

The Impact of Social Relationships on Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being among Young Adults

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Abstract

Social relationships play an essential role in shaping mental health and emotional well-being among young adults, particularly during developmental transitions involving personal independence, educational responsibilities, employment challenges, and changing interpersonal expectations. This study aims to explore how social relationships contribute to young adults' experiences of psychological well-being, emotional support, loneliness, and interpersonal challenges. A qualitative phenomenological approach is proposed to examine the subjective meanings individuals assign to their relationships with family members, friends, romantic partners, and broader social networks. Data collection involves semi-structured interviews, with thematic analysis guiding the interpretation of participants' experiences. The literature-informed analysis identifies four interconnected dimensions: emotional support within social relationships, interpersonal experiences associated with mental health, social connectedness and loneliness, and coping strategies for maintaining healthy relationships. Supportive interpersonal connections may provide emotional reassurance, psychological security, and opportunities for developing resilience, whereas interpersonal conflicts, emotional invalidation, and perceived rejection may contribute to psychological distress. Meaningful social connectedness depends primarily on relationship quality, mutual trust, and emotional responsiveness rather than the frequency of social interactions. Digital communication further influences emotional experiences by facilitating interpersonal contact while introducing challenges associated with social comparison and relational expectations. Constructive communication, emotional regulation, personal boundaries, and support-seeking represent important strategies for navigating interpersonal difficulties. This study provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the relational dimensions of psychological well-being and highlights the importance of relationship-centered approaches to mental health promotion among young adults across diverse social environments and developmental circumstances in contemporary society.

Keywords: Social Relationships; Mental Health; Emotional Well-Being; Young Adults; Social Connectedness

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Introduction

Social relationships represent a fundamental dimension of human development and psychological well-being, particularly during young adulthood, when individuals experience significant transitions in personal identity, education, employment, and interpersonal responsibilities. This developmental period is characterized by increasing independence, changing family relationships, and the establishment of meaningful friendships and romantic partnerships. These experiences influence how individuals perceive themselves, regulate emotions, and respond to psychological challenges. Supportive relationships can provide emotional security, social belonging, and opportunities for personal growth, whereas

interpersonal conflicts and social disconnection may contribute to psychological distress. Social connectedness is increasingly recognized as an important determinant of health because interpersonal relationships shape psychological functioning through emotional, behavioral, and social mechanisms. Holt-Lunstad (2022) emphasized that social connection constitutes a significant public health consideration, highlighting the importance of social support, relationship quality, and social integration in understanding individual health outcomes.

Mental health challenges among young adults have attracted considerable academic attention because this population encounters multiple developmental pressures while establishing independent social identities. Academic expectations, employment uncertainty, financial difficulties, and changing interpersonal relationships may increase psychological vulnerability. Within these circumstances, social relationships can function as protective resources by providing reassurance, companionship, and practical assistance. Friends and family members frequently become important sources of emotional encouragement, particularly when individuals encounter stressful experiences. Richard et al. (2022) demonstrated through a scoping review that peer support was associated with improvements in happiness, self-esteem, and coping abilities, alongside reductions in loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. These findings suggest that meaningful interpersonal relationships may contribute to psychological resilience, although their effectiveness depends on the nature of social interactions and the support individuals perceive.

The relationship between social connectedness and emotional well-being is nevertheless complex because interpersonal relationships may generate both psychological benefits and emotional difficulties. Supportive interactions can strengthen feelings of acceptance, belonging, and personal worth, while unstable relationships, emotional rejection, and interpersonal misunderstandings may increase distress. Loneliness is particularly relevant because individuals may experience emotional isolation despite maintaining frequent social contact. Consequently, the number of relationships does not necessarily reflect their emotional significance. Nielsen et al. (2024) explored loneliness among emerging adults and identified interconnected experiences involving negative self-perceptions, interpersonal difficulties, and coping strategies. Their findings demonstrate that loneliness develops through complex personal and relational experiences, emphasizing the importance of understanding how individuals interpret social disconnection rather than exclusively measuring their levels of social participation.

Contemporary social relationships are also influenced by digital communication technologies that transform how young adults establish, maintain, and evaluate interpersonal connections. Social networking platforms facilitate communication across geographical boundaries and provide opportunities for emotional expression, community participation, and social support. However, digital interactions may also intensify social comparison, perceived exclusion, and expectations of constant availability. These contrasting experiences suggest that online connectivity does not automatically produce emotional closeness or meaningful interpersonal engagement. Käcko et al. (2024) found that young adults perceived social media as having both positive and negative relationships with loneliness, depending on their individual experiences and social circumstances. Understanding this complexity requires attention to how young adults distinguish between meaningful relationships, superficial interactions, and emotionally demanding digital communication.

Social relationships may become particularly important during major life transitions, when established interpersonal networks undergo substantial changes. Entering higher education, relocating, beginning employment, and developing independent lifestyles can disrupt existing friendships while creating opportunities for new social connections. Such transitions may

produce uncertainty, reduced emotional security, and difficulties establishing belonging within unfamiliar environments. Sundqvist et al. (2024) demonstrated that educational transitions could influence young adults' experiences of loneliness and mental health through changes in social networks, insufficient interpersonal attachment, and limited community belonging. Although existing studies provide valuable evidence regarding social support and psychological outcomes, further qualitative exploration is needed to understand how young adults interpret the emotional significance of relationships across different social contexts and life circumstances.

