

Research Paper



Loneliness in Emerging Adults: A Meta-synthesis

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Abstract

Introduction and Objective: Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period where individuals are particularly vulnerable to loneliness, a condition with significant mental health risks. While quantitative research has documented its prevalence, a synthesized understanding of the lived experience remains fragmented. This study aimed to address this gap by conducting the first meta-synthesis of qualitative research to develop a comprehensive, multi-layered model of the loneliness experience in emerging adults.

Research Methodology: Following PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search of international and Iranian databases was conducted. From an initial pool of documents, nine primary qualitative studies met the inclusion criteria. The findings of these studies were analyzed and integrated using Thomas and Harden's thematic synthesis approach.

Findings: The analysis yielded 11 descriptive themes and four higher-order analytical themes, revealing that the experience of loneliness is: (1) complex and ambiguous, (2) a fluctuating phenomenon, (3) characterized by diverse pathways, and (4) deeply intertwined with sociocultural pressures.

Conclusion: Loneliness in emerging adults is a dynamic experience shaped by both intrapsychic factors and formidable social norms. This finding underscores the need for holistic interventions that move beyond social skills training to address relationship quality and the capacity to cope with normative pressures.

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood is distinguished from adulthood by several key characteristics: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling of being in-between, and Possibilities/optimism (Arnett, 2023). These traits can create contradictory and conflicting emotions that may lead individuals to choose their life path, especially in social and intimate relationships, making them vulnerable to mental health problems, including loneliness (Arnett et al., 2014). These characteristics have the potential to make them hesitant and uncertain about the social world around them. While individuals may find themselves in a world they perceive as devoid of affection and attention, they often retreat inward to understand themselves more deeply and discover the meaning and purpose of life, simultaneously drifting further from deep and lasting relationships. An adult has typically established a relatively stable identity and is thus in a clear and stable state, whereas emerging adults are still engaged in a process of trial and error to resolve identity uncertainty across various domains, including occupational, social, political, and religious identities. Consequently, they often hesitate when deciding to start a long-term, committed intimate relationship. They can be so preoccupied with themselves that their engagement with and devotion to another may lack the element of commitment. As a result, relationships are likely to become short in duration, superficial in depth, and unreliable in terms of dependability. Therefore, some emerging adult men and women, by altering their preferences and expectations, not only place no value on long-term relationships but also may perceive commitment as a nuisance, preferring short-term, casual relationships such as serial monogamy or "hooking up."

The characteristic of self-focus does not necessarily mean egocentrism or pathological narcissism, but as Arnett clarifies, it is related mainly to a lack of commitment and obligation to others. This occurs while emerging adults are actively engaged in identity exploration in love, and having a soul mate is often an important goal for them (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). These factors likely make the emerging adult population, especially in Iran, susceptible to loneliness.

Loneliness is a subjective discrepancy between one's actual and desired relationships in terms of closeness, intimacy, emotional support, and connectedness (Luo et al., 2012). This emotional experience is associated with a range of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, self-destructive behaviors, and suicide attempts, as well as physical health issues such as high body mass index, high blood pressure, elevated inflammation levels, cardiovascular problems, and premature death (Shah, 2021; Buecker, Petersen, et al., 2024; Pascalidis & Bathelt, 2024; Borjali & Taheri, 2025).

While a vast body of quantitative research has focused on the prevalence (Lee et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2024; Kirwan et al., 2025) and correlates of loneliness in emerging adulthood (Buecker, Petersen, et al., 2024; Christiansen et al., 2021), a deep and synthesized understanding of the subjective, lived experience of this phenomenon remains fragmented. The literature tells us that young people are lonely, but a significant gap exists in understanding how they experience this state from an insider's perspective. This study addresses this gap by conducting the first meta-synthesis of qualitative research to answer the central research question: How do emerging adults describe their experience of loneliness? By systematically integrating findings from existing qualitative studies, this paper provides a novel, multilayered model of the experience of loneliness. This contribution is vital for moving beyond simple prevalence rates and developing a more nuanced understanding of the relational and sociocultural dynamics that shape loneliness in this vulnerable population, thereby informing more targeted and effective interventions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is a meta-synthesis. Meta-synthesis is a method that, by utilizing rigorous qualitative techniques, can integrate existing qualitative research on a specific issue and thereby achieve a comprehensive construction of meaning. Although the integration of qualitative studies faces paradigmatic and epistemological challenges due to their constructivist and situated nature and may affect the uniqueness, richness, and details of each study in some ways, it can provide an opportunity to reveal contextual characteristics and human diversity across studies. Meta-synthesis is a qualitative method that analyzes qualitative findings and evidence with the aim of achieving a higher-level and novel understanding of qualitative phenomena and categories. This method is, in fact, derived from thematic synthesis, which itself draws upon a combination of features from grounded theory and meta-ethnography. Meta-synthesis first extracts descriptive themes from the initial codes and then, by interpreting commonalities and patterns emerging from the findings, arrives at analytical themes. Analytical themes have the capacity to offer interpretations and explanations that are broader and at a higher level than those of primary studies. The iterative and cyclical process of analysis begins with a thorough initial familiarization and then continues with line-by-line coding, grouping, and categorizing of the codes derived from the reviewed studies to extract descriptive themes. In the next step, a higher-level synthesis is performed to achieve emerging themes and knowledge (Lachal et al., 2017; Major & Savin-Baden, 2012; Paterson, 2011; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The aim of the present study is to provide a comprehensive perspective on the experience of loneliness in emerging adults through a systematic review and thematic synthesis. For this purpose, and to balance the researcher's inevitable objectivity and subjectivity, a six-step process was employed (Lachal et al., 2017):

1. Define the research question and selection criteria;
2. Select the studies;
3. Quality appraisal;
4. Extracting and presenting the data;
5. Analyzing the data; and
6. Reporting the synthesis of findings.

