''Although, I'll never really be the best at anything'': A Comparative Analysis of Negative Self-descriptions and Gender During Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

An individual's self-description illustrates their conceptualizations of their identity and perceptions of self. The purpose of this study is to examine whether there are gender differences in how males and females negatively describe themselves during emerging adulthood. The study explored the hypothesis that the number of negative self-descriptions are related to gender in the population. It was expected that females would engage in more negative self-description than males. To conduct the study, 115 first year Psychology students at the University of Groningen were instructed to describe themselves for three minutes, while alone in an experiment room. These self-descriptions were transcribed and coded based on the IMICA manual and 39 participants negatively self-described. The self-descriptions of 19 males and 20 females were compared in terms of gender differences in relation to negative self-description counts and negative self-description content. This investigation was both qualitative and quantitative. The analysis found that in the context of this study, gender did not have an influence on the participants' negative self-description. However, further research is needed to explore this more definitively. These findings have implications for understanding the ways in which males and females perceive themselves during emerging adulthood and how those perceptions may influence their mental health, social functioning and well-being.

Keywords: negative self-description, gender differences, self-concept, emerging adulthood

''Although, I'll never really be the best at anything": A Comparative Analysis of Negative Self-descriptions and Gender During Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 29) is widely considered a crucial time for the formation and consolidation of self-concept (Crocetti et al., 2012). Emerging adult males and females have been found to have different experiences during this maturation period. For example, women may experience higher levels of emotional dysregulation and feelings of depression (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). From a developmental perspective (Jenzer et al., 2018), this stage is characterised by instability as young people experience significant changes in interpersonal and intrapersonal constructs, including cognitive ability and social relationships (Williams, 2017). Research has shown that emerging adults begin to think intensely about themselves, reflect on their own qualities and capabilities, and make important decisions about their future, contributing to the development of their self-concept (Crocetti et al., 2012; Crocetti et al., 2016). This also involves self-exploration and identity formation as they strive to gain insight into who they are and their role in society (Arnett, 2000). Ultimately, this period of growth and development facilitates the fortification of self-certainty and prosocial tendencies (Havighurst, 1952; Arnett, 2000; Crocetti et al., 2016). Emerging adults may experience fluctuations in their self-concept as they explore different roles and identities and encounter new experiences and challenges (Crocetti et al., 2016). This can lead to positive and negative changes in their self-concept. For example, positive feedback and success in a specific domain can lead to a stronger and more positive self-concept in that area, while failure or negative feedback can lead to a weaker or more negative self-concept (Crocetti et al., 2016; Hansen & Henderson, 2019).

Specifically, then, this paper will examine whether variations exist between how male and female emerging adults negatively describe themselves.

Self-concept

Many characterise self-concept as the range of beliefs a person develops about themselves over time and their own assessment of who they are as a person (Kuhn & Mcpartland 1954; Lewis 1990; Purdie & Hattie, 1995; Baumeister 1999). This assessment may include their competence to perform a certain task to a desired level (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Mullis & Martin, 2013). One's self-concept cannot be viewed as static. Rather, it is a dynamic part of an individual and subject to change (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Morf & Mischel, 2012). Developing a positive self-concept is considered desirable in our society (Ryberg, 2018), and is important for maturation, social functioning and adaptive development (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Sloan, 2007; Morf & Mischel, 2012; Bukowski et al., 2018; Knez et al., 2020). However, negative self-descriptions can result in negative commitments and the development of a negative self-concept which could undermine adaptive development (Morf & Mischel, 2012). Research on self-description suggests that negative self-descriptions may hinder performance (Van Raalte et al., 2016). For example, there is evidence that women report higher levels of depression, trait anxiety, and exhibit higher scores in measures of negative self-talk compared to men (Eaton et al., 2011; DeVore & Pritchard, 2013). According to Shavelson et al. (1985) the development self-concept involves a person's self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretations of their environment. They note self-concept is especially influenced by the reinforcements and criticisms of one's behaviour by significant others (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh & Hattie, 1996).

Self-concepts are domain-specific and relate to beliefs about one's characteristics and abilities in different areas, such as academia, social contexts and physical proficiency (Sadhwani, 2013). High self-concept can encourage a range of positive outcomes and support the realisation of one's potential (Craven et al., 2003; Marsh & Craven, 1997, 2006; Hansen & Henderson, 2019). In addition to domain-specific self-concepts, individuals also have a general self-concept, which determines their overall perception of themselves (Markus & Wurf, 1987). This can influence their emotional and psychological well-being (Harter, 1999). For example, individuals with a positive general self-concept tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall well-being (Chui & Wong, 2015).

Gender and Self-concept

Research into gender identity suggests that it is central to an individual's sense of self (Sinclair et al., 2019). Gender-related experiences and socialisation processes, for instance gender role and expectation exposure, may influence the development and expression of the self-concept differently in males and females (Hyde, 2014; Strapko et al., 2016). For example, females are typically socialised to be more nurturing and emotionally expressive, while males are socialised to be assertive and competitive (Eccles et al., 1990).

