

The Impact of Self-Affirmation Interventions on Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis

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Previous research on self-affirmation has mainly focused on outcomes related to academic achievement and health-related behavior changes, suggesting that self-affirmation could facilitate adaptive responses to psychological threats. This has attracted increasing attention in the field of well-being research. However, the findings on the relationship between self-affirmation and well-being have not been synthesized. This meta-analysis aimed to fill this gap by summarizing the impact of self-affirmation interventions on well-being in nonclinical, general populations. It identified and coded 129 independent tests derived from 67 published articles. Effect sizes (ESs) were calculated for four types of well-being outcomes and synthesized using a random-effects model. The analysis revealed different ways of implementing self-affirmation interventions. The synthesized results showed that self-affirmation had small but significant positive effects on self-perception ($ES = .32$), general well-being ($ES = 0.29$), social well-being ($ES = 0.26$), and reduction of psychological barriers ($ES = -.22$). Notably, the benefits associated with all outcomes were not only immediate but also long-lasting, with delayed effect being significantly larger than immediate effect in reducing psychological barriers. Additionally, mature participants benefited more than adolescents in terms of increased self-perception. The continent where the study was conducted also influenced the effects on self-perception and general well-being. Overall results suggest that self-affirmation can significantly improve various aspects of well-being, with both immediate and lasting effects. Findings highlight the potential of self-affirmation as a valuable component that can be incorporated into well-being programs. Findings also suggest the need for a theoretical reconceptualization of self-affirmation.

Public Significance Statement

This meta-analysis reveals that self-affirmation interventions consistently promote small but significant improvements in various aspects of well-being, including self-perception, general well-being, and social well-being, as well as reducing psychological barriers to well-being. The findings advocate for integrating self-affirmation strategies into well-being programs.

Keywords: self-affirmation, well-being, meta-analysis

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Steele (1988, p. 262) argued that people essentially tend to maintain an adaptively and morally adequate self-perception, that is, “as competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes, and

so on.” The perception of global adequacy is, in particular, self-integrity, which is central to self-affirmation theory. This theory describes a method to maintain or restore one’s global positive self-perception in response to threats by affirming

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important aspects of the self (e.g., cherished values) that are not relevant to the threatened domain. In other words, self-affirmation is regarded as a protective buffer or coping resource during instances of self-threat, wherein various valuable domains of the self can be used as strong resources, to counter a psychological threat such as academic failure (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Accordingly, self-affirmation has been widely used as a brief intervention to address threats, often through written activities that promote individuals to reflect on cherished values. These interventions help individuals reaffirm their self-integrity, reducing the impact of threats and promoting adaptive responses.

Benefits of Self-Affirmation on Human Performance and Health

Self-affirmation has been used as an effective intervention for altering how individuals perceive and respond to threats, especially in education and health domains. Cohen and Sherman (2014) outlined three mechanisms underlying its effectiveness: First, affirmations remind people of inner psychological resources, allowing them to view threats within a broader context, therefore psychologically distancing the threat from the self (Wakslak & Trope, 2009). Second, the process of distancing threats reduces the mental energy spent ruminating on past failures. Last, the shift encourages constructive rather than defensive responses to threats.

In the area of education, self-affirmation has been utilized as a strategy to enhance academic performance, particularly for groups at risk of identity threat, including racial minorities (Cohen et al., 2006; Sherman et al., 2013), first-generation undergraduates (Harackiewicz et al., 2014), and students facing socioeconomic challenges (Hadden et al., 2020). Many studies have shown significant improvements in

academic achievements, such as higher grade point averages and a narrowed achievement gap between identity-threatened and identity-nonthreatened students (Sherman et al., 2013), with some effects persisting for years (Harackiewicz et al., 2014). However, some studies have found negative or short-term effects (e.g., Hanselman et al., 2017; Protzko & Aronson, 2016). A recent meta-analysis identified an overall significant affirmation effect on academic achievement for identity-threatened students ($\bar{g} = .15$), but not for identity-nonthreatened students ($\bar{g} = .01$; Wu et al., 2021).

In the health domain, self-affirmation has been effective in reducing defensiveness toward health-risk messages (Harris & Epton, 2009), such as consumption of cigarettes and alcohol (Armitage et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2007) and unhealthy diet (Fielden et al., 2016; Napper et al., 2014). Studies demonstrated that adopting self-affirmation could enhance receptivity to health-risk information (Armitage et al., 2008), increase motivations for behavior change (Napper et al., 2014), and promote healthier behaviors compared to control groups (Armitage et al., 2011). The meta-analysis by Epton et al. (2015) confirmed the positive effects of self-affirmation on health message acceptance ($d = .32$), intentions to transform behavior ($d = .14$), and actual health-behavior engagement ($d = .32$).

Impact of Self-Affirmation on Well-Being

Well-being, a multidimensional construct encompassing various aspects of human life and happiness, has increasingly been linked to self-affirmation interventions. Research suggests that self-affirmation can relieve stress and benefit individuals' well-being by helping them maintain a stable and positive mental state to handle daily problems (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Building on the positive-activity model (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013), which posits that simple, intentional positive activities can increase well-being, Howell (2017) proposed self-affirmation as a potential well-being intervention within the field of positive psychology. Previous meta-analyses of positive psychological interventions have consistently demonstrated positive effects on a variety of outcomes (e.g., Bolier et al., 2013; Carr et al., 2021), including subjective and psychological well-being and reductions in depression and anxiety. These outcomes significantly overlap with those explored in self-affirmation studies.

To comprehensively analyze the wide range of psychological outcomes observed in self-affirmation studies, this meta-analysis organized them into four categories, namely, self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being.

Self-Perception

The core of self-affirmation is the idea of maintaining a perception of personal adequacy (Steele, 1988, p. 262). Research has explored whether self-affirmation can protect



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self-evaluation from threats, focusing on outcomes like self-esteem (Armitage, 2012), self-efficacy (Albaloooshi et al., 2020), self-worth (Critcher & Dunning, 2015), and self-integrity (C.-H. Liu & Huang, 2019). These variables are closely tied to well-being research, where they have been shown to significantly mediate well-being (W. Liu, Li, et al., 2016). However, findings are not consistently significant (e.g., Vohs et al., 2013), making it uncertain whether affirming an important aspect of the self will increase one's global self-perception. This meta-analysis groups these self-evaluated psychological variables into the category of "self-perception."