Search Protocol and Strategy

To achieve this goal, a research protocol aligned with the PRISMA statement was established. After the research topic was selected, a list of keywords was identified: "loneliness," "lonely," "youth," "emerging adults," and "emerging adulthood." These terms were searched for in the title, keywords, and abstract of the studies. The search for international articles and dissertations was conducted in the Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, PsycInfo, and ProQuest databases and for Iranian articles and dissertations in the SID, Irandoc, Noormags, and Magiran databases. The keyword search in the mentioned databases was conducted up to November 1, 2024. In the next step, studies that contained the specified keywords in their title or abstract were included in the initial list. The results were transferred to EndNote version 21 software. After removing duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the studies were reviewed more thoroughly and screened for compliance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Two of the authors subsequently read the full texts of the remaining studies and actively scrutinized the findings section. After disagreements were resolved and a consensus was reached, open coding was performed.

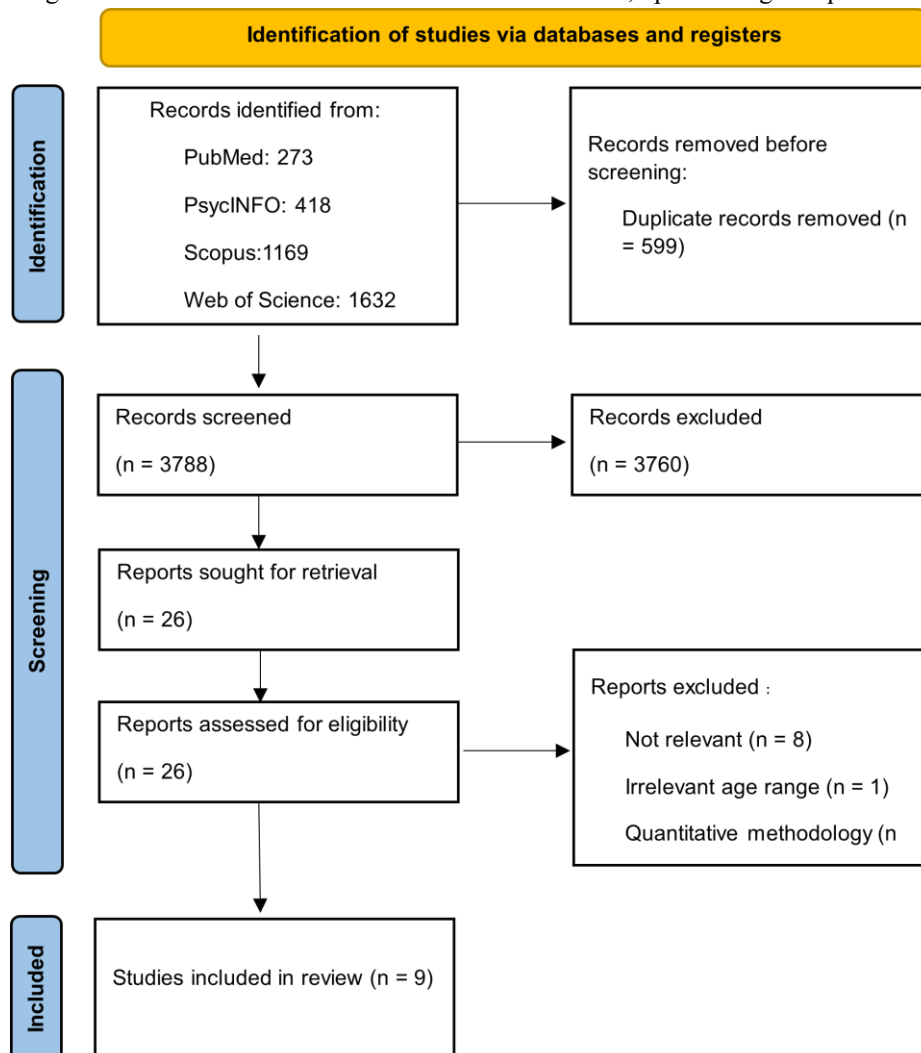


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility of studies appropriate for the research question was determined on the basis of the PICO model. Accordingly, P (Population) refers to emerging adults experiencing loneliness; individuals are not exposed to an intervention, so I (Intervention) is absent; C (Context) is considered to be developed or developing countries where there is evidence of the emergence of the emerging adulthood period, owing to the nature of this life stage; and O (Outcome) is the report and expression that emerging adults provide of their experience and perception of loneliness.

