

# Hidden Grief, Visible Grades: Components of Academic Functioning after Friendship Loss in Adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore the emotional and academic consequences of friendship loss among adolescents, identifying the components of academic functioning most affected by the hidden grief of relational dissolution.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 24 adolescents (ages 13–18) from Argentina who had experienced the loss of a significant friendship within the past two years. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, school type, and academic performance levels. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis, combining inductive and deductive strategies, was used to identify patterns across participants' narratives. Credibility was enhanced through independent coding, constant comparison, and reflexive memoing.

**Findings:** Four overarching themes emerged: (1) Emotional impact of friendship loss, encompassing grief, sadness, anger, loneliness, insecurity, and rumination; (2) Academic consequences, including declines in motivation, concentration, and performance, as well as paradoxical overinvestment in schoolwork; (3) Coping and adjustment strategies, ranging from seeking support and creative expression to maladaptive behaviors such as avoidance and substance use; and (4) Identity and future orientation, reflecting disrupted self-concept, cautiousness in future friendships, and eventual processes of resilience and growth.

**Conclusion:** The study demonstrates that friendship loss in adolescence is a profound relational rupture with both emotional and academic consequences. Recognizing academic decline as a potential indicator of hidden grief may inform educational and counseling practices. Supporting adolescents in coping with friendship loss through adaptive strategies can foster both resilience and academic recovery.

**Keywords:** Adolescence; Friendship loss; Academic functioning; Emotional adjustment; Resilience

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by identity exploration, emotional intensity, and increasing reliance on peer relationships. During this stage, friendships serve as a primary source of emotional support, social learning, and academic encouragement, often shaping both psychological adjustment and educational outcomes (Annisa et al., 2025; Neprily et al., 2025). Research consistently highlights that high-quality friendships are associated with greater happiness, reduced stress, and enhanced school engagement, underscoring the role of peers as protective factors in adolescent development (Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Koele et al., 2023). However, the loss of a close friendship—whether through conflict, neglect, or shifting peer dynamics—can disrupt emotional stability and compromise academic functioning. This hidden grief, often unrecognized by adults, can manifest visibly in declining grades, absenteeism, and disengagement from schoolwork (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018; Robertz et al., 2024).

Friendship in adolescence is not merely a social connection but a developmental necessity. Adolescents rely on peers to negotiate autonomy, self-esteem, and resilience in the face of challenges (Harmelen et al., 2019; Wicaksono & Adiyanti, 2019). When friendships flourish, they can buffer stress, enhance emotional regulation, and contribute to resilience even among youth exposed to adversity (Harmelen et al., 2020). Conversely, the dissolution of these bonds introduces profound emotional stress, which often remains invisible to educators and families. Adolescents interpret friendship termination as both a personal rejection and a disruption of their social world, which can intensify feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and insecurity (Öztürk & Sumbas, 2023).

Cultural and contextual factors further shape how adolescents perceive and respond to friendship dynamics. For instance, indigenous psychology approaches to friendship formation reveal that adolescents negotiate relational closeness in ways that are embedded in cultural scripts and collective expectations (Wicaksono & Adiyanti, 2019). Similarly, gender differences play a role in friendship experiences, as girls often prioritize intimacy and emotional sharing, while boys may focus on companionship and shared activities (Annisa et al., 2025). These differences influence not only the quality of friendships but also the impact of their dissolution on adolescents' mental health and academic functioning.

High-quality friendships are consistently linked with academic engagement and resilience. Supportive peers provide motivation to persist in challenging tasks, encourage collaborative learning, and reinforce academic values (Gallardo et al., 2016; Kim & Kim, 2024). In contrast, unstable or conflictual friendships can compromise concentration and lower motivation, leading to academic decline (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). Peer influence is particularly powerful during adolescence, shaping both risk-taking behaviors and academic attitudes. Studies demonstrate that adolescents with friends who value school tend to achieve higher grades, whereas those embedded in networks of academically disengaged peers often exhibit diminished performance (Rambaran et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the interplay between friendship and academic outcomes extends beyond direct influence. Peer acceptance and friendship quality foster a sense of belonging within schools, which mediates academic success (Fan & Bellmore, 2023). Inversely, friendship loss may erode school belonging, thereby creating a cascade of disengagement, absenteeism, and reduced academic efficacy (Robert et al., 2018). When adolescents lose friends who functioned as academic collaborators, they may not only lose emotional stability but also structural support for learning activities.

