

Narrative Identity of Christian College Students in Western New York

Hannah H. Kim¹

Houghton University, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Narrative identity has proven valuable in understanding identity development. However, its application to emerging adults in college settings has been limited. This qualitative research explored the narrative identity of Christian college students in Western New York through a life story analysis. Ten in-depth interviews with students were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 173 pages of transcripts that were analyzed using seven coding categories. The study revealed that the participants' identities were shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including their Christian faith, interpersonal connections with family and peers, academic and professional aspirations, and challenges related to physical and mental well-being. The findings highlight the dynamic nature of identity, constantly evolving as individuals interact with their surroundings. The participants' rich life stories painted a vivid picture of who they were, and their identity evolved as their stories unfolded. These findings can illuminate future research on the identities of Christian college students and guide them in navigating their journey of self-understanding and positive identity development. This research can also inform the development of programs and support services that address the specific needs and challenges faced by Christian college students as they navigate their identities. Understanding the sources of social support these students value can be crucial in creating a more supportive campus environment.

KEYWORDS: Narrative identity, identity development, emerging adults, qualitative research, life story analysis

Identity development is a critical task during late adolescence and young adulthood, and it has a lifelong impact on a person's psychological well-being (Arnett & Jensen, 2023; Erikson, 1968; McLean, 2005; Verschuere et al., 2017). One growing area of research is understanding identity through a person's life story narratives (McAdams, 1985, 1987, 1990, 2018), which is referred to as narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McAdams, 2018). Scholars have enhanced the understanding of identity as a life story (Bamberg, 1997; Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 1985, 1987, 1990). McAdams (1990, 1996) argues that life stories provide people with unity, purpose, and direction. Each individual works as a storyteller and, at the same time, the protagonist at the center of the story (Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1987, 1990). In this sense, as McAdams (1990) writes, "the person is both historian and history" (p. 151). Life story narratives, yielding valuable

¹ Corresponding author; an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the Department of Psychology and Criminal Justice, Houghton University, 1 Willard Avenue, Houghton, New York 14744, United States. Email: Hannah.Kim@houghton.edu

insights into the development and dynamics of identity, have gained prominence as a tool for studying identity (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Fivush, 1991; Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1990, 1993, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, 2005; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Schachter, 2004, 2005). As Bruner (1986) asserted, our stories reveal the essence of our being. Nelson (2003) further explained that these stories are constructed from our autobiographical memories, which shape our self-perception. Echoing these scholars, understanding an individual fully requires delving beyond their traits or characteristics and embracing their life narratives (McAdams, 1995, 1996, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the most influential theorist in identity research is Erik Erikson (Arnett & Jensen, 2023). Erikson (1968) argued that the quest for identity held importance in every human life and that identity problems could appear in all stages of human life. Nonetheless, adolescence emerges as the critical phase of identity formation, as individuals engage in a profound exploration of self-identity and their role within society (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's psychosocial theory defines adolescence as the age range from 13 to 21 years, which he labeled as Identity vs. Role Confusion (Erikson, 1968). Yet, his definition of adolescence, considering contemporary understandings of development, extends into the early years of emerging adulthood. While adolescence plays a crucial role in identity formation, Erikson (1968) emphasized that identity development is a lifelong process that doesn't reach completion by the end of adolescence.

Erikson (1968) identified love, work, and ideology as key domains crucial for identity development (Arnett & Jensen, 2023). Ideology, encompassing a person's belief system and values as reflected in their political and religious affiliations, provides essential context for individuals to make meaning of their experiences and develop their sense of self (Bell, 2008). Identity is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct (Jones et al., 2014). Individuals possess various identity domains, such as racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and religious identities (Bell, 2008; Griffith & Griggs, 2001; Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2000). Within these domains, individuals develop varying levels of identity statuses (e.g., Marcia, 1966). Notably, despite its potential influence on an individual's overall sense of self and well-being, religious identity has received less research attention compared to other domains (Bell, 2008).

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are particularly significant stages because those are when individuals' life stories emerge and take shape (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Thorne & Nam, 2007). Thorne and Nam (2007) posit that adolescents embark on a journey of self-discovery, seeking to define their personal identities during early adolescence. This exploration culminates in forming relatively complete narratives by the end of adolescence or young adulthood (Thorne & Nam, 2007). As adolescents weave their life stories, they progressively integrate these narratives into an ideological framework that shapes their understanding of themselves (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1985; McLean, 2005). An ideological framework provides a context within which each individual's identity story is shaped and perpetuated (McAdams, 1985). Human development—when viewed as a process of identity development—unfolds through the construction of meaning-embedded personal narratives throughout one's lifespan (Cohler, 1982; Hammack, 2008). Exploring narrative identity through people's life stories can give researchers a deeper understanding of how individuals describe their internalized thoughts and consciousness about themselves and how this storytelling further creates meaning and purpose in their lives (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1996, 1997).

Literature Review

Since McAdams' proposal of identity as a life story (1990), researchers have investigated the identity of college students or young adults through their life stories (H. Kim & Vietze, 2023; Schachter, 2004; Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010; Waters & Fivush, 2015). Yet, there is a scarcity of research exploring the development of narrative identity in young adults. H. Kim and Vietze (2023) explored the development of bicultural identity among Korean American youth and its role in safeguarding them against prejudice and discrimination while fostering resilience. The study employed narrative inquiry, drawing primarily on life story narratives of Korean American youth. The findings revealed that as Korean youths encountered racism, stereotypes, and prejudices directed towards them, their acceptance of bicultural identity as both Koreans and Americans evolved, heightening their awareness of their Korean and Asian heritage. The study demonstrated that biculturalism could serve as an asset, promoting cultural flexibility and adaptation for ethnic minority youth in the multicultural U.S. society (H. Kim & Vietze, 2023).

Waters and Fivush (2015) examined the relationships between narrative coherence, identity, and psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. They collected data from 103 undergraduate students who provided two autobiographical narratives of personally significant events. By analyzing the participants' narratives for coherence and identity content, the researchers confirmed that constructing coherent autobiographical narratives is related to emerging adults' psychological well-being. The study also proved that identity-relevant narratives moderated the relationship between narrative coherence and psychological well-being. Additionally, the study revealed that unique life events are a critical feature of identity construction in emerging adulthood and that the ability to tell coherent autobiographical narratives that explicitly address identity is linked to a higher sense of purpose and meaning in life (Waters & Fivush, 2015).

Syed and Azmitia (2008) used a narrative approach to investigate how emerging adults experience ethnicity in their everyday lives. Their research participants were 191 ethnically diverse college students who provided written narratives about when they became aware of their ethnicity. The study findings highlighted the importance of using a narrative approach to examine the content and developmental processes of ethnic identity (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). In a follow-up longitudinal study, Syed and Azmitia (2010) continued their investigation of emerging adults' ethnicity-related experiences through their narratives. They collected data from 70 ethnically diverse college students, and the findings indicated that the emerging adults' narratives of ethnicity-related experiences were associated with changes in ethnic identity exploration. Additionally, the study demonstrated the usefulness of the narrative approach to studying ethnic identity development in emerging adults (Syed & Azmitia, 2010).

Schachter (2004) investigated personal identity conflicts among young Orthodox Jewish adults. Drawing on Erikson's "identity configuration" (p. 167) construct, the author scrutinized identity construction processes in 30 young adult Orthodox Jews, 15 males and 15 females. The participants narrated accounts of their religious development and sexual development. This research demonstrated that young Jewish adults made efforts to figure out how to navigate relationships through the development of their conflicting identities (Schachter, 2004). Thus, while research on young adult narrative identity exists (e.g., previous studies), qualitative studies using life story analysis to explore this facet of identity remain scarce, particularly among college students and emerging adults. This research gap extends to the domain of religious identity, which has received less attention compared to other social identities like race, ethnicity, gender, and occupation (Bell, 2008).

