

RUNNING HEAD: American Identity Crisis

# **Exploring an American Identity Crisis in Emerging Adulthood**

## **Honors Thesis**

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### Abstract

This study investigates the possibility of an American Identity crisis in emerging adults, where young, college-aged people are feeling conflicted and possibly rejecting a common American identity. The period of emerging adulthood in many first-world countries is a time between adolescence and adulthood where young adults are able to explore different roles, identities, and ideas independently from their parents, guardians, and hometown (Arnett, 2000). The goal of this research is to listen to young Americans regarding their conceptions of a common American identity and to explore the degree to which they accept or reject this identity for themselves. This research further explores the theme of emerging adults finding their voices and exploring new viewpoints to vocally question ideas that conflict with personal values, and possibly changing the future of America through active involvement as citizens. An original, online survey was created for students at Salem State University that includes open-response and Likert-style questions regarding their own identity and attitudes regarding a perceived common American identity. Qualitative and quantitative analysis are used to examine the possibility of a generational American identity crisis among emerging adults. The intersections between American identity and other participant identities, such as race, sexual orientation, and gender, are also analyzed and discussed.

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### Exploring an American Identity Crisis in Emerging Adulthood

As a college student living on campus, I am constantly introduced to new ideas and beliefs that expand my views and conceptualization of the world, and my place inside of it. Being exposed to so many different beliefs, especially those that drastically differ from what I have been taught and introduced to in my adolescence, has me questioning the construct of American identity. Every American citizen has had a different experience and beliefs, but is there an overall shared experience or set of beliefs that defines a common national American identity? And if there is, how many American citizens around my age believe they fit into this framework? In my observations, there seems to be an American-identity crisis arising among young American adults. Many young Americans that I encounter see the United States as having certain ideals that they do not identify with. I aim to research what constitutes the modern American identity as understood by young adults (ages 18-29) and the degree to which young adults generally accept or reject the American identity as a part of their own personal identity.

According to Jeffrey Arnett (2013), there is a prolonged transition period between adolescence and adulthood known as emerging adulthood. This period in a person's life approximately starts at age 18 up until age 29 where people between adolescence and young-adulthood are able to have an extended period of time to explore possible life directions in love, work, and world-views before settling into the routine that 'true adulthood' brings (Arnett, 2000). With responsibilities of full time jobs and families to take care of, there is little time for adults to continue to explore their interests and different identities, while the increasingly popular pursuit of a higher education has made the late-teens through the twenties an ideal time to explore new ideas as emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). In many Americans' lives, the period of emerging adulthood is when they go to college and meet new people, are exposed to new ideas,

and have the opportunity to explore different roles and identities. Arnett conceptualizes emerging adulthood as “the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities” (Arnett, 2013, pg. XV), which coincides with the experiences of many college-aged Americans as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Of course, this concept of emerging adulthood is culturally constructed where young people must be allowed a prolonged period of time where they can independently explore different identities (Arnett, 2000). In cultures where teenagers are expected to start and provide for families, this idea of emerging adulthood does not apply.

Of particular interest is Arnett’s exposition of Kenneth Keniston’s theory of youth in 1971 (Arnett, 2000). Keniston’s ideas about a period of prolonged role exploration between adolescence and young adulthood laid some of the groundwork for Arnett’s idea of emerging adulthood. Arnett disclaims that Keniston wrote about a time in history when there were highly visible youth movements protesting and speaking out in the United States regarding events such as the Vietnam War (Arnett, 2000). Keniston specifically describes youth as a time of “tension between self and society”, though Arnett dismisses this as a reflection of the time period more than any enduring characteristics (Arnett, 2000, p. 470).

Interestingly enough, this “tension between self and society” aptly describes the possibility of an American identity crisis in emerging adults today (Arnett, 2000). Much like the era in which Keniston wrote, there is a great political divide between conservative and liberal beliefs as to which values America should embody. Young Americans today speak out about their opinions and what they believe is right, especially if they believe that their country is not upholding the ideals they value. Unlike the emerging adults in the 1960’s and 1970’s who existed before the term ‘emerging adulthood’ had been introduced, today’s emerging adults also

have the power of the internet and social media to share ideas and voice their opinions. The internet and social media platforms allow anyone to publish and participate online to find information, people with the same values, and information for making more informed choices through sharing thoughts, experiences, and information (Mustonen, 2009). Many emerging adults, especially those on college campuses working towards degrees in higher education who are exposed to many different ideas and identities, are finding that they do not fully accept what America stands for as a part of their own identity. They might reject their conceptualization of what the American identity is due to there being a tension between what they personally value and what they see their country valuing as the common American identity, especially with constant media coverage providing information that might influence opinion.

