

When families shape the self: The mediating role of self-esteem in the link between family functioning and loneliness

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood is a period of transition and exploration during which, as individuals fulfill developmental tasks, they are vulnerable to experiencing loneliness. This study aims to investigate the mediating role of self-esteem on the association between family functioning and loneliness among emerging adults. This study used a quantitative correlational method and a cross-sectional approach with 139 participants aged 18-29 years. The instruments used in this study consisted of the General Functioning Subscale (FAD-GF), the UCLA Loneliness Scale, and the Self-esteem Scale. The study found that self-esteem acts as a mediator in the relationship between family functioning and loneliness. This finding explains how positively functioning families build higher individual self-esteem, thereby reducing loneliness in emerging adulthood. The implications of this study are expected to serve as a reference for creating psychoeducation or designing family relationship-based interventions by optimizing family function as a core community to increase individual self-esteem and reduce loneliness.

Keywords: emerging adulthood; family functioning; loneliness; self-esteem

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is a stage of development spanning the ages of 18 to 29 (Arnett et al., 2014). This stage, known as the transition from childhood to adulthood, is characterized by specific developmental tasks. This period is a time for identity exploration, tends to focus on oneself, is a time to leave the family and start to be independent, and builds more intimate social and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Fulfilling developmental tasks at this stage presents a unique challenge, along with social expectations for individuals that make emerging adulthood vulnerable to loneliness (Kirwan et al., 2023; Qualter et al., 2015).

Several studies indicate that although individual experience loneliness throughout the lifespan, from young to old, it is particularly common in emerging adulthood (Barreto et al., 2021). The results of a 2018 BBC loneliness experiment involving 5,500 participants showed that 33% felt lonely, and the 16-24 age group had the highest level of loneliness (40%). Several similar studies have shown that loneliness levels peak during emerging adulthood (Barreto et al., 2021;



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Hawkley et al., 2022). In the Indonesian population, research by Peltzer & Pengpid (2019) also found that loneliness prevalence is generally evenly distributed, with a relatively higher peak among late adolescents and emerging adults.

Loneliness, as described by Perlman & Peplau (1981), is an unpleasant feeling that arises from unfulfilled needs for social relationships, both in quantity and quality. In this case, feelings of loneliness occur when there is an inconsistency between the quality and/or quantity of social relationships a person experiences and what they desire. Therefore, a person may feel lonely despite having a large social network, or socially isolated without feeling abandoned. Furthermore, qualitative research by Kirwan et al. (2023) describes loneliness as an unpleasant feeling that occurs across the stages of human development.

The emerging adulthood period is a transitional phase where individuals become independent and separate from their families. This situation, both directly and indirectly, contributes to predicting feelings of isolation and loneliness in emerging adulthood. Demands and expectations both from the social environment and the individual themselves regarding the future, work, and career influence mental health, such as the levels of anxiety and depression experienced by individuals in emerging adulthood. Furthermore, emerging adulthood is a time for building relationship closer and more intimate, a phase Erikson (2013) identifies as the resolution of the psychosocial crisis of intimacy versus isolation. Thus, the success of this stage determines an individual's ability to build social relationships and influences the potential for experiencing loneliness. The qualitative study by Permana & Astuti (2021) portrayed that feelings of loneliness in emerging adulthood are experienced more from an emotional perspective, with the emergence of sadness, stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions due to a perceived lack of social relationships and connections.

Prolonged and intense experiences of loneliness have serious impacts on physical and psychological health. A literature review by Hawkley & Cacioppo (2010) outlines various empirical study findings indicating that loneliness increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, elevates blood pressure, and is associated with increased morbidity and mortality. Additionally, loneliness has long-term negative effects, such as predicting declines in cognitive processes and functions, as well as mental health disorders like depression and anxiety, and reduced well-being (Irmansyah & Ningrat, 2024).

One significant factor contributing to loneliness is the presence or absence of a family. The family is the primary, core, and enduring community and relationship for every individual. Ideally, Family fulfils the need for connection and protects the individual from feelings of loneliness. Various family aspects, such as cohesion, attachment, family atmosphere, communication, parent-child relationships, and family functioning, influence loneliness. Sellawati et al. (2022) explain that strong parental attachment from both fathers and mothers will reduce children's feelings of loneliness, even into adulthood. A family environment characterized by cohesion, close relationships, and mutual support reduces the likelihood of loneliness (Chokkanathan, 2024). Similar findings reported by Balážová et al. (2017), who noted that the family environment (parental empathy, emotional relationships, and parental control)

contributes to adolescent loneliness, means that optimal family roles, as reflected in family functioning, can serve as a protective factor against experiences of loneliness.