The study of gender differences has a long history (Douglas & Salzman, 2019), and psychologists show increasing interest in how self-evaluations differ among genders (Stake, 1992; Wilgenbusch & Merrell, 1999; Jackson et al., 2010; Sinclair et al., 2019). In the research into self-concept and gender differences, many studies measure academic self-concept, that is the self-evaluation of one's skills and abilities in academic domains (Mejía-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Hansen & Henderson (2019) found that, while females underestimate their academic capabilities, males typically overestimate their abilities. In particular, males regularly exaggerate their

abilities in subjects that are historically seen as masculine, for example, mathematics and sciences (Marsh, 1989; Marsh & Yeung, 1998; Sullivan, 2009; Chen et al., 2013). Mejía-Rodríguez et al. (2020) found that, despite non-significant gender differences in abilities relating to mathematics, boys have higher self-concepts in this area (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004; Wilkins, 2004; Herbert & Stipek, 2005; Meelissen & Luyten 2008; Vandecandelaere et al., 2012).

Similarly, gender discrepancies tend to follow a pattern; females often have higher self-concepts on measures of morality and likability compared with males. Males often exhibit more positive self-concepts on power, giftedness and invulnerability (Stake, 1992). These patterns are in line with stereotypical gender roles (Sinclair et al., 2019). Gender socialisation is linked to the development and perpetuation of stereotypes (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2022). Stereotypes are impactful in shaping biassed expectations of and behaviours for groups, particularly relating to categories such as gender (Schneider, 2004). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), widely-held stereotypes about social groups can influence a person's view of themselves. Males and females have also been seen to differ in how motivated they are to achieve and how goals they set for themselves vary (Shin & Ryan, 2014). Lastly, research has consistently shown that, during emerging adulthood, females experience more body dissatisfaction and negative self-concepts relating to their weight than males (Striegel-Moore et al., 1986). Increased societal pressure or objectification has been found to lead to a more negative body self-concept for females (Sarwer et al., 2005).

Self-descriptions

A person's self-descriptions illustrate conceptualisations of their identity and perceptions of the self (Bond & Cheung, 1983; McAdams, 1995; Somech, 2000; McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Self-descriptions are considered to be verbal illustrations of one's self-concept, and in many studies they are used as an instrument to measure self-concept (Calhoun & Morse, 1977). Research suggests that, as people age, self-descriptions become more domain-specific (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; van der Aar et al., 2018) due to increasing scope for self-evaluation regarding intellectual capacity (academic domain), physical features (physical domain) and comparison with other individuals (social domain) (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; van der Aar et al., 2018). Moreover, gender socialisation can influence the domains individuals prioritise when self-describing. For example, social expectations have been found to lead males to be inhibited in their willingness to be emotionally expressive and women to prioritise more relational self-descriptions (Wong et al., 2017). Studying the way in which individuals describe themselves can provide insights into their self-perception and facilitate understanding of how elements of their self-concepts are inter-related (Marsh et al., 2004). It is understood that self-descriptions are expressions of an individual's inner sense of self and a person's identity can be viewed as who a person chooses to say they are (Schachter, 2015). Therefore, self-concept and self-descriptions are closely associated, in that self-descriptions both influence and reflect self-concept and can be used to evaluate self-concept. Given the importance of self-description in the development of self-concept, it is worthwhile to deepen our understanding of its positive and negative impacts and to explore whether gender is an influential factor.

Current Study

There is a paucity of research into variations in negative self-descriptions among genders. Therefore, the current study's primary objective was to analyse how negative self-descriptions vary among male and female emerging adults, endeavouring to answer the research question: How do negative self-descriptions differ between genders? More specifically, the study set out

to examine how males and females differ in their exploration and construction of their negative self-description. Drawing on the literature reviewed thus far, this study is based on the expectation that males and females will differ in the construction of their negative self-descriptions due to the influence of gender socialisation. More specifically, it is expected that males will engage in less negative self-descriptions relating to academic achievement than females, given existing research suggesting males have more positive academic self-concepts; and females will engage in more negative self-descriptions relating to their weight than males. The sample for this study consists of 115 University of Groningen first-year Psychology students who participated in a prior research project, where they were left unaccompanied in an experiment room and asked to verbally describe themselves for three minutes. The self-descriptions were assigned to various identity domains using the Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis method (IMICA) (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021; Appendix A), and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Method

Participants

In this study, a total of 115 participants (N = 62 women, 53 men) have taken part (M = 20.6; SD = 2.03; *age range* = 18-28). Data from one participant were excluded due to it being incomplete. Participants were recruited from undergraduate Psychology courses, and they earned course credits for their participation.

Procedure

Prior to the study, participants were asked for permission for their data to be used anonymously and securely. Their informed consent was acquired through a form, which included

information about the research procedure and about their rights as a research participant, including their right to withdraw from the study at any point in the process. Thereafter, the actual research procedure could start, which was structured along three different phases.

The first phase of the study consisted of participants verbally describing themselves for three and a half minutes using a microphone headset connected to a computer, where the statements were recorded. Participants were asked to start speaking freely ten seconds after the recording started so that the researcher present could leave the experiment room and give the participants the privacy to self-disclose. Participants could say anything that came to mind that was connected to themselves. The recorded narratives were collected in this phase of the study as the data for the current research. It must be mentioned that, prior to phase one, the participants were aware that they, as well as the researcher, would listen to their self-descriptions after recording them.

In the following two phases, the participants were asked to participate in some follow-up measuring tasks regarding their feelings about their self-descriptions of the first phase and regarding their feelings about themselves in more general terms. In the second phase, participants were given the task to listen to their self-descriptions and to indicate how they felt during the moment of expression. For this purpose, the Mouse Paradigm was used (Vallacher et al., 2002), which allowed participants to evaluate their feelings about each self-description along a continuum from positive to negative. In the third phase, the Rosenberg self-esteem scale was introduced to the participants (Rosenberg, 1965). After the study, participants were informed about the true purpose of the research, which was deliberately withheld prior to the study.