Despite being under-researched both theoretically and empirically, religious identity likely plays a significant role in shaping self-perception, especially during the crucial college years

(Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). Emerging adults in the United States grapple with significant intellectual and personal growth during this time, making a closer examination of their identity formation and struggles through the lens of religious identity particularly important. Therefore, two key factors motivated this study. First, religious identity remains under-investigated in identity research studies (Bell, 2008). Second, college is a pivotal time for emerging adults, marked by significant intellectual and personal growth through both challenges and changes in self-perception (Arnett & Jensen, 2023). Given these factors, a closer look at identity formation and struggles among college students is essential. Thus, this research aimed to address this gap by exploring the narrative identity of Christian college students in Western New York through an analysis of their lived experiences, as told in their own voices.

Purpose and Research Questions

This research was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of identity issues among Christian college students through their lived experiences rather than generalize results to the larger college-age population in the United States. To do this, I developed the following three research questions:

1. What critical life experiences tell us about their identity?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of their religious identity as Christians?
3. How do they perceive their identity statuses and prospects over their lifetime?

Methodology

Research Participants

To understand participant identities through life story analysis, I recruited ten participants from a Christian liberal arts college in Western New York, where I work as a psychology faculty. This number aligned with the established range for narrative inquiry and ensured a manageable sample size for in-depth interviews. Twelve students initially expressed interest, and ten ultimately participated after scheduling individual interviews. A purposive sampling strategy targeted students relevant to the research goals (S. Campbell et al., 2020). In qualitative research, sample size is not dictated by a single rule but rather determined by the researchers to best address the research questions and achieve saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2002; Vasileiou et al., 2018). This is particularly true for narrative inquiry, where studies typically involve 6 to 12 participants (Adhikari, 2021; J. Kim, 2016). The recruitment process adhered to ethical guidelines approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Demographic Information

The participants' ages ranged from 18 years to 23 years. There was one freshman student, three sophomores, four juniors, and two seniors. The average age of the participants was 20.2 years ($SD = 1.48$). Eight of the participants were white, and two were international students born in Botswana and Ghana, respectively. They were all singles. They all identified themselves as Christians. All used English as their primary language. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1*A Summary of the Demographics of the Participants*

Participants' Initials and Numeric Codes	Age	Gender	Major	Race/Ethnicity	Level of education	Religion	Primary language
DC (1)	19	Male	Psychology/ Music Industry	White	College Sophomore	Christianity	English
JM (2)	18	Female	English/ Inclusive Adolescent Education	White	College Freshman	Christianity	English
NP (3)	22	Male	Psychology/ Communication	White	College Senior	Christianity	English
JZ (4)	20	Female	Psychology	African	College Junior	Christianity	English
AR (5)	20	Female	History	White	College Senior	Christianity	English
IZ (6)	20	Male	Psychology	White	College Junior	Christianity/ Raised Catholic	English
GS (7)	20	Female	Art/Childhood Education	White	College Junior	Christianity	English
EF (8)	21	Female	Equestrian Performance	White	College Sophomore	Christianity	English
AF (9)	19	Female	Art/ Psychology	White	College Sophomore	Christianity	English
ET (10)	23	Female	Liberal Arts	African	College Junior	Christianity	English

Data Collection and Analysis***Recruitment and Interviews***

Upon IRB approval, I recruited ten research participants through an advertisement at my current institution. Interviews were scheduled and conducted based on each participant's preference, in person or over Zoom. All interviews were recorded on Zoom (both video and audio) to facilitate transcription and data analysis. Interviews were conducted in January and February 2022, each lasting 90-120 minutes. Interview lengths varied depending on the participant's age, personality characteristics, and talkativeness. Younger participants with introverted personalities generally talked less. At the start, each participant received an informed consent form and

completed a demographic survey. Next, I interviewed each participant using a modified version of McAdams' life story interview protocol (McAdams, 1995). All interviews were conducted in English, and all participants received a \$10 Amazon e-gift card as compensation.

Transcribing

Transcriptions were produced using both NVivo (QSR International, 2020) and Zoom in January and February 2022, shortly after each interview was completed. Each interview generated 9 to 25 transcript pages, totaling 173 pages. At the beginning of the transcribing process, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and numeric code for use in data analysis and presentation of results.

Coding Procedure

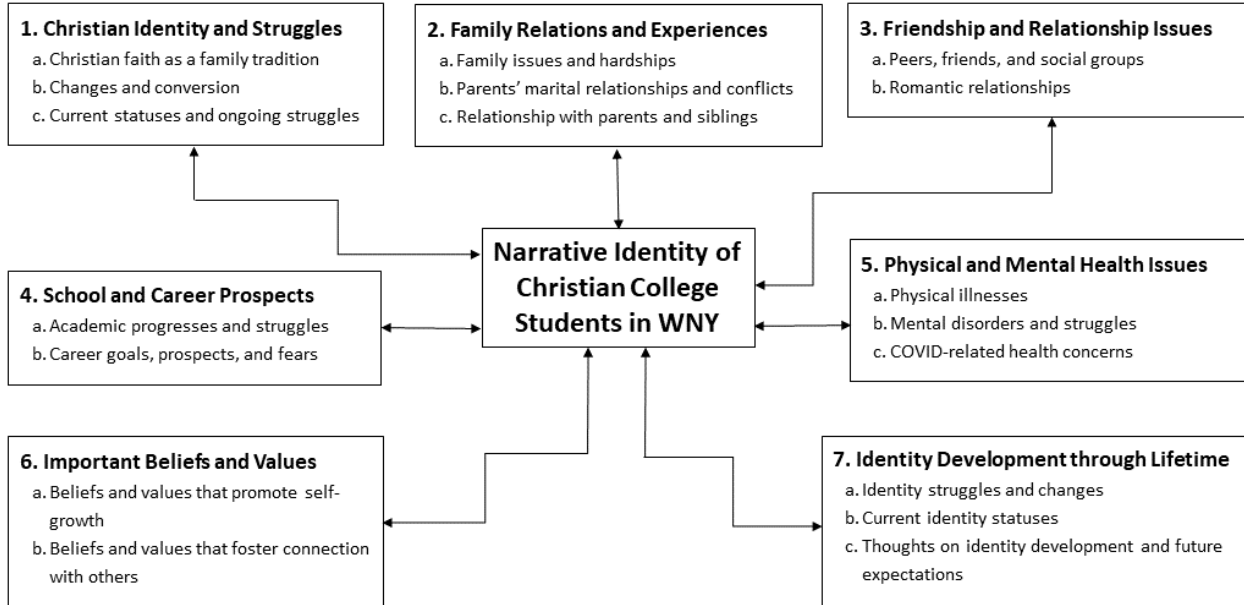
I used NVivo software (QSR International, 2020) to code the interview transcripts. First, I read all transcripts carefully and repeatedly to ensure that my initial coding themes were adequate and to open myself to the possibility of finding new themes. I anticipated discovering salient and common coding themes across all transcripts, but the cyclical and sporadic nature of narrative discourses made this process labor-intensive. As a result of repeated reading and note-taking, I reorganized my coding themes to combine the initial themes with those that emerged from the data. Second, I went through each transcript and highlighted the quotations that applied to the codes I created in NVivo. Finally, I reorganized the codes according to the hierarchy and salience that appeared across the ten interview transcripts for fine-grained coding and analysis.

Coding Categories and Subcategories

To capture the participants' perception of identity as comprehensively as possible, seven coding categories were used in data coding and analysis (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Map of Coding Categories



Inter-Rater Reliability

Inter-rater reliability was calculated by having an independent coder (coder B) code two interview transcripts, 20% of the study’s transcripts. I sent coder B my coding system and two transcripts (one for a man and one for a woman) by email and had a Zoom conversation to discuss how the coding categories were generated. We clarified our thoughts and resolved any disagreements about each category using examples. Then, coder B independently coded the transcripts. I developed an Excel spreadsheet to determine the percentage agreement between the two coders. To assess inter-rater reliability, I calculated the percentage agreement for each coding category. Next, I obtained the overall percentage agreement by averaging the individual category percentages. For the female transcript, the average percentage agreement was 95%, while for the male transcript, it was 93%. Consequently, the overall percentage agreement between the two coders was 94%.