Despite growing scholarly attention, the interconnected experiences of relationship quality, mental health, emotional well-being, and interpersonal coping warrant deeper examination. Existing research has established important associations between social connectedness and psychological outcomes, yet understanding the subjective meanings individuals assign to supportive, conflicting, or absent relationships remains essential. Holt-Lunstad and Steptoe (2022) highlighted the importance of considering multiple dimensions of social relationships rather than treating social isolation and relationship quality as interchangeable concepts. Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how young adults experience and interpret social relationships in relation to their mental health and emotional well-being. Specifically, it examines emotional support, interpersonal challenges, social connectedness, loneliness, and coping strategies. By emphasizing lived experiences and personal interpretations, the study seeks to provide contextual insights into the role of social relationships in shaping psychological experiences and inform more responsive approaches to promoting emotional well-being among young adults.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to explore the experiences and perceptions of young adults regarding the role of social relationships in their mental health and emotional well-being. The phenomenological approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to interpersonal relationships within their everyday lives. Rather than measuring statistical associations or establishing causal relationships, the study focused on understanding the subjective experiences of participants concerning emotional support, social connectedness, interpersonal conflicts, loneliness, and psychological well-being. This approach allowed the researchers to investigate how different forms of social relationships, including family connections, friendships, romantic relationships, and digital interactions, were perceived to shape participants' emotional experiences and psychological functioning.

Research Setting and Participants

The study focused on young adults aged 18–29 years who had experienced various forms of interpersonal relationships and were able to reflect on their emotional and psychological significance. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to obtain individuals with experiences relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria comprised individuals within the specified age range who had experienced meaningful social relationships, were willing to discuss their interpersonal experiences, and provided informed consent to participate. Individuals who did not meet the age requirements or were unable to provide informed consent were excluded. The study proposed recruiting approximately 15–25 participants, with the final number determined by the richness and adequacy of the information collected. Participant selection was intended to capture diverse social experiences, including differences in educational backgrounds, employment circumstances, living arrangements, and relationship

experiences. Such diversity was considered important for understanding how social relationships were experienced across different personal and social contexts.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to explore participants' lived experiences of social relationships and their perceived connections with mental health and emotional well-being. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature, covering several topics, including relationship quality, family support, friendships, romantic relationships, emotional security, loneliness, interpersonal challenges, and coping strategies. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe personal experiences, significant interpersonal events, and the emotional meanings associated with their relationships. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and obtain more detailed accounts of participants' experiences. Interviews were designed to last approximately 40–60 minutes and could be conducted face-to-face or through secure online communication platforms, depending on participant availability and preference. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of their narratives. Field notes were also used to document relevant contextual information and researcher reflections during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analytical process began with familiarization, during which interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. The second phase involved generating initial codes by identifying meaningful statements related to social relationships, psychological experiences, emotional support, loneliness, and interpersonal difficulties. During the third phase, related codes were organized into preliminary themes representing recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining the themes to ensure coherence with the coded extracts and the overall dataset. In the fifth phase, themes were clearly defined and named to represent their central meanings and relationships with the research objectives. Finally, the sixth phase involved developing an interpretive narrative that integrated thematic findings with relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to participants' subjective meanings, contextual experiences, and the diversity of interpretations. The analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing codes and themes to evolve through continuous engagement with the data rather than imposing predetermined categories.

Trustworthiness and Research Rigor

The trustworthiness of the study was supported through methodological transparency, reflexivity, and systematic engagement with participants' narratives. Credibility was strengthened by conducting in-depth interviews, using follow-up questions to clarify participants' experiences, and maintaining close engagement with the original transcripts during interpretation. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participant characteristics, social contexts, and research procedures, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings. Dependability was addressed through documentation of recruitment procedures, interview processes, coding decisions, and theme development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, in which the researchers documented their assumptions, interpretations, and potential influences on the analytical process. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to ensure that emerging interpretations remained attentive to participants' perspectives.

Participant quotations were selected to illustrate the developed themes and demonstrate the relationship between the findings and the underlying empirical material.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were incorporated throughout the research process to protect participants' rights, privacy, and psychological well-being. Before participating, individuals were provided with information regarding the study's objectives, interview procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw without negative consequences. Written or electronically documented informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms or identification codes, while personal information and interview recordings were securely stored with access restricted to the research team. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussions involving mental health, loneliness, interpersonal conflicts, and emotional distress, participants were informed that they could decline to answer particular questions or discontinue interviews whenever they felt uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and nonjudgmental manner, and participants who experienced distress were offered a pause or termination of the interview and information about appropriate psychological support services when needed. The study was designed to prioritize participant autonomy, emotional safety, and responsible management of qualitative research data.

Results and Discussion

Social Relationships and Emotional Support among Young Adults

Social relationships constitute a fundamental aspect of emotional experiences during young adulthood, particularly as individuals navigate developmental transitions involving education, employment, personal independence, and changing interpersonal responsibilities. Within these transitions, emotional support is closely associated with the perceived availability of meaningful relationships that provide understanding, reassurance, acceptance, and psychological security. Social relationships encompass multiple dimensions, including family attachments, friendships, romantic partnerships, and broader community connections, each contributing differently to individuals' emotional experiences. The quality of these relationships is reflected not merely in the frequency of interpersonal interactions but also in the extent to which individuals experience trust, emotional responsiveness, and reciprocal understanding. Supportive relationships create opportunities for emotional expression and interpersonal validation, enabling young adults to communicate personal concerns and navigate uncertainty within their social environments. Holt-Lunstad (2022) distinguished structural, functional, and qualitative dimensions of social connection, emphasizing that interpersonal relationships involve more than the presence or absence of social contact. This perspective highlights the importance of perceived emotional availability and meaningful interpersonal engagement when examining social support among young adults.

Family relationships represent a significant dimension of emotional support, particularly during the transition from dependence to greater personal autonomy. Although young adults increasingly make independent decisions concerning education, employment, romantic relationships, and future aspirations, family members may remain important sources of emotional reassurance and interpersonal stability. Emotional support within family relationships can take various forms, including attentive listening, encouragement during difficult circumstances, acceptance of individual choices, and practical assistance when personal resources are limited. Parental involvement and sibling relationships may offer a sense of continuity during periods of uncertainty, allowing individuals to maintain emotional connections while developing independent identities. Nevertheless, the emotional significance

of family relationships is influenced by the negotiation of expectations, autonomy, and interpersonal boundaries. Differences in values, expectations regarding academic or professional achievement, and conflicting interpretations of personal responsibility may generate tension within otherwise supportive family environments. Young adults may therefore experience family relationships as both sources of emotional security and contexts in which independence must be continuously negotiated. The meanings attached to family support may differ according to household structures, cultural expectations, communication practices, and previous interpersonal experiences.

