

Linking Family Dynamics, Social Media Use, and Maladaptive Coping in Emerging Adults: A University-Based Correlational Study

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Abstract. Emerging adults are expected to contend with numerous stressors brought about by the transition from adolescence to full-fledged adulthood. This predisposes them to resort to several coping mechanisms, which is influenced by their family dynamics and social media use (SMU). This study investigated the relationship between emerging adults' general family functioning, social media use, and maladaptive coping. This study utilized a cross-sectional design that collected data from 725 emerging adults aged 18-25 years old from a university in Quezon City, Philippines. The participants answered a questionnaire integrating the Family Functioning Device, Self-Report Measures Assessing SMU, and the BRIEF-COPE. The relationships between the variables were assessed by conducting correlational and regression analyses. The results of this study showed that there was no significant correlation between family functioning and SMU ($p = 0.775$). Alternatively, lower levels of general family functioning is significantly correlated with higher levels of maladaptive coping behaviors ($p < 0.049$). Increased SMU was also associated with maladaptive coping ($p < 0.000$). The regression analysis revealed that both SMU ($b = 0.1205$, $p < .001$) and family functioning ($b = 0.0505$, $p = .042$) predicted maladaptive coping ($R^2 = .057$, $F(2, 722) = 22.2$, $p < .001$). While findings imply that there is no direct correlation between general family functioning and social media use, family functioning is still a key factor in emerging adults' coping. Therefore, the negative effects of excessive social media use can be diminished by incorporating interventions tailored to improve family functioning.

Keywords: Family functioning; Maladaptive coping; Social media use

1.0 Introduction

The transition from adolescence to full-fledged adulthood entails the intensification of responsibilities and roles. Emerging adults are being bombarded with tremendous pressure and expectations consonant with sojourning in the aforementioned phase of life. Hence, they become susceptible to stress to a greater extent (Brito and Soares, 2023). In many instances, people accustom themselves to the stressors by ignoring the issue and regaining a sense of control by doing other things that would appear as counterproductive and ineffective, such as binge eating, sleeping late, impulsive buying, and binge-watching (Sutton, 2024). These maladaptive coping can actually be influenced by several factors, specifically their general family functioning and social media use. However, there

is a research gap brought by the limitation of research discussing the array of the three variables among emerging adults in the Philippine setting. Nonetheless, their connection has been independently supported by various international literature.

Firstly, general family functioning was regarded to affect the engagement of emerging adults in maladaptive coping. The family is a child's prime and fundamental social interaction (South Carolina Department of Social Services, 2021). It is through these family interactions that children will adopt and validate beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, practices, and even coping styles (Mincu, 2024). Herewith, their family functioning may induce the likelihood of emerging adults engaging in different maladaptive coping (e.g. binge eating). For instance, a study by Lee et al. (2018) asserted that good family functioning serves as a protective barrier against binge eating among adolescents. While a study by Osborne (2019) found that family dysfunction increases the likelihood of college students having eating disorders.

Secondly, social media use is another factor that may escalate the prospect of emerging adults engaging in maladaptive coping. Social media lets them be involved in the discussions of innumerable topics that may be prominent and rampant in an area. These topics may come out as internet trends that people would conform to (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2024). Case in point, a study by Kim and Mackert (2022) revealed that social media use significantly affects the binge-eating behaviors of people. As people highly engage with social media, more likely they are to have an increased intention to eat and follow certain eating habits, which may lead to binge eating. Ahmed et al. (2022) also discussed how social media use may generate conversations regarding trending shows or movies, which accordingly affect the binge-watching behavior of people.

These understandings depict how general family functioning and social media use independently affect emerging adults' maladaptive coping. However, as stated, there is a limitation in the discussion regarding the totality of the aforementioned variables among emerging adults in the Philippines. Consequently, this study aimed to fill that particular research gap. By recognizing their correlation, emerging adults can make more informed decisions to improve their coping and overall well-being, and various individuals may better support them as they deal with the stressors brought by emerging adulthood.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A descriptive correlational strategy was employed in the study to explore the relationship between general family functioning, social media use, and maladaptive coping mechanisms among emerging adults. This design was employed as it allowed the researchers to gather data on multiple variables without manipulating any of them. The goal was to observe and analyze these variables as they naturally occur and identify potential trends or correlations between them.

2.2 Research Locale

This study was conducted at a university in the National Capital Region. The university offers a diverse range of academic programs, making it an ideal setting for research due to its representation of different student groups.

