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Loneliness Among Women in Emerging Adulthood: The Roles of Relational Expectations, Social Comparison, and Perceived Belonging

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the roles of relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging in loneliness among women in emerging adulthood.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive-correlational, cross-sectional study was conducted among 384 women aged 18 to 29 years residing in Tabriz, Iran, in 2026. Participants were recruited from educational, vocational, cultural, and community-based settings using a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a relational expectations questionnaire, the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure, and the General Belongingness Scale. Data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine bivariate relationships among the main variables, and multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the unique and combined contributions of relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging to loneliness. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Findings: Loneliness was positively correlated with relational expectations ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and social comparison ($r = .48$, $p < .001$), whereas it was negatively correlated with perceived belonging ($r = -.63$, $p < .001$). The multiple regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 380) = 124.69$, $p < .001$, and explained 49.6% of the variance in loneliness ($R^2 = .496$, adjusted $R^2 = .492$). Relational expectations significantly and positively predicted loneliness ($\beta = .222$, $p < .001$), as did social comparison ($\beta = .228$, $p < .001$). Perceived belonging significantly and negatively predicted loneliness ($\beta = -.471$, $p < .001$) and emerged as the strongest independent predictor in the model.

Conclusion: Loneliness among women in emerging adulthood appears to be meaningfully associated with interpersonal standards, comparative self-evaluation, and subjective social inclusion, with perceived belonging representing the strongest protective factor.

Keywords: *Loneliness; Emerging Adulthood; Women; Relational Expectations; Social Comparison; Perceived Belonging*

1. Introduction

Loneliness has increasingly been recognized as a significant psychosocial concern across the life course, but its meaning, determinants, and consequences vary considerably according to developmental stage, gender, relational context, and social environment. Rather than reflecting simple physical isolation, loneliness is generally understood as a subjective discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships, encompassing perceived insufficiency in emotional intimacy, companionship, social integration, and interpersonal responsiveness. This distinction is critical because individuals may experience loneliness even when embedded within apparently active social networks, while others may live alone without experiencing substantial loneliness. Contemporary research has further emphasized that loneliness is dynamic rather than static, with meaningful variation across age, developmental transitions, social roles, and life circumstances (Qiu et al., 2026; Reine et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2026). The growing recognition of loneliness as a multidimensional and developmentally contingent phenomenon has therefore shifted attention from purely structural indicators of social contact toward subjective evaluations of relationship quality, social comparison, inclusion, and belonging.

Emerging adulthood represents a particularly important developmental context in which to examine loneliness. This period, generally situated between late adolescence and the late twenties, is characterized by intensive exploration of identity, education, employment, intimacy, autonomy, and future life directions. Emerging adults often experience instability in residential arrangements, peer networks, romantic relationships, and educational or occupational roles, making their social environments highly fluid. Research on conceptions of adulthood has shown that emerging adults do not necessarily define adulthood solely through age or formal role transitions, but often through psychological markers such as independence, responsibility, decision-making, and self-sufficiency (Kuang et al., 2022). These developmental expectations can increase sensitivity to perceived discrepancies between one's actual social position and an idealized image of adult connectedness, intimacy, and social competence. Longitudinal evidence further suggests that loneliness in emerging adulthood follows heterogeneous developmental trajectories rather than a single uniform pattern, with differences in worldview and psychosocial orientation contributing to how loneliness changes over time (Zhou et al., 2026). This makes emerging adulthood a particularly relevant period for investigating interpersonal and cognitive mechanisms associated with loneliness.

Although much of the loneliness literature has historically focused on older populations, evidence from university and young adult samples suggests that loneliness is also highly salient earlier in adulthood. Among university students, loneliness has been linked to psychological stress and has shown meaningful gender-related patterns in the way social and emotional difficulties are experienced (Iwasaki et al., 2025). Loneliness has also been associated with maladaptive patterns of digital engagement, with research indicating reciprocal relationships between loneliness, life satisfaction, and problematic Instagram use among university students (Rogowska & Libera, 2022). These findings are especially important in emerging adulthood, when online and offline social environments are closely intertwined and individuals are repeatedly exposed to curated representations of other people's friendships, intimate relationships, achievements, social activities, and lifestyles. Such exposure may intensify evaluative processes and create conditions in which dissatisfaction with one's own social relationships becomes increasingly salient. At the same time, evidence on young adults indicates that the expression of love and affection within close relationships is associated with loneliness, further underscoring the importance of relational quality rather than mere social contact (Ryś et al., 2023).

The experience of loneliness among women requires particular attention because gender can influence both the experience and expression of loneliness. Recent scholarship has cautioned against treating gender differences in loneliness as simple mean-level contrasts between men and women and instead argues for more context-sensitive approaches that consider social roles, norms, expectations, relational structures, and opportunities for connection (Barreto et al., 2025). Gendered expectations may affect how women evaluate intimacy, reciprocity, emotional availability, and relationship quality, as well as how acceptable it feels to disclose loneliness. Research on gender and community stigma has demonstrated that the willingness to reveal loneliness is shaped by the interaction between gender and perceived social norms, suggesting that loneliness is not experienced independently of social evaluation (Langenkamp & Schobin, 2024). Similarly, stigma surrounding loneliness can influence whether individuals interpret loneliness as a personal deficiency, social failure, or temporary emotional state, thereby affecting both disclosure and coping (Barreto et al., 2022). For women in emerging adulthood, these processes may be

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particularly relevant because this developmental period often carries strong social expectations regarding friendship networks, romantic involvement, emotional competence, and social belonging.

