




Youth Perceptions of Friendship Loyalty: Uncovering Psychological Components Through Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore how adolescents and young adults perceive and construct the meaning of friendship loyalty, focusing on its emotional, behavioral, and psychological components.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative narrative design was employed, involving 21 participants aged 16–24 from Germany. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling to ensure diversity in age, gender, and educational background. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions addressing experiences of trust, betrayal, and support in friendships. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensiveness of the findings. Rigor was enhanced through peer debriefing, audit trails, and reflexive memo writing.

Findings: Analysis revealed four main themes: (1) Emotional Foundations of Loyalty (trust, emotional support, belonging, forgiveness, sacrifice, stability, shared joy), (2) Behavioral Expressions of Loyalty (presence in adversity, defense in absence, reciprocity, keeping commitments, protecting vulnerabilities, long-term continuity), (3) Challenges and Breaches of Loyalty (betrayal, neglect, conflicting loyalties, boundary violations, conditional loyalty), and (4) Psychological Outcomes of Loyalty (emotional security, self-worth, resilience, generalized trust, fear of loss, empathy, prosocial motivation). Participants' narratives emphasized loyalty as both a protective and fragile construct, capable of fostering resilience and self-worth while also producing vulnerability when breached.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that friendship loyalty among adolescents is a multidimensional phenomenon, deeply embedded in emotional ties, behavioral practices, and developmental outcomes. Loyalty acts as both a stabilizing force and a source of vulnerability, influencing identity, resilience, and trust. These insights underscore the importance of fostering loyal friendships through educational, parental, and community interventions, particularly in an era where digital interactions increasingly shape loyalty norms.

Keywords: Friendship loyalty; Adolescence; Narrative inquiry; Qualitative research

1. Introduction

Friendship has long been recognized as one of the most influential developmental contexts for children, adolescents, and young adults. It provides opportunities for intimacy, trust, loyalty, and the negotiation of social roles, which are all crucial for psychosocial well-being. Beyond companionship, friendships shape identity, buffer against stress, and provide a training ground for navigating complex interpersonal worlds (Graber et al., 2015; Lindsey, 2025). However, despite the centrality of friendships in adolescence, loyalty within these relationships remains a construct that is often taken for granted and insufficiently unpacked in terms of its psychological underpinnings. Loyalty is typically viewed as a moral or emotional commitment, yet it also entails cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that require deeper examination (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024).

During adolescence, friendships evolve from shared activities in childhood toward deeper connections grounded in trust, mutual disclosure, and emotional commitment. Loyalty plays a key role in this transformation, serving both as an anchor for relational stability and as a marker of the adolescent's developing moral reasoning (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024). Research on early adolescents has shown that qualities such as prosocial behavior, reciprocity, and dyadic synchrony contribute to friendship quality and help distinguish loyal from fragile relationships (Lindsey, 2025). Similarly, loyalty provides a sense of psychological safety that allows adolescents to disclose vulnerabilities and build enduring trust (Martin et al., 2017).

Moreover, loyalty is not merely an abstract value but a lived relational practice. Adolescents' narrative accounts often reveal that loyalty is experienced through forgiveness, presence during adversity, and defense against peer victimization (Bowker et al., 2024; Calhoun et al., 2014). The foundations of loyalty thus extend across emotional, behavioral, and moral dimensions, intertwining the developmental trajectory of self and social identity (Markovic & Bowker, 2017).

While loyalty can serve as a protective factor, the fragility of adolescent friendships is also well documented. Best friendships may dissolve due to betrayal, lack of reciprocity, or developmental transitions, often resulting in distress and emotional disruption (Bowker et al., 2024). Experiences of relational victimization or toxic friendship dynamics can exacerbate feelings of insecurity and impact stress regulation, as illustrated in adolescents' heightened

hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal responses during social challenges (Calhoun et al., 2014; Dryburgh et al., 2024). Such betrayals undermine loyalty and are often remembered as pivotal moments in youths' social lives, leaving lasting impressions on their capacity for trust.

