

Rumination and Identity Confusion as Predictors of Emotional Exhaustion in Emerging Adult Women

Zainab. Al-Taie¹, Mona. El-Sayed^{2*}

¹ Department of Health Psychology, University of Kufa, Najaf, Iraq

² Department of Educational Psychology, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt

* Corresponding author email address: mona.elsayed@cu.edu.eg

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Al-Taie, Z., & El-Sayed, M. (2025). Rumination and Identity Confusion as Predictors of Emotional Exhaustion in Emerging Adult Women. *Psychology of Woman Journal*, 6(2), 1-9.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.pwj.6.2.18>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the predictive roles of rumination and identity confusion in emotional exhaustion among emerging adult women.

Methods and Materials: A correlational descriptive research design was employed, involving a sample of 410 emerging adult women from Egypt. The participants were selected based on Morgan and Krejcie's sample size table to ensure adequate statistical power. Standardized self-report instruments were used to measure emotional exhaustion, rumination, and identity confusion. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were calculated, and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between the dependent variable and each independent variable. A standard linear regression analysis was then conducted to assess the joint predictive value of rumination and identity confusion on emotional exhaustion, and to determine the unique contribution of each predictor.

Findings: The results indicated that both rumination ($r = .58, p < .01$) and identity confusion ($r = .51, p < .01$) were significantly and positively correlated with emotional exhaustion. Multiple regression analysis revealed a significant predictive model, $F(2, 407) = 148.62, p < .001$, with an R^2 of .41. Rumination ($\beta = .46, p < .001$) and identity confusion ($\beta = .31, p < .001$) both contributed significantly to the model, indicating that each variable uniquely predicted emotional exhaustion among the participants.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that rumination and identity confusion are critical psychological factors contributing to emotional exhaustion in emerging adult women. Interventions that target maladaptive cognitive styles and promote identity clarity may be essential in reducing emotional fatigue during this life stage.

Keywords: Emotional exhaustion, Rumination, Identity confusion, Emerging adulthood, Women.

1. Introduction

Emotional exhaustion, defined as a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion resulting from excessive and prolonged stress, is increasingly observed among emerging adult women navigating complex identity, academic, and relational challenges. As the core dimension of burnout, emotional exhaustion affects not only occupational functioning but also psychological well-being, leading to detachment, diminished accomplishment, and reduced emotional regulation capacity (Kim & Park, 2024; Zyl-Cillié et al., 2024). Within transitional life stages such as emerging adulthood, particularly among women who often face heightened societal expectations, emotional exhaustion can compromise identity development and future goal orientation. Recent findings suggest that this exhaustion does not arise in isolation but is influenced by persistent cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities, notably rumination and identity confusion (Jiang & Gu, 2025; Liu et al., 2020).

Rumination, characterized by repetitive and passive focus on one's distress and its possible causes and consequences, has been widely implicated in emotional dysregulation and psychological distress (Yin et al., 2023). As a maladaptive cognitive process, rumination intensifies negative affect and interferes with problem-solving, making individuals more susceptible to burnout-related symptoms, especially emotional exhaustion (Liao et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). For women in the emerging adulthood stage, who may already be navigating complex transitions such as career ambiguity and interpersonal changes, ruminative tendencies can amplify feelings of helplessness and fatigue. Ruminative thinking also undermines individuals' ability to recover from stress, serving as a cognitive barrier to resilience and emotional recovery (Tong & Prompanyo, 2021).

Simultaneously, identity confusion—a hallmark developmental challenge in emerging adulthood—can further compromise emotional well-being. Erikson's theory posits identity formation as the central task during this life stage; unresolved identity issues, including inconsistency in self-concept and role uncertainty, are linked with psychological distress and functional impairment (Verschueren et al., 2021; Zhang, 2023). Recent empirical investigations underscore that identity confusion is significantly associated with emotional depletion, particularly in environments where individuals are exposed to competing demands and unclear expectations (Jian-ming et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Identity confusion undermines one's sense of agency, increases susceptibility

to stress, and decreases perceived self-efficacy, all of which contribute to emotional exhaustion.