The concept of cognitive dissonance, or having inconsistent/ conflicting beliefs or attitudes that can shape behavior, is an important idea when it comes to identity. As cited in *Cognitive Dissonance Theory After 50 Years of Development*, Leon Festinger found that when a person holds multiple elements of knowledge that are relevant to each other but are inconsistent, then a state of discomfort, or dissonance, is created (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). When a person has these conflicting beliefs about the same general topic, they can either merge the ideas into one, choose one to follow more strongly, or switch between the two depending on their current setting (Kulich, De Lemus, Kosakowska-Berezecka, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2017). Especially when it comes to emerging adults who are being exposed to a plethora of new ideas and beliefs, it can be difficult to not have conflicting beliefs about a certain topic. This is especially true of young Americans who were influenced by their parents' or guardians' beliefs when they were living at home, but now are able to experience all new ideas on their own as a

college student. This might explain why many emerging adults have conflicting beliefs and feelings while they are still exploring new ideas.

According to the current thesis, many young Americans today see the United States as having certain ideals that they do not feel they identify with. They are not going through an identity crisis as a whole as they are simply exploring different roles. It is possible that they are instead experiencing an American-identity crisis, where they do not know what their country stands for, or disagree with a conceptualization of what the American identity is and largely reject it as their own. Even though I use the term ‘crisis’, this does not mean this phenomenon is a bad thing – it is actually an opportunity for exploration. However, people tend to view identity as something that is to be unchanged by physical development and external forces (Burgett & Hendler, 2014). But if people do not learn and grow from the things they experience and/or observe going on in the world around them, then there is little room for growth, empathy, and seeing the world from the perspectives of others. It is an essential part of personal growth to question beliefs and think independently to come up with personal opinions that are not just handed down from generation to generation as the world and the people in it change from generation to generation. Emerging adults experiencing an American identity crisis denotes young Americans actively questioning the principles their country stands for, and speaking out when their country does not embody the values that are important to them.

Researching an American identity crisis in emerging adults is important in understanding how the youngest adult generation will engage as active citizens. If many young Americans generally reject what they believe their country stands for, then it is to be expected that there will be concerted attempts at changing the country’s core mission(s) in the near future. This is because they are the future leaders of America and will implement policies and rules based on

their views of the nation and the change they hope to see reflected in the work they do. If it is discovered that many emerging adults reject the common American identity as a part of their personal identity, this common American identity will most likely change as older citizens are replaced by younger citizens in the workforce. On the other hand, if younger Americans cease advocating for their values to be represented, then the country could become more divided and people might instead start leaving the country.

When researching the topic of identity, many ethnic and gender-related studies are readily available in the literature, though little exists concerning the American identity itself. American identity is often viewed through the lenses of other identities, such as gender or race. Previous research on gender and American national identity revealed that men and masculinity are considered more American than women and femininity, just as white Americans are more closely associated with American identity than Americans of minority races (Berkel, Molina, & Mukherjee, 2017). Studies measuring differences in personal acceptance of an American identity among people with differing demographic identities generally show that dominant groups of Americans feel a much greater connection and association with American identity than do minority groups (Berkel et al., 2017). Previous research available about American identity itself cites the perceived “dissonance between American ideals and the reality of politics” that younger Americans feel when considering the common American identity, supporting the current thesis (Jahromi, 2011, pg. 85). The previous research regarding American identity was completed roughly ten years ago and utilized a small sample of American participants in high school, ages 17-18.

The current thesis aims to study how college-aged emerging adults in the United States perceive a common American identity in the present-day political and social climate of the



country where evidence of a possible American identity crisis is being observed. The political climate of this period was characterized by crisis and division and raises questions about how it affected the outlooks of emerging adults. It is important to research emerging adults in this study as they are more likely than teenagers and adolescents to have a sense of independence and freedom to explore new, different ideas and values to form their own thoughts and opinions. This study will also explore the intersections between American identity and other personal identities in participants, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

An original survey was created to examine the correlations between the participants' personal identity, what they see to be the common American identity, and the degree to which they accept or reject this conceptualization of American identity as a part of their own personal identity. This survey was administered in fall, 2019.