Data preparation

The self-descriptions given by participants were first transcribed using online software. They were then uploaded to Atlas.ti. The coding of these transcripts took place in three stages. The group was split into three sets of pairs. Each pair was assigned between 10 -13 transcripts to code. Coder 1 (C1) coded the first half of the transcripts, and Coder 2 (C2) coded the second. Each identity claim was quoted and saved. C2 checked the transcripts that C1 had coded and vice versa.

The transcripts were cross-checked to ensure there was interrater reliability and consistency in how the coding was conducted. If there was doubt or disagreement, the pair would revisit the coding manual and discuss it. In the event that the pair could not come to an agreement, the claim was recorded and discussed amongst the complete research group in the subsequent meeting. The coding manual was adjusted and embellished after each query was raised. Once the coding was completed, the quotes were imported to excel.

Each quote was then assigned a code categorising the quote under a domain. The coding manual used for this is based on a narrative identity domains coding manual developed by McLean and Syed (2011). The coding manual can be found in appendix A. Coding of each identity claim was done in terms of the identity content domains that the claim is constructing. Identity content domains are split into relational categories and ideological categories. Both categories include more specific, in-depth codes. To be coded as present, the domain has to be related to a central aspect of the claim, it can not be background information. Every single claim was coded with only one domain.

Data analysis

Participant Selection

The initial step for selecting the sample relevant to this study was to create an accurate code to classify participants who engaged in negative self-descriptions. An additional code for 'negative self-description' was added to our coding procedure after the first phase of coding and each transcript was coded by three independent raters using a deductive approach. The specific criteria for the negative self-description were any statement/description/evaluation that relates to the self, that is critical, deprecating and discouraging in tone (Bukowski et al., 2018), such as ''I don't like myself that much because of my body'' or ''I'm not the smartest kid.'' Participants who spoke negatively but did not specifically relate their description to the self were excluded from the sample. Following the review of each transcript, each claim that explicitly included a negative self-description was coded accordingly. In the event of disagreement or uncertainty, the coders would review the definition and examples provided, discuss their opinions and come to a consensus.

Analysis

The variables investigated in this study were male and female negative self-descriptions. The study adopted a mixed method format. To investigate the hypothesis that the number of negative self-descriptions are related to gender in the population, an initial quantitative analysis collated the prevalence of such claims in the whole sample. Then, the proportion of negative self-description claims made by males versus females was compared to the total combined and the average number of claims per self-description was compared based on gender. The data were checked to ensure they met the chi square test assumptions, which included the independence of two groups, frequency data in cells, categorical measurement of two variables and mutually exclusive categories. The qualitative part of this study involved analysing the content and construction of the negative-self description. In line with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006;

Charmaz, 2014), the data were inspected using frequency plots and themes emerged, which were then extracted. These themes were analysed in two ways; a comparison to the total number of claims and a comparison separated by gender. An exploratory analysis was conducted to determine gender differences in negative self-descriptions. The contents of the themes were also examined to detect prevalent patterns.

Results

Descriptives

From the total sample of 115 participants, 39 engaged in negative self-descriptions, representing 33.91% of the total sample. The 39 participants selected for the analysis 20 (17.39% from the total sample) identified as female and 19 (16.52% from the total sample) identified as male. The participants were between 18 and 28 years old, with males and females averaging almost the same age (M = 20.8, SD = 2.65; M = 20.9, SD = 2.23). The 39 participants made a total of 99 negative self-description claims. Interestingly, the number of claims were relatively evenly distributed between males and females, with 49.49% being made by females and 50.50% made by males. On average, participants made 2.54 negative self-description claims each per self-description. Males made slightly more claims on average than females (M = 2.63, SD = 1.83; M = 2.45, SD = 1.47). However, the results of the t-test (t(37) = 0.355, p > .05) comparing the number of claims by gender revealed a non-significant result indicating there was no meaningful difference between the two groups. Male participants also had a larger range of claims than females, ranging from 1 to 6 while females ranged from 1 to 5. The distribution of claims by gender is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 1 illustrates the comparison of the frequency of the number of claims relative to gender. The majority of participants (64.1%) made

either one or two negative self claims (68.42% of males and 60% of females). While no female

made more than 5 negative self claims, 14.79% of males did.

Table 1

*Chi square table of the thematic analysis regarding how many claims were made in each theme*

Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	p
X^2	0.828	4	0.935
N	99		

The results of Table 1 pertain to the chi square test involving thematic segregation that

was conducted to determine if, when the observed findings are compared to the expected

findings, the difference is due to a relationship or chance (Table 1). As previously mentioned, the

hypothesis investigated in this paper was that the number of negative self-descriptions are related

to gender in the population. The findings indicate the differences observed between men and

women are small and non-significant with $\chi2$ (4, $N = 99$) = .83, p = .935. This indicates that

there is not enough evidence to support the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship

between the variables. These results suggest that gender does not have a significant influence on

the themes mentioned by each participant. More generally, the observed differences between the

