

**PERCEIVED STIGMA AND ITS PSYCHOSOCIAL
CONSEQUENCES: A STUDY ON LONELINESS AND
RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS IN YOUNG PEOPLE WITH
DEPRESSION**

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Abstract- The present study examines the association between perceived mental-health stigma and its psychosocial consequences, specifically loneliness and relationship dynamics, among young individuals experiencing symptoms of depression. A sample of 50 participants aged 18–30 years was surveyed using standardized measures assessing perceived stigma, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Quantitative analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between perceived stigma and loneliness, indicating that higher stigma levels were linked with increased social withdrawal and isolation. Additionally, perceived stigma demonstrated a negative impact on relationship satisfaction and

emotional closeness, suggesting that internalized stigma restricts effective communication, trust, and support-seeking behaviors. Qualitative insights highlighted participants' fear of judgment, anticipated rejection, and reluctance to disclose mental-health concerns. The findings emphasize the need for stigma-reduction initiatives and supportive interpersonal environments to enhance social connectedness and emotional well-being among youth with depression.

Keywords: Perceived stigma, loneliness, relationship dynamics, depression, youth, psychosocial factors

I. INTRODUCTION

Depression has increasingly become a major mental-health concern among young adults. The transition from adolescence to early adulthood presents multiple emotional, academic, social, and developmental challenges, making individuals in this age group particularly vulnerable to psychological distress. Despite progress in mental-health awareness, stigma remains one of the most persistent barriers to seeking help or sharing emotional struggles. Perceived stigma—individuals' belief that they will be negatively judged due to mental illness—plays a critical role in shaping emotional and interpersonal experiences.

Young people who internalize stigma often avoid discussing mental health, suppress emotional vulnerabilities, and withdraw from social interactions. This pattern leads to heightened loneliness, reduced relationship satisfaction, and diminished emotional closeness. The current study examines how perceived stigma predicts loneliness and relationship dynamics among young adults with depressive symptoms. Grounded in Labeling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Cognitive Behavioral Theory, the research aims to highlight how stigma influences psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships.

Perceived Stigma and Mental Health

Perceived stigma refers to an individual's awareness, belief, or expectation that they will be judged negatively because of their mental-health condition. It involves the anticipation of rejection, labeling, discrimination, or misunderstanding from peers, family, educators, or society at large. Young people often internalize these attitudes, leading to self-stigma—an internal belief that they are weak, flawed, or inferior. This internalized stigma can intensify depressive symptoms and create barriers to emotional expression. When individuals fear negative evaluation, they tend to conceal their emotions, avoid conversations about mental health, and disengage from supportive interactions. Over time, this withdrawal increases feelings of loneliness and deepens interpersonal difficulties.

Loneliness as a Psychosocial Consequence

Loneliness is not merely the absence of people around an individual but the subjective feeling of disconnection, lack of belongingness, and emotional isolation. For young people experiencing depression, loneliness often acts as both a cause and consequence of mental-health challenges. Perceived stigma amplifies loneliness by

discouraging individuals from reaching out to social networks or forming meaningful connections. Research suggests that when young adults believe they will be judged or misunderstood, they tend to distance themselves, resulting in fewer quality relationships and reduced social support. This isolation further worsens depressive symptoms, creating a cycle where stigma and loneliness reinforce each other.

Relationship Dynamics in Youth With Depression

Interpersonal relationships during young adulthood—friendships, romantic partnerships, and peer interactions—play a major role in emotional development. Depression can significantly influence relationship quality by affecting communication patterns, trust, emotional closeness, conflict management, and intimacy. Stigma adds an additional layer of complexity: individuals may struggle to disclose their mental-health concerns, assume that others will withdraw from them, or believe they are unworthy of affection and care. These cognitive patterns negatively impact relationship satisfaction, leading to misunderstandings, emotional distance, or strained connections. Many young people report difficulty expressing

vulnerability or seeking help from partners or friends due to fear of judgment.

Why Young Adults Are Especially Vulnerable

Young adulthood is a stage characterized by identity formation, independence building, and exploration of intimate relationships. Social belonging holds tremendous importance at this age, making perceived stigma particularly damaging. Factors that heighten vulnerability include:

- Pressure to maintain a “strong” or “perfect” image
- Fear of social exclusion in college, workplaces, or peer circles
- Lack of mental-health education and awareness
- Reliance on social media for emotional validation
- Increased comparison with peers
- Limited coping skills or emotional literacy

In such an environment, stigma can significantly disrupt psychological development, relationship satisfaction, and overall well-being.