Gendered social expectations surrounding relationships may also make relational expectations especially important in understanding loneliness among young women. Relational expectations refer to the standards individuals hold regarding how close relationships should function, including expectations of responsiveness, emotional support, reciprocity, intimacy, reliability, validation, and mutual understanding. When expectations are high but perceived relationship quality does not meet those standards, feelings of disconnection may intensify. This expectation-reality discrepancy is central to cognitive conceptualizations of loneliness because it shifts the focus from the objective number of relationships to whether those relationships satisfy personally meaningful standards. Evidence from qualitative work among women experiencing perinatal depression illustrates how loneliness can persist even in the presence of partners, family members, or social contacts when individuals feel emotionally unseen, misunderstood, unsupported, or unable to communicate their experiences (Adlington et al., 2023). Although perinatal women differ developmentally from emerging adults, such findings reinforce the broader principle that loneliness often reflects unmet relational needs rather than simple absence of contact.

The importance of relational expectations is further supported by evidence showing that loneliness varies across major relational transitions and social roles. Widowhood research has demonstrated that loneliness is strongly connected to the loss of emotionally meaningful relational functions and cannot be adequately explained by marital status alone (Vedder et al., 2024). Likewise, life-course studies among women have shown that family trajectories and educational histories are associated with later-life loneliness, indicating that relational experiences accumulate and remain embedded within broader social pathways (Fernández-Carro & Gumà, 2022). These findings support the proposition that loneliness is closely linked to how individuals interpret the adequacy of their social and intimate relationships in relation to their expectations. Even though many existing studies involve older women, the underlying mechanism is relevant to emerging adulthood, when individuals are actively forming expectations about friendship, intimacy, partnership, and adult social life.

Social comparison constitutes another potentially important process in the development of loneliness. Social comparison involves evaluating one's own abilities, achievements, appearance, relationships, social position, or life progress in relation to others. During emerging adulthood, when life pathways become increasingly individualized and less synchronized, comparison with peers may become particularly salient. Differences in romantic status, educational progress, employment, independence, financial autonomy, and social popularity may create repeated opportunities for upward comparison. When individuals perceive others as more socially connected, more valued, or more successful in forming intimate relationships, such comparisons may reinforce feelings of inadequacy or exclusion. This process may be amplified in digital environments, where selective self-presentation exposes individuals to idealized portrayals of other people's lives (Rogowska & Libera, 2022). Social comparison may therefore contribute to loneliness not only by altering self-evaluation but also by changing the perceived standard against which one's own relationships are judged.

The role of comparison is also consistent with broader evidence demonstrating that loneliness is influenced by psychological interpretations rather than solely by objective social circumstances. For example, research on leadership and loneliness has shown that the effects of social position on loneliness may differ by gender, suggesting that status, role expectations, and subjective experience can interact in complex ways (Ong, 2022). In another line of work, trauma-related processes and sex-specific patterns of amygdala reactivity have been associated with loneliness, highlighting that perceived isolation may be embedded within broader emotional and neurobiological systems of threat sensitivity and social evaluation (Morr et al., 2022). These findings suggest that loneliness emerges from an interplay between external social conditions and internal interpretive processes. Social comparison may represent one such interpretive mechanism through which individuals evaluate whether they are sufficiently connected, accepted, or socially successful relative to meaningful others.

Perceived belonging is likely to be especially central within this framework. Belonging refers to the subjective sense of being accepted, valued, included, and socially integrated within meaningful interpersonal contexts. Unlike social network size or frequency of contact, perceived belonging reflects the psychological experience of fitting in and being recognized as a legitimate member of a social environment. Its relevance to loneliness is evident across diverse populations. Studies of social environments in middle-aged and older adults have shown that supportive

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contexts and meaningful social embeddedness are associated with lower loneliness (Murtazina et al., 2025). Research among Black older adults has similarly highlighted the ways family devotion, caregiving expectations, social roles, and gendered relational presentations shape the experience of loneliness (Ojembe et al., 2025). Although these studies concern older populations, they emphasize a general principle that is highly applicable to emerging adulthood: people may have relationships and social obligations yet still experience low belonging if those interactions fail to provide acceptance, authenticity, or emotional connection.

The protective role of belonging is also supported by findings from research on social isolation and health. Loneliness has been linked to differences in healthy life expectancy and broader indicators of health and functioning (Yu & Wu, 2024). Other work has shown that loneliness may reduce disability-free life expectancy, suggesting that perceived social disconnection has implications extending well beyond transient emotional discomfort (Simon et al., 2026). Reviews of loneliness in aging likewise describe associations with psychological distress, physical health problems, cognitive difficulties, and reduced quality of life (Field, 2023; Rokach, 2023). Although the present study focuses on women in emerging adulthood rather than older adults, these findings underscore the importance of identifying psychosocial factors associated with loneliness before patterns of social disconnection become more persistent across the life course.

Longitudinal studies also demonstrate that gender differences in loneliness are not fixed but may vary with age, transitions, and available coping resources. Gender-specific trajectories have been observed in later adulthood, with men and women showing different patterns of loneliness over extended periods (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023). Other longitudinal evidence indicates that loneliness trajectories may change after age 65 in gender-specific ways (Chiu et al., 2025), while an eight-year longitudinal study has similarly identified differences between older men and women in the development of loneliness (Huang et al., 2026). Research on involuntary retirement further suggests that gender can shape the mechanisms through which vulnerability and coping resources influence loneliness (Shin et al., 2022). These studies collectively indicate that gender should not be conceptualized merely as a demographic control variable but as a contextual factor embedded in relational norms, resources, and expectations across different developmental periods.

The social context of loneliness also became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies of older men and women living alone or with others demonstrated that loneliness changed during the onset of the pandemic in ways that could not be explained simply by household composition (Wilson-Genderson et al., 2021). Comparative research involving older women living alone likewise illustrated how social isolation, vulnerability, and coping were shaped by cultural and migration-related circumstances (Öğütle et al., 2022). Methodological research comparing populations during the pandemic has further emphasized the importance of distinguishing loneliness from objective social isolation and examining both within their sociocultural settings (Reine et al., 2023). These observations are relevant to emerging adults because they reinforce the idea that subjective belonging, perceived relational adequacy, and interpersonal interpretation may be more psychologically consequential than the simple presence or absence of other people.