Studies also highlight that loyalty is not always unidimensional. Adolescents may experience conflicting loyalties, particularly in larger peer networks or when navigating overlapping offline and online social spheres (Zalk et al., 2014). Shyness, withdrawal, or poor emotion identification skills can further complicate the ability to sustain loyal bonds (Lodder et al., 2015; Rowsell et al., 2013). These challenges suggest that loyalty is not simply a binary construct (loyal vs. disloyal) but a dynamic process influenced by personal characteristics, relational contexts, and broader social environments.

The quality of friendships, including their loyalty dimension, has direct implications for mental health and resilience. Studies show that supportive friendships enhance coping with stress and contribute to psychological resilience in both boys and girls (Graber et al., 2015). Conversely, poor friendship quality, including perceived disloyalty, is linked with higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Kharimah et al., 2018). Cross-cultural studies echo these findings: for example, research in Jakarta revealed that adolescents with high-quality friendships reported fewer symptoms of depression, underlining the universal importance of loyalty and support (Kharimah et al., 2018).

Family contexts also interact with friendship loyalty. Adolescents from intact families tend to report higher friendship quality and resilience compared with those from divorced or remarried families, although strong friendships can buffer against family-related stress (Saraswati & Suleeman, 2018). Responsive parenting has been identified as another antecedent, as it nurtures interpersonal communication skills that support loyal and high-quality peer connections (Mahirah & Tondok, 2024). Similarly, patterns of attachment and affiliation in early adolescence shape how loyalty is expressed and perceived in friendships (Martin et al., 2017).

The role of loyalty becomes particularly salient in friendships involving adolescents with additional challenges, such as chronic pain or ADHD. Friendships of adolescents with chronic pain tend to show unique dyadic differences, with loyalty often tested through the demands of caregiving, understanding, and patience (Forgeron et al., 2018). Follow-up research suggests that although such

friendships may experience instability, loyalty remains a critical factor in sustaining them over time (Forgeron et al., 2022). Likewise, adolescents with ADHD face greater risks of friendship difficulties, yet when loyalty is present, it acts as a compensatory mechanism that supports their social integration (Beristain & Wiener, 2020). These studies highlight that loyalty is not only a general developmental theme but also a compensatory resource in vulnerable populations.

Friendship loyalty cannot be fully understood without considering broader social and cultural shifts. The rise of digital platforms and social media has redefined how young people conceptualize loyalty. Online-exclusive and hybrid friendships present novel challenges to loyalty, with adolescents navigating blurred boundaries between virtual and offline interactions (Zalk et al., 2014). Perceptions of loyalty now include dimensions such as online presence, responsiveness, and defense against cyber gossip. Moreover, social media influencers and parasocial friendships reveal how loyalty extends beyond peers to imagined relational figures, linking consumer loyalty with perceived psychological well-being (Kim & Kim, 2022; Suwandi & Astuti, 2023).

Interestingly, research on commercial friendships in adult contexts demonstrates that loyalty, even when transactional, is tied to psychological perceptions of trust and commitment (Pamacheche & Duh, 2021). This suggests that loyalty in adolescence may also operate at both interpersonal and symbolic levels, with emotional and social capital intertwined. As cultural environments evolve, adolescents' narratives of friendship loyalty reflect broader norms of belonging, responsibility, and self-expression.

The formation of loyal friendships is also facilitated by interpersonal communication skills and emotion identification capacities. Adolescents who are better able to recognize emotions in themselves and others are more successful in maintaining loyal, supportive friendships (Rowell et al., 2013). Similarly, effective communication skills not only mediate the influence of parenting on friendship quality but also empower adolescents to negotiate conflicts and reinforce loyalty (Mahirah & Tondok, 2024). On the other hand, relational victimization, toxic dynamics, and poor emotion regulation skills can undermine loyalty and diminish friendship stability (Dryburgh et al., 2024).