Findings

A total of 173 pages of interview transcripts were analyzed using the seven coding categories discussed above. Several participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the study, reporting that they had never shared their life stories before. They said that it was a good opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences and to share them with someone who specializes in identity research. The findings are presented in three sections, each addressing a research question and using the corresponding coding themes: (1) Critical life experiences and identity development, (2) The role of Christian identity, and (3) Identity development through lifetime.

Critical Life Experiences and Identity Development

Family Relations and Experiences

Family is an important contextual factor in identity development. The coding of family relations and related experiences categorized the participants' perceptions of how their family relations and experiences shaped their identities.

Family Issues and Hardships. Several participants reported experiencing family problems growing up, such as illnesses and deaths of parents. These experiences had a significant impact on their lives. One woman (ET) shared how her family life became difficult after her father's sudden death when she was very young:

When I was eight and my brother was nine, our father passed away, and our lives changed. Those were very dark times. I went through the normal things that a child goes through when they lose a parent, and some things happened that should not have happened.

Another woman (JM) talked about the difficult times when her grandmother passed away, followed shortly by her mother's hospitalization for a tumor and her own illness.

I was in sixth grade when my grandmother passed away. The same week, my mother was hospitalized and had a cancerous tumor that they had to remove. So, in a very short amount of time, I experienced a lot of trauma, including a concussion from a bus accident.

Parents' Marital Relationships and Conflicts. A few participants whose parents experienced marital problems and subsequent divorce reported a difficult time during those years. These experiences had a significant impact on their family life and emotional struggles from childhood through adolescence. One participant (IZ) recounted the profound impact of his parents' divorce and his father's alcoholism on his life. He struggled with the hardships caused by these events and realized how difficult it was to grow up without a father figure in the home. He recalled that it took him a long time to accept his father's absence, but he acknowledged that those years helped to shape him into the person he is today. He reflected:

The most influential event in my life was my parents' divorce and my dad's alcoholism. Not having a father figure in the picture was a huge challenge. There's been a valley in every stage of my life. My parents' divorce was probably the most difficult experience I've had. It took me many years to get over it and finally accept it. I have no emotions towards it anymore; I'm completely done with it. But it's also the point in my life that has shaped me the most.

Relationship with Parents and Siblings. The participants described how their relationships with parents and siblings played a role in their identity development. A few participants reported having close relationships with their siblings and appreciated their love and support. Those who grew up with a single parent acknowledged their love and sacrifice, expressing gratitude for their parent's strength and dedication. One man (IZ) reflected:

I appreciate my mom's love and sacrifice. I'm grateful for her strength and dedication. She can see the fruits of her labor with me and my brother succeeding in school and socially. Growing up with a single parent has made me a better person. I wouldn't be the same person I am today if it wasn't for my mom and the way she handled the situation.

One woman (EF) discussed her parents' love and sacrifice for her growing up, especially during her illness:

They were always very open and supportive when I was struggling. They were willing to do whatever it took to help me get better. For example, when I was really struggling with migraines, chronic pain, and my mental health, my mom quit her job so she could spend full-time calling doctors and insurance companies and driving me places. I couldn't have done any of that without her sacrifice.

Friendship and Relationship Issues

The code of friendship and relationship issues was particularly salient in exploring the identity development of the participants, all young adults in their late teens to early twenties. The interview transcripts were replete with episodes about participants' experiences with friends, romantic partners, and social groups.

Peers, Friends, and Social Groups. The participants discussed how they made friends at school or work and how these friendships impacted their identity development. Several participants also reported difficulties making friends and connecting with others socially. One man (NP) said:

I placed a high priority on finding friends for my first job, but the biggest challenge was definitely middle school and early high school because I had almost no friends. I was trying to figure out what friendship means, but I never really found anyone who stuck, or people ended up moving away, and I would lose my friends.

Some participants discussed how they changed their approach to making friends in social situations by becoming more comfortable presenting themselves authentically rather than how they wanted others to see them. One woman (ET) reported:

No one knew anything about me, so I could redefine myself and present myself to people how I wanted them to see me. I was able to present them with what I wanted them to see, but I eventually got more comfortable presenting the real me and not just what I wanted them to see of me. I overcame that challenge by learning which friendships are worth keeping and the people who you enjoy being around and they enjoy being around you.

Several participants reported experiencing bullying by peers in middle school or high school. They described these experiences as painful and having a lasting impact on their self-image and identity. One woman (JZ) reported being bullied so severely that she had to transfer schools. She explained that she was bullied because of her larger body size, which was different from her peers at the time. She implied that this had a lasting impact on her body image. She said:

I was bullied the entire time I was at boarding school. It wasn't as bad as the previous school, but it was still uncomfortable. Then I transferred schools, and my mom brought us back home so I went to boarding school in Malawi. I knew the bullying was a lot about weight because I wasn't an overweight child, but compared to the children in the school, I was bigger than them. I can see that now looking at pictures, but in the moment, it felt like I was extremely overweight, and that's why they would pick on me because I was an easy target.

Romantic Relationships. Given the age range of the participants, romantic relationships were considered an important factor in investigating their identity development. The participants had experienced romantic relationships that had both positive and negative impacts on their lives.

A few participants shared how their romantic relationships had negatively affected their sense of self. One woman (AR) reported:

I have a lot of friends and family there, but my partner forced and manipulated me into doing things I didn't want to do. I convinced myself afterwards that it was okay, but it damaged my self-image for a long time. That was a negative but important experience. I still think about it sometimes, so it still has an effect on me.

Several participants discussed the significant harm they had experienced from previous abusive relationships. One woman (JM) shared her story, explaining how her lack of self-respect had led her to stay in such a relationship:

Even though I knew it was bad for me, I started dating someone else who was bad for me. I was so distressed for that short period of time that I was harmful to myself. It was difficult for me to separate myself from something negative because I had no self-respect. I didn't think I deserved something good.

School and Career Prospects

The code of school and career prospects revealed important aspects of the participants' identity. As they were all college students, they portrayed themselves in light of their academic abilities, achievements, and struggles. They also discussed their career goals and prospects but expressed a great deal of anxiety and fear about not being able to achieve them.

Academic Progress and Struggles. The participants discussed their school experiences growing up, both positive and negative. They reflected on their educational goals and standards, as well as the struggles they faced in middle and high school. One woman (EF) discussed how her parents' educational attainment influenced her educational goals and how she worked hard to achieve those goals when she was younger. However, she was unable to achieve them. She said:

Both my parents went to Princeton for college, and that played a big role in where I wanted to go to college as a kid. I thought that if my parents went to an Ivy League school, especially Princeton, I also had to go to Princeton. So, as a child and adolescent, I worked hard in school and got perfect grades because I wanted to go to a college like my parents did.

Another woman (AF) described her negative experience in high school, expressing regret for the way the teachers treated her. She said:

My high school experience was not good. The teachers weren't good to us. They would yell at us so much, and one teacher even pulled me aside and started yelling at me. It was just not a very good experience.

Career Goals, Prospects, and Fears. The participants discussed their hopes and concerns for their future in light of their career goals. The interview transcripts revealed that they had both high hopes and deep concerns. Here are a few excerpts on their career goals and prospects. One woman (JM) said:

I want to be an English teacher when I graduate, and I've long wanted to teach international students English as a second language. Many of my friends in high school were international students, so I would really love to do that. My biggest dream is to make a difference for the people I teach.