Recent research has also expanded methodological approaches to loneliness measurement. Repeated assessment of loneliness has been shown to provide incremental information beyond single-point evaluations, indicating that loneliness may fluctuate and that repeated measures can capture meaningful variation (Qiu et al., 2026). At the same time, technological approaches have demonstrated that perceived social isolation can be detected through characteristics of speech. Automatic speech analysis has been reported to predict loneliness, suggesting that loneliness may be reflected in subtle behavioral and communicative patterns that extend beyond self-report (Immel et al., 2025, 2026). Such findings strengthen the argument that loneliness is a pervasive psychosocial state with cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal manifestations.

Despite this expanding literature, important gaps remain. Much contemporary research still concentrates on older adults, health consequences, marital transitions, retirement, or pandemic-related isolation (Field, 2023; Rokach, 2023; Vedder et al., 2024). Other studies examine gender differences without sufficiently integrating interpersonal standards, social evaluative processes, and belonging within a single explanatory framework (Barreto et al., 2025). Yet these variables may be particularly salient in emerging adulthood, when women are navigating changing social roles, constructing adult identities, establishing intimate and peer relationships, and evaluating their progress relative to others. Furthermore, because loneliness can be stigmatized

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and socially difficult to disclose, especially where connectedness is treated as a marker of personal success, women may experience loneliness through a complex combination of unmet relational expectations, repeated social comparison, and insufficient perceived belonging (Barreto et al., 2022; Langenkamp & Schobin, 2024). Examining these factors simultaneously may therefore provide a more coherent account of why some women experience greater loneliness even when they are socially active.

Taken together, the literature suggests that loneliness in women during emerging adulthood is best understood as the product of intertwined relational, cognitive, and social-perceptual processes. Relational expectations may shape the standards against which interpersonal experiences are judged; social comparison may influence how individuals evaluate their own connectedness relative to peers; and perceived belonging may reflect the extent to which individuals feel genuinely accepted and socially integrated. Existing evidence indicates that loneliness is developmentally dynamic, gender-sensitive, psychologically consequential, and closely linked to the perceived quality of social relationships rather than their mere quantity (Barreto et al., 2025; Iwasaki et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2026). A focused examination of these constructs among women in emerging adulthood may therefore contribute to a more precise understanding of loneliness and help identify psychosocial processes that could become targets for preventive and supportive interventions.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to examine the roles of relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging in loneliness among women in emerging adulthood.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employed a descriptive-correlational, cross-sectional design to examine the relationships between relational expectations, social comparison, perceived belonging, and loneliness among women in emerging adulthood. The statistical population consisted of women aged 18 to 29 years residing in Tabriz, Iran, during 2026. A total of 384 women were included in the final sample. Participants were recruited through a multistage sampling procedure from universities, educational and vocational centers, cultural centers, and community-based settings located in different geographical areas of Tabriz to increase the socioeconomic and educational diversity of the sample. In the first stage, several districts of Tabriz were selected to provide adequate geographical coverage; in the second stage, accessible educational, cultural, and community centers within the selected districts were identified; and in the final stage, eligible women were invited to participate in the study. Eligibility criteria included being female, being between 18 and 29 years of age, residing in Tabriz for at least one year, having sufficient literacy to understand and complete the questionnaires, and providing informed consent for participation. Participants were excluded if they submitted substantially incomplete questionnaires, provided patterned or otherwise invalid responses, or reported circumstances that prevented reliable completion of the study measures. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their information would remain confidential, that questionnaires would be analyzed anonymously, and that they could discontinue participation at any stage without any adverse consequences. Questionnaires were administered either individually or in small groups in appropriate settings, and participants were provided with standardized instructions before completion. The questionnaires required approximately 25 to 35 minutes to complete. Before the main data collection, the questionnaire package was reviewed for clarity, comprehensibility, and appropriateness for women in the emerging-adulthood age range.

2.2. Measures

Loneliness was assessed using the UCLA Loneliness Scale, which measures the subjective experience of insufficient, unsatisfactory, or emotionally disconnected social relationships. The scale assesses the extent to which individuals experience feelings such as social isolation, lack of companionship, interpersonal disconnection, and dissatisfaction with the quality of their social relationships. Participants indicated the frequency with which each statement reflected their experiences using the response format specified by the instrument. Negatively and positively worded items were scored according to the scale's scoring instructions, with appropriate reverse scoring applied where necessary. Item scores were summed to generate an overall loneliness score, with higher scores indicating greater perceived loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale has been extensively employed in psychological and social research and is particularly

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appropriate for the present study because loneliness during emerging adulthood may arise despite the presence of relatively large social networks when individuals perceive their relationships as insufficiently close, supportive, or consistent with their interpersonal expectations. In the present study, the internal consistency of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha before inferential analyses were conducted.

Relational expectations were assessed using a relational expectations questionnaire designed to measure the standards, assumptions, and anticipated qualities that individuals hold regarding emotionally meaningful interpersonal relationships. The instrument focused on expectations concerning emotional availability, mutual understanding, reciprocity, responsiveness, reliability, intimacy, support, acceptance, and continuity within close relationships. Participants rated the degree to which each statement represented what they expected from important interpersonal relationships. Higher total scores represented stronger or more demanding relational expectations. The construct was conceptualized as the individual's internal standard regarding how close and meaningful relationships should function rather than as an objective indicator of the actual quality of existing relationships. This distinction was particularly important because loneliness may emerge when individuals perceive a discrepancy between the relationships they expect and the relationships they actually experience. Content adequacy and comprehensibility of the relational expectations measure were evaluated before its administration in the main study, and its internal consistency was subsequently examined using Cronbach's alpha. The total score was used in the principal statistical analyses so that the overall contribution of relational expectations to loneliness could be evaluated alongside social comparison and perceived belonging.