Loyal friendships contribute directly to developmental outcomes such as resilience, prosocial behavior, and social competence. Adolescents who experience loyalty from peers are more likely to engage in cooperative and empathic

behaviors, reinforcing a cycle of mutual trust (Lindsey, 2025). Similarly, friendships characterized by loyalty foster coping mechanisms during stressful periods, enabling young people to build adaptive strategies for future challenges (Graber et al., 2015; Saraswati & Suleman, 2018). Conversely, disloyalty or friendship dissolution is often associated with emotional pain, feelings of betrayal, and even long-term maladjustment (Bowker et al., 2024).

From a developmental perspective, loyalty serves as both a marker of maturity and a foundation for later relational competencies. It reflects adolescents' increasing ability to balance self-interest with the needs of others, negotiate moral dilemmas, and commit to long-term social ties (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024; Markovic & Bowker, 2017). As such, examining loyalty not only sheds light on friendship dynamics but also provides insights into adolescents' broader psychological growth.

Despite the expanding body of literature, several gaps remain. Much existing research has focused on friendship quality in general, without systematically unpacking the psychological components that define loyalty specifically (Lodder et al., 2015; Qu et al., 2021). Furthermore, cultural differences in how loyalty is perceived and expressed are still underexplored, particularly in European contexts where shifting social norms and digitalization are reshaping youth friendships (Kim & Kim, 2022; Suwandi & Astuti, 2023).

While prior work has linked loyalty to resilience, coping, and well-being, few studies have directly engaged adolescents' narratives to uncover how they themselves construct and articulate the meaning of loyalty (Martin et al., 2017; Rowell et al., 2013). Narrative approaches can illuminate the lived experiences of loyalty, betrayal, and reconciliation in ways that quantitative measures alone cannot capture (Calhoun et al., 2014; Dryburgh et al., 2024). Additionally, while loyalty has been studied in vulnerable populations, the general adolescent population provides equally valuable insights into how loyalty functions as a psychological and relational resource (Beristain & Wiener, 2020; Forgeron et al., 2022).

Given these gaps, the present study seeks to investigate youth perceptions of friendship loyalty through narrative accounts, focusing on the psychological components that underpin this phenomenon.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore youth perceptions of friendship loyalty and the underlying psychological components associated with this construct. A narrative inquiry approach was adopted to capture participants' lived experiences, stories, and subjective meanings related to loyalty within their friendships.

The study sample consisted of 21 participants, all of whom were adolescents and young adults residing in Germany. Purposeful sampling was used to select individuals who could provide rich and diverse insights into the phenomenon under investigation. To ensure variation, participants were recruited from different educational and social backgrounds, including secondary school students, university students, and young professionals. The age range of the participants was between 16 and 24 years. Recruitment was carried out through community organizations, educational institutions, and youth networks. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in probing participants' unique perspectives while maintaining consistency across core questions. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on personal experiences of friendship, perceptions of loyalty and betrayal, and the emotional and social consequences of loyalty-related situations. Interviews were conducted in German, either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participant preference and logistical feasibility. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or significant insights were emerging from additional interviews. This ensured that

the data set was sufficiently comprehensive to address the research objectives.

2.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where necessary, translated into English for analytical purposes. To enhance accuracy, transcripts were reviewed against the audio recordings before analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and subthemes within the narratives.

The coding process was supported by NVivo 14 software, which facilitated systematic data organization, retrieval, and interpretation. Initial open coding was carried out to capture participants' expressions and key concepts. These codes were then clustered into broader categories and refined into overarching themes that reflected the psychological components of friendship loyalty. Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in reflexive memo-writing to ensure transparency in interpretive decisions.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, strategies such as peer debriefing among the research team and maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions were employed. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage, were strictly observed.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved 21 participants aged between 16 and 24 years ($M = 19.4$), all residing in Germany. Of these, 12 were female and 9 were male. In terms of educational background, 8 participants were secondary school students, 9 participants were university students, and 4 participants were young professionals in their early careers. Regarding place of residence, 13 participants lived in urban areas and 8 participants resided in semi-urban or rural settings. The sample also reflected some diversity in cultural background: while the majority (15 participants) were native Germans, 6 participants identified as having dual cultural heritage (e.g., German-Turkish, German-Polish, or German-Arab).

