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Analyzing Emerging Adulthood Narratives and the Role of Anxiety in Developmental
Functioning

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Psychology
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Psychology

by
Daryl Ponce Parungao
December 2022

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Keywords: Emerging Adult Themes, Anxiety, Developmental Functioning

ABSTRACT

Analyzing Emerging Adulthood Narratives and the Role of Anxiety in Developmental

Functioning

by

Daryl Parungao

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period characterized by the themes of identity exploration, instability, feeling in-between, being self-focused, and exploring possibilities (Arnett, 2006). Emerging adults are at higher risk for anxiety as they navigate novel developmental experiences and responsibilities (Kranszler et al., 2019). This study explores whether these themes map on to the experiences of modern-day emerging adults, and whether developmental functioning corresponds to anxiety. College students completed standard questionnaires and provided free-text responses about adjusting to adulthood. Identity exploration and instability were perceived as the most positive and negative aspects of aging, respectively, though response-type varied by participant demographics. Several responses were not captured by these themes. Participants' ability to engage in self-care and their living situation were negatively associated with current anxiety. These findings provide important directions for expanding theoretical models and measurement of emerging adulthood.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a unique developmental period that has risen out of a need to recontextualize the prototypical idea of “reaching adulthood” formed in decades past. A stage between the times of adolescence and young adulthood has recently been recognized, wherein individuals are unbound by the restrictions of adolescence but have yet to find stability through completing traditional markers of adulthood—a time coined as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period is shaped by unique experiences in domains of education, work, and home life, amongst others. Many emerging adults may pursue higher education, with the percentage of individuals pursuing a college education rising over time, increasing from 25% in 1978 to 40% in 2018. This increase is due in part by the rising presence of women in higher education, whose college enrollment rates have increased from 24% to 44% between 1978 to 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Many students also find themselves balancing their time and energy by maintaining employment while attending school. In 2018, 43% of full-time undergraduate students were employed either part-time or full-time, a value which has remained relatively stable in the past twenty years (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Beyond the realm of education, there have been marked changes in the ways emerging adults conduct their personal lives. Changing residences can occur more frequently in emerging adulthood in comparison to other life stages (Arnett, 2006). The purpose of moving differs among individuals but may first take place when college students transition to residence halls from their childhood homes. This is often a period in life that brings upon newfound independence and autonomy. Attitudes regarding love and family have also changed, with the median ages of first marriage steadily increasing in the United States over the past decade (The

United States Census Bureau, n.d.). This can be explained in part by shifts from traditional attitudes for women, many of whom have been pursuing higher education and advanced degrees at higher rates than men over the past several decades (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This coincides with data that show a steady increase in median age of first childbirth over time (Centers for Disease Control, 2019). Such detachments from commitment, whether they take the form of romantic relationships or places of residence, represent the self-focused and experience-seeking attitudes that permeate across many emerging adulthood narratives (Arnett, 2016).

Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood

The first theory of emerging adulthood was proposed by Arnett (2000), who defines the emerging adult as an idealist who possesses an increased drive toward exercising personal freedom and discovery. Loosely spanning the range of 18-29 years old, emerging adults are seen as generally optimistic about their future, while prioritizing enjoyment and self-fulfillment in the present (Arnett, 2016). Arnett's theory centers on five distinguishing features that commonly define the lives of emerging adults in the United States (Arnett, 2006). The features of identity exploration, instability, feeling in-between, being self-focused, and exploring possibilities are characteristics distinctly present in this developmental period, as they are more likely to be found in the emerging adult population than older age groups (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). For most individuals, identity exploration begins in adolescence but rampantly continues into the emerging adulthood phase. While identity formation is a process that continues across the lifespan, emerging adulthood is period marked by novel experiences that were not previously present in adolescence, particularly in terms of romantic relationships (Morgan, 2013) and career/education decisions. Participating in these experiences promotes the development of a sense of self that

may be independent from childhood conceptions. This process often involves questioning and evaluating one's values and interests in accordance with current experiences. Individuals who perceive themselves as unsuccessfully engaging in identity development are typically associated with decreased psychosocial well-being (Baggio et al., 2017).

Emerging adulthood is also seen as a period of instability. The vast opportunities that present themselves to emerging adults lends itself to identity exploration, but also comes with the consequences of increased uncertainty. This uncertainty manifests in numerous ways, though is most often demonstrated in the literature as frequent changes in living situations and financial instability (Arnett, 2000). Additionally, emerging adults often report feeling in-between childhood and adulthood—what they gain in newfound freedom also comes with increased uncertainty and emotional challenges, as they are often away from typical systems of social support that may have previously buffered the expression of negative emotions (Arnett, 2016).

Arnett also describes emerging adults as highly individualistic and self-focused. The concepts of autonomy and expression permeates throughout many avenues of an emerging adult's work and personal life. The emerging adult, unbound by the heavy responsibilities of 'complete' adulthood, can spend more time engaging in activities and experiences on their own volition free of relative commitment. Lastly, emerging adulthood is seen as a time spent on exploring possibilities (Arnett, 2000). Here, individuals can exercise their personal agency and engage in various experiences that they may not have had the chance to do previously. At this time, individuals can actively make choices (such as choosing a career field) that can impact their futures in significant ways. In that regard, this domain is characterized as the 'age of possibilities', which emphasizes the optimism within emerging adults who believe that the outcome of their lives will be generally positive and fulfilling.

With growth in the emerging adulthood literature, there are measurement efforts to assess Arnett's conceptual framework of emerging adulthood. One measure used to evaluate an individual's applicability to these five themes is the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood-8 (IDEA-8; Baggio et al., 2017). This scale has been primarily used to examine the applicability of these themes to populations outside of the United States, which will be discussed in greater depth in the 'Diversity in Emerging Adulthood' section. However, this measure has also been used to explore the degree to which these themes are experienced by 'at-risk' teens, who may encounter more difficulties with adequately transitioning to adulthood (Lish et al., 2012). This information could be used to create resources and programs which can aid parents, career advisors, and educators in connecting with emerging adults who may be struggling to navigate this transitional period (Reifman et al., 2017). Targeted interventions can be developed based on which themes are most salient to the individual, with the desired outcome of reducing risky behaviors and promoting healthy self-discovery. The success of this measure is predicated upon the ability of Arnett's (2000) five dimensions to withstand the tests of time and accurately describe the lives of emerging adults in the modern age. In addition, understanding the ways in which one's life experience differs based upon individual factors is necessary for these measures to have clinical utility, a concept which has not been explored in previous literature.

Diversity in Emerging Adulthood

Since the very idea of emerging adulthood has formed out of changes in societal norms (Arnett, 2000), the theory and its features must be constantly examined through the sociocultural context in which emerging adults develop. Indeed, a common critique of emerging adulthood theory states that current conceptualizations are centered on white, Western, middle to upper-middle class individuals (Hendry & Kloep, 2010) and do not fully encapsulate the large degree

of heterogeneity within those that fit in this category. Counterpoints to such critiques state that despite the differences in lived experiences and demographic heterogeneity of the emerging adulthood population, there is still enough commonality within these individuals to draw meaningful conclusions (Arnett, 2014). There is some evidence leading to the conclusion that the five dimensions of emerging adulthood are not consistent among racial groups (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). Research suggests that, for individuals with minority status, navigating their race and ethnic identity is a crucial part in making career and education decisions, thus drawing crucial inferences regarding the theme of exploring possibilities and identity exploration and how they may be experienced differently between those who are underrepresented in their career field (Chemers et al., 2011). Emerging adulthood as a period of being self-focused has also been critically evaluated with racial and ethnic identity in mind, with critiques mainly surrounding the binary conceptualization of independence and interdependence (Fuligni, 2007; Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell, 2007). These studies call for a greater differentiation between functional independence and independence as it relates to self-motivated behaviors and attitudes, and suggests that individuals who retain close family ties in emerging adulthood may be erroneously perceived as ‘failing’ to become independent despite being functionally independent, which must be addressed in future research.

The unique ways in which instability may be experienced for ethnic and racial minorities compared to white emerging adults remains scarce in the literature, though studies suggest that they experience residency and job changes at similar rates (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). However, there remains theoretical support that racial and ethnic minorities experience greater difficulty navigating the transition to adulthood due to experiences of prejudice and discrimination, which is compounded by the presence of systemic barriers that make it difficult for one to achieve their

goals. While studies have indicated the need to explore the experiences of emerging adults with racial or ethnic minority status, research on this topic remains scarce.

