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Published online: 24 Jul 2015.

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Future-oriented or present-focused? The role of social support and identity styles on 'futuring' in Italian late adolescents and emerging adults

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Late adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods in the life cycle when individuals are involved in anticipating and planning for the future (*futuring*). However, in the last five or six years, as the effects of the recession have made themselves felt in Southern Europe, the situation that young people face has deteriorated dramatically. As a consequence, contemporary young people's relationship with the future is strongly marked by these social difficulties, and family support becomes essential to their survival. The present study was interested in how *futuring* could be influenced by identity styles and perceptions of social support. Participants were 1201 Italian late adolescents and emerging adults attending the last year of high school and first years of university. We used three self-report measures: Functions of Identity Scale, Identity Style Inventory, and Social Support Scale. Findings indicate that *futuring* was influenced by the normative style and the diffuse-avoidant style and by the interactions between both normative identity style and diffuse/avoidant identity styles with peer support. Gender and age differences are discussed.

Keywords: futuring; identity styles; social support; identity functions

Defining one's identity and planning and preparing for the future are the main and intertwined developmental tasks for late adolescents and, recently, also for young adults, especially in Western societies (Luyckx et al. 2008; Marcia 1993; Nurmi, Poole, and Seginer 1995). During and in preparation for the transition to adulthood, young people are expected to achieve their sense of self and to define plans and projects for their future across vocational, relational, and personal domains. Imaging the future and one's self in this future may influence present-day behavioral decision-making and provide some direction for identity exploration and commitments (Oyserman et al. 2004).

This progression from present to future has, in Western industrial society, been marked by institutional support and a commitment to occupational and family goals (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011). Institutions such as the labor market, families, and welfare states have provided a form of social stability, along with a clear set of norms and developmental trajectories for young people as they transitioned into adulthood (Morselli 2013). In these

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societies and contexts, future was somewhat predictable, programmable, and certain, thus the process of identity construction experienced by young people may have felt more stable or certain as it was controlled to some degree by societal expectations and support in conjunction with developmental trajectories: move through adolescence, build autonomy, and transition to adulthood via the acquisition of stable work/career and family.

The Western and European crises that began in 2008 and resulting social and economic unpredictability have markedly shifted the context within which young people embark on these developmental transitions. In fact, these social crises have contributed to a less certain and more unpredictable future for our current youth. This is evidenced in the weakening of post-industrial societies in terms of welfare (Ranci 2010) and the de-standardization of life trajectories (du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm 2006), among other things. These social changes have 'transformed the Western concept of 'future' into a culture of fear of the future' (Morselli 2013, 308). Empirical evidence supports these concerns and proposes the onset of a new pattern of transition to adulthood typical of Southern European welfare states. This new pattern is marked by older age at completion of education, difficulty achieving secure employment and economic independence, longer periods of living with family of origin, and delayed coupling and parenthood (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011).

From a psycho-developmental perspective, the new economic and social conditions of Southern Europe (namely of the Mediterranean area) have produced a postponement in the achievement of identity, disengaging the acquisition of occupational and relational commitments and amplifying the transition to adulthood through a period of additional exploration. Recent studies in this area (Arnett 2012) argue that the commitment to these tasks extends itself into new phase of development called *emerging adulthood*,[1] particularly for youth in Western societies. Identity exploration, experimentation with many possibilities, self-focusing, and instability are characteristic of the period of life between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 2000). This phenomenon is especially salient for youth in industrialized or 'post-industrial' countries, where educational pursuits are extended well into early adulthood in order to satisfy the demands for the increased education and expertise required for inclusion in the labor market (du Bois-Reymond and Crisholm 2006). Indeed, previous research testified to the importance of emerging adulthood, and the college context in particular, for identity exploration and future orientation (Luyckx, Goossens, and Soenens 2006; Luyckx et al. 2008).

This future orientation is a complex phenomenon and one that is impacted by social location. For example, Adams (2009) suggested that time perspective and future orientation are socioeconomically patterned whereby high-income occupations with permanent contracts provide a degree of future security in contrast to the insecurity associated with low incomes and temporary employment. What does planning for the future look like when (and where) the future is uncertain?

Examining what this looks like is the purpose of the present study. In doing so, we focused on a specific cultural context (the Italian one), which can be considered an exemplar of southern-Mediterranean societies in terms of the new transition patterns discussed earlier: (1) identity achievement postponement; (2) weak labor market; and (3) the prolonged family support. In Italy, a delayed transition to adulthood and a pervasive socioeconomic crisis have been affecting the ways in which young people organize their time (e.g., Leccardi 2005), develop their identity (e.g., Crocetti, Rabaglietti, and Sica 2012), and structure their relational systems (e.g., Scabini, Marta, and Lanz 2006). In particular, it has been documented that young Italian people, like their peers from other Southern

European countries, face significant difficulties in defining future plans and thus find themselves experiencing an 'extended present' (Leccardi 2006). It is, therefore, of crucial importance to understand the role that personal and relational factors play in supporting youths' *futuring* process. In doing so, we integrated three theoretical perspectives: the identity functions model (Adams and Marshall 1996; Serafini and Adams 2002), the identity styles model (Berzonsky 1992), and the provider model (Harter 1985).

