedback, reinforcing the credibility of their emerging identity (Abdul-Radi & Fakhri, 2005).

3. Stages of Identity Crisis

Erik Erikson, the pioneer of developmental psychology, divided human development from infancy to late adulthood into approximately eight stages. Each stage presents specific developmental challenges and crises that individuals are expected to navigate successfully to achieve healthy psychological growth. According to Erikson, each stage builds upon the previous one, much like a stepwise pyramid: success in one stage significantly increases the likelihood of success in the next, while failure in a stage tends to influence outcomes in subsequent stages.

The early stages, from birth to around 11 years, are considered foundational (the basic stage), as they lay the groundwork for the individual's personality. Most psychological successes, failures, and potential difficulties often originate during childhood and later manifest during adolescence or adulthood. Freud similarly emphasized that fundamental factors shaping mental life are established during infancy, forming a basis upon which later experiences build, which can be modified or influenced over time (Moshir, n.d., p. 1).

Erikson categorized the human life cycle into eight age-related stages, each representing a critical period for development and identity formation.

Table 1: Psychosocial Development Stages and Identity Formation According to Erikson

| Age Stage | Identity Crisis / Psychosocial Conflict | Ego Strength / Resulting Virtue |
|------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1st Year | Trust vs. Mistrust | Hope |
| 2nd Year | Autonomy vs. Shame | Will |
| Early Childhood | Initiative vs. Guilt | Purpose |
| Middle Childhood | Industry vs. Inferiority | Competence |
| Adolescence | Identity vs. Role Confusion | Fidelity |
| Young Adulthood | Intimacy vs. Isolation | Love |
| Middle Adulthood | Generativity vs. Stagnation | Care |

| Late Adulthood | Integrity vs. Despair | Wisdom |
|----------------|-----------------------|--------|
|----------------|-----------------------|--------|

(Al-Ghamdi, 2010)

It is evident from the table above that the psychosocial crisis during adolescence is the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. Successful resolution of this crisis leads to the development of fidelity, which reflects the adolescent's ability to define their personal and occupational goals, clarify plans for achieving them, maintain loyalties, and understand and adhere to social values. This process depends on the adolescent's exploration of alternatives and options across ideological and social domains and the commitments they undertake (Al-Ghamdi, 2010).

On this basis, Erikson views the identity crisis as a period that enables adolescents and young adults to begin perceiving themselves as mature individuals and to adopt adult behaviors. The identity crisis is not merely an internal psychological conflict but is often accompanied by experiences of failure and noticeable embarrassment (Radwan, 2010; Al-Shaikh & Ata Allah, 2009).

Thus, the identity crisis represents a period during which the adolescent actively engages in choosing between alternatives, particularly concerning career paths and ideological beliefs related to politics and religion (Al-Shaikh & Ata Allah, 2009). Erikson's theory emphasizes that adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods for the formation of ego identity. Achieving a coherent identity involves navigating a crisis centered on defining and shaping the roles expected by society.

The emergence of this crisis is associated with a degree of anxiety and disturbance as the adolescent attempts to determine their life's purpose, set goals, and establish meaningful social relationships that meet adult responsibilities. Consequently, the central task for the adolescent during this stage is identity formation, which involves affirming who they are, understanding their role in society, and recognizing their capabilities and potential. This process also depends on the support provided by society, including offering appropriate roles, allowing sufficient time for exploration, and providing guidance. Erikson notes that although society may set a temporal framework for identity development, some individuals may remain uncertain about their future into their third or even fourth decade of life (Salaf Al-Mashri, 2017).

4. Identity Statuses

Building on Erikson's work on identity development, Marcia (1985) identified four identity statuses in adolescents:

1. **Identity Diffusion:** These are individuals who have not yet experienced an identity crisis and have not formed a clear identity. They are often unaware of the need to explore alternatives or options, and may struggle to commit to a stable ideology.
2. **Foreclosed Identity:** These individuals have not experienced a crisis but adopt beliefs and values acquired from others (e.g., parents or influential figures in their environment) without personally testing or critically evaluating them. This process, often occurring during early childhood, results in a closed or constrained identity.
3. **Moratorium:** Individuals in this status are currently experiencing or have experienced an identity crisis. They are actively exploring their beliefs and values but have not yet achieved a clear and definitive sense of self.
4. **Achieved Identity:** These individuals have undergone an identity crisis and successfully developed a clear and coherent identity. They have explored alternatives, made personal choices, and committed to a stable ideology, reflecting psychological and social maturity.