General Well-Being

Empirical research has increasingly considered self-affirmation as a beneficial strategy for enhancing well-being. Outcomes encompass a broad range of measures, including direct assessments of well-being, such as subjective and/or psychological well-being (e.g., Armitage, 2016; Nelson et al., 2014), specific indicators such as positive mood (Crocker et al., 2008) and life satisfaction (Manke et al., 2021), as well as aspects of psychological functioning, like self-compassion (Gregory et al., 2017) and willingness to seek help (Glazer et al., 2023). Results, however, have been inconsistent, with some studies showing positive effects and others reporting null findings (Amoura et al., 2015; C.-H. Liu & Huang, 2019). Because well-being integrates both feeling good and functioning well (Huppert, 2017), this meta-analysis categorizes these diverse outcomes together as "general well-being."

Social Well-Being

Beyond the individual level of well-being, some studies examine how self-affirmation impacts individuals' perceptions

about their social relationships and roles, contributing to their overall sense of community and belonging (Batory-Ginda, 2022; Turetsky et al., 2020). However, a few studies report that self-affirmation had no significant effect on perceptions of group relationships (Seidman et al., 2022). Given these findings, this study treats the social aspect as a separate dimension of well-being, that is, "social well-being."

Psychological Barriers to Well-Being

Research on self-affirmation not only explored its direct impacts on enhancing well-being but also investigated its potential to mitigate negative issues that could impair well-being, representing two distinct yet convergent dimensions (Slade, 2010). For example, Crocker et al. (2008) found that self-affirmation greatly improved participants' positive feelings, but it had no effect on reducing negative feelings. Some studies reported its positive effects on reducing psychological symptoms like depression, anxiety, and paranoia (e.g., Dang et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2019). Others explored detrimental factors such as defensiveness (Wakslak & Trope, 2009) and stigma (Glazer et al., 2023) but reported inconsistent results. This meta-analysis categorizes these negative issues as "psychological barriers to well-being" to capture self-affirmation's role in addressing challenges to well-being.

Potential Factors Influencing the Outcomes of Self-Affirmation

As self-affirmation research grows, variations in study design, such as self-affirmation type, control condition, threat condition, and posttest time, have been noted. These variables may affect outcomes and thus are analyzed as potential moderator in this meta-analysis.

Self-Affirmation Type

Self-affirmation has been implemented in a variety of ways, which can be categorized into two main types, namely, value affirmation and attribute affirmation. *Value affirmation* involves engaging with personal values, typically by ranking values and writing about why the top-ranked value is important (e.g., Brady et al., 2024; Czech et al., 2011). Alternative methods that reduce the reliance on essay writing have also been developed (e.g., Khoo et al., 2024). *Attribute affirmation*, on the other hand, focuses on affirming positive personal traits, like recalling acts of kindness (Armitage, 2012) or personal strengths (Rosas et al., 2017), aiming to reinforce self-integrity through positive attributes.

Empirical studies often treat these two types as equivalent, assuming they produce the same effects. However, this assumption remains unproven. Early meta-analysis by Sweeney and Moyer (2015) initially attempted to differentiate these two types in health-behavior research but found no significant differences, partly because they limited their scope



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of attribute affirmation to kindness affirmation, resulting in only a few studies ($k = 6$) being included. Later meta-analyses either mixed together the two types (Epton et al., 2015; Escobar-Soler et al., 2023; Ferrer & Cohen, 2019) or focused solely on value affirmation (Wu et al., 2021). Due to the lack of distinction, it is difficult to determine which type works better.

Control Condition

In self-affirmation research, control conditions often involve participants writing about why a lower ranked value might be important to someone else, contrasting with experimental groups affirming top-ranked values. However, this approach has been criticized for still engaging participants with their value systems (McQueen & Klein, 2006). To address this, recent studies have employed inactive controls, such as neutral tasks (e.g., writing about jelly bean flavors; Vail et al., 2018), or solely collecting data without additional tasks (Armitage, 2016). Despite these adjustments, previous meta-analyses have not investigated whether variations in control conditions influence self-affirmation effects.

Threat Condition

Self-affirmation is theorized as a coping response to psychological threats, with research exploring its effects under two main threat conditions in the well-being domain. Some studies intentionally induce explicit threats, like a stressful speech task (Czech et al., 2011), to place participants in stressful situations, while others focus on neutral contexts with implicit stressors that individuals regularly encounter, such as loneliness among older adults (Dang et al., 2023) or university challenges for students (Nelson et al., 2014). Despite these differing approaches, it remains unclear how these variations affect self-affirmation outcomes.

Additionally, the timing of self-affirmation interventions varies across studies that intentionally induce threats, complicating the understanding of self-affirmation as either a preventive or intervention strategy (Pilot & Stutts, 2023). Some studies delivered the interventions before exposure to threats (Albalooshi et al., 2020), while others did so after exposure to threats (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). The results are inconclusive. Critcher et al. (2010) suggested that self-affirmation works better as an intervention after exposure to threats, whereas Pilot and Stutts (2023) argued that the timing of threat exposure has no significant impact. These variations are not adequately addressed in previous meta-analyses.

Posttest Time

The timing of posttest measurement is a crucial moderator, as self-affirmation effects may vary in their durability. In the educational domain, studies typically measure outcomes over extended periods due to the gradual nature of academic performance. Wu et al. (2021) found that longer follow-up periods (measured in months) reported larger affirmation effects on academic achievement among identity-threatened students, regardless of the number of intervention doses. Conversely, Epton et al. (2015) reported that time intervals between the intervention and the measurement did not influence health-behavior change outcomes.

This raises questions about the durability of self-affirmation effects in the well-being domain. While many studies measure outcomes immediately after interventions, others assess delayed effects at follow-up intervals (e.g., Brady et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2014). It remains unclear whether the benefits of self-affirmation on well-being are immediate but short lived or if they have longer lasting impacts. This question is critical for a deeper understanding of how self-affirmation influences well-being over time.

