

Distinct Features of Emerging Adulthood in Kenya

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Abstract

Research on emerging adulthood continues to grow worldwide. However, extensive research is yet to be conducted among African populations (Obadioa, 2019). This study investigated the endorsement of the five features of emerging adulthood among young people aged 18-29 years, in the Nairobi Metropolitan Region of Kenya, and explored whether there are significant differences between collegiate and non-collegiate populations in perceptions of the transition to adulthood. Data was collected using the Inventory for the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA). Results from this study indicate that young people endorse the five features of emerging adulthood. The highest endorsed feature was identity exploration while the least endorsed feature was negativity/instability. Significant differences were noted in the endorsement of the five features between collegiate and non-collegiate participants. Understanding young people in Kenya within the context of emerging adulthood and enabling practitioners, parents, instructors, institutions, and society as a whole, to adequately address the unique challenges that emerging adults in Kenya are facing.

Keywords: adulthood, transitions, emerging adulthood, features, sub-Saharan, Africa, Kenya.

Introduction and Background

Emerging adulthood has been proposed as a cultural theory (Arnett, 2000). Arnett indicated that from the beginning, researchers should expect to find that the theory varies in its forms and features across cultures and countries. Africa is one region where emerging adulthood is just beginning to be researched. Africa too has the youngest population in the world, with 77% of the population under 35 years (Hajjar, 2020). The median age is 18 years. In studies

conducted in West Africa, while some of the cultural and traditional markers of adulthood are still evident, there are social changes that have impacted on how young people view the transition to adulthood (Obadioa, 2019). This study investigated emerging adulthood in Kenya. In Kenya, young people between the ages of 18-29 are 10 million in number, the largest age category being at 21% of the population (KNBS, 2019). There are 42 ethnic groups in Kenya, each with their own unique language.

According to the data released by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Kenya has the lowest fertility rate in East Africa. The size of the Kenyan family has steadily decreased since 1970. This is illustrated by the decrease in the number of children per family as more and more families embrace family planning methods. In 2017, 55% of married women were reported to be using modern contraceptives. This is because of the reduction of stigma regarding family planning, access to free, low-cost contraception, and information about various options such as delay or spacing of pregnancies (UNFPA, 2017). The median age of marriage has also steadily increased from 16.2 years to 19.8 years (1994-2014) and 18.0 to 22.0 (2016-2020). This is the outcome of various interventions such as ending child marriage by Government and relevant stakeholders attaining critical Sustainable Development Goals (Petroni et al., 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals are a call to action developed by the United Nations member states to end poverty and experience peace and prosperity globally by 2030 (UNDP, 2015)

The median age of marriage has steadily increased in Kenya in recent decades, from 16.2 years to 19.8 years (1994-2014) and 18.0 to 22.0 (2016-2020). Education attainment has also increased in Kenya. In 2019, those attending middle -level college/`technical training colleges

were 500,000 compared to 127,691 in 2012 and 63, 823 in 2003. Those attending university were 471,000 compared to 240,551 in 2012 and 122,847 in 2008 (KNBS,2019). Thus, the same demographic changes that occurred in the West that led to the emergence of emerging adulthood are now happening in Africa and specifically in Kenya. These socio- economic changes are an increase in educational attainment, postponement of transition to traditional adult roles such as marriage and childbearing and the use of various forms of technology.

Data shows that Kenya is urbanizing rapidly, and a significant number of those that migrate to urban centers are young people in pursuit of various opportunities. Most migrate in pursuit of employment or education, others because of leisure and others are due to economic development activities such as entrepreneurship (World Bank, 2016). It is possible then that this population, as reported in other parts of the world, would put off key adulthood roles such as marriage and parenting to pursue higher education, travel and job explorations.

The theory of emerging adulthood was proposed by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in the year 2000 as a new conception of the period from the late teens (around age 18) through the twenties. According to Arnett, during this period, significant changes occur in the lives of young people that set the foundation for their life direction and can contribute to a successful transition into adulthood. Based on his research on hundreds of Americans, Arnett reported that emerging adulthood in the United States of America (USA) is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, possibilities/optimism, and feeling being in-between (Arnett, 2000).

Identity exploration is the most distinctive feature of emerging adulthood in the U.S. It is described as a time when young people are free to explore various aspects and facets of themselves. They take time to try out new things, more than any other time in their adult life.