Family function is a family characterized by which members fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities. Family functioning refers to effective family rules and communication, emotional connectedness, problem-solving, mutual support, assistance, attention, and care among family members (Olson et al., 2019; Viranda et al., 2023). Epstein et al. (1983) identified six dimensions of family functioning: problem-solving, communication, roles, responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavioral control. Literature review findings indicate that family functioning negatively predicts loneliness among adolescents and college students (Hidayati, 2018; Qian et al., 2022; Ying, 2023). Similar research found that family functioning was associated with a decrease in loneliness among married individuals (Theresia et al., 2024).

Although several studies have examined the relationship and role of family functioning regarding experiences of loneliness, limited research has explained the dynamic process by which family functioning reduces feelings of loneliness. Whereas Self-esteem, as an internal individual factor, is assumed to act as a mediator, bridging the role of family functioning in reducing loneliness. A functional family provides a supportive environment where individuals can develop, feel accepted, and valued. Previous research found that family functioning positively correlates with an individual's self-esteem. The result implies that closeness, clear rules, and strong support enhance an individual's self-esteem, which is assumed to reduce feelings of loneliness (Balážová et al., 2017; Rahayu et al., 2021; Ying, 2023).

Self-esteem is an individual's overall evaluation of themselves, whether positive or negative. Typically, someone who views and evaluates themselves positively has high self-esteem, whereas someone who views and evaluates themselves negatively has low self-esteem (Rosenberg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2014). The formation of self-esteem also occurs most often within the family, as explained by the ecosystem theory, which holds that the family is the most central, enduring, and directly influential microsystem in individual development (Novilla et al., 2006). A functional family, characterized by warmth, cohesion, and emotional support, fosters positive self-esteem. The formation and development of self-esteem do not occur instantly but unfold throughout the course of human life, typically beginning in early adolescence and continuing into adulthood. Trzesniewski et al. (2003) noted that self-esteem development is relatively stable across the lifespan, increasing in adolescence and early adulthood and declining in late adulthood and old age. Furthermore, the context of self-esteem is relevant to research on emerging adulthood, as emphasized by Wagner et al. (2013), who found that self-esteem increases from late adolescence through early adulthood, affecting various aspects of an individual's life, including feelings of loneliness.

Previous studies on the Indonesian population have provided a picture of the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness, particularly among university students across various contexts. Hayundaka & M. Salis Yuniardi (2023) found that international students with higher self-esteem experience reduced levels of loneliness, as self-esteem provides individuals with the confidence and self-assurance to socialize with others and form positive social relationships. A

study among students living away from home found that self-esteem was negatively correlated with loneliness (Yunior & Rohmatun, 2022). Specifically, high self-esteem served as a protective factor against loneliness experienced by students during the pandemic (Suryadi, 2022; Yunita et al., 2022).

Previous research has provided a wealth of insight into the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness, as summarized in the meta-analysis by Pramodana Medha Wisesa & Eny Purwandari (2024), which found a significant negative correlation between the two. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to experience lower levels of loneliness, or not at all. Conversely, low self-esteem become one of the strongest factors underlying individuals' loneliness. Several recent studies have focused on identifying the patterns and phenomena of loneliness in emerging adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014; Irmansyah & Ningrat, 2024; Permana & Astuti, 2021) and have examined its relationship with family involvement factors (Magdalena et al., 2023; Suprayogi & Vaynadita, 2023; Zaizul et al., 2019). However, few studies have examined simultaneously the dynamics and mechanisms underlying family functioning, loneliness, and self-esteem in emerging adulthood. Therefore, this study aims to test the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between family functioning and loneliness in emerging adulthood. The research hypothesis is that self-esteem will mediate the relationship between family functioning and loneliness, such that positive family functioning will be associated with increased self-esteem, which in turn reduces feelings of loneliness during emerging adulthood, as illustrated in Figure 1.