Additionally, this study considers other potential moderators, such as the intervention dosage, participant type, sample size, and the geographical location of the study.

Purpose of the Present Meta-Analysis

Existing reviews on self-affirmation are in educational and health domains (Epton et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2021). They focused on the effects of self-affirmation on specific outcomes such as academic achievement and health-behavior changes. While self-affirmation is regarded as psychological intervention, there is a lack of systematic reviews on the effects of self-affirmation on psychological outcomes, summarizing how self-affirmation influences individuals' feelings, thoughts, and psychological states.

In addition, existing reviews focused on specific types of self-affirmation (e.g., value affirmation only or a mix of value and attribute affirmation) and focused on specific threat contexts (i.e., identity threats, health-risk messages).



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They failed to provide a holistic understanding of how self-affirmation interventions are implemented using different methods and in different contexts, how intervention outcomes are assessed from different perspectives and at different time points after the intervention, and how these methodological variations or potential moderators affect intervention outcomes.

The purpose of this meta-analysis is to systematically examine the effects of self-affirmation on well-being within a general, nonclinical population. This study synthesized the effects across four key dimensions, namely, self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being. Additionally, this analysis explored how potential moderators might affect the outcomes of self-affirmation interventions.

The research questions explored in this study include the following:

Research Question 1: How do individual studies implement self-affirmation interventions in different ways and assess the intervention effects on well-being from different perspectives?

Research Question 2: What are the overall effects of self-affirmation on well-being in terms of self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being?

Research Question 3: How might the posttest time influence the effects of self-affirmation on well-being?

Research Question 4: How might other potential moderators (such as self-affirmation type, threat condition, control condition) influence the effects of self-affirmation on well-being?

Besides well-being outcomes, some studies also assessed the effects of self-affirmation on cognitive performance and behavioral responses. Given the significance of these outcomes, this meta-analysis analyzed them as supplementary findings.

Method

Transparency and Openness

This review was not preregistered. The study was designed and reported following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021) and the American Psychological Association's Quantitative Meta-Analysis Article Reporting Standards (Appelbaum et al., 2018). All data, coding schemes, and additional online materials for this study are publicly available (see Supplemental Materials). Data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0.

Literature Research

The literature review for this study focused on peer-reviewed journal articles written in English, retrieved from Scopus, APA PsycInfo, PubMed, and Educational Resources Information Center, using search terms such as *self-affirmation* and *value affirmation* and limiters related to experimental design. The search strategy and flowchart are provided in Supplemental Material S1. All included articles were listed in Supplemental Material S2. These articles were manually reviewed to ensure comprehensive coverage. This process was conducted iteratively until no new study was found.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be included, a study had to meet all of the following criteria:

1. The research was peer-reviewed empirical articles, which analyzed empirical evidence to address the research question. Studies using second-hand data or simulated data, nonpeer-reviewed articles, conference articles, and reports were excluded.
2. Participants should be from a nonclinical, general population to ensure generalizability. Studies involving clinical samples (e.g., adults with psoriasis), minority groups (e.g., sexual or racial minority), or those with specific psychological conditions (e.g., participants with moderate to high social anxiety) were excluded, as these populations may face unique psychological threats. This criterion aimed to establish a foundational understanding of self-affirmation's effects on well-being in the broader population.

3. The research used randomized controlled trials or cluster randomized controlled trials design.
4. Comparisons must be made between groups using and not using a self-affirmation intervention. Studies were excluded if (a) self-affirmation was part of a broader intervention (e.g., combined with gratitude practices), or (b) active control groups involved alternative psychological interventions (e.g., goal-setting control group) or different forms of self-affirmation (e.g., comparing value affirmation with attribute affirmation). These exclusions were necessary to isolate the specific effects of self-affirmation interventions.
5. Studies must measure at least one interested outcome related to well-being, including self-perception (e.g., self-esteem), general well-being (e.g., positive affect), social well-being (e.g., sense of belonging), and psychological barriers to well-being (e.g., depression).
6. The study needed to provide sufficient data for calculating effect size (ES) of an intervention, including means and standard deviations or standard errors, *t* value of *t* test, *F* ratio of *F* test, chi-square statistics, *r* index, or *z* score of Mann–Whitney's *U* test, as well as the sample size of the participants in the control and experimental groups.

Article Screening and Coding Framework

The initial search yielded 1,709 articles from databases and 15 from other sources. After removing duplicates, 970 articles were screened based on titles and abstracts, resulting in the exclusion of 853 articles. The full texts of 117 remaining articles were thoroughly reviewed, with 52 excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria. Finally, 67 articles were included in the analysis. The whole screening process was independently conducted by two reviewers. The screening agreement level is high (Cohen's $\kappa = .81$). Disagreements were resolved by a discussion among the reviewers. See the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses flowchart in Supplemental Material S1.

Two authors developed and refined a coding framework, which was confirmed by other authors involved in the research. Each selected study was coded on all dimensions of the coding framework. Two authors independently coded all 67 articles and regularly met with the third author to discuss uncertainties. The intercoder reliability was good to perfect across all study features (Cohen's $\kappa = .84$ – 1.00). Finally, all discrepancies were discussed and resolved by all authors together.

The coding framework includes the following elements. For each study, the authors, publication year, continent (where the study was conducted), participant type (undergraduates, adolescents, or general adults), sample age, and the sample size

for both experimental and control conditions were recorded. If group sizes were not specified, equal group sizes were assumed due to random assignment. Other elements in the coding framework are elaborated below, with full details presented in Supplemental Material S1.

Self-Affirmation Type

Interventions that focused on identifying important personal values were coded as value affirmation, while those that highlighted positive characteristics of the self were coded as attribute affirmation.

Threat Condition

It was categorized into (a) neutral threat, referring to daily environments that do not specify any particular threat; (b) preexposure threat, referring to specific threats induced before self-affirmation; and (c) postexposure threat, referring to specific threats induced after self-affirmation.

Control Condition

Two types were coded: (a) unimportant value essay, where participants wrote about why lower ranked values might matter to others, and (b) inactive control, adopting either neutral tasks without self-reflection statements (e.g., listing daily activities) or no intervention (merely collecting data).