On the basis of the research question and objective, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Research Design: Qualitative studies (regardless of the specific qualitative design or strategy).
- Participants: Males and females aged 19-29 years.
- Topic of interest: Experience of loneliness.
- Context: Developed or developing countries where there is evidence of the emergence of the developmental period known as emerging adulthood.
- Publication Date: Published after the year 2000.

Other inclusion criteria included publication in reputable national and international journals and databases, availability of the full text, and the language of the article being English or Persian. The exclusion criteria included irrelevance, invalidity, unavailability of the full version, the use of quantitative research methods, being outdated, and lacking geographical criteria. Additionally, studies that were confined to specific groups, such as individuals with a particular illness or a specific demographic group, as well as studies related to a specific time period or a particular event, such as the COVID-19 general quarantine period, were excluded from the study.

Selection

First, a search was conducted in the databases via keywords. In the next step, studies that contained the specified keywords in their title or abstract were included in the initial list. The results were transferred to EndNote version 21 software. After removing duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the studies were reviewed more thoroughly and screened for compliance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Considering the central objective of this research, some articles were excluded at the final evaluation stage for several reasons. Some studies have explored loneliness in a specific population, such as homeless youth (Johari et al., 2022) or migrants (Bessaha et al., 2023), such that the final output is influenced by the distinct characteristics of that population. Other studies focused on a specific situation or particular aspects of loneliness. These types of research are inconsistent with the main goal of this review, which is to identify the internal perceptions and experiences of loneliness in emerging adults. For example, one study focused on rumination related to loneliness (Yun et al., 2023), another examined the relationship between educational transitions and youth loneliness (Sundqvist et al., 2024), and others explored coping strategies (Schoenmakers & Ten Bruggencate, 2024; Vasileiou et al., 2019). Several studies have also focused specifically on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hemberg et al., 2024; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2021; Sawyer et al., 2022). All these studies were excluded from the final analysis. Nevertheless, the authors concluded that if the specific population or particular dimension and context did not have a significant effect on the final derived themes, they would be included in the analysis. For instance, the study by Fardghassemi and Joffe (2021) examined loneliness in young people from deprived areas of London. Yousefi (2024) also explored loneliness in single women living away from their families. However, in these articles, the presented themes were not considered to be influenced by these specific situations and were therefore deemed worthy of inclusion in the meta-synthesis.

Another issue relates to the age range of the study participants. Some studies have aimed to explore the inner experience of loneliness among young people but have been indifferent to Arnett's theory and the developmental period of emerging adulthood. This has led some studies to have a narrower (e.g., Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021) or broader (e.g., Yousefi, 2024) age range than the emerging adulthood period. Given the limited number of qualitative studies on loneliness that consider Arnett's theory, it was decided to include these studies in the review. The main argument for this was that theoretical adherence to the theory of emerging adulthood and its consideration by researchers does not affect the discovery of the internal experience of loneliness in this group or its reporting by the researchers. Furthermore, as Arnett (2023) also states, emerging adulthood does not have a strict age boundary and is identified more by life events (such as entering university or marriage). Consequently, a deviation of one or two years from the age range does not compromise adherence to the target population. In the

next stage, two of the authors read the full texts of the remaining studies and actively analyzed the findings section. After disagreements were resolved and a consensus was reached, open coding was performed.

Data Extraction and Quality Appraisal

To extract the details of the studies included in the analysis, each article was reviewed, particularly in the participants and methods sections, and their characteristics were extracted and recorded. The characteristics of the articles are presented in Table 1 and are based on five criteria: location, data collection method, analysis method, population, number, age, and gender of the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Study	Country	Data Collection Method	Analysis Method	Population	N	Age	Gender
(Vaarala et al., 2013)	Finland	Internet forum messages	Qualitative content analysis	University students	58	17-37	M & F
(Rönkä et al., 2018)	Finland	Interview	Qualitative content analysis	Youth	35	27-28	M & F
(A. Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021)	Finland	Interview	Qualitative content analysis	Swedish-speaking Finns	11	17-28	M & F
(Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021)	England	Free association technique and interview	Thematic analysis	Youth in deprived areas	48	18-24	M & F
(Hemberg et al., 2022)	Finland	Interview	Content analysis	Swedish-speaking Finns	15	17-30	M & F
(Kirwan et al., 2023)	Ireland	Interview	Framework analysis	Emerging adults	27	18-25	M & F
(Yousefi, 2024)	Iran	Interview	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Single women living alone	10	22-32	F
(Cala & Ortega, 2024)	Spain	Interview	Thematic analysis	University students	40	19-24	M & F
(Nielsen et al., 2024)	Denmark	Interview and cultural probes	Thematic analysis	Emerging adults	21	18-25	M & F

A narrative appraisal of the included studies was conducted to assess their overall rigor and contribution to the synthesis. This appraisal was guided by established principles for qualitative inquiry, focusing on the clarity of the research question, the appropriateness of the methodology, and the congruence between data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Morse, 2021).

Consistent with the principles of meta-synthesis, the purpose of this appraisal was not to assign numerical scores or to exclude studies based on a predefined quality threshold (Toye et al., 2014). Rather, it was an iterative process aimed at developing a nuanced understanding of the evidence base, its collective strengths, and its limitations, which in turn informed the confidence in our final synthesized findings.