Social comparison was measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure, which assesses individual differences in the tendency to compare one's opinions, abilities, achievements, experiences, and social circumstances with those of other people. The instrument captures a general social comparison orientation rather than comparison within one specific life domain. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with statements describing attention to similarities and differences between themselves and others and their tendency to use information about other people as a reference point for evaluating their own circumstances. Items requiring reverse scoring were recoded according to the scoring protocol, and item scores were combined to obtain an overall social comparison score. Higher scores represented a stronger tendency to engage in social comparison. The inclusion of this construct was particularly relevant to women in emerging adulthood because this developmental period frequently involves evaluation of personal progress in domains such as intimate relationships, education, occupation, appearance, independence, and social status. Frequent comparison with peers may therefore influence the way individuals interpret the adequacy of their own relationships and social position. Reliability of the measure in the present sample was examined through Cronbach's alpha, with the total score entered into subsequent correlational and predictive analyses.

Perceived belonging was assessed using the General Belongingness Scale, which evaluates the extent to which individuals experience social acceptance, interpersonal connectedness, inclusion, and a subjective sense of fitting within their interpersonal environment. The instrument encompasses both positive experiences of belonging and experiences reflecting rejection, exclusion, or lack of social fit. Participants responded to each item according to the standard response format of the scale, and negatively worded items were reverse-scored before calculating the total score. Higher total scores indicated a stronger perceived sense of belonging. Perceived belonging was treated as a subjective psychological evaluation rather than as a simple measure of the number of available relationships because individuals may have numerous interpersonal contacts while still feeling excluded, misunderstood, or emotionally disconnected. This distinction was central to the conceptual framework of the present research, in which perceived belonging was expected to constitute an important protective factor against loneliness. The internal consistency of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha in the study sample. In addition to the principal psychological instruments, a demographic information form was used to collect basic participant characteristics, including age, educational status, employment status, marital status, and other general sociodemographic information relevant to the description of the sample.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Before conducting the principal statistical analyses, the dataset was screened for data-entry errors, missing values, invalid response patterns, and potential outliers. Descriptive

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statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values, were calculated as appropriate to characterize the participants and describe the distributions of loneliness, relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging. The internal consistency of the study instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Assumptions underlying parametric statistical procedures were examined before hypothesis testing. Normality of the principal study variables was evaluated through indices of skewness and kurtosis as well as inspection of their distributions. Linearity and homoscedasticity were assessed through graphical examination of residuals and scatterplots. Potential multicollinearity among predictor variables was evaluated using tolerance statistics and variance inflation factor values. Independence of residuals in the regression model was examined using the Durbin–Watson statistic, and standardized residuals and influence statistics were inspected to identify potentially influential observations.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the magnitude and direction of the bivariate relationships among relational expectations, social comparison, perceived belonging, and loneliness. Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the unique and combined contributions of relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging to loneliness. Loneliness was entered as the dependent variable, while relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging were entered as predictor variables. Standardized regression coefficients, unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, t statistics, significance levels, confidence intervals, the coefficient of determination, adjusted coefficient of determination, and the overall F statistic were examined to evaluate the predictive model. The relative magnitude of the standardized coefficients was used to compare the independent contribution of each predictor after controlling for the other variables included in the model. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$, and all statistical tests were conducted using two-tailed criteria. This analytical strategy allowed the study to evaluate not only whether relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging were individually associated with loneliness, but also the extent to which each construct uniquely explained differences in loneliness among women in emerging adulthood when the effects of the remaining predictors were statistically controlled.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 384 women in emerging adulthood were included in the final analyses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 23.74 years (SD = 3.21). Regarding educational status, 48 participants (12.5%) had a high-school diploma or lower level of education, 61 (15.9%) held an associate degree or were enrolled in an associate-level program, 191 (49.7%) held or were pursuing a bachelor's degree, and 84 (21.9%) held or were pursuing a master's degree or higher qualification. With respect to employment status, 151 participants (39.3%) were students, 108 (28.1%) were employed either full-time or part-time, 57 (14.8%) were simultaneously studying and working, and 68 (17.7%) were not employed at the time of data collection. In terms of marital status, 278 participants (72.4%) were single, 86 (22.4%) were married, and 20 (5.2%) were divorced, separated, or otherwise not currently living with a partner. Most participants reported living with their family of origin (n = 249, 64.8%), while 74 participants (19.3%) lived with a spouse or partner, 38 (9.9%) lived independently, and 23 (6.0%) lived in student accommodation or another shared residential arrangement. The distribution of participants across these demographic categories indicated adequate heterogeneity in educational, occupational, relational, and residential circumstances and therefore provided an appropriate basis for examining individual differences in loneliness, relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Distributional Characteristics, and Internal Consistency of the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Loneliness	45.82	10.67	21	73	0.29	-0.41	.91
Relational expectations	64.37	11.24	33	91	0.18	-0.36	.88
Social comparison	38.91	7.86	19	57	0.24	-0.28	.86
Perceived belonging	48.76	9.52	22	70	-0.31	-0.22	.90

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As shown in Table 1, the participants demonstrated substantial variability across all four principal study constructs. The mean loneliness score was 45.82 (SD = 10.67), indicating that experiences of loneliness varied considerably within the sample rather than clustering within a narrow range. Relational expectations had a mean score of 64.37 (SD = 11.24), suggesting meaningful individual differences in the standards and anticipated qualities participants associated with emotionally significant relationships. The mean social comparison score was 38.91 (SD = 7.86), reflecting moderate variability in participants' tendency to evaluate themselves in relation to others, whereas the mean perceived belonging score was 48.76 (SD = 9.52), indicating substantial variation in the degree to which participants experienced acceptance, inclusion, interpersonal connection, and social fit. Examination of skewness and kurtosis coefficients showed that all values were within acceptable limits for the use of parametric statistical procedures. Skewness values ranged from -0.31 to 0.29, and kurtosis values ranged from -0.41 to -0.22, providing no indication of substantial departure from normality. Internal consistency coefficients were also satisfactory to excellent for all measures. Cronbach's alpha was .91 for loneliness, .88 for relational expectations, .86 for social comparison, and .90 for perceived belonging. These coefficients indicated that the measures demonstrated adequate reliability in the present sample and supported the use of their total scores in subsequent correlational and regression analyses.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Loneliness, Relational Expectations, Social Comparison, and Perceived Belonging

