University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Brazil
University of Free State (UFS), South Africa
Tomsk state University (TSU), Russia

Systematic review of Identity and Student Well-Being in South Africa, Brazil, and Russia

Theoretical Contributions

- Identity and well-being are dynamically co-constructed during the student years, rather than operating as static traits.
- Sociocultural context shapes which identity dimensions (e.g., professional, collective, national) become salient for well-being.
- Evidence from non-WEIRD contexts challenges individualistic models dominant in the literature.

Research Question

How does the existing literature describe how students in South Africa, Russia, and Brazil experience and negotiate their sense of identity and well-being within their sociocultural and developmental contexts?

- What are the characteristics of the existing empirical literature on student identity and well-being in South Africa, Russia, and Brazil? *(Descriptive scope)*
- How are identity and well-being conceptualised and operationalised in studies of students across these sociocultural contexts? *(Conceptualisation and measurement)*
- How do students describe and make sense of their identity and well-being, and what processes of negotiation are evident across contexts? *(Lived experience and negotiation processes)*
- What sociocultural and developmental factors shape similarities and differences in how identity and well-being are experienced and negotiated across South Africa, Russia, and Brazil? *(Sociocultural and developmental influences)*
- What theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps emerge from the literature, and what implications do these have for future research, policy, and student support initiatives? *(Implications and gaps)*

Method

Eligibility criteria
S - Sample (students in South Africa, Russia, and Brazil)
PI – Phenomenon of Interest (identity and well-being)
D – Design (Cross-sectional studies, Longitudinal studies, Comparative or multicountry studies; Exploratory or descriptive studies, Narrative, Conceptual/ theoretical (non-empirical) papers)
E – Evaluation (Experiences, perceptions, patterns, associations, and meaning-making related to identity and well-being)
R – Research type (Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods studies, and conceptual/ theoretical/non-empirical, review).

Research Design
PRISMA-guided systematic review (SPIDER & PICo frameworks)

Major international and national databases (Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO, EBSCOhost, Wiley Online Library; SciELO [Brazil]; eLibrary [Russia]; Sabinet and Africa-Wide.

Background and Rationale

Identity development and ***student well-being*** are closely intertwined processes that shape academic engagement, adjustment, and psychological functioning during the university years.

- Existing research on identity and well-being is predominantly WEIRD-focused, limiting understanding of students' experiences in diverse sociocultural contexts.
- South Africa, Brazil, and Russia represent distinct sociocultural, historical, and educational systems across different continents, offering a comparative non-WEIRD perspective.
- A systematic synthesis is needed to integrate fragmented evidence and identify sociocultural patterns influencing identity formation and well-being among students.

Conceptual Focus

Identity and student well-being are conceptualised as mutually reinforcing processes shaped by developmental stage and sociocultural context.

Head of Research: Ass. Prof. **Aleksandra Fakhretdinova** (UFRN, Brazil)

Members: Prof. **Luzelle Naudé** (UFS, SA)
Prof. **Anastasia Larionova** (TSU, Russia)
Prof. **Jorge Tarcisio da Rocha Falcão** (UFRN, Brazil)
Prof. **Hilda du Plooy** (University of Verona, Italy)

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Key Findings

Country-Specific Findings

Brazil. Studies link identity and well-being to structural inequality. Economic status predicts political identity; marginalized students show higher distress. Autonomy support promotes well-being, while racialized academic contexts intensify identity-based vulnerability. Identity (racial, political, and socio-demographic) predominantly functions as a predictor of well-being and mental health outcomes rather than as an outcome variable.
Russia. Identity research predominantly focuses on ethnic, professional, socio-cultural, creative, and environmental (regional) forms. Well-being is operationalized through subjective and psychological frameworks (life satisfaction, adaptation, self-regulation, distress). Identity achievement and coherence consistently predict (or mediate) higher psychological well-being, adaptation, and self-regulation. Recent studies expand toward digital, environmental, and professional domains.
South Africa. Research is mainly qualitative and institution-specific, with few quantitative or longitudinal studies. Identity is relational and intersecting; well-being is implicit through belonging. The field highlights structural inequality and post-apartheid transformation but lacks integrative, intervention-based evidence.

Cross-National Synthesis

- Quantitative cross-sectional designs dominate in Brazil and Russia and qualitative ones in SA, whereas longitudinal and intervention studies are largely absent across all contexts.
- Contextual emphases varied across countries: structural inequality and post-colonial transformation (South Africa and Brazil) versus socio-cultural and educational role expectations (Russia).
- Identity and well-being are dynamically interconnected across student populations in non-WEIRD contexts, with identity most frequently functioning as a predictor of well-being outcomes.