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts Derived from Narrative Interviews

Categories (Main Themes)	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Foundations of Loyalty	Trust as a Core Element	reliability; keeping secrets; honesty; dependability; consistency
	Emotional Support	being "there" in hard times; active listening; validation; empathy
	Sense of Belonging	acceptance; feeling understood; shared values; inclusion in group

	Forgiveness and Understanding	overlooking mistakes; second chances; conflict resolution; empathy for flaws
	Sacrifice for the Friend	prioritizing friend's needs; selflessness; putting others first; compromise; loyalty despite cost
2. Behavioral Expressions of Loyalty	Stability in Emotions	emotional constancy; calmness; predictability in reactions
	Shared Joy	celebrating achievements; happiness for friend; shared laughter
	Presence in Difficult Situations	showing up physically; availability; emergency help; support during crises
3. Challenges and Breaches of Loyalty	Defending Friend in Absence	standing up against gossip; correcting rumors; protecting reputation
	Reciprocity of Actions	returning favors; balanced giving and taking; mutual investment
	Keeping Commitments	following through on promises; punctuality; honoring words
	Protecting Vulnerabilities	safeguarding private stories; respecting confidentiality; discretion
	Long-Term Continuity	maintaining contact over time; consistent communication; remembering milestones
4. Psychological Outcomes of Loyalty	Betrayal Experiences	backstabbing; lying; gossiping; neglect
	Perceived Disloyalty	ignoring messages; choosing others over the friend; indifference
	Conflict of Loyalties	divided loyalties in group; torn between friends; competing expectations
	Boundary Violations	revealing secrets; overstepping privacy; lack of respect
	Conditional Loyalty	loyalty based on benefit; opportunism; transactional mindset
	Emotional Security	reduced anxiety; feeling safe; confidence in relationship
	Self-Worth and Identity	self-validation; sense of being valued; self-esteem boost
	Resilience in Adversity	coping with stress; motivation; encouragement in hardship
	Trust Generalization	trusting others; openness in relationships; optimistic outlook
	Fear of Loss	worry about betrayal; fear of abandonment; over-dependence
	Growth of Empathy	compassion; emotional awareness; perspective-taking
	Motivation for Prosocial Behavior	altruism; kindness; willingness to help others

Theme 1: Emotional Foundations of Loyalty

Trust as a Core Element. Participants consistently highlighted trust as the cornerstone of loyalty in friendship. Trust was described as reliability, keeping secrets, and the assurance that friends would remain consistent. One 18-year-old participant emphasized, *"I can tell her anything and I know it will stay between us. That's when I feel she is truly loyal."* For many, honesty and dependability were described as non-negotiable features of friendship.

Emotional Support. Beyond trust, loyalty was also expressed through emotional presence. Participants stressed that a loyal friend actively listens, validates feelings, and provides empathy in moments of struggle. As one interviewee explained, *"When I had problems at school, my best friend was always the first to listen, not judge, and remind me that I wasn't alone."* This sense of support was described as a central marker of psychological loyalty.

Sense of Belonging. Friendship loyalty was deeply tied to feeling accepted and understood. Participants reported that loyal friends created an environment where they could "just be themselves" without fear of exclusion. A 21-year-old student remarked, *"Loyalty means you don't have to pretend. My friends accept me the way I am, and that makes me feel like I truly belong."* Shared values and inclusion in social circles were often mentioned as evidence of this bond.

Forgiveness and Understanding. Many participants associated loyalty with the willingness to forgive mistakes and offer second chances. Conflicts were seen as inevitable, but loyalty meant "not giving up on the friendship." As one participant put it, *"Even when I messed up, she gave me another chance. That's when I realized how loyal she was."* This readiness to reconcile and understand flaws highlighted loyalty as a forgiving stance toward imperfection.

