

## Working together or separately? The role of identity and cultural self-construal in well-being among Japanese youth

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Young people develop a sense of personal identity during the transition to adulthood, a time when individuals choose and adhere to a specific set of goals, values, and beliefs. In addition, in many contemporary Asian societies, youth are expected to acquire and balance traditional and Western cultural views of the self — that is, independent and interdependent self-construal. To understand the relationships between the personal and cultural facets of the transition to adulthood, this study examined (a) associations between personal identity and well-being and (b) the possible moderating role of cultural self-construal (independence and interdependence) in this link. These hypotheses were tested in a sample of 520 Japanese university students (52.6% female). The results indicated that personal identity predicted each dimension of well-being, suggesting that the importance of personal identity in promoting youth's well-being can be understood as a universal phenomenon. Moreover, because the moderating role of self-construal in the links between identity and well-being was found to be limited, personal identity can be viewed as operating separately from self-construal in well-being to a large extent. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

*Key words:* identity, independence, interdependence, Japan, transition to adulthood, well-being.

### Introduction

Identity formation has been recognized as a central task for young people as they strive to develop a sense of a coherent self and find their place in society (Erikson, 1968). This task is particularly crucial during the transition to adulthood, a time when individuals choose and adhere to a specific set of goals, values, and beliefs (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). In addition, young people are expected to acquire social schemata that organize their behaviours as 'mature' or 'desirable' community members within the cultural contexts in which they live. Different

cultural contexts often have different goals for youth development, such as individualized decision making in many Western societies (Côté, 2014) and family obligations in many Eastern societies (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011). These differences are likely interwoven with the process of personal identity formation – that is, the process of deciding who to be and what to do with one's life (Schwartz, 2012).

Culturally based self-construals, such as independence and interdependence, reflect these culturally endorsed goals for development and hence may serve to direct the ways in which young people develop a sense of identity (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011). By considering cultural self-construal as a contributing factor directing (or at least contributing to) identity development and well-being, we may be able to detect culturally unique pathways through which identity is developed and maintained. However, there has been little empirical research thus far on the relationships between identity and self-construal during the transition to adulthood – a time when identity issues (e.g., career choices and interpersonal relationship formation) tend to be most salient. In the present study, we examined this issue empirically by studying the relationship between identity and cultural self-construal *vis-à-vis* well-being among young Japanese people transitioning into adulthood. Specifically, we first examined the associations between identity and well-being; we then

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explored whether personal identity operates separately from self-construal (i.e., independence and interdependence) or whether it works in concert with cultural self-construal in explaining well-being. In other words, we examined the possible moderating role of cultural self-construal in the links between identity and different forms of well-being.

### **Identity development and well-being**

In his theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1968) frames the identity stage as ‘identity synthesis versus identity confusion.’ Marcia (2002) provided the most enduring empirical operationalization of Erikson’s work. As part of this effort, Marcia recast Erikson’s identity stage as ‘identity synthesis *with* identity confusion.’ In this operationalization, identity synthesis refers to the extent to which various aspects of one’s identity fit together, representing a sense of recognition and feeling that one knows where one is headed. On the other hand, identity confusion represents an unclear feeling as to what one is doing in life, along with being unable to implement and maintain lasting commitments to important life choices. The conceptualization of synthesis and confusion as somewhat compatible, rather than mutually exclusive, suggests that healthy identity development is characterized by a degree of both synthesis and confusion. A coherent sense of identity cannot be ‘final’ and must provide young people with ‘room’ for further identity exploration.

Although a number of neo-Eriksonian identity measures have been developed, only a handful of these measures provide separate synthesis and confusion subscales. One of these is the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). Supporting Marcia’s contention regarding the potential coexistence of identity synthesis and confusion, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, and Olthuis (2009) tested a series of models for the EPSI and found that a two-factor solution for synthesis and confusion provided a better fit to the data compared to a one-factor solution, in which synthesis and confusion were forced to load onto a single factor. Moreover, in a latent profile analysis with a sample of young US adults, Schwartz *et al.* (2015) found a cluster characterized by high scores for both identity synthesis and confusion, further suggesting that synthesis and confusion are distinct but related components of identity.

The value of identity as a psychosocial construct lies in its relevance to mental health and psychosocial adjustment (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz *et al.*, 2009). In many Western cultural contexts, a sense of coherent identity has been found to have a positive impact on well-being (see Kroger & Marcia, 2011, for a review). Similar findings have emerged in Eastern cultural contexts. For instance, several studies have found positive relationships of identity synthesis with self-esteem (Miyoshi, Ono, Uchijima, Wakahara, & Ono, 2003; Tani, 2001), and one study with