From future orientation to 'futuring' (the identity functions model)

Although the construct of future orientation has been analyzed from several points of view and by various authors (e.g., Luyckx, Goossens, and Soenens 2006; Markus and Nurius 1986; Seginer, 2008; Waterman, 1993; Zimbardo and Boyd 1999), this study refers to future as a function of identity as first conceptualized by Adams and Marshall (1996) and later expanded by Serafini and Adams (2002) and Serafini and Maitland (2013). Within this framework, future orientation is one of basic functions that identity serves. Thus, by setting future-oriented goals, exploring different identity alternatives, and committing to certain life paths, late adolescents and emerging adults can direct their own development in their social world and negotiate their passage into adulthood (Nurmi, Poole, and Seginer 1995). This new capacity is also congruous with the cognitive skills acquired by late adolescents and emerging adults that enable them to move within a wider time perspective and to look ahead while drawing up plans, anticipating consequences, and developing hypothetical projects (Luyckx et al. 2010; Seginer 2008, 2009).

In this respect, Adams and Marshall (1996) suggested that *futuring* for youth involves two capabilities in particular: (1) 'providing *meaning* and *direction* through commitments, values, and goals' (Adams and Marshall 1996, 433) and (2) 'the ability to *recognize potential* in the form of future possibilities and alternative choices' (433). Drawing upon this framework and the work of Sools and Mooren (2012), we define this *futuring* process in terms of considering, imagining, and planning for the future. The first part of the *futuring* identity function is based on the capacity for believing in oneself and promise that commitments or chosen values or goals will receive institutional confirmation (Adams and Marshall 1996). These commitments or goals of identity direct or channel behaviors and actions, thereby invoking a future-oriented direction or focus. Identity-achieved individuals (those who reflect the most mature or sophisticated level of identity development according to the Identity Status Paradigm; Marcia 1966) have been found to be more committed than diffused individuals (Adams, Shea, and Fitch 1979), as well as more goal-directed and self-motivated (Blustein and Palladino 1991). Thus, past research suggests that individuals who have achieved an identity appear to be more committed and have a stronger goal-orientation than those in other identity statuses.

The second component of *futuring* focuses on recognizing one's personal potential in terms of the possibilities that the future holds and the array of choices that would lead one there. This requires greater cognitive complexity than is characteristic of childhood and entails the projection of the self into the future (or seeing oneself in the future). Academic achievement, as measured by grade point average, and career planning for the future are two of the significant areas in which adolescents may find recognition of their potential (Adams and Ethier 1999). For example, individuals who have an achieved identity have higher grade point average scores as well as a greater desire to continue their education than do diffused individuals (Francis 1981). Similarly, advanced identity-status individuals show greater career planning and decidedness (Wallace-Broscious, Serafica, and

Osipow 1994), and a greater belief in aspects of work as representing a feasible method for fulfilling their future aspirations than do identity-diffused individuals (Vondracek et al. 1995). This body of research suggests that individuals who show active self-constructed identity development are more likely to invest in endeavors that recognize their potential, such as academic success and career planning for the future.

Styles of exploration and commitment (the identity styles model)

Berzonsky (1989) postulated that individuals use different socio-cognitive strategies or processing orientations to deal with or avoid the task of identity formation: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. Individuals with an *informational orientation* are self-reflective and tend to actively seek out and evaluate self-relevant information. They show high levels of cognitive complexity, problem-focused coping strategies, cognitive autonomy, and persistence. They are also critical of their beliefs and they seem particularly open to new information and to reviewing available commitments in order to define an integrated and consistent 'self' (Berzonsky 1992; Berzonsky and Kuk 2000; Duriez, Soenens, and Beyers 2004). Individuals with a *normative orientation* adopt prescriptions and values from significant others and conform their plans to others' expectations. They are generally closed to new information if they feel it could threaten their personal convictions; they also tend to build their commitments in a rigid way and to maintain and preserve them (Soenens, Duriez, and Goossens 2005). Individuals with a *diffuse-avoidant orientation* procrastinate and delay dealing with identity issues for as long as possible. They tend also to adapt their behavior and their views to external demands (Soenens et al., 2005). Recently, some authors (cf. Kunnen 2009) who position the informational style as the most mature coping strategy believe that this style encompasses two key elements of development: stability and change. In particular, they underline that during periods of transition, such as from high school to university, individuals characterized by high exploration tend to show decreased levels of diffuse-avoidant style, while individuals who demonstrate low exploration show an increase of diffuse-avoidant style (Kunnen 2009).

Perceived social support from parents and friends (the provider model)

Erikson's (1968) conceptualization of identity development is placed at the intersection of individual characteristics and the transactions between individuals and their environment. A contextual focus, influenced by Developmental Systems Theory (Ford and Lerner 1992), has highlighted that development is a co-constructed process occurring between the active individual and his/her active context within ongoing, long-term relationships (Kuczynski 2003). These person-in-context interactions with important others allow individuals to gather information regarding possible identities from various contexts and models, and to test and practice temporal commitments (Adams and Marshall 1996; Bosma and Kunnen 2001; Kroger 2004). Since the family and peer systems comprise a large part of this context for adolescents, parenting, family, and peer socialization, experiences may enhance or hinder the individual's ability to deal with developmental issues, in particular with identity formation (Zimmermann and Becker-Stoll 2002). In late modern societies, the parental context remains significant even into early adulthood; given the socio-historical context in Southern European countries and Italy, in particular, many young people still live with their parents, either on a full- or part-time basis, and increasingly do so into to their late 20s or even 30s (Seiffge-Krenke 2013). This extended close-contact and dependency positions family as central to the context within which

adolescents and young adults navigate identity-related choices and decisions. In fact, the research clearly positions parents and friends as the main sources of social support for adolescents and emerging adults, with a gradual increase in friends' importance throughout adolescence (Arnett 2007; Helsen, Vollebergh, and Meeus 2000).