In terms of geographic differences, research indicates relative stability of the five themes described by Arnett in Swiss (Baggio et al., 2017), Japanese and European populations (Arnett et al., 2014). However, no studies thus far have examined small-scale, regional communities that exist within these large populations. Socioeconomic status (SES) and gender may also shape the experience of emerging adulthood. SES is seen as significant predictor of positive psychosocial development (O'Connor et al., 2011; Zukerman et al., 2011) as financial stability can grant an individual with adequate resources and opportunities to shift priorities away from obtaining basic needs, allowing them to better engage in valuable identity-forming experiences and work towards personal and professional stability (LeBlanc et al., 2020). This is supported by data which suggests that individuals with low SES tend to pursue postsecondary education and obtain stable employment at later ages compared to individuals with high SES (Zukerman et al., 2011), indicating that resource insufficiency due to low SES can lengthen the moratorium period of emerging adulthood. Despite this, research suggests that the five defining features of emerging adulthood remain constant regardless of SES (Arnett, 2016).

Regarding gender, there is some evidence to indicate that women and men differ to the extent in which they affiliate with these dimensions (Zorotovich & Johnson, 2019). College-aged women who reported themselves as having close interpersonal relationships were more likely to perceive their lives as full of possibilities, being self-focused, and feeling in-between and were less likely to perceive their lives as instable. These findings remained consistent for same-aged men, though an increased association with identity exploration was found (Schnyders et al., 2018). Research regarding gender and these dimensions remains sparse, though there is related

support for the notion that men and women undergo different pathways to intimacy and relationship building, suggesting that their engagement with identity exploration and exploring possibilities may be markedly different (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006).

These limited findings indicate a need to further explore the ways in which the experience of emerging adulthood may differ among factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Understanding these potential differences is important for both applied research and measurement purposes. For a measure such as the IDEA-8 to maintain internal reliability (Baggio et al., 2017), these five dimensions must adequately represent the life experiences of a typical emerging adult. No prior studies have sought to question whether these themes have withstood the changes of time and cultural shifts. As one example, emerging adults living in the COVID-19 pandemic experienced a number of stressors (e.g., household disruptions, financial stress; Hotez et al., 2021) that were unique to that circumstance and also may have compounded the instability of emerging adulthood, leading to greater anxiety and depressive symptoms in emerging adults (Kujawa et al., 2020). Therefore, along with considering issues of diversity, continued debate regarding the general applicability of Arnett's five dimensions is needed to explore the ways in which the lives of emerging adults in modern times may be different from those classified as emerging adults over two decades ago.

Developmental Functioning in Emerging Adulthood

The five dimensions of emerging adulthood can be viewed as intangible markers, which means that assessing whether an individual undergoes successful navigation through these dimensions is inherently subjective in nature. For example, the extent to which an individual feels that they are no longer 'in-between' childhood and adulthood is largely dependent on their self-perception. Due to the subjectivity of these intangible markers, 'successfully' reaching

adulthood is a feat many rarely feel they achieve (Halls & Walls, 2016) and is thus difficult to quantify. In contrast to these psychologically-oriented dimensions, the degree to which an individual transitions into adulthood can also be evaluated using concrete markers, such as the ability to take care of oneself independently or maintain close relationships.

One example of a measure that examines concrete markers of adulthood is the Launching Emerging Adults Functioning Scale (LEAF; Albano et al., [unpublished]), which was introduced to evaluate functioning in emerging adulthood based on milestones established by Arnett (2000). The LEAF examines an emerging adult's level of functioning by measuring progress in ten unique aspects of development: 1) the ability to engage in self-care (including hygiene and wellness), 2) managing and understanding finances, 3) establishing and maintaining peer and romantic relationships, 4) performance and engagement in work and school, 5) performing tasks independently 6) engagement in recreational activities, 7) engagement in altruistic behavior, 8) religious and political affiliation, 9) one's living situation, and 10) the ability to demonstrate emotional independence. Domains such as peer and romantic relationships, altruistic behavior, and recreational activities measure one's ability to adaptively interact with their social environment. Many other domains encapsulate the concrete skills that are necessary for emerging adults to build as they assume more adult responsibilities, including skills in the areas of finances, self-care, living situation, independent tasks, and work and school. Lastly, emotional independence and religious and political affiliation appears to measure traits (ie. maturity, personal responsibility) and behaviors (ie. creating and holding a perspective on religion/politics) that are indicative of personal growth. By examining one's degree of affiliation with these milestones, the LEAF is not only able to identify specific domains where functioning may be

impaired but can also recognize areas of strength, leading to a more comprehensive view regarding individual developmental trajectories in emerging adulthood.

Developmental Functioning and Anxiety in Emerging Adulthood

Anxiety is a common mental health concern during emerging adulthood, with 12-month prevalence rates for college-attending emerging adults estimated to be up to 14.7% (Auerbach et al., 2016). Despite the significant presence of anxiety, mental health utilization remains low for those in this age group, with a lack of time or financial means being the largest barriers to care (Cadigan et al., 2018). Some treatment programs have emerged out of the increased perceived need of mental health services for emerging adults, such as the Launching Emerging Adults Program (LEAP) (Hoffman et al., 2018), an intervention program where anxiety is viewed as a contributing factor to a stalled transition to adulthood. In addition to the influence of individual factors, the program targets the impact of highly controlling and protective parent/child relationships, wherein children are unable to develop the independence necessary to function independently due to over-involved parental support, which leads to continued avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations (Hoffman et al., 2018). These individuals are often unable to engage in the newfound responsibilities of emerging adulthood due to these aforementioned factors, leading to a sense of helplessness or perceived inadequacy. Failure to engage in these tasks due to increased anxiety creates a feedback loop that leads to further avoidance (Kuwabara et al., 2007) and may increase one's dependency on caregivers to remedy problems that may arise (Hoffman et al., 2018). Thus, untreated anxiety and compromised developmental functioning is a clinically relevant concern in emerging adulthood (Wood et al., 2018).

With this in mind, it is important to consider the ways in which insufficient developmental gains may contribute to anxiety in emerging adults. Broadly, the instability

surrounding emerging adulthood may generate and maintain feelings of worry and stress. Anxiety can therefore manifest from the lofty expectations held regarding what it means to ‘become’ an adult, and create further distress about whether one is transitioning to adulthood at a sufficient time or in an appropriate way (Kranzler et al., 2019). For example, difficulties in engaging in self-care, which includes items related to hygiene and maintaining an organized space, has been associated with increased levels of reported anxiety (Deepa, 2015). In this scenario, individuals who are unable to address these crucial needs without direction may find themselves in a compounding cycle of poor health conditions. This additive pressure could lead to decreased motivation and an increase in anxious thoughts and behaviors. Additionally, lack of engagement in social or recreational experiences commonly encountered by emerging adults may contribute to anxiety. This avoidance may make it difficult to form and maintain close interpersonal relationships, thereby limiting their social development and adversely affecting one’s ability to engage in identity formation (LeBlanc et al., 2019). The loneliness often caused by the inability to form high-quality relationships may then cause further anxiety and lead to a cycle of avoidance of recreational activities. Low intimacy and poor relationship quality has been associated with worse internalizing symptom outcomes (Weisskirch, 2018), which suggests that difficulties in the domain of romantic/peer relationships and recreational activities may correspond to anxiety.

In regard to the work/school performance domain, increased academic demands and pressure to succeed may also impact emerging adult anxiety, with studies indicating that anxiety symptoms tend to increase throughout the first year of college (Newcomb et al., 2017). This influence extends to collegiate emerging adults in the workforce to whom managing time is a necessity. Difficulty balancing these various responsibilities and trouble performing work tasks

independently may heighten one's anxiety, with prior research indicating a relationship between workplace performance and anxiety symptoms (Motowidlo et al., 1986).

The emotional independence domain of the LEAF includes items related to accepting responsibility and exhibiting maturity, which are constructs related to self-regulation and have not been explicitly examined in emerging adult literature. However, difficulties in self-regulatory behaviors has an established link with anxiety. As such, individuals who are unable to respond to their environment in acceptable and prosocial ways experience difficulties overcoming anxious symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema & Corte, 2004). Additionally, there is theoretical support that emerging adults who are unable to engage in independent tasks may also face increased anxiety. The inability to perform tasks independently is often attributed with parent/child relationships high in parental over-involvement in which the child is unable to engage in strategies to cope with and manage these stressors alone (Hoffman et al., 2018). However, no studies have explicitly examined the relationship between one's ability to manage their time and make appointments with anxiety in emerging adulthood, which the items on this domain depict.