Japanese university students (Hatano, Sugimura, Nakama, Mizokami, & Tsuzuki, 2014) found that synthesis was positively related – and confusion was negatively related – to satisfaction with life. However, less is known regarding the role of identity *vis-à-vis* broader aspects of well-being among the youth in Eastern societies. Erikson’s (1968) theory, which was formulated in a Western cultural context, postulates that a coherent sense of personal identity fits with an important developmental goal in Western cultures and is necessary for facilitating well-being. The extent to which this theory applies to a non-Western cultural context is not clear, and it is possible that identity is less important among Eastern youth. Moreover, although Ryff (1989) proposed six dimensions of well-being – autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and environmental mastery – we know of no published attempts that unpack the relationship of identity synthesis and confusion with these well-being dimensions. Psychological well-being represents a sense of excellence and meaningfulness in one’s own life that can be experienced through diverse aspects of life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Thus, although psychological well-being includes the dimensions relevant to the self and interpersonal relationships (e.g., autonomy and positive relationships with others), it can be regarded as conceptually different from identity and self-construal in its emphasis on the sense that one is living in a meaningful fashion.

In sum, in the present study, we further unravel the role of identity in well-being among Eastern youth (i.e., Japanese youth, as we discuss in a later section) by examining the relationships of identity synthesis and confusion. It would logically follow that identity synthesis would advance, and identity confusion would hinder, psychological well-being in Eastern youth, as is the case with their Western counterparts. Considering that an optimal sense of identity is experienced as feeling at home in one’s own body and mind and in the form of harmonious relationships with one’s social, physical, and cultural environments (Erikson, 1968), identity and well-being likely go together, regardless of the cultural context in question.

### **Self-construal and identity in Eastern and Western cultural contexts**

Although the association between identity and well-being is assumed to be generalized across Western and Eastern countries, some researchers have proposed that cultural values impact young people’s identity development (e.g., Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011). Specifically, the concept of cultural self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 2010) provides a useful frame to explain cultural variability in identity development. Young people are normally directed to

internalize a culturally expected balance of independence and interdependence, assumedly favoring independence in Western countries and favoring interdependence in Eastern countries (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011). Thus, the interplay between independence and interdependence occurs at the individual and cultural levels (Guo, Schwartz, & McCabe, 2008), and this interplay may help us examine culturally unique features of identity development.

According to Markus and Kitayama (2010), many Western cultures place primary importance on distinguishing oneself as a unique individual. One's own thoughts and feelings, rather than those of others, are considered to be most important. Thus, the self is construed as largely separate from others, and consistency of the self over time and across situations is strongly valued (Cross, Morris & Gore, 2002). On the other hand, in Eastern cultures, particularly East Asian societies, maintaining harmonious relationships with others is a primary goal (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). Thus, the self is construed as connected and interdependent with others. Although both personal identity and self-construal refer to the self, they are different in their emphasis on relations between the self (the individual) and others (other individuals). Specifically, identity is conceptualized as a sense of coherent self that the person has (Erikson, 1968), and this refers to the structure of self. On the other hand, self-construal refers more to the values of how the individual thinks or believes him or herself to be in relation to other individuals or groups, focusing on sociality or social relations that can be linked to senses of self (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

The previous arguments about identity development and cultural self-construal have outlined two primary ways in which personal identity can be developed in differing cultural contexts. Youth in individualistic cultures consider multiple identity alternatives and choose from among the alternatives considered, whereas youth in collectivistic cultures internalize ideals held by others (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Either of these mechanisms could conceivably lead to a synthesized sense of identity. Thus, young people in cultures emphasizing collectivism and interdependence engage in finding their own unique path, regardless of the differences in the pathways to construct personal identity. The previous arguments regarding adolescent development have indicated the association of independence with identity development in contemporary East Asian nations (e.g., Cheng & Berman, 2012, for China; Lee, Beckert, & Goodrich, 2010, for Taiwan). On the other hand, it is not entirely clear as to whether and how identity might relate to interdependent self-construal. For example, in Japan, one study (Mori, 2012) reported that identity synthesis was linked to independence but not interdependence, whereas another study (Misugi, 1998) found that identity synthesis was linked to both independence and interdependence. In cultures emphasizing

interdependence, the youth are expected to consider their own needs and interests while also thinking about how their choices affect important interpersonal relationships (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012). It is possible that balancing finding one's own way (a Western/globalization based task) with maintaining harmonious relationships with others (an Eastern/traditional task) can be difficult and may undermine a synthesized sense of identity (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). Although these arguments provide some information regarding the possible relationship between identity development and cultural self-construal, few studies examining the links between identity and well-being have also considered the role of self-construal. For example, do identity and cultural self-construal work together or separately in relation to well-being?

### **Japanese society as an exemplar**

In addressing this issue, contemporary Japanese youth provide an exemplar for exploring the way identity and cultural self-construal are interwoven with one another *vis-à-vis* well-being. Japan has often been referred to as a collectivistic society in which individual and group goals are interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Social relationships are generally prioritized over individual needs and desires and, as a result, individuals' choices are largely dictated by others' feelings and expectations (Azuma, 2001; Tataru, 1974). In cultural contexts characterized by shifts away from collectivism and toward greater individualism, a unique mixture of independence and interdependence is likely to occur (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011). Examining such cultural contexts allows us to examine the role of both independence and interdependence in the meaning and function of identity among youth.