Intervention Dosage

Dosages were coded by the number of intervention implementations (e.g., once, twice). For moderator analysis, these were further coded as “one dose” for single implementation and “more doses” for interventions conducted more than once.

Posttest Time

The time points of outcome measurements were coded as “immediate” if the measurement occurred right after the intervention or “delayed” if there was a time gap, based on the interval between the last intervention and assessment.

Outcome

Psychological outcomes were assessed using self-reported scales and categorized into four groups: (a) self-perception, referring to individual's view or evaluation of the self; (b) general well-being, including subjective and psychological well-being and positive psychological functioning; (c) social well-being, referring to individuals' perception of their social relationships; and (d) psychological barriers to well-being, including negative affect, psychological symptoms, and negative psychological functioning. Some included studies also measured objective indicators beyond well-being. These indicators fell into two categories: (e) cognitive performance, such as scores from cognitive tests and problem-solving tasks,

and (f) behavioral responses, which observed actual behaviors like classroom interaction and prosocial and antisocial behaviors.

Statistical Method

The unit of analysis was the independent study, defined as an experimental study with one experimental and one control group. Cohen's d was used to calculate ESs, representing the standardized mean difference between groups, and was adjusted to Hedges' g to address small sample bias. A random-effects model was applied to calculate the weighted mean ES ($\bar{g}$), accounting for within- and between-study variance. Publication bias was assessed using funnel plots and Egger's regression test, with no significant bias detected. Outliers were identified and evaluated through sensitivity analysis, resulting in the exclusion of one social well-being result reported by Bierbaum and Nillesen (2021) due to significant influence. Homogeneity analysis, based on homogeneity statistics (Q), was conducted to examine variability in ESs, and significant heterogeneity prompted moderator analysis. Subgroup analyses tested moderators using between-group (Q_B) and within-group (Q_W) homogeneity statistics. To avoid low statistical power when detecting differences among ESs, moderator analysis was conducted in a cohort with most subgroups containing at least five studies. See more details of the statistical method in Supplemental Material S1.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

This meta-analysis included 67 articles meeting all inclusion criteria, comprising 129 studies. Most studies (82%) were published after 2013. Geographically, 78 studies were conducted in America, 10 in Europe, six in Asia, and the rest from various or unspecified locations. The majority of studies targeted students, with 89 studies involving undergraduates aged 18–35 years and 13 involving adolescents aged 12–18 years. The remaining 27 studies involved general adults from organizational and community contexts, with an age range of 18–72 years.

Implementation of Self-Affirmation Interventions and Assessment of Well-Being

Research Question 1 examined the diverse implementation methods of self-affirmation interventions and the different dimensions of well-being outcomes. In summary, most studied employed value affirmation ($k = 114$), particularly using writing exercises about top-ranked values (e.g., Brady et al., 2024). The adoption of attribute affirmation is less common ($k = 15$), with kindness being the most frequently affirmed attribute (e.g., Armitage, 2012). Besides affirming specific attributes, a few studies affirmed the self as a valuable entity in its entirety (e.g., C.-H. Liu & Huang, 2019). One study combined value affirmation and attribute affirmation together (Dang et al., 2023). Most studies implemented the intervention effects in neutral contexts or daily environments (e.g., Nelson et al., 2014) without explicit threats ($k = 74$). The remaining studies intentionally induced psychological threats through challenging tasks or recalled stressful experiences, with 16 studies inducing threats before the intervention (e.g., Critcher & Dunning, 2015) and 39 studies after the intervention (e.g., Albalooshi et al., 2020).

Regarding the assessment of well-being, the psychological barriers to well-being represented the most frequently examined outcome ($k = 72$), followed by general well-being ($k = 56$) and self-perception ($k = 52$), while the social well-being received the least attention ($k = 25$). The majority of studies measured effects immediately after the interventions, with only a small number ($k = 27$) conducting follow-ups to measure delayed outcomes (e.g., Brady et al., 2024). These follow-up periods varied widely, ranging from 2 days to 2 years ($M = 1.8$ weeks, $SD = 4.4$ weeks).

Overall Effects of Self-Affirmation on Multiple Outcomes

Research Question 2 examined the overall effects of self-affirmation on self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, psychological barriers to well-being, and cognitive performance and behavior. As shown in Table 1, all weighted mean ESs were statistically significant, with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) not overlapping zero. The absolute value of

Table 1
Overall Weighted Mean Effect Sizes of Self-Affirmation Across Outcomes

Participant	N	Outcome	k	$\bar{g}$	95% CI	95% PI	Q
17,748	129	Self-perception	52	0.32	[0.22, 0.43]	[−0.34, 0.99]	63.65*
$N_{Exp} = 8,941$		General well-being	56	0.29	[0.17, 0.41]	[−0.49, 1.07]	122.52*
$N_{Ctrl} = 8,807$		Social well-being	25	0.26	[0.17, 0.35]	[−0.10, 0.62]	22.20
		Psychological barriers	72	−0.22	[−0.30, −0.13]	[−0.78, 0.34]	95.37*
		Cognitive performance	19	0.23	[0.05, 0.40]	[−0.40, 0.86]	22.52
		Behavior	13	0.22	[0.10, 0.34]	[−0.09, 0.53]	14.74

Note. N = total number of independent studies; k = number of independent studies analyzed for each outcome; $\bar{g}$ = weighted mean effect size; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 95% PI = 95% prediction interval; Q = homogeneity statistics; N_{Exp} = number of participants in the experimental group; N_{Ctrl} = number of participants in the control group.

* $p < .05$.

mean ESs ranged from 0.22 to 0.32, indicating consistently small to moderate effects across various outcomes. In Supplemental Material S1, Supplemental Figure S3(A)–(F) presents the forest plots with prediction intervals for each outcome, illustrating the dispersion of ES across included studies.