The authors wish to declare that one of the studies included in this meta-synthesis (Yousefi, 2024) was authored by a member of the current review team. To ensure objectivity and mitigate potential bias, the quality appraisal and data extraction for this particular study were performed and verified exclusively by coauthors with no involvement in the original research.

Results

Following the recommendation of Thomas and Harden (2008) to facilitate analysis, the full texts of the "Findings" and "Results" sections were extracted from the articles and transferred to MAXQDA software. In line with the research paradigm and objective, quantitative findings were removed, and qualitative findings were retained. After the transfer, the text was studied line by line and reread. In the next stage, line-by-line coding was performed in parallel by two of the authors. The codes were subsequently grouped and presented in a hierarchical tree structure in the form of comparative themes to ensure the existence of corresponding and similar themes in other studies.

Although the main focus of the reviewed studies is the internal experience and perception of loneliness in emerging adults, a significant portion of such research is dedicated to the factors and contexts of loneliness. This, of course, reflects the content of the interviews and naturally represents the underlying meaning of the experience of loneliness for the participants. On the one hand, factors and contexts can be considered irrelevant elements for understanding the internal phenomenon and can be excluded from the analysis. On the other hand, it seems that issues such as social exclusion or life transitions not only play a role as antecedent and contextual factors but also hold a share of the meaning and representation of emerging adults' perceptions of their specific loneliness. In fact, a deep and interpretive analysis of the phenomenon of loneliness in emerging adults is not feasible without an awareness that the individual feels lonely due to experiences of bullying in school, economic problems, or social expectations.

The positioning of the emerging adult in the constellation of relationships—including society, peer groups, and romantic relationships—which is often accompanied by a mixture of conflicting elements such as friendship and rivalry, support and jealousy, acceptance and rejection, is a deceptively simple developmental task that leaves the lonely emerging adult suspended in a limbo of subjectivity and objectivity, agency and passivity.

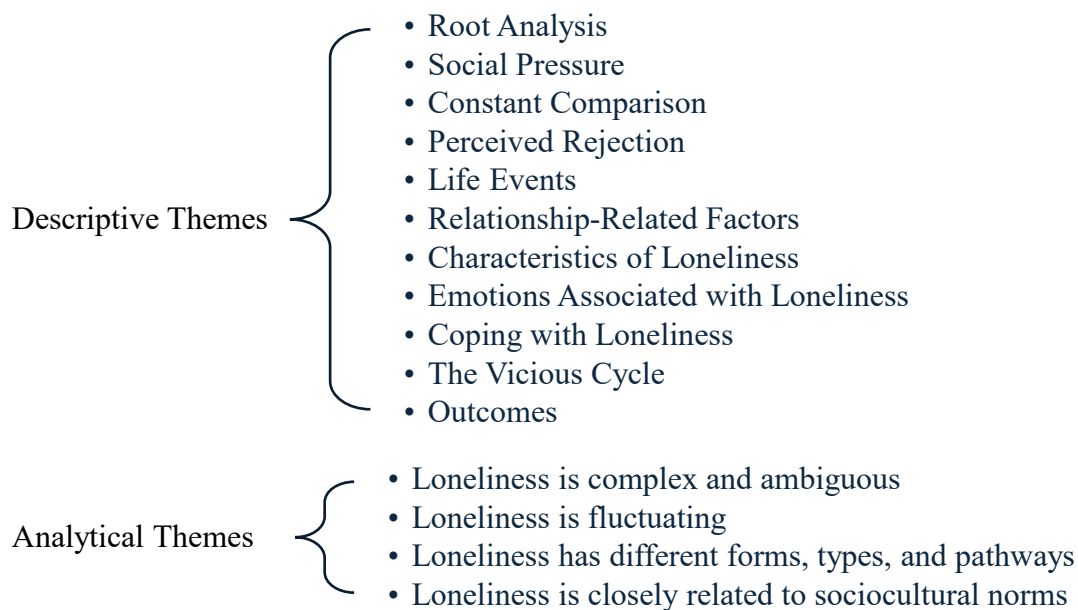


Figure 2. Descriptive and Analytical Themes

Descriptive Themes

Root Analysis: Emerging adults actively engage in analyzing the "why" of their loneliness. They sometimes attribute the roots and causes of their loneliness to macro and global factors, such as the spread of individualism and modern technologies, sometimes to communication problems, and some also focus on personality and skill deficits.

Social Pressure: Emerging adults feel deeply under various pressures originating from society. Some of these pressures arise from intolerance of differences—age, ethnic, gender, cultural, religious, and group differences—that expose the individual to being marginalized or discriminated against. The high expectations of micro and macrosocieties and the construction of countless standards place emerging adults in a severe predicament that leaves little chance of success. Consequently, emerging adults who fail to meet social expectations are reproached and stigmatized and pushed aside. In the next step, society's unacceptance of loneliness further severs their connection with the community.

Constant comparison: To understand their position among others, emerging adults constantly engage in social comparison. They envy the social and romantic relationships of their peers by seeing pictures of their parties, gathering on social media and finding themselves lonely. Behind this hidden competition lies a feeling of inadequacy. They perceive themselves as different and incongruous with others and constantly feel pressured because of it.