Japan may represent an exemplar of such a context (Schwartz, 2016). Although Japan is often regarded as a collectivist and interdependent cultural context, many young Japanese people endorse a form of 'individualistic collectivism' where both individual choice and interpersonal obligations are important (Matsumoto, 2002). Takata (2011) found that interdependence increased from early to late adolescence, whereas independence increased from young to late adulthood. The increasing globalization taking place in Japan and the intersection between traditional and Western cultural forces make Japanese youth a particularly important group in terms of understanding the rootedness of identity in both independent and interdependent cultural self-construal dimensions.

### **Research questions and hypotheses**

The present study addressed two research questions within a sample of Japanese youth in the transition to adulthood. The first question concerns the way in which personal identity synthesis and confusion are associated with well-being. The

second question concerns whether and how cultural self-construal (i.e., independence and interdependence) may operate as a moderator in the relationship between identity and well-being. We operationalized well-being in terms of both Eastern and Western conceptions.

In many Western countries, psychological well-being is one of the most widely studied indicators of positive psychological functioning (Ryff, 1989). Scholars in cultural/cross-cultural psychology have recently begun exploring a variety of forms of well-being across cultures (Dimitrova, Bender, & van de Vijver, 2013; Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007). For instance, Kitayama *et al.* (2007) found that among Japanese individuals, adherence to strongly interdependent cultural values may be associated with lower well-being when well-being is operationalized at the level of the individual person. Based on these arguments, Kan, Karasawa, and Kitayama (2009) have proposed 'minimalist well-being' as an Eastern well-being dimension. The Eastern conception of minimalist well-being subsumes both gratitude of being and peaceful disengagement. According to Kan *et al.*'s (2009) definition, in Western cultural contexts, well-being represents an attribute that each individual cultivates within her/himself. On the other hand, in Eastern cultural contexts, well-being reflects a strong value of social relationships, in which individuals are highly sensitive to others' expectations and conform to these expectations. From an Eastern viewpoint, well-being is not a 'thing' that can be personally maximized but is rather fluid and transitory within a context in which others' desires take precedence over one's personal needs and interests. In this context, individuals experience happiness 'with a feeling of gratitude for a life that affords the momentary glimpse of happiness' (Kan *et al.*, 2009, p. 303), where such happiness is called *gratitude of being*. Moreover, individuals tend to experience happiness when they disengage from the realities that constrain their own needs and interests (i.e., *peaceful disengagement*). This feeling is derived from the notion that realities are constantly changing and that it is extremely difficult to completely adjust oneself to such a fluid situation. In this situation, a moment of happiness can arise from temporarily disengaging oneself from the external reality. The distinction between psychological well-being and minimalist well-being enables us to understand the link between identity and well-being from a sociocultural and macro-level view of identity development. That is, to the extent to which Japanese youth endorse independence, their sense of identity should be related to psychological well-being. Similarly, to the extent to which they endorse interdependence, their sense of identity should be related to minimalist well-being. Therefore, we included measures of both psychological and minimalist well-being in our study.

With respect to the first research question, we hypothesized that identity synthesis would positively predict and identity confusion would negatively predict both

Western and Eastern forms of well-being. This hypothesis was based on previously reviewed literature on Western and Japanese youth that examined the relationships between identity and Western forms of well-being (e.g., Hatano *et al.*, 2014; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Additionally, although there is a dearth of research on the relationship between identity and minimalist well-being, it would follow that a sense of identity advances minimalist well-being. Given that an optimal sense of identity is experienced as a feeling of being at home in one's own body and mind and as harmonious relationships with one's social, physical, and cultural environments (Erikson, 1968), identity is expected to promote Eastern conceptions of well-being in Japanese youth.

With respect to the second research question, we hypothesized that cultural self-construal would moderate the aforementioned associations. Given that cultural independence is linked with Western conceptions of well-being (Kan *et al.*, 2009) and that identity synthesis is positively (and confusion is negatively) associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Hatano *et al.*, 2014; Kroger & Marcia, 2011), we expected that the associations between identity and Western forms of well-being – but not Eastern forms of well-being – would be more pronounced for highly independent individuals. On the other hand, given that interdependent cultural values are linked with Eastern conceptions of well-being (Kan *et al.*, 2009), we expected that, among highly interdependent individuals, identity synthesis would relate positively – and confusion would relate negatively – to Eastern forms of well-being, not Western forms of well-being. These hypotheses may be especially important in terms of understanding how young people's well-being can be optimized in societies that are rapidly changing toward emphasizing independent cultural values in the era of globalization.

In the present study, although gender was not a factor of primary interest, it may potentially affect the relationships between identity, cultural self-construal, and well-being. Therefore, we explored gender differences in the analyses.