Although much research has examined the formation and benefits of friendships, fewer studies explore the experience of losing friends. Evidence suggests that friendship instability—frequent cycles of losing and gaining friends—compromises academic functioning in middle school, producing long-term consequences for motivation and grades (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). Adolescents interpret friendship loss in complex ways: some view it as betrayal, while others perceive it as a natural part of growing up (Öztürk & Sumbas, 2023). This variation underscores the importance of examining not only the presence of loss but also how adolescents make sense of it.

The grief of losing a close friend has been compared to mourning, as adolescents often report rumination, sadness, and diminished self-worth following such experiences (Zhao & Gao, 2014). In addition, neurodevelopmental differences may amplify these challenges. For instance, adolescents with ADHD describe heightened difficulties in maintaining friendships, and the loss of peers is linked to exacerbated academic and emotional problems (Reinke et al., 2023; Robertz et al., 2024). Such findings highlight that friendship

loss is not a uniform experience but one that interacts with individual vulnerabilities.

Friendships play a particularly critical role in resilience processes. Positive peer relationships can buffer the effects of early adversity and promote adaptive functioning (Harmelen et al., 2019). Longitudinal research suggests that adolescents who maintain high-quality friendships demonstrate greater resilience even when exposed to childhood trauma or social stressors (Harmelen et al., 2020). Conversely, when friendships dissolve, the absence of this protective buffer may expose adolescents to heightened vulnerability, both emotionally and academically.

Resilience, however, is not only about recovery from adversity but also about the ability to adapt and find new sources of support. Adolescents who rebuild social networks or develop coping strategies following friendship loss may eventually demonstrate improved emotional regulation and academic persistence (Lan, 2020). This adaptive process underscores the importance of investigating not only the negative consequences of friendship loss but also the mechanisms of recovery and growth.

The dynamics of peer networks extend beyond dyadic friendships, influencing adolescents' academic behaviors through norms and expectations. Studies show that academic status norms shape friendship selection, as adolescents are more likely to form ties with peers who share similar achievement levels (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019). This reciprocal influence means that losing a friend who held strong academic values may leave adolescents vulnerable to reduced performance. Conversely, replacing a lost friend with peers who are disengaged from school may accelerate academic decline (Poulin & Denault, 2013).

School environments also moderate the relationship between friendships and academic outcomes. For example, peer nominations of self-control have been shown to predict changes in academic achievement and the formation of friendships, highlighting the interplay between individual traits and peer perceptions (Park et al., 2022). Similarly, collective experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic altered the dynamics of friendship quality, mental health, and academic functioning, underscoring the situational variability of these processes (Koele et al., 2023).

The impact of friendship loss cannot be divorced from the broader social and cultural context in which it occurs. Research on adolescents in multicultural and diverse school environments emphasizes the role of ethnic-racial regard, peer socialization, and school practices in shaping adjustment (Hoffman et al., 2021). Friendships often

intersect with issues of identity and belonging, meaning that loss may also carry implications for how adolescents view themselves in relation to their social group. In some contexts, friendship loss may be compounded by experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or cultural transition.