Notably, there are some domains of emerging adulthood assessed on the LEAF that may be unrelated to anxiety symptoms, such as religious and political affiliation, current living situation, engagement in altruistic behavior, and ability to manage and understand finances. While emerging adults may face financial uncertainty that causes and maintains anxiety symptoms (Archuleta et al., 2013), there is no evidence to suggest that financial literacy or responsibility, which the items on this domain appear to assess, are associated with anxiety. Additionally, while religious service attendance is linked fewer internalizing symptoms (Jansen et al., 2009), no prior studies have examined religious and political affiliation as a combined construct. Similarly, altruistic behavior has exhibited only weak associations with adult anxiety

(Fujiwara, 2007). Lastly, living independently from one's family and 'seeking' independence, which comprise the living situation subscale, has not been explored concerning its association with child anxiety symptoms. While parental over-involvement is a potential consequence of living with one's family during college, numerous factors can also dictate why some emerging adults live at home during these years. This includes the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led most students to participate in remote learning during the time of data collection. Therefore, while living situation may have an indirect impact on anxiety, there are other underlying variables to consider that may play a role.

While the LEAF has been used to address treatment considerations for clinically anxious populations (Albano et al., [unpublished]), no known studies have used this measure to examine the association between emerging adulthood developmental functioning and anxiety symptomology in a college-attending community sample. Since emerging adults are a widely diverse population, students face their own unique stressors associated with the college environment that may affect their ability to transition adequately into adulthood, thus highlighting the importance of understanding the specific needs and treatment considerations for this population.

The Present Study

There is a need to explore the experiences of individuals as they tackle the emerging adulthood stage, with special consideration on the ways their lives may present differently based on personal characteristics, upbringings, and social identities. This study seeks to analyze the narrative experiences of college-attending emerging adults regarding commonly faced stressors, joys, and systems of support in their lives. These narratives will be used to examine the degree to which they demonstrate the five dimensions established by Arnett (2000) 1) identity exploration,

2) instability, 3) feeling in-between, 4) being self-focused, and 5) exploring possibilities). The present study will also explore various developmental domains of emerging adulthood, as assessed on the LEAF, in relation to anxiety in a college-attending population. Based on the available literature, the following hypotheses are offered:

Hypotheses

1. (H1) The themes that occur in an emerging adult's developmental narrative regarding the joys and difficulties of their lives will be consistent with Arnett's five distinguishing features of (1) identity exploration, 2) instability, 3) feeling in-between, 4) being self- focused, and 5) exploring possibilities.
2. (H2) Anxiety will be negatively associated with the following domains as defined by the LEAF: the ability to engage in self-care, establishing and maintaining peer and romantic relationships, performance and engagement in work and school, performing tasks independently, engagement in recreational activities, and emotional independence.
3. (H3) Anxiety will not be significantly related to the following domains as defined by the LEAF: engagement in altruistic behavior, religious and political affiliation, managing and understanding one's finances, and one's living situation.

Chapter 2. Methods

Participants

Participants were 296 college students attending university in the northeastern region of Tennessee. To maintain an emerging adult sample (Arnett, 2000), participants over the age of 29 were excluded in data analysis. After accounting for unfinished surveys and the age exclusion criteria, the final sample size for analysis were 270 participants. Analysis of missing data demonstrated that the information was missing at random and did not significantly differ across the demographic variables of age, race, gender, and current school year. Participants were 18-29 years of age ($M = 20.13$, $SD = 2.42$). A majority of participants were European American (78.1%), with African American (7.4%) biracial or 'other' (7.4%), Hispanic or Latino (3.0%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1.9%), and Asian American (0.7%) individuals represented at smaller rates. This sample largely identified as cisgender female (65.6%), with the rest identifying as cisgender male (31.9%), transgender female (.4%) and transgender male (1.1%). One individual preferred to not state their gender identity (.4%). The sample contained mostly freshman (41.9%), with sophomores (21.9%), juniors (17.0%), and seniors (17.4%) following at similar rates. Regarding other sample characteristics, (26.3%) were first-generation college students (63.3%) were currently under paid employment. In terms of community setting, student's self-report indicated that (32.3%) grew up in a rural area, (40.6%) in an urban area, and (7.8%) in a suburban area. Regarding current living accommodations during the semester, (22.2%) of students were living in on-campus housing, (34.4%) students were living in off-campus housing, and (42.2%) students were living with family.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey for psychology course credit through the SONA platform. All study procedures were approved by the university IRB prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and completed several questionnaires. All study procedures took approximately 30 minutes.

Measures

Emerging Adulthood Narratives

Participants were asked the following questions in a free-text format: What have you most enjoyed about becoming an adult? and What is most stressful about becoming an adult? to assess the experience of emerging adulthood. These responses were analyzed using a novel coding scheme which was based upon the framework of Arnett's five themes of emerging adulthood: (1) identity exploration, 2) instability, 3) feeling in-between, 4) being self-focused, and 5) exploring possibilities) . See Emerging Adult Narratives Coding Scheme, Appendix.

A team of two coders independently reviewed participant responses and determined whether these themes were present or absent. More than one theme could be present in a single participant response if it included an abundant amount of information. Alternatively, coders could choose to categorize a response as belonging to neither of these categories or deem the responses as irrelevant when participants responded with incomprehensible answers. The coding team met on a weekly basis to compare codes and, in the event of a discrepancy, come up with a group consensus on the appropriate categorization of each response. As coding progressed, certain "rules" emerged which were not captured in the coding scheme, but nonetheless guided the categorization process. For example, mentions of residency changes or financial responsibilities were always coded as instability to remain consistent with Arnett's (2006)

description of this theme. Additionally, the similar concepts shared by identity exploration and exploring possibilities created a need to differentiate between the two answers. As such, responses which emphasized internal growth ('learning who I am') were coded as identity exploration, whereas responses which emphasized external discovery ('trying new things') were coded as exploring possibilities.

Cohen's Kappa was used to assess adequate reliability between two coders. The final reliabilities for the question of What have you most enjoyed about becoming an adult? are as followed: identity exploration ($K = .78$), instability ($K = .21$), being self-focused ($K = .73$), exploring possibilities ($K = .62$), and other ($K = .78$). The theme of feeling in-between was not found in any responses to this question, and thus no reliability values can be provided. Due to low inter-rater reliability, instability was omitted from analysis. For the question What is most stressful about becoming an adult?, the final reliability values are as followed: identity exploration ($K = .62$), instability ($K = .87$), feeling in-between ($K = .29$), being self-focused ($K = .86$), exploring possibilities ($K = .74$), and other ($K = .84$). Due to low inter-rater reliability, feeling-in between was omitted from analysis.

Emerging Adult Milestones

This study utilizes an early an early iteration of The Launching Emerging Adult Functioning Scale (LEAF; Albano et al., [unpublished]), which was created to measure an individual's level of functioning in developmental milestones typically expected of emerging adults. The LEAF contains 58 items assessing an individual's level of independence in various domains. Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = About half of the time, 4 = Most of time, 5 = All of the time). These items pertain to categories of self-care ($\alpha = .84$), finances ($\alpha = .84$), peer/romantic relationships ($\alpha = .71$), job/school

engagement ($\alpha = .82$), independent tasks ($\alpha = .78$), recreational activities ($\alpha = .78$), altruistic behavior ($\alpha = .74$), religious and political affiliation ($\alpha = .74$), living situation ($\alpha = .33$), and emotional independence ($\alpha = .89$). This measure was developed off Arnett's (2000) original model of emerging adulthood. See Launching Emerging Adult Functioning Scale, Appendix.

The psychometric properties of the LEAF have not been established in extant research, as this is a newly developed measure that is under review by the measure authors. As noted above, acceptable internal consistency was found for all dimensions in the present study except for the living situation subscale. Further examination of the living situation subscale suggests that its low alpha value is likely due to the small number of items that comprise this dimension.

Anxiety

The General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006) is a self-report scale of anxiety symptoms over the past two weeks. The GAD-7 contains 7 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = Not at all, 1 = Several days, 2 = Over half the days, 3 = Nearly every day). All items are summed into a total score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of anxiety. A score of 10 or greater is a commonly used indicator for traits of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Spitzer et al., 2006). In this study, ninety-nine (34.0%) participants scored above this minimum threshold. In the present study, the GAD-7 exhibited high internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$). In addition, this measure has demonstrated strong reliability and validity with the general population (Löwe et al., 2008). See GAD-7, Appendix.