## Methods

### *Participants and procedure*

The participants included 520 Japanese university students (256 males, 263 females, and one unidentified by gender) aged 18 to 25 years ( $M_{age} = 19.82$ ,  $SD_{age} = 1.15$ ). The participants were recruited from three large universities as follows: one in the Tokyo metropolitan area, one in Aichi (a large urban centre with the fourth-largest population among the 47 Japanese prefectures), and one in Hiroshima (a midsized urban centre with the 12th largest population among the 47 prefectures). The sample consisted mainly of

students majoring in the humanities (32.3 %), education (28.8 %), business and commerce (17.6 %), or law (15.2 %). Students were contacted in a student hall at a university in Tokyo and in classrooms at universities in Aichi and Hiroshima by a researcher, who provided them with information about the research aims and asked them if they wished to participate in the study. Interested participants then completed the study measures as an anonymous self-report questionnaire via a paper-and-pencil method.

## Measures

*Identity synthesis and identity confusion.* Identity synthesis and identity confusion were measured using the identity subscale from the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Rosenthal *et al.*, 1981; Japanese validation by Hatano *et al.*, 2014). The scale consists of 12 items with a response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The sample items include the following: 'I know what kind of person I am' (synthesis; 6 items) and 'I feel mixed up' (confusion; 6 items). The Cronbach's alphas for the present sample were .64 and .72 for synthesis and confusion, respectively.

*Cultural self-construal.* Independent and interdependent self-construal were measured using the Independence/Interdependence Scale (Uchida, 2008; Uchida & Kitayama, 2004), which was developed both in English and Japanese and was validated by samples from American and Japanese youths. The scale consists of 20 items with a response scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 5 (describes me very much). The sample items include the following: 'I always try to have my own opinions' (independence; 10 items) and 'I think it is important to keep good relations among one's acquaintances' (interdependence; 10 items). The Cronbach's alphas for the present sample were .69 and .65 for independence and interdependence, respectively.

*Western conceptions of well-being.* Western conceptions of well-being were measured using the Psychological Well-being Scale (Nishita, 2000). Nishita's scale was originally developed and validated for use with Japanese-speaking samples based on Ryff's (1989) conceptions and include subscales assessing individuals' psychological well-being in terms of six dimensions (autonomy, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and environmental mastery). This measure consists of 43 items with a response scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 6 (describes me very much). The sample items include the following: 'When I make decisions, I place my sense of value above social appraisal' (autonomy; 8 items), 'I want to continue to develop as a person in various ways' (personal growth; 8 items), 'I have warm and trusting

friendships' (positive relations with others; 6 items), 'I have a clear vision about what kind of life I would like to lead' (purpose in life; 8 items), 'I can accept my way of being and my personality' (self-acceptance; 7 items), and 'I can cope well with the surrounding conditions and make the best of it for myself' (environmental mastery; 6 items). The Cronbach's alphas for the present sample ranged from .77 to .87 across the six subscales.

*Eastern conceptions of well-being.* Eastern conceptions of well-being were measured using the Minimalist Well-being Scale (Kan *et al.*, 2009), which was developed both in English and Japanese and was validated using samples of young American and Japanese people. This scale consists of 16 items with a response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The sample items include the following: 'I feel grateful that I am alive' (gratitude of being; 8 items) and 'It feels good to do nothing and relax' (peaceful disengagement; 8 items). The Cronbach's alphas for the present sample were .85 and .79 for gratitude of being and peaceful disengagement, respectively.

## Results

### Preliminary mean-level and correlational analyses

To examine possible gender differences, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with gender as a between-subject variable and all identity, self-construal, and well-being indices as dependent variables. An overall multivariate effect was found (Wilks'  $\lambda = .87$ ;  $F(12, 506) = 6.50$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .13$ ). Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that males scored higher than females on independence, whereas females scored higher than males on personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, gratitude of being, and peaceful disengagement (see Table 1).

Additional correlational analyses demonstrated that age was positively related to identity synthesis ( $r = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ), autonomy ( $r = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ), personal growth ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), purpose in life ( $r = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and environmental mastery ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and was negatively related to identity confusion ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Older students tended to report higher levels of identity synthesis and psychological well-being and tended to report lower levels of identity confusion compared to younger students.