In this exploration, young people create a sense of who they are and begin developing a clearer understanding of their personal identity (Arnett, 2015). A poll conducted at Clark University in 2012 showed that 77% of 18-29-year-olds agreed that this was the time in their life to discover who they were (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Nelson and Barry (2005) had earlier compared the process of identity exploration between perceived adults and emerging adults. Their study, which was conducted in the United States with students at Brigham Young University, Loyola College in Maryland and the University of Maryland, College Park, sought to outline the differences between established and emerging adults.

Identity exploration is mainly focused on two areas: love and work. As young people explore their identity, they often do so through love. Many romantic relationships during this time are transient. As they approach age 30, young people often report they are looking to settle down or move toward marriage and therefore are more focused on who they are in a relationship with (Arnett, 2015). Young people approach work the same way they approach love and relationships, as a search for the right fit with their identity. This means that when looking for jobs; most young people report that they are looking for something that they are passionate about and that will bring satisfaction and be a good fit for them.

Emerging adults experience various life changes between the ages of 18 and 29, making this time frame somewhat unpredictable and unstable. As individuals approach adulthood, they feel they should have goals and a general life direction. With time, their goals shift and evolve. Instability in relationships is common as relationships are often short-lived. They also change their jobs and places of residence in this period more than any other time in their adult life.

The self-focus feature highlights a time when young people may have very few obligations and commitments. In many developed countries, like the U.S., many young people move out of their childhood home at 18 and are tasked with making daily decisions for themselves. It is paramount to note that this time that young people get to focus on themselves does not make them selfish. This is a unique time that enables them to learn the daily tasks and requirements for adult living.

A common occurrence in the lifespan is the systematic movement from parents toward peers. This often begins at adolescence and continues into emerging adulthood. Individuals in the process of growing up will shift attachment -related needs to adult peers from parents that can offer emotional support and security (Dykas & Siskind, 2020). In this unique period, they have few obligations to others since they were children and have been under the authority of their parents and school. However, in cultures like those found in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, family obligations can sometimes take priority over an individual's ability to focus on self. Young people are often expected or encouraged to support, help, and respect the family or cultural traditions. While young people may report a high level of family involvement, this does not mean they are happy to sacrifice the feature of Self-focus (Syed & Mitchell, 2013).

With features such as exploration and instability being the normal routine for emerging adults, many report a feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood. Most of them feel like they are no longer adolescents, but, in many ways, they do not qualify to be called adults. The reason most of them feel like an adult one day and a child the next is because they feel that they do not 'meet the mark' for their own idea of what adulthood is or what an adult does. The top three criteria given as the criteria for adulthood in many countries are first the ability to be

responsible for oneself, second, financial independence; and third, being able to make decisions independently. When they feel they have not yet achieved any of these, then they may not identify as adults (Arnett et al., 2014).

This feeling where young people do not completely feel like adults may be because of dependence mostly financial but also psychological; on one hand, they feel like they can live alone, make their own schedules and earn their own upkeep. On the other hand, their parents are still their caregivers, they pay their school fees, and some might move back home temporarily because they need assistance financially and psychological support. A study conducted by Berzin et al., (2014) of youth in the foster care system in America, observed that the feeling of being in-between for foster youth, is not only about being in-between adolescence and adulthood, but also being in-between foster care and living independent of that system.

Emerging adulthood is a period of remarkable optimism. In a Clark University Poll conducted in 2012, 89% of 18-29-year-olds in the USA reported that they believe that eventually they will get what they want out of life, and that they were looking forward to what the future holds. Emerging adults are also very hopeful because they believe because of their education attainment that their future is going to be better than the life their parents had. Education, they believed, was an indicator of a better future for them (Arnett et al., 2014).

The age of possibilities also means that young people have opportunities to make drastic changes to the course of their lives. If a young person came from a tumultuous home, they now have the chance to move away from that environment and chart an independent life. This might have been especially hard before because they had to go back to the same toxic environment (Arnett et al., 2014). Unfortunately, this is not the case for some in developing countries.

Since Arnett (2000) proposed the theory, research on emerging adulthood has taken place mainly in North America, Europe, Asia and most recently Africa to enable developmental psychologists to understand the concept of emerging adulthood globally. As Arnett (2000) had stated in his seminal paper, the world, due to globalization, has become more interconnected and therefore this concept is likely to apply worldwide. He did, however, state that there might be many differences in the way it is experienced and the time that it is experienced. For instance, he noted that in some developing countries, the experience of emerging adulthood may differ for the young people who were in urban settings compared to those in rural settings.