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Loneliness	1			
2. Relational expectations	.42***	1		
3. Social comparison	.48***	.31***	1	
4. Perceived belonging	-.63***	-.27***	-.39***	1

The correlation analysis presented in Table 2 revealed statistically significant relationships among all principal variables. Loneliness was positively correlated with relational expectations ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants who reported stronger or more demanding expectations regarding emotionally meaningful relationships also tended to report greater loneliness. Loneliness was also positively and moderately associated with social comparison ($r = .48$, $p < .001$), suggesting that women who more frequently evaluated themselves, their circumstances, or their interpersonal experiences in comparison with others tended to experience higher levels of loneliness. The strongest bivariate association with loneliness was observed for perceived belonging, which was negatively correlated with loneliness at $r = -.63$ ($p < .001$). This relationship indicated that participants who experienced greater social acceptance, interpersonal integration, and subjective connectedness were substantially less likely to report loneliness. Significant relationships were also observed among the predictor variables. Relational expectations were positively associated with social comparison ($r = .31$, $p < .001$), suggesting that stronger interpersonal expectations were accompanied by a greater tendency to evaluate one's relational experiences against those of others. Relational expectations were negatively related to perceived belonging ($r = -.27$, $p < .001$), while social comparison was also negatively associated with perceived belonging ($r = -.39$, $p < .001$). Importantly, none of the correlations among the predictor variables approached levels commonly associated with problematic multicollinearity, supporting their simultaneous inclusion in the subsequent multiple regression model.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Loneliness from Relational Expectations, Social Comparison, and Perceived Belonging

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	47.286	4.126	—	11.46	<.001	39.17, 55.40	—	—
Relational expectations	0.211	0.038	.222	5.55	<.001	0.136, 0.286	.88	1.14
Social comparison	0.309	0.058	.228	5.33	<.001	0.195, 0.423	.80	1.25
Perceived belonging	-0.528	0.049	-.471	-10.78	<.001	-0.624, -0.432	.82	1.22

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Table 3 presents the unique predictive contributions of relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging to loneliness when the three predictors were entered simultaneously into the regression equation. All three variables emerged as statistically significant independent predictors of loneliness. Relational expectations positively predicted loneliness (B = 0.211, SE = 0.038, β = .222, t = 5.55, p < .001), indicating that, after controlling for social comparison and perceived belonging, a one-unit increase in relational expectations was associated with an estimated 0.211-unit increase in loneliness. The 95% confidence interval for this coefficient ranged from 0.136 to 0.286 and did not include zero, confirming the statistical robustness of the association. Social comparison also significantly and positively predicted loneliness (B = 0.309, SE = 0.058, β = .228, t = 5.33, p < .001), demonstrating that stronger tendencies toward interpersonal and self-evaluative comparison were associated with greater loneliness even after accounting for the other variables in the model. Perceived belonging was the strongest independent predictor of loneliness and showed a substantial negative association with the outcome (B = -0.528, SE = 0.049, β = -.471, t = -10.78, p < .001). Thus, higher perceived belonging was independently associated with markedly lower loneliness. Comparison of the standardized beta coefficients indicated that perceived belonging made the largest unique contribution to the prediction of loneliness, followed by social comparison and relational expectations. Multicollinearity diagnostics further supported the stability of the regression estimates. Tolerance values ranged from .80 to .88, while variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.14 to 1.25, substantially below conventional thresholds indicating multicollinearity. These findings therefore suggested that the three predictors represented related but sufficiently distinct psychological processes contributing independently to loneliness.

Table 4

Summary and Analysis of Variance for the Multiple Regression Model Predicting Loneliness

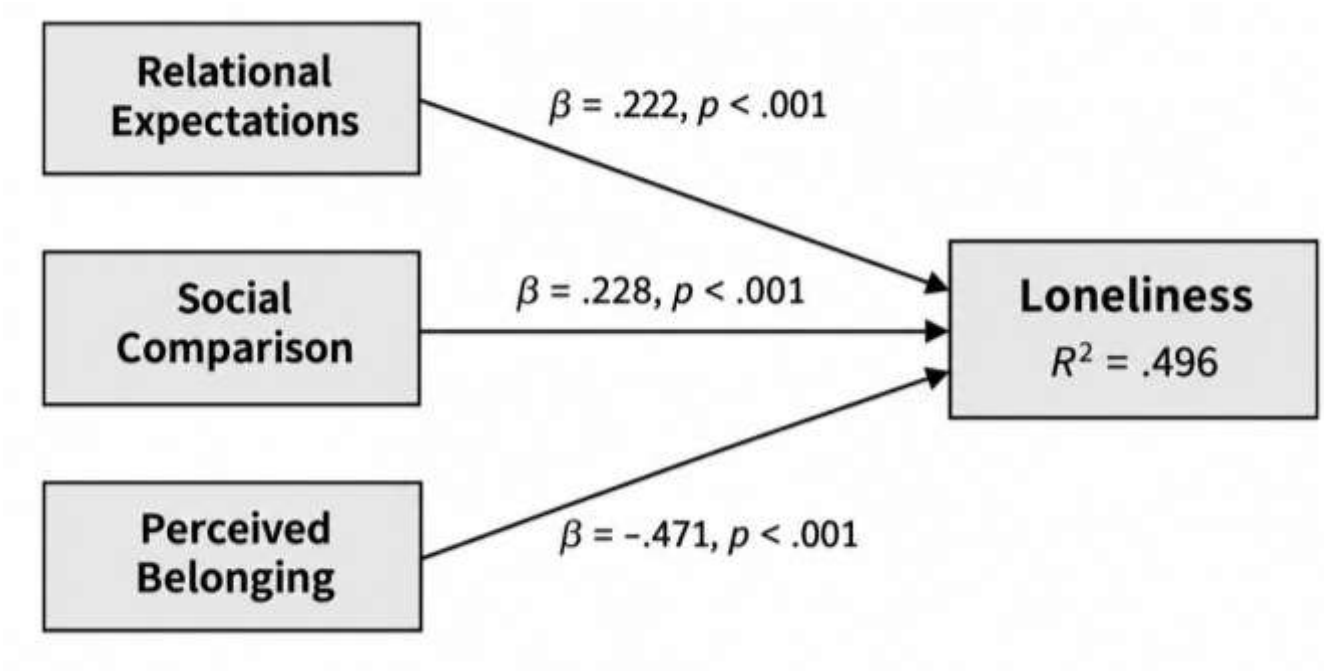
Model statistic	Value
R	.704
R^2	.496
Adjusted R^2	.492
Standard error of the estimate	7.61
F	124.69
df	3, 380
p	<.001
Durbin–Watson	1.96