Social support (*provider model*; Harter 1985; Waters and Whitesell 1998) is thus an important variable to consider in the identity construction process. Drawing upon the work of Cooley (*looking glass self*, [1902]), social support is conceptualized as a specific form of validation from others (Harter 1990): it represents acceptance, approval, and esteem (*regard*) that the person perceives to receive from significant others through a gradual process of internalization. For adolescents, both parents and peers become significant sources of self-knowledge, evaluation, and feedback about the self (see Harter 1990).

In this respect, social support can be considered a powerful predictor of an individual's assessment of his/her global value (global self-worth or self-esteem), especially during adolescence (Harter 1985, 1990; Waters and Whitesell 1998). Thus, support received from parents and friends is a resource that enhances developmental paths and protects the individual from negative influences (Demaray and Malecki 2002). Indeed, social support represents an important factor in promoting well-being and a significant mediating variable between stress and adaptation in both adolescents (Varni et al. 1989) and adults (Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser 1996).

Connections between the identity functions, styles, and social support

The existing literature suggests links between identity functions, styles, and social support from significant others, across gender and age for all three models examined in this study. Findings obtained in a recent study (Crocetti et al. 2013), consistent with unpublished evidence obtained with North American samples (Serafini 2008), demonstrated that the informational and normative styles were positively associated with the identity functions in general, and with future orientation and goals specifically. The diffuse-avoidant style, on the other hand, was negatively related to all identity functions, including future. With respect to age differences, the suggestion that adolescents become more future-oriented as they get older has generally been supported across studies that have varied considerably in their methodology (see reviews in Furby and Beyth-Marom 1992). Additionally, compared to young adolescents, older adolescents think more about and report greater planning for the developmental tasks of late adolescence and young adulthood, such as completing their education and going to work, and are better able to talk about future-oriented emotions such as fear or hope (Nurmi 1991).

A number of studies have found gender differences in identity styles, with men scoring higher on diffuse-avoidance compared to their female counterparts (e.g., Berzonsky and Kinney 2008; Soenens et al. 2005). Despite this evidence, Berzonsky (2013) stated that gender did not appear to qualify relationships between identity styles and other variables. There is, however, some evidence for developmental changes in identity style scores; specifically, Luyckx et al. (2010) found that the informational scores of university students increased significantly over a four-month interval, thus supporting this notion that identity changes are developmental in nature.

The research clearly links social support and identity development. Several studies have emphasized that the perception of support received from significant others influences the ways in which individuals gather information about identity (Bosch, Segrin, and Curran 2012). Research has shown that young adults who experience difficulties dealing with

identity issues perceive less social support from friends and family (Gfellner and Córdoba 2011). Specifically, individuals with diffuse-avoidant identity styles were more likely to avoid hanging out with friends or in peer group settings and reported lower expectations for success in social situations than any other identity style group. In contrast, individuals with informational or normative identity styles were less likely to avoid friends and peers. Further, individuals with diffuse-avoidant identity styles reported the least competence with initiating and maintaining friendships, being tolerant of others, and being self-assured, whereas individuals with informational and normative identity styles had significantly better social skills (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000). In sum, there is a wide corpus of evidence that has identified significant associations between family/peer relationships and identity styles in pre-adolescence (Luyckx et al. 2007), late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Adams, Berzonsky, and Keating 2006), and adulthood (Passmore et al. 2005).

Late adolescents and emerging adults in Italy: peculiarities of Mediterranean countries

In this study, we explored links between *futuring* and personal (identity styles) and relational (family and peer support) resources in Italian late adolescents and emerging adults. Italy was chosen as a prototype of Southern European countries wherein young people's possibilities to develop coherent and fulfilling future plans are strongly threatened by the current socioeconomic situation (Leccardi 2005). The main problems that affect Southern European youth include high rates of unemployment (ranging approximately from 35% to 55% in the last quarter of 2012; Eurostat 2014); large numbers of youth classified as 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' (NEET; Bynner and Parsons 2002); widespread job precariousness (e.g., Cortini, Tanucci, and Morin 2011); and a deep-rooted crisis of confidence in the social institutions (e.g., Pharr and Putnam 2000). All these problems can be observed in the Italian context that is characterized by a particularly difficult job market for young people (Aleni Sestito, Sica, and Nasti 2013). In fact, even after concluding their prolonged programs of study, these young people have been found to experience additional periods of instability, insecurity, and economic uncertainty (Berton, Richiardi, and Sacchi 2009; Iezzi and Mastrobuoni 2010; ISTAT[2], 2012).

Given the challenging social and economic contexts in which Italian youth live, it is not surprising that we are noting changes in developmental pathways. For example, when compared to their Northern European peers, Italian late adolescents and emerging adults demonstrate a postponement of identity choices (Crocetti, Rabaglietti, and Sica 2012; Sica, Aleni Sestito, and Ragozini 2014). Furthermore, the image of the future as a controllable and governable time is shrinking, and as a result, 'the present looks like the only temporal dimension available for defining choices, an authentic existential horizon that, in a certain sense, includes and replaces future and past' (Leccardi 2006, 41).