Data Analytic Plan

Hypothesis 1 examined emerging adult narratives in relation to Arnett's five distinguishing features of (1) identity exploration, 2) instability, 3) feeling in-between, 4) being self- focused, and 5) exploring possibilities. This was achieved by examining the

frequency with which these themes were endorsed positively and negatively, as well as evaluating correlations between themes. Chi-square analyses examined how the positive and negative endorsement of these themes varied by demographic variables (race/ethnicity, gender, first generation students, area where one grew up). Consideration was given to themes that often arise that do not clearly fit into these categories (e.g., coded as “Other”).

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were tested with a linear regression. Prior to hypothesis-testing, demographic variables of race/ethnicity, gender, academic year, first-generation status, living situation, area where one grew up, and employment status were evaluated as potential covariates using one-way ANOVAs and independent samples-t-tests. Identified covariates were entered in the first step of analysis, and the LEAF’s 10 subscales were entered in the second step of analysis. The total score on the GAD-7 was entered as the dependent variable. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) and found that a minimum sample size of 89 was needed to detect a small effect.

Chapter 3. Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to see if the various subscales on the LEAF met the assumption of collinearity. These analyses indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern. See Table 1. The LEAF subscales and the GAD-7 total score were evaluated for skewness and kurtosis. Elevated kurtosis was identified in the work and school (kurtosis = 1.41, SE = .29) independent tasks (kurtosis = 1.46, SE = .29), and emotional independence (kurtosis = 1.69, SE = .29) subscales and were addressed using the winsorizing (Osborne & Overbay, 2004), which reduced the kurtosis values.

Table 1

Multicollinearity Diagnostics for LEAF Variables

	Tolerance	VIF
Self-Care	.40	2.50
Finances	.63	1.58
Peer/Romantic Relationships	.49	2.06
Job/School Engagement	.31	3.21
Independent Tasks	.36	2.77
Recreational Activities	.51	1.95
Altruistic Behavior	.63	1.60
Religious and Political Affiliation	.66	1.51
Living Situation	.74	1.35
Emotional Independence	.33	3.02

Narratives About Emerging Adulthood

Frequency Analysis of Narrative Themes

Hypothesis 1 involved analyzing narrative responses from students regarding the highs and lows of being an emerging adult. See Table 2. When analyzing the question “What have you enjoyed most about becoming an adult?”, the theme of identity exploration was most endorsed. An example response for the theme of identity exploration includes “I love being able to learn about myself and my own emotions”. Among all responses, 59.9% (n = 172) were coded as identity exploration. Being self-focused was a theme endorsed by 29.3% (n = 84) of respondents, with participants noting “Having a stronger voice for myself rather than being in the background of my parents”. Exploring possibilities was a theme endorsed by 21% (n = 60) of respondents, who reported “(being an adult) allows for more opportunities in your personal life, job, and activities you can pursue in your free time”. Twenty-three-point seven percent (n = 68) of responses contained a code of other, suggesting that these responses contained concepts that were not encapsulated by the five themes explored in this study. Positive endorsements of the other theme include “Getting more respect from society”, “Gaining the ability to vote”, and “(that) I am no longer considered a kid”. Feeling in-between was not endorsed by any participants as a positive aspect of becoming an adult.

Table 2*Frequencies of Emerging Adult Themes*

	Positive Endorsements			Negative Endorsements		
	n	%	Examples	n	%	Example
Identity Exploration	172	59.9%	“I love being able to learn about myself and my own emotions”	13	4.6%	“Pressure to be perfect and keep up with what society deems as successful”
				132	46.8%	“As a kid, you never worry about bills groceries, or simply affording to live on your own. However, as an adult this is a constant worry for me”
Feeling In-Between	0	0%	No participants endorsed this response.			
Being Self-Focused	84	29.3%	“Having a stronger voice for myself rather than being in the background of my parents”.	49	17.4%	“(Now that) I am an adult, I need to be independent and not ask for help so I try doing everything on my own”
Exploring Possibilities	60	21.0%	“(being an adult) allows for more opportunities in your personal life, job, and activities you can pursue in your free time” “The freedom of making small, daily decisions.”,	29	10.3%	“Thinking about not being able to maintain the life I want”
Other	68	23.7%	“Getting more respect from society”, “Gaining the ability to vote”; “(that) I am no longer considered a kid”	123	43.6%	“Focusing on time management”, “(that) the expectations of you become much greater”; “The added pressure of being successful”

When analyzing the question “What is most stressful about becoming an adult?”, the theme of instability was most endorsed (46.8%; n = 132). An example response for theme of

instability included “As a kid, you never worry about bills groceries, or simply affording to live on your own. However, as an adult this is a constant worry for me” as a negative endorsement. 43.6% (N = 123) of responses contained concepts that were not captured by the five themes of this study and were coded as other. These responses ranged from “Focusing on time management”, “(that) the expectations of you become much greater”, and “The added pressure of being successful”. Identity exploration was endorsed in 4.6% (n = 13) of responses. An example response for the theme of identity exploration includes “Pressure to be perfect and keep up with what society deems as successful”. Feeling in-between was endorsed in 2.3% (n = 8) of responses. An example response for the theme of feeling in-between includes “My parents still treating me like a kid, (and) being in a situation that truly does make me feel behind my peers” as a negative endorsement. Being self-focused was endorsed in 17.4% of responses (n = 49), with participants noting “(Now that) I am an adult, I need to be independent and not ask for help so I try doing everything on my own”. Exploring possibilities was endorsed in 10.3% (n = 29) of responses, with responses such as “Thinking about not being able to maintain the life I want” as a negative endorsement.

There were multiple instances in which two or more themes overlapped. For example, the response “I have enjoyed learning from experiences and gaining much needed self-confidence” was coded for positively endorsing both exploring possibilities and identity-exploration for the former and latter statements, respectively. The presence of multiple themes per response may indicate that the themes share many conceptual similarities. For example, the themes of exploring possibilities and identity exploration both center around self-discovery and maturation, which provides an explanation for their common convergence. Similarly, multi-faceted responses such as “The added responsibilities and expectations, whether it is moving out on your own and

paying bills or showing up to work or school when you are expected to be there. The fact that you don't have someone like your parents that are always around kind of keeping an eye on you" were coded as negative endorsements of instability (financial and living instability), being self-focused (away from parental support), and other (time management). This suggests that longer free-text responses were richer in detail and provided a greater look at an emerging adult's joys and hardships, which allowed the response to 'fit' multiple themes.

Interrelations of Narrative Themes

There were several significant correlations between the positive and negative endorsements of narrative themes. See Table 3 for positive endorsements and Table 4 for negative endorsements.

Table 3

Correlations of Emerging Adult Coding Themes, Positive Endorsement

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Identity Exploration	1					
2. Feeling In-Between	x	x	x			
3. Being Self-Focused	-.16*	-.05	x	1		
4. Exploring Possibilities	-.24*	.06	x	.01	1	
5. Other	-.33*	-.05	x	-.27*	.02	1

Note. *p < .05.

Table 4*Correlations of Emerging Adult Coding Themes, Negative Endorsement*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Identity Exploration	1					
7. Instability	-.11	1				
8. Feeling In-Between	-.04	.16*	1			
9. Exploring Possibilities	-.20*	-.15*	.01	-.06	1	
10. Other	-.09	-.35*	-.06	-.22*	-.25*	1

Note. * $p < .05$.

For the positive endorsements question, those who endorsed identity exploration as a positive aspect of becoming an adult were less likely to endorse themes of being self-focused, exploring possibilities, and other. Similarly, individuals who reported the theme of being self-focused were less likely to endorse the theme of other. A similar pattern persisted when looking at negative endorsements question, where it was found that those who endorsed instability as a negative aspect of emerging adulthood were less likely to endorse themes of feeling in-between, being self-focused, exploring possibilities, and other. Lastly, the themes of being self-focused and exploring possibilities were also negatively correlated with theme of other.

Demographic Differences in Narrative Themes

A series of chi-square tests of independence examined the relationship between several demographic variables (gender, first generation status, race/ethnicity, academic year, and the area in which one grew up [rural/urban/suburban]) and endorsement of Arnett's five themes of emerging adulthood. Upon analysis, several significant associations were found, which were further explored with post-hoc analyses. An adjusted alpha was calculated based upon the

number of squares in each model, which were then compared to the newly calculated p-values that were based upon the adjusted residual values.