Methodological Procedures of the Study

1. Research Method

Any scientific study cannot achieve its objectives accurately and objectively without relying on a research method, which represents the most efficient and reliable pathway to reach the desired outcomes. Research methods in psychology vary depending on the nature of the problem being investigated. The selection of a method depends on the specific research question or issue addressed by the researcher. In this study, the descriptive method was employed. This approach involves a systematic scientific analysis and interpretation to describe a specific phenomenon or problem. It enables quantitative development through the collection, classification, and analysis of standardized data and information, allowing for rigorous examination and understanding of the phenomenon.

2. Study Sample and Characteristics

The study sample consisted of first- and second-year middle school students enrolled at Sidi Rouhou Middle School in the Ouargla province. enrolled at Mohammed bin Musa Khawarizmi High School in the Ouargla province.

1.1.4 Psychometric Properties of the Identity Crisis Questionnaire

Validity:

- Criterion-related validity (or extreme-group validity):

Table 2: Results of Extreme-Group Validity for the Identity Crisis Questionnaire

| Variable | Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | t-value | Significance Level |
|-----------------|------------|---|-------|--------------------|---------|--------------------|
| Identity Crisis | Low Group | 8 | 44.37 | 2.82 | 7.49 | 0.01 |
| | High Group | 8 | 64.50 | 7.05 | | |

4. Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the Identity Crisis Questionnaire, two methods were employed:

- Cronbach's Alpha:** The reliability coefficient was estimated at **0.75**, which is considered highly acceptable, indicating that the questionnaire demonstrates strong internal consistency and can be reliably reapplied.
- Split-Half Method:**

Table 3: Reliability Coefficient of the Identity Crisis Questionnaire Using the Split-Half Method and Spearman-Brown Correction

| Variable | Reliability Coefficient |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Before Correction |
| Identity Crisis Questionnaire | 0.51 |

It is evident from Table 03 that the reliability coefficient of the Identity Crisis Questionnaire was 0.51, and after applying the Spearman-Brown correction, it increased to 0.67. This value is considered acceptable, indicating that the questionnaire demonstrates sufficient reliability and can be reapplied in future studies.

5. Main Study

After establishing the psychometric properties of the research instrument, it was administered randomly to 300 students from the first and second years at Sidi Rouhou Middle School in the Ouargla province.

6. Statistical Analysis Methods

The collected data were analyzed using **SPSS (v.19)** to perform the following statistical analyses:

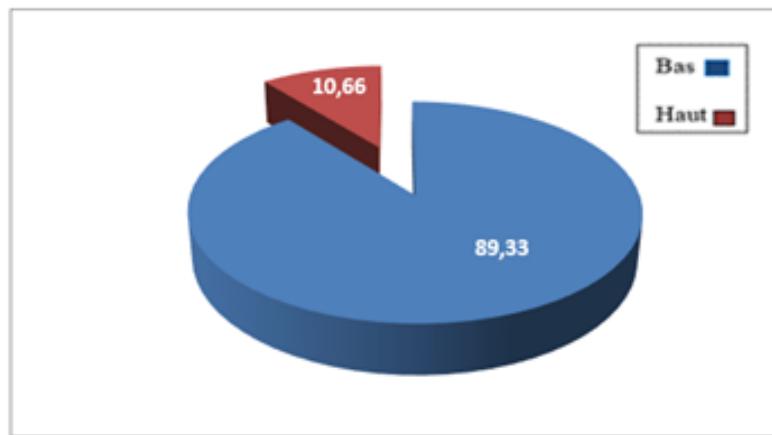
- Frequencies and Percentages:** To describe the characteristics of the study sample.
- Mean Scores:** To determine the level of identity crisis among the participants.
- Pearson Correlation Coefficient:** To assess the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

4. **T-Test:** To examine the significance of differences between the means of two independent groups.

Discussion and Interpretation of the Study Results

1. Presentation and Interpretation of the First Research Question Results

The first research question states: "What is the level of identity crisis among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School?"



As shown in Figure 03, the majority of first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School ($N = 268$; 89.33%) do not exhibit an identity crisis, while 32 students (10.66%) displayed a low level of identity crisis.

This finding can be interpreted in light of several psychological and social factors. Adolescents at this stage often show relatively stable self-esteem and psychological adjustment, which enhance their ability to cope with challenges and approach new ideas with flexibility (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, the family environment appears to play a crucial role. Many students come from households where parents are employed in the military, which may contribute to the development of structured social behaviors, discipline, and early maturity in interpersonal relationships (Al-Ghamdi, 2010). Such upbringing can provide adolescents with clear behavioral models and consistent social expectations, reducing the likelihood of experiencing an identity crisis during early adolescence.