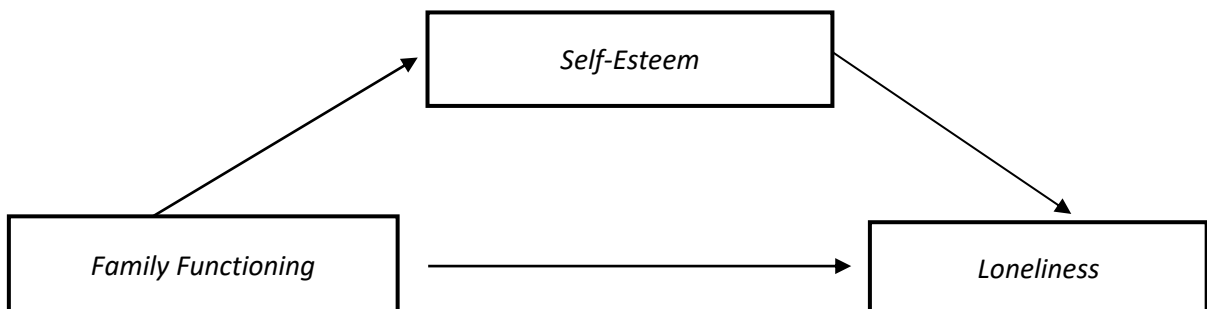


Figure 1. Mediation Model for Testing Research Hypotheses

RESEARCH METHODS

The selection of research participants was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, with the criteria being individuals in emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) and unmarried. Unmarried status was a participant criterion because of the specific focus on participants as children and their relationships to nuclear family functioning. A total of 139 individuals voluntarily participated in the study.

The study design is a quantitative correlational study using a mediation analysis, with family functioning as the independent variable, loneliness as the dependent variable, and self-

esteem as the mediating variable. Data were obtained online from various regions in Indonesia.

Researcher collected data by distributing a Google Form questionnaire containing an informed consent form, demographic data, and the research instrument. Participants voluntarily provided consent, completed demographic data, and subsequently answered all survey questions. As a token of appreciation, 50 participants were awarded electronic money worth Rp30,000.00 through a random draw.

The instrument used to measure family functioning was the General Functioning Subscale (FAD-GF), one of the subscales of the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) (Epstein et al., 1978; Mansfield et al., 2019). This measurement tool consists of 12 items, and the scoring is based on four response options, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The reliability of this instrument is 0.71 (Mansfield et al., 2019). This measurement tool adapted into Indonesian with a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.88$ (Theresia et al., 2024). In the present study, the measurement tool was valid, with item-rest correlations ranging from 0.262 to 0.680 and a reliability coefficient (α) of 0.849. To measure the loneliness variable, the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Russell et al. (1978) and adapted by Sutanto & Suwartono (2019) was used, with a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.875$. This measurement tool consists of 22 items with response categories ranging from "often" (4) to "never" (1). In this study, the UCLA Loneliness Scale was valid, with item-total correlations ranging from 0.260 to 0.727 and a reliability coefficient (α) of 0.909. The instrument used to measure self-esteem was the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, developed by Rosenberg (1965) to measure global self-esteem. This measurement tool has been adapted into Indonesian by Henryan & Simanjuntak (2022). It consists of 10 items, comprising 5 positive statements and 5 negative statements. The item response categories range from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). Testing of this measuring instrument demonstrated validity, with item-rest correlations ranging from 0.167 to 0.783, and reliability (α) = 0.879.

Data analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro in SPSS version 22 for mediation analysis, developed by Andrew Hayes. Before conducting the main analysis, the researcher conducted residual normality tests and classical assumption tests to ensure the regression model was suitable.

RESULTS

The study sample consisted of 139 unmarried participants in emerging adulthood, comprising 37 men (26.62%) and 102 women (73.38%), the majority of whom still lived with their nuclear families (59.71%). The average age of the participants was 22.74 years, and the majority had completed higher education (53.96%). Regarding employment, 73 participants (52.53%) work in the private sector, and 61 (43.88%) were students (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=139)

Demographic Characteristics	n	Percentage (%)
Age (average = 22.74)		
18-20	44	31.65
21-23	36	25.90
24-26	41	29.50
27-29	18	12.95
Gender		
Woman	102	73.38
Man	37	26.62
Work		
Student	61	43.88
Private	73	52.53
Self-employed	3	2.15
Other	2	1.44
Education		
Higher education (Diploma, Bachelor's, and Master's)	75	53.96
Senior High School		
Not attending school	63	45.32
	1	0.72
Living with nuclear family	83	59.71
Living with extended family	7	5.04
Living alone	49	35.25

The results of the correlation analysis in Table 2 indicate that family functioning is negatively correlated with loneliness ($r = -0.540$, $p < 0.01$). That self-esteem is also negatively correlated with loneliness ($r = -0.556$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, family functioning and self-esteem have a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.429$, $p < 0.01$). This result indicates that higher levels of family functioning and self-esteem during emerging adulthood are associated with reduced feelings of loneliness, and increased family functioning is associated with increased self-esteem, and vice versa.