### **Population and Sampling**

Participants in the research study were all undergraduate students in the United States at Salem State University enrolled in select psychology courses in fall, 2019. The population of interest of this research was college students ages 18-29. All participants were presently enrolled in the classes where students were actively being recruited, with permission from the professor. No students meeting these criteria were excluded, though there were different questions about national identity for students who self-identified as American citizens and students who disclosed a different status (being an international student, documented/undocumented resident). This research utilized a convenience sample instead of random sampling as students were able to

participate in this survey due to the classes they were enrolled in. Students were also chosen to be participants at Salem State University as the location where the initial observation of a possible American identity crisis was witnessed.

There were a total of 34 participants in my study. Participants in the study self-identified their race, gender identity, and residential status, shown in the tables below. Based off of these identifications, the participant sample was comprised of 4 males, 25 females, and 1 non-binary student (see Table 1). The races represented by participants are White, Hispanic/Latino, two or more races, and unknown (Table 2). In addition, 28 participants were citizens by birth, 3 were naturalized citizens, and 1 reported being a documented/undocumented citizen (Table 3).

**Table 1****Gender Identity of Participants**

Preferred Gender Identification	Male	Female	Non-Binary	Unanswered
Number of Participants	4	25	1	4

**Table 2****Racial Identity of Participants**

Preferred Racial Identity	Number of Participants
White	21
Two or more races	5
Hispanic/Latino	2
Unknown	1
Prefer not to Answer	1
Unanswered	4

**Table 3****Residential Status of Participants**

Residential Status in America	Number of Participants
Citizen by birth	28
Naturalized citizen	3
Documented/ Undocumented citizen	1
Unanswered	2

## **The American Identity Survey**

The survey contained five total sections, including both open-response questions and questions in the form of a Likert scale. The first section asked about the participant's personal identity, the second section asked questions regarding a common American identity, and the last section asked questions regarding personal American identity. These sections are largely composed of open-response questions that allowed the participants to explain their thoughts in their own words. The fourth section asked questions based on a Likert scale, asking participants to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with statements that give a better idea of the participant's identity and views of America. The last section of the survey asked demographic questions of the participants. These demographic survey questions helped in investigating intersections between American identity and other identities, such as religion, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. Professors were asked to distribute the survey online in order to get qualitative answers from students. By doing this, it was thought that participants would give more thoughtful responses, as surveys shared on social media rarely get thoughtful responses from students. A full copy of the 'American Identity Crisis in Emerging Adulthood' survey can be found in the appendix.

## **Procedures**

**Recruitment and Distribution Procedures.** An original, online survey was created on SurveyMonkey to ask college students questions regarding identity. The survey was distributed online to student participants via a link provided by their psychology professors and did not ask for the students' names. The survey was approximated to take 20 minutes to complete. The professors who distributed the survey in their classes gave extra credit to students for completing the survey, though it was not a requirement for a grade in the class. A disclosure statement was

provided to all participants at the beginning of the survey. In addition, supplemental resources were provided to students at the end of the survey. The survey was approved to be distributed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Coding Procedures.** To analyze the Likert style-questions, the responses of participants were converted to numbers to be analyzed: 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= disagree, 4= strongly disagree. The converted responses to each question were averaged to produce a number between 1 and 4, closer to 1 being more strongly agreeing with the statement, and closer to 4 being more strongly disagreeing with the statement. Questions that had a similar theme were then averaged together. In some instances, reverse-coding was needed when the wording of questions was negative but the question needed to be compared to a positively-worded question.

Qualitative analysis of open-ended items was conducted with a coding scheme, and then relationships between different question responses were compared. In order to create a coding scheme, a participant's responses to every open-response question were analyzed to determine the substance and meaning of the response. The original coding scheme was created by analyzing the responses of each participant, determining the essence of each participant's response, and then creating coding response categories to represent every unique response. If different participants had the same substance in their responses to the same open-response question, then the coding category was written once, but tallied multiple times to represent the number of participants who indicated the same response. If a participant's response to an open response question was completely unique from all other responses to the same question, then the category was represented with one tally mark to represent the single response.

Each open response question on the survey received a multitude of different categorical responses among the 34 participants. The open-response questions with fewer categorical

responses signified greater similarities in the participants' outlooks as the participants responded similarly to other participants and therefore fell into the same categorical coding category. Open response questions that had a greater number of categorical responses suggested that there was a greater amount of differing opinions among the participants regarding that question.