Emerging adult women may be uniquely vulnerable to the synergistic effects of rumination and identity confusion. Cultural, social, and gender-specific factors—such as internalized societal expectations, pressures to conform, and limited autonomy—can magnify internal conflict and self-doubt (Kim et al., 2024; Reich et al., 2023). These dynamics not only shape how women perceive themselves but also how they process stress cognitively. Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to engage in ruminative coping strategies and report difficulties in identity formation, especially under pressure to meet externally imposed roles and standards (Li et al., 2020; Pu et al., 2021). Consequently, emotional exhaustion in this population may stem not just from external stressors, but from the internal, recursive loop of unresolved self-concept and maladaptive cognitive processes.

Emotional exhaustion also manifests within the framework of interpersonal and institutional contexts. For instance, perceived job instability, unmet role expectations, and unsupportive environments have been shown to correlate with elevated emotional exhaustion levels (Altınay & Bicientürk, 2023; Jia et al., 2022). In these settings, women with unclear identity boundaries or heightened ruminative tendencies may feel particularly disempowered, especially if their values conflict with imposed organizational norms or if they face chronic ambiguity. This has been echoed in organizational psychology literature, which highlights the psychological toll of identity misalignment, especially when it interacts with emotional labor and cognitive strain (Jain, 2024; Wang, 2023).

Furthermore, emotional exhaustion has been found to serve as both a consequence and mediator of adverse outcomes in multiple domains—ranging from burnout and turnover intentions to impaired interpersonal functioning and mental health issues (Kumar, 2021; Ntim et al., 2023). For example, teachers, caregivers, and frontline service workers have reported significant levels of emotional exhaustion when their personal identity, values, or coping resources were misaligned with their occupational demands (Nordhall et al., 2020; Zyl-Cillié et al., 2024). In such cases, rumination and identity confusion act as latent psychological stressors that exacerbate emotional fatigue, even in the absence of overt external pressures. These findings support the necessity of examining cognitive and identity-related predictors of emotional exhaustion in populations

undergoing psychosocial development, such as emerging adult women.

The theoretical link between rumination and emotional exhaustion lies in the prolonged activation of stress-related thoughts. Unlike adaptive reflection, rumination fosters a self-focused, abstract style of thinking that prolongs negative emotional states and increases physiological arousal, both of which deplete emotional resources over time (Liao et al., 2024; Tong & Prompanyo, 2021). This depletion may become particularly severe when the individual simultaneously experiences identity confusion, which further destabilizes self-regulation capacities. Identity confusion interferes with an individual's ability to access a coherent narrative of self, which is essential for interpreting life events meaningfully and recovering from stressors (Li et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023).

Additionally, social and institutional structures can influence how rumination and identity confusion affect emotional exhaustion. Research suggests that individuals working or studying in environments with low perceived support, unclear role expectations, or misaligned identity values are more vulnerable to these processes (Kim & Park, 2024; Santiago-Torner et al., 2024). For example, when emerging adult women are embedded in academic or organizational settings that ignore their identity struggles or reinforce perfectionism, the burden of self-evaluation and rumination increases (Jiang & Gu, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Over time, these dynamics can erode emotional capacity, leading to sustained exhaustion and disconnection from one's goals, responsibilities, and self-concept.

Moreover, emotional exhaustion may play a feedback role in sustaining identity confusion and rumination. When individuals become emotionally depleted, their cognitive resources diminish, making it more difficult to process challenges effectively or engage in adaptive identity exploration (Yin et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Emotional exhaustion also narrows attentional focus and increases reliance on habitual, often maladaptive, cognitive processes such as rumination. As a result, individuals may become trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of identity ambiguity, emotional fatigue, and cognitive entrapment. This feedback loop is particularly concerning during the stage of emerging adulthood, where identity consolidation is critical for long-term psychosocial functioning.

Taken together, the interplay of rumination, identity confusion, and emotional exhaustion in emerging adult women represents a complex yet crucial area of psychological inquiry. Understanding these relationships is

essential for developing effective interventions that support young women in navigating internal conflicts and mitigating emotional burnout. Despite the growing body of research on burnout and identity development, few studies have examined how these constructs intersect during emerging adulthood, particularly within sociocultural contexts such as Egypt, where gender roles, societal expectations, and institutional pressures may uniquely shape women's experiences (Reich et al., 2023; Verschuere et al., 2021).