Table 2. Pearson correlation between variables (n=139)

Variable	1	2	3
1 Family Functioning	1	-0.540**	0.429**
2 Loneliness	-0.540**	1	-0.556**
3 Self-esteem	0.429**	-0.556**	1

Note: **. Significant correlation at the 0.01 significance level (2-tailed)

Before conducting the hypothesis test, classical assumption tests were performed, including tests for normality and heteroscedasticity. The results of the residual normality test using the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicate that the data are normally distributed ($p > 0.05$), with the QQ plot of the data distribution following the diagonal line. The

heteroscedasticity test, as shown by the scatterplot of residuals versus predicted values, does not form a megaphone pattern, indicating that the data are homogeneous.

The research hypotheses were tested using mediation analysis with PROCESS v4.2 by Andrew F. Hayes. The mediation analysis was first validated by significant relationships in the mediation pathways, including the relationship between family functioning and the mediator variable self-esteem (path a) and the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness (path b). The total effect of family functioning on loneliness through self-esteem (path c). The significance of the mediator variable is assessed through the indirect effect, which is the product or interaction of path a and path b. If the confidence interval (CI) does not cross 0, then self-esteem can be considered a mediator of the relationship between family functioning and loneliness. The type of mediation is indicated by the presence or absence of a direct effect after including the mediator variable (path c'). If path c' has a significant p-value, the mediation is partial, and if a non-significant p-value is found, the mediation is full mediation.

Table 3. Mediation Test

Variables	Path	Coefficient (B)	SE	t	p
Family functioning towards self-esteem	<i>a</i>	0.363	2.3166	5,5581	0.0000
Self-esteem towards loneliness	<i>b</i>	-0.8366	0.1519	-5,5088	0.0000
Family Functioning towards Loneliness (total effect)	<i>c</i>	-0.9621	0.1281	-7.5103	0.0000
Family functioning towards loneliness (direct effect)	<i>c'</i>	-0.6580	0.1287	-5.1127	0.0000
Bootstrap results for indirect effects		B	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Effect		-0.3041	0.0797	-0.4679	-0.1592

Note: CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Level; UL = Upper Level

The results of the hypothesis test as in table 3 show that family functioning has a significant relationship with self-esteem ($a = 0.363$; $t = 5.5581$; $SE = 2.3166$; $p < .001$) and self-esteem had a significant relationship with loneliness ($b = -0.8366$; $t = -5.5088$; $SE = 0.1519$; $p < .001$). Then it was also found that there was a significant negative total effect of family functioning on loneliness ($c = -0.9621$; $t = -7.5103$; $SE = 0.1281$; $p < .001$). The results of the bootstrap test showed a significant indirect effect of family functioning on loneliness through the self-esteem variable as a mediator (indirect effect (B) = -0.3041; BootSE = 0.0797; CI = [-0.4679 to -0.1592]). The mediating role of self-esteem is partial or partial mediation ($c' = -0.6580$; $t = -5.1127$; $SE = 0.1287$; $p < .001$), which means that the relationship between family functioning and loneliness is partially mediated by self-esteem. The mediation model can be seen more clearly in Figure 2.

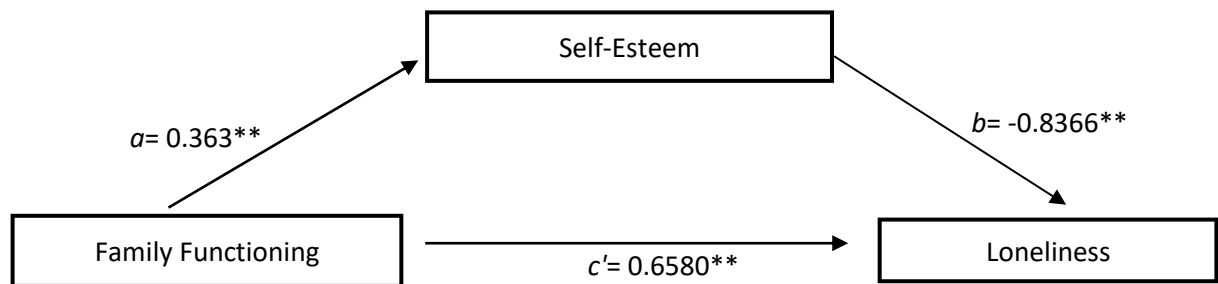


Figure 2. Results of the mediation test of self-esteem on the relationship between family functioning and loneliness.