## **Results**

### **American Identity Crisis Indicators**

**Quantitative Analysis.** Table 4 shows the degree to which participants as a whole either strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each American identity statement. For some items, there was a general consensus among participants either strongly agreeing and agreeing with a statement, or disagreeing and strongly disagreeing with a statement. More than 66% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, 'I am proud to be an American', 'In American elections, every vote is important', and 'Generally, America is no more superior than any other industrialized country in the world'. Conversely, more than 66% of participants indicated disagreement or strong disagreement with the statement, 'To maintain America's superiority, war is sometimes necessary'. Other American identity statements that participants responded to show more diversity in agreement and disagreement.

**Qualitative Analysis.** If a participant's response to an open-response question included multiple segments with different essential parts, both parts of the response were represented by tallying in both coding response categories.

**Table 4****Likert Scale Responses for American Identity Statements**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Number of Responses
I am proud to be an American.	43.75%	28.13%	18.75%	9.38%	32
The American government has citizens' best interest in mind.	3.23%	32.26%	35.48%	29.03%	31
The United States extends life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to every citizen.	18.75%	34.38%	31.25%	15.63%	32
In American elections, every vote is important.	68.75%	15.63%	12.5%	3.13%	32
Generally, America is no more superior than any other industrialized country in the world.	53.13%	15.63%	21.88%	9.38%	32
To maintain America's superiority, war is sometimes necessary.	3.23%	16.13%	32.26%	48.39%	31
Every time I hear the American national anthem, I feel strongly moved.	25%	15.63%	28.13%	31.25%	32

With regard to the question that asked participants to express what thoughts came to mind when thinking of what it means to be American, the most common response was freedom (31%), followed by participants being residents in America (16%). The third response question asked participants to identify which values America embodies today. The most common response was that freedom is the principal value that America embodies today (21%), followed closely by the response that capital gain is the central value of the country (17%). As with the previous two questions, the most common response to the fourth open response question asking participants to identify what being American means was having freedoms and rights (26%), closely followed by participants saying America means having opportunities (23%).

The responses to the fifth and sixth open response questions were very similar, as they both were important in breaking down why being an American is an important part of the participants' identity, or why it is not. Twenty-one percent of participants identified residing in and living in America as being the main reason why being an American is an important part of their identity. A total of 27% of the responses to this question indicated that participants did not believe that being an American is an important part of their identity. Sixty-four percent of the participants' responses indicated that they believed that being an American is an important part of their identity, and 9% of responses showed that participants have very mixed feelings about the topic.

The sixth and final open response question asked participants to either strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with America being an important part of their identity, and then expanding on why they believe this is the case. Thirty-four percent of participants said they strongly agreed that being an American is an important part of their identity, 41% agreed, 9% disagreed, and 16% strongly disagreed with the statement. The highest percentage of participant



responses for this open response question cited living and being raised in America as their reasoning for strongly agreeing with the statement at 16%, just as 16% of those who agreed with the statement also cited living and being raised in America as their reasoning.

## **Emerging Adulthood**

**Age compared to Likert American Identity Questions.** Participants ages 18-23 and 24+ were split into two separate groups to statistically test for differences in their answers to the Likert-style questions to see if there was a difference in responses for typical college-aged participants and older participants. After conducting independent-samples *t* tests, there was a significant difference in the answers from ages 18-23 and 24+ for one statement. When asked to respond to the statement “In American elections, every vote is important”, there was a significant difference in the answers between younger and older participants. Participants ages 18-23 were more likely to agree with this statement ( $M=1.23$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ) compared to participants ages 24+ ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=0.92$ ),  $t(28)=-3.97$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $d=-1.64$ .

The most common reply to the first open response question, asking participants if they believed in the theory of emerging adulthood, was yes for the reason that people between the ages of 18 and 29 are able to engage in more active action to explore different identities. Overwhelmingly, the responses indicated that most participants agreed with the theory of emerging adulthood as a vital time in a person’s life, with only 15% of the responses indicating disagreement with emerging adulthood, all for the reason that identities can change at other stages of a person’s life.

Most participants of both groups believed in the theory of emerging adulthood as a period of time for young adults to explore identities. Participants in the age group 18-20 described the

age of emerging adulthood as a time “when you experience being on your own for the first time, and it makes you try to find your place in the world”, to discover specific things about themselves”, and “when I was able to start exploring my own identity and felt free to form my own ideas, but before that, I was confined because of school and family”. Similarly, participants ages 27-29 believed that “During this time we are more on our own than in childhood. This allows us to think more for ourselves, make mistakes, find ourselves, understand the world and how relate to it”, and that they are “just beginning to settle into [their] fixed identity” at 27 years old. Both ends of the emerging-adulthood spectrum agreed that this stage of life is for identity exploration.