Sacrifice for the Friend. Youth narratives also revealed that sacrifice, such as prioritizing a friend's needs or compromising personal desires, was perceived as proof of loyalty. One young professional stated, *"He skipped his own plans just to be with me when I needed help. That's loyalty for me — choosing the friend even when it costs something."* Such gestures reinforced the emotional depth of their bonds.

Stability in Emotions. Some participants emphasized the importance of emotional constancy and predictability in reactions as part of loyalty. One noted, *"I know how she will react, and she never suddenly changes her attitude toward me. That makes me feel secure."* Stability provided a sense of calmness that enhanced the trust in the friendship.

Shared Joy. Finally, loyalty was also described through shared joy and positive emotions. Celebrating achievements and laughing together were considered essential. A 17-year-old explained, *"She was as happy as I was when I passed the*

exam. That's loyalty too — sharing in the good times, not just the bad.”

Theme 2: Behavioral Expressions of Loyalty

Presence in Difficult Situations. A loyal friend was often defined as one who “shows up” in moments of crisis. As one participant remarked, “When my grandfather died, he came right away without me even asking. That's loyalty in action.” Such availability during hardships was a recurring marker of true friendship.

Defending Friend in Absence. Several participants shared experiences where they felt loyalty most strongly when a friend defended their reputation in their absence. One explained, “I heard later that she stood up for me when people were talking badly. That meant more than anything.” Protecting a friend's name was equated with standing against disloyalty.

Reciprocity of Actions. Loyalty was also understood in terms of balanced reciprocity. Participants valued friendships where giving and taking were mutual, rather than one-sided. A 19-year-old reflected, “It's not always me helping, and not always her. We both invest, and that balance shows loyalty.”

Keeping Commitments. Keeping promises was repeatedly cited as a behavioral marker of loyalty. One participant said, “If you say you'll be there, you have to be there. Otherwise, it doesn't feel loyal.” For youth, loyalty meant honoring words and commitments over time.

Protecting Vulnerabilities. Safeguarding private stories and respecting boundaries emerged as another key aspect. A participant emphasized, “I once shared something really personal, and she never told anyone. That's why I trust her loyalty completely.” Protecting vulnerabilities was central to maintaining a loyal image.

Long-Term Continuity. Finally, loyalty was expressed through the ability to sustain contact over time. Remembering birthdays, keeping communication consistent, and showing continuity were all examples. One participant commented, “Even when we don't meet often, she still texts and remembers small things. That shows loyalty doesn't fade.”

Theme 3: Challenges and Breaches of Loyalty

Betrayal Experiences. Youth also spoke vividly about experiences of betrayal, often marked by lying, gossip, or neglect. A participant shared, “I told her something in confidence, and the next day the whole class knew. That betrayal broke the friendship.” Such moments were described as deeply painful breaches.

Perceived Disloyalty. Ignoring messages, showing indifference, or prioritizing other people was interpreted as disloyalty. As one interviewee remarked, “It felt like I wasn't important anymore when she chose new friends over me.” Perceived neglect was one of the most common sources of hurt.

Conflict of Loyalties. Several participants described situations where loyalty was complicated by group dynamics, leading to “torn loyalties.” One participant noted, “I didn't know whether to stand by my old friend or my new group. In the end, someone felt betrayed.” Such dilemmas highlighted the complexity of loyalty decisions.

Boundary Violations. Crossing privacy lines or exposing secrets was consistently identified as disloyal behavior. A participant reflected, “When someone ignores your boundaries, you can't see them as loyal anymore.” These violations weakened the perception of loyalty significantly.

Conditional Loyalty. Finally, conditional loyalty based on benefits or opportunism was criticized by participants. As one young adult explained, “He was only loyal when he needed something. That's not real loyalty, that's using.” This transactional mindset was perceived as incompatible with genuine friendship.