Discussion

The research results demonstrate that self-esteem acts as a mediator explaining the dynamics of the relationship between family functioning and loneliness. The dynamics of the relationship between these variables are explained by the findings showing that family functioning predicts self-esteem in emerging adulthood (path a). The family functioning theory by McMaster and Skinner's process family functioning theory (Epstein et al. 1978), which is oriented toward processes and systems within the family, explains that family functioning is viewed through the interactions, processes, and dynamics of family members and the various functions within the family. Family functioning is characterized by warm relationships, emotional closeness or attachment, effective communication, mutual support, cooperation, and flexibility as experienced by individuals within family relationships. These factors contribute to the development and enhancement of an individual's sense of self-esteem.

The family serves as the individual's first social community and environment for interpersonal interaction, as well as the setting where one's self-concept and sense of self-esteem are formed. If a family is characterized by strong emotional bonds and effective communication, family members are more likely to experience a sense of acceptance rather than feelings of isolation within society. Furthermore, this fosters the individual's perception of themselves as a valuable person, culminating in improved self-evaluation and a more affirmative attitude, thereby reinforcing high self-esteem. This explanation shows that the dynamics of family functioning are a key predictor of an individual's self-esteem. The findings of this study align with previous empirical research, which consistently demonstrates that family functioning has a positive relationship with and predicts increased self-esteem in individuals (Hadori et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2017; Sultana et al., 2024; Valencia & Soetikno, 2022; Zaizul et al., 2019).

The results of the regression analysis indicate a significant negative effect of self-esteem on loneliness (path b), suggesting that self-esteem reduces loneliness during emerging adulthood. These results reaffirm previous meta-analyses that as an individual's self-esteem increases, they generally experience less or even no loneliness (Pramodana Medha Wisesa & Eny Purwandari, 2024). Conversely, low self-esteem predicts and increases an individual's loneliness (Geukens et al., 2022; Lyyra et al., 2021, Vanhalst et al., 2013). The Socio-cognitive process approach explains that individuals with high self-esteem engage in specific behaviours

and cognitive processes such as interpreting and evaluating social relationships and interactions more positively which support the formation of satisfying social relationships and reduce their feelings of loneliness (Peplau et al., 1982). Conversely, young adults with low self-esteem tend to perceive themselves as less accepted by their peers, even though this perception is not always accurate. That perception of a lack of social acceptance (Vanhalst et al., 2013) and negative self-evaluation (Geukens et al., 2022) triggers increased feelings of loneliness.

This study found a significant negative total effect of family functioning on loneliness. This means that family functioning negatively contributes to and predicts feelings of loneliness during emerging adulthood. Harmonious family dynamics, with each member fulfilling their respective functions and roles effectively in terms of communication, presence, support, and warmth will meet social relationship needs in both quantity and quality, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness. In this context, a positive family functioning serves as a protective factor against loneliness.

The primary objective of this study was to test the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between family functioning and loneliness. Empirically, mediation pathways are significant, as evidenced by the results that family functioning predicts self-esteem, self-esteem predicts loneliness. Regarding the total effect, a significant negative association between family functioning and loneliness was also found. Furthermore, the role of self-esteem as a mediator is evidenced by a significant indirect effect, indicating that self-esteem mediates family functioning with loneliness. The mediation test results explain that the more emerging adults have positively functioning families, the lower their levels of loneliness, because family function enables individuals to build positive self-esteem. The mediation role found is partial, indicating that, aside from self-esteem, family functioning still directly influences reductions in loneliness levels.

The family and the systems within it constitute the most essential setting and community for the formation and development of an individual's self-esteem and self-understanding. Although an individual's self-esteem develops in childhood, it continues through adolescence into adulthood. Particularly during emerging adulthood, individuals complete psychological maturation tasks such as building a stable identity, autonomy, self-control, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. Research indicates that the nuclear family plays a role in completing these maturation tasks, particularly in identity formation and self-esteem (Mandara & Murray, 2000; Mullis et al., 2003; Schumacher & Camp, 2010).