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the predictive roles of rumination and identity confusion on emotional exhaustion among emerging adult women in Egypt.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study utilized a correlational descriptive research design to explore the predictive role of rumination and identity confusion on emotional exhaustion among emerging adult women. The sample consisted of 410 female participants aged 18 to 25 years, selected from various academic and community settings across Egypt. The sample size was determined based on Morgan and Krejcie's (1970) sample size table for a population size exceeding 1,000, ensuring adequate statistical power for the planned analyses. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection. Standardized self-report instruments were administered to measure emotional exhaustion, rumination, and identity confusion.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was assessed using the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey (MBI-GS), developed by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter in 1996. This subscale comprises 5 items designed to measure feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted by one's work or personal demands. Participants rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day), with higher scores indicating greater emotional exhaustion. The subscale does not include reverse-scored items and has been widely used in both clinical and non-clinical populations. Validity and reliability of the MBI-GS have been well-established in various studies, with the emotional exhaustion subscale

demonstrating high internal consistency, typically reporting Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.85 (Wang et al., 2024; Yue, 2024; Zyl-Cillié et al., 2024).

2.2.2. Rumination

Rumination was measured using the Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS), originally developed by Nolen-Hoeksema and Morrow in 1991 and later revised by Treynor, Gonzalez, and Nolen-Hoeksema in 2003 to improve its psychometric properties. The revised RRS consists of 22 items and includes three subscales: Brooding, Reflection, and Depression-related Rumination. Participants respond on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always), with higher scores indicating greater ruminative tendencies. The Brooding and Reflection subscales are often used to differentiate maladaptive from potentially adaptive forms of rumination. The revised version has shown good internal consistency (with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 0.90) and demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity across different populations (Polat, 2025; Wang, 2025; Zhao, 2025).

2.2.3. Identity Confusion

Identity confusion was evaluated using the Identity subscale of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI), developed by Rosenthal, Gurney, and Moore in 1981. This subscale specifically captures difficulties related to role confusion and identity uncertainty, consistent with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. It includes 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater levels of identity confusion. Items address issues such as instability in self-image, values, and future goals. The EPSI Identity subscale has demonstrated solid psychometric properties, with internal consistency coefficients often exceeding 0.80, and its construct validity

has been supported by both adolescent and emerging adult samples (Hsieh et al., 2019; Özcan & Durukan, 2011; Priliyanti et al., 2024).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated for demographic variables and study constructs. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the strength and direction of the bivariate relationships between emotional exhaustion (dependent variable) and the two independent variables—rumination and identity confusion. Following this, a standard linear regression analysis was performed to examine the extent to which rumination and identity confusion jointly predicted levels of emotional exhaustion. Prior to conducting the analyses, assumptions for parametric testing—normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, independence of errors, and multicollinearity—were thoroughly assessed and met.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample included 410 emerging adult women from Egypt. Among the participants, 167 (40.7%) were aged between 18 and 20, 143 (34.9%) were aged between 21 and 23, and 100 (24.4%) were between 24 and 25 years old. Regarding educational status, 218 participants (53.2%) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, 139 (33.9%) were recent graduates, and 53 (12.9%) were pursuing postgraduate education. In terms of employment, 192 participants (46.8%) reported being full-time students, 137 (33.4%) were employed part-time, and 81 (19.8%) were working full-time. These demographic characteristics reflect a diverse sample within the emerging adulthood stage in the Egyptian context.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 410)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Emotional Exhaustion	21.87	5.63
Rumination	54.42	8.71
Identity Confusion	39.56	6.98

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 show that participants reported moderate to high levels of emotional exhaustion (M = 21.87, SD = 5.63), rumination (M = 54.42,

SD = 8.71), and identity confusion (M = 39.56, SD = 6.98). These means are consistent with existing literature that

highlights elevated cognitive and identity-related stress in emerging adult populations.

Before proceeding with the correlation and regression analyses, all assumptions of parametric testing were examined and confirmed. Normality of the key variables was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, which were found to be within acceptable ranges (skewness values ranged from -0.38 to 0.54; kurtosis values ranged from -0.62 to 0.41). Linearity was evaluated through scatterplots, which indicated a linear relationship between the independent

variables (rumination and identity confusion) and the dependent variable (emotional exhaustion). Homoscedasticity was confirmed using the Breusch-Pagan test ($\chi^2 = 1.79$, $p = .181$), and no multicollinearity was detected, as variance inflation factor (VIF) values were 1.43 for rumination and 1.56 for identity confusion. Lastly, the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.94, indicating independence of residuals. These results confirmed that the data met the necessary assumptions for conducting Pearson correlations and linear regression.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables (N = 410)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Emotional Exhaustion	—		
2. Rumination	.58** ($p < .01$)	—	
3. Identity Confusion	.51** ($p < .01$)	.44** ($p < .01$)	—

Table 2 indicates that emotional exhaustion was significantly and positively correlated with rumination ($r = .58$, $p < .01$) and identity confusion ($r = .51$, $p < .01$). Additionally, rumination and identity confusion were

moderately correlated with each other ($r = .44$, $p < .01$), suggesting that these psychological constructs may co-occur and reinforce emotional distress.