A consequence of the unpredictable social and developmental context in Southern Europe, as in all contexts characterized by high levels of job insecurity, unemployment, and a general distrust in political institutions, family represents the main social safety net (Albertini and Kohli 2013). In Southern Europe specifically, the family plays a central role in the welfare system, acting as the main provider of care and welfare for young people (e.g., *familism*, León and Migliavacca 2013; Saraceno 2003); therefore, in Italy relationships with family are often considered more important than relationships with friends, and parents play a critical role in the identity development and future planning of their children (Aleni Sestito and Sica 2014).

The current study

In the last five or six years, as the effects of the recession have made themselves felt in Southern Europe, the situation that young people face has deteriorated dramatically. As a consequence, contemporary young people's relationship with the future is strongly marked by these social difficulties, and family support has become essential to their survival (Aleni Sestito and Sica 2014; Aleni Sestito, Sica, and Nasti 2013). On the basis of the literature reviewed thus far, where *futuring* and identity formation are hypothesized as interrelated developmental tasks for adolescents and emerging adults (Luyckx et. al. 2008; Marcia 1996; Nurmi, Poole, and Seginer 1995; Seginer and Noyman 2005), and support from parents and friends can buttress developmental paths (Demaray and Malecki 2002; Harter 1990), we are interested in how *futuring* could be influenced by identity styles and perceptions of social support, in order to identify the key elements for targeted interventions to enhance *futuring* in late adolescents and emerging adults, especially in 'times of crisis.'

Hypotheses of the present study

The present study addressed one research question with respect to the relationships among four main dimensions (*futuring*, identity styles, perceived support from parents, and perceived support from peers) in a cross-sectional study using a sample of both late adolescents and emerging adults. We also explored both gender differences and relationships with age within the sample.

Based on existing literature and the documented impacts of a difficult Southern Europe economic situation, we expect (Hypothesis 1) that social support could be a moderator of the relationship between identity styles and *futuring*. From this, relationships with significant others (parents and friends) may play a moderating role in the personal socio-cognitive orientations associated with the acquisition of identity and the capacity to plan the future. In fact, the role of contextual support could function to condition one's personal identity style thereby reinforcing or inhibiting young people's orientation toward making plans for the future. In this sense, we further expect (Hypothesis 2) that the associations between identity styles and *futuring* would be moderated by different levels of social support received from parents and friends.

Method

Participants

Respondents consisted of 1201 Italian late adolescents and emerging adults (457 males and 744 females) between the ages of 17 and 29 years (M_{age} = 19.65 years, SD = 1.66). The late adolescent group consisted of 389 students (152 males and 237 females) in their last year of high school (M_{age} = 18.30 years, SD = 0.64; age range 17–19)[3]. Specifically, 113 (29%) students were at a *lyceum* (i.e., high-level secondary school that prepares students for university studies), 103 (26.5%) at a technical school, and 173 (44.5%) attended a vocational school. Eighty-seven percent of the non-high school students intend to continue their studies at university. The emerging adult sample included 812 students (305 males and 507 females) attending three Italian universities (located in the North, Centre, and South of Italy). The greater presence of women in our student groups reflects the presence of women in Italian university faculties (60.2%; AlmaLaurea 2012, 2013; 61.%, AlmaLaurea 2014). Of the sample, 812 university students were in their first

($n = 430$) or second ($n = 382$) year of university. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 29 years ($M_{age} = 20.30$, $SD = 1.61$) with 94.7% of the sample ($n = 769$) falling between 19 and 22 years. University students were enrolled in various areas of study: law (33.3%), psychology (19%), sociology (14.3%), educational sciences (8.3%), architecture (6.1%), economics (4.9%), communication sciences (4.8%), philosophy (4.4%), political sciences (3.9%), and languages (0.9%).

Procedure

The research team contacted via email and personal contacts a network of schools and universities in three Italian 'regions' (as described in the previous section) to inform them about the study and to propose recruiting participants from their schools. It was the aim of the researchers to obtain the greatest possible diversification of schools and universities across Italy's three main regions (north, centre, and south). Permission to administer anonymous self-report questionnaires was obtained from the principals of the high schools and the deans of the university faculties. Participant recruitment involved two main methods. Students were contacted in person at their school/university buildings by a researcher and invited to participate in the study. Recruitment also occurred via the teachers for courses with high enrolment numbers (teachers were provided with an information blurb about the study to share with their students). Students who were interested took a questionnaire package home to complete. They were provided with written information about the study and required to provide consent to participate. For participants under the age of 18, parental consent was obtained. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. Students have not received any form of compensation to participate in the research. The time required completing the questionnaires ranged from 35 to 50 minutes. Approximately, 90% of the individuals who were contacted completed the package; the other 10% of students refused to participate for reasons unknown to us. The data were collected between 2010 and 2011.

Measures

Futuring

In order to measure the *futuring* construct described in this study, we drew upon the scale construction work of Serafini and Adams (2002) and Serafini and Maitland (2013). We combined two subscales (goals and future) of the Italian version of the Functions of Identity Scale (Crocetti et al. 2010), with three items measuring goals and three items measuring future. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*completely untrue*) to 5 (*completely true*), how well each of the proposed statements described them. Sample items are: 'I have constructed my own personal goals for myself' (goals) and 'I have a good idea of what my future holds for me' (future). In this sample, Cronbach's alphas were .61 for goals and .66 for future, and .65 for the combined measure (*futuring*). Cronbach's alphas were comparable to those obtained in previous uses of these subscales (Crocetti et. al. 2010, 2013).