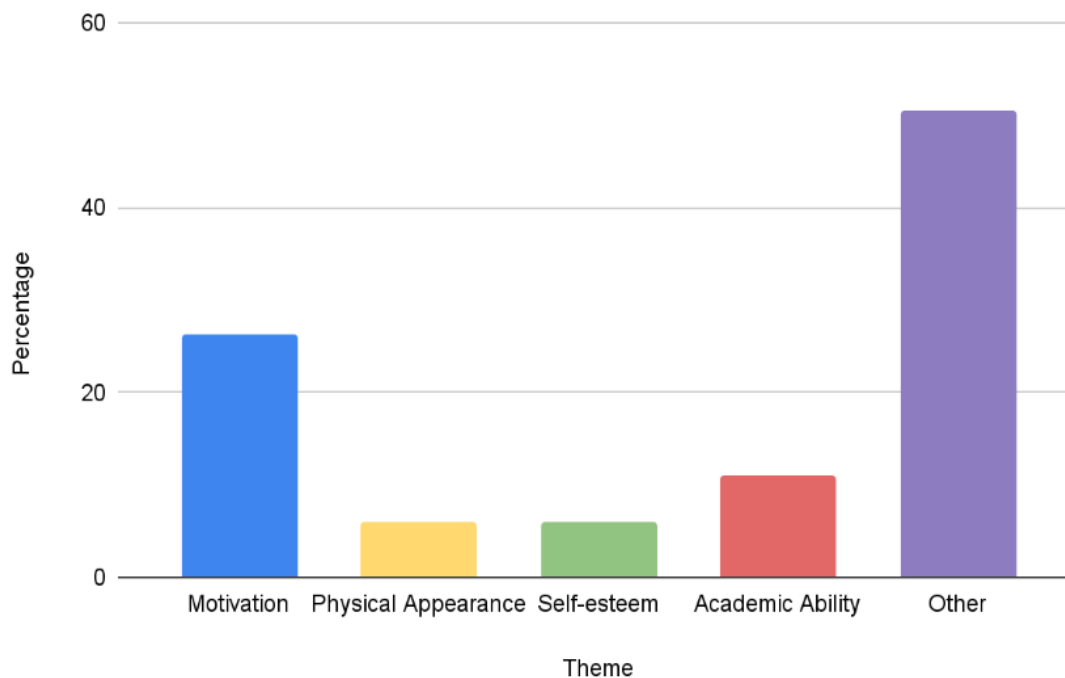groups may be due to chance rather than a meaningful difference.

Figure 1

Comparison of the frequency of number of claims relative to gender
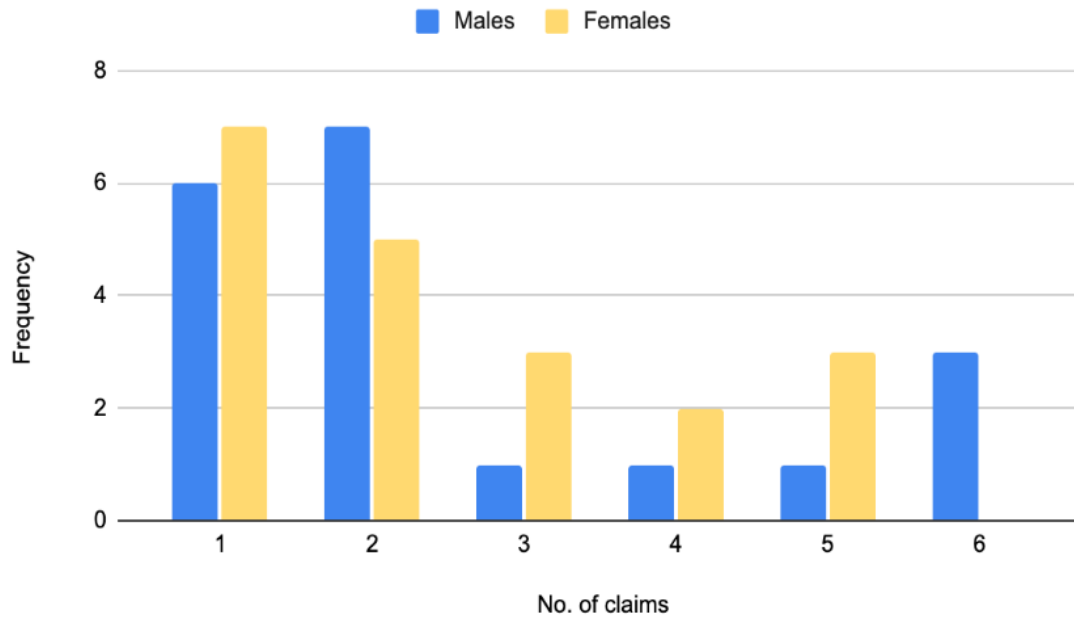
Note. This graph illustrates the distribution of the frequency of claims per self-description

separated by gender.