Table 3

Summary of ANOVA Results for Regression Analysis (N = 410)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	3921.84	2	1960.92	.64	.41	.41	148.62	<.001
Residual	5600.18	407	13.76					
Total	9522.02	409						

The regression analysis, as shown in Table 3, revealed a statistically significant model, $F(2, 407) = 148.62$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .41. This indicates that 41% of the variance in

emotional exhaustion was explained by the combined effects of rumination and identity confusion, reflecting a substantial effect size for psychological predictors.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Emotional Exhaustion (N = 410)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	3.42	1.07	—	3.19	<.01
Rumination	0.29	0.04	.46	7.25	<.001
Identity Confusion	0.22	0.05	.31	5.68	<.001

As presented in Table 4, both rumination ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$) and identity confusion ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted emotional exhaustion. The unstandardized coefficients indicate that for every one-unit increase in rumination, emotional exhaustion increases by 0.29 units, while a one-unit increase in identity confusion predicts a 0.22-unit increase in emotional exhaustion. These results

highlight that both predictors uniquely contribute to the overall model.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed that both rumination and identity confusion were significant positive predictors of emotional exhaustion among emerging adult

women in Egypt. The Pearson correlation results demonstrated moderate to strong positive associations between each independent variable (rumination and identity confusion) and the dependent variable (emotional exhaustion). Furthermore, linear regression analysis showed that rumination and identity confusion together accounted for a significant proportion of variance in emotional exhaustion, with both variables contributing uniquely and significantly to the predictive model. These results underscore the influential roles of maladaptive cognitive processing and unstable self-concept in contributing to emotional depletion during the developmental phase of emerging adulthood.

The strong positive association between rumination and emotional exhaustion aligns with a robust body of research emphasizing the detrimental effects of repetitive negative thinking. Rumination intensifies emotional distress by prolonging and amplifying negative emotional states, which depletes cognitive and affective resources over time and impairs emotional regulation (Liao et al., 2024; Tong & Prompanyo, 2021). These cognitive patterns are particularly pervasive in women, who, according to gendered coping models, are more likely to engage in ruminative responses to stress. Rumination increases mental fatigue and reduces perceived coping efficacy, thereby directly contributing to the experience of emotional exhaustion (Yin et al., 2023; Zyl-Cillié et al., 2024). Our findings confirm this trajectory, as participants who endorsed higher levels of rumination also reported significantly elevated emotional exhaustion.

The role of identity confusion in predicting emotional exhaustion is also consistent with prior empirical literature emphasizing the importance of self-concept clarity in mental health outcomes. Identity confusion—a state characterized by uncertainty in values, goals, and roles—interferes with goal-directed behavior and impairs one's ability to interpret experiences meaningfully (Verschuere et al., 2021; Zhang, 2023). When identity remains unresolved, especially in emerging adulthood, individuals may experience chronic psychological tension and reduced emotional resilience, which can manifest as exhaustion. Studies on workplace burnout and student fatigue have similarly shown that individuals with unstable identity commitments are more vulnerable to emotional fatigue, even when environmental stressors are moderate (Jian-ming et al., 2023; Reich et al., 2023). In our sample, participants exhibiting higher levels of identity confusion were more likely to report a sense of emotional depletion, supporting the idea that internal

incoherence and self-ambiguity compromise affective stability.

Notably, the joint predictive power of rumination and identity confusion offers deeper insight into how cognitive and developmental factors may interact in shaping emotional outcomes. While rumination involves a dysfunctional processing of distressing experiences, identity confusion reflects a broader developmental vulnerability that leaves individuals ill-equipped to make meaning of those experiences. Together, these vulnerabilities may create a reinforcing loop: unresolved identity questions may fuel rumination, and prolonged rumination may in turn hinder identity resolution. This interrelationship can magnify emotional exhaustion, particularly in cultures or social environments where young women face complex and often conflicting expectations regarding identity, autonomy, and achievement (Ntim et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024).