Perceived Rejection: Lonely emerging adults may be uncertain about their lovability. They are often preoccupied with the thought that no one understands them. Not being invited to gather or not being chosen intensifies their feeling of being alone, and subsequently, all these factors make them feel that they do not belong to any group or anyone. Thus, they blame themselves, and their sense of self-worth declines and shatters.

Life Events: A significant part of emerging adults' loneliness is related to their past experiences. A considerable share of these experiences go back to family and school. However, recent life events are also very important. Some of these events, such as losses, migration, and life problems, may not be universal, but some factors, such as lifestyle indicators, life transitions, and turning points, exist in the lives of all emerging adults.

Relationship-Related Factors: The quality of relationships has undergone significant changes compared with that in the past. Superficial, temporary, replaceable, instrumental, and utilitarian relationships do not provide a sense of security and are always accompanied by fear and misunderstanding. These factors create or exacerbate feelings of loneliness.

Characteristics of Loneliness: Emerging adults identified numerous characteristics of loneliness. Some of these are features of the course and onset of loneliness, such as a sudden start or the "loneliness plot" theme, which, despite the fluctuating presence of loneliness, reveals its constant presence in connection with a series of causes and effects. Some characteristics refer to the changes and fluctuations in loneliness: nocturnal loneliness; absolute loneliness; and chronic, transient, severe, or mild loneliness. Some themes are also dedicated to the general characteristics of loneliness in emerging adults, including ambiguity, complexity, contextuality, abstractness, bodily experience, the inevitability of loneliness, and the paradox of loneliness. Emerging adults have experienced different forms and types of loneliness and have followed different paths to reach this feeling.

Emotions associated with loneliness: Loneliness can be the worst possible thing. A wave of negative emotions concurrent with loneliness is a difficult experience that results in a range of psychological reactions from panic to depression. Emotions of fear, anxiety, terror, sadness, despair, and states such as boredom, a feeling of emptiness, being lost, helplessness, guilt, and shame turn loneliness into an unbearable condition.

Coping with loneliness: The pain and suffering resulting from loneliness compel emerging adults to strive to cope with this agonizing feeling. These reactions cover a very wide spectrum, from engaging in physical, artistic, social, and scientific activities to relying on technology and virtual space. Some coping mechanisms are active, whereas others, such as staying in bed and seeking solitude, are considered passive methods. Like all coping mechanisms, some are healthy and adaptive, such as family orientation, education, counseling, and therapy, and seek social support, whereas other groups, such as internet and mobile addiction, overeating, and alcohol and drug use, are unhealthy and dysfunctional.

Vicious cycle: Notably, emerging adults are sometimes aware that they are caught in a vicious cycle that fuels and ignites their loneliness. Actions and reactions that occur via a domino effect. To compensate for their feelings of weakness and damaged self-worth, they turn to idealizing relationships and trying to create the best version of themselves. They also blame themselves for their loneliness due to feelings of shame and may resort to projection. Rushing into damaging relationships and repeated rejection in these relationships turn the pit of loneliness into a deep well from which they have little hope of escaping, leading them to withdrawal and isolation.

Outcomes: Generally, the outcomes can be placed in two categories: acceptance and nonacceptance. In the acceptance category, emerging adults perceive loneliness as an opportunity for growth, self-reflection, and a chance to be their true selves. They see this state as a result of maturity and a sign of courage in enduring loneliness. Individuals do not deny their need for connection but prefer loneliness to a troubled relationship. Some emerging adults see loneliness as a part of growing up and face it with hope and optimism. In a state of nonacceptance, mental turmoil and exhaustion, physical pain, and suicidal ideation are prevalent. In this state, there is constant rumination and anger, and individuals see happiness and satisfaction in their lives as unattainable, to the point where they may resort to self-harm or suicide. Importantly, individuals do not necessarily fall into one of these two categories. Additionally, these two states are not necessarily sequential, meaning that a person first experiences nonacceptance and then moves to the acceptance stage. While both states are conceivable and possible, they are not confined to these states, and individuals may fluctuate between them.

Analytical Themes

After the open codes were extracted and descriptive themes were presented, four analytical themes were presented. These themes are, in fact, third-order interpretations that are presented by combining first-order (open codes) and

second-order (descriptive themes) constructs with the aim of explaining the phenomenon at a higher level. These themes elevate the study from a mere descriptive synthesis to an analytical one:

Loneliness is complex and ambiguous: loneliness is a very nebulous and nontransparent state. Emerging adults experience ambivalence and confusion toward it. This state is like being suspended in the middle of things: between independence and connection, conformity, nonconformity, suffering and peace, and wanting and not wanting. On the one hand, this state is indicative of their developmental stage: neither adolescents nor adults.

Loneliness fluctuates: Sometimes loneliness is alleviated simply by passing through this life stage, sometimes individuals overcome it with active and diligent effort, and sometimes it becomes a chronic or acute condition that cannot be adapted to, resulting in serious complications and consequences.

Loneliness has different forms, types, and pathways: loneliness, as an emotional state mixed with several different emotions, in a distinct combination of condensed life experiences and in confrontation with each individual's unique events, creates a unique emotional and cognitive experience. Therefore, individuals' encounters with loneliness also cover a diverse spectrum.