Figure 2

Percentage of claims made in each theme

Note. The graph above illustrates the total percentage of claims made in each of the extracted
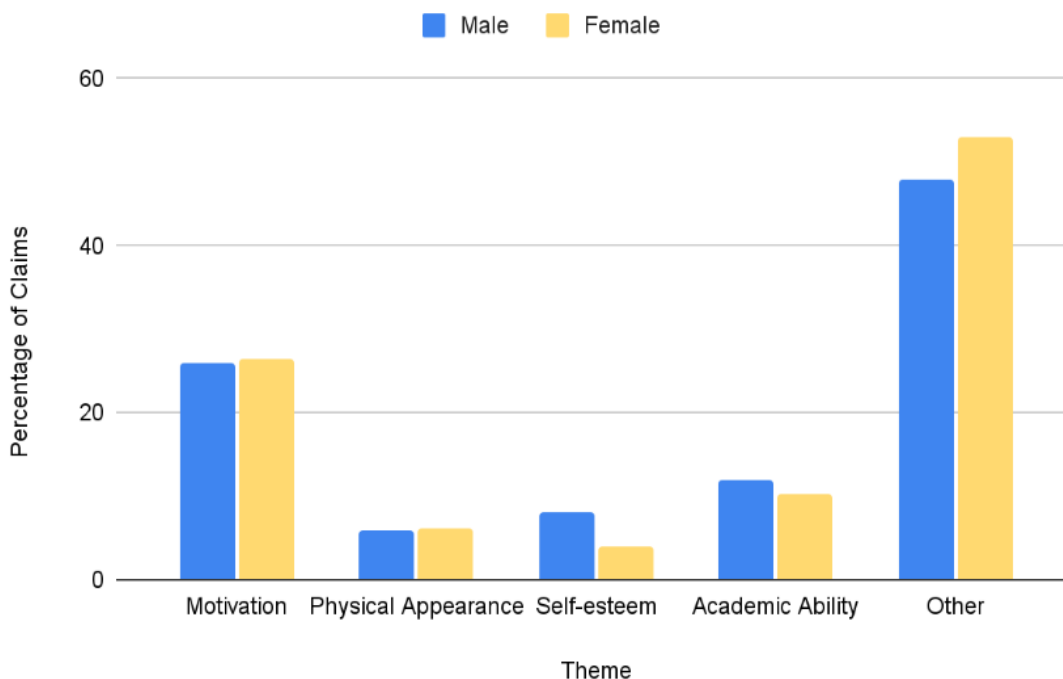
themes.

Claims and Content Themes

The qualitative exploratory analysis of the negative self-description claims revealed five

prevalent themes, namely, *motivation*, *self-esteem*, *academic ability*, *physical appearance* and

other (Figure 2). Of the 99 negative self-description claims that were extracted from the whole

sample, 49 of these claims pertained to the four themes, *motivation, self-esteem, academic

ability, physical* and *appearance*. The remaining 50 claims were placed in the *other* theme.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of claims in percentages, per theme. For the purpose of this

study, the theme *motivation* is defined as follows; anything that references 'laziness'

'motivation' or 'ambition' (e.g. "I don't do well, I'm not very organised"). Similarly, the theme

self-esteem encompasses anything that specifically refers to an individual's self-esteem, confidence or insecurity (e.g. "I have a pretty bad low self-esteem, I suppose''). *Academic ability* refers to the participants' perceived academic capabilities/ineptitude or intelligence in a particular subject or in general (e.g "I'm bad in biology, for example.''). And *physical appearance* refers to anything to do with the participants' perceived looks or appearance (e.g. "flaws are like my, my body"). The negative self-description claims that did not fit into these four themes were assigned to the *other* theme (e.g. "because I can't take criticism very well'').

As shown in Figure 2, aside from the *other* theme, the majority of negative self-claims were found in the *motivation* (26.26%) and the *academic ability* (11.11%) themes, while *physical appearance* and *self-esteem* each had 6.06%. Interestingly, 50.50% of the claims did not align with any of the aforementioned four themes. These claims lacked a discernable pattern or subject matter, but rather included general sentiments of inadequacy. Examples of such topics included difficulty with healthy habits, struggling to excel in specific areas, being chaotic, forgetfulness, not paying attention to details, taking things too seriously, being stressed out easily, being clumsy, unfunny, and struggling with criticism (e.g. ''I have a lot of bad, um, um, yeah qualities''; ''I sometimes, um, take, um, some things too serious''; ''have absolutely no problems with picking up really unhealthy habits'').

Figure 3

The percentage of claims made in each theme separated by gender

Note. The graph above shows the comparison of the percentage of claims made in each theme separated by gender.

Some possible differences can be observed after visually inspecting Figure 3, which depicts the breakdown of claims per theme, separated by gender. Firstly, there appears to be a difference in how often each theme was mentioned. Notable, the *motivation* theme was most commonly referenced. More than half (53.06%) of the negative self-description claims that fall into the four categories were made by males (except for *other*). Females made fewer claims than males in the *academic ability* and *self-esteem* themes, but made a comparable number of claims in the themes *motivation* and *physical appearance*. Although males and females made almost the same number of negative self-description claims per interview (male averaging 2.63 and females averaging 2.45), males made more claims that fit into the four extracted themes. However, the

differences between men and women were small and non-significant ($\chi2 = 2.83$) based on the non significant chi-square test result.

Figure 3 illustrates the results from the thematic categorisation section of this analysis, separated by gender. It can be observed that males made more negative self-description claims than females in every theme except *motivation* and *physical appearance* where the number of claims were equal. As has been stated earlier, the majority of negative self-description claims were made in the *motivation* theme. In this theme, more than half (57.69%) of the claims specifically mentioned 'laziness'. Overall, males tended to use 'laziness' and 'disorganisation' in their description more frequently than females (''I would describe myself as someone who is a bit lazy''; ''And sometimes I can be very lazy''; ''I am sometimes a bit unorganised,''). Females tended to mention 'ambition' and 'motivation' more frequently than males (''I'm not very motivated for school''; ''and unmotivated''; ''I'm not that ambitious''). In the theme *physical appearance,* males mentioned their weight more often than females (''I, um, think about myself that I could, uh, maybe lose some weight''; ''Um, I always was fat as a child''), while female descriptions were more varied (e.g. ''Sometimes I don't like well how I see myself''; 'flaws are like my, my body''; ''don't think that I'm very good looking''). Males made twice as many claims in the *self-esteem* theme as females. Males mentioned 'insecurity' more than females (e.g. "I consider myself as insecure''; ''I'm insecure to be judged, uh, superficially''), whereas the claims made by females focused on 'confidence' and 'self-esteem' (e.g. ''I have a pretty bad low self-esteem, I suppose''; ''However, the past couple of months I would stay in Groningen, my confidence went down''). Similarly, males made slightly more claims in the *academic ability* theme than females. On average, males showed a tendency to make more claims referencing a specific subject than females (''But I'm pretty bad in mathematics''; ''I'm bad in biology, for

example."). Additionally, females tended to mention their perceived 'smartness' more than males (e.g. ''I wouldn't say that I'm especially smart,''; ''I'm not particularly smart or something").