### Bivariate correlations

The correlations among all study variables are presented separately for males and females in Table 2. For both males and females, identity synthesis was positively related and

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics and mean differences by gender ( $N=520$ )

Variable	Total sample		Gender differences		$F$ ratio	$\eta^2$	Possible range
	$M$ ( $SD$ )		Males $M$ ( $SD$ )	Females $M$ ( $SD$ )			
Multivariate test <sup>a</sup>	—		—	—	6.50***	.13	—
Identity synthesis	3.09 (0.64)		3.14 (0.66)	3.04 (0.61)	3.48	.01	1–5
Identity confusion	2.86 (0.72)		2.91 (0.76)	2.79 (0.68)	3.60	.01	1–5
Independence	3.19 (0.55)		3.24 (0.56)	3.14 (0.53)	4.57*	.01	1–5
Interdependence	3.62 (0.47)		3.62 (0.52)	3.63 (0.43)	0.04	.00	1–5
Psychological well-being							
Autonomy	3.53 (0.74)		3.56 (0.77)	3.51 (0.72)	0.75	.00	1–6
Personal growth	4.79 (0.76)		4.70 (0.82)	4.87 (0.70)	6.57**	.01	1–6
Positive relations with others	4.32 (0.78)		4.22 (0.79)	4.42 (0.76)	8.60**	.02	1–6
Purpose in life	3.89 (1.01)		3.80 (1.05)	3.98 (0.94)	4.75*	.01	1–6
Self-acceptance	3.51 (0.90)		3.51 (0.92)	3.52 (0.88)	0.02	.00	1–6
Environment mastery	3.93 (0.76)		3.90 (0.77)	3.97 (0.75)	1.30	.00	1–6
Minimalist well-being							
Gratitude of being	4.91 (0.97)		4.77 (0.99)	5.05 (0.92)	10.94**	.02	1–7
Peaceful disengagement	5.10 (0.87)		4.90 (0.87)	5.29 (0.82)	27.43***	.05	1–7

$M$  = mean;  $SD$  = standard deviation;  $\eta^2$  = eta squared.

<sup>a</sup>Using Wilks' Lambda.

\*  $p < .05$ ,

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2** Correlations among all study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Identity synthesis	—	-.51***	.46***	.06	.22***	.41***	.37***	.60***	.52***	.54***	.42***	.29***
2. Identity confusion	-.46***	—	-.34***	.29***	-.51***	-.39***	-.34***	-.58***	-.66***	-.54***	-.27***	-.18**
3. Independence	.48***	-.31***	—	-.12*	.53***	.43***	.17**	.29***	.33***	.48***	.28***	.29***
4. Interdependence	-.03	.19**	-.16**	—	-.51***	.17**	.29***	-.06	-.20**	.05	.24***	.21**
5. Autonomy	.32***	-.51***	.50***	-.49***	—	.29***	.04	.37***	.48***	.39***	.15*	.13*
6. Personal growth	.39***	-.35***	.39***	.13*	.32***	—	.50***	.50***	.34***	.47***	.58***	.38***
7. Positive relations with others	.33***	-.40***	.16*	.18**	.13*	.43***	—	.47***	.38***	.43***	.61***	.35***
8. Purpose in life	.65***	-.60***	.35***	-.05	.45***	.56***	.43***	—	.64***	.45***	.47***	.20**
9. Self-acceptance	.54***	-.53***	.33***	-.21**	.48***	.31***	.37***	.53***	—	.55***	.42***	.28***
10. Environmental mastery	.48***	-.45***	.42***	.07	.43***	.48***	.46***	.52***	.55***	—	.44***	.37***
11. Gratitude for being	.40***	-.31***	.31***	.15*	.21**	.54***	.55***	.50***	.50***	.46***	—	.58***
12. Peaceful disengagement	.24***	-.07	.34***	.15*	.17**	.35***	.28***	.22***	.28***	.35***	.58***	—

Males correlations above the diagonal ( $N=256$ ); females correlations below the diagonal ( $N=263$ ).

\*  $p < .05$ ,

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

identity confusion was negatively related to all psychological and minimalist well-being dimensions with one exception (i.e., there was no relationship between confusion and

peaceful disengagement among females). Furthermore, for both males and females, independence was positively related to all psychological and minimalist well-being dimensions,

whereas interdependence was positively related to personal growth, positive relationships with others, gratitude of being, and peaceful disengagement and was negatively related to autonomy and self-acceptance. Using Fisher *r*-to-*z* transformations, we tested the statistical significance of the difference between the correlation coefficients across gender. A pairwise comparison of the 66 pairs of correlations revealed that only one was significantly different between males and females (i.e., identity confusion and self-acceptance;  $z = 2.153$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Thus, the patterns of correlations were found to be similar between males and females.

**Primary analyses**

The primary aims of the present study were to examine whether and how identity is associated with different forms of well-being and to examine the moderating roles of self-construal in these associations. To this end, we conducted a path analysis, a structural equation modeling (SEM) technique that uses observed variables, in *Mplus 7.2* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). To avoid increasing the Type I error rate through multiple tests of a single study hypothesis, all study variables were entered simultaneously into a single model (cf. Luyckx, De Witte, & Goossens, 2011). The following three sets of predictor variables were used:

covariates, main effects, and moderated effects. Gender and age were entered as control variables. Identity synthesis, identity confusion, independence, and interdependence were entered as main effects. All four possible interaction terms between (a) identity synthesis and confusion and (b) independence and interdependence were included as moderated effects. The main effect terms were centred prior to multiplying them to create the interaction terms. Because all possible paths were included, the model was fully saturated (i.e., had zero degrees of freedom) and, by definition, provided a perfect fit to the data. If the interaction terms between personal identity and self-construal were significant, we probed the interaction effect using simple slopes analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). To avoid a Type I error inflation associated with multiple comparisons, in our *post hoc* analyses, we used a Bonferroni correction to adjust the Type I error risk.