Friendship and peer relationships provide opportunities for emotional connection through shared experiences, mutual understanding, and reciprocal communication. During young adulthood, friendships frequently develop within educational institutions, workplaces, community organizations, and digital environments, creating social spaces where individuals can exchange personal experiences and develop a sense of interpersonal belonging. Unlike relationships primarily structured around family obligations, friendships often involve greater freedom in selecting social connections based on shared interests, emotional compatibility, and mutual trust. Emotional support within friendships may be expressed through listening to personal concerns, providing encouragement during stressful situations, offering companionship, and acknowledging individual experiences without judgment. Richard et al. (2022), in a scoping review of 17 studies, identified associations between peer support and positive mental health outcomes among young adults, including improved happiness, self-esteem, and coping, as well as reduced loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. However, peer relationships may also involve emotional challenges when expectations of reciprocity are unmet or when individuals experience exclusion, competition, or unequal emotional investment. These relational complexities demonstrate that friendship quality depends on sustained interpersonal responsiveness rather than the mere existence of social networks.

Romantic relationships introduce another dimension of emotional support through intimacy, emotional attachment, and shared personal experiences. During young adulthood, romantic partnerships may represent important contexts for developing interpersonal trust, communicating emotional needs, and negotiating expectations regarding commitment and personal independence. Emotional intimacy within romantic relationships involves the willingness to express vulnerability and the expectation that personal feelings will be acknowledged respectfully. Partners may provide reassurance during stressful situations, encourage personal development, and offer companionship that strengthens an individual's sense of emotional acceptance. However, romantic relationships also involve potential sources of emotional strain, particularly when partners experience communication difficulties, conflicting priorities, uncertainty regarding commitment, or differences in expectations. Emotional dependence may become challenging when individuals rely excessively on their partners for reassurance or when interpersonal boundaries are insufficiently respected. The emotional significance of romantic relationships is therefore shaped by the interaction between affection, reciprocity, trust, communication, and individual autonomy. Understanding these experiences requires examining how young adults interpret supportive and challenging interactions within their romantic relationships rather than assuming that romantic involvement consistently contributes to positive psychological experiences.

The distinction between social interaction and meaningful emotional connection is particularly relevant to understanding the quality of social relationships. Young adults may participate actively in social activities and maintain extensive interpersonal networks while experiencing limited opportunities for authentic emotional expression. Conversely, individuals with

relatively small social networks may experience substantial emotional support when their relationships are characterized by trust, consistency, and mutual understanding. Emotional accessibility becomes important because individuals may evaluate the strength of their relationships according to whether significant others remain responsive during periods of uncertainty or personal difficulty. Experiences of being listened to, emotionally validated, and accepted without excessive judgment may encourage greater interpersonal openness and reinforce a sense of belonging. In contrast, repeated experiences of dismissal, emotional neglect, or superficial communication may discourage disclosure and increase interpersonal distance. Emotional support also involves reciprocity, whereby individuals participate in relationships as both providers and recipients of understanding and reassurance. Such reciprocal processes may influence perceptions of fairness, emotional responsibility, and interpersonal commitment. These dimensions are particularly significant during young adulthood because expanding responsibilities and changing social environments can alter the availability, expectations, and perceived reliability of established relationships.

Digital communication has further transformed the experience of emotional support by enabling young adults to maintain relationships across geographical distances and changing social circumstances. Social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, and online communities provide opportunities for interpersonal communication, emotional disclosure, and sustained contact with family members, friends, and romantic partners. Digital interactions may be especially meaningful for individuals experiencing geographical separation, relocation, or demanding educational and professional schedules. Regular online communication can facilitate reassurance and preserve a sense of connection when direct interpersonal interaction is limited. Nevertheless, digitally mediated relationships may also introduce emotional uncertainty through delayed responses, ambiguous communication, social comparison, and expectations of constant availability. Käcko et al. (2024), in a qualitative investigation involving young adults, identified the dual nature of social media in experiences of loneliness, showing that digital communication could facilitate connectedness while also intensifying perceived social disconnection. These experiences illustrate how emotional support within digital relationships may depend on the perceived authenticity of communication, the responsiveness of significant others, and the meanings individuals attach to online interactions. Digital environments also provide opportunities for maintaining multiple forms of interpersonal connection simultaneously, creating complex experiences involving emotional availability, social expectations, interpersonal boundaries, and the negotiation of intimacy across online and offline relationships.

Social Relationships and Mental Health Experiences

Social relationships play a significant role in shaping mental health experiences among young adults, particularly during a developmental period characterized by increasing independence, changing responsibilities, and exposure to various psychological challenges. The relationship between interpersonal connections and mental health involves complex interactions between emotional security, perceived social support, interpersonal expectations, and individual responses to stressful circumstances. Young adults frequently encounter academic pressures, employment uncertainty, financial responsibilities, and identity-related challenges that may influence their psychological functioning. Within these circumstances, supportive social relationships can provide opportunities for emotional expression, reassurance, and shared problem-solving, while strained relationships may contribute to psychological vulnerability. The perceived availability of trusted individuals is particularly important because emotional support depends not only on the existence of social connections but also on the quality of interpersonal communication and the willingness of others to respond to personal difficulties.

Pearce et al. (2023), through an umbrella review of 53 systematic reviews, identified associations between various dimensions of social relationships, including loneliness, social isolation, social support, and social network characteristics, and mental health conditions or symptoms. These findings highlight the multidimensional relationship between interpersonal experiences and psychological functioning, emphasizing the importance of examining supportive and distressing relationships within broader social contexts.