Identity styles

The Italian version (Crocetti et al. 2009) of the revised Identity Style Inventory (ISI-3; Berzonsky 1992) was used. This measure consists of 30 items scored on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Sample items are: 'I've spent a great deal of time thinking seriously about what I should do with my life' (information-oriented style; 11

Table 1. Mean scores (and standard deviations) for futuring, identity styles, and social support by gender.

	Gender differences			
	Males (N = 457)	Female (N = 744)	F	p value
Futuring	3.27 (.86)	3.36 (.60)	3.11	.07
Identity styles				
Informational	3.29 (.53)	3.29 (.43)	.00	.99
Normative	3.08 (.57)	3.09 (.50)	.03	.86
Diffuse-avoidant	2.74 (.57)	2.62 (.59)	11.85	.00
Social support				
Parent support	2.92 (.60)	2.97 (.67)	2.20	.13
Friend support	2.96 (.70)	3.14 (.73)	17.20	.00

items); 'I prefer to deal with situations where I can rely on social norms and standards' (normative style; 9 items); and 'I'm not really thinking about my future now; it's still a long way' (diffuse-avoidant style; 10 items). Cronbach's alphas were .60 for scores on the informational style subscale, .59 for scores on the normative style subscale, and .73 for scores on the diffuse-avoidant style subscale. These low Cronbach's alphas are comparable to those reported using the ISI in other languages (e.g., Berzonsky, Macek, and Nurmi 2003).

Social support

Two subscales of the Italian version of Harter's Social Support Scale (SSS; 1985) for adolescents and late adolescents (Aleni Sestito et al. 2008), the *Parents Subscale* and *Friends Subscale*, each containing 6 items, were used in this study. For each item, participants were asked to read two statements and decide which one was more like them. For example, 'Some adolescents have parents who don't really understand them BUT other adolescents have parents who really do understand them.' Then students decided if the statement was 'sort of true' or 'really true' of them. The instrument has a scoring-key (in which *really true for me* could have score 1 or 4 and *sort of true for me* could have 2 or 3, depending on the items). The main construct Harter purports to measure in the SSS is social support in the form of positive regard from others. Cronbach's alphas were .83 for the parental support subscale and .89 for friends subscale.

Results

Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

Results of descriptive statistics (See Table 1) indicate that participants reported moderately high scores on informational style (M = 3.29; SD = 0.47), mid-range scores on normative style (M = 3.08; SD = 0.53), and moderately low scores on diffuse-avoidant style (M = 2.67; SD = 0.58). They also scored moderately high on *futuring* (M = 3.33; SD = 0.84) and had mid-range scores on social support from both parents (M = 2.95; SD = 0.64) and friends (M = 3.07; SD = 0.72).

T-tests for differences between two means were conducted to determine the effects of gender on *futuring*, identity styles, and social support. The analyses revealed some statistically significant differences. Males reported higher scores on diffuse-avoidant

Table 2. Pearson's correlations among study variables and age.

	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Futuring	.123**	.231**	−.150**	.085**	.049**	−.021**
2. Informational style		.218**	−.189**	.104**	.147	.130**
3. Normative style			.077**	.144**	−.028**	−.106**
4. Diffuse-avoidant style				−.247**	−.263**	−.007
5. Parent support					.338**	−.036
6. Friend support						0.22**
7. Age						

Note: $N = 1201$.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

identity style; females reported higher scores on friends' support. No significant differences for *futuring* were found.

We also examined the correlations between age and the considered variables. Results revealed a significant positive relationship between age and the informational style and a significant negative correlation between age and the normative style. We also observed some other significant correlations (but close to zero) between age and the support provided by friends and *futuring* (Table 2).

Looking at the correlations among all the considered measures and focusing on *futuring*, we noted that *futuring* is positively related to the informational and normative identity styles and negatively related to the avoidant style, as would be expected. For sources of support, relationships among variables are positive, but weak (Table 2).

The effects of different identity styles and support sources on futuring through structural equation models

In order to verify the effects of different identity styles and support sources on *futuring*, we first estimated a structural equation model in which we tested the direct effects of the identity styles and of social support sources on *futuring*. In this model (not reported here) the support sources did not show significant main effects. Following the arguments discussed in the literature review and our hypotheses, we then estimated a new model to test the moderation effect of both sources of social support on the relationships between identity styles and *futuring*. The variables associated with the moderation effect (parent and friend support) were centered (Kromrey and Foster-Johnson 1998). We also controlled the effects of age and sex (dummy coded: 0 = males, 1 = females) on the identity styles and *futuring*. We estimated the model by using the robust version of the maximum likelihood estimator implemented in Mplus 7.3.