Self-Perception

Self-affirmation significantly improved individuals' self-perception across 52 studies ($\bar{g} = .32$, 95% CI [.22, .43]). The significant effect indicated that current interventions effectively fostered more positive self-appraisal and greater self-awareness. For example, Brady et al. (2016) conducted a value-affirmation intervention wherein college freshmen wrote about their most important values. Over 2 years, affirmed students demonstrated a greater sense of adequacy as measured by indicators of self-integrity and self-esteem compared with peers who wrote about unimportant values.

General Well-Being

Self-affirmation had a small but positive effect on general well-being ($\bar{g} = .29$, 95% CI [.17, .41], $k = 56$). Positive affect was the most frequently assessed outcome across studies. For instance, Crocker et al. (2008) found that writing about important values greatly improved undergraduates' general positive feelings, such as pride, contentment, and especially feelings of love, regardless of gender or which value was affirmed. Additionally, lasting improvements of well-being were observed. For example, Nelson et al. (2014) conducted two studies involving undergraduates in South Korea and America. They found that affirming the most important values increased participants' subjective and psychological well-being over 2–4 weeks compared with students who wrote about daily activities.

Social Well-Being

The $\bar{g}$ for social well-being was 0.26 (95% CI [.17, .35], $k = 25$), indicating a small effect of self-affirmation on enhancing individuals' social well-being. Self-affirmation can strengthen people's sense of belonging, prosocial feelings, and peer social networks. A notable study by Turetsky et al. (2020) highlighted these effects on both the quantity and quality of social connections. They found that affirmed students, who affirmed important values at the beginning of semester, not only preserved more existing friendships but also established more new ones over 2.5 months compared with their peers who wrote about unimportant values. Moreover, these affirmed students became more central within the overall course social network.

Psychological Barriers to Well-Being

The negative ES ($\bar{g} = -.22$, 95% CI [–.30, –.13], $k = 72$) indicated that self-affirmation significantly mitigated the

negative impacts of psychological barriers to well-being, providing both temporary psychological relief and protection against persistent stress. For example, Pilot and Stutts (2023) found that exposure to fitpiration images led to increased body dissatisfaction and negative mood among unaffirmed undergraduates who wrote about daily activities, while affirmed students who wrote about important values were unaffected. Li et al. (2022) used the same affirmation approach during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that unaffirmed adults experienced increased anxiety over a 2-week period as COVID-19 prevalence increased, whereas self-affirmed individuals maintained stable anxiety levels during the same period.

Cognitive Performance

The $\bar{g}$ for cognitive performance was 0.23 (95% CI [.05, .40], $k = 19$), indicating a small but positive impact of self-affirmation. For example, in the study by Creswell et al. (2013), undergraduates who affirmed important personal values scored significantly higher on the remote associates task, which measured the problem-solving performance and creativity, compared with those who wrote about their unimportant values.

Behavior

Thirteen included studies examined behavior outcomes besides psychological effects, showing a small but positive effect on behavior change ($\bar{g} = .22$, 95% CI [.10, .34]). For instance, Lindsay and Creswell (2014) observed that undergraduates who wrote about their top-ranked values displayed significantly greater helping behaviors in a designed shelf-collapse scenario compared with those who wrote about their bottom-ranked values.

Influence of Posttest Time on the Effects of Self-Affirmation

Research Question 3 examined whether the timing of posttest assessments impacts the effectiveness of self-affirmation interventions on well-being outcomes. Due to the limited number of studies testing delayed effects and their varied time intervals, the analysis categorized them into two groups: immediate and delayed. In Supplemental Material S1, Supplemental Figure S4(A)–(D) presents the forest plots with prediction intervals for four well-being outcomes, showing the dispersion of ESs of included studies under different posttest times. Note that there are no forest plots for two outcomes (cognitive performance and behavior) because no studies employed delayed measures to assess these two outcomes.

As shown in Table 2, the delayed ES for mitigating psychological barriers to well-being ($\bar{g} = -.36$, 95% CI [–.52, –.19], $k = 22$) was significantly larger than the immediate ES ($\bar{g} = -.16$, 95% CI [–.26, –.06], $k = 50$), suggesting that the benefits of self-affirmation in overcoming psychological

Table 2*Effect Sizes of Self-Affirmation at Different Posttest Time Across Well-Being Outcomes*

Outcome	Posttest time	<i>k</i>	$\bar{g}$	95% CI	95% PI	Q_W	Q_B
Self-perception	Immediate	43	0.33	[0.21, 0.45]	[-0.36, 1.02]	31.36	0.018 ($p = .894$)
	Delayed	9	0.31	[0.07, 0.55]	[-0.50, 1.12]	4.20	
General well-being	Immediate	44	0.31	[0.16, 0.47]	[-0.64, 1.27]	71.06*	1.670 ($p = .196$)
	Delayed	12	0.17	[0.01, 0.33]	[-0.33, 0.67]	25.35*	
Social well-being	Immediate	15	0.30	[0.17, 0.43]	[-0.11, 0.71]	30.98*	0.909 ($p = .341$)
	Delayed	10	0.21	[0.08, 0.34]	[-0.16, 0.58]	18.54	
Psychological barriers	Immediate	50	-0.16	[-0.26, -0.06]	[-0.70, 0.39]	39.46	4.100* ($p = .043$)
	Delayed	22	-0.36	[-0.52, -0.19]	[-1.07, 0.36]	35.10*	

Note. k = number of independent studies analyzed for each outcome; $\bar{g}$ = weighted mean effect size; CI = 95% confidence interval; 95% PI = 95% prediction interval; Q_W = within-group homogeneity statistics; Q_B = between-group homogeneity statistics.

* $p < .05$.

barriers may increase or become more apparent over time. For the other three outcomes (self-perception, general well-being, and social well-being), immediate effects tended to be larger than delayed effects, though the difference was not statistically significant. Importantly, all ESs remained significantly positive, indicating that the benefits of self-affirmation persist over time, with follow-up periods averaging 1.8 weeks.

Moderator Analysis

As shown in Table 1, homogeneity statistics (Q) indicated significant variances in ESs across studies for three well-being outcomes (self-perception, general well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being). Therefore, substantive study features were analyzed as potential moderators on the three outcomes to address Research Question 4. The moderator analysis results are summarized below, with full details presented in Supplemental Material S1. Forest plots with prediction intervals for the three mentioned outcomes are presented in Supplemental Figure S5(A)–(G), Supplemental Figure S6(A)–(G), and Supplemental Figure S7(A)–(G), illustrating the dispersion of ESs across included studies in different subgroups under potential moderators.