Theme 4: Psychological Outcomes of Loyalty

Emotional Security. Participants reported that loyalty in friendships provided a deep sense of emotional safety. One said, “I don't worry about being left alone, because I know she has my back.” This emotional security reduced anxiety and reinforced confidence in relationships.

Self-Worth and Identity. Loyal friendships were often tied to self-validation and enhanced self-esteem. A participant explained, “Her loyalty makes me feel like I matter. It shapes who I am.” Being valued by a loyal friend contributed positively to identity development.

Resilience in Adversity. Youth described how loyal friendships strengthened their resilience in the face of difficulties. One reflected, “When I failed my exam, my friend's loyalty gave me the courage to try again.” Loyalty was seen as a motivating and protective resource.

Trust Generalization. Experiences of loyal friendships also influenced participants' trust in broader social interactions. A participant shared, “Because my best friend is so loyal, I believe others can be trustworthy too.” This effect extended beyond individual relationships to social outlooks.

Fear of Loss. At the same time, loyalty also generated a fear of betrayal or abandonment. One youth expressed,

“Sometimes I’m scared she’ll leave, and I’ll lose that loyalty. It makes me cling more.” This highlights the ambivalence between security and dependency.

Growth of Empathy. Friendship loyalty was described as fostering compassion and perspective-taking. *“Being loyal means I also try to understand how others feel,”* said one participant, emphasizing the empathic growth linked to loyalty.

Motivation for Prosocial Behavior. Finally, participants reported that experiencing loyalty inspired them to act kindly toward others. One remarked, *“Her loyalty makes me want to be a better person, not just for her but for others too.”* Prosocial motivation was seen as a psychological ripple effect of loyalty.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined youth perceptions of friendship loyalty, uncovering the psychological components that shape how adolescents and young adults narrate their experiences of trust, support, betrayal, and belonging. Through thematic analysis of 21 participants’ narratives, four main themes emerged: emotional foundations of loyalty, behavioral expressions of loyalty, challenges and breaches of loyalty, and psychological outcomes of loyalty. Together, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how loyalty is constructed in adolescent friendships, demonstrating that loyalty is not simply a static trait of the relationship but a dynamic process encompassing emotions, behaviors, and developmental outcomes.

Participants emphasized that loyalty is grounded in trust, emotional support, belonging, forgiveness, sacrifice, stability, and shared joy. This aligns with existing literature that identifies loyalty as one of the core markers of high-quality adolescent friendships (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024; Martin et al., 2017). Trust has been described as the foundation upon which loyalty is built, as it enables disclosure, reliability, and the expectation of reciprocity (Lindsey, 2025). In the present findings, adolescents frequently highlighted keeping secrets, honesty, and dependability as the most salient aspects of loyalty. These results echo prior research showing that friendships characterized by openness and mutual reliability enhance resilience and coping (Graber et al., 2015).

Furthermore, participants’ emphasis on forgiveness and second chances reflects developmental theories suggesting that adolescents increasingly integrate moral reasoning into

friendships, balancing individual needs with empathy for the other (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024). Past studies have noted that loyal friendships often involve tolerance for mistakes and a willingness to repair ruptures (Bowker et al., 2024). Similarly, sacrifice was narrated as a central feature, resonating with studies showing that loyalty entails prioritizing the friend’s needs and commitments, even at a cost to oneself (Martin et al., 2017). These accounts suggest that loyalty functions not only as an affective bond but also as a moral compass guiding relational decisions.

Participants in this study highlighted presence during adversity, defense in absence, reciprocity, keeping commitments, protecting vulnerabilities, and maintaining long-term contact as behavioral manifestations of loyalty. These results build upon prior research showing that loyalty is observable in both verbal and nonverbal actions (Calhoun et al., 2014; Dryburgh et al., 2024). In particular, standing up for friends when they are absent reflects what has been termed “protective loyalty,” which has been linked with friendship stability over time (Forgeron et al., 2022). Likewise, reciprocity in actions was perceived as a hallmark of loyalty, mirroring findings that mutual investment predicts friendship satisfaction and adjustment (Markovic & Bowker, 2017).