The overall regression model was statistically significant, F(3, 380) = 124.69, p < .001, demonstrating that relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging jointly provided a meaningful explanation of individual differences in loneliness among women in emerging adulthood. The multiple correlation coefficient was R = .704, indicating a strong overall relationship between the set of predictors and loneliness. The model explained 49.6% of the variance in loneliness (R^2 = .496), while the adjusted coefficient of determination remained highly similar at .492, suggesting that the explanatory capacity of the model was not substantially inflated by the number of predictors included. Accordingly, approximately one-half of the observed variability in loneliness within the sample could be accounted for by differences in relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging. The standard error of the estimate was 7.61, indicating a substantial reduction in prediction error relative to the observed variability in loneliness scores. The Durbin–Watson statistic was 1.96, which was close to the theoretical value of 2.00 and therefore provided no evidence of problematic autocorrelation among the residuals. Examination of standardized residuals, scatterplots of predicted values against residuals, and influence statistics likewise indicated no serious violations of linearity, homoscedasticity, independence, or residual distribution assumptions. Collectively, these results demonstrated that the final regression model was both statistically significant and diagnostically acceptable and that the three interpersonal-cognitive variables jointly accounted for a substantial proportion of loneliness in the study population.

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Figure 1

Standardized Regression Model of the Relationships of Relational Expectations, Social Comparison, and Perceived Belonging with Loneliness Among Women in Emerging Adulthood



The pattern illustrated in Figure 1 summarizes the standardized effects obtained from the multiple regression analysis and demonstrates that loneliness was simultaneously associated with higher relational expectations, stronger social comparison orientation, and lower perceived belonging. The standardized path from relational expectations to loneliness was positive (β = .222, p < .001), indicating that stronger expectations concerning responsiveness, emotional availability, reciprocity, acceptance, and intimacy were associated with greater loneliness when the effects of the other variables were statistically controlled. The standardized path from social comparison to loneliness was also positive (β = .228, p < .001), showing that a greater tendency to assess one's relationships, social circumstances, achievements, or personal position relative to others independently contributed to loneliness. In contrast, perceived belonging exhibited a substantially stronger negative standardized association with loneliness (β = -.471, p < .001), confirming that subjective experiences of inclusion, social fit, connectedness, and acceptance were associated with lower levels of loneliness. The relative magnitude of the standardized paths demonstrates that perceived belonging constituted the most influential variable in the model, although both relational expectations and social comparison retained significant independent effects. Together, the three constructs explained 49.6% of the total variance in loneliness, indicating that loneliness among women in emerging adulthood was not associated with a single interpersonal factor but rather reflected the combined influence of expectations about relationships, evaluative comparison with others, and the extent to which individuals experienced themselves as socially connected and accepted.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the roles of relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging in loneliness among women in emerging adulthood. The findings showed that all three variables were significantly associated with loneliness and that, when considered simultaneously, they explained a substantial proportion of its variance. Relational expectations and social comparison were positively associated with loneliness, whereas perceived belonging was negatively associated with loneliness and emerged as the strongest predictor in the regression model. More specifically, women who reported stronger relational expectations tended to experience greater loneliness, women with a stronger tendency toward social comparison also reported higher loneliness, and women who

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experienced a stronger sense of belonging reported markedly lower loneliness. The combined model accounted for approximately half of the variance in loneliness, indicating that loneliness in emerging adulthood is meaningfully related to the way women evaluate their close relationships, compare themselves with others, and perceive their social inclusion. These findings are consistent with contemporary perspectives that conceptualize loneliness as a subjective and developmentally dynamic experience rather than a simple reflection of objective social isolation (Qiu et al., 2026; Reine et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2026).

The positive association between relational expectations and loneliness suggests that women who hold stronger expectations concerning emotional availability, reciprocity, intimacy, responsiveness, support, and relational reliability may be more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness when their actual relationships fail to correspond with these standards. This result is theoretically consistent with discrepancy-based conceptualizations of loneliness, in which loneliness emerges when a gap exists between desired and experienced social relationships. The present finding indicates that loneliness may therefore be intensified not only by inadequate social contact but also by a perceived mismatch between what individuals believe close relationships should provide and what they actually receive. This interpretation aligns with qualitative evidence showing that loneliness may persist even when social relationships are objectively present if those relationships are experienced as emotionally insufficient, invalidating, or lacking meaningful understanding. For example, women experiencing perinatal depression have described loneliness in terms of emotional disconnection, being misunderstood, and feeling unsupported despite the presence of partners or family members (Adlington et al., 2023). Similarly, research on expressions of love and intimacy in young adults has shown that the quality and form of emotional exchange within close relationships are closely linked to loneliness (Ryś et al., 2023). These findings support the current result by suggesting that loneliness is particularly sensitive to perceived deficiencies in the emotional functions of relationships.