Continent

When analyzing data across continents, comparisons were limited to America, Asia, and Europe due to insufficient studies from other regions (<5 studies). Differences across continents were marginally significant for self-perception ($Q_B = 7.759, p = .051$) and general well-being ($Q_B = 5.672, p = .059$) outcomes. Specifically, Asia showed a notably higher ES for self-perception outcomes ($\bar{g} = .66, 95\% \text{ CI } [.27, 1.06], k = 9$) compared with America ($\bar{g} = .25, 95\% \text{ CI } [.06, .44], k = 25$) and Europe ($\bar{g} = .17, 95\% \text{ CI } [.09, .25], k = 16$), suggesting greater effectiveness of self-affirmation in maintaining a positive self-view among Asian populations. Conversely, for general well-being outcomes, America showed a greater ES ($\bar{g} = .42, 95\% \text{ CI } [.26, .58], k = 35$) compared with

Asia ($\bar{g} = .21, 95\% \text{ CI } [.02, .39], k = 6$), while Europe showed a nonsignificant ES.

Type of Participants

Significant Q_B values ($p = .015$) for self-perception outcome indicated differences in self-affirmation effects across different types of participants. Undergraduates ($\bar{g} = .37, 95\% \text{ CI } [.19, .56], k = 30$) and general adults ($\bar{g} = .38, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.12, .64], k = 11$) showed similar ESs, while adolescents had a significantly lower ES ($\bar{g} = .13, 95\% \text{ CI } [.07, .20], k = 12$). These findings suggested that self-perception responses were more pronounced among grown-ups than adolescents.

Additionally, while ESs for undergraduates across three outcomes were significant, results varied for other groups. Adolescents showed nonsignificant effects for psychological barriers, and general adults showed nonsignificant effects for self-perception and well-being. These variations suggested that the effectiveness of self-affirmation may vary across different life stages. However, given the limited number of studies involving adolescents and general adults, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Nonsignificant Moderators

Other examined potential moderators, including sample size, intervention dosage, threat condition, self-affirmation type, and control condition, did not exhibit significant influences on the effects of self-affirmation.

Discussion

Implementation of Self-Affirmation Interventions and Assessment of Well-Being

The findings under Research Question 1 provide some new insights that may enrich the conceptualization of both self-affirmation interventions and well-being outcomes. Regarding self-affirmation interventions, the finding on its implementation mainly through value affirmation and attribute affirmation may contribute to an operational definition of self-affirmation

as well as the design of self-affirmation interventions, which may directly affect the intervention effects. Further, the predominance of neutral contextual implementations suggests that self-affirmation may serve as a general psychological resource that enhances well-being in daily environments rather than merely protecting against specific threats. This finding suggests the need for a transformative shift in the conceptualization of self-affirmation, from being primarily studied as a strategy for addressing threat to being recognized as a resource-building mechanism that can enhance psychological functioning across contexts, even in the absence of explicit threats.

The findings also reveal a few substantial methodological imbalances, such as value affirmation dominating the literature, while attribute affirmation remains underexplored. Due to the limited number of included studies, this meta-analysis could not determine whether affirming different aspects of the self (e.g., kindness vs. strength) and affirming the global self differ in their intervention effectiveness. Additionally, most studies measured only immediate effects, with relatively few examining delayed outcomes. The wide variations in follow-up periods across studies further complicate the understanding of how self-affirmation effects evolve over time. This temporal gap represents a critical area for future research.

Concerning well-being, this review demonstrates that the impact of self-affirmation on well-being spans multiple dimensions, including self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being, which enriches the understanding of well-being. This multidimensional view of well-being suggests that future research could adopt a more balanced perspective, conceptualizing well-being not only as the alleviation of psychological distress but also as the promotion of positive psychological functioning across cognitive, emotional, and social domains. Meanwhile, the major focus on psychological barriers when examining intervention outcomes is consistent with a historical emphasis on deficit reduction rather than strength promotion (Slade, 2010).

Impact of Self-Affirmation on Well-Being

This meta-analysis examined the overall effects of self-affirmation on well-being by synthesizing findings from individual studies. It summarized the well-being outcomes into four categories, namely, self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being. Results demonstrated small but significant effects of self-affirmation ($\bar{g} = 0.22$ to 0.32) across these outcomes in diverse contexts.

Self-Perception

Aligning with self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), the findings suggested that self-affirmation interventions significantly enhanced self-perception, showing the largest ES

among outcomes. By reflecting on personal values and qualities, individuals maintained a stable and resilient self-image, recognized their inherent worth and competence (Critcher & Dunning, 2015), and fostered a belief that they deserve love and care (Crocker et al., 2008; Gregory et al., 2017). Even when faced with setbacks or negative comparisons, self-affirmed individuals were more likely to preserve a sense of global adequacy (Pilot & Stutts, 2023) rather than shifting their self-evaluation toward feelings of defeat or inadequacy. This resilience could be attributed to reinforced awareness of their cherished self-aspects, supporting robust and enduring self-esteem.

General Well-Being

This meta-analysis found that self-affirmation positively impacted general well-being, with subjective and psychological well-being being the most commonly measured outcomes (e.g., Armitage, 2016; Yan et al., 2024). Based on the positive-activity model (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013), self-affirmation is viewed as an intentional positive activity that can enhance well-being through increased positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Nelson et al., 2014). These findings support Howell's (2017) suggestion that self-affirmation functions as a positive psychological intervention. The observed ES was comparable to Bolier et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis of positive psychological interventions in enhancing well-being ($d = 0.20$ to 0.34) but lower than Carr et al.'s (2021) findings ($\bar{g} = 0.39$). Nonetheless, the simplicity and time efficiency of self-affirmation interventions make their effectiveness noteworthy.