2.3 Research Participants

The population for this study consisted of 1,575 college students enrolled in the summer semester of the academic year 2023-2024 from a non-sectarian private university in NCR. The students came from various academic programs, including Information Technology, Hospitality Management, Tourism, Nursing, Education, Biology, and Psychology. Stratified sampling was used to ensure that the sample adequately represented all programs. The total sample size was calculated using Raosoft software, which considered the entire population, a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error. This resulted in a final sample size of 854 respondents. However, only 725 answered due to schedule conflict, giving an attrition rate of 15%.

2.4 Research Instrument

Socio-demographic Data

A socio-demographic questionnaire was used to solicit the age, sex, and type of family of the respondents. In other studies, it was found that these demographics influenced both social media and the coping behaviors of emerging

adults. According to previous studies, ages 18 - 25 or emerging adults are transitioning from childhood to adulthood characterized by increased exposure to stressors. Moreover, age affects social media usage because young adults are often more active on social media, potentially influencing their coping behaviors. Similarly, various studies demonstrated that males and females use social media and cope with stress in different ways. The type of family also plays an important role in how one copes. These emerging adults may experience a variety of emotional support and communication depending on the type of family, influencing their coping behaviors and usage of social media.

Social Media Use Questionnaire

For their social media use, which is a dependent variable, the respondents were asked for the duration/frequency of their social media use, the type of social media used (e.g. Tiktok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), and its content (e.g. Online shopping, eating unhealthy foods, sleeping late, binge-watching, binge-eating, online games). The frequency they countered the content of their social media was scored from 1 to 5, which were never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always, respectively. The respondents' top 2 self-reported coping mechanisms were also asked. Since this tool was self-made, the researchers had this tool validated by a research expert to remove any bias. To ensure its reliability and validity, a pilot testing was done which involved 19 participants from the same university (Cronbach alpha = 0.711, $p > 0.001$). Social media use according to hour is based on Kavanagh's (2022) thesis regarding social media and coping. The type of social media used and its contents is based on a study by Shabaznezhad et al. (2022) where they analyzed the role of social media platforms and user engagement.

Family Assessment Device (FAD)

The Family Assessment Device (FAD) - General Functioning subscale, developed by McMaster, was used to measure general family functioning. This is a 12-item tool that evaluates family interactions, communication, and problem-solving on a 4-point Likert scale, where "1" represents strongly disagree and "4" represents strongly agree. The FAD was chosen due to its reliability and previous validation in various family studies. It allowed the researchers to assess the overall health and functioning of the respondents' families. The researchers did not modify any of the original questions in the FAD. Previous studies have demonstrated that this tool has high reliability (Cronbach alpha = 0.92, $p > 0.001$).

Brief-COPE for Maladaptive Coping

The Brief-COPE instrument developed by Carver (1997) was used to measure maladaptive coping strategies among respondents. This 28-item tool evaluates different coping mechanisms, and for this study, only the maladaptive coping items (such as denial, disengagement, and substance use) were analyzed. The Brief-COPE uses a Likert scale ranging from "1" (I haven't been doing this at all) to "4" (I've been doing this a lot). Two questions were removed from the original 28-item instrument to align the tool with the study's specific objectives. This instrument has been validated in previous studies, with a demonstrated reliability (alpha = 0.81-0.82).

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Lists of respondents were acquired through their batch presidents, who were chosen at an earlier date based on an internal election conducted by the student body of each college. After acquiring the lists, respondents were recruited through their batch presidents/representatives who have access to the presidents of each block through which they disseminated the survey links via email and social media platforms (Facebook Messenger). Data from the survey questionnaires were collected online through Google Forms, allowing participants to respond at their convenience. For those with limited internet access, respondents had the option to log into the Wi-Fi network provided by the school, accessible through their student identification number. At their request, participants would be provided with a digital copy of the survey which they can print and scan to allow a manual entry of their responses. Regarding difficulty or questions in answering the survey, participants were placed in a group chat on Facebook Messenger with a member of the research team. All questionnaires were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed into a linked Google Sheet for later analysis. To ensure confidentiality, personal identifiers were removed from the secured respondent data.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethics clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Review Committee. The approval was granted after a thorough review of the study's protocols, ensuring that all ethical standards, including the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, were upheld throughout the research process.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The results include the fulfillment of the objectives and refer to general family functioning impacts on coping strategies, social media use, maladaptive coping behaviors, family structure, age, and sex along with their respective correlations. Table 1 shows the majority of our respondents are from the age group 20 to 21 years old. A staggering amount of our respondents are also female. It shows gender-specific trends among female emerging adults and may give insight into the general family functioning and maladaptive coping behaviors of women in this age bracket. Furthermore, a large group of our study's respondents belonged to families with a nuclear structure (65.4%). In comparison, others belonged to extended families (17.0%), single-parent families (13.9%), step-families (2.6%), and co-parenting families (0.3%).