Keeping commitments emerged as another strong indicator of loyalty. This is consistent with research on friendship stability among vulnerable populations, such as adolescents with chronic pain, where loyalty often manifests through sustained commitment despite obstacles (Forgeron et al., 2018). Moreover, the emphasis on protecting vulnerabilities mirrors findings in studies of adolescents with ADHD, where friends who respect privacy and provide emotional safety are perceived as exceptionally loyal (Beristain & Wiener, 2020). Collectively, these findings underscore that loyalty is enacted through repeated behaviors that signal dependability and advocacy, confirming that loyalty is a lived practice rather than a mere sentiment.

Participants’ narratives also revealed loyalty’s fragility. Betrayal, neglect, boundary violations, and conditional loyalty were consistently described as damaging to the friendship bond. These accounts corroborate studies of best friendship dissolution, which show that betrayal or failure to uphold loyalty can trigger both immediate distress and long-term difficulties in trust (Bowker et al., 2024). Adolescents in the current study articulated betrayal as one of the most painful social experiences, echoing Calhoun and colleagues’

findings that relational victimization activates heightened stress responses in adolescents (Calhoun et al., 2014).

Conflict of loyalties within peer groups was another common theme. This reflects Zalk's study on online and offline friendship networks, which demonstrated that adolescents often feel torn between competing allegiances when navigating complex social environments (Zalk et al., 2014). Similarly, boundary violations such as disclosing private information were viewed as forms of disloyalty, consistent with research on toxic friendships that identifies breaches of confidentiality as markers of relational victimization (Dryburgh et al., 2024). Finally, conditional loyalty based on benefits was particularly criticized, resonating with research on commercial friendships, where loyalty becomes transactional and therefore undermines genuine relational bonds (Pamacheche & Duh, 2021).

The findings also revealed that loyalty fosters psychological security, enhances self-worth, strengthens resilience, generalizes trust to broader contexts, and motivates prosocial behavior. Such outcomes are consistent with a large body of literature linking friendship quality with psychosocial well-being. For example, loyal friendships have been shown to promote resilience and adaptive coping (Graber et al., 2015; Saraswati & Suleman, 2018), while betrayal and disloyalty can exacerbate loneliness and maladjustment (Kharimah et al., 2018; Lodder et al., 2015).

The current results also suggest that loyalty enhances adolescents' identity development, as participants frequently described feeling valued and important through loyal friendships. This resonates with research showing that affiliation and attachment processes in adolescence contribute to identity consolidation (Martin et al., 2017). Moreover, loyalty appears to have ripple effects on broader trust and empathy, reinforcing the notion that loyal friendships cultivate prosocial orientations (Lindsey, 2025; Rowsell et al., 2013). In addition, the fear of losing loyalty was expressed as a double-edged sword, reflecting both the security and vulnerability that loyal friendships entail. Such ambivalence has been highlighted in studies on the dissolution of friendships, which show that anticipation of loss can itself be stressful (Bowker et al., 2024).

This study's findings should also be understood in the context of cultural and social shifts that redefine loyalty. Adolescents in the digital age increasingly evaluate loyalty through online presence, responsiveness, and defense in virtual spaces. This observation aligns with research documenting the role of social media in reshaping perceptions of friendship and loyalty (Suwandi & Astuti,

2023; Zalk et al., 2014). Moreover, the broader literature on social media influencers demonstrates how loyalty can extend beyond peers to symbolic figures, linking loyalty with perceived psychological well-being (Kim & Kim, 2022). Such findings underscore the need to consider both traditional and digital dimensions of loyalty in contemporary adolescence.