Research has previously been conducted in Africa on the transition to adulthood by (Obadioa, 2019; Lo-oh, 2016; van Breda & Pinkerton, 2020). However, there is limited research investigating how the features of emerging adulthood apply in an African setting. This study will conduct a seminal investigation using the Inventory for the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) tool developed by (Reifman & Arnett, 2007).

The study also aims to see if the five features of emerging adulthood apply in Kenya and to understand any unique, culturally distinctive features that young people in Kenya might have in their transition to adulthood. Since previous studies have mainly focused on either urban or rural settings, this study will focus on the peri-urban setting of the Nairobi Metropolitan Region, to determine if these features are endorsed in this environment. This study will engage young people between the ages of 18 and 29 who are in several different categories: university, technical and vocational education and training (TVET); in employment; and not in education, employment, or training (NEETs). This diverse sample will make it possible to examine similarities and differences across various socio-economic demographics.

Methodology

The study included 389 collegiate and non-collegiate participants: university, TVET, employed, and those Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) in three selected counties in the Nairobi Metropolitan Region; Kajiado, Kiambu and Machakos. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to collect data.

The target population was divided into two groups: collegiate and non-collegiate participants. For this study, “collegiate” participants included those in university and Technical Vocational Educational Training institutions (TVET). The researcher and research assistant engaged with the Dean of Students of participating universities and TVET institutions that were randomly selected for the recruitment of students. Non-collegiate populations were employed or those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs). Simple random sampling was utilized to recruit non-collegiate participants. Simple random sampling is a type of non-probability sampling where participants are selected randomly from the population to enable each member of the population to have an equal chance of being selected (Creswell, 2007; 2014). For those in employment, convenience sampling was also used. IRB approval was obtained from the first author’s institution. The researcher also obtained informed consent from the participants.

Inventory for the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA)

Developed by Reifman et al. (2007), the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) has been used to measure the five features of EA. This 31-item inventory can be used across cultures and has been translated into over 16 languages (Spišáková & Ráciová, 2020). Adaptations of the IDEA tool have been validated on samples between the ages of 18-29. Respondents answer on a 4-point Likert scale the degree to which they identify with the

experiences described on the questionnaire. In addition to capturing the five features of EA, the category of *other focused* has been added to counter *self-focused*.

Since emerging adulthood is experienced differently across various cultures, the IDEA tool was developed to capture the features of emerging adulthood. The tool is vital in understanding emerging adulthood and allows these features to be compared to other cultures and countries. This study utilized all the 31-item version of IDEA.

IDEA is scored by obtaining an average within each subscale to obtain a score for the features of emerging adulthood. An average mean score of closer to 4.0 indicates that they display more of the characteristics of emerging adulthood while an average mean score of less than 3.0 indicates that they display less of the characteristics of emerging adulthood.

Results

The mean age of the participants was 23.3 years ($SD=3.08$). Of the 389 participants, there were 187 males (48%) and 202 females (52%). 36% of the sample were university students, 28% were in the Technical Vocational and Educational Training Centers (TVET), while 36% were not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). In addition, 64.0% of the participants were single, 14.9% were married, and 21.1% were in a relationship. Moreover, 62.5% of the participants were not parents, while 9.4% were single parents and 28.1% were parenting as part of a couple. Participants whose combined family income was USD 0- 131.96 were 37.2%, which was the highest percentage. Table 4.1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

	n	%
Gender		
Male	187	48.1%
Female	202	51.9%
Educational Level		
University	142	36.4%
TVET	109	27.9%
NEET	139	35.6%
Employment Status		
Employed	62	16.0%
Self-Employed	89	22.9%
Other	234	61.1%
Marital Status		
Single	245	64.0%
Married	57	14.9%
In a Relationship	78	21.1%
Parental Status		
Not a Parent	238	62.5%
Single Parent	36	9.4%
Both Parents	106	28.1%
County		
Kajiado	107	27.8%
Kiambu	158	41.0%
Machakos	118	31.2%
Combined Family Income		
Ksh. 0-19,999	139	37.2%
Ksh. 20,000-39,999	93	24.9%
Ksh. 40,000-59,999	63	16.8%
Ksh. 60,000-79,999	32	8.6%
Ksh. 80,000-99,000	25	6.7%
Ksh. 100,000 and above	22	5.9%

To establish whether the five features of emerging adulthood were endorsed by young people between the ages of 18-29 in the Nairobi Metropolitan Region, an overall mean endorsement for each of the five features of emerging adulthood was established. As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha for the 6 subscales ranged from .56 to .76. The features of emerging

adulthood include the ‘age of optimism or possibilities.’ However, the IDEA does not capture this feature and therefore was excluded in this analysis.