Table 1. Demographic profile of the samples (n = 725)

Characteristics	N	Characteristics	N	Characteristics	N
Age		Sex		Type of family	
18 - 19 years old	196	Male	175	Nuclear	474
20 - 21 years old	382	Female	550	Single-parent	101
22 - 23 years old	128			Extended	123
24 - 25 years old	19			Step-family	19
				Grandparent	6
				Others: Co-parenting	2

Table 2 shows the BRIEF-COPE results of the respondents which is how they cope in times of stress. For item 3, 'I've been saying to myself "this isn't real.,"' the respondents reflected a mean of 1.73 with a descriptive equivalent of "I haven't been doing this at all." This suggests that when faced with a problem, the respondents try to deal with their problems and do not deny it. This can be seen as a positive indicator of being emotionally ready in times of challenging situations and being proactive in solving problems. For item 6, 'I've been taking action to try to make the situation better,' the respondents reflected a mean of 3.26 with a verbal interpretation of "I've been doing this a lot." This suggests that the respondents try to find ways to manage or improve the situation they are in. Similar to Item 3, Item 6 is about being proactive in problem-solving and taking control of their situation. For item 17, 'I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping,' the respondents reflected a mean of 3.32 with a verbal interpretation of "I've been doing this a lot."

Table 2. Brief-COPE Inventory of the respondents

Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
3. I've been saying to myself "This isn't real."	1.73	0.859	I've been doing this a lot
6. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.	3.26	0.721	I've been doing this a lot
14. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.	1.80	0.865	A little bit
17. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.	3.32	0.791	I've been doing this a lot
Weighted Mean Response	2.75	0.374	A medium amount

This suggests that the respondents frequently try to distract themselves with entertainment or leisure activities. Regular engagement in these activities means that individuals prefer to divert their attention rather than address the underlying issues which might indicate that they find these things more comforting compared to confronting their concerns head-on. The weighted mean response for maladaptive coping as seen in Table 2 is 2.75 and its verbal interpretation is "a medium amount." This suggests that when faced with stressful situations, the respondents try to cope using a variety of coping strategies, rather than relying on just one mechanism: adaptive (e.g. acceptance or positive reframing) or maladaptive (e.g. denial).

Based on Table 3, online gaming has a mean score of 4.21, which indicates that this maladaptive coping behavior was always encouraged, supported, or depicted on social media. TikTok being the most popular social media platform plays a role in the popularity of gaming among the respondents. The target population which is the

emerging adults are young individuals who know a lot about gaming and technology. Online shopping/buying being the second most frequently observed social media with a mean score of 3.79 might be due to the fact that TikTok is easily accessible and appeals to the general population videos, which creates a conducive environment for showcasing products. The weighted mean score of the respondents is 3.44 with a verbal interpretation of “frequently”. This means that the respondents frequently observed this type of content on social media.

Table 3. Distribution of maladaptive coping behaviors being supported, encouraged, or depicted on social media by respondents

Maladaptive Coping Behaviors	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Online Shopping	3.79	1.601	Frequently
Eating unhealthy food (e.g. fast food, sodas, junk food)	3.29	0.970	Occasionally
Sleeping late	3.66	1.062	Frequently
Binge watching	3.51	1.048	Frequently
Binge-eating	3.09	1.078	Occasionally
Others: Online Gaming	4.21	0.867	Always
Weighted Mean Response	3.44	0.711	Frequently

Furthermore, as shown in Table 3, online gaming has a mean score of 4.21, which indicates that this maladaptive coping behavior was always encouraged, supported, or depicted on social media. Online gaming being the most frequently observed content in social media is supported by Sailer and Homner (2020) stating that it is becoming more popular since it can be a source of entertainment and relaxation. Additionally, TikTok being the most popular social media platform (see Table 2) plays a role in the popularity of gaming among the respondents. Once an individual shares or interacts with a certain content, the algorithm will detect it, amplifying the gaming content being observed. This cyclical nature of content consumption is a key factor in the development of maladaptive behaviors. Algorithms that amplify specific content based on user interactions can reinforce unhealthy behaviors, making it difficult for individuals to break out of negative coping cycles. As research by Redmond (2019) suggests, social media's ability to continuously feed similar content can result in emotional disengagement and avoidance behaviors, further exacerbating maladaptive coping. This can lead to a cycle of content consumption and behavior adoption since users are continuously exposed to similar types of content.