Various indices were used to evaluate model fit (Kline 2006): the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) should be equal or less than .05 (Byrne 2009); the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) should be equal to or exceed .95 (Hu and Bentler 1999), with values higher than .90 considered to be acceptable (Bentler 1990); and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should be equal to or less .05, with values than .08 considered to be acceptable (Browne and Cudeck 1993). Goodness of fit indices reveal quite a good fit of the model ($\chi^2 = 43.242$, $df = 18$, p value = 0.0007; CFI = .887; SRMR = .030; RMSEA = .034 [.021–.047]). Figure 1 shows the model with
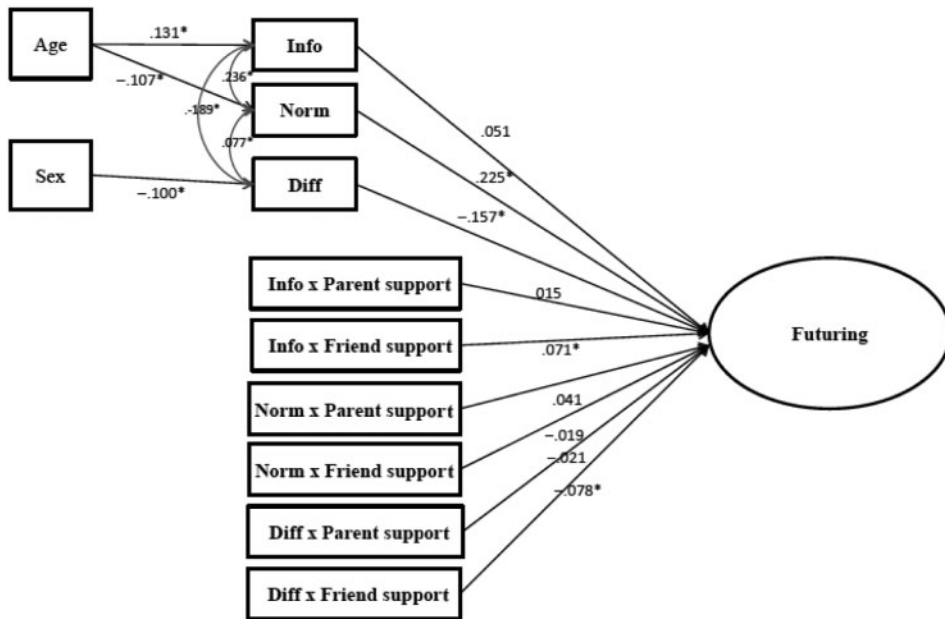
Figure 1. Structural equation model linking identity styles, social support, and futuring. *p* < .05.

the significant parameters (standardized estimates) in bold, along with the nonsignificant parameters in italics.

The model revealed that the informational style did not have a significant effect on *futuring*. On the other hand, the normative and diffuse-avoidant styles significantly affected *futuring* – positively for the normative identity style and negatively for the diffuse-avoidant style. Furthermore, the model also revealed some significant interaction effects. Specifically, the effects of the informational and diffuse-avoidant styles were moderated by levels of friend support. The interaction between informational style and friend exerts a positive influence on the *futuring*, while the significant interaction between diffuse/avoidant style and friend support has a negative effect on *futuring*. To interpret these results, we plotted the association between the identity styles and *futuring* for different levels of friends' social support (Figure 2). For the informational style, we found that low support from friends had the lowest (and nonsignificant) impact on *futuring*, while high support from friends reinforces the positive effect of the informational style on *futuring*. The diffuse-avoidant style, however, had an almost consistent negative effect on *futuring*. The largest negative effect occurred in the case of students who reported receiving high levels of friend support.

Discussion

This contribution was designed to shed light on influences of identity styles and social support from significant others (parents and peers) on *futuring* in a large sample of Italian late adolescents and emerging adults. This *futuring* construct is grounded in the identity functions literature and draws upon notions of goal-setting, making plans for the future, and seeing one's potential recognized in future actions or choices. The general aim of the study was to identify key elements that could enhance *futuring* in late adolescents and
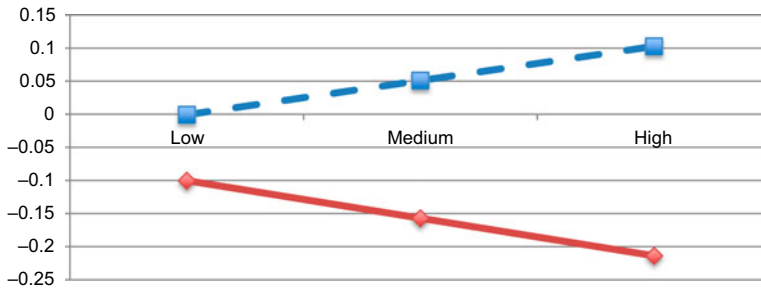
Figure 2. Plot of the significant interaction effects between friend support and identity styles (dashed line = informational style × friend support; continuous line = diffuse/avoidant style × friend support).

emerging adults in contexts such Italy, where socioeconomical conditions make planning for the future and developing personal projects difficult. In order to address this issue, we explored the impact of identity styles and social support from two different sources (parents and peers) on the identity future function and have tested the moderator role of social support between identity styles and *futuring*. Findings have revealed gender differences in scores on the variables of intersect and correlations between age and these variables. Mainly, our results illustrate the role of friends' support in enhancing identity styles and orienting *futuring*.