Table 2: Cronbach’s alpha for the five features of emerging adulthood

Feature	Cronbach’s α
Identity Exploration	.65
Experimentation	.62
Negativity/Instability	.76
Other-focused	.71
Self-focused	.60
Feeling in-between	.56

The highest endorsed feature for the whole sample was identity exploration, while the lowest endorsed feature by both was negativity/instability (Table 3). The developers of the Inventory for Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood outlined that there are no cut-off scores for emerging adulthood, rather that people show ‘more or less the characteristics of emerging adulthood’ (Reifmann n.d).

Table 3: Endorsement of the features of Emerging Adulthood

	n	M	SD
Negativity/Instability	389	2.72	.70
Feeling in Between	389	3.00	.73
Self-Focus	389	3.23	.54
Experimentation	389	3.38	.53
Identity Exploration	389	3.47	.45

To explore whether there are significant differences among collegiate and non-collegiate populations in the endorsement of the features of emerging adulthood, means of the endorsement of the five features of emerging adulthood were compared between the two groups.

The Highest endorsed feature by collegiate participants was Experimentation. The lowest endorsed feature by collegiate participants was Negativity/Instability. The overall mean

endorsement of the five features by the non-collegiate sample was Identity Exploration, Experimentation, Self-focus, feeling in between, Negativity/Instability. The highest endorsed feature was Identity Exploration, while the lowest endorsed feature was Negativity/Instability. To establish whether these differences were statistically significant, independent sample t-tests were done. Significant differences were noted on the features of emerging adulthood of 'Experimentation' and 'Self-Focus.' For both of these subscales, collegiate participants endorsed the items more favorably than non-collegiate participants did as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: Independent Samples T-Test for the Features of Emerging Adulthood

Features of Emerging Adulthood	Level of Education	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (Two-tailed)	Mean Difference (Cohen's d)	Standard Error Difference
Identity Exploration	Collegiate	3.49	.40	1.197	232.066	.232	0.45	0.051
	Non-collegiate	3.43	.52					
Experimentation	Collegiate	3.51	.41	-6.107	193.885	<.001	0.500	0.06
	Non-collegiate	3.18	0.66					
Negativity /Instability	Collegiate	2.67	0.68	-1.84	266.314	.066	0.69	0.07
	Non-collegiate	2.81	0.72					
Self-focus	Collegiate	3.30	0.48	2.617	227.637	.005	0.53	0.06
	Non-collegiate	3.14	0.61					
Feeling between	Collegiate	3.03	0.68	0.842	244.355	.400	0.72	0.08
	In-Non-collegiate	2.96	0.81					

To investigate whether there were differences in the endorsement of the five features of emerging adulthood with regards to age, a One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. With regards to age groups, significant differences emerged between groups in the endorsement of the features of Negativity/Instability ($F_{2,359} = 8.18, p < .001$), where those in the age group 18-21 years scored higher than those in the age group 22-25 and 26-29 years, respectively. Mean difference .38 $p < .001$, and other focused ($F_{2,359} = 16.559, p < .001$) where participants in the age groups 26-29 years scored higher than those in the 18-21 and 22-25 years, respectively. Differences were also noted with regard to the different levels of education and the features of Experimentation ($F_{2,383} = 18.810, p < .001$), where those Not in education, employment or training (NEET) scored higher than those in University or TVET mean difference .34 $p < .001$ and other focused ($F_{2,383} = 12.211, p < .001$), where those not in education, employment or training scored higher than those in University or TVET mean difference .50 $p < .001$; Marital status and the features of other focused ($F_{2,376} = 16.897, p < .001$), where participants who were married scored higher than those who were single or in a relationship

mean difference .63 $p < .001$; and parental status and the feature of other focused ($F_{2,374} = 7.688$, $p < .001$), where participants who were not a parent scored higher than those who were single parents or those parenting together. No significant differences were noted with regards to the county of origin, employment status and combined family income.