A negative endorsement of several themes varied by gender identity, with the adjusted alpha for these tests being $\alpha = .005$. Negative endorsement of exploring possibilities also varied by gender, $X^2(4, 277) = 31.87, p < .001$, with cisgender women reporting the theme of exploring possibilities as a negative aspect of emerging adulthood more than expected ($p = .002$; expected count = 5.3, actual count = 7). Lastly, negative endorsement of identity exploration varied by gender, $X^2(4, 278) = 20.63, p < .001$, with individuals who preferred not to state their gender identity reporting the theme of identity exploration more than expected ($p < .001$; expected count = 0, actual count = 1).

First generation status was also significantly associated with negative endorsement of identity exploration and positive endorsement of being self-focused, with the adjusted alpha for these tests being $\alpha = .013$. The relationship between positive endorsement of being self-focused and first-generation status was significant $X^2(1, 276) = 6.61, p = .010$. Based on the adjusted alpha, it was found that non-first-generation students reported the theme of being self-focused more positively than expected ($p = .002$; expected count = 51.6, actual count = 59). The relationship between negative endorsement of identity exploration and first-generation status was also significant, $X^2(1, 276) = 8.635, p = .003$. Based on the adjusted alpha, it was found that non-first-generation students reported the theme of identity exploration as a negative aspect of emerging adulthood more than expected. ($p = .007$; expected count = 3.6, actual count = 5).

Lastly, the relationship between positive endorsement of being self-focused and the area in which one grew up was significant, $X^2(2, 277) = 13.34, p = .001$. Based upon the adjusted alpha of $\alpha = .008$, it was found that individuals from rural areas reported the theme of being self-

focused as a positive aspect of emerging adulthood more than expected ($p = .002$; expected count = 12.5, actual count = 19).

Emerging Adult Anxiety and Developmental Functioning

A linear regression analysis examined how emerging adults' developmental functioning, as measured by the 10 subscales of the LEAF, corresponded to emerging adult anxiety. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVAs were conducted to evaluate possible covariates for this model (e.g., participant race, gender, academic year, first-generation status, living situation, area where one grew up, and employment status). Emerging adult anxiety varied by gender identity ($B = -.13$, 95% C.I. (-2.26, -.49), $p = .025$), and thus was entered in the first step of the model. The LEAF subscales were entered in the second step of the model, with anxiety entered as the dependent variable. See Table 5 for descriptive statistics and Table 6 for correlations of all model variables.

Table 5*Descriptive Statistics of LEAF Domains*

	M	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-Care	38.46	7.61	10-50	-.60 (.15)	.28 (.29)
Finances	19.87	5.41	5-25	-1.06 (.15)	.27 (.29)
Peer/Romantic Relationships	23.47	4.83	6-30	-.57 (.15)	.06 (.29)
Job/School Engagement	25.25	4.35	11-30	-.96 (.15)	.55 (.29)
Independent Tasks	36.84	5.72	17-45	-.97 (.15)	.30 (.29)
Recreational Activities	15.61	4.98	5-25	.17 (.15)	-.73 (.29)
Altruistic Behavior	12.90	3.50	4-20	-.05 (.15)	.03 (.29)
Religious and Political Affiliation	16.30	3.87	4-20	-1.12 (.15)	.79 (.29)
Living Situation	7.29	2.12	2-10	-.15 (.15)	-.93 (.29)
Emotional Independence	30.13	4.83	16-35	-.97 (.15)	.30 (.29)
GAD-7	7.78	5.78	0-21	.48 (.15)	-.73 (.29)

Table 6*Correlations of LEAF Subscales and Emerging Adult Anxiety*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Anxiety (GAD-7)	1										
2. Self-Care	-.36*	1									
3. Finances	-.10	-.35*	1								
4. Peer/romantic Relationships	-.12	.58*	-.38*	1							
5. Job/School Engagement	-.19*	.63*	-.42*	.55*	1						
6. Independent Tasks	-.04	.59*	-.57*	.52*	.67*	1					
7. Recreational Activities	-.22*	.56*	-.20*	.56*	.45*	.41*	1				
8. Altruistic Behavior	-.03	.35*	.24*	.41*	.42*	.27*	.47*	1			
9. Religious and Political Affiliation	.06	-.40*	.18*	-.41*	-.39*	-.34*	-.34*	-.35*	1		
10. Living Situation	.17*	.25*	-.41*	.34*	.31*	.41*	.16*	.32*	-.29*	1	
11. Emotional Independence	-.15*	.61*	-.38*	.59*	.76*	.64*	.48*	.39*	-.45*	.33*	1

Note. * $p < .05$.

The first step of the model was significant, $F(1, 240) = 4.08$, $p = .045$ with an adjusted R^2 of .013, indicating that gender identity accounted for 1.3% of the variation in emerging adult anxiety. The second step of the model was also significant, $F(11, 230) = 8.80$, $p < .001$ with an adjusted R^2 of .263, indicating that the variables in this step accounted for 26.3% of variance in emerging adult anxiety. Gender identity remained significant ($B = -.13$, $p = .045$). Self-care was negatively associated with emerging adult anxiety ($B = -.17$, $p < .001$). Additionally, living

situation was positively associated with emerging adult anxiety ($B = .16, p = .017$) The other domains of finances, relationships and sex, independent tasks, recreation, altruism, emotional independence, work and school engagement, and religious/political views were not related to emerging adult anxiety ($ps < .05$). See Table 7 for a summary of model statistics.

Table 7

Regression Results for LEAF Subscales and Emerging Adult Anxiety

Effect	B	SE	F	R ²
Step 1			4.07*	.013
Gender	-.13*	.51		
Step 2			8.81*	.263
Gender	-.17*	.45		
Self-Care	-.54*	.06		
Finances	.14	.07		
Peer/Romantic Relationships	.09	.09		
Job/School Engagement	-.16	.13		
Independent Tasks	.18	.09		
Recreational Activities	-.13	.09		
Altruistic Behavior	.08	.11		
Religious and Political Affiliation	-.17	.10		
Living Situation	.16*	.17		
Emotional Independence	.05	.11		

Note. * $p < .05$.

Chapter 4. Discussion

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period whose theoretical foundations have been informed by societal shifts over decades (Arnett, 2000). One theory, which postulate five themes that often prevail the lives of emerging adults, have exhibited mixed findings. While some studies suggest that these themes apply despite the heterogeneity of this population (Baggio et al., 2017), it is also clear that ways in which these themes manifest (including which ones are most salient) differs between individuals. Therefore, there is a need to understand how one's experiences and personal identification with these themes may change based on individual factors, which cannot be captured by current quantitative measures. Additionally, one result of the challenges and responsibilities associated with emerging adulthood includes increased anxiety symptoms, which is the focus of intervention programs such as the Launching Emerging Adults Program (LEAP; Hoffman et al., 2018). However, the measure used in the LEAP to assess functioning, the LEAF (Albano et al., [unpublished]) has not been empirically evaluated in its relation to measures of anxiety. This demonstrated a need to assess the relationship between an emerging adult's anxiety symptoms and their self-reported degree of independence on various developmental domains.

Emerging Adult Narratives

One aspect of the present study involved analyzing participant responses regarding the positive and negative experiences of being an adult within the theoretical framework of Arnett's (2000) five themes of emerging adulthood. Prior to analysis, it was broadly hypothesized that these responses will be largely consistent with the five themes of 1) identity exploration, 2) instability, 3) feeling in-between, 4) being self-focused, and 5) exploring possibilities.

The first question, “What have you enjoyed most about becoming an adult?”, reflects the positive experiences of emerging adulthood. The theme of identity exploration was most often endorsed among participants. These responses commonly represent experiences of self-discovery, reflected in answers such as: “Building myself as a person”, “Learning new things about myself” and “(...) feeling a sense of independence in the fact that I can explore who I truly am.” The large percentage to which identity exploration was endorsed for this question could be explained by the sample, which was made up of college students. For many students, college is typically associated with novel social and academic experiences that either serve to shape or maintain their views of self. Findings that engagement in identity exploration is a beneficial process associated with increased psychosocial well-being (Baggio et al., 2017) also provide support for the large frequency of positive endorsements coded as identity exploration.