The correlation analysis in Table 4 shows the relationships between the variables: Social media use, maladaptive coping, age, sex, and type of family. There is a significant positive correlation of general family functioning ($p = 0.000$), the type of family ($p = 0.000$), and maladaptive coping ($p = 0.049$) with each other, suggesting that these variables are related. The results indicated that social media use was significantly correlated with age ($p = 0.039$), sex ($p = 0.000$), and maladaptive coping ($p = 0.000$) and that these variables are related. No correlation was found using social media use regardless of the type of family ($p = 0.716$), age ($p = 0.326$), and maladaptive coping type.

Table 4. Correlation analysis matrix

Variables	<i>p</i> -value				
	Age	Sex	Type of family	Social media use	Maladaptive coping
General Family Functioning	0.527	0.454	0.000	0.775	0.049
Social Media Use	0.039	0.000	0.716		0.000
Maladaptive Coping	0.326	0.025	0.527		

Note: Bold values indicate significant p -values. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results highlight a significant age-related trend in maladaptive coping, especially among younger emerging adults, who are at a critical transitional stage characterized by heightened psychological vulnerability. Previous studies have shown that coping strategies often evolve during this life stage as individuals navigate increased independence and responsibility (Brito & Soares, 2023). Thus, the prevalence of maladaptive coping among the 20-21 age group in this study underscores the need for targeted interventions to improve coping mechanisms. A large group of respondents (see Table 1) belonged to the age group of 20 to 21 years old (52.7%), while the remaining respondents belonged to the other age groups of 18-19 (27.0%), 22-23 (17.7%), and 24-25 (2.6%). Emerging adulthood entails psychological, physiological, and social changes that cause high stress and negatively impact health (Dungog et al., 2021).

Moreover, having good family functioning is crucial to streamlining this period of transition in the lives of emerging adults. Positive family dynamics not only provide emotional support but also foster effective problem-solving skills, which are essential for navigating the challenges of emerging adulthood. Studies by Gervais et al.

(2019) and Jabbari et al. (2023) suggest that families with strong communication and cohesion can significantly reduce the likelihood of maladaptive coping behaviors by providing a stable environment in which individuals can process stress. Based on Table 1, 65.4% of the respondents belonged to families with a nuclear structure. The respondents being predominantly from nuclear families suggest that having better coping behaviors resulted from having good family functioning, indicated by emotional support and communication.

Interestingly, the findings also shed light on the importance of family structure in influencing coping mechanisms. Individuals from nuclear families were shown to have better family functioning scores compared to those from single-parent or extended families. This suggests that the composition of the family unit plays a role in the emotional resources available to individuals, thereby impacting their ability to cope with stress effectively. It can be seen from Table 4, that general family functioning and the type of family were found to be statistically significant. This means that the type of family correlates to the kind of functioning their family has, as stated in Lanozo et al. (2021), where minors from broken families learn to handle difficulties from a young age, resulting in them learning to cope with life earlier than most and staying positive despite the status of their family. Additionally, Jabbari et al. (2023) state that, unlike challenging family connections that are characterized by frequent criticism, conflicts, and high expectations, stable and empathetic familial ties offer love, caring, and support.

As shown in Table 4, there was a significant relationship between general family functioning and maladaptive coping. The results showed that general family functioning and maladaptive coping had a direct proportional relationship. This proportional relationship suggests that family environments characterized by high dysfunction may limit the emotional resources available to individuals, making them more susceptible to stress. Moreover, families with poor functioning often lack the communication skills and emotional support necessary to develop effective coping strategies, as noted by Lanozo et al. (2021). These findings are critical in understanding how family interventions could improve coping mechanisms in emerging adults. Reflecting on the results of the study, it can be inferred that another study done by Lanozo et al. (2021) also had the same concept. The family significantly affects how individuals learn how to handle difficult situations. As a family, they depend on each other for support (Jabbari et al., 2023). Having strong family ties affects having positive coping strategies. Those emerging adults who are more connected with their families have healthier ways to cope (Gervais et al., 2019). In relation to this, a study done by Caurel (2023) found that when a family fully supports their children, they will become emerging adults who can cope effectively with different challenges and develop adaptive attitudes.