### **Intersectionalities**

**Top 3 Personal Identities Reported.** In the first part of the survey, participants were asked to identify their three most significant personal identities in making up who they are and what is important to them. Table V shows that of the nine identities offered for participants to choose from, education level was the most chosen, followed by gender, and then nationality. It is important to point out that the nationality identity, which was the American identity being researched, was one of the higher-rated identities.

**Table 5**

#### **Most Significant Personal Identities according to Participants**

Education Level	Gender	Nationality	Religion	Sexual Orientation	Race	Economic Status	Ethnicity	Social Class
24	19	15	8	8	7	7	6	6

**Residency and American Identity.** Participants in this study reported being citizens of the United States by birth, being citizens by naturalization, and being a documented/undocumented resident. To conduct analysis based on residential status, participants were separated into two groups, the first being all natural born citizens, the second being naturalized citizens and documented/ undocumented citizens. For the most part, there was not a significant difference in answers between the two residency groups. The only questions that showed a significant difference stated “Generally, America is no more superior than any other industrialized country in the world”, though this was reverse-scaled in analysis to match the positive wording of the other questions. Participants who were not born in the United States strongly disagreed with the idea of American superiority over other comparable countries ( $M=4$ ,  $SD=0$ ) compared to participants born in America ( $M=3$ ,  $SD= 1.09$ ),  $t(27)= -4.86$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $d= -2.95$ .

Participants who were not born in the United States had mixed responses to American identity questions. One participant stated that “I was born outside of America ... and when I moved here at age 6 it never felt the same as back home. I have been an American for the majority of my life but I do not participate in the typical ‘American’ culture” and that “being an American just means that America is the place you call home”. However, other participants who were also not born in the United States commented that being an American means “[having] access to opportunities that I would not have if I was not an American Citizen” and “being free to be who I want to be and accomplish all I set out to do”. This mix in responses was consistent with responses gathered from participants who were born in the United States, ranging from feelings of pride and freedom, disgust in an oppressive system, and citing simple residency as what it means to be an American.

**Race and American Identity.** In order to compare the answers of participants based on race, participants were separated into two groups, the first being White and the second being Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Black or African American, Asian, Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, or two or more races. The only statement that yielded significant differences between the groups was “The United States extends Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness to every citizen”. Participants who identified as white were much more likely to agree with the statement ( $M=2.19$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ) compared to participants of color ( $M=3.11$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ),  $t(28)=-2.49$ ,  $p=.019$ ,  $d=-0.99$ .

Both participants of color and white participants had mixed responses when responding to the American identity open response questions. One student who identified as Hispanic/Latino stated that being an American means “[having] access to opportunities that I would not have if I was not an American Citizen”. Another participant who identified as White and Native American stated that being an American means being a “resident of North/South America”, but also stated that being an American is a part of her identity whether she likes it or not because being an American “impacts [her] socially, economically, physically, and mentally in many ways- so it must be an important part of [her] identity”. Most white participants also stated that being an American was an important part of their identity, though some cited their status as an American as unimportant because “[they] would be just as comfortable living in any other country with a comparable standard of living”, “[they] haven’t really considered it much”, and that “it is just [their] nationality, [their] place of origin, nothing more”.

**Gender and American Identity.** Participants in this study who identified as either male or females were separated into two groups to investigate gender differences in responses to American identity questions. Participants identifying as male or female responded differently to

one statement: “In American elections, every vote is important”. Male participants more strongly agreed with the statement ( $M=1$ ,  $SD=0$ ), than did females ( $M=1.56$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ),  $t(24)= -3.22$ ,  $p=.004$ ,  $d=-1.73$ .

Though there were few statistical differences between male and female participants in the quantitative analysis, the qualitative answers from the open-response questions revealed more of a consensus among male participants whereas the answers from female participants were more diverse. When asked what it means to be American, male respondents stated “having more opportunities than most... it gives me freedom for the life that I want”, “the right to be free and able to choose what life you want to live”, “the freedom to have my voice be heard”, and “upholding the rights of others”. Each male participant response contained freedom as an essential part of what it means to be American and the values that America upholds.