In addition, the intersection of organized activity participation and social-emotional adjustment demonstrates that structured settings can provide alternative opportunities for peer support. For adolescents with autism spectrum disorder, participation in organized activities fosters social integration and emotional adjustment, even when traditional friendships are challenging to maintain (Bohnert et al., 2016). These findings point to the possibility that adolescents experiencing friendship loss may find resilience and belonging in extracurricular or community contexts.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of friendships in adolescence, the academic consequences of friendship loss remain understudied. Much of the research emphasizes the benefits of friendships or the risks of peer rejection, but less attention has been paid to the nuanced ways in which losing a close friend affects school performance and identity. Existing evidence suggests that friendship instability is linked to compromised academic outcomes (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018), while disengaged peer influences predict declining achievement (Schwartz et al., 2016). Moreover, adolescents themselves describe friendship endings as painful, confusing, and deeply impactful on their daily lives (Öztürk & Sumbas, 2023; Zhao & Gao, 2014).

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how adolescents in Argentina experience friendship loss and how this hidden grief manifests in their academic functioning.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the components of academic functioning in adolescents following the loss of a close friendship. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth of subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations adolescents attribute to friendship loss and its influence on their academic lives. The study was grounded in a phenomenological perspective, emphasizing the lived experiences of participants in relation to grief and schooling.

The participants were 24 adolescents from Argentina, recruited through purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender, school type, and academic performance levels. Eligibility criteria included being between the ages of 13 and 18, having experienced the termination of a significant friendship within the past two years, and currently being enrolled in secondary school. Informed consent was obtained from both participants and their parents or guardians prior to participation.

## 2.2. Measures

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences while also enabling the researchers to probe for depth and clarification. An interview guide was developed to address key themes such as the emotional impact of friendship loss, perceived changes in academic motivation, concentration, grades, relationships with teachers, and coping strategies. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted in Spanish, the native language of participants, to ensure comfort and authenticity of responses.

Interviews were carried out in person in quiet school counseling rooms or, when necessary, via secure online platforms to accommodate participants' availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging from subsequent interviews.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. The

analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, combining inductive and deductive strategies. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity, followed by open coding to capture significant statements and concepts. Codes were then grouped into categories, from which broader themes were derived that represented patterns across participants' accounts.

To enhance credibility, two researchers independently coded a subset of interviews and discussed discrepancies to reach consensus, refining the coding framework accordingly. Constant comparison was employed throughout the process to identify similarities and differences in adolescents' narratives. Reflexive memos were maintained to document analytical decisions and potential researcher biases. Finally, themes were reviewed and validated against the original transcripts to ensure they authentically represented participants' voices.

## 3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 24 adolescents from Argentina, including 13 females (54.2%) and 11 males (45.8%). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years, with the largest proportion being 16 years old (7 participants, 29.2%). Most participants were enrolled in public secondary schools (15 participants, 62.5%), while the remainder attended private institutions (9 participants, 37.5%). Regarding grade level, 6 participants (25.0%) were in the first year of secondary school, 8 (33.3%) in the second year, 5 (20.8%) in the third year, and 5 (20.8%) in the final year. The majority reported experiencing friendship loss within the past year (14 participants, 58.3%), while the rest had undergone this experience within the past two years (10 participants, 41.7%).

**Table 1**

### *Thematic Coding Framework*

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Impact of Friendship Loss	Grief and Sadness	crying frequently; feeling abandoned; emotional numbness; constant sadness; longing for friend
	Anger and Betrayal	blaming friend; resentment; frustration; feeling deceived
	Loneliness and Isolation	avoiding peers; eating alone at school; social withdrawal; feeling invisible
	Anxiety and Insecurity	fear of new friendships; worrying about being rejected; self-doubt
	Resilience and Emotional Growth	learning independence; increased maturity; acceptance of change
2. Academic Consequences	Rumination and Obsession	replaying past memories; overthinking conversations; difficulty letting go
	Motivation Changes	loss of interest in schoolwork; decreased goal orientation; lack of enthusiasm
	Concentration Difficulties	daydreaming in class; easily distracted; inability to focus on homework
	Decline in Academic Performance	falling grades; unfinished assignments; skipping exams