One man (IZ) discussed his goal to be a therapist. He stated:

I want to be a therapist. That's all that's on my mind right now. I'm just thinking of finishing school and getting a job, and then a master's and a

PhD. I think I would be a good therapist, and I continuously look back and make sure that's what I'm striving for.

The participants also depicted their deepest fears for the future, often painting a stark contrast to their desired outcomes. They expressed a range of concerns spanning various aspects of life, including graduation, employment, financial stability, relationships, and mental well-being. Here are some excerpts from the transcripts that illustrate these fears. One man (NP) discussed:

My feared future would be if I graduated from school and couldn't find work, which I think I'll be able to, but if I can't, it might lead to me moving back home, becoming depressed, and being unable to take care of myself.

Another man (IZ) expressed his fears about a negative future. He said:

If I didn't end up becoming a therapist, I think the worst thing would be if I was somewhere where I had no passion for my job. I want to have a passion in life, so if I ended up without one, I think that would be the worst.... My negative future would be not growing and fostering the relationships I have, slipping back to my old ways of negative mental health, not succeeding in school, and not being able to fulfill my purpose of helping others.

Physical and Mental Health Issues

A majority of the participants reported struggling with health issues, either physical, mental, or both. This revealed another important aspect of their identity development, as they reported feeling a sense of change and growth in their identity realization as they went through these illnesses.

Physical Illnesses. Several participants reported suffering from physical illnesses, including migraine, chronic pain, and autoimmune disease. These illnesses had a significant impact on their lives, both physically and emotionally. One woman (EF) described the chronic pain she experienced in various forms and how it impacted her life:

Probably chronic pain. It's just comes on in various forms. Throughout high school, I had chronic migraines. In late elementary and middle school, I had chronic foot problems, which made me quit soccer. And since high school, I've started having joint issues.

Another woman (AF) recalled being diagnosed with a connective tissue disorder, which has had a lifelong impact on her life. She shared how difficult it is to live with very limited physical activity:

Yes, I was diagnosed with a connective tissue disorder. That has been truly impactful on my life, not in the best way. I think that was a really big turning point because I realized I couldn't do the things I normally would do because my body limits what I can do. I don't get a lot of solid physical activity. Sometimes, writing, drawing or painting is affected by my hands.

Mental Disorders and Struggles. Participants reported a variety of mental health disorders and struggles, including anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), self-harm, and suicidal thoughts and tendencies. They speculated that these struggles had a significant impact on their lives and views of themselves. Two participants spoke about the lowered self-esteem, worthlessness, guilt, and self-blame they experienced when they suffered from anxiety and depression. One woman (JM) said:

I think a lot of anxiety stems from that and like not feeling or having low self-esteem. I think that feeling comes from that because of the

abandonment and like, am I good enough for people? Those thoughts go through a lot.

Another woman (AR) discussed:

It was kind of a lot of blame and guilt for myself personally, thinking that I did something wrong, which obviously were wrong cognitions that I had. It was met with insomnia, I wasn't able to sleep a lot, anxiety, depression, all those things kind of going on.

Several participants shared their experiences with self-harm, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, and depression, saying that these experiences were the turning point that led them to seek professional help. Here are a few excerpts. One woman (JM) reported:

I remember specifically standing in the shower that night, feeling absolutely despondent and having thoughts of ending my own life. I had suicidal tendencies for about two and a half years, from fourteen to sixteen years old. I started self-harming at fifteen, and that's when I decided to tell my counselor.

Another woman (AR) shared her story about being depressive and suicidal. She said:

Most of my emotions felt fake. I knew how I should respond, but I didn't actually feel anything. I never got excited for anything. My therapist told me that this was just a symptom of depression. I wasn't feeling any pleasure or happiness. The peak was when I broke the vase, and from there on, it kind of got better for a while.

One woman (GS) reported that obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) was the biggest challenge in her life. She said:

Probably my OCD. I get so bad. It's been my challenge throughout my life. When I was little, I would do things repeatedly or a certain number of times. Then it was like hygiene. I might wash and be really paranoid about it. Yeah, so it was like usually doing things over and over again, more like cleanliness. That's my biggest challenge.

COVID-Related Health Concerns. Several participants discussed experiencing severe anxiety and depression when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and they had to return home. These experiences led them to seek help and try medication. Here are some of their recollections. One woman (JZ) discussed:

When COVID hit our freshman year, it caused a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. It wasn't until I came to college and COVID hit that I realized I needed to go on medication to deal with my anxiety and depression.

One man (IZ) had been taking medication to treat anxiety and depression since he started college. He spoke, "I'm on Prozac for anxiety and depression. I started having panic attacks at the beginning of my freshman year after we came back from COVID in the spring. It was just kind of immobilizing mentally."

The Role of Christian Identity

Christian Identity and Struggles

All participants grew up in Christian families and attended a Christian liberal arts college. Their life story narratives reflected their Christian identities. An analysis of their narratives indicated that most participants perceived their Christian faith as having a significant influence on their lives.

Christian Faith as a Family Tradition. Most participants reported that their Christian faith was central to their home environment growing up and important to their identity formation. The participants' Christian faith is deeply rooted in their early experiences growing up in Christian families. These experiences continue to impact their faith. One participant (AF) shared how important her Christian lifestyle is in her daily life, such as through devotions and Bible reading. She said:

I'm a Christian, and I've been attending church since I was five. I used to go to a Pentecostal church, but now I go to a non-denominational church. My spiritual life is a huge part of my day. I pray and read the Bible every day, and I have a devotional book that I read along with the Bible.

Changes and Conversion. Parental Christian beliefs played a critical role in the development of the participants' faith. Several participants reported real-life experiences that helped them realize their Christian faith on a personal level. For example, one participant (JM) described their confirmation experience in middle school:

I grew up in a Christian home, so I went to church and believed, but I was so young that I didn't fully understand what it meant. Then, in seventh grade, I went through confirmation, and I realized that this was more real.

Most of the participants' changes in faith and conversion occurred during adolescence, from middle school to high school. One participant (GS) shared her experience of accepting Jesus Christ as her savior and the subsequent changes in her faith throughout high school:

I remember one moment when I just cried and cried and was like, 'I know there's something better for me.' That's when I accepted Jesus. I was raised Christian before, so I knew everything, but I didn't really care that much until that moment. I would say I changed the most spiritually my senior year of high school.

Current Statuses and Ongoing Struggles. Despite identifying as Christians, most participants expressed struggling to understand their own beliefs. This was evident in the interview transcripts, which were full of reflections on their identities as Christians and the meaning of Christianity. As one participant (EF) put it:

Much of my identity had been tied to being a Christian. But at that point, I was able to ask myself, 'Why am I Christian?' Is it because that's what my parents believe? No, I've had enough experiences at Bible camp to understand that. I have an identity in Christ, but what does that even mean? I was still in a weird spot.

Another participant (ET) expressed concern about how Christianity is often portrayed in a way that is inconsistent with biblical principles, particularly in terms of how people treat each other. She put it:

I definitely believe in God and always will. But I feel like a lot of the way Christianity is portrayed today is not accurate. For example, the Bible says to love your neighbor as yourself, but some Christians condemn homosexuals. How can you call yourself a Christian and have so much hate for another human being?

One man (DC) discussed the difficulty of maintaining a relationship with God as he grew older, especially because he felt like God wasn't answering his prayers. However, he still wanted to reestablish his relationship, which was one of the reasons he chose to attend a Christian college.

As I got older, it was harder to establish that relationship with God, because I had to take it upon myself. It just felt harder, because I felt like I never heard anything back and I definitely struggled with my spiritual

relationship with God. That's one reason why I came here. I hoped to either mend that relationship or find out where I stand.