Female participants, however, had a greater diversity in responses. Many stated that “being an American means you live in the USA. It does not mean much more than that to me”, and that being an American “isn't something that shapes me or affects my way of living”. Many female participants stated that being an American means simply that “I live here”, and others had mixed feelings, commenting that “I live in a good country besides the bad things I have seen”. There were also responses similar to those of the male participants, claiming that being an American means that they “have an opportunity to follow [their] dreams” and “being free to be who [they] want to be and accomplish all [they] set out to do”. While a percentage of female participants had similar responses, there was more diversity in their American identity answers than those from the male participants.

**Sexual Orientation and American Identity.** In order to measure any possible differences in responses in regards to sexual orientation, participants were separated into two

groups, the first group representing heterosexual participants and the second group representing homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual participants. Results from this analysis showed that there were statistically differing results between these groups when they reacted to 4 different Likert-style American identity statements.

Heterosexual students were more likely to identify with the statement “I am proud to be an American” ( $M=1.68$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) compared to students who used preferred language for identification ( $M=2.6$ ,  $SD=0.97$ ),  $t(27)=-2.46$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $d=-.96$ .

When reacting to the statement “The United States extends Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness to every citizen”, participants who identified as heterosexual were statistically more likely to agree ( $M=2.21$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ) than students who identified as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual ( $M=3$ ,  $SD=.94$ ),  $t(27)=-2.09$ ,  $p=.046$ ,  $d=-.82$ .

The two groups of participants showed differences when asked “Generally, America is no more superior than any other industrialized country in the world”, though this was reverse-scaled in analysis to match the positive wording of the other questions. Students identifying with preferred language for their sexual orientation greatly disagreed with this statement ( $M=3.7$ ,  $SD=0.48$ ) compared to students identifying as heterosexual ( $M=2.74$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ),  $t(25)=-3.07$ ,  $p=.005$ ,  $d=-1.19$ .

Heterosexual students were more likely to identify with the statement “Every time I hear the American national anthem, I feel strongly moved” ( $M=2.47$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ) compared to students who identify as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual ( $M=3.3$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ),  $t(27)=-2.25$ ,  $p=.03$ ,  $d=-.88$ .

Most participants who identified as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual referred to residency as what it means to be American, stating “living in America”, “simply being a resident

of North/South America”, “it is my home”, and “I live here”. Participants in this group were split in their feeling about America being an important part of their identity. About a third of respondents said that “It is and it isn’t” important, feeling a strong urge to protect their country but also not being able to ignore its flaws, as another participant stated “Being American is an aspect of my identity, but it doesn't rule my life.” Another third of homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual participants believed that being an American was not an important part of their identity at all, some stated that they “do not agree with how the country is being operated” and another participant said that “being American among Americans doesn't set me apart.” The other third of participants in this group agreed that being an American is an important part of their identity, stating that they “can't deny that it's a part of my identity whether I want it to be or not” and that “it is where I was born and raised”.

Even though a third of homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual respondents state that being an American is an important part of their identity, their response seems reluctant and generally insincere compared to many responses to the same question from heterosexual participants. For example, heterosexual students stated that “Yes, being American is an important part of my identity. I am proud to be American and what our true values stand for” and “yes, I am proud of our freedoms and what they represent”. These responses are very different from the responses of participants with preferred language who viewed being an American as a more dormant part of their identity. There was a great difference in both the quantitative and qualitative responses between heterosexual participants and participants who identified as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual in regards to the American identity questions, with heterosexual students clearly having been more likely to accept the common American identity and values as a part of their own identity.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the possibility of an American identity crisis among emerging adults due to cognitive dissonance and rejection of a common American identity. However, the quantitative data did not indicate evidence to support a general American identity crisis among emerging adults. Or if there is an American identity crisis, the age group of emerging adulthood does not seem to be a main factor in predicting this internal conflict. The majority of quantitative participant responses indicated acceptance of a common American identity as a part of their personal identity.

While the overall quantitative data didn't support the thesis that there is a generation-wide American identity crisis, further examination of the qualitative data shows more diversity in perspectives. Open-ended responses reveal a range of feelings regarding the common American identity and values. There were participants who felt the American identity is a strong part of their identity, others who felt as though it was not and rejected America as a part of their personal identity, and participants in-between. The results of this study suggest that other identities are greater predictors of the degree to which someone is more likely to identify with a common American identity.