Loneliness is closely related to sociocultural norms: Although it is fundamentally rooted in attachment patterns, early relationships, personality traits, and other intrapsychic factors, in the 18–29 age group it is less a consequence of the child's relationships with parents and primary objects, and more a result of structural conditions—particularly the exhausting social expectations and idealized standards whose burden individuals in this age group deeply feel.

Discussion

In this meta-synthesis, the analysis of the findings from the final nine qualitative studies led to the identification of eleven descriptive themes and four analytical themes. The lived experience of loneliness in emerging adults highlights a multifaceted narrative that often begins with an analysis of its roots and an attempt to understand the reasons behind this feeling. The lonely emerging adult, in an emotional–logical struggle, tries to trace the underlying factors of this unpleasant internal state to individual, relational, or even macrosocial factors. This search occurs within a group and social context where the individual finds themselves under the pressure of societal demands. Society's expectations for success, the ability to achieve specific standards, and low tolerance for differences put the individual in a tight spot. Simultaneously, constant comparison with peers, especially with idealized and exaggerated images on social media, reinforces feelings of inadequacy, being a loser, and being unacceptable. These pressures and comparisons gradually lead to a perception of rejection; the individual feels misunderstood and ignored and that they do not belong to any group. This, in turn, damages their sense of self-worth. Meanwhile, life events, both distant experiences (such as childhood and school experiences) and recent events (such as losses, transitions, and current problems), fuel this feeling and render the individual passive due to the accumulation of these heavy experiences. In this situation, on the basis of their social nature and inclination, individuals turn to forming relationships. These relationships, like all human relationships, are accompanied by struggles and conflicts. The nature of these relationships plays a key role in the loneliness of emerging adults; superficial, unstable, and instrumental relationships cannot meet the deep need for connection and intimacy and make individuals even lonelier. Loneliness in emerging adults generally has unique characteristics: an ambiguous, complex experience, sometimes intense and sometimes mild, sometimes chronic and sometimes transient, which can be accompanied by bodily experiences. This condition results in deep pain and suffering, characterized by a range of negative emotions such as sadness, despair, anxiety, and emptiness. To escape this suffering, the individual resorts to coping with loneliness and uses various strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive. These efforts often become trapped and lost in a vicious cycle of behaviors and interactions; dysfunctional strategies or failure in establishing relationships lead to further rejection and intensified isolation. Ultimately, the consequences of all this can be varied. Some fall into a state of mental and physical distress and even suicidal ideation, whereas others may accept loneliness as an opportunity for growth and self-discovery and come to terms with it. These two states are not necessarily sequential or stable.

Findings in the Context of Previous Studies

The findings of this meta-synthesis present a multilayered picture of the experience of loneliness in emerging adults, which has both consonances with and noteworthy points in the literature.

Complexity, Ambiguity, and Fluctuation: The key findings of this research regarding the complexity and ambiguity of loneliness (analytical theme one) and its fluctuating nature (analytical theme two) are reflected in

the descriptive themes of "Characteristics of Loneliness" (including ambiguity, complexity, contextuality, severe fluctuations, chronic or transient nature, increasing loneliness, and types of loneliness) and "Emotions associated with Loneliness" (including helplessness, shame, powerlessness, and the horrifying scenario). This finding is consistent with the results of the study by McKenna-Plumley et al. (2023), which described loneliness as a psychological, contextual, and fluctuating experience. Emerging adults experience a kind of ambivalence and confusion in describing their loneliness, which can be a reflection of their "in-between" developmental status (Arnett, 2023). Fluctuations in loneliness over short (Buecker, Horstmann et al., 2024; Wilson & Koffer, 2025), medium (Victor et al., 2015), and long (Graham et al., 2024) periods and in relation to various life events (Mobach et al., 2024) have also been reported. This finding highlights the importance of paying attention to each type of loneliness, including situational and chronic (Martín-María et al., 2021; F. Wang et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2016), as well as social and emotional (Walsh et al., 2025) loneliness, as different types of loneliness can have significant negative consequences for mental and physical health.

Diverse Roots and Pathways: The evidence of diversity in the forms, types, and pathways of loneliness (analytical theme three) in the descriptive themes of "Root Analysis," "Life Events," and "Relationship-Related Factors" indicates the multidimensional nature of this experience. Emerging adults trace the roots of their loneliness—reflecting the exploratory nature and multiple transitions of this period—sometimes to past experiences (such as family relationships or school experiences), sometimes to recent events (such as losses, migration, economic problems), and sometimes to the quality of current relationships (superficiality, temporariness, lack of commitment). This finding aligns with the multidimensional view of loneliness (Rönkä et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2025), especially with distinction between emotional loneliness (resulting from the lack of intimate relationships) and social loneliness (resulting from the lack of a social network), and shows that the identified roots can be related to either these dimensions or a combination of them. The path and passage to feel lonely are different for emerging adults; sometimes, early experiences and attachment patterns have a strong presence and can create more stable patterns of loneliness (Marčinko & Sutara, 2024; Goldman et al., 2025); sometimes, they are the product of normative transitions, such as entering university, starting a job, or unemployment (Agadullina et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2022; Sundqvist et al., 2024), or they arise from nonnormative life events, such as childhood traumas, divorce, financial problems, or natural disasters (Cheung et al., 2025; Lam & Li, 2025; Lampraki et al., 2019; Lin & Ma, 2021; Struckmeyer et al., 2021). The combination of internal dispositions, environmental factors, and macroeconomic conditions creates very diverse pathways. This diversity of pathways emphasizes the need for accurate assessment and tailored interventions.