Supportive relationships may contribute to psychological resilience by providing young adults with interpersonal resources for navigating stressful experiences and maintaining emotional stability. Family members, friends, and romantic partners can offer different forms of support, ranging from emotional reassurance and practical assistance to encouragement and constructive feedback. Experiences of being understood and accepted may help individuals interpret stressful circumstances as more manageable, particularly when they have opportunities to share concerns without experiencing criticism or rejection. Emotional validation is relevant to this process because it communicates that personal feelings and psychological difficulties are acknowledged rather than dismissed. Relationships characterized by trust and consistent communication may also encourage individuals to seek assistance when experiencing emotional distress. Richard et al. (2022), in a scoping review examining peer support among young adults, reported that peer-support approaches were associated with improvements in psychological outcomes, including self-esteem, happiness, and coping abilities, alongside reductions in depressive symptoms, anxiety, and loneliness. These associations illustrate the potential importance of interpersonal understanding and shared experiences in supporting psychological well-being. However, the perceived effectiveness of emotional support may differ according to relationship quality, individual preferences, cultural expectations, and the specific psychological challenges encountered.

Interpersonal conflicts represent another important dimension of young adults' mental health experiences because relationships that provide emotional security may simultaneously generate psychological pressure. Conflicts involving family expectations, friendship disagreements, romantic uncertainty, and difficulties establishing personal boundaries can create experiences of frustration, insecurity, and emotional exhaustion. Within family relationships, differences concerning independence, career decisions, financial responsibilities, and personal values may produce tension between individual aspirations and perceived social obligations. Friendship conflicts may involve perceived exclusion, unequal emotional investment, breaches of trust, or the gradual deterioration of previously meaningful connections. Romantic relationships may introduce additional psychological challenges through uncertainty, communication difficulties, jealousy, emotional dependence, and unmet expectations. The psychological significance of these experiences depends partly on how individuals interpret interpersonal difficulties and whether they perceive opportunities for constructive communication and conflict resolution. Repeated experiences of criticism, rejection, or emotional invalidation may contribute to negative self-perceptions and reluctance to communicate personal concerns. At the same time, interpersonal disagreements do not necessarily indicate unhealthy relationships, as constructive conflict resolution may provide opportunities to develop emotional awareness, communication skills, and mutual understanding. The distinction between manageable interpersonal disagreements and persistent emotionally harmful interactions is therefore important when examining how young adults experience psychological distress within their social environments.

Social rejection, loneliness, and perceived interpersonal disconnection may further complicate mental health experiences during young adulthood. Individuals may encounter situations in which their desire for meaningful social interaction is not matched by the emotional availability

or responsiveness of others. Such experiences may occur during major life transitions, including entering higher education, relocating for employment, ending romantic relationships, or experiencing changes in friendship networks. Loneliness can emerge even when individuals maintain regular interpersonal contact, particularly when existing relationships do not provide the expected level of emotional intimacy, understanding, or acceptance. Feelings of social exclusion may also influence how young adults evaluate their personal worth and interpersonal competence, potentially reinforcing concerns about belonging and social acceptance. Nielsen et al. (2024), through a qualitative investigation of loneliness in emerging adulthood, identified experiences involving negative self-perceptions, feelings of inadequacy, intrusive thoughts, and interpersonal difficulties that influenced participants' psychological experiences. Their findings also indicated that earlier life experiences, including bullying and family difficulties, could influence how individuals experienced loneliness and developed subsequent relationships. These observations suggest that the psychological significance of loneliness extends beyond temporary social isolation and may involve enduring patterns of interpersonal interpretation, emotional vulnerability, and difficulties establishing meaningful connections.

The relationship between social experiences and mental health is also influenced by individuals' willingness and ability to communicate psychological difficulties within their interpersonal networks. Young adults may experience hesitation when discussing emotional distress because of concerns about judgment, rejection, misunderstanding, or the possibility of becoming a burden to others. Such concerns can influence patterns of emotional disclosure and determine whether individuals seek assistance from family members, friends, romantic partners, or professional support services. Within relationships characterized by psychological safety, individuals may feel more comfortable expressing uncertainty, acknowledging emotional difficulties, and communicating personal needs. Conversely, environments marked by criticism, emotional dismissal, or limited confidentiality may discourage disclosure and reinforce tendencies toward emotional withdrawal. Cultural expectations regarding independence, emotional strength, and personal responsibility may further shape how young adults interpret the appropriateness of seeking support. Gender norms, family communication practices, and previous experiences of receiving assistance can also influence individuals' perceptions of emotional vulnerability. The process of seeking social support therefore involves more than identifying available interpersonal resources; it also requires evaluating trust, anticipated responses, and the emotional consequences of disclosure. These processes may differ across relationships, with some individuals preferring family support for practical difficulties while relying on friendships or romantic partnerships for emotionally sensitive experiences.

Mental health experiences among young adults are further shaped by the interaction between changing social environments, interpersonal expectations, and personal coping processes. Transitions involving graduation, employment, geographical mobility, and increased independence may alter the availability of established support networks while requiring individuals to develop new relationships. Such transitions can generate uncertainty regarding social belonging and emotional security, particularly when previously accessible sources of reassurance become less available. Digital communication may help sustain interpersonal connections across geographical distances, but online interactions can also introduce challenges associated with social comparison, perceived exclusion, ambiguous communication, and expectations of immediate responsiveness. These experiences may influence how individuals interpret social acceptance and emotional availability in everyday life. Young adults may respond to interpersonal stress through different coping practices, including seeking reassurance, communicating concerns, temporarily withdrawing from social

situations, establishing boundaries, or engaging in independent emotional regulation. The meanings attached to these practices may vary according to personal experiences, relationship histories, and perceived opportunities for support. Examining these processes through individuals' accounts allows attention to the ways supportive interactions, interpersonal tensions, emotional disclosure, and changing social circumstances become intertwined with their experiences of psychological distress, resilience, and mental health management.