Positive endorsements of being self-focused, exploring possibilities, and other occurred at similar frequencies. The act of being self-focused reflects one’s increased autonomy during emerging adulthood. Individuals engaged in this theme often noted an increased sense of freedom and independence because of their departure from family or familiar circumstances. One response which adequately reflects this theme is, “I have enjoyed the freedom that comes with (adulthood). I still ask my mom for permission to go out with friends out of respect since I live with her, but I like knowing that I don't exactly have to. I also like knowing that I can move out whenever I want.” Exploring possibilities is a theme that reflects a similar concept of autonomy but differentiates itself from being self-focused by centering on choices that are performed to deliberately alter the course of one’s life. These are reflected in responses such as: “(Adulthood) also allows more opportunities in your personal life, job, and activities you can pursue in your free time” and “I have enjoyed being able to get a different job and work towards

the career that I want.” The findings that engaging in identity exploration, being self-focused, and exploring various life pathways are reflected as positive aspects of becoming an adult is consistent with previous literature that portrays these themes in the same way (Arnett, 2006). It seems as if these three themes share similar concepts of autonomy and discovery (both of oneself and their environment), which may provide support for their heavy appearance in participant responses.

The notable presence of responses coded as other suggests that Arnett’s five themes may not adequately encapsulate the lived experiences of emerging adults in this sample. Noticeably, several responses (ie. “Getting more respect from society” and “Freedom and respect from others”) indicate that aging into adulthood alters the way others view and react to them, which is often considered a positive experience. This change in identity status and its relational impacts are similar, though not entirely related, to the theme of feeling in-between. Rather, these responses seem to be indicative of another theme which involves a ‘Change in Outsider Perception’. most notably from other adults who treat them with increased respect. Numerous references to increased ‘responsibility’ and time management challenges were also coded as other. The difficulties of time management are not typically reflected in the literature as an aspect of instability, but these findings may suggest that the way instability is discussed should include mention of the many roles and responsibilities that emerging adults assume as a result of engaging in self-focused, identity-forming processes. Other responses pertaining to “Getting married and starting my own family”, while infrequent ($n = 2$), serve well to bring attention to the heterogeneity of the emerging adult population. The theme of instability was scarcely endorsed as a positive aspect of emerging adulthood, appearing in only two responses. Both

responses made mention of one's living situation, which is a mark of instability often cited by the literature (Arnett, 2000).

The second question, "What is most stressful about becoming an adult?", reflects the negative experiences of emerging adulthood. The theme of instability was most often endorsed among participants. These responses commonly represent experiences of uncertainty, most often through financial instability. Answers include: "Working to make enough money to pay bills. Learning how to save money.", "I have to deal with a lot more things (taxes, bills, etc).", and "Paying the bills." Financial instability has been described as a salient stressor in prior emerging literature (Arnett, 2000). This is corroborated with findings which indicate that finances are the most pressing stressor for adults in the United States (American Psychological Association, 2015). These results become increasingly important under the context of the college student population, as associations have been found between increased financial stress and poor educational outcomes, including drop-out rates (Britt, 2017) and academic performance (Serido et al., 2014).

Responses coded as other captured the second largest number of negative endorsements. While not a part of data analysis, it was observed that many of the responses coded as other included mention of increased responsibilities in emerging adulthood. One such answer is "The responsibilities of work, school and personal life (having to keep up with everything at once)." These responses, along with responses mentioning increased pressure and expectations, suggest that emerging adults face tremendous amounts of external stressors from various avenues of their life. These responses are consistent with the novel challenges and experiences often confronted during emerging adulthood, such as the formation of serious romantic commitments (Morgan, 2013) and obtaining employment after completing their education (Murphy et al., 2011). These

frequent transitions create uncertainty and may explain the frequent presence of these participant responses.

Being self-focused (17.4%) and exploring possibilities (10.3%) were endorsed at similar rates for the question regarding the negative aspects of adulthood. Participants who described being self-focused as a negative part of their lives appear to view their newfound freedom in decision-making to be worrisome, indicated in responses like “Not being able to depend on my parents as much as I used to” and “It is so stressful making big life decisions on my own. I just want to succeed and I am the only one to blame if I make the wrong decision.” Negative endorsements of exploring possibilities played out in a similar way, with answers including “I have no idea what I am doing. I feel lost, and I don't have a clear goal for my future” and “Planning for the future and preparing for future chapters in my life”. Therefore, being self-focused and exploring possibilities appear to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, emerging adults can make decisions that are in line with their wants and goals relatively free of commitment. In addition, at this point in their lives more than any point prior, college-attending adults also obtain access to resources that allow them to expand their potential (Murphy et al., 2010). On the other hand, lack of access to typical systems of guidance (e.g. caregivers) have also been exhibited as a stressor for college students (Renk & Smith, 2007; Aquilino, 2006) which may account for a portion of the negative responses observed in the data. Paradoxically, increased access to opportunities can also act as a stressor by complicating the decision-making process for important life events.

Identity exploration was rarely endorsed as a negative aspect of emerging adulthood. The infrequent negative endorsement of identity exploration is likely because this theme was often viewed positively, as noted earlier. This is in line with prior literature which shows that

engagement in identity explorations is associated with better psychosocial outcomes in emerging adulthood (Baggio et al., 2017).

Endorsements by Participant Demographics

Further analysis was conducted to explore whether participants endorsed the themes of 1) identity exploration, 2) instability, 3) being self-focused, and 4) exploring possibilities differently depending on various individual differences: (gender identity, first generation status, race/ethnicity, academic year, and community setting [rural/urban/suburban]). Post-hoc analysis of significant results showed that participants varied in their experiences of emerging adulthood by the factors of race/ethnicity, gender identity, first-generation status, and the area in which one grew up.

Regarding race and ethnicity, results found that biracial individuals reported instability as a positive aspect of emerging adulthood more than expected. A similar conclusion can be drawn from exploring gender identity. One result indicates that cisgender women ($n = 7$) reported exploring possibilities as a negative aspect of emerging adulthood more than expected. Responses from women include mention of “attending college and branching out to meet new people in a different environment” and “lots of stress about my future and making decisions”. Thus, the feature of emerging adulthood as being the optimistic ‘age of possibilities’ (Arnett, 2000) does not seem to reflect the experiences of some women. Rather, these results suggests that some women experience distress when choosing between life paths that have recently become available to them. Indeed, increased rates of higher education pursuits for women (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) lend support for this. As more women continue to prioritize education during the emerging adulthood, some will also choose to enter marriage or have children at later ages (CDC, 2019). These emerging shifts in societal norms, while

ultimately allowing for more agency and autonomy, can also be a source of stress as women as they begin to explore avenues that were not as acceptable or as easily accessible in the past.

However, much research regarding explicit gender differences in the endorsement of emerging adulthood themes remains inconclusive and difficult to compare across studies. Individuals who preferred not to state their gender identity also reported the theme of identity exploration more negatively than was expected. However, due to small cell sizes in individuals endorsing this theme (prefer not to answer, $n = 1$), these results cannot be interpreted with adequate certainty. However, low statistical power due to the lack of gender and racial diversity in this sample should not strip the significant post-hoc results of complete merit. The notion that the experiences of emerging adults differ based on various aspects of identity, such as gender, should be explored in greater depth. While studies have found that endorsements of these themes vary by participant gender (Zorotovich & Johnson, 2019; Shchnyders et al., 2018), this area of research remains scarce. This conclusion holds true regarding transgender emerging adults and the way their life experiences map onto these domains.

Individuals who were not first-generation college students positively reported being self-focused more frequently than expected. Parents who have previously attended college are able to provide especially useful and impactful advice to their children regarding the college transition and the expectations associated with it (Palbusa, 2017), which may lead these students to view the emerging adulthood years as a time to focus and develop oneself. On the other hand, first-generation students may be left without the same types of support in regard to the college transition. Additionally, some first-generation students are a part of interdependent family systems where entering college does not separating the emerging adult from taking care of family needs, such as providing financial support and physical care (Covarrubias et al., 2018). It

was also found that non-first-generation students also negatively reported the theme of identity exploration more frequently than expected. However, due to small cell sizes in individuals endorsing the theme of identity exploration (non-first-generation, $n = 5$), these results cannot be interpreted with adequate certainty.

Lastly, it was found that individuals from rural areas reported being self-focused as a positive aspect of life at greater rates than expected ($n = 19$). This may be due to the strong family commitments often associated with rural culture (Hand & Payne, 2008), where rural emerging adults may perceive the ability to focus on their own priorities and goals, rather than that of their family members, as the most salient benefit of growing older. In other words, departure from their family systems allow these individuals to appreciate their newfound autonomy.