Discussion

Emerging adulthood is a time in which individuals undergo many changes and their self-concepts are subject to adjustment (Crocetti et al., 2012; Crocetti et al., 2016). Negative self-concepts have been found to inhibit performance in certain domains and impair social functioning (Hansen & Henderson, 2019). The objective of this study was to deepen our comprehension of how negative self-descriptions vary between males and females during emerging adulthood. The specific research question being addressed was: 'How do negative self-descriptions differ among genders?'. To do this, a verbal study was conducted to compare the frequency and nature of negative self-descriptions in males and females. Moreover, an analysis was conducted to identify how often males and females described themselves negatively and to determine any differences in the content and construction of these negative self-descriptions. This comparative and explorative study adopted both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. As people mature, their self-concept becomes more domain-specific and intricate due to more focus on self-evaluation and changes in an individual's relationships (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; van der Aar et al., 2018). In general there is broad consensus, according to existing research, that gender-based differences exist with regard to negative self-concept among emerging adults (Marsh, 1989; Marsh & Yeung, 1998; Sullivan, 2009).

Findings

Previous research into negative self-concepts has found evidence of gender differences between males and females (Mejía-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Therefore, based on this previous research, it was hypothesised that this current study would yield results that indicated disparities between how males and females negatively self-describe. However, the results of this study were unexpected, as they indicated that gender did not have a significant influence on how participants negatively described themselves. The findings suggested that there was no support to reject the null hypothesis that the number of negative self-descriptions are not related to gender in the population. Thus, there is not enough evidence to support the claim that there is a significant relationship between the variables. Interestingly, this study's results found that both males and females exhibited comparable numbers of claims relating to motivation and physical appearance. But surprisingly, the qualitative analysis revealed that males made more negative self-claims that specifically related to their weight than females. In addition, this study found that males actually reported more negative self-claims than females regarding their perceived academic ability.

These findings are particularly interesting, given the existing research that has suggested gender differences in negative self-concept (Sinclair et al., 2019. More specifically, previous research has demonstrated that females tend to report higher levels of negative self-concept than males, which could be attributed to a range of factors such as gender socialisation, cultural expectations, and societal norms (Fivesh, 2010).   Similarly, numerous studies have shown that males and females differ in their levels of motivation and their attitudes towards their physical appearance (Shin & Ryan, 2014). This study's findings are in contrast to the established literature in the field of academic self-concept and body image, which has consistently demonstrated that males generally hold more positive self-concepts than females in both areas (Skaalvik &

Skaalvik, 2004; Wilkins, 2004; Herbert & Stipek, 2005; Meelissen & Luyten, 2008; Fan & Williams, 2010; Vandecandelaere et al., 2012).

Implications

These results may have important implications for developing interventions that aim to improve individuals' self-concepts, in the context of gender. The finding that approximately one third (33.91%) of the 115 participants engaged in negative self-descriptions merits further investigation. It is concerning that this significant fraction of this sample of emerging adults engaged in negative self-description, which has been shown to damage performance in certain fields and undermine the development of self-concept (Morf & Mischel, 2012). If these results were replicated in more comprehensive research, it would carry a number of implications. Firstly, it would imply that negative self-description requires greater awareness among university staff to ensure that they are conscious of the issue and actively searching for appropriate interventions and support to fulfil their pastoral care obligations. Secondly, it would imply that students should be made aware of their propensity to negatively self-describe and the implications these have for performance in areas, like academia, and in the development of their self concepts. Lastly, it would imply that institutions of higher learning should examine the feasibility of establishing programmes of intervention, counselling and support that would mitigate the negative impacts of such negative self-descriptions among the emerging adult population.

This study challenges the widely held belief that women tend to have more negative self-concepts than men. Traditionally, men have been socialised to be more assertive and confident while women have been encouraged to be more nurturing and accommodating (Zelezny et al., 2000; Strapko et al., 2016). However, recent societal changes promoting gender

equality and equal opportunity may have led to changes in socialisation experiences and a reduction in gender role socialisation practices. As a result of these societal shifts, it is possible that men and women's self-perceptions are changing. Whether or not the gap previously observed between men and women in terms of negative self-concept is closing, merits further research and study.

The findings of the current study may have theoretical implications for how self-concept is conceptualised in the context of gender differences and may shed light on the ways in which societal expectations and cultural norms shape individuals' self-concept and identity development. The findings also highlight the importance of considering the intersectionality of different social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, in understanding how individuals experience and construct their sense of self. Further research in this area could inform interventions and policies aimed at promoting gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes, emphasising the importance of creating inclusive environments that value diversity and support individuals' self-exploration and self-expression.