Gender differences: the diffuse-avoidant style of males and responsiveness to social support for females

At a more general level, preliminary findings on gender differences reveal that males score higher on diffuse-avoidance compared to their female counterparts. This result is in line with a number of past studies (e.g., Berzonsky and Kinney 2008; Soenens et al. 2005). According to Berzonsky and Ferrari (2009), it is not clear why this relationship occurs, but the contributions of gender-role stereotypes and differences in parental processes should be considered (Berzonsky and Kinney 2008). With regard to social support, females scored higher on support from friends, compared to their male counterparts. This result is also consistent with a previous study (Colarossi 2001) that suggested that when compared to male adolescents, female adolescents are more oriented toward peers for social support and are also more satisfied with the support gained from their peers. With regard to *futuring*, we did not find significant gender differences. To date, studies conducted both in North America (Serafini 2008) and Southern Europe (Crocetti et al. 2010, 2013) have consistently found no mean differences on identity functions by gender.

Relationships between age and identity styles

Our findings show that age is correlated with both informational and normative identity styles but in opposite directions. With increasing age, informational style becomes more consistent, whereas normative style becomes less so. These results support the existing evidence that documents linear increases in informational scores and decreases in normative scores during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Berzonsky and Ferrari 2009; Luyckx et al. 2010).

We did not find other significant relationships between age and *futuring* or perceived social support. This evidence supports the idea that in the Mediterranean area (in Italy specifically) there is a fine line between late adolescents and emerging adults; both have to cope with the same difficulties and tasks. Our young people do not differ across age in terms of future planning capacity or in terms of perceived support form significant others. Our young people seem to be involved in the same 'period of life,' despite differences in experiences of daily life (high school context vs. university context) characterized by a prolonged and difficult transition to adulthood.

The role of peer support in enhancing identity styles and orienting futuring

In terms of the core question of this study (what impacts *futuring*), the results revealed two interesting findings: (1) of the identity styles, only the informational and the diffuse-avoidant styles influence *futuring*; (2) both the identity styles' influence on *futuring* was enhanced by support from friends (but not parents). In other words, the findings confirm the hypothesized moderation role of social support on identity styles and the *futuring* identity function. These results highlight the complexity of the relationships between personal and relational factors in identity development. They are also in line with a number of important studies that have examined the relationship between social, economic, and cultural conditions and identity (Adams and Marshall 1996; Dunkel 2002; Jensen et al. 1998; Stegaeud et al. 1999). As a group, these studies provide evidence for the contextual nature of self-construction and the important role of self-other dynamics within this process (Kroger 2004).

The current study reveals that identity processing style impacts *futuring* through level of peer support. For young people with an informational identity processing style, low support from friends had the least (not significant) impact on *futuring*, while a high support from friends reinforced the positive effect of the informational style on *futuring*. Conversely, the diffuse-avoidant style has an almost consistent negative effect on *futuring*, with the greatest impact occurring for students highly supported by friends. In both cases, social support from friends enhances the personal identity style effect on *futuring*.

For individuals with an informational processing style, who generally adopts a constructivist stance that invites and accepts that people play a role in constructing who they are, they become more future-oriented (Luyckx et al. 2010) than those without strong peer support. Here, support from friends plays an important beneficial role in the identity construction process by strengthening the information-oriented style's movement toward *futuring*. On the other hand, the diffuse-avoidant style might compromise goal-setting and planning for the future (Kerpelman and Mosher 2004; Pulkkinen and Rönkä 1994). Individuals with a diffuse-avoidant style tend to operate in a hedonistic, situation-specific fashion (Berzonsky 1990) and, as a consequence, could be seen as 'present-focused.' Peer support may operate a way that serves to deepen a young-person's diffuse-avoidant identity style, which is characterized by procrastination or avoidance of the type of self-related processing (Berzonsky 1990) of which goal-setting and planning for the future are central (Serafini and Adams 2002; Serafini and Maitland 2013). In short, informational and diffuse-avoidant identity styles' effects on *futuring* are enhanced by the perceived support of friends. As such, results of our study emphasize the important role of peers in identity formation during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, even in Southern European contexts where *familism* (León and Migliavacca 2013) is prominent

and research has documented strong parent–child relationships that contribute to identity-related developments for young people (Aleni Sestito and Sica 2014).

Generally speaking, the role of peers in this life stage has been well-documented. Peers offer models, diversity, and opportunities for exploration of beliefs and values (Bosma and Kunnen 2001); they influence important attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics (Berndt 2004); and research suggests the quality of friendships affects the impact of peers on an individual (Bagwell et al. 2001). Overall, the current study highlights the importance of peer support in young people's process of *futuring*, whereby peer support can exacerbate or deepen one's identity processing style, thus bringing them closer to or further away from the important developmental process of *futuring*. These results also leave us wondering about the implications for parental support in a social context that is characterized by the central role of the family in the welfare system (León and Migliavacca 2013; Saraceno 2003), and current research that underlines the importance of parents in identity development (Aleni Sestito and Sica 2014).

We may interpret these findings in light of the complex relationship that exists between parents and children in Mediterranean areas in times of crisis. For example, these findings are somewhat supported by a study that signaled different relationships between parental support and future orientation in terms of future family, work, and education (Jambori and Sallay 2003). In the latter, the support adolescents received from their mothers increased their goals concerning future family, but among young adults an opposite tendency was observed – those having a less supportive family climate had more hopes related to their future family. Furthermore, in Italian contexts, previous research has highlighted complex interactions between parental support and a form of future orientation. For example, Lanz et al. (2001) found that parents and adolescents were in agreement on issues surrounding three core domains: education, work and career, and marriage and family. However, while parents focus mainly on these domains, the future orientation of adolescents is more elaborate and includes additional domains, such as health and self-actualization. In addition, Italian parents had greater expectations for their children to assume adult roles though the transition to higher education and/or work, career, and marriage/family later in life than did the adolescents themselves. Furthermore, Lanz and colleagues also found that parents and children also differed in terms of confidence in future possibilities, and that Italian parents were more optimistic than their children regarding goal realization. However, another study (Scabini, Marta, and Lanz 2006) found that parents had less confidence in their children's internal control over future education and career than their children did. These mixed findings, along with the importance of friend revealed in the current study, suggest that the importance of parents as social support for late adolescents and emerging adults may be more complex than previously considered, even in the current socioeconomic Mediterranean context.