On the other hand, the result differs from the findings of Ahmed Nouri (2010–2011), whose study indicated that adolescents in his sample did experience identity crisis. This discrepancy may be due to contextual differences, such as variations in social environment, family support, and cultural expectations, which are known to influence the development of ego identity and the resolution of psychosocial crises during adolescence (Marcia, 1985; Erikson, 1968).

Presentation and Analysis of the First Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: There are no statistically significant differences in identity crisis according to gender among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School.

Table 4: Results of the First Hypothesis by Gender

| Gender | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | t-value | df | Significance |
|--------|-----|-------|--------------------|---------|-----|--------------------------------|
| Male | 150 | 52.02 | 6.62 | 1.13 | 298 | Not Significant ($p = 0.25$) |
| Female | 150 | 51.11 | 7.24 | | | |

As presented in Table 04, the mean score for male students was 52.02 with a standard deviation of 6.62, while female students had a mean score of 51.11 with a standard deviation of 7.24. The calculated t-value (1.13) was not statistically significant ($p = 0.25$), indicating that gender does not influence the

level of identity crisis among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School. Consequently, the research hypothesis is confirmed.

This outcome can be explained from several perspectives. Adolescents of both genders experience the same developmental stage—early adolescence—which is characterized by the emergence of ego identity and the gradual formation of self-concept (Erikson, 1968). During this stage, adolescents engage in self-exploration to define their existence, establish personal goals, and clarify plans for achieving them. They also develop the capacity to maintain loyalties, recognize social values, and adhere to them, which is influenced by their active engagement in exploring alternatives across social and ideological domains (Marcia, 1985; Al-Ghamdi, 2010).

Furthermore, the similarity in identity crisis levels between males and females may reflect shared educational experiences, cultural norms, and family socialization practices. For instance, structured family environments, such as those present in households where parents are employed in the military, may promote discipline, maturity, and stable social interactions, equally affecting both genders (Al-Ghamdi, 2010).

However, this finding differs from the results of Ahmed Nouri (2010–2011), which reported significant gender differences in identity crisis. Such divergence could be attributed to contextual factors, including variations in social environment, parental involvement, cultural expectations, and exposure to different socialization experiences, all of which are known to influence identity development and psychosocial adjustment during adolescence (Marcia, 1985; Erikson, 1968).

3. Presentation and Discussion of the Third Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis 3: There are no statistically significant differences in identity crisis according to the academic level among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School.

Table 5: Results of the Third Hypothesis by Academic Level

| Academic Level | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | t-value | df | Significance |
|----------------|-----|-------|--------------------|---------|-----|----------------------------|
| First Year | 150 | 50.86 | 6.28 | 1.75 | 298 | Not Significant (p = 0.08) |
| Second Year | 150 | 52.26 | 7.50 | | | |

As shown in Table 05, the mean score for first-year students was 50.86 with a standard deviation of 6.28, while second-year students had a mean score of 52.26 with a standard deviation of 7.50. The calculated t-value (1.75) was not statistically significant, indicating that the academic level does not affect the level of identity crisis among students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School. Therefore, the research hypothesis is supported.

This result can be interpreted by considering that both first- and second-year students are approximately in the same age range, sharing similar life experiences, social interactions, and environmental influences. Such similarities may account for the absence of a significant effect of academic level on the degree of identity crisis, as adolescents' psychosocial development is more strongly influenced by age-related experiences and socialization than by grade level alone (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1985; Al-Ghamdi, 2010).

However, this finding contrasts with the study conducted by Ahmed Nouri (2010–2011), which reported significant differences in identity crisis according to academic level. This discrepancy may be explained by variations in sample characteristics, school environments, and contextual factors that influence the development of identity during adolescence.

Summary of Findings

The presentation and discussion of the study revealed several important results, which can be summarized as follows:

- The majority of first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School (N = 268; 89.33%) do not exhibit an identity crisis. However, 32 students (10.66%) displayed a low level of identity crisis.
- There are no statistically significant differences in identity crisis according to gender among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School.
- There are no statistically significant differences in identity crisis according to academic level among first- and second-year students at Sidi Rouhou Middle School.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- Pay greater attention to studying identity crisis as an important social phenomenon in adolescents' lives, given its impact on their personal and professional development.
- Investigate the relationship between identity crisis and other relevant psychological and social variables.
- Conduct further field studies and research to explore these variables and their influence on adolescents' identity development.

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