Participants who reported minoritized identities, for example participants of color and those identifying with sexual orientations other than heterosexual, were more likely to report negative feelings associated with the common American identity. Participants who classified themselves with less privileged identities in American society might have been more likely to rate these identities as more important in their self-identification because these identities tend to differentiate them from the American majority. These participants might have reported a lower degree of acceptance of the common American identity due to their feelings of separation and



differing values from that common American 'norm'. Specifically, participants with these identities were less likely to believe America is superior to other countries, that the United States extends life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to every citizen, and that every vote is important in American elections. These were the only Likert statements that received statistically different responses between the two groups being compared for multiple identities. Statistical analysis of Likert responses from participants does not confirm an American identity crisis in emerging adulthood.

The vast majority of participants' responses indicated agreement with Arnett's theory. Most participants expressed their own personal feelings of freedom and exploration during and directly following their college years, something they were not able to experience when living in their hometowns under the authority of parents and/or guardians. Participants as a whole identified the five core concepts of emerging adulthood as defining characteristics of their life throughout their early twenties, being identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and increasing possibilities (Arnett, 2013). In addition, older participants in the research stated that the period of emerging adulthood was also significant as they were able to explore new ideas and identities without the pressure of real, adult responsibilities. Through participant responses and feedback, the current study supports Arnett's theory that young people ages 18-29 in advanced societies, like the United States, do not fit the category of adolescence or adulthood due to the new freedoms and independence they can explore without the responsibilities that come with true adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Another reason that a pervasive American identity crisis might not have been identifiable in this research is that every person has a different perception of what makes up a common American identity; some perceive it from a more idealistic or pessimistic angle while others a

more realistic perspective. In this way, participants' results could have been skewed if they reported the common American identity as more idealistic or pessimistic than they actually believe due to a change in mood or fresh news story that swayed their immediate response, though not their long-term sentiment. Some participants revealed cognitive dissonance in their responses by indicating differing feelings and levels of acceptance of the common American identity in different questions in the survey, which could also be a result of this occurrence. This observed cognitive dissonance is consistent with Arnett's description of emerging adulthood being a time for exploration, instability, and feeling in-between (2013).

### **Previous Research**

The current study somewhat corresponded with Berkel et al.'s previous research on intersectionalities between American identity and other identities (2017). While previous research has shown that dominant groups of Americans, such as white Americans and male Americans, are more closely associated with being an American and feeling ownership over their American identity (Berkel et al., 2017), there was not a great variance in the responses between different demographics of Americans. Differences between males and females and white and minority Americans in this research were relatively minimal in both the quantitative and qualitative analysis. Only the analysis between heterosexual Americans and participants who identified as a different sexuality showed consistently differing results, with the dominant group of heterosexual Americans more closely associating with the American identity.

The results of this research coincide with Jahromi's research (2011), however direct comparisons cannot be made due to the different age group of participants and a differing political climate. Participants in previous research had the same general outlooks as participants in the current study, feeling as though they live in an overall good country that has room to grow

to be better (Jahromi, 2011). The previous research done was more qualitative and therefore provided participants more liberty to expand upon their feelings. Though, the small sample size of the previous study done by Jahromi (2011) does not justify generalizing the results to any group of Americans.

### **Participant Feedback**

Of the survey participants, 24 responded that they have thought about the questions asked in the survey before, 6 responded that they had not, and the rest did not answer the question. Twenty-seven of the total participants indicated that they believed the questions in the survey are very important or somewhat important to reflect on. Two participants believed that the questions in the survey were somewhat unimportant to reflect on, and one student reported the questions as not at all important to reflect on. Overall, participants had previously reflected upon the questions and believed that the questions asked in the survey were important to think about and discuss.

After completing the survey, participants were asked reflective questions about the survey by their professor. Though most students had reflected upon American identity and their personal values in the past, many reported that participating in this study reminded them of what they value and take for granted living in America, one participant specifically stating “It is easy to take our freedom for granted”. Others stated that studying and discussing American identity is important because younger people are less likely to value the common American values and they are “way less nationalistic than generations before... more young people today may rather not identify as being American”. Though participants had diverse feelings in their degree of identification with the American identity, most felt as though the topic is important to discuss, though for a plethora of different reasons.

Participants largely agreed that studying American identity in the age group of emerging adulthood is important because it is “the time they begin their life of independence [and] is also the period of time they begin forming an identity for themselves”. In particular, participants reported that studying the feelings of emerging adults is important for gauging their future engagement in America, one participant stated “eventually they will be the generation shaping the next generation’s opinions on identity/American values and what it means to be an American”.