Cross-cultural studies further demonstrate variability in how loyalty is experienced. For example, research in Indonesia revealed that resilient adolescents from intact families reported higher friendship quality, pointing to the buffering role of loyalty in contexts of family stress (Saraswati & Suleman, 2018). Similarly, studies in Jakarta found associations between friendship quality, loyalty, and lower depressive symptoms (Kharimah et al., 2018). These cultural insights align with the present study's findings that loyalty enhances emotional security and self-worth, reinforcing its universality while also highlighting its contextual nuances.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 21 participants, while adequate for qualitative inquiry, limits the generalizability of the findings. The narratives reflect the perspectives of German adolescents and young adults, which may not fully capture cultural variations in the meaning and expression of loyalty. Second, although the study relied on semi-structured interviews, self-reported narratives may be subject to social desirability bias, with participants emphasizing positive aspects of loyalty or downplaying instances of disloyalty. Third, while thematic analysis allowed for rich interpretation, researcher subjectivity inevitably influenced the coding and categorization processes. Although strategies such as peer debriefing and audit trails were employed, complete elimination of interpretive bias is not possible. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents examination of how loyalty evolves over time, leaving questions about the stability and transformation of loyalty unanswered.

Future research should expand on this study in several ways. First, cross-cultural comparative studies would help clarify whether the psychological components of loyalty identified here are universal or culturally specific. For example, loyalty may be conceptualized differently in collectivist versus individualist societies. Second, longitudinal designs could provide insight into the developmental trajectory of loyalty, capturing how loyalty emerges, strengthens, or dissolves as friendships progress from adolescence into adulthood. Third, incorporating

digital ethnographic methods would shed light on how loyalty operates in online spaces, where interactions are increasingly central to youth friendships. Fourth, exploring loyalty in vulnerable populations, such as youth with disabilities, chronic illness, or minority status, would further illuminate loyalty's role as a compensatory and protective factor. Finally, integrating mixed-methods approaches could triangulate qualitative narratives with quantitative measures, providing a more holistic picture of loyalty's impact on psychosocial outcomes.

The findings also carry practical implications for educators, parents, and practitioners. Schools and community organizations could design interventions that explicitly promote loyalty as a component of social-emotional learning, teaching skills such as trust-building, conflict resolution, and reciprocity. Counselors and youth workers should encourage adolescents to reflect on loyalty not only as an expectation but as an active practice, empowering them to navigate challenges such as betrayal or conflicting allegiances. Parents can foster loyalty by modeling trustworthiness and responsiveness, thereby equipping adolescents with interpersonal communication skills that transfer into peer contexts. Finally, practitioners designing digital literacy programs should address the complexities of loyalty in online friendships, helping adolescents recognize both the opportunities and risks of virtual loyalty. By emphasizing loyalty as a psychological and social resource, these practices can contribute to healthier and more resilient youth friendships.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias and recall inaccuracies. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, limiting the ability to determine the directionality of relationships between time perspective, perceived social support, and hope. The sample was restricted to university students in Tehran, which may reduce the generalizability of findings to other age groups, educational contexts, or cultural settings. Additionally, while the statistical models demonstrated good fit, the exclusion of potential moderating variables such as personality traits, academic performance, or mental health status may have omitted important nuances in the observed relationships.

Longitudinal studies are needed to establish causal pathways between time perspective, perceived social support, and hope. Future work could explore potential

moderators, including emotional intelligence, coping styles, and resilience, to better understand how these factors shape the observed relationships. Comparative studies across cultural contexts would help determine the universality of the proposed model. Experimental interventions that manipulate temporal orientation or enhance perceived social support could provide valuable evidence of their causal effects on hope. Finally, incorporating qualitative methods could yield richer insights into how students personally interpret and integrate time perspectives and social support into their motivational systems.

Universities should consider implementing programs that simultaneously address students' time perspectives and social support networks. Time perspective training can be incorporated into counseling services to help students cultivate a more balanced temporal profile. Peer mentoring, family engagement initiatives, and faculty–student interaction programs could enhance perceived social support. Integrating goal-setting workshops with collaborative group activities may further strengthen both agency and pathways thinking. These interventions should be tailored to the developmental and cultural needs of students, ensuring relevance and sustainability.

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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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