Several participants expressed disagreements with the school's theological perspectives and faith principles. They had debates with people they met on campus, and they discussed that they had a lot of questions and were still trying to figure out the right reasoning behind the Christian world. One man (IZ) discussed:

I'm a Christian; I believe in God. I like to have theological debates with people, especially my roommate, who comes from a more Protestant tradition, while I come from a more Catholic tradition. I don't identify with the Catholic Church anymore, and I don't really identify with any church. I kind of like to practice my spirituality on my own.

Another man (NP) shared his struggles related to his Christian faith. He said:

I'm still trying to find my way, and now I have a lot of questions. I want to become a Christian, but I just don't know how I feel about the whole thing. I want to get to that point where I fully believe and really know. I think that's my reasoning right now.

Important Beliefs and Values

The code of important beliefs and values was included because the participants reflected on their life stories and identified the beliefs and values that were most important to them. These beliefs and values were the foundation for the futures they envisioned for themselves as young adults.

Beliefs and Values that Promote Self-Growth. The participants discussed how their beliefs and values helped them cope with difficult life experiences and hardships. They saw these beliefs and values as tools for growth and becoming better people. They cherished the opportunities to develop as mature human beings, even though the experiences were painful at the time. One woman (ET) discussed:

Despite the pain and hardship, there is always growth on the other side, even if it doesn't seem like it in the moment. For me, pain and hardship have always shifted my life and opened up opportunities for growth and development as a person. I feel like I've been through so much that it would be a shock to many people to see that I'm still here today.

One man (NP) identified passion as the most important value in life. He stated:

Passion is the first word that comes to mind when I think about this. What are you passionate about? What drives you and why? What makes you get out of bed in the morning? What makes your life worth living? You should be passionate about living your life and making something out of it.

Beliefs and Values that Foster Connection with Others. Another group of beliefs and values that the participants discussed frequently was related to how to better connect with other people, both significant others and those around them. Several participants identified love, kindness, encouragement, and empathy as the most important values to them. One woman (ET) said:

For me, it would be love. If people loved purely, the world would be a better place. But most people don't love purely; they love with intentions. And that's the problem. As a Christian, we're supposed to love people unconditionally. I feel like love is the one thing in the world that could never be done in a bad way or with bad intentions. Love is definitely my most important value.

Another woman (AR) prioritized empathy as her most crucial value. She stated:

I think empathy is the most important value. So much in the world could be solved if we took the time to listen to other points of view, consider other people, and have an open mind. Instead of rushing to conclusions, we should come at things with a loving, caring heart.

Several participants identified relationships with loved ones and others as their most important value. They valued relationships because humans are inherently social beings, and relationships make us better people. One man (DC) discussed:

Relationships are my most important value. I don't mean just being connected to other people, but understanding myself as existing within some sort of hierarchy, not necessarily social or political but natural. I don't exist as an island, but I need relationships with the people I enjoy to become a better me.

Two men cherished the values of cooperation and communication. They spoke about the importance of working together collaboratively, despite our differences, through mutual understanding and communication instead of hating or fighting each other. One man (NP) said:

People can work together, either putting aside their differences or at least keeping them to themselves, to achieve so much more. Fighting with each other, killing each other, fighting over political stuff, and driving our own families apart is a sad sight to see.

Another man (DC) highlighted the importance of cooperation and communication in life. He said:

I think cooperation and communication are very important. They are aspects of our lives, and if we work together, we can achieve so much more than if we are at odds with each other. Everyone works for their own resources, but we should help each other when we can. It can make a big difference without us even realizing it.

Identity Development Through Lifetime

The participants' life stories revealed that their identity had evolved from early childhood to the present. They believed that their perception of themselves had changed considerably. Most experienced significant shifts in their perception of identity during their junior or high school years.

Identity Struggles and Changes. Reflecting on their life experiences, participants discussed how their identities have evolved over time. They connected their struggles and hardships to their evolving sense of self. Several participants reflected on their ongoing exploration of identity from adolescence to emerging adulthood. They shared that during adolescence, their primary focus was on how they were perceived by others. Over time, they developed a deeper sense of self-acceptance and comfort in their evolving identity. One woman (JM) discussed:

Middle school was a rough time for me, as it is for many kids. It's a period of physical and hormonal changes, and it can be hard to find your place in the world. During that time, my friends and I were all trying to impress our peers and act our best because that's what we thought mattered most.

Another woman (EF) discussed the developmental shifts in identity development that occur during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood stating, "Adolescence was a time of self-discovery, identity formation, and learning to cope with the challenges I faced in late childhood. Emerging adulthood allowed me to fully express my identity, come to terms with life's experiences, and embrace authentic self-expression."

Another man (IZ) also considered the importance of the transition period from high school to college years in identity development. He stated:

I think the pinnacle of life so far has been the transition from high school to college. During this time, I began to fully understand myself and gained the confidence to express my identity authentically with others, including my girlfriend, parents, brother, and other significant relationships. This ability to express my true self brought me a profound sense of inner peace.

One woman (AR) eloquently reflected on her life's journey, highlighting the impact of her experiences on her identity development. She emphasized that identity formation is an ongoing process, continuously evolving as we navigate life's twists and turns. She remarked:

I'd say the most prominent theme in my life has been shaping and molding who I am. It's a process that unfolds over time, and each of my life experiences has led to personal growth, likely influencing how others perceive me as well. It's been an ongoing journey of shaping my identity, my self-understanding, and my relationships with others. Life is a continuous process, and I don't believe there's an endpoint where identity development ceases.

Current Identity Statuses. The majority of the participants expressed that they had achieved a clearer understanding of their identity in recent years. They indicated that they now feel at ease presenting themselves to others authentically. One woman (ET) stated:

It's actually over this past year, or maybe the last year and a half, that I've come to a better understanding of who I think I am. I would now say that I'm coming into myself and really being able to express who I am. I would say 'fully developed expression' would be a good phrase to put it in.

One man (DC) expressed contentment with his present identity status. He said:

I feel truly comfortable with myself and haven't changed significantly. In my mind, I want to say that I won't change too much in the future, but I'm sure there will be many unexpected developments and that my mind will evolve. However, I'm content with my identity at this moment.

Several participants delved into their identities, highlighting their defining traits and qualities. They also elaborated on their aspirations and desires. For instance, one man (IZ) stated:

I identify with individuality, independence, and a deep concern for others. I yearn to undo the harm that was inflicted upon me and ensure that no one else endures similar pain. I'm a complete individual who embodies these traits through habit and life experiences, and that's where I stand today. If I were to write a book, it would be about untangling the complex narrative of my life.

Thoughts on Identity Development and Future Expectations. Several participants reflected on identity development and their hopes for the future. One woman (AR) eloquently captured the ever-evolving nature of identity, stating "I don't think identity development ever is stagnant. It's not stagnant ever because you have so many different experiences that can shape your identity and your personality." An aspiring clinical psychologist (IZ) shared his perspectives on identity development, drawing parallels to human development. He emphasized that identity development is an ongoing journey, subject to change over time, while certain core qualities remain steadfast. He elaborated:

I can't predict my future identity, as it's an unpredictable journey. In the field of clinical psychology, encountering a patient can profoundly shift your worldview, potentially altering your self-perception. Identity

development, much like human development, is a lifelong process. Core aspects of our identity are formed during early childhood, late childhood, and adolescence as we navigate self-discovery and aspirations. However, these elements can be reshaped and refined throughout life, though some fundamental pillars remain unchanged. It's an ongoing process, a continuous work in progress.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the identity of Christian college students in Western New York by examining their individual life story narratives. The research was grounded in the theoretical framework that posits identity is best understood through a person's life story narrative (McAdams, 1990, 2018). To achieve this, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten Christian college students. The rich data gleaned from their life stories revealed how these students perceive themselves. Participants used their own voices to discuss how their perceptions of identity have evolved over time. They shared personal experiences and reflected on challenges and adversities faced, highlighting how these experiences shaped their self-understanding. Analyzing their narratives through the lens of the life story model of identity (McAdams, 1990, 2018) proved valuable in understanding their individual journeys and the factors shaping who they are today. In this sense, the quote by Henry Murray resonates deeply, "the history of the organism is the organism" (Murray, 1938 as cited in McAdams, 1990, p. 150).