Emerging Adult Developmental Functioning and Anxiety

The present study also examines domains of emerging adult development in relation to anxiety. It was hypothesized that anxiety would be negatively associated with the following developmental domains as defined by the LEAF: the ability to engage in self-care, establishing and maintaining peer/romantic relationships, performance and engagement in work and school, performing tasks independently, engagement in recreational activities, and emotional independence (H2). There was partial support for this hypothesis, in that the ability to engage in self-care was negatively associated with emerging adult anxiety. This subscale consisted of questions pertaining to hygiene, cleanliness, food consumption, and health. Therefore, individuals who rate themselves as high on the self-care subscale rate themselves as able to take adequate care of one's needs in these areas without help. This is consistent with prior studies which found that increased levels of anxiety were significantly related with difficulty in

performing hygienic practices (Deepa, 2015).

Contrary to hypotheses (H2), peer/romantic relationships, job/school engagement, independent tasks, recreational activities, and emotional independence were not significantly related to emerging adult anxiety. This was unexpected in light of extant research. Prior research suggests that anxiety was associated with poor interpersonal functioning (LeBlanc et al., 2019; Weisskirch, 2018) and school-related performance (Newcomb et al., 2017) in college-aged participants, which affect the peer/romantic relationships and job/school engagement domains respectively. Engagement in structured recreational activities have been previously linked with lowered state-trait anxiety in school-aged adolescents (Birturk & Karagun; 2015). While this relationship has not been examined with emerging adults, it can be assumed to act in a similar way, as participating in desired leisure activities is generally perceived as an enjoyable, stress-relieving behavior. Similarly, poor self-regulation (Nolen-Hoeksema & Corte, 2004) in young adults has been linked to increased anxiety symptoms, which lends theoretical support for anxiety's association with the emotional independence domain of the LEAF. While there is no direct empirical support for the association between independent tasks engagement and anxiety, there is theoretical support that being able to manage one's time is associated with decreased anxiety symptoms. It can be assumed that individuals who are able to juggle the multiple responsibilities of emerging adulthood feel less anxious overall, however this was not observed in the study.

Because the LEAF is an unpublished measure currently in revision, there have been no studies looking at associative relationships between anxiety symptoms and these subscales. Therefore, while the domains of peer/romantic relationships, job/school engagement, and emotional independence were believed to be significantly linked to anxiety symptoms based on

prior literature, it is possible that the items comprising these subscales on the LEAF are not capturing the same constructs that were being evaluated in previous studies, despite a similarity in name. For example, the peer/romantic relationships domain includes items pertaining to engaging with authority figures and having a mentor. While these kinds of items are useful for understanding the developmental trajectories of emerging adults, they are dissimilar to the measures which strictly assess one's ability to create and maintain peer and romantic relationships. Additionally, the LEAF was developed to assess functioning with populations who are considered 'at-risk' of launching into adulthood. Ninety-nine (33.4%) participants met the threshold score of 10 on the GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2016) screener for anxiety, which indicates moderate levels of anxiety. This suggests that a large majority of this study's participants (76.6%) did not experience functional impairment due to anxiety symptoms, which may explain the lack of findings.

Lastly, though not part of the original hypotheses, the results found that gender was significantly associated with emerging adult anxiety. Cisgender women in the sample exhibiting more anxiety symptoms than cisgender men. While this was not included in the original hypothesis, these results are consistent with typical anxiety prevalence rates in adults (McLean & Anderson, 2009).

It was also hypothesized that anxiety would not be significantly related to one's functioning in the following domains as defined by the LEAF: engagement in altruistic behavior, religious and political affiliation, managing and understanding one's finances, and one's living situation (H3). Consistent with this hypothesis, the results found that the domains of altruistic behavior, religious and political affiliation, and finances were not related to emerging adult anxiety. This is in line with prior studies which have found limited associations between anxiety

and altruistic behavior (Fujiwara, 2007). While previous associations have been examined between financial stress and anxiety in college students (Archuleta et al., 2013), no studies have looked at financial competence as defined by the LEAF measure, which includes topics of financial literacy and timeliness with bills. Lastly, the items that comprise the religious and political affiliation subscale, which measures one's self-motivated involvement in these domains, has not been examined together in the literature. While religious service attendance has been associated with fewer internalizing symptoms (Jansen et al., 2009), it is possible that the inclusion of items pertaining to political affiliation confounded any relationship that may have been detected with religious affiliation and anxiety.

Unexpectedly, results indicated that the scores on the living situation subscale were associated with increased emerging adult anxiety. This subscale consisted of two questions: 'I seek independence' and 'I live independently from my family'. This scale exhibited poor internal consistency ($\alpha = .328$), suggesting that the items on this subscale are not closely related to one another and do not appear to measure the same construct. Thus, it cannot be determined whether living independently from one's family is truly associated with anxiety symptoms, as the question broadly measuring 'seeking independence' may reflect an entirely different construct altogether. Future studies could alter the living situation subscale to solely consist of the question 'I live independently from my family'.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

A notable strength of this study was its ability to address a gap in emerging adult literature, which was whether Arnett's (2000) conceptual framework of emerging adulthood applied to modern-day emerging adults. To accomplish this, this study utilized a novel coding methodology, that, unlike quantitative measures such as the IDEA-8 (Baggio et al., 2017),

allowed for responses that were contextually rich and detailed. This level of detail becomes incredibly important when the goal is to capture the broad themes of one's currently lived experience. As research continues to evaluate the framework of emerging adulthood and its applicability to modern times, it must also consider the role one's social identities and environment can play in impacting their developmental trajectories. These themes were examined in relation to race, gender, and first-generation student status. While the homogeneity of the sample limited this examination, this coding approach serves as a useful starting point for future research.

Though there was generally support for Arnett's theoretical framework of emerging adulthood, the present study also points to other topics for future research. The frequency to which responses were coded as other also suggest that there are other aspects of emerging adulthood that Arnett's (2000) theory doesn't capture. Thus, it may be useful to consider the themes captured by these other responses (ie. responsibility, respect from others) when looking at measures such as the IDEA-8 (Baggio et al., 2017). Perhaps there is a need to consider adaptations to this measure's items so that it may more accurately reflect the experience of emerging adults today.

Regarding other methodological strengths, the study benefited from a large sample size ($n = 296$) that ensured adequate statistical power. Additionally, this study utilized a heavily researched clinical measure (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2016) which has previously exhibited strong psychometric properties across numerous studies, along with demonstrating valid clinical utility in assessment of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Löwe et al., 2008). The Emerging Adult Coding Scheme exhibited strong inter-rater reliability in many domains. For the question regarding the positive aspects of aging, the themes of identity exploration ($K = .78$), being self-focused ($K =$

.73), and other ($K = .78$) all demonstrated values above the acceptable minimum of .70. For the second question, the themes of instability ($K = .87$), being self-focused ($K = .86$), exploring possibilities ($K = .74$), and other ($K = .84$) met this criteria. However, this study suffers from low reliability values in other domains. Namely, this was demonstrated in the instability ($K = .21, n = 2$) and exploring possibilities ($K = .62, n = 60$) domains for positive endorsements, as well as the identity exploration ($K = .62, n = 13$) and feeling in-between ($K = .29, n = 8$) domains for negative endorsements. Notably, the domains exhibiting low reliability were also endorsed less frequently overall. Perhaps raters did not experience as strong of a learning effect when coding these domains due to their small presence in participant responses. These values may also be reflective of a larger limitation with the coding scheme, in that the descriptions of these five themes were not clearly defined in a way that allowed for easy differentiation. Conceptually, these themes appear to share common values of autonomy and independence. Future iterations of this coding scheme could benefit from bolstering these descriptions so that the themes are more clearly delineated. With this limitation noted, these low Kappa values suggest that the results garnered from these domains should be interpreted with caution.

There were also methodological limitations worth consideration. The cross-sectional nature of this study means that a causal relationship between anxiety and developmental functioning cannot be established. This implies that other factors may contribute to the presence of anxiety symptoms that this study does not measure. This includes the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be discussed further below. The present study also relied on self-report measures for both LEAF domain engagement and anxiety symptomology, which is prone to respondent bias. It is possible that participants have vastly different perspectives on their degree of functioning compared to their caregivers. This can be addressed in future studies by obtaining caregiver data

on LEAF domain engagement in addition to the emerging adult's report. Lastly, this study does not inquire about participant socioeconomic status. Given the importance of financial instability within the framework of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) future studies could benefit from directly assessing income beyond current employment status.