3. Coping and Adjustment Strategies	Coping through Academic Overinvestment	studying excessively; channeling grief into schoolwork; striving for recognition
	Teacher–Student Relationship Strain	reluctance to ask for help; perceiving teachers as unsupportive; avoiding class participation
	Peer Comparison in Academics	comparing grades with ex-friend; competitiveness; feeling inferior
	School Attendance Issues	skipping classes; tardiness; avoiding shared spaces with ex-friend
	Seeking Support from Others	confiding in parents; talking with siblings; relying on close peers
4. Identity and Future Orientation	Avoidance Behaviors	excessive social media use; avoiding reminders; distraction with entertainment
	Creative and Expressive Outlets	writing diaries; music and art as therapy; poetry or journaling
	Rebuilding Social Networks	making new friends; joining clubs; engaging in group activities
	Self-Reflection and Meaning-Making	questioning friendship values; learning life lessons; redefining priorities
	Maladaptive Coping	substance use; overeating; withdrawing into gaming
	Changes in Self-Concept	feeling less worthy; questioning likability; reduced confidence
	Identity Rebuilding	developing independence; strengthening individuality; embracing solitude
	Academic Identity Shifts	redefining self as “average student”; adopting new study habits; striving for resilience
	Future Relationship Expectations	skepticism about trust; cautious approach to intimacy; desire for authentic friendships
	Hope and Personal Growth	optimism about future; belief in self-recovery; new goals and aspirations

### Emotional Impact of Friendship Loss

**Grief and Sadness.** Participants described an overwhelming sense of grief after losing a close friend, often comparing it to mourning. Many recounted persistent crying, emotional emptiness, and longing for the friend’s presence. One 16-year-old female participant stated, *“It felt like someone had died; I couldn’t stop crying, and every corner of the school reminded me of her.”* This sadness often lingered for months, permeating both personal and academic life.

**Anger and Betrayal.** Alongside grief, many adolescents expressed anger and feelings of betrayal. Some reported resentment toward friends who left them for new social groups. A 15-year-old male explained, *“He just stopped talking to me one day and started hanging out with others. I felt tricked, like all our years of friendship meant nothing.”* Such narratives revealed deep frustration and an enduring sense of injustice.

**Loneliness and Isolation.** Adolescents frequently described feeling invisible and socially isolated after losing a friend. They avoided lunchrooms, group projects, or after-school gatherings, preferring solitude. One participant shared, *“I started eating alone in the cafeteria. It was embarrassing because everyone noticed.”* This withdrawal intensified feelings of disconnection, creating a cycle of loneliness.

**Anxiety and Insecurity.** For many, the loss generated anxiety about forming new friendships. Adolescents feared rejection and questioned their own worth. A 14-year-old girl revealed, *“Now I’m afraid to trust anyone. I think maybe I’m*

*not good enough to keep friends.”* Such insecurities were closely tied to diminished social confidence.

**Resilience and Emotional Growth.** Some participants, however, interpreted the loss as an opportunity for growth. They spoke of learning independence, developing maturity, and eventually accepting change. As one boy reflected, *“At first, I was broken, but later I realized I didn’t need to depend on anyone to feel okay.”* This resilience highlighted adaptive emotional trajectories in adolescence.

**Rumination and Obsession.** Yet, for others, the friendship loss triggered obsessive patterns of thinking. Adolescents replayed conversations in their heads and struggled to let go of shared memories. A participant admitted, *“Every night I kept thinking, what did I do wrong? I couldn’t stop going back to that last fight.”* Such rumination often deepened emotional pain.

### Academic Consequences

**Motivation Changes.** Many adolescents reported a sharp decline in academic motivation, noting that sadness made schoolwork feel meaningless. One student explained, *“I used to study to share achievements with her. Without her, I didn’t care anymore.”* The loss drained enthusiasm for both long-term goals and everyday assignments.

**Concentration Difficulties.** Concentration problems were common, with participants describing daydreaming during class or getting distracted while studying. A boy recalled, *“The teacher was explaining, but I was just staring at the desk thinking about him.”* This mental preoccupation interfered with effective learning.