The Prominent Role of Sociocultural Pressures: An important finding of this study is the significant role of sociocultural norms and pressures in the experience of loneliness among emerging adults (analytical theme four). This is well represented in the descriptive themes of "social pressure," "constant comparison," and "perceived rejection." Unlike elderly individuals, whose loneliness is more related to factors such as the loss of a spouse and physical problems (Carrasco et al., 2024; Delbari et al., 2023), loneliness in emerging adults seems to be more influenced by high social expectations regarding academic and career success or finding a romantic partner (Adamczyk et al., 2022; Heu et al., 2021; Kirwan et al., 2023), constant social comparisons (especially on social media), and the fear of not conforming to norms and being rejected (Cala & Ortega, 2024; Park & Park, 2024; Piko et al., 2024). These pressures, especially in collectivistic cultures, are likely to be more intense and associated with more destructive health consequences (Beller & Wagner, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). The findings of Yousefi's (2024) study on single Iranian women living alone can also be evidence of these pressures. Perceived rejection (Du et al., 2024), feeling misunderstood (Baek et al., 2023; Kirwan et al., 2023), and not belonging (Dutcher et al., 2022; Rönkä et al., 2018), which were also identified as part of the experience of loneliness in individuals with personality disorders in the study by Ikhtabi et al. (2022), are also common in lonely emerging adults (Hemberg et al., 2022; Kirwan et al., 2023). Furthermore, the spread of communication technologies, despite facilitating communication, can exacerbate loneliness by intensifying social comparisons and creating superficial relationships (Ge et al., 2025; Nowland et al., 2018).

Suffering, Coping, and Outcomes: The descriptive themes of "Emotions Associated with Loneliness," "Coping with Loneliness," "The Vicious Cycle," and "Outcomes" illuminate the emotional, behavioral, and consequential dimensions of confronting loneliness. Intense negative emotions such as sadness, despair, anxiety, and emptiness make loneliness an overwhelming experience (Buecker & Neuber, 2024; Mann et al., 2022; Pascalidis & Bathelt, 2024). To manage this suffering, individuals resort to a variety of coping strategies, from

adaptive (such as exercise, art, and seeking support) to maladaptive (such as substance use, isolation, and internet addiction) (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2024; Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021). Sometimes, these coping strategies themselves become part of a "vicious cycle" that perpetuates loneliness; for example, trying to idealize oneself or relationships leads to failure and further rejection, thereby intensifying isolation (Cala & Ortega, 2024; Skoko et al., 2024; Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021). Ultimately, the consequences of loneliness can range from psychological distress (Yousefi, 2024; Yung et al., 2023) and suicidal thoughts (Buecker & Neuber, 2024; Hemberg et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2023) to acceptance and an effort for personal growth (Rönkä et al., 2018), which includes (Kirwan et al., 2023; Maes & Vanhalst, 2025; Nielsen et al., 2024), indicating the duality and complexity of this experience.

Although the primary aim of this study is not to contrast developmental periods, the findings suggest that the experience of loneliness in emerging adulthood displays phenomenological features that appear less prominent in later life. The analytic theme of loneliness as taking diverse forms, types, and pathways is especially illuminating here. In later life, trajectories of loneliness tend to follow relatively more established patterns, such as bereavement, physical frailty, or cognitive decline. By contrast, in emerging adulthood the routes to loneliness are markedly heterogeneous and idiosyncratic, shaped by the exploratory and unstable nature of this developmental stage—from academic transitions and career uncertainties to the volatility of romantic and social ties. Furthermore, the analytic theme of sociocultural norms emerges as particularly salient. Whereas loneliness in later life is often culturally legitimized and met with social compassion, in emerging adulthood it is frequently compounded by normative pressures for academic achievement, professional success, and relational fulfillment. In this sense, loneliness is not only experienced as a personal struggle but also as a social deviation from cultural benchmarks, deepening its intensity in ways that seem distinctive to this stage. Taken together, these distinctions underscore the importance of conceptualizing loneliness in emerging adulthood as a phenomenon with its own unique contours and developmental significance.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is among the first meta-syntheses to systematically explore the lived experience of loneliness in emerging adults, offering a deeper, multi-layered understanding that transcends the findings of individual studies. However, the research faced several limitations. The number of qualitative studies focused specifically on this age group was relatively limited, necessitating the inclusion of some studies with broader age ranges or specific subpopulations. Furthermore, a significant geographical bias exists, with most studies originating from European contexts, which calls for caution when transferring findings to other cultures, particularly more collectivistic ones. Finally, the variable reporting quality of some primary studies, though accounted for in the analysis, remains a limitation of the available evidence base.