Strengths

Unlike previous research, this study examines participants who are free to explore their stream of consciousness in a judgement-free context. The novel nature of this research design allows the participants to depict their articulation of themselves in both a familiar and verbalised manner. The time frame of three minutes was optimal as it was not enough for participants to prepare their self-descriptions but it still facilitated sufficient exploration of their self-concept to a satisfactory degree. Moreover, this study design allows for an exploration without interpersonal interplay that could have an impact on the expression of one's self-concept. This

intrapersonal exploration of identity content, using real-time speech and self-description provides useful insights into identity content and self-concept.

Limitations

Context Saliency

The results of this study must be interpreted with a certain degree of caution and a number of limitations should be taken into account. Firstly, the setting of the study may have influenced the findings. The university context - a room in the research laboratory of their faculty building - may have made the topic of academia more salient. Context saliency involves information processing and attentional focus and it has been found to play a role in decision making and behaviour (Hickey et al., 2009). In this way, the academic self-concept may have been activated which would increase the discussion of collegiate issues among participants. More specifically, the prevalence of the theme *academic ability* may be accounted for by the activation of this self-concept domain. Future research could choose the study's setting based on impartiality to avoid activating context-specific topics and biases.

Continuity

Secondly, the cross-sectional nature of this study inhibits further analysis on the evolving relationship between negative self-descriptions and gender differences. Existing research suggests that during emerging adulthood self-concepts are subject to many changes and develop over time (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; van der Aar et al., 2018). Considering emerging adulthood spans across an 11 year period, it would be more suitable and thorough to conduct a repeated measure longitudinal qualitative study. By extending the duration of the observation period, the association between negative self-descriptions and gender would be captured more comprehensively and the studies reliability would increase.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study builds on previous research by investigating whether gender-based differences exist in emerging adults' negative self-descriptions. It was hypothesised that males and females would differ in their negative self-descriptions. Contrary to the hypothesis, the results of this quantitative and qualitative study indicate no significant difference between how male and female emerging adults negatively describe themselves. Males and females engaged in relatively similar levels of negative self-description. However, there were slight variations in the content of their self-descriptions, with males engaging in more negative self-claims relating to academic ability and self-esteem. Gender socialisation processes may have impacted the expression of negative self-descriptions. While acknowledging the limitations of this study, its findings raise implications for future research and its insights shed light on how emerging adults self-describe negatively. Building on this study, further research may inform interventions aiming to increase positive self-concepts during emerging adulthood and add to our understanding of gender socialisation and conceptualisation of self-concept during this pivotal life stage. How we perceive and respond to negative self-descriptions among emerging adults is of critical importance if we are to empower future generations to realise their individual potentials.

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Appendix A

Coding Manual: Content Domains

The following coding manual is based on a narrative identity domains coding manual developed by McLean and Syed (2011). Each identity claim is coded in terms of the identity content domains that the claim is constructing. To be coded as present the domain has to be related to some central aspect of the claim, not just background information. One way to test whether a content domain is present is to ask: "Would exchanging the domain content change the claim?" Each claim should only be coded with one domain (though different extracts of the same turn may have different domains assigned to them).

Relational Categories
For these categories to get coded as present the claim must address what "kind of person" is constructed within a specific domain. Claims that construct personal characteristics within a specific relational domain are often coded as "personal". This means that the relational domain should be the content, rather than the context of a claim. Recall that to determine if this category is present, ask yourself if the other person is replaced with someone else (e.g. mother for friends) does the claim change? If not, do not code the category as present. The questions provided are not exclusive and may be suitable across domains.

Dating	Family	Friends	Sex Roles (Gender)
This category is defined as dating and sexuality negotiations. Claims can inform about relevant identity categories (i.e. relationship status, sexual identity, being "a virgin", etc.). Claims may provide answers to questions such as: *What kind of person is the speaker…* - *in regard to dating* - *as a partner*	This category focuses on claims about family, both biological and chosen and includes positive or negative aspects. Claims can address identity categories (i.e. child, mother, sister). Claims may address questions such as: *What does it mean to be a son/sibling/grandchild/parent?* *How does the speaker feel about their familial relationships?*	This category is related to friends and peer groups. These can be claims about relevant identity categories (i.e. friend, best friend, etc.) Claims may address questions such as: *What kind of friend is the speaker?* *What does the speaker value in friendships?* *How would others describe the speaker as a friend?*	This category captures claims that address expectations for behavior and attitudes, that are based on gender, as well as claims about gender stereotypes. Claims may address identity categories (i.e. woman, guys, chicks, etc.). *What does it mean to be a man/woman/trans?* *What is the importance of gender in the speaker's life?*

- *when it comes to sexual encounters*
 What is important to the speaker…
   - *regarding love, romance, dating, and desire*
   - *in a sexual/romantic partner*
 What does it mean to be single/LGB/in an open relationship?
	What was the speaker's life like growing up?
	
	 What is the configuration of the speaker's family?
		What are friendship rituals?
		
		 What characterizes the speaker's friendships?
			Tip: If exchanging the gender of the speaker (or who is spoken about) makes a difference, sex roles should be coded.

Ideological Categories

For these categories to get coded as present the claim must be related to the speaker, in terms of their own attributes, characteristics, or values. To determine the presence of this category, ask yourself what the identity issue at stake is. Occasionally, speakers will construct claims that provide information on issues such as "values" in a relational domain ("It's important to me that my boyfriend is honest with me") - these should be coded as relational (i.e. Dating). In contrast, claims which extend beyond the specific relational context are coded as ideological ("Honesty is really important to me, especially in a boyfriend").