**Decline in Academic Performance.** Several adolescents linked friendship loss directly to declining grades and incomplete tasks. A 17-year-old girl noted, *"Before, I had good grades, but after she left, I failed two exams because I couldn't focus."* Teachers often misinterpreted this decline as laziness rather than emotional struggle.

**Coping through Academic Overinvestment.** Conversely, a smaller group coped by throwing themselves into academics. Some described studying excessively to fill the emotional void. One student reflected, *"I stayed up late every night studying. It was the only way to forget."* For these participants, achievement became a distraction and a source of validation.

**Teacher-Student Relationship Strain.** Participants described distancing themselves from teachers, avoiding questions in class, and perceiving teachers as unsupportive. A student explained, *"When I was sad, I didn't want to raise my hand. I thought teachers wouldn't understand."* This withdrawal limited the possibility of academic assistance.

**Peer Comparison in Academics.** Several adolescents reported comparing their academic progress with their former friend's, which often triggered competitiveness or feelings of inadequacy. A participant remarked, *"She was still doing well, and I felt like a loser next to her."* Such comparisons magnified insecurities.

**School Attendance Issues.** Some participants even avoided attending school to escape the presence of former friends. A 15-year-old boy confessed, *"I skipped classes because I didn't want to see him with new people."* Absenteeism was therefore both an emotional and academic consequence.

#### Coping and Adjustment Strategies

**Seeking Support from Others.** Many adolescents sought solace from parents, siblings, or new peers. A participant explained, *"My sister became my best friend during that time. Talking to her saved me."* Support networks provided crucial emotional scaffolding.

**Avoidance Behaviors.** Others coped through avoidance, spending excessive time on social media, streaming series, or engaging in distractions. One participant admitted, *"I scrolled for hours just so I didn't think about her."* While temporarily helpful, such strategies often prevented deeper healing.

**Creative and Expressive Outlets.** Some adolescents turned to writing, music, or art to process grief. A girl reflected, *"I wrote poems about our friendship. It helped me cry and then feel lighter."* Creative expression served as a therapeutic outlet for unspoken emotions.

**Rebuilding Social Networks.** Participants described efforts to form new friendships or join group activities. One adolescent shared, *"I joined the school soccer team and made new friends. It wasn't the same, but it helped."* Re-engagement with peers provided a pathway out of isolation.

**Self-Reflection and Meaning-Making.** Adolescents also engaged in self-reflection, rethinking values and life lessons. A participant expressed, *"I realized real friends stay, and maybe losing her showed me what friendship truly means."* Such meaning-making facilitated personal growth.

**Maladaptive Coping.** A few participants disclosed harmful behaviors such as overeating, excessive gaming, or experimenting with substances. One student admitted, *"I started smoking because it was the only way to calm down."* These maladaptive strategies risked compounding the problem.

#### Identity and Future Orientation

**Changes in Self-Concept.** The loss of friendship destabilized adolescents' sense of self, leading to feelings of unworthiness and decreased confidence. A participant confessed, *"I thought, maybe I'm not good enough to keep any friend."* These doubts eroded self-esteem.

**Identity Rebuilding.** Over time, some participants began reconstructing their sense of self, emphasizing independence and individuality. One boy shared, *"I stopped defining myself by who I was with. I learned to stand alone."* Such narratives revealed empowerment through separation.

**Academic Identity Shifts.** Adolescents reported reshaping their academic self-concepts. Some redefined themselves as "average students," while others developed resilience by adopting new study habits. A student reflected, *"I decided to work harder and prove I could still succeed."* These shifts showed the fluidity of academic identity under emotional stress.

**Future Relationship Expectations.** Friendship loss influenced expectations for future relationships. Many expressed skepticism and caution, fearing new betrayals. A 16-year-old boy remarked, *"Now I don't trust easily. I keep my distance until I'm sure."* This guardedness shaped how they envisioned future social bonds.