*Psychological well-being.* Table 3 displays the standardized coefficients and the  $R^2$  values for paths to psychological well-being. First, the control variables were significantly related to all psychological well-being dimensions except autonomy and self-acceptance. Second, with respect to the main effects, the personal identity dimensions were significantly related to each of the psychological well-being dimensions with one exception. Specifically, identity synthesis was positively

**Table 3** Standardized path coefficients of the path analysis predicting well-being from identity synthesis, identity confusion, independence, and interdependence ( $N = 519$ )

Predictor	Psychological well-being						Minimalist well-being	
	Autonomy	Personal growth	Positive relations with others	Purpose in life	Self-acceptance	Environmental mastery	Gratitude of being	Peaceful disengagement
<i>Controls</i>								
Gender (female)	-.04	.13***	.11**	.10*	.01	.07*	.15***	.24***
Age	.03	.08*	-.03	.03	-.02	.08*	-.03	-.02
<i>Main effects</i>								
Identity synthesis	-.06	.12*	.16**	.45***	.32**	.21***	.24***	.11
Identity confusion	-.31***	-.27***	-.37***	-.38***	-.42***	-.34***	-.19***	-.03
Independence	.37***	.30***	.02	-.02	.04	.27***	.15**	.27***
Interdependence	-.38***	.26***	.33***	.02	-.11**	.18***	.26***	.23***
<i>Interaction effects</i>								
Identity synthesis × Independence	-.06	-.07	.04	-.01	.04	.04	-.07	-.03
Identity synthesis × Interdependence	.02	-.02	.00	.04	.06	.01	-.02	-.13**
Identity confusion × Independence	-.14***	-.07	.04	-.07	-.04	.04	-.03	.01
Identity confusion × Interdependence	-.05	.05	-.02	-.05	.02	.01	.02	-.01
$R^2$	.54***	.34***	.29***	.51***	.46***	.42***	.27***	.22***

\*  $p < .05$ ,  
 \*\*  $p < .01$ ,  
 \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

related to all psychological well-being dimensions except autonomy, whereas identity confusion was negatively related to all psychological well-being dimensions. Furthermore, independent self-construal was positively related to autonomy, personal growth and environmental mastery but not to positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Interdependent self-construal was positively related to personal growth, positive relations with others, and environmental mastery and negatively to autonomy and self-acceptance but was unrelated to purpose in life. Third, only one of the 24 interaction effects was significant as follows: the interaction between identity confusion and independence was negatively related to autonomy. Subsequent simple slope analyses indicated that the simple slopes were  $-0.19$  ( $p < .01$ ) at low levels of independence (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) and  $-0.44$  ( $p < .01$ ) at high levels of independence (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean). This suggests that the negative link between identity confusion and autonomy was stronger when coupled with high levels of independence. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction effect.

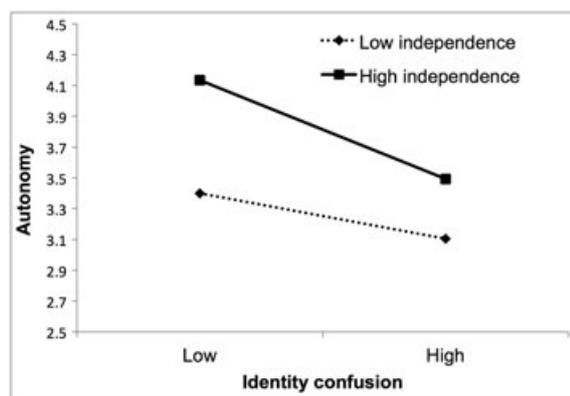
*Minimalist well-being.* Table 3 also provides the standardized coefficients and  $R^2$  values for minimalist well-being. First, with respect to the control variables, gender was significantly related to both well-being dimensions; being female was related to higher levels of gratitude of being and peaceful disengagement. Second, with respect to the main effects, identity synthesis was positively related to gratitude of being, whereas identity confusion was negatively related to gratitude of being. No main effects emerged for peaceful disengagement. Furthermore, the self-construal dimensions were both positively related to both of the minimalist well-being dimensions. Third, we found that only 1 out of 8 interaction effects was significant as follows: the interaction between

identity synthesis and interdependence was negatively related to peaceful disengagement. The simple slopes were  $0.23$  ( $p < .01$ ) at low levels of interdependence but was  $0.00$  ( $p = 1.00$ ) at high levels of interdependence. This suggests that the positive link between identity synthesis and peaceful disengagement was significant in the context of low levels of interdependence but not in the context of high levels of interdependence. Figure 2 illustrates this significant interaction.