The importance of relational expectations may be particularly pronounced during emerging adulthood because this developmental stage is characterized by active formation of intimate, social, educational, and occupational identities. Emerging adults often encounter strong implicit and explicit expectations regarding friendship quality, romantic partnership, emotional closeness, independence, and adult social competence. Research on emerging adulthood has demonstrated that young people conceptualize adulthood partly in terms of responsibility, autonomy, and personal maturity rather than simply chronological age (Kuang et al., 2022). At the same time, longitudinal research has shown that loneliness follows distinct developmental trajectories during emerging adulthood and is associated with broader patterns of worldview and psychosocial orientation (Zhou et al., 2026). It is therefore plausible that women who hold especially demanding expectations for emotionally meaningful relationships may become more attentive to perceived relational shortcomings, thereby increasing the likelihood that ordinary fluctuations in closeness or support are interpreted as evidence of social disconnection.

The observed relationship between relational expectations and loneliness is also compatible with broader life-course research emphasizing the significance of relationship quality and relational transitions. Studies of widowhood and other marital statuses indicate that loneliness is strongly influenced by the loss or absence of emotionally meaningful relational functions rather than by marital status alone (Vedder et al., 2024). Similarly, research among older women has shown that education and family trajectories across the life course are related to later loneliness, suggesting that expectations and experiences within intimate and family relationships accumulate over time (Fernández-Carro & Gumà, 2022). Although these studies focus on later adulthood, they support the broader proposition that loneliness is fundamentally linked to perceived adequacy of meaningful relationships. The present study extends this logic to emerging adulthood by showing that relational expectations may already be relevant to loneliness before more established adult roles and long-term partnerships have fully developed.

The finding that social comparison positively predicted loneliness also deserves careful attention. Women who reported stronger tendencies to compare themselves with others experienced higher levels of loneliness, even after relational expectations and perceived belonging were statistically controlled. This suggests that social comparison may independently contribute to loneliness by shaping how women interpret their social lives, relationships, and personal progress. During emerging adulthood, comparison targets are especially salient because peers often differ considerably in education, employment, intimate relationships, social participation, financial independence, appearance, and lifestyle. Individuals who frequently

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compare themselves with peers may therefore become more aware of perceived deficits in their own relationships or social position. This process may be especially pronounced when comparison is upward, involving peers perceived as more socially connected, more romantically successful, or more integrated into desirable social networks.

This interpretation is supported by evidence linking loneliness to digital social environments and evaluative processes. Research among university students has found a bidirectional association between loneliness and problematic Instagram use, suggesting that loneliness may both influence and be influenced by patterns of social media engagement (Rogowska & Libera, 2022). Social media platforms provide highly selective and often idealized representations of other people's relationships, social activities, achievements, and emotional lives, creating conditions in which upward social comparison can become frequent and psychologically consequential. In such environments, women who already tend toward social comparison may repeatedly encounter information that appears to confirm that others are more socially successful or more deeply connected. The present findings are therefore compatible with the possibility that social comparison magnifies perceived discrepancies between one's own relationships and perceived social norms, thereby increasing loneliness.

The positive effect of social comparison can also be understood in relation to gendered social expectations. Recent work has argued that gender and loneliness should not be examined solely through average differences between men and women but should instead be understood through the social roles, expectations, norms, and relational contexts that shape loneliness differently across groups (Barreto et al., 2025). Women may encounter particularly strong cultural expectations concerning emotional connectedness, friendship maintenance, relational competence, and intimacy. Consequently, social comparison may involve not only whether one has relationships, but whether those relationships appear sufficiently close, supportive, stable, or socially desirable. Evidence that loneliness disclosure is affected by gender and community stigma further suggests that individuals evaluate their loneliness within broader normative contexts (Langenkamp & Schobin, 2024). Similarly, loneliness stigma can cause people to interpret social disconnection as a personal inadequacy rather than a common psychosocial experience (Barreto et al., 2022). Such processes may intensify the emotional consequences of unfavorable social comparison.

The strongest finding in the present study concerned perceived belonging. Perceived belonging was negatively associated with loneliness and had the largest standardized regression coefficient among the three predictors. This result indicates that women who felt accepted, included, valued, and socially integrated experienced substantially lower loneliness. The finding is conceptually important because belonging concerns the subjective quality of social inclusion rather than the simple number of relationships or frequency of contact. An individual may participate in multiple social settings and maintain numerous interpersonal relationships yet still feel peripheral, misunderstood, or insufficiently connected. The present results therefore support the distinction between objective social contact and subjective social integration and indicate that belonging may represent a central psychological mechanism through which social environments influence loneliness.

This finding is consistent with research across multiple populations showing that the quality of social environments is strongly related to loneliness. Studies among middle-aged and older adults have demonstrated that supportive social environments and meaningful interpersonal integration are associated with lower loneliness (Murtazina et al., 2025). Qualitative work with Black older adults has similarly emphasized that family devotion, caregiving roles, and social expectations do not automatically protect against loneliness when individuals feel emotionally disconnected or constrained by gendered expectations (Ojembe et al., 2025). These studies reinforce the current conclusion that social embeddedness must be understood subjectively rather than structurally. A woman may be surrounded by family members, classmates, colleagues, or friends but still experience loneliness if she does not feel genuinely accepted or emotionally connected within those relationships.