Research suggests that life stories begin to develop during adolescence and continue to solidify into coherent narratives throughout young adulthood and even into late adulthood (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1985, 1990; McLean, 2005; McLean & Pratt, 2006). The participants' life stories in this study substantiated this concept. Notably, the period from adolescence through emerging adulthood appears to be critical for constructing personal narratives. All participants, ranging from their late teens to early twenties, had accumulated a wealth of life experiences that provided rich details illustrating their identities. Their unique experiences were intricately woven with their evolving contexts, collectively explaining how they came to be the individuals they are today (Adams & Marshall, 1996). The following sections will explore the study's implications, particularly in relation to my three research questions. I will then examine the study's limitations and suggest areas for future research on narrative identity.

Critical Life Experiences and Identity Development

Critical life experiences, including family relationships, navigating friendships and romantic relationships, educational journeys and career aspirations, as well as physical and mental challenges, all seemed to play significant roles in shaping the participants' identities. First, they shared a wealth of stories about how family played a pivotal role in shaping their identities, supporting previous research findings (Benson & Johnson, 2009; H. Kim & Vietze, 2023; Pearce & Thornton, 2007; Scabini & Manzi, 2011). Several participants recounted facing challenges within their families during their upbringing, such as parental illnesses and deaths, divorce, and alcoholism. These experiences had a profound impact on their lives, both emotionally and in terms of their identity formation. The participants also elaborated on how their relationships with parents and siblings influenced their identity development. This confirms an Eriksonian idea that "children identify with their parents and other loved ones" in an attempt to develop loving and respectful relationships and to become similar to them (Arnett & Jensen, 2023, p. 176). Those who grew up with a single parent acknowledged their love and sacrifice, expressing gratitude for their single

parent's strength and dedication. These findings align with previous research on the role of family in identity development among children and youth (H. Kim & Vietze, 2023).

Second, the participants' life stories revealed rich reflections on how friendships, social group interactions, and romantic relationships shaped their self-perception. These findings align with previous research highlighting the roles of friendships and social groups (Anthony & McCabe, 2015; Ragelienė, 2016) and romantic relationships (Emery et al., 2020) in identity development. Some participants found it challenging to form friendships and connect with others socially, while others reported gaining greater comfort in being themselves in social settings. While some participants faced challenges in forming social connections, others found these experiences to be positive and supportive. The experiences of participants in this regard varied widely. Several participants also recounted experiencing bullying by peers, which left a detrimental mark on their self-image and identity. Thus, bullying appeared to have a lasting, negative impact on identity development (Galán-Arroyo et al., 2023). Considering the participants' age range, romantic relationships were deemed a significant factor in exploring their identity development (Emery et al., 2020). Some participants described how their romantic relationships positively influenced their identity, while others shared how their romantic relationships negatively impacted their self-perception, recounting the detrimental effects they had experienced from past harmful and abusive relationships. Erikson viewed romantic love as one of the key areas where an individual's identity is formed in young adulthood (Arnett & Jensen, 2023). Likewise, the participants' romantic relationships had substantial ramifications on their lives and identity development, manifesting in both positive and negative ways (Emery et al., 2020).

Third, the participants' educational and professional aspirations unveiled significant aspects of their identity, revealing both positive and negative self-perceptions (Destin et al., 2022). Echoing Erikson's (1968) theory, our educational and occupational aspirations are intrinsically linked to our understanding of ourselves and our desired life paths (Syed et al., 2011). The participants' academic experiences, including their abilities, achievements, and struggles, were deeply intertwined with their self-perception. Their career aspirations and prospects were often accompanied by anxiety and fear of failure, underscoring the profound impact that educational and professional goals can have on one's sense of identity. While these aspirations can open doors to growth and development, they can also lead to disappointment and frustration. They harbored a range of hopes and fears about their future, portraying both "possible selves" and "feared selves" (Arnett & Jensen, 2023, p. 164). Other prevalent fears included financial instability, relationship problems, and mental health issues. These hopes and fears appeared to influence their perception of their current and future selves (Destin et al., 2022).

Lastly, a substantial proportion of participants reported experiencing a range of health issues, encompassing both physical and mental health challenges. Participants faced physical health challenges such as chronic pain and a connective tissue disorder, which had a lifelong impact on their physical and emotional well-being. Despite these challenges, many participants experienced a sense of transformation and growth in their identity realization during their struggles with these illnesses (Karnilowicz, 2011). They believed that their experiences with health problems helped them to understand themselves better, become more resilient, and develop greater compassion for others. Participants also grappled with various mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), self-harm, and suicidal thoughts and tendencies. Associated with anxiety and depression were lowered self-esteem, hopelessness, guilt, and self-blame. These struggles had a significant impact on their lives and self-perception (Wisdom et al., 2008). Additionally, participants discussed experiencing severe anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading them to seek help and consider medication. Thus, the

participants' mental health struggles appeared to have a profound impact on their perception of self and identity (Wisdom et al., 2008).

The Role of Christian Identity

The participants' Christian identity emerged as a significant factor shaping their overall sense of self, with some finding it provided a strong sense of purpose and belonging, while others described struggles with doubts or challenges reconciling their faith with personal experiences. Researchers agree that identity is a complex and multifaceted concept (Jones et al., 2014), encompassing various aspects of an individual's being. As Jones et al. (2014) aptly note, individuals possess "many ME's: multiple identities" (p. 151), among which Christian identity stands out as a significant social identity. In line with this notion, Jones et al. (2014) define social identity as "an identity that you share with others-special others, those in a group that you belong to and care about" (p. 149). Accordingly, they refer to social identity as "reference group identity" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 149). The study's findings corroborate the centrality of Christian identity in the participants' life narratives, as they consistently identified themselves as Christians. Notably, their perception of Christian identity often emerged during periods of hardship and challenge, underscoring the role of this religious identity as a source of strength and resilience (C. Campbell & Bauer, 2021; Howard et al., 2023).

The Christian faith played a pivotal role in the lives of the participants. Raised in Christian households and having attended a Christian college, their faith profoundly influenced their life trajectories. Many recounted notable transformations in their faith journeys, openly sharing their current struggles and affirmations. The majority of the youth acknowledged the centrality of Christian faith in their upbringing and its significance in shaping their identities (Lun, 2015). Immersed in Christian family environments from a young age, the participants' faith was deeply ingrained in their upbringing (Lun, 2015). Parental Christian beliefs played a pivotal role in shaping their faith development (Pearce & Thornton, 2007), with significant transformations and conversions occurring primarily during adolescence. This finding reinforces the importance of adolescence in faith development (Fowler & Dell, 2006; Lopez et al., 2011). Despite their Christian upbringing, many participants grappled with understanding their personal beliefs. Interviews revealed their introspective reflections on their Christian identity and the challenges they faced. Many participants engaged in debates and wrestled with unanswered questions about the Christian faith, highlighting the complexity of their theological perspectives and faith journeys (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011).

Identity Development Through Lifetime

The participants' life story narratives shed light on the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity development (McAdams, 2001), spanning from childhood to the present. They acknowledged significant transformations in their self-perception, particularly during their junior or high school years. This aligns with the understanding that adolescence is a critical period in identity development (Arnett & Jensen, 2023; Erikson, 1968; McLean, 2005; Verschueren et al., 2017). Several participants shared their profound engagement with self-discovery during their transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. In adolescence, their primary focus was on how they appeared to others, but as they matured, they grew more comfortable with their identity and embraced self-acceptance. This transformation mirrors the continuous evolution of identity development as individuals transition from relying on external validation from peers to embracing internal acceptance and self-assurance (Arnett & Jensen, 2023). Thus, they underscored that

identity development is an ongoing and lifelong process (Erikson, 1959), a journey of continuous refinement of one’s sense of self as they adapt to their developing context (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). The participants introspected the impact of pivotal life experiences on their evolving identities, often connecting struggles and hardships to these changes. Some participants acknowledged ongoing challenges in fully comprehending their own identities, highlighting the complexity and fluidity of self-perception. Erikson (1959) puts it, “A sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all...It is constantly lost and regained.” (p. 118; quoted in Arnett & Jensen, 2023, p. 176).