Moreover, we can see from Table 4 that social media use and age were found to be statistically significant, as well as social media use and sex. This means that the type of social media use and age correlate to one another, as stated in Redmond (2020), where due to a lack of parental supervision, young adults at college are more likely to use the internet. It also indicates that social media and sex correlate as stated in Vieira (2022), where adolescent females used social media excessively at a rate approximately twice that of boys.

In addition, there was a significant relationship between social media use and maladaptive coping. This result is similar to the results of Faraci's (2023) study, wherein, it showed that watching dietary and exercise contents would result in body dissatisfaction then leads to disordered eating behaviors. Additionally, according to Sanzari (2023), exposure to weight loss content was associated with poor body image, vomiting, and frequent use of laxatives. Moreover, the more an individual uses social media, the higher the likelihood of having an increased appetite, leading to binge eating (Kim and Mackert, 2022) since it promotes an unrealistic body image, which affects body dissatisfaction (Rizwan et al., 2022). In addition, it can also lead to the formation of maladaptive coping through negative social comparison (Brimmel et al., 2023). As seen from Table 4, maladaptive coping and sex were found to be statistically significant. This means that maladaptive coping and sex are correlated, as stated by Graves et al. (2021), where individual coping techniques and coping characteristics adopted showed clear gender variations.

Table 5 shows the regression analysis for the variables Family functioning, Social media use, and Maladaptive coping. A linear regression was conducted using the composite score for Social media use and Family functioning to predict maladaptive coping. The results showed that Social media use ($b = 0.1205$, $p < .001$) and Family functioning ($b = 0.0505$, $p = .042$) predicted the Maladaptive coping ($R^2 = .057$, $F(2, 722) = 22.2$, $p < .001$).

Table 5. *Regression analysis*

Variables	b	p	R2	F
General Family Functioning	0.050	.042		
Social Media Use	0.120	.001		
Maladaptive coping		.001	.057	22.22

The findings suggest that lower levels of Family functioning were associated with the increase in Maladaptive coping. As previously cited people with strong communication and cohesion with their families can significantly lessen the probability of having maladaptive coping behaviors by which the individual has a stable and free environment where they can process emotions (Jabbari et al. 2023). Additionally, having a higher level of Social media use, also predicted having an increase in Maladaptive coping. When there is an increase in exposure to specific social media content related to maladaptive coping, individuals who engage in social media use results show that these coping behaviors are adopted (Graves et al. 2021).

4.0 Conclusion

With the study's well-grounded foundation, the researchers were able to attain sufficient and relevant insights that answered the research questions and helped achieve the aims of the study. The findings revealed that emerging adults who belong to the age group of 20-21 years old engaged in social media more compared to other age groups with a p-value of 0.039. Females were also regarded to use social media more than males with a p-value of 0.000. In line with this, females also engaged in maladaptive coping more as opposed to males with a p-value of 0.025. Furthermore, emerging adults who belong to a nuclear family were seen to have good general family functioning compared to other types of families with a p-value of 0.000. With these being stated, the general family functioning and social media use of emerging adults independently affect the way they cope in response to stressors, with a p-value of 0.049 and 0.000, respectively.

On the other hand, the researchers also found some variables that did not have any significant relationship with each other. The age and general family functioning of emerging adults were seen to not have a significant relationship with each other, with a p-value of 0.527. Age and maladaptive coping were also not significantly related, with a p-value of 0.326. Moreover, sex and general family functioning were seen to not be significantly related to each other, with a p-value of 0.454. The type of family did not also have a significant relationship with either social media use or maladaptive coping of emerging adults, with a p-value of 0.716 and 0.537, respectively. In addition, general family functioning and social media use were not significantly related to each other with a p-value of 0.775.

Given these findings, emerging adults can now understand how their coping behaviors are being affected by their family functioning and social media use. Hence, they may make more informed decisions that will bring about their wellness in response to stressors. Secondly, this study will also help families to realize the essence of strengthening familial relationships. Through this study, they can build a supportive and nurturing environment for emerging adults to grow as they strive to deal with the transition between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood. Thirdly, these findings will aid nurses in attaining an adequate rationale for establishing effective and efficient family interventions that will cater to strengthening families, enabling them to communicate better and have enhanced relationships with one another. Nurses will also have a basis to incorporate the effects of social media use on emerging adults' quality of life as they conduct health education aimed at the overall wellness of emerging adults. Lastly, the findings of this study were able to fill in the research gap brought by the limitation of research discussing the correlation between the three variables among emerging adults in the Philippines. Hence, this study may also help future researchers who would like to delve into the topic deeper.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors all contributed equally to each section. The authors have also reviewed and approved the final work.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest about the publication of this paper.

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