The magnitude of the relationship between perceived belonging and loneliness also corresponds with broader evidence regarding the psychological and health significance of loneliness. Previous research has associated loneliness with reduced healthy life expectancy and broader disparities in health outcomes (Yu & Wu, 2024). Other studies suggest that loneliness is related to reduced disability-free life expectancy, highlighting its potential long-term implications for well-being and functioning (Simon et al., 2026). Reviews of loneliness among older adults have likewise documented associations with psychological distress, poorer physical health, cognitive difficulties, and diminished quality of life (Field, 2023; Rokach, 2023). Although the current sample consisted of

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women in emerging adulthood, the strong role of perceived belonging suggests that enhancing social connectedness earlier in the life course may be important for preventing persistent patterns of loneliness that could extend into subsequent developmental stages.

The present findings also resonate with studies demonstrating that loneliness is shaped by gendered developmental trajectories. Longitudinal research has shown that men and women may follow different patterns of loneliness over time (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023), while other studies have identified gender-specific changes in loneliness after later-life transitions (Chiu et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2026). Research on involuntary retirement has further demonstrated that gender can influence the mechanisms through which vulnerability and coping resources affect loneliness (Shin et al., 2022). Although these studies concern later adulthood, they support the broader conclusion that loneliness should be interpreted within developmental and gender-specific contexts. The present study contributes to this literature by demonstrating that among women in emerging adulthood, relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging operate as distinct but interconnected correlates of loneliness.

The findings can also be interpreted in light of evidence showing that loneliness is expressed through multiple psychological, behavioral, and even physiological pathways. Research on trauma and amygdala reactivity has identified sex-specific associations between loneliness and responses to threat signals, suggesting that perceived social isolation may interact with emotional processing systems (Morr et al., 2022). Recent studies using automatic speech analysis have also shown that loneliness can be predicted from speech-related features, indicating that perceived social isolation may become reflected in subtle patterns of communication and behavior (Immel et al., 2025, 2026). These studies reinforce the idea that loneliness is not merely a conscious self-evaluation but a broader psychosocial condition linked to cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal functioning.

The combined explanatory power of the regression model is also noteworthy. Relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging jointly explained nearly half of the variance in loneliness, suggesting that these constructs capture important but nonredundant dimensions of the experience. The modest correlations among the predictors further indicate that they are related without representing the same underlying process. Relational expectations appear to concern the standards individuals apply to interpersonal relationships, social comparison concerns how individuals evaluate themselves and their relationships relative to others, and perceived belonging concerns whether they experience themselves as accepted and included within their social environment. Together, these processes may form a psychologically coherent pathway in which demanding relational standards and frequent comparison heighten awareness of perceived interpersonal deficiencies, while strong belonging provides a protective counterbalance.

5. Conclusion

The study supports the importance of distinguishing loneliness from objective social isolation. Pandemic-related research has shown that changes in loneliness were not fully determined by whether individuals lived alone or with others (Wilson-Genderson et al., 2021). Comparative research on older women living alone has similarly demonstrated that social and cultural context influences how isolation is experienced (Öğütle et al., 2022). Methodological research has further emphasized that loneliness and social isolation should be conceptualized and measured separately (Reine et al., 2023). The current results are consistent with this distinction because perceived belonging, rather than structural indicators of contact, showed the strongest association with loneliness. This suggests that interventions focusing solely on increasing the number of social interactions may be insufficient if they do not also enhance the subjective quality, meaning, and inclusiveness of those interactions.

6. Limitations and Suggestions

The present findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not permit causal conclusions regarding whether relational expectations, social comparison, and perceived belonging lead to loneliness or whether loneliness itself influences these psychological processes. Second, all primary variables were assessed through self-report instruments, which may introduce common-method variance, social desirability effects, and response biases. Third, the sample was limited to women aged 18 to 29 years residing in Tabriz, and the findings may therefore not generalize to women from other regions, rural populations, different cultural contexts, or men in emerging adulthood. Fourth, although the model explained a substantial

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proportion of loneliness variance, other potentially relevant factors, including attachment style, depressive symptoms, anxiety, family functioning, romantic relationship quality, socioeconomic conditions, digital media use, and personality characteristics, were not included. Finally, the study examined overall scores for the principal constructs and did not distinguish between potentially different dimensions of relational expectations, forms of social comparison, or specific sources of belonging.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to clarify the temporal relationships among relational expectations, social comparison, perceived belonging, and loneliness across emerging adulthood. Repeated assessments would be particularly valuable for determining whether changes in relational expectations or belonging precede changes in loneliness or whether reciprocal processes are involved. Future research could also test mediational and moderated models, for example examining whether perceived belonging mediates the relationship between social comparison and loneliness or whether relational expectations strengthen the effect of unfavorable social comparison. Including men and participants from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds would help determine whether the observed relationships are gender-specific or culturally dependent. Researchers should also distinguish between upward and downward social comparison, offline and online comparison, emotional and social loneliness, and different domains of belonging such as family, friendship, romantic relationships, university, workplace, and community belonging. Mixed-methods research could further enrich understanding by combining standardized measures with interviews exploring how women themselves interpret loneliness and unmet relational needs.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that programs designed to reduce loneliness among women in emerging adulthood should move beyond increasing the frequency of social contact and instead address the quality and meaning of interpersonal experiences. Counseling and psychoeducational interventions may benefit from helping young women identify rigid or unrealistic relational expectations, develop more flexible interpretations of interpersonal difficulties, and distinguish desirable relationship standards from perfectionistic expectations. Interventions should also target maladaptive social comparison, particularly in digital environments, by strengthening awareness of selective self-presentation and encouraging more realistic self-evaluation. Universities, community centers, and mental health services could develop belonging-focused initiatives that promote authentic peer connection, inclusive group participation, supportive mentoring, and opportunities for emotionally meaningful interaction. Screening for loneliness in educational and community settings may also allow earlier identification of women who feel socially disconnected despite appearing socially active, enabling more timely and individualized support.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

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

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