Future researchers may consider alternative measurement strategies to assess the experience of emerging adults. Rather than free-text responses to open-ended questions, researchers may benefit from using a semi-structured interview to gather more specific and contextually-rich responses. It was possible that participants lacked the motivation or incentive to write about their life experiences in great depth, which may provide explanation for why many participant responses did not exceed one sentence. Longer responses were often coded as more than one theme (e.g. identity exploration, exploring possibilities, and feeling self-focused), which implies that the degree to which an individual endorsed a theme as salient was dependent on their motivation to answer the questions provided with depth. Perhaps these modifications to the data collection method can address this discrepancy.

The LEAF measure also posed methodological limitations that can be improved with future research. The living situation subscale demonstrated poor internal reliability in this study ($\alpha = .33$) that is likely a result of the domain consisting of only two items. Adding additional items that demonstrate one's physical independence from caregivers may improve the construction of this subscale. In addition, some items belonging to one domain appear to share similar characteristics to items in other domains. For example, the item "I fill and pick up my own prescriptions" from the independent tasks subscale bears similarities to the item "I take my medicine on my own and as prescribed" from the self-care subscale. The altruism subscale items measure one's compassion towards close family and friends, as well as their participation in

volunteer activities. While these items may point to the same overarching theme, it's also likely that they are measuring two different constructs. Taken together, future studies should emphasize conducting a confirmatory factor analysis to see whether these items load highly on their established domains, as well as evaluating other psychometric properties of this measure.

As noted above, the sample was fairly homogenous with respect to gender and race, with largely cisgender female (65.6%) and European American (78.1%) participants. Additionally, this sample consisted entirely of college students from the Appalachian region of the United States, suggesting that this data is not generalizable to all emerging adults. However, this is not to strip these findings of its utility. Rather, these data can impart important sociocultural information and provide a unique look on the lives of emerging adults belonging to this demographic region in this particular moment in time. Future studies could benefit from continuing down this path and evaluating how these themes present and are perceived by diverse samples, especially with respect to race and gender.

Use of a college-attending sample may also provide explanation for the lack of associative findings with the LEAF measure. The LEAP, the program in which the LEAF measure was developed for, works with individuals who are deemed as 'failure to launch' (Hoffman et al., 2018). This differs significantly from the college-attending participants of this study, who arguably exhibit a higher baseline of functioning compared to the clinical population studied in the LEAP. College students are often navigating multiple responsibilities, including conflicting academic, work, and social demands. Managing this requires a degree of self-sufficiency and suggests that the participants in this study are likely already 'launching' successfully to some respect. With this considered, it should be reiterated that this was largely a community sample, with 33.4% of participants endorsing clinically elevated symptoms of

generalized anxiety. Future research may benefit from examining whether this measure is applicable for research use in the general population.

Lastly, it should be noted that data collection occurred in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but there were no data on participants' COVID-related stress. Indeed, studies indicate that emerging adults are at high risk for developing internalizing symptoms due to COVID-19 related stressors (Kujawa et al., 2020). It is possible that the relation between participants' self-reported anxiety and their developmental functioning may be confounded by an unaccounted variable—pandemic-related stress. One measure which can address this for future research includes the Pandemic Stress Questionnaire (PSQ; Kujawa et al., 2020).

Conclusions

The present study examined the experiences of emerging adults and whether the extent of their developmental functioning corresponded to anxiety symptoms. Results indicate that most emerging adults found identity exploration to be the most prevalent positive aspect of adulthood, whereas instability, most commonly in the form of financial instability, was the most negative aspect of growing into adulthood. Several participant responses included concepts that were not encapsulated by Arnett's (2000) proposed themes, such as increased responsibilities and obtaining respect from society. Further exploration into demographic differences found that emerging adults experience these themes differently based on first-generation student status, rurality, and gender identity. These findings broadly reflect the need to conceptualize the emerging adult population as a diverse group whose life experiences are shaped and influenced by various aspects of their identity.

The present study also indicates that emerging adult developmental domains had unique associations with emerging adult anxiety symptoms. Individuals who perceive themselves as

engaging in high levels of self-care also reported greater anxiety symptoms. Emerging adults' living situation also corresponded to anxiety symptoms, but these results cannot be interpreted with certainty due to low scale reliability. Regardless, these results offer preliminary psychometric data and useful feedback regarding the construction of the LEAF, a measure which has never been studied in published literature.

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APPENDIX: Measures

Launching Emerging Adults Functioning Scale (LEAF)

Rate how independent you are on these tasks.

0 (1)	25 (2)	50 (3)	75 (4)	100 (5)
Not at All (always relies on others)	Sometimes (needs help often)	A lot (needs help half of the time)	Most of the Time (rarely needs help)	All of the Time (never needs help or prompting)

1. Self-Care

- I bathe and groom myself daily without prompting
- I am able to soothe and relax myself when needed
- I take my medication on my own and as prescribed
- I prepare and eat my own meals daily
- I strive to maintain a healthy, balanced diet
- I do my own laundry
- I regularly exercise
- I maintain organization of my belongings and space
- I keep current on health and sex information
- I present myself well to others

2. Finances

- I support myself financially (I earn my own money)
- I manage my own bank account
- I am aware of and plan my spending and saving
- I pay my own bills on time
- I pay my own rent on time

3. Relationships and Sex/Peer and Romantic Relationships

- I make my own friends
- I maintain friendships
- I have romantic relationships
- I have a mentor or someone who can provide guidance (that is not a family member or close friend)
- I deal with authority appropriately
- I engage (relate to) with my parents on an adult level

4. Work and School

- I seek work on my own
- I am able to negotiate with superiors
- I register for class(es) or duties on time

- d. I manage my schedule (daily and long-term plans)
- e. I complete tasks and assignments on time
- f. I seek help when it is necessary

5. Independent Tasks

- a. I buy and care for my own clothes
- b. I take care of my possessions
- c. I fill and pick up my own prescriptions
- d. I can get to and from where I need to go (transportation)
- e. I am punctual and reliable
- f. I get hair-cuts when needed
- g. I travel alone
- h. I assert myself to have my needs met
- i. I am aware of current events (in community and globally)

6. Recreation

- a. I go on trips and vacations (alone or with others)
- b. I go to parties and social gatherings
- c. I have hobbies
- d. I partake in cultural events and festivities
- e. I am involved in clubs and/or sports

7. Altruism

- a. I volunteer for non-profit organizations
- b. I partake in community service
- c. I care for close ones (emotionally and/or physically)
- d. I extend myself to help family and friends

8. Religious/Political Views

- a. I define myself as religious or non-religious
- b. I choose to practice or not practice a religion on my own
- c. I choose to support or not support political parties on my own
- d. I vote in political elections

9. Living Situation

- a. I seek independence
- b. I live independently from family

10. Emotional Independence

- a. I recognize my own action
- b. I own and accept personal responsibility
- c. I self-correct
- d. I can apologize when it is needed
- e. I profit from experience
- f. I can express my thoughts and ideas clearly
- g. I know when I need to ask for help

GAD-7

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

Not at all (0) | Several days (1) | More than half of days (2) | Nearly every day (3)

1. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying
3. Worrying too much about different things
4. Trouble relaxing
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

Emerging Adult Narratives Coding Scheme

Instructions:

We have text-based responses from emerging adults where they have been asked the following questions: "What have you most enjoyed about becoming an adult?" and "What is most stressful about becoming an adult?". The goal is to see if their answers to these two questions map up with the five themes of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett, and if there are any new themes that emerge that Arnett did not include.

Procedure:

Read each participant's response individually and see if they match up well with any of the five themes discussed below (0 = theme is absent 1 = theme is present). If they do not map onto any these themes, consider if they should be included as a new theme (other) or if the response should be discarded altogether (irrelevant).

- Identity exploration
 - Engaging in opportunities that allow an emerging adult to learn what they want out of work, school, and love.
 - (example: learning about themselves, figuring out who they are)
- Instability
 - The emerging adult often remarks their lives as unstable, never really feeling like they have their feet on solid ground. This is particularly applicable to living situation.
 - (example: moving away from home)
- Feeling in-between
 - The emerging adult feels in-between childhood and adulthood. They have more freedoms and responsibilities than before, but they still don't feel like actual adults.
 - (examples: having increased responsibilities)
- Being self-focused
 - Emerging adults do not have traditional adult commitments (marriage, stable job), nor are they constrained by parental rules, which allows them to focus on themselves.
 - (example: making decisions for themselves)
- Exploring possibilities
 - The emerging adult is generally optimistic that they will be able to have the lives they imagine for themselves.
 - (example: being able to build their own path)
- Other
 - This narrative response does not seem to fit with one of these themes, but should be considered as a new theme.
- Irrelevant
 - This narrative response does not make sense or did not actually relate to the question.

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