Social Connectedness, Loneliness, and Emotional Well-Being

Social connectedness represents a fundamental dimension of emotional well-being among young adults, particularly during a developmental period characterized by changes in personal identity, interpersonal expectations, and social responsibilities. The experience of social connectedness involves more than participation in social activities or maintaining frequent interpersonal communication; it reflects the subjective perception of being accepted, understood, valued, and emotionally connected to significant individuals and communities. Young adults develop these experiences through interactions with family members, friends, romantic partners, educational communities, and broader social networks. A sense of belonging may provide emotional reassurance, strengthen self-confidence, and contribute to positive perceptions of personal identity. Conversely, difficulties establishing meaningful connections may produce feelings of uncertainty, emotional vulnerability, and social exclusion. The emotional significance of connectedness is closely related to the quality of interpersonal interactions, particularly the availability of trustworthy relationships, opportunities for authentic self-expression, and experiences of mutual recognition. Individuals may participate in extensive social networks without necessarily experiencing emotional belonging, indicating that social integration and psychological connectedness represent related but distinct dimensions of interpersonal life. These distinctions are particularly relevant when exploring how young adults interpret their social experiences and evaluate their emotional well-being across different relational environments.

The experience of belonging and social acceptance is particularly significant during young adulthood because individuals increasingly encounter unfamiliar social environments and changing interpersonal expectations. Educational transitions, employment opportunities, geographical mobility, and independent living arrangements may require individuals to establish new social networks while maintaining existing relationships. Within these transitions, social acceptance can emerge through shared activities, interpersonal recognition, emotional responsiveness, and participation in communities that acknowledge individual identities. Feelings of belonging may be strengthened when individuals perceive that their contributions are valued and that they can express personal perspectives without excessive fear of judgment. However, integration into unfamiliar environments may also generate emotional challenges, particularly when individuals encounter social exclusion, communication barriers, or difficulties establishing interpersonal trust. The experiences of emerging adults undergoing educational transitions and identified changes in social networks, insufficient interpersonal attachment, and limited community belonging as important aspects of loneliness and mental health difficulties (Sundqvist et al., 2024; Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022). Their qualitative findings illustrated how transitions could involve emotional uncertainty, concerns about acceptance, and challenges in developing meaningful relationships. These experiences demonstrate the relevance of examining belonging as a dynamic process shaped by interpersonal interactions, environmental changes, and the gradual development of emotional security.

Loneliness represents a complex psychological experience that emerges when individuals perceive a discrepancy between their desired and actual social relationships. Unlike objective

social isolation, loneliness is not necessarily determined by the number of interpersonal connections or the frequency of social participation. Young adults may experience loneliness while maintaining active friendships, participating in educational activities, or interacting regularly through digital platforms when these relationships do not provide sufficient emotional intimacy or understanding. Feelings of loneliness may involve emotional emptiness, perceived rejection, interpersonal insecurity, and uncertainty about one's position within social groups. These experiences may become particularly pronounced during periods of relationship disruption, relocation, academic transitions, or changes in personal responsibilities. Nielsen et al. (2024), through a qualitative study involving emerging adults, identified multiple dimensions of loneliness, including negative self-perceptions, feelings of inadequacy, intrusive thoughts, and difficulties developing interpersonal connections. Their findings indicated that loneliness could be shaped by earlier experiences of bullying, family difficulties, and emotionally challenging relationships, with these experiences influencing subsequent patterns of social interaction. Such perspectives demonstrate that loneliness may reflect accumulated interpersonal experiences and subjective interpretations rather than simply the absence of social contact.

Emotional well-being is closely associated with how young adults interpret their interpersonal experiences and perceive their capacity to maintain meaningful relationships. Positive emotional experiences may emerge through interactions characterized by acceptance, empathy, companionship, and interpersonal reliability, while emotionally demanding relationships may contribute to insecurity, frustration, and psychological exhaustion. Within supportive environments, individuals may experience greater confidence in expressing emotions, discussing personal challenges, and seeking reassurance during stressful circumstances. Social connectedness may also contribute to life satisfaction by creating opportunities for shared experiences, mutual encouragement, and recognition of personal achievements. Nevertheless, emotional well-being cannot be understood exclusively through the presence of positive social relationships because individuals differ in their emotional needs, expectations, and preferences for interpersonal engagement. Some young adults may experience emotional satisfaction through a limited number of close relationships, whereas others may value broader participation in friendship networks and community activities. Personal autonomy, emotional independence, and the ability to maintain healthy boundaries may also influence perceptions of interpersonal satisfaction. Consequently, experiences of emotional well-being involve an ongoing negotiation between the desire for belonging, the need for personal space, and the quality of emotional exchanges within different social environments.

The growing integration of digital technologies into everyday communication has introduced additional dimensions to social connectedness and loneliness among young adults. Social networking platforms, online communities, and instant messaging applications provide opportunities to maintain relationships across geographical distances and participate in social interactions beyond immediate physical environments. Digital communication may strengthen feelings of connectedness by enabling individuals to exchange emotional support, maintain existing friendships, and establish relationships with people sharing similar interests or experiences. However, online interactions may also generate emotional difficulties associated with social comparison, perceived exclusion, and expectations of constant availability. Young adults may interpret limited responses, reduced online engagement, or exposure to others' social activities as indicators of interpersonal distance or diminished social acceptance. Young adults' perceptions of social media and loneliness, identifying the contrasting ways digital platforms could facilitate interpersonal connection while simultaneously contributing to experiences of loneliness (Käcko et al., 2024; Hemberg et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). The

emotional implications of digital interaction therefore depend on the subjective meanings attached to communication, the perceived authenticity of interpersonal engagement, and the extent to which online relationships fulfill expectations for emotional closeness. The distinction between digital accessibility and meaningful emotional connection becomes especially relevant when examining the social experiences of individuals who maintain extensive online networks but encounter limited opportunities for deeper interpersonal interaction.