### **Further Research**

This current study utilized convenience sampling to obtain participant responses in a university setting, which limits the generalizability of the findings. There is room for continued research in this area. The results of this research would be more valid if completed through random sampling of college and non-college populations across the country. Sampling of a more diverse group of participants might yield differing results, including more American citizens who were not born in the United States, and a more proportionally balanced racial and gender sample. In order to better analyze results from participants in the emerging adulthood age group, additional research comparing participant responses from the emerging adulthood age groups and other age groups would be beneficial. This would reveal if there were more diverse American identity feelings and responses from participants in the emerging adulthood age group in comparison to participants of other age groups.

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**Appendix**

The American Identity Crisis in Emerging Adulthood Survey

SECTION 1: PERSONAL IDENTITY

**Please write your answers to the following question in the space provided.**

1. Emerging adulthood is a theory that proposes that there is a distinct period of identity exploration between adolescence and actual adulthood (ages 18-29) where young adults are exploring different ideas and do not yet have a fixed identity. Do you personally agree with this statement, why or why not?

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2. Please pick three of the following identities that are the most significant in making up who you are and what is important to you.
  - a) Race
  - b) Ethnicity
  - c) Religion
  - d) Gender
  - e) Sexual orientation
  - f) Nationality
  - g) Social Class
  - h) Economic status
  - i) Education level

SECTION 2: AMERICAN IDENTITY

**Please write your answers to the following questions in the spaces provided.**

3. When you think of what it means to be an American, what thoughts come to mind?

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4. What values does the United States embody today?

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SECTION 3: AMERICAN PERSONAL IDENTITY

**Please select the answer that best describes you.**

What is your residential status in America?

- a) Citizen by birth
- b) Naturalized citizen
- c) Documented or Undocumented Resident
- d) Student Visa / International student
- e) Choose not to disclose

*If you answered c, d, or e, please proceed directly to section 4.*

**Please write your answers to the following questions in the spaces provided.**

5. What does being American mean to you?

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6. Is being an American an important part of your identity? Why or why not?



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**For Questions 7 and 8, please indicate your level of agreement.**

- 7. Being an American is an important part of my identity.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree

Why do you feel this way?

**Please write your answer in the space provided.**

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- 8. I am proud to be an American.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree

**SECTION 4: Personal Beliefs and Behaviors**

**For the next statements, please indicate your level of agreement.**

- 9. I am the same person that I was three years ago.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 10. I take commitments very seriously and rarely break commitments.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree

- c) Disagree
- d) Strongly disagree
- 11. I enjoy searching out new information.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 12. I deliberate and evaluate when presented with new information before forming opinions or making new commitments.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 13. I tend to surround myself with like-minded people.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 14. I never have conflicting thoughts or opinions.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 15. I have strong beliefs that my parent(s) and/or guardians would likely disagree with.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 16. Even if people have different beliefs, I always try to see things from their point of view.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 17. People shown in the media do not accurately resemble real Americans.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 18. The American government has citizens' best interests in mind.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
- 19. I generally feel safe in this country.
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree

- c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
20. The United States extends life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to every citizen.
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
21. In American elections, every vote is important.
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
22. Generally, America is no more superior than any other industrialized country in the world.
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
23. To maintain America's superiority, war is sometimes necessary.
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
24. Every time I hear the American national anthem, I feel strongly moved.
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree

#### SECTION 5: PERSONAL SURVEY

1. What is your current age?
  - a) 18-20 years old
  - b) 21-23 years old
  - c) 24-26 years old
  - d) 27-29 years old
  - e) 30+ years old
  - f) Prefer not to answer
2. What is your annual family income?
  - a) \$0-29,999
  - b) \$30,000-49,999
  - c) \$50,000-79,999
  - d) \$80,000-119,999
  - e) \$120,000+

- f) Don't know
  - g) Prefer not to answer
3. Which of the following best captures your racial identity?
- a) Hispanic/ Latino
  - b) American Indian
  - c) Black or African American
  - d) White
  - e) Asian
  - f) Hawaiian / Pacific Islander
  - g) Two or more races
  - h) Unknown
  - i) Prefer not to answer
  - j) Preferred language (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
4. What gender do you identify as?
- a) Male
  - b) Female
  - c) Preferred language for identification (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) Prefer not to answer
5. What is your sexual orientation?
- a) Heterosexual
  - b) Homosexual
  - c) Preferred language for identification (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) Prefer not to answer
6. Have you ever thought about the questions asked in this survey before?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
7. How important do you believe the questions in this survey are to reflect on?
- a) Very important
  - b) Somewhat important
  - c) Somewhat unimportant
  - d) Not at all important
  - e) Unsure