**Hope and Personal Growth.** Despite hardships, several adolescents embraced hope, envisioning recovery and new beginnings. A girl optimistically said, *"I believe I'll find real friends in the future. This pain won't last forever."* Such outlooks demonstrated the role of resilience in navigating adolescent transitions.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the emotional and academic consequences of friendship loss in adolescents in Argentina, identifying four major themes: emotional impact, academic consequences, coping and adjustment strategies, and identity and future orientation. The findings revealed that friendship loss was experienced as a form of hidden grief, often accompanied by sadness, anger, loneliness, and anxiety, while also producing visible academic consequences such as declining motivation, concentration problems, and performance difficulties. Participants also reported both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, and many described processes of identity rebuilding and shifting expectations for future relationships. These results underscore the complex interplay between peer relationships, emotional well-being, and academic functioning in adolescence.

The first major theme highlighted the deep emotional impact of friendship loss. Adolescents in this study described grief, sadness, anger, loneliness, insecurity, and in some cases rumination about the circumstances of the friendship dissolution. These emotional trajectories are consistent with earlier findings suggesting that adolescents interpret the end of friendships as profound personal losses, often equating them to bereavement (Öztürk & Sumbas, 2023; Zhao & Gao, 2014). Such experiences reflect the centrality of peer relationships in adolescence, as friendships provide critical support for self-esteem and emotional regulation (Annisa et al., 2025; Neprily et al., 2025). The reports of anger and betrayal among participants align with studies showing that conflictual endings can create heightened emotional distress, particularly when adolescents perceive themselves as abandoned or replaced (Öztürk & Sumbas, 2023).

The findings also reinforce resilience perspectives by showing that while some adolescents were overwhelmed by sadness and insecurity, others reported personal growth, maturity, and eventual acceptance of loss. This echoes research emphasizing the dual role of friendships as both protective and risky: their presence fosters resilience, but their dissolution may also trigger adaptive processes that strengthen independence and coping (Harmelen et al., 2019, 2020). Such variation suggests that emotional responses to friendship loss are not uniform but contingent on individual, relational, and contextual factors.

A second theme identified the academic consequences of friendship loss, with participants reporting decreased motivation, concentration difficulties, and declining grades. These outcomes confirm earlier evidence that friendship

instability compromises academic functioning during adolescence (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). Participants frequently described disengagement, absenteeism, and avoidance of teachers or classroom interactions, underscoring how emotional grief translated into diminished school engagement. This aligns with research linking poor friendship quality or peer rejection to academic decline, as such disruptions often reduce adolescents' sense of school belonging and motivation (Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Koele et al., 2023).

At the same time, some participants reported coping by overinvesting in schoolwork, channeling emotional pain into academic performance. This paradoxical response reflects the dual potential of stress to either hinder or motivate achievement, depending on coping style and available support systems (Kim & Kim, 2024; Lan, 2020). The role of peer comparison in academics, where participants evaluated their performance against that of former friends, further supports findings that peers influence not only social belonging but also academic identity (Park et al., 2022; Rambaran et al., 2016). Importantly, our results suggest that the loss of academically engaged friends may remove structural supports for achievement, leaving adolescents more vulnerable to academic disengagement (Robert et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016).

The third theme focused on coping and adjustment, revealing a spectrum of adaptive and maladaptive strategies. Many adolescents sought support from parents, siblings, or new friends, illustrating the compensatory role of other social networks (Annisa et al., 2025; Poulin & Denault, 2013). Others relied on creative outlets such as writing or art, consistent with research on expressive coping as a means of emotional regulation (Rieffe et al., 2018). For some, however, maladaptive strategies emerged, including substance use, excessive gaming, or social withdrawal, paralleling findings that adolescents with poor friendship quality or unstable social ties are at increased risk of externalizing behaviors (Reinke et al., 2023).

Avoidance behaviors such as excessive social media use were particularly prominent, echoing earlier studies describing adolescents' tendency to use digital distraction as a coping mechanism following relational stress (Zhao & Gao, 2014). Meanwhile, those who rebuilt social networks through extracurricular involvement demonstrated the buffering role of organized activities in restoring emotional and academic adjustment, as previously highlighted among adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (Bohnert et al., 2016). Collectively, these findings reinforce the notion that

coping strategies significantly determine whether friendship loss becomes a developmental risk or an opportunity for growth.