The experience of social connectedness and loneliness is further shaped by individual coping practices, interpersonal histories, and the changing availability of meaningful relationships. Young adults experiencing emotional disconnection may respond by seeking new friendships, reconnecting with established social networks, increasing participation in community activities, or pursuing opportunities for personal development. Others may temporarily withdraw from social interactions, engage in solitary activities, or rely on digital communication to manage feelings of isolation. These responses may reflect differences in emotional confidence, previous relational experiences, and perceived opportunities for social acceptance. The process of rebuilding interpersonal connections can be particularly challenging when individuals have experienced repeated rejection, conflict, or disappointment in previous relationships. Such experiences may influence their willingness to disclose emotions, initiate conversations, or establish trust with unfamiliar individuals. At the same time, the development of meaningful relationships may involve gradual processes of mutual understanding, shared experiences, and emotional reciprocity rather than immediate interpersonal familiarity. Changes in educational settings, employment environments, living arrangements, and social responsibilities may continuously reshape opportunities for belonging, requiring young adults to renegotiate existing relationships and establish new forms of emotional connection. These evolving experiences encompass the interaction between social expectations, perceived acceptance, emotional vulnerability, and personal strategies for maintaining interpersonal engagement.

Interpersonal Challenges and Coping Strategies in Maintaining Healthy Social Relationships

Maintaining healthy social relationships during young adulthood involves navigating complex interpersonal challenges associated with emotional expectations, personal independence, communication differences, and changing social responsibilities. During this developmental period, individuals increasingly establish relationships outside their immediate family environments while simultaneously negotiating new expectations concerning education, employment, romantic commitment, and social participation. These transitions may create interpersonal difficulties when individuals experience conflicting priorities, unequal emotional investment, or differences in their expectations of relational closeness. Challenges frequently arise when personal needs are not clearly communicated or when individuals perceive insufficient understanding from significant others. Interpersonal disagreements may involve friendship misunderstandings, family expectations, romantic conflicts, and difficulties balancing social obligations with personal responsibilities. The emotional significance of these challenges depends on the ways individuals interpret disagreements, assess the reliability of their relationships, and respond to perceived threats to interpersonal security. Mackinnon et al. (2022), in a longitudinal study examining friendship conflict and coping motives among emerging adults, investigated the relationship between interpersonal conflict and maladaptive coping through alcohol use. Their research illustrates the relevance of examining how relational tensions intersect with emotional responses and coping behaviors, particularly when young adults experience difficulties managing negative emotions within close friendships.

Communication difficulties represent an important challenge in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships because individuals may differ in their willingness to express emotions, disclose personal concerns, and address disagreements directly. Misunderstandings can emerge when emotional expectations remain unspoken or when individuals interpret communication patterns differently. Within friendships, difficulties may arise from inconsistent communication, unmet expectations of reciprocity, or perceived exclusion from shared activities. Family relationships may involve communication barriers associated with generational differences, expectations regarding independence, and conflicting perspectives on personal decision-making. Romantic relationships introduce additional challenges involving emotional intimacy, vulnerability, commitment, and the interpretation of interpersonal boundaries. Constructive communication strategies may involve active listening, clarification of misunderstandings, acknowledgment of different perspectives, and the expression of personal needs without dismissing others' experiences. However, conflict management may become more complicated when individuals avoid emotionally difficult conversations because they anticipate criticism, rejection, or further disagreement. The ability to communicate emotional concerns therefore involves both interpersonal confidence and perceived psychological safety. Young adults may adopt different communication approaches depending on the relationship context, previous experiences of conflict, and the perceived responsiveness of significant others. These variations illustrate how emotional regulation, interpersonal trust, and communication competence become interconnected in everyday relational experiences.

The establishment of personal boundaries constitutes another significant dimension of relationship management during young adulthood. As individuals develop greater independence, they may encounter situations requiring them to negotiate the balance between maintaining emotional closeness and protecting their personal autonomy. Boundaries can involve decisions concerning emotional disclosure, time commitments, personal privacy, financial responsibilities, and expectations of interpersonal availability. Difficulties may emerge when individuals experience pressure to prioritize others' needs over their own or when relational expectations conflict with educational, occupational, or personal responsibilities. Establishing boundaries does not necessarily indicate emotional distance or reduced commitment; instead, boundaries may provide opportunities for developing relationships characterized by mutual respect and realistic expectations. Young adults may experience discomfort when expressing personal limitations, particularly when they fear that refusing requests or questioning established expectations could damage meaningful relationships. Costello et al. (2023), in a longitudinal study examining the development of emotional support competence from adolescent friendships to young adult romantic relationships, demonstrated the developmental importance of supportive interpersonal experiences and their relevance to later relationship functioning. Their findings provide a basis for understanding how interpersonal responsiveness, emotional support skills, and relationship quality develop across different relational contexts. Within young adulthood, these capacities may inform how individuals negotiate independence, communicate emotional expectations, and maintain relationships while responding to changing personal circumstances.

Emotional regulation and conflict resolution represent important coping processes when young adults encounter interpersonal disappointment, rejection, or persistent disagreements. Emotional responses to relational difficulties may include frustration, sadness, insecurity, anger, or uncertainty, particularly when conflicts involve individuals who provide significant emotional support. Coping practices may include taking temporary distance from stressful interactions, reflecting on personal reactions, discussing concerns with trusted individuals, and approaching conflicts through collaborative problem-solving. Problem-focused coping may

involve identifying the source of disagreements, clarifying expectations, negotiating responsibilities, and developing mutually acceptable solutions. Emotion-focused coping may involve managing immediate distress through reflection, emotional expression, relaxation, or engagement in meaningful personal activities. However, not all coping strategies are equally constructive across circumstances. Persistent avoidance, emotional suppression, excessive reassurance-seeking, or repeated withdrawal may leave interpersonal difficulties unresolved and potentially reinforce misunderstanding. Conversely, temporary disengagement may be constructive when it allows individuals to regulate intense emotions before communicating more effectively. The perceived usefulness of particular coping strategies may depend on the seriousness of the conflict, the quality of the relationship, previous interpersonal experiences, and the availability of supportive individuals. These processes illustrate how maintaining healthy relationships requires ongoing negotiation between emotional expression, personal responsibility, and responsiveness to others' needs.