The majority of participants expressed a newfound sense of acceptance and comfort with their identities. They felt confident in presenting their “actual selves” to others, embracing their personal qualities, aspirations, and future plans, and picturizing their “possible selves” in the best light (Arnett & Jensen, 2023, p. 164). Recognizing the ongoing development of identity, participants acknowledged the impact of experiences, relationships, and choices on shaping their evolving sense of self. They viewed identity as an integral part of being human, a dynamic process analogous to human development, where core qualities may remain constant while other aspects evolve over time (Berger, 2022). The participants’ diverse thoughts and perspectives highlighted the complexity of identity development, underscoring its continuous and ever-evolving nature (McAdams, 2001).

Limitations and Implications of the Study

This study explored the identity formation of Christian college students in Western New York through an in-depth analysis of their life narratives. Contributing to the limited research on college student identity, particularly regarding religious identity, this qualitative approach yielded rich insights into the participants’ lives. These insights illuminate the complex interplay between their Christian identities and the evolving context of young adulthood. However, this study has limitations that warrant consideration.

First, this qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with ten students from a single Christian college in Western New York. This approach offers rich, detailed data, but it also presents limitations in generalizability. The small sample size and the specific characteristics of the college population limit the extent to which the findings can be applied to the broader Christian college student population or other groups. Most students at this conservative private Christian college come from Christian families and were raised according to Christian traditions. This homogeneity in the sample further restricts the generalizability of the results. Nonetheless, the study prioritized a detailed exploration of the participants’ identities through life story analysis. To achieve this goal and provide sufficient depth for analysis, the sample size was intentionally chosen. The purposive sampling strategy, aligned with the research goals (S. Campbell et al., 2020), facilitated a focused investigation within this specific context. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this approach limits the transferability of the findings to broader college populations in the United States or beyond.

Second, this study utilized life story theories to analyze the narrative discourses of a sample of Christian college students, capturing their identity construction. As McAdams (2001) posits, life stories are dynamic and constantly evolving, with varying significance depending on factors such as time, place, and context. Consequently, a single life story is insufficient for comprehending an individual’s identity. Instead, we must consider a person’s diverse narratives across various developmental stages and extended periods. Furthermore, since stories hold specific meanings for individuals within their sociocultural contexts (McAdams & McLean, 2013), interpreting these

narratives to understand an individual's identity requires an understanding of that context at a specific time.

Third, the study faces limitations inherent to the nature of the narrative itself. Critics argue that narrative, being inherently subjective and artistic in nature (Brown, 2006; Mink, 1978), falls outside the realm of scientific inquiry. They contend that individuals' stories may not always accurately reflect the realities of their lives, potentially serving as idealized representations of their desired selves or a means to escape from their actual circumstances (Brown, 2006; Mink, 1978). Thus, the limitations of the life story method must be considered when interpreting the findings of this study and for future research endeavors.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that my own Christian identity may have influenced the way I interacted with participants during interviews and data collection/analysis. As the principal investigator, I held a genuine interest in understanding how Christian college students perceive their religious identities, the struggles they navigate, and how their faith has developed. Additionally, I sought to explore the impact of these faith factors on their overall identity formation as emerging adults within a Christian liberal arts college environment. Given this background, my Christian faith may have influenced the identification of the analytic themes and their interpretations, potentially shaping them to reflect Christian beliefs and values. Readers should consider my positionality as a Christian psychology professor when interpreting the study's findings.

Despite its limitations, this study offers valuable insights for various stakeholders in higher education, particularly those working with Christian college students. College administrators, faculty, and staff can gain valuable knowledge about how these students navigate life challenges, the social support systems they value, and how to optimize such support for their successful development during emerging adulthood. One striking finding with significant implications for counselors and educators is the prevalence of mental health struggles among this population despite their Christian faith. Late adolescence and early twenties are a critical period for emerging adults (Arnett & Jensen, 2023), as they often face significant life challenges that can contribute to mental health struggles (Marc et al., 2024). Given the alarming rise in mental health struggles among college students nationwide (National Education Association, 2024), these findings add urgency to calls for increased and accessible support services on college campuses. For identity researchers, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious identity formation, particularly among Christian emerging adults in higher education settings. This area has been underexplored, with limited qualitative research illuminating religious identity development during this critical life stage. While acknowledging the limitations of the study, particularly the small sample size and specific student population, these insights can hold relevance beyond the studied Christian college. The findings may be applicable to other Christian colleges with similar demographics, where students come from predominantly Christian backgrounds. Additionally, the study's exploration of identity development through life stories offers a valuable framework that could be applied to research with students from diverse religious backgrounds and college environments.

Conclusion

While narrative identity has proven valuable in understanding identity through life stories, its application to emerging adults in college settings has been limited. Aiming to bridge the gap in identity research, this study delved into the identity formation of Christian college students in Western New York, offering valuable insights into their experiences. The study revealed that the participants' identities were molded by an intricate interplay of factors, encompassing their

Christian faith, interpersonal connections with family and peers, academic and professional aspirations, and challenges related to physical and mental well-being. The study also highlights the dynamic nature of identity, which is constantly evolving as individuals interact with their surroundings. These findings can inform future research on the identities of Christian college students and guide Christian college students in their journey of self-understanding and positive identity development.

References

- Adams, G. R., & Marshall, S. K. (1996). A developmental social psychology of identity: Understanding the person-in-context. *Journal of Adolescence, 19*(5), 429–442. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1996.0041>
- Adhikari, S. P. (2021). Revealing the story of an individual through narrative inquiry: A methodological review. *Interdisciplinary Research in Education, 6*(1), 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ire.v6i1.43425>
- Anthony, A. K., & McCabe, J. (2015). Friendship talk as identity work: Defining the self through friend relationships. *Symbolic Interaction, 38*(1), 64–82. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.138>
- Arnett, J. J., & Jensen, L. A. (2023). *Adolescence and emerging adulthood* (7th ed.). Pearson/Prentice-Hall.
- Bamberg, M. (1997). Positioning between structure and performance. *Journal of Narrative and Life History, 7*(1–4), 335–342. https://www2.clarku.edu/~mbamberg/Material_files/Positioning_Between_Structure_and_Performance.pdf
- Baumeister, R. F., & Muraven, M. (1996). Identity as adaptation to social, cultural, and historical context. *Journal of Adolescence, 19*(5), 405–416. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1996.0039>
- Bell, D. M. (2008). Development of the religious self: A theoretical foundation for measuring religious identity. In A. Day (Ed.), *Religion and the individual: Belief, practice, Identity* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Benson, J. E., & Johnson, M. K. (2009). Adolescent family context and adult identity formation. *Journal of Family Issues, 30*(9), 1265–1286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X09332967>
- Berger, K. S. (2022). *Invitation to the life span* (5th ed). Worth Publishers.
- Brown, A. D. (2006). A narrative approach to collective identities. *Journal of Management Studies, 43*(4), 731–753. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00609.x>
- Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Campbell, C., & Bauer, S. (2021). Christian faith and resilience: Implications for social work practice. *Social Work & Christianity, 48*(1), 28–51. <https://doi.org/10.3403/swc.v48i1.212>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 25*(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Cohler, B. J. (1982). Personal narrative and life course. In P. Baltes & O. G. Brim (Eds.), *Life span development and behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 205–241). Academic Press.
- Destin, M., Silverman, D. M., & Braslow, M. D. (2022). Future identity as a support for college motivation and success. *Frontiers in Education, 7*, Article 901897. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.901897>