The findings of this study are also consistent with and confirm previous research indicating that an individual's evaluative assessment of their self-esteem is predicted by well-functioning and healthy families (Sultana et al., 2024). The significance of family functioning dynamics extends not only to individuals in the general population but also to children from divorced families, and proven to enhance self-esteem (Valencia & Soetikno, 2022), improve self-esteem in chronically ill patients (Preechawong et al., 2007), enhance psychological well-being in families with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Valencia & Soetikno, 2022), reduce anxiety levels, and improve individual well-being (Judodihardjo et al., 2024;

Nabilah CS & Hermaleni, 2021).

Family functioning, as characterized by a positive family atmosphere, environment, and dynamics, provides foundational basis for individuals to develop a positive self-concept (Liang et al., 2024). The formation and development of self-esteem are indeed the result of interactions between social culture, family, and school; however, the family is considered the most important environment for building self-esteem (Bradshaw, 1996; Cashwell, 1995). Harmonious family relationships, good communication, and emotional closeness can make family members feel loved, accepted, and supported, thereby fostering more positive self-perceptions and self-evaluations. Conversely, dysfunctional, disharmonious, and emotionally distant families foster feelings of rejection and neglect, which negatively impact the formation of self-evaluation or self-esteem. Consistent with previous research by Huang et al. (2022), emotional closeness, positive communication, problem-solving, and family rules are significantly and positively correlated with self-esteem. Research by Hadori et al., (2020) also emphasizes that a functional family, characterized by involvement, interaction, communication, and attachment between parents and children, significantly influences improvement in a child's self-esteem.

Furthermore, positive self-esteem helps individuals build meaningful social relationships and reduces their loneliness (Hayundaka & M. Salis Yuniardi, 2023). Individuals with high self-esteem will evaluate themselves more positively, be more confident, and be adaptable, making them more flexible or comfortable in social relationships, and helping them avoid feelings of loneliness (Putri et al., 2024). For example, emerging adulthood is a transitional period in life during which young adults may separate from their parents and build new social relationships, such as those in college and the workplace. Family functions that provide support, communication, and emotional closeness help emerging adults become more confident and feel capable during periods of adaptation and social relationships building, thereby preventing loneliness (Hayundaka & M. Salis Yuniardi, 2023; Johnson et al., 2010; Magdalena et al., 2023).

The findings of this study offer a new perspective on dynamic explanation of how a high sense of self-esteem develops within an individual and emerges from the dynamics of a positive family functioning. A functional family provides a safe space for emerging adults to build a sense of belonging and internalize a positive self-view, thereby enhancing their self-esteem. Self-esteem serves as a foundation for undertaking the next developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, namely building meaningful social interactions and relationships and avoiding experiences of loneliness.

Furthermore, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of relational quality and family functioning in shaping individual's self-esteem. Aspects of well-functioning families such as communication, validation, emotional warmth, cohesion, and support among family members predict high self-esteem; conversely, dysfunctional families predict negative self-evaluation and lower an individual's self-esteem. Furthermore, self-esteem during emerging adulthood acts as a mediator explaining the reduction in individuals' feelings of loneliness.

In addition to novel findings regarding the dynamics of variable relationships in

understanding loneliness during emerging adulthood, this study has limitations that the data are dominated by female participants, limiting generalizability to male participants. Additionally, measuring family functioning at the general level tends to limit in-depth elaboration and explanation. Therefore, it is important for future research to identify how specific aspects or dimensions of family functioning can optimize social life during emerging adulthood.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that self-esteem partially mediates the relationship between family functioning and loneliness among individuals in emerging adulthood. Family functioning predicts lower levels of loneliness through the mediating role of self-esteem. This research suggests that greater closeness, harmony, and support within the family system enhance an individual's self-esteem, which in turn reduces loneliness. Conversely, individuals with families exhibiting lower levels of functioning also experience reduced self-esteem, which subsequently increases feelings of loneliness.

Future research could examine various dimensions of family functioning, including the roles of the family unit. Given that the family is an interconnected system of members with unique and distinct cultures, this creates different dynamics for optimizing positive family functioning. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for developing psychoeducation or designing family-relationship-based interventions by optimizing family function as the core community to enhance individual self-esteem and reduce loneliness.

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