Seeking social support constitutes another important strategy through which young adults may manage interpersonal challenges and protect their emotional well-being. When experiencing conflict or emotional uncertainty, individuals may seek assistance from friends, family members, romantic partners, mentors, or professional counselors. Support-seeking may involve discussing personal difficulties, requesting advice, obtaining emotional reassurance, or identifying alternative perspectives on challenging situations. Trusted relationships can provide opportunities for individuals to interpret interpersonal experiences without feeling isolated in their difficulties. However, the decision to seek assistance is influenced by concerns about confidentiality, potential judgment, interpersonal loyalty, and the perceived ability of others to provide appropriate support. Some individuals may hesitate to disclose relational difficulties because they fear criticism or worry that discussing private matters could create additional conflict. Richard et al. (2022), through a scoping review of peer-support interventions among young adults, identified associations between peer support and improvements in coping abilities, happiness, and self-esteem, alongside reductions in loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. These findings indicate the potential value of supportive peer environments in promoting adaptive psychological responses. Nevertheless, informal social support may not always be sufficient when individuals experience persistent psychological distress, harmful relationships, or complex emotional difficulties. The accessibility of professional assistance, the perceived safety of interpersonal disclosure, and individuals' previous experiences of receiving support may influence how they navigate these circumstances.

Contemporary interpersonal challenges are further influenced by digital communication practices, changing social expectations, and the increasing complexity of maintaining relationships across different environments. Social media platforms and messaging applications enable young adults to sustain relationships despite geographical separation, demanding schedules, and changing personal responsibilities. However, these technologies may also introduce difficulties associated with communication ambiguity, expectations of immediate responses, online disagreements, social comparison, and perceived exclusion. Individuals may experience pressure to remain continuously available to their social networks, creating tension between interpersonal responsiveness and personal well-being. Digital misunderstandings may arise when written messages lack emotional context or when individuals interpret delayed responses as signs of rejection or declining relational commitment. Managing these experiences may involve establishing expectations regarding online availability, discussing communication preferences, limiting exposure to emotionally demanding interactions, and prioritizing direct conversations when addressing sensitive

interpersonal concerns. Relationship management may also require adapting to major life transitions, including relocation, employment changes, graduation, and the development of new social networks. These circumstances can alter established patterns of communication and emotional support, requiring individuals to negotiate new expectations regarding closeness, availability, and reciprocity. Coping practices may therefore vary across interpersonal contexts, reflecting differences in emotional needs, relationship histories, individual autonomy, and the perceived importance of maintaining particular social connections.

Discussion

The findings explored in this study highlight the multidimensional role of social relationships in shaping mental health and emotional well-being among young adults. Social relationships extend beyond interpersonal contact and involve complex emotional experiences characterized by trust, acceptance, reciprocity, and psychological security. Family relationships, friendships, and romantic partnerships provide different forms of emotional support, each contributing to how young adults interpret their personal experiences and respond to developmental challenges. The relationship between social connections and psychological well-being appears to depend more strongly on the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions than on the number or frequency of social contacts. This interpretation aligns with Holt-Lunstad (2022), who emphasized that social connections encompass structural, functional, and qualitative dimensions that contribute differently to individual health and well-being. From a phenomenological perspective, these dimensions are particularly important because individuals assign different meanings to similar relational experiences depending on their personal histories, emotional expectations, and social environments. Supportive relationships may reinforce emotional security and personal confidence, whereas relationships characterized by limited responsiveness or emotional invalidation may contribute to interpersonal uncertainty. Consequently, understanding social relationships requires attention to how emotional support is experienced, negotiated, and interpreted within specific interpersonal contexts rather than assuming that greater social participation necessarily produces better psychological outcomes.

The relationship between social support and mental health can be further understood through the psychological mechanisms of emotional validation, stress regulation, and interpersonal reassurance. Young adults frequently encounter developmental challenges involving academic responsibilities, occupational uncertainty, financial pressures, and changing personal identities. During these experiences, meaningful interpersonal relationships may provide opportunities to communicate emotional concerns, receive practical assistance, and develop more adaptive interpretations of stressful situations. Emotional validation is particularly significant because individuals who feel understood and accepted may experience greater confidence in expressing psychological difficulties and seeking appropriate assistance. However, social relationships are not uniformly protective, as interpersonal conflict, excessive expectations, emotional dependence, and perceived rejection may also intensify psychological distress. This complexity is consistent with Richard et al. (2022), whose review identified beneficial associations between peer support and psychological outcomes, including improved coping abilities, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. The relationship between interpersonal support and mental health should therefore be interpreted as a dynamic process influenced by relationship quality, emotional accessibility, and individual coping resources. These considerations also suggest that social support is not merely an external resource but an interpersonal experience through which young adults negotiate emotional vulnerability, personal autonomy, and psychological resilience.

Social connectedness and loneliness represent interconnected but conceptually distinct experiences that contribute to the complexity of emotional well-being during young adulthood. A sense of belonging develops when individuals perceive themselves as accepted, valued, and meaningfully connected to others, whereas loneliness emerges when perceived interpersonal relationships do not fulfill desired emotional needs. The discussion of these experiences demonstrates that social participation cannot be equated directly with emotional satisfaction because individuals may maintain extensive interpersonal networks while experiencing psychological isolation. Conversely, a limited number of emotionally meaningful relationships may provide substantial opportunities for reassurance, intimacy, and personal acceptance. Loneliness may also become particularly significant during educational transitions, employment changes, geographical relocation, or disruptions in established relationships. Loneliness among emerging adults involves complex experiences of negative self-perception, interpersonal difficulties, and emotional vulnerability, indicating that social disconnection cannot be understood exclusively through objective indicators of isolation (Nielsen et al., 2024; Kaarakainen et al., 2025). These perspectives reinforce the importance of examining the subjective meanings of interpersonal belonging and the emotional expectations individuals attach to their relationships. The phenomenological orientation of the present study is therefore relevant for understanding how young adults perceive emotional closeness, negotiate social acceptance, and interpret experiences of loneliness within changing social circumstances.