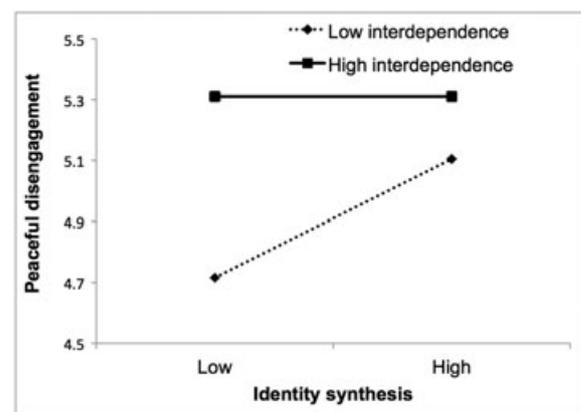
## Discussion

During the transition to adulthood, young people engage in the task of identity formation, in which they attempt to construct a coherent sense of self to find their place in society (Erikson, 1968). At the same time, especially within Eastern cultural contexts, young people are also expected to develop cultural self-construal to be viewed as mature or desirable members of the family, community, and other social groups (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011). The present study was conducted to examine whether and how personal identity and cultural self-construal relate to Eastern and Western conceptions of well-being during the transition to adulthood among young Japanese adults. We used data from university students in Japan, where both Eastern and Western cultural forces are at work and where both independent and interdependent self-construal are endorsed by contemporary young people (Matsumoto, 2002; Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012).

A number of key findings emerged. First, personal identity dimensions were related not only to Western conceptions of well-being (i.e., psychological well-being) but also to Eastern conceptions of well-being (i.e., minimalist well-being). For



**Figure 1** Simple slopes of identity confusion predicting autonomy at varying levels of independence. High levels are 1 *SD* above the mean; low levels are 1 *SD* below the mean.



**Figure 2** Simple slopes of identity synthesis predicting peaceful disengagement at varying levels of interdependence. High levels are 1 *SD* above the mean; low levels are 1 *SD* below the mean.

psychological well-being, the results indicated that identity synthesis was positively associated and identity confusion was negatively associated with each of the well-being dimensions with one exception (i.e., autonomy). These results are generally in line with our hypotheses and are consistent with findings from previous studies conducted in many Western cultural contexts (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Thus, as is the case with Western youth, a sense of identity is positively related to psychological well-being in Japanese youth. For minimalist well-being, our results indicated that identity synthesis was positively associated and identity confusion was negatively associated with gratitude of being. These results suggest that personal identity plays an important role not only in Western conceptions of well-being but also in Eastern conceptions of well-being. As Erikson (1968) suggested, a coherent sense of identity is experienced as a feeling of fitting in with the cultural environments in which individuals are rooted. Hence, identity formation promotes broader aspects of well-being in Japanese youth, who are living in a cultural context where the intersection between the traditional cultural value of interdependence and the Western (or global) value of independence is important.

Second, we found some – albeit limited – evidence for the moderating role of self-construal in the links between identity and well-being. Two interaction effects emerged. First, as expected, the association between identity confusion and autonomy was more strongly negative when independence was high. Second, surprisingly, high levels of interdependence appear to decrease the link between identity synthesis and peaceful disengagement. In other words, a poorly synthesized sense of identity (i.e., low scores on identity synthesis) is less likely to contra-indicate peaceful disengagement when interdependent self-construal is high. It can also be said that youth with a high identity synthesis appear to be able to peacefully disengage. However, for youth with a poorly synthesized sense of identity, peaceful disengagement is an option only for those who value interdependence.

Autonomy refers to happiness associated with independent decision-making and a sense of control over one's own behaviour (Ryff, 1989). Such feelings can be regarded as crucial during the transition to adulthood, when many youth become increasingly independent from their families of origin (Arnett, 2000). An independent self-construal – which is linked with globalized culture – may help to facilitate autonomy even in young people who have difficulty developing a sense of self. In terms of the links between identity synthesis, interdependence, and peaceful disengagement, when interdependence is high, youth may actively learn or internalize coping strategies that fit with Japanese culture, such as disengaging quietly from social relationships (even if only momentarily; Azuma, 2001; Tatara, 1974). Interdependent self-construal may help young Japanese people be attuned to the needs of

important others and to disengage peacefully when possible. When interdependence is low, young people may place less importance on social relationships and may rely more heavily on their own personal identities. For such individuals, a poorly synthesized sense of self may interfere with the tranquility that accompanies peaceful disengagement. Indeed, there is a great deal of Western evidence suggesting that a confused sense of identity is associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx *et al.*, 2008; Schwartz *et al.*, 2015). It may also be interpreted that, for individuals who experience less synthesis and value interdependence, the psychological gains of peaceful disengagement may be perceived as outweighing the loss of opportunity to define oneself through social interactions. On the other hand, for less synthesized individuals who do not value interdependence, peaceful disengagement may not be meaningful, and they may feel more compelled to assert a particular identity or create a certain type of impression upon others in social interactions as part of the process of self-definition, which is inherently relational.