Discussion

Prior to this study, though there was limited research on emerging adulthood in Africa, this was the first time using the Inventory for the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) tool in either in Kenya or the rest of Africa. The results from this study indicate that young people between the age of 18 and 29 years endorse the five features of emerging adulthood, indicating that young people in Kenya go through the developmental changes that this decade of transition to adulthood brings. Some of these distinct features during the emerging adulthood period are identity exploration, experimentation, feeling in-between, and self-focus.

Identity exploration was the highest endorsed feature by young people in this study. This feature of emerging adulthood describes a time in a young person's life where they are asking the question, "who am I?" (Arnett, 2015). Young people are trying to develop a sense of who they are. In a study conducted by Nelson & Barry (2005) that explored the process of identity exploration between perceived adults and emerging adults, those that identified as emerging adults displayed behaviors that were consistent with the features of emerging adulthood such as identity exploration. Findings from the Nelson and Barry study are consistent with the current study in that identity exploration was a feature highly endorsed by young people in this study.

The least endorsed feature by participants was negativity/Instability, indicating that young people experienced low levels of this trait despite the numerous challenges that they were going

through as well as the many changes and shifts that come with this period. These shifts are related mainly to the areas of education, work, relationships and many other transitions. Some are in college/university, and some of them start working. Friendships from childhood may come to an end as others begin. Romantic relationships may take center stage at this period and for some, it is the first time they have entered a significant romantic relationship. Some challenges include the necessary life skills that come with independent living such as planning, decision making, and risk assessment. This may be challenging because the part of the brain that performs these tasks is still growing (Taber-Thomas & Perez-Edgar, 2015).

Scholarships on emerging adulthood has mainly focused on collegiate populations. Those who do not attend college or university are often referred to as the 'forgotten half.' In the transition period of emerging adulthood, many young people take this decade to pursue college, employment, or both. In this study, there were differences in the endorsement of the features of Experimentation, 'Self-focus' and Negativity/Instability, between collegiate and non-collegiate populations. Although non-collegiate participants also endorsed the five features of emerging adulthood, non-collegiate participants comprising of young people between the age of 18 and 29 years, who were not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) scored higher on the feature of Negativity/Instability. The finding that non-collegiate participants scored higher on the feature of negativity/instability compared to their collegiate counterparts could mean that the non-collegiate participants experience this time of their life with a lot of uncertainty and unpredictability. This could be due to the nature of their circumstances as young people who are not in employment, education or training, or may not have anything that was offering them stability at the moment and therefore exacerbated the feeling of experiencing instability. Compare this with a study conducted by Reifman et al. (2007) that investigated

differences in the endorsement of the features of emerging adulthood. There were similarities between the two studies in the endorsement of the feature of Negativity/Instability with the non-collegiate population having a higher mean than collegiate population. In the study by Reifman and colleagues, collegiate students scored higher in the Experimentation feature compared to non-collegiate participants.

Significant differences were noted in the endorsement of the emerging adulthood features of Self-focus and 'Feeling In-between.' Collegiate participants scored higher on the feature of Self-focus. However, different educational trajectories did not affect the subjective view that this time in their lives was one of 'Identity Exploration' and 'Instability'. Students and non-students endorsed 'Feeling In-between.' Graduates tended to be more self-focused than students (Zorotovich, 2014)

Young people in the peri-urban areas of Kenya usually endorse the features of emerging adulthood. These young people comprise of 18–29-year old's that come from areas outside the capital of the country. Studies have stated that emerging adulthood may apply to only those young people in urban settings (Lee & Waithaka, 2017). Studies such as those of Hendry and Kloep, (2007; 2010) state that this only applied to those who had attended college, but the current study was conducted with collegiate as well as non-collegiate participants who endorsed the features of emerging adulthood. In addition, studies such as du-Bois Reymond (2016) have suggested that emerging adulthood may not apply to those who are from a lower socio-economic background. However, this study had participants who were from low socioeconomic backgrounds who endorsed the features of emerging adulthood as well, confirming emerging adulthood as a cross-cultural concept.

Since emerging adults comprise a significant segment of the African population, there are specific applications of these findings in Kenya and the rest of Africa. In many clinical settings in Africa, the concept of emerging adulthood is not well understood or recognized meaning that there is a need to raise awareness among clinical practitioners, which leads to better mental health outcomes for their clients. Furthermore, for African governments, a better understanding of emerging adulthood will lead to shifts in policy direction, in order to direct additional resources towards supporting emerging adults through developmentally appropriate programs that are effective in creating impact in the lives of the young people.

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