Interpersonal challenges and coping strategies further demonstrate that maintaining healthy social relationships involves continuous negotiation between emotional needs, personal boundaries, and relational expectations. Conflicts within families, friendships, and romantic partnerships may arise from communication differences, unequal emotional investment, competing responsibilities, and difficulties expressing personal expectations. Such challenges can become psychologically demanding when individuals experience repeated misunderstandings, criticism, or uncertainty regarding interpersonal commitment. Nevertheless, interpersonal disagreements are not inherently detrimental to emotional well-being, as their psychological significance depends partly on the strategies used to manage them. Constructive communication, emotional regulation, mutual acknowledgment, and clearly established boundaries may enable individuals to address relational tensions while preserving personal autonomy and interpersonal respect. By contrast, persistent avoidance, emotional suppression, and excessive dependence on external reassurance may complicate conflict resolution and reinforce negative emotional experiences. The interpretation of coping strategies must therefore consider the relational context in which they occur, because temporary withdrawal may facilitate emotional regulation in one situation while contributing to interpersonal disconnection in another. This perspective emphasizes that healthy social relationships are not necessarily relationships without conflict but those in which individuals have opportunities to communicate differences, negotiate expectations, and maintain emotional safety.

Digital communication introduces additional complexity into the relationship between social connectedness and emotional well-being. Social media platforms and messaging applications allow young adults to sustain interpersonal connections across geographical distances, maintain friendships, and access emotional support beyond their immediate physical environments. These opportunities are particularly relevant during periods of educational mobility, employment transitions, and changing social responsibilities. However, digitally mediated communication may simultaneously intensify expectations of constant responsiveness, social comparison, and concerns regarding interpersonal acceptance. Online interaction may provide frequent opportunities for communication without necessarily

facilitating emotional intimacy, suggesting that technological connectivity and meaningful social connectedness should be understood as separate dimensions of interpersonal experience. Digital environments can also blur personal boundaries by creating expectations of continuous availability and immediate emotional engagement. Young adults may consequently need to negotiate communication preferences, privacy expectations, and the balance between online and offline interactions. Understanding these experiences requires examining how individuals assign meaning to digital responsiveness, interpret online interpersonal behavior, and evaluate the authenticity of digitally mediated relationships. The relationship between digital communication and emotional well-being is therefore context-dependent, reflecting differences in personal expectations, interpersonal histories, and the perceived quality of emotional interaction.

The theoretical and practical implications of these interpretations extend to the development of relationship-centered approaches to mental health promotion among young adults. Social Support Theory provides a useful perspective for understanding how emotional reassurance, informational assistance, and interpersonal availability may influence psychological experiences, while Attachment Theory offers insight into the significance of emotional security and relational expectations. Together, these perspectives suggest that initiatives intended to support young adults' mental health should address not only individual coping skills but also the quality and accessibility of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Educational institutions, community organizations, and mental health services may benefit from creating environments that encourage supportive peer interactions, emotional literacy, constructive communication, and opportunities for social belonging. Relationship education and psychological support initiatives may also incorporate strategies for managing interpersonal conflicts, establishing healthy boundaries, and recognizing emotionally harmful interactions. Nevertheless, the phenomenological orientation of this research requires caution in generalizing interpretations across populations because experiences of interpersonal support and emotional well-being may differ according to cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic circumstances, personal histories, and relational environments. The absence of longitudinal observation also limits conclusions concerning causal relationships between social experiences and psychological outcomes. Future empirical investigations may integrate qualitative interviews with longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to explore how changing interpersonal relationships influence mental health experiences across different stages of young adulthood.

Conclusion

This study highlights the important role of social relationships in shaping mental health and emotional well-being among young adults, emphasizing the interconnected experiences of emotional support, interpersonal belonging, loneliness, and relationship management. Social relationships involving family members, friends, romantic partners, and broader social networks provide different opportunities for emotional reassurance, psychological security, and personal development. The analysis indicates that the quality of interpersonal relationships is more meaningful than the frequency of social interactions, particularly when relationships are characterized by mutual trust, emotional responsiveness, acceptance, and reciprocal understanding. Supportive relationships may strengthen psychological resilience, facilitate emotional expression, and help young adults navigate academic, occupational, and personal challenges. Conversely, interpersonal conflicts, emotional invalidation, social rejection, and unmet relational expectations may contribute to psychological distress and emotional instability. Social connectedness emerges as an important dimension of emotional well-being, while loneliness reflects the perceived absence of meaningful interpersonal connections rather than simply limited social participation. Digital communication further introduces

opportunities and challenges by facilitating interpersonal contact while potentially intensifying social comparison, emotional uncertainty, and expectations of constant availability. Maintaining healthy relationships therefore requires effective communication, emotional regulation, personal boundaries, constructive conflict resolution, and appropriate support-seeking strategies. From a phenomenological perspective, these dimensions underscore the importance of understanding how young adults interpret and assign meaning to their interpersonal experiences within diverse social environments. The study offers a conceptual foundation for developing relationship-centered mental health initiatives that promote emotional literacy, supportive peer networks, interpersonal competence, and inclusive social environments. Educational institutions, community organizations, and mental health professionals should consider the relational dimensions of psychological well-being when designing preventive and supportive interventions. Future research should incorporate diverse participant experiences and longitudinal perspectives to examine how evolving social relationships influence psychological functioning across different developmental and sociocultural contexts, while providing deeper insights into the mechanisms connecting interpersonal experiences, emotional resilience, and mental health outcomes.

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