On a related note, it should be noted that our results revealed that the interaction effects were significant for autonomy in Western well-being and peaceful disengagement in Eastern well-being but not on other well-being dimensions. This may reflect that both autonomy and peaceful disengagement are the well-being dimensions that especially focus on the sense that one attains an appropriate interpersonal distance in one's relationships with others. The extent to which youth enjoy happiness or welfare in such well-being dimensions may be more sensitive to one's view of self in relation to other individuals or groups (i.e., cultural self-construal) than in other well-being dimensions.

In sum, our results imply that, with some notable exceptions discussed immediately above, personal identity operates separately from self-construal in relation to well-being. In general, the importance of personal identity in promoting youths' well-being (in both Eastern and Western terms) can be understood as a universal phenomenon and that Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development may be applicable to Eastern cultural contexts. The interaction effects that we found suggest that, in the presence of Western/independent values, identity confusion is rather problematic *vis-à-vis* some Western forms of well-being (i.e., autonomy). On the other hand, in the presence of Eastern/independent values, identity synthesis may be less strictly required to facilitate an Eastern form of well-being (i.e., peaceful disengagement). The important roles of both independent and interdependent value systems support Phinney and Baldelomar's (2011) contention that cultural contexts undergoing a rapid change from collectivism toward greater individualism are making progress and that both value systems have important implications for well-being.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that identity confusion was related to more dimensions of well-being than identity synthesis, suggesting that *the absence of coherence in one's sense of identity may be especially problematic*. Such findings have also emerged in Western samples. These findings suggest that, even in cases where young people have not identified a consistent set of goals and ideals for themselves, what is important is that they do not have a sense of being lost and confused. Schwartz *et al.* (2011) found that individuals classified as diffused (i.e., not able to establish, or not interested in establishing, a set of identity commitments) had lower levels of psychological well-being and higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to individuals classified as being in moratorium (i.e., working on creating a workable sense of identity). The present results suggest that this pattern may also be generalized to young Japanese people.

The present findings appear to have practical implications for promoting positive development among Japanese youth as they negotiate the transition to adulthood. Research on identity formation conducted in late-modern or globalized societies has indicated that there are clear distinctions between youth who are proactive about their future careers and lifestyles versus those who are not (Côté & Levine, 2016). Given that social norms and structures are likely to be changeable, fragmented, and even chaotic in late-modern societies – and perhaps in societies that are becoming globalized – proactive engagement in the process of identity formation is important if youth are to become productive members of society. Contemporary Japanese youth are expected to develop such proactivity beginning at very young ages. Our results also illustrate the complexity of identity formation among Japanese youth – that is, it was characterized by both Western and Eastern dimensions. To achieve a balance between independent and interdependent forms of identity, which can be viewed as an important challenge for identity formation in Japan, it may be necessary for youth to exercise specific forms of agency. The findings from a recent study using American and Japanese youth indicated that the type of agency represented by enjoying challenging situations (i.e., ego strength) was more important to identity formation for Japanese youth than for their American counterparts (Côté, Mizokami, Roberts, & Nakama, 2015). Because Japanese society is in transition, young people may need even more of an ‘internal compass’ than do their Western counterparts.

### Limitations and suggestions for future research

The present results should be interpreted in light of at least three important limitations. First, because we used a university student sample, our results should be generalized with caution. Although university students represent a large portion of young Japanese adults (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2012), there might be crucial differences between university and non-university youths in terms of financial, emotional, and motivational variables. It is important to extend our research to young people who do not attend university, such as young workers, and to test whether similar results also emerge for this group.

Second, the use of a cross-sectional design to test predictive hypotheses is an important limitation. Cross-sectional designs do not permit directional or causal inferences to be drawn. It is critical for future studies to utilize longitudinal or experimental methods to strengthen our understanding of the role of identity and self-construal in well-being among young Japanese people.

Third, although one strength of this study is the use of measures that cover both Western and Eastern conceptions of well-being, other prominent indices of psychological adjustment in the transition to adulthood may also be important to use. This point is particularly important when considering a variety of goals and developmental practices in different cultural contexts. There is evidence that children and adolescents in Japan traditionally tended to be socialized to prioritize group memberships over individual goals (Tatara, 1974), although there is evidence that this has been changing into a form of ‘individualistic collectivism’ (Matsumoto, 2002; Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012). Such a hybrid Eastern/Western value system may be interwoven with the conception of what it means to become an adult in Japanese society. Both personal and cultural dimensions of identity, as well as multiple aspects of well-being, are essential in this emerging line of research. Accordingly, the present study represents one of the first attempts to unpack the meaning and functions of personal identity and cultural self-construal for young Japanese adults. We hope that this study inspires more research in this direction with new or more sophisticated indices beyond those employed here.

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