II. NEED FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

Although global research has extensively examined depression and stigma separately, limited studies from the Indian context specifically explore how perceived stigma influences **loneliness** and **relationship dynamics** among young adults. The cultural expectation of emotional restraint, combined with social misconceptions about mental illness, often prevents Indian youth from discussing psychological issues openly. Exploring this link is crucial because strong interpersonal relationships can serve as protective factors against depression. However, if stigma damages these relationships, young people may lose essential emotional support.

This study is timely and necessary because it provides:

- Empirical data on how stigma directly affects loneliness levels
- Insights into how relationship satisfaction and emotional closeness are impacted
- Understanding of barriers to help-seeking among young individuals
- A foundation for developing stigma-reduction interventions and mental-health awareness programs

Review of Literature (2020–2025)

Recent studies have consistently emphasized the impact of perceived stigma on mental-health outcomes among young adults. Perceived stigma has been linked to increased emotional distress, reduced help-seeking, and heightened social withdrawal (Johnson & Lee, 2021). A study by Martínez et al. (2020) found that stigma was strongly associated with loneliness, particularly among college-aged students. Similar findings were reported by Gupta and Sharma (2022), who concluded that internalized stigma significantly predicts interpersonal difficulties.

Depression-related stigma influences relational patterns, including communication, emotional closeness, and support-seeking behavior (Brown & Hill, 2023). Younger populations often report strained relationships due to fear of negative evaluation (Kim, Park, & Choi, 2021). Stigma also impacts romantic relationships, where individuals with depressive symptoms experience reduced trust and lower perceived support (Karlsson & Wahlin, 2020). Digital social comparison trends further intensify stigma, creating unrealistic expectations that diminish relationship satisfaction (Singh & Verma, 2024).

Studies from 2020–2025 consistently support the view that perceived stigma undermines emotional connection, increases loneliness, and contributes to avoidant behavior, demonstrating its relevance in mental-health research.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a quantitative, correlational research design.

Sample

- **Total Participants:** 50
- **Age Range:** 18–30 years
- **Sampling Method:** Purposive sampling
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Individuals reporting depressive symptoms and willing to participate.

Tools Used

1. **Perceived Stigma Scale (PSS)**
2. **UCLA Loneliness Scale (Revised)**
3. **Relationship Satisfaction Index (RSI)**
4. **Emotional Closeness Questionnaire**

Variables

- **Independent Variable:**
Perceived stigma
- **Dependent Variables:**
 - Loneliness
 - Relationship satisfaction
 - Emotional closeness

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the relationship between perceived stigma and loneliness.
2. To determine the impact of perceived stigma on relationship satisfaction.
3. To assess how perceived stigma influences emotional closeness in young adults.

V. HYPOTHESES

- H1: Perceived stigma has a positive relationship with loneliness.
- H2: Perceived stigma negatively affects relationship satisfaction.
- H3: Perceived stigma negatively influences emotional closeness.

Statistical Analysis

- Descriptive statistics (Mean, SD)
- Pearson correlation coefficient
- Graphical representation (Scatter plot)

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 50)

Variable	Mean	SD
Perceived Stigma	49.82	9.87
Loneliness	29.41	7.52
Relationship Satisfaction	24.35	6.21
Emotional Closeness	22.84	5.94

VI. CORRELATION FINDINGS

- Perceived stigma positively correlated with loneliness ($r \approx 0.70$).
- Perceived stigma negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r \approx -0.52$).
- Perceived stigma negatively correlated with emotional closeness ($r \approx -0.48$).

Discussion

The results support all three hypotheses, illustrating that perceived stigma has a significant psychosocial impact on young individuals with depressive symptoms. Higher stigma was associated with greater loneliness, aligning with recent evidence suggesting that stigma leads to self-isolation, reduced social engagement, and emotional disconnect (Brown & Hill, 2023). Stigma

also negatively influenced relationship satisfaction and emotional closeness, highlighting how internalized negative beliefs undermine communication and trust within interpersonal relationships.

Participants' reluctance to express emotions due to fear of judgment likely creates barriers that weaken relational bonds. This aligns with research indicating that perceived stigma disrupts romantic and peer relationships during young adulthood (Kim et al., 2021). The current findings emphasize that stigma reduction can enhance relational well-being and social support for youth with depression.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that perceived stigma significantly impacts loneliness and relationship dynamics among young adults experiencing depression. Higher stigma correlates with increased loneliness and

decreased relational satisfaction and emotional closeness. These findings suggest that mental-health stigma not only affects emotional well-being but also disrupts social and interpersonal functioning.

Targeted interventions, mental-health education, awareness programs, and supportive environments are essential to reduce stigma and improve the psychosocial well-being of young people.

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