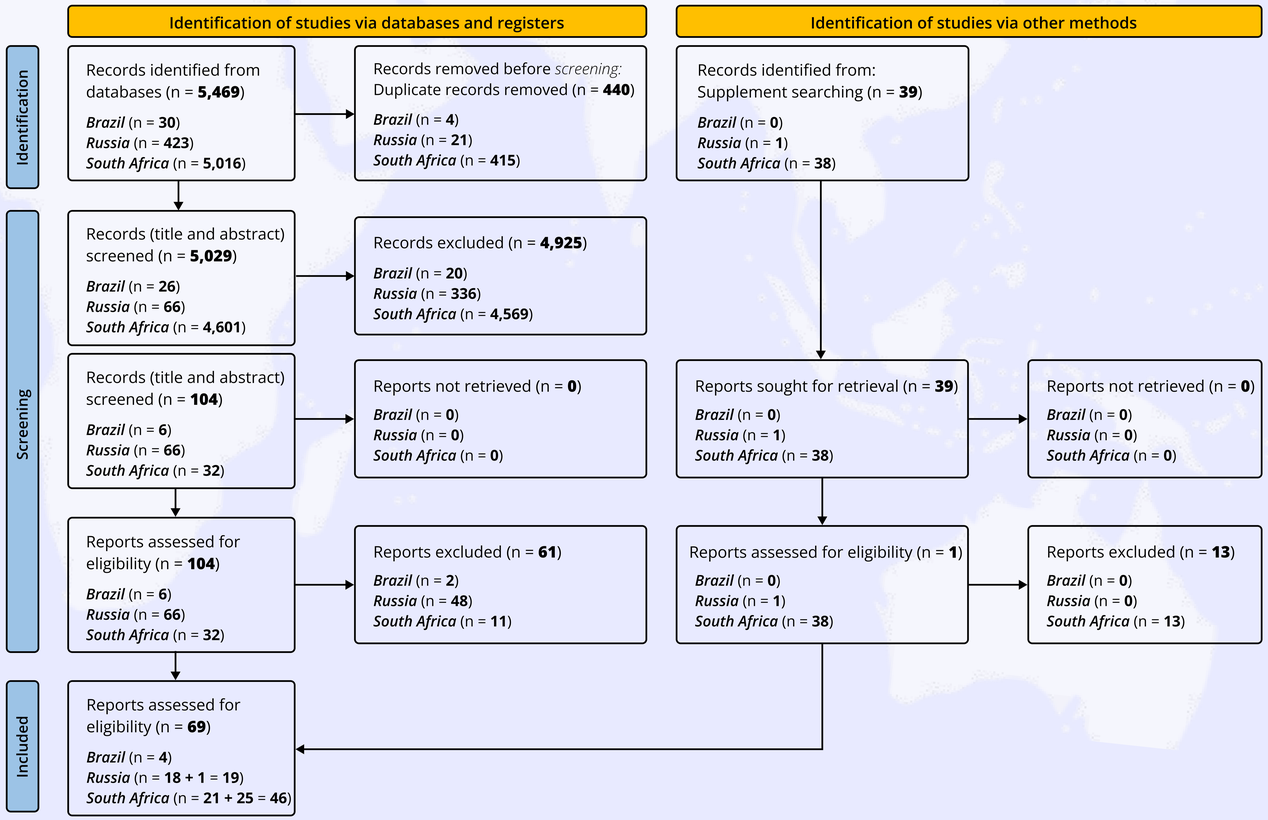
These findings contribute to expanding identity–well-being research beyond WEIRD contexts, yet reveal the need for more integrative and developmental designs.

Implications

- Findings highlight the need for culturally and structurally sensitive approaches to student support and identity development, particularly in contexts shaped by inequality, transformation, or socio-cultural role expectations.
- Universities should design well-being and mentoring initiatives that strengthen identity clarity and belonging, while addressing context-specific stressors (e.g., structural inequality, academic transitions, socio-cultural expectations).

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that identity and well-being are dynamically interconnected and shaped by sociocultural context, underscoring the need to move beyond WEIRD-focused student research.

Transparency and Ethics

- PROSPERO registration: CRD420251013947.
- Ethics waiver granted by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee, UFS, South Africa (UFS-HSD2025/1196).