Social Well-Being

Beyond the individual level of well-being, this study demonstrated that self-affirmation positively impacted social well-being, a critical but often overlooked dimension in previous meta-analyses of well-being interventions (e.g., Koydemir et al., 2021). Although the number of studies that examined this outcome was the smallest within this meta-analysis, the social dimension of well-being is crucial as humans are inherently social creatures with a fundamental need to belong. This can be reflected in the findings of value-affirmation studies, where social relationships with family or friends were the most frequently top-ranked values that participants chose to affirm (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Crocker et al., 2008). While psychological threats often involve social comparisons that undermined an individual's inner sense of security and comfort in their environment (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), self-affirmation fosters a shift from harmful social comparisons to more positive personal resources. Such shift reinforces individuals' sense of social value and belonging (Manke et al., 2021) and facilitates stronger social connections (Turetsky et al., 2020). These findings suggest that self-affirmation can support interpersonal relationships and aid in smoother transitions and

better integration into new social settings, such as for freshmen adjusting to new environments.

Psychological Barriers to Well-Being

Among the four aspects of well-being outcomes, psychological barriers were the most frequently measured one, indicating a significant focus within the field. The findings showed that self-affirmation had small but beneficial effects in mitigating the harmful effects of these barriers. Specifically, self-affirmation could either serve as a buffer by attenuating increases in psychological vulnerability (Li et al., 2022; Pilot & Stutts, 2023) or act as an intervention by reducing the psychological symptoms (Dang et al., 2023; Kingston & Ellett, 2014). These benefits could be especially beneficial for populations that are vulnerable to psychological threats, such as elder adults experiencing loneliness (Dang et al., 2023), students with chronic stress (Creswell et al., 2013), and individuals in high-stress circumstances (Brady et al., 2024). Integrating self-affirmation into the support systems could enhance their resilience and better equip them to handle daily stress.

Forest Plots

However, the positive results should be treated with caution, as the forest plots (see Supplemental Material S1) reveal variability in the ESs of self-affirmation interventions across studies, especially in self-perception and general well-being outcomes. The negative or minimal effects reported in some studies could be explained by (a) methodological issues, such as studies employing single-item measures tend to show minimal effects (e.g., Armitage, 2016); (b) domain relatedness, that is, when the affirmed aspects were closely tied to the threat domains, self-affirmation could inadvertently increase participants' focus on their shortcomings in the threatened domain, thereby undermining its effectiveness, for example, Vohs et al. (2013) found that self-affirmation reduced self-efficacy in participants who had just experienced failure; and (c) individual vulnerability factors, for example, C.-H. Liu, Huang, et al. (2016) demonstrated that self-affirmation was unhelpful or even detrimental for individuals with high gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at), reducing their motivation to confront challenges. This variability underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of when and for whom self-affirmation interventions are most effective.

Influence of Posttest Time on the Effect of Self-Affirmation

The effects of self-affirmation on self-perception, general well-being, and social well-being outcomes appeared to stabilize or slightly decrease over time, while its benefits on psychological barriers intensified over an average follow-up period of 1.8 weeks. The follow-up studies concerning psychological barriers primarily focused on psychological

symptoms such as perceived stress, depression, and anxiety (Brady et al., 2016; Lakuta, 2020; Yan et al., 2024). These greater delayed effects, compared with immediate effects, suggested that the advantages of self-affirmation in overcoming psychological barriers may accumulate over time.

These findings suggested that self-affirmation extended beyond temporary emotional uplifts, serving as a trigger for an upward spiral of adaptive outcomes over time (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Its sustained effects may result from the gradual integration of affirmed aspects into one's self-concept and daily actions, fostering positive interpretations of the self and experiences. Consistent with the conceptualization of wise interventions, which refers to brief and targeted psychological strategies designed to create lasting changes by altering how people interpret themselves and their situations (Walton & Wilson, 2018), self-affirmation may initiate a self-reinforcing circle, where initial benefits (such as protected sense of adequacy and better performance) and reflections on self-affirmation experience can further strengthen self-affirmative reflections over time (Brady et al., 2016). This study provided empirical evidence to the growing literature on how brief psychological interventions can produce enduring or even increasing benefits in follow-up periods by changing how people interpret themselves and their experiences. Future research should explore the mechanisms underlying these temporal patterns, particularly focusing on how initial shifts in perspective become embedded in daily life and social relationships.

However, the limited number of studies on delayed outcomes and the varied time intervals across studies (ranging from 2 days to 2 years) make it challenging to interpret these results as long-term effects. Future research should standardize follow-up durations and increase the number of studies examining delayed effects to better understand how the impacts of self-affirmation evolve over time. Additionally, as this meta-analysis excluded individuals with diagnosed mental health conditions, the findings may not generalize to those with severe psychological distress. Further exploration in clinical settings is needed to assess the potential integration into mental health interventions.

Impacts of Moderators

Type of Participants

The findings revealed the variability in the effectiveness of self-affirmation across different demographic groups. Mature participants showed higher ESs in self-perception outcome compared with adolescents. The difference may be due to the fact that adults possess more developed self-awareness and richer internal resources, enabling deeper reflection and meaningful insights (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Undergraduates, in a transformative phase of identity formation and heightened self-awareness (McAdams, 2013), were especially receptive to self-affirmation, benefiting consistently

across various well-being outcomes. Conversely, adolescents, who were still in the progressive stages of forming a stable sense of self (Klimstra et al., 2010), may find common approaches to self-affirmation less attractive and engaging. For general adults, the complicated life experiences and more fixed self-perceptions might lessen the impact of such brief intervention (Brockner & van Dijke, 2024). Further interventions should consider developing age-appropriate affirmation activities that align with the developmental and psychological needs of adolescents and general adults. For adolescents, interactive approaches like creating digital avatars (Kang & Kim, 2020) could better support their self-discovery. For general adults, integrating self-affirmation into regular wellness programs should be considered. However, these conclusions should be interpreted with caution due to the limited number of studies involving adolescents and general adults, underscoring the need for further research across different life stages.