- Emery, L. F., Gardner, W. L., Carswell, K. L., & Finkel, E. J. (2020). Who are “we”? Couple identity clarity and romantic relationship commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(1), 146–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220921717>
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*. Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. Norton.
- Fivush, R. (1991). The social construction of personal narratives. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 37(1), 59–81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23087339>
- Fowler, J. W., & Dell, M. L. (2006). Stages of faith from infancy through adolescence: Reflections on three decades of faith development theory. In E. C. Roehlkepartain, P. E. King, L. Wagener, & P. L. Benson (Eds.), *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 34–45). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976657.n3>
- Galán-Arroyo, C., Gómez-Paniagua, S., Contreras-Barraza, N., Adsuar, J. C., Olivares, P. R., & Rojo-Ramos, J. (2023). Bullying and self-concept, factors affecting the mental health of school adolescents. *Healthcare*, 11(15), Article 2214. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11152214>
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.
- Griffith, B., & Griggs, J. (2001). Religious identity status as a model to understand, assess, and interact with client spirituality. *Counseling and Values*, 46(1), 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2001.tb00203.x>
- Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(5), 748–769. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.126.5.748>
- Hammack, P. L. (2008). Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12(3), 222–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308316892>
- Howard, A. H., Roberts, M., Mitchell, T., & Wilke, N. G. (2023). The relationship between spirituality and resilience and well-being: A study of 529 care leavers from 11 nations. *Adversity and Resilience Science*, 4, 177–190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-023-00088-y>
- Jones, J. M., Dovidio, J. F., & Vietze, D. L. (2014). *The psychology of diversity: Beyond prejudice and racism*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Karnilowicz, W. (2011). Identity and psychological ownership in chronic illness and disease state. *European Journal of Cancer Care*, 20(2), 276–282. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2354.2010.01220.x>
- Kim, J. H. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Kim, H. H., & Vietze, D. (2023). Using narrative inquiry for exploring biculturalism and resilience in Korean American young adults in New York City. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 7(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12711>
- Lopez, A. B., Huynh, V. W., & Fuligni, A. J. (2011). A longitudinal study of religious identity and participation during adolescence. *Child Development*, 82(4), 1297–1309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01609.x>
- Lun, M. W. A. (2015). A qualitative study of students’ perception of spirituality and religion. *Social Work & Christianity*, 42(2), 178–192.
- Marc, G., Mitrofan, L., & Vlad, C. I. M. (2024). The relationship between critical life events, psycho-emotional health and life satisfaction among youths: Coping mechanisms and emotional regulation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1288774. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1288774>

- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3(5), 551–558. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281>
- Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, 13(6), 522–525. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/13.6.522>
- Mayrl, D., & Oeur, F. (2009). Religion and higher education: Current knowledge and directions for future research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(2), 260–275. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01446.x>
- Mayrl, D. & Uecker, J. E. (2011). Higher education and religious liberalization among young adults. *Social Forces*, 90(1), 181–208. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/90.1.181>
- McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (1987). A life-story model of identity. In R. Hogan & W. Jones (Eds.), *Perspectives in personality* (Vol. 2, pp. 15–50). JAI.
- McAdams, D. P. (1990). Unity and purpose in human lives: The emergence of identity as a life story. In A. I. Rabin, R. A. Zucker, R. A. Emmons, & S. Frank (Eds.), *Studying persons and lives* (pp. 148–200). Springer.
- McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. Morrow.
- McAdams, D. P. (1995). What do we know when we know a person? *Journal of Personality*, 63(3), 365–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1995.tb00500.x>
- McAdams, D. P. (1996). Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry*, 7(4), 295–321. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0704_1
- McAdams, D. P. (1997). The case for unity in the (post)modern self: A modest proposal. In R. D. Ashmore & L. Jussim (Eds.), *Self and identity: Fundamental issues* (pp. 46–80). Oxford University Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100–122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
- McAdams, D. P. (2018). Narrative Identity: What is it? What does it do? How do you measure it? *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 37(3), 359–372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236618756704>
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- McLean, K. C. (2005). Late adolescent identity development: Narrative meaning making and memory telling. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(4), 683–691. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.41.4.683>
- McLean, K. C., & Pratt, M. W. (2006). Life’s little (and big) lessons: Identity statuses and meaning-making in the turning point narratives of emerging adults. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(4), 714–722. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.4.714>
- Mink, L. O. (1978). Narrative form as a cognitive instrument. In R. H. Canary (Eds.), *The writing of history* (pp. 129–149). University of Wisconsin Press.
- Murray, H. A. (1938). *Explorations in personality*. Oxford University Press.
- National Education Association. (2024). *The mental health crisis on college campuses*. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/mental-health-crisis-college-campus>
- Nelson, K. (2003). Self and social functions: Individual autobiographical memory and collective narrative. *Memory*, 11(2), 125–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/741938203>
- NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis. (2020). Version 13 [software]. QSR International.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. SAGE Publications.

- Pearce, L. D., & Thornton, A. (2007). Religious identity and family ideologies in the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(5), 1227–1243.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00443.x>
- Pulkkinen, L., & Kokko, K. (2000). Identity development in adulthood: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 34(4), 445–470.
<https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.2000.2296>
- Ragelienė, T. (2016). Links of adolescents identity development and relationship with peers: A systematic literature review. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 25(2), 97–105. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4879949/>
- Scabini, E. & Manzi, C. (2011). Family processes and identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 569–588). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_23
- Schachter, E. P. (2004). Identity configurations: A new perspective on identity formation in contemporary society. *Journal of Personality*, 72(1), 167–200.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00260.x>
- Schachter, E. P. (2005). Context and identity formation: A theoretical analysis and a case study. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 20(3), 375–395.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558405275172>
- Syed, M., & Azmitia, M. (2008). A narrative approach to ethnic identity in emerging adulthood: Bringing life to the identity status model. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(4), 1012–1027.
- Syed, M., & Azmitia, M. (2010). Narrative and ethnic identity exploration: A longitudinal account of emerging adults' ethnicity-related experiences. *Developmental Psychology*, 46(1), 208–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017825>
- Syed, M., Azmitia, M., & Cooper, C. R. (2011). Identity and academic success among underrepresented ethnic minorities: An interdisciplinary review and integration. *Journal of Social Issues*, 67(3), 442–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01709.x>
- Thorne, A., & Nam, V. (2007). The life story as a community project. *Human Development*, 50(2–3), 119–123. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000100941>
- Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S., & Young, T. (2018). Characterizing and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: Systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 18, Article 148.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7>
- Verschueren, M., Rassart, J., Claes, L., Moons, P., & Luyckx, K. (2017). Identity statuses throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood: A large-scale study into gender, age, and contextual differences. *Psychologica Belgica*, 57(1), 32–42.
<https://doi.org/10.5334/pb.348>
- Waters, T. E. A., & Fivush, R. (2015). Relations between narrative coherence, identity, and psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality*, 83(4), 441–451.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12120>
- Wisdom, J. P., Bruce, K., Saedi, G. A., Weis, T., & Green, C. A. (2008). “Stealing me from myself”: Identity and recovery in personal accounts of mental illness. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 42(6), 489–495.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00048670802050579>

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Hannah H. Kim is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Houghton University. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Her research focuses on identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood, as well as the developmental trajectories and outcomes of ethnic minority youth in the United States. As a qualitative researcher, she is committed to listening to the life stories of young adults and ethnic minority youth in the United States to address their struggles and needs so that their voices can be heard. Hannah.Kim@houghton.edu

ORCID

Hannah H. Kim, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8528-8485>