The complexity surrounding the relationship between parental support and young people's future orientation can also be understood in terms of developmental psychosocial changes. Research indicates that the role of parental support decreases with age; as adolescents become older, they experience less parental support, and its importance for their emotional adjustment also declines (Meeus et al. 2005). We must also consider the traditional literature on the development of autonomy in adolescence/young adulthood and the recent literature on identity diffusion in the Italian context (Sica, Aleni Sestito, and Ragozini 2014). Developmentally speaking, Italian students in their final year of high

school and early university are likely still actively involved in the search for personal autonomy. In doing so, they are still detaching from parents and referring to friends for identity-related explorations and considerations. It may be that support from parents becomes more important during the next stage in their transition to adulthood; namely, from university to work. In this case, the socioeconomic difficulties characteristic the Italian context described earlier (Leccardi 2005, 2006) could foster a recall of parental support in terms of the instrumental, economic, and emotional support necessary for planning one's future in a difficult context. Drawing upon other research, we can frame this as the postponement of identity (Crocetti, Rabaglietti and Sica 2012) becoming intertwined with the active role of parents as identity agents (Aleni Sestito and Sica 2014), thereby prolonging the consolidation of identity and the achievement of autonomy (Crocetti et al. 2012) and adult traditional roles. In fact, Italian parents support their children by providing them with the opportunity to try out various job alternatives in times of economic crisis, thereby allowing an extended moratorium phase (Aleni Sestito and Sica 2014). Depending upon a number of factors and timings, social support may moderate the relations between *futuring* and identity styles differently at different stages. According to the present study, for adolescents and emerging adults, support from friends has the greatest impact on how identity styles either deepen (informational style) or stall/undermine (diffuse-avoidant style) the *futuring* process for these young people.

Finally, our findings underscore that support also moderates the relationship between *futuring* and the diffuse-avoidant identity style, which consists of delays in dealing with identity issues and making commitments. In this case, social support from friends could further interfere with developing the capacity to plan and organize the future. When this avoidance tendency is met by support from significant peers, the negative impact on *futuring* is greatest. However, especially for high school students, low support (instead of high support) could moderate the poor attitude toward *futuring*. That is, the results suggests that when adolescents who adopt a diffuse-avoidant identity processing style do not receive strong friend support, the tendency to procrastinate making future plans seems to regress and a small tendency toward planning for the future seems to appear.

In this way, the lack of support from significant others (friends) may serve a protective function for these youth by keeping a path to *futuring* clear.

Limitations and future directions

The present study is characterized by a number of limitations that need to be considered in future research. First, the study was cross-sectional; therefore, longitudinal research is needed to support a more specific set of conclusions (centered on the predictive nature of the relationships between the considered variables) around identity and the development of *futuring* during emerging adulthood. Second, all measures used were self-report; therefore, the data may be influenced by a reporting bias. Moreover, future research could use a mixed approach to data collection (quantitative and qualitative) to allow for a more in-depth study of the role of *futuring* in identity development (Seginer 2009; Sica 2009). Concerning the alpha levels of the measure subscales, those for *futuring* and identity styles were below what de Vaus (2002) considers an acceptable threshold of .70. Finally, the sample could be viewed as having an over-representation of females. This could be a limitation from statistical and generalizability points of view; however, this represents the Italian distribution by gender in the educational system (especially in university).

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the current findings have many important conceptual and practical implications. First, the study provides support for counseling initiatives to help individuals design their lives (Collin and Guichard 2010). Specifically, our findings indicate that a number of school and university students need support to develop their identity and plan their future in an adaptive way. Second, results advance the literature linking identity styles and identity functions in late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Crocetti et al. 2013). Findings also support previous literature suggesting that identity formation during the transition from high school to university is a complex developmental task that is sensitive to relational and contextual factors. In particular, this study highlights that the role of friends is essential in order to support young people to define their future and imagine the possibilities of their self-development.

Disclosure of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The term *emerging adulthood* is described a period in the lifespan between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, proposed by Jeffrey Arnett in a 2000 article in the American Psychologist. It primarily applies to young adults in developed countries who do not have children, do not live in their own home, or do not have sufficient income to become fully independent in their early-to-late 20s. According to Arnett (2004, 2007), emerging adulthood is characterized by high levels of exploration of many opportunities and also by high levels of uncertainty and instability.
2. The National Statistics Institute (ISTAT) is a governmental research organization. It has been in existence since 1926 and it is the main producer of official statistics in support of citizens and decision-makers. It works independently and in continuous interaction with the academic and scientific worlds.
3. In Italy, some students complete high school when they are 18 years old (if they are born in the second half of the year), and other students complete high school when they are already 19 (if they are born in the first half of the year). For this reason, both the late adolescent group and the emerging adult group contain some participants who are 19 years old.

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