The fourth theme revealed that friendship loss not only disrupted adolescents' immediate emotions and academics but also influenced their broader self-concept and expectations for future relationships. Participants reported changes in self-esteem, with many questioning their worthiness as friends, consistent with research linking peer rejection to reduced self-concept and emotional insecurity (Hoffman et al., 2021; Wicaksono & Adiyanti, 2019). Over time, however, some described identity rebuilding, emphasizing independence and individuality. These narratives resonate with findings that resilience following adversity often involves reconstructing one's sense of self and redefining priorities (Harmelen et al., 2020).

Importantly, participants' cautious approach to future friendships mirrors prior studies showing that adolescents who experience peer betrayal often adopt more guarded relational strategies (Öztürk & Sumbas, 2023). While this skepticism may serve as self-protection, it also risks limiting opportunities for intimacy and social learning. Nevertheless, hope and optimism were evident among several participants, who expressed belief in their eventual recovery and the possibility of forming more authentic friendships. This finding aligns with longitudinal evidence that friendship quality during adolescence fosters resilience and future adaptation, even following periods of adversity (Gallardo et al., 2016; Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019).

Overall, the results of this study support and extend existing literature by illustrating how the hidden grief of friendship loss manifests in visible academic outcomes. Previous studies have largely examined friendship quality, peer influence, and friendship instability, but few have focused specifically on the subjective experiences of adolescents navigating friendship dissolution. The present findings show that friendship loss encompasses both emotional and academic domains, influencing motivation, concentration, performance, coping, and identity. These results underscore the multidimensional role of friendships in adolescence, where the absence of a peer can reverberate across domains of development (Neprily et al., 2025; Shen & French, 2023).

By situating adolescents' narratives within existing research, this study highlights the need to view academic decline not merely as a performance issue but as a potential indicator of unrecognized emotional struggles related to friendship loss. Recognizing the interdependence of

emotional and academic functioning can inform educators, counselors, and parents in supporting adolescents through relational transitions.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design, while providing depth and insight, limits generalizability to broader populations. The findings reflect the lived experiences of 24 adolescents in Argentina, and cultural factors may have influenced how participants perceived and described friendship loss. Second, the reliance on self-reported narratives may have introduced recall bias, as participants reflected on past experiences that could have been reshaped by time and emotion. Third, while efforts were made to ensure credibility through coding validation and reflexivity, researcher interpretation may have influenced theme development. Finally, the study did not systematically examine potential moderating variables such as socioeconomic status, family structure, or personality traits, which could shape the emotional and academic impact of friendship loss.

Future research should build on these findings by employing mixed-methods designs that integrate qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how friendship loss influences academic trajectories over time, and whether recovery or adaptation occurs. Comparative studies across cultural contexts would also be valuable, as friendship norms and coping strategies vary across societies. Additionally, future work should investigate protective factors such as school-based interventions, extracurricular activities, and digital communities that may mitigate the negative effects of friendship loss. Exploring differences by gender, age, and individual vulnerabilities such as ADHD or hearing impairments could provide more nuanced insights into how friendship loss interacts with other developmental factors.

Practitioners working with adolescents should recognize friendship loss as a legitimate source of grief with tangible academic consequences. Educators can be trained to identify signs of disengagement or declining performance as potential indicators of relational distress, rather than interpreting them solely as disinterest or laziness. School counselors should provide safe spaces for adolescents to share their experiences of friendship loss and to explore adaptive coping strategies. Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities and peer support programs may

help adolescents rebuild social networks and restore a sense of belonging. Parents should also be guided to acknowledge the seriousness of friendship loss and to offer emotional support that validates their adolescents' experiences. By integrating awareness of relational dynamics into academic support systems, practitioners can address the hidden grief of friendship loss and foster both emotional healing and academic resilience.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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