Implications and suggestions

The findings of this study have important implications for mental health professionals, social policymakers, and future researchers. Understanding the complexity, dynamism, and contextuality of loneliness in emerging adults is essential for designing effective interventions. Interventions should focus not only on increasing the quantity of relationships and relying on social skills training for individuals but also on the quality of relationships, the sense of belonging, healthy coping strategies, and especially the capacity to deal with social pressures. Given the prominent role of social norms, educational and cultural programs aimed at reducing the stigma associated with loneliness and promoting the acceptance of differences can be beneficial. Additionally, supporting emerging adults during transitional phases (such as entering university, starting a job, and marrying) and providing opportunities for creating meaningful connections in educational, work, and social environments are important.

For future research, the following are suggested:

- More qualitative studies focused on the lived experience of loneliness in emerging adults in diverse cultural contexts, especially in non-European countries, should be conducted.
- Investigating the role of gender factors in the experience, expression, and coping with loneliness in this age group.
- The nature and manner of using digital technologies and their role in social comparison and feelings of loneliness in emerging adults should be explored more deeply.
- To design and evaluate psychological and social interventions on the basis of qualitative findings to reduce loneliness in this population.
- Longitudinal studies should be conducted to examine the developmental pathways of loneliness and the risk and protective factors in emerging adults.

Conclusion

The five core features of emerging adulthood should not be regarded as discrete characteristics but as a dynamic, interconnected system, where each feature both shapes and is shaped by the others. For instance, a focus on the self provides the psychological autonomy and practical freedom necessary for identity exploration. This exploration, by its nature, involves trial and error, which often manifests as instability in areas such as residence, education, career, and romantic relationships. This instability, when combined with the absence of well-defined adult roles, cultivates the sense of being "in-between," a transitional state fraught with uncertainty. Finally, the lack of life-defining commitments, a hallmark of this period, nurtures an optimism rooted in the belief that possibilities remain wide open. This optimism serves as an essential psychological resource, helping individuals endure the anxiety of instability and persist in their exploratory processes.

While individuals in this developmental stage may experience a lack of external affection or recognition, they often turn inward, cultivating self-knowledge and discovering a sense of purpose. Paradoxically, this inward focus can lead to a distancing from stable, deep relationships. In contrast to adults with more settled identities, emerging adults continue to navigate uncertainty across multiple domains of life. Indeed, core features such as instability, self-focus, and identity exploration play pivotal roles in fostering heightened feelings of loneliness. Supporting this assertion, Hopmeyer et al. (2020) found a positive correlation between greater concerns about identity and the future and increased levels of loneliness among emerging adults.

This developmental context also influences romantic engagements, often leading to hesitation or reluctance to form long-term, committed relationships. A preoccupation with self-identity can result in relationships characterized by a lack of commitment, often rendering them brief, superficial, and unreliable. As a result, many emerging adults recalibrate their relational preferences, downplaying the importance of long-term partnerships and perceiving commitment as a potential hindrance. Instead, they may gravitate toward short-term, casual arrangements, including serial monogamy or "hooking up." It is crucial to note that this self-focus does not equate to egocentrism or pathological narcissism; as Arnett (2023) clarifies, it reflects a temporary, albeit significant, period of reduced obligation to others, even while the goal of finding a "soul mate" often remains central to their aspirations.

Moreover, economic factors undeniably contribute to this landscape. The instability of employment, unpredictable income streams, housing challenges, and rising living costs create a perception of an uncertain and tumultuous future, rendering long-term commitments seem unfeasible. Nevertheless, the characteristic optimism of emerging adulthood often serves as a crucial adaptive mechanism for managing these financial stressors. The absence of this optimism, however, may exacerbate mental health difficulties, including heightened loneliness.

From this vantage point, loneliness during emerging adulthood can be viewed not merely as a transient emotional state, but as a complex, albeit challenging, byproduct of the period's central developmental tasks. One of the primary tasks involves a significant restructuring of one's social world, transitioning from dependence on the family of origin to a self-constructed network of peers, colleagues, and romantic partners. This transition often necessitates renegotiating familial bonds, shifting from a hierarchical, parent-child dynamic to a more reciprocal, adult-to-adult relationship. This process, by its very nature, entails both psychological and, at times, physical distance. The phase of transition—marked by a diminishing reliance on family and the establishment of a new support network—creates a period of relational vulnerability. In this context, the experience of loneliness can serve as an important motivational signal, urging individuals to forge the new connections necessary for their progression into the next phase of life.

Loneliness in emerging adulthood thus represents a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic phenomenon, shaped by the interplay between intra-psychic vulnerabilities and powerful sociocultural forces. Emerging adults often occupy a psychological liminal space, suspended between a pressing need for intimacy and a persistent fear of rejection or abandonment. Within this tension, they must negotiate conflicting societal expectations, developmental uncertainties, and their own evolving desires, frequently contending with a constellation of painful affective states through diverse coping strategies. Recognizing the lived texture of this experience, in both its descriptive and analytical dimensions, is a critical step toward conceptualizing loneliness not merely as an individual affliction but as a developmental challenge. Such an understanding provides the necessary foundation for designing interventions that can support emerging adults in navigating this transitional life stage more adaptively and mitigating the substantial psychological burden associated with loneliness.

Ethical Considerations

Our study did not require an ethical board approval because it is a meta-synthesis of previously published literature and did not directly involve humans or animals.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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