Continent

The continent where the study was conducted may act as a moderator, as marginally significant differences across continents for self-perception and general well-being outcomes indicated that the effects of self-affirmation might be influenced by cultural differences in how self-concept and personal values were conceptualized and expressed. Scholars argued that cultural variables, such as self-construal, may play a role in the self-affirmation process (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). In individualistic cultures like American culture, the self is construed as unique and independent, while in collectivistic cultures like Asian culture, it is more intertwined with relational roles and social harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These cultural distinctions in the self-perception may contribute to the observed variations in self-affirmation effects. Kim et al. (2022) provided compelling evidence supporting these findings. Their study demonstrated that self-affirmations were more effective when aligned with individuals' self-construal. Specifically, individual self-affirmations (affirming personal values) resonated more in individualistic cultures, whereas collective self-affirmations (emphasizing values important to both the self and a significant group) were better suited for collectivistic contexts. Although the primary outcome in Kim et al.'s study was academic achievement, their findings underscored the importance of tailoring self-affirmation interventions to match cultural self-construal. Alternatively, other cultural factors such as different social systems may also play a role (Choi & So, 2019). However, this meta-analysis cannot provide a definitive conclusion. Further research is needed to understand how the cultural dimensions influence the efficacy of self-affirmation strategies.

Other Moderators

While the influences of other moderators were not significant in this study, the findings still offered valuable insights. For instance, the two types of self-affirmation yielded comparable outcomes, indicating that their effectiveness shares a core mechanism, reminding people of "who they are." The activated connection to the true self may contribute to the efficacy of self-affirmation. The nonsignificant threat condition highlighted the flexibility of self-affirmation as both a preventive and reactive tool across explicit and implicit stress conditions. Finally, writing about unimportant values was similar to inactive tasks as the control condition was not a significant moderator either. Further discussion on nonsignificant moderators is available in Supplemental Material S1.

Implications for Research and Practice

This meta-analysis highlights several research priorities. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impacts of self-affirmation on self-perception and well-being. This could help explore how temporary protection in self-perception can be transformed into sustained improvements in well-being. Second, further research should consider more diverse populations beyond American undergraduates, such as adolescents, general adults, and non-American cultural groups, to enhance generalizability. Third, more attention should be paid to the impact of self-affirmation on social well-being (e.g., sense of social value and belonging), which is an important issue but has been less explored and often overlooked in previous meta-analyses of well-being interventions. Given that belongingness interventions may also affect the sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011), it would be worthwhile to examine in future research the different and joint effects of self-affirmation and belongingness interventions on belongingness. Understanding these relationships would help clarify intervention mechanisms and optimize implementation strategies. Fourth, future research should measure both positive and negative psychological outcomes to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of self-affirmation's impact. Fifth, more exploration of attribute affirmation, especially holistic approaches that emphasize accepting the whole self, could inform more personalized and effective intervention strategies.

The findings also provide practical implications. First, practitioners, such as educators or parents, can use self-affirmation to provide immediate psychological support to students facing challenges or failures. Second, customizing self-affirmation interventions based on individual differences (e.g., life stages of participants, cultural background) can enhance effectiveness. Third, integrating self-affirmation into well-being programs targeting the general population across various settings, particularly in educational environments, can not only enhance well-being but also strengthen social connections.

Limitations

The meta-analysis has several limitations. First, gender was not analyzed as a moderator because many studies did not provide sufficient data for coding this variable. Second, well-being outcomes were grouped broadly to maintain robustness and avoid an overly fragmented set of outcomes but potentially overlooking nuanced effects. Third, this meta-analysis excluded nongeneral population groups, such as clinical participants and racial minorities, because they may face unique psychological threats. While this exclusion ensured greater homogeneity in our sample, it may lead to more conservative hypothesis testing, as individuals experiencing high levels of self-threat may be more susceptible to self-affirmation interventions. Though this study did not find a moderating effect of explicitly manipulated threat, baseline levels of self-threat may be high even in neutral conditions. Future research should explore these nongeneral population groups to understand their specific needs and the benefits of self-affirmation intervention for them. Fourth, temporal effects were categorized as immediate and delayed. Given the limited studies providing follow-up data and significant variations in time intervals, these factors hinder the ability to thoroughly analyze how the effects of self-affirmation interventions persist over time. Finally, the overlap across moderators complicates result interpretation. For example, studies with longer follow-up intervals often included multiple doses of the intervention, and studies involving undergraduates frequently employed value-affirmation tasks. This meta-analysis cannot disentangle which factor was primarily driving effects or identify what combination of moderators might produce the most effective outcomes. Further research should systematically explore these interactions to identify conditions for maximizing self-affirmation benefits.

Conclusions

This meta-analysis synthesized the results of individual studies examining the effects of self-affirmation interventions on well-being in nonclinical, general populations. The key findings are multifaceted. First, self-affirmation interventions were implemented mainly through value affirmation and attribute affirmation; this finding may contribute to an operational definition of self-affirmation as well as the design of self-affirmation interventions, which may directly affect the effects of self-intervention. Second, the benefits of self-affirmation on well-being can be grouped into four dimensions, namely, self-perception, general well-being, social well-being, and psychological barriers to well-being. This multidimensional view of well-being enriches the understanding of well-being by viewing it not only as the alleviation of psychological distress but also as the promotion of positive psychological functioning across cognitive, emotional, and social domains.

Third, self-affirmation significantly contributed to the enhancement of well-being, offering not only immediate psychological relief but also sustained effects over time. Fourth, the effectiveness of self-affirmation varied by the type of participants and the continent where the study was conducted; more research is needed before conclusions can be drawn.

Fifth, the findings suggest the need for a theoretical reconceptualization of self-affirmation beyond its traditional framing as a situational coping mechanism against psychological threats. The dominance of implementing self-affirmation in neutral contexts suggests that self-affirmation may serve as a general psychological resource that enhances well-being in daily environments rather than merely protecting against specific threats such as identity threats or health-risk messages. This demonstrates that self-affirmation is not merely a deficit-focused strategy but a resource-building mechanism that promotes well-being across contexts, even in the absence of explicit threats.

Sixth, the study identified significant methodological variances in the literature, such as the dominance of value affirmation over attribute affirmation and an overreliance on immediate outcome measurements. These findings can inspire further research and practice to effectively integrate self-affirmation strategies into well-being programs to foster individual and social well-being.

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