Further support for these findings can be found in research examining how emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between cognitive strain and behavioral disengagement. For example, studies on workplace environments have shown that individuals with high levels of emotional exhaustion due to identity-related stress and persistent negative thoughts are more likely to withdraw behaviorally and emotionally from their roles (Altınay & Bicentürk, 2023; Jia et al., 2022). These findings resonate with our results, suggesting that in the absence of a coherent sense of self, and under conditions of cognitive overload through rumination, emerging adult women may gradually lose emotional energy and motivation, culminating in burnout symptoms.

Cultural and contextual factors may further exacerbate these effects. In collectivist societies such as Egypt, where gender norms and familial expectations exert strong influence over women's identity development, the conflict between personal aspirations and external obligations may intensify identity confusion (Jain, 2024; Jiang & Gu, 2025). Simultaneously, limited emotional expression and pressure to conform to idealized roles may reinforce ruminative coping styles, as individuals internalize distress rather than seeking resolution through interpersonal communication. These culturally bound patterns can make emotional exhaustion both more likely and more difficult to identify and address, especially in populations that may lack access to psychosocial resources.

The findings also complement literature on emotional exhaustion in professional contexts, where similar mechanisms have been identified. Research with frontline

workers and teachers has shown that emotional exhaustion often emerges when cognitive demands are high, and personal values or identity are misaligned with institutional roles (Kim & Park, 2024; Nordhall et al., 2020; Wang, 2023). In these contexts, both rumination and identity discrepancy have been implicated as significant predictors of burnout symptoms. These parallels reinforce the notion that emotional exhaustion is not limited to occupational stressors but may arise from internal psychological processes, particularly when developmental milestones such as identity formation are unresolved.

Moreover, several studies suggest that emotional exhaustion can act as a feedback mechanism that impedes emotional and cognitive recovery, thereby sustaining maladaptive cycles (Li et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Once emotionally exhausted, individuals may experience reduced capacity for reflection, adaptive emotion regulation, or goal setting—all of which are essential for both resolving identity confusion and disengaging from rumination. This feedback loop is particularly critical in emerging adulthood, a developmental window where foundational emotional and cognitive skills are being solidified.

Finally, our study contributes to a growing awareness of how emotional exhaustion among young women must be addressed through a biopsychosocial lens. The strong predictive value of rumination and identity confusion on emotional exhaustion points to the need for integrative interventions that address both cognitive style and identity formation. Cognitive-behavioral interventions that reduce rumination, combined with identity-focused therapy or narrative approaches, may be especially beneficial for this population. Addressing both variables simultaneously could help prevent emotional exhaustion from escalating into more severe psychological outcomes such as depression or functional impairment.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any inference of causality between the variables studied. Although rumination and identity confusion were found to predict emotional exhaustion, it is also plausible that exhaustion exacerbates cognitive vulnerability and identity instability, suggesting a bidirectional relationship. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which are subject to biases such as social desirability and recall inaccuracy. Participants may have

underreported rumination or emotional exhaustion due to stigma associated with psychological distress. Third, the sample was limited to emerging adult women in Egypt, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or age groups. Finally, the study did not account for other variables that may influence emotional exhaustion, such as socioeconomic status, trauma history, or social support.

Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine the temporal dynamics between rumination, identity confusion, and emotional exhaustion, helping to clarify causality and developmental trajectories. Experimental or intervention-based research may also shed light on whether targeting rumination or identity confusion independently—or in combination—can effectively reduce emotional exhaustion. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate potential moderators and mediators, such as self-compassion, emotional intelligence, or social connectedness, which may buffer or exacerbate the effects of cognitive and identity factors. Expanding the research across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and gender groups could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how these constructs operate within various psychosocial environments.

Practitioners working with emerging adult women should consider incorporating cognitive strategies that reduce ruminative thought patterns and foster self-awareness. Identity-based interventions, such as narrative therapy or guided exploration of values and goals, may help clients construct a coherent sense of self. Educational and mental health professionals in university settings should provide workshops and counseling services that address both identity development and emotional regulation skills. Finally, preventive programs that integrate emotional literacy, coping flexibility, and decision-making training can equip young women with the psychological tools to navigate the challenges of emerging adulthood without becoming emotionally depleted.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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