Personal		Politics	Recreation
Values, Principles & Insight	*Characteristics*		
Values: Claims that focus on the development, questioning, or elaboration of personal values, or negotiation with a larger (someone else's) value system. **Principles:** *Personal ideals, what is important for a (good) life, general life rules, personal satisfaction.* **Insight:** *Realizations, insights, and reflections <u>about</u> the speaker.* *- What is important to a good life?* *- What characterizes a "good" person?*	This category is coded when a claim describes the speaker's self-image in terms of characteristics, personality traits, or traits: *Mental well/ill-being, or personality traits (extraversion, reliability, etc.), preferences, as well as typical behaviors or actions.* **Demographics:** *Demographic information (living situation, nationality, age).* *- What is characteristic about the speaker?* *- What would someone need to know, to really know the speaker?* *- How does the speaker view themselves/how would others describe them?*	Captures claims that address political issues at a very local level (e.g. school elections) to a very distal level (federal politics). *What is the political identification of the speaker (also in terms of left/right/woke/ etc.)?* *What is the role of politics in the life of the speaker?*	To be coded a claim should include a kind of activity or describe what the speaker enjoys [...]. *What does the speaker do for fun?* *What does define the speaker in the domain of 'leisure'?*
		Religion	**Occupation/Education**
		What does it mean to be a muslim/Christian/Sikh/atheist? What spiritual values does the speaker hold?	Claims that emphasize engaging in experiences that give reporters clarity about what they are good at (and not), and that helps to direct them towards an occupation.
		Other	

- What behavior is characteristic of the speaker?	*- How do speakers feel about how others see them?*	Is coded when claims to not fit any of the major domains. pd	*How do you describe yourself in the domain of occupation? What is the value of education? What are future/past jobs? What are career aspirations?*
Note: Both of the sub-types should be coded as "Personal", a distinction is not required (nor possible).			

pipspptr

Sub-Domains: Personal
The domain of personal should only be coded if no other domain can be coded, or if the claim constructs the speaker across multiple domains in a more generalized sense. Coding should be focusing on how a participant is formulating their claim, not of how the coder interprets the content of the claim.

Abilities & Skills	Appearance	Demographics
The speaker refers to things they can do, and/or things they are good/bad at. **Examples:** *I am quite good with technology.*	The speaker references any physical traits (e.g., height) or features of their appearance (e.g., clothing style, make up). **Examples:** *I have curly hair, dark skin*	Speaker introduces demographic information (e.g.name, nationality or age)

Attitudes & Interests	Participant	Values & Ideals
The claim includes things the speaker likes or is interested in AND does NOT constitute a claim in another domain. To be coded a claim should include a generalized attitude or interest towards a generalized concept (i.e. children, pets, old people, etc.) The word "like" is not sufficient or necessary for something to be coded as an attitude or interest. This can also include dislikes. **Examples:** *I think Psychology is super interesting I like kids.*	Participant references being a participant in the study. **Example:** I'm not very good at describing myself	The speaker talks about their personal values and principles or ideals. **Examples:** *A:::nd in that way I try to make a change, in my direct environment.* *It's important to me that everyone is kind to each other.* *You only live once, so I don't waste my time being worried.*

Personality, Emotions and Psychological Traits	Reflection, Growth & Personhood	Habits & Behavioral tendencies

The speaker references their psychological dimensions, including thoughts, personality traits, emotions, psychological traits, and psychologically- relevant aspects such as mental health..	The speaker describes themselves in abstract terms. This can include descriptions of developments and growth, generalized comparisons to others, or generalized evaluations of the type of person they are.	The speaker references things they generally do or would do in specific or hypothetical situations that are behavioral and could be physically observed by an external observer, and that do not reference an emotional or psychological trait.
Claims in this sub-domain can primarily be observed by the speaker themselves.	**Examples:** *"And, um, from, from that point, like during the troubles I really I think changed a whole lot of me"* *"It's made me the person that I am"* *'I tell myself that I need to do things, but it never really works out the way I wanted to.'* *'When I set a goal for myself, usually I try to actually do it.'*	If tendencies cannot be externally observed, code as Personality, Emotions and Psychological traits.
Examples: *''I am a very shy person''* *''I have a fear of starting things''* *"I like to think about, evaluate, like, my feelings"* *"I don't like insecure situations; they make me feel real bad sometimes"* *"I think I also have problems with depression or something"* *"I avoid leaving the house"*		**Examples:** *I don't really go to bed on time.* *I never leave the house, honestly.* *I always take the longest route to go somewhere.* *I like to check the oven before leaving the house.*

Domain Codes:
Each claim can be awarded only one code. All codes are written in lower cases. Codes for the domain personal are a combination of the base-code (p) and the code for the specific sub-domain (i.e. Values = v; pv).

nc   **N**ot a **C**laim

a   f**A**mily
f   **F**riends
d   **D**atingv
g   **G**ender

r   **R**ecreation
t   poli**T**ics
e   **E**ducation
s   religion/**S**pirituality
o   **O**ther

Personal[drpter
ps   Ability & **S**kills
pa   **A**ppearance
pi   Attitudes & **I**nterest
pp   **P**articipant
pd   **D**emographics

pv   **V**alues & Ideals

pt   Personality, Emotions and Psychological **T**raits

ph   **H**abits & Behavioral Tendencies

pr   **R**eflection, Growth & Personhood