



# THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORK SERVICE ADDICTION TENDENCY BETWEEN PERFECTIONISTIC SELF-PRESENTATION AND LONELINESS AND THE MODERATED MEDIATION EFFECT OF SPIRITUALITY IN KOREAN YOUNG ADULTS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the psychological burden experienced by young adults due to developmental tasks imposed by society, which often contribute to feelings of loneliness. It aims to investigate the mediating effect of social network service (SNS) addiction tendency on the relation between perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP) and loneliness and to explore whether this mediating relation is moderated by levels of spirituality. Data were collected from 671 young adults across South Korea, with particular attention to relational and psychological factors. The analysis produced three main findings. First, higher levels of PSP were associated with greater SNS addiction tendency and increased loneliness. Second, SNS addiction tendency partially mediated the relation between PSP and loneliness. Third, spirituality moderated the mediating relation among PSP, SNS addiction tendency, and loneliness. These findings support both the social disconnection and holistic models, suggesting that enhancing individual spirituality can reduce loneliness and promote a deeper, more meaningful quality of life beyond superficial social connections. Finally, the study discusses its limitations and proposes directions for future research.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *perfectionistic self-presentation, social network service addiction tendency, loneliness, spirituality, young adults*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood represents a critical developmental stage during which individuals are expected to assume major social and economic responsibilities, to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, and to consolidate their personal identity. However, rapid industrialization and digital transformation have delayed the traditional developmental milestones once associated with this stage of life (Willoughby et al., 2021). Contrary to the dynamic images of innovation historically associated with youth, these socially imposed expectations have increasingly become psychological burdens, leaving many young adults feeling isolated and vulnerable to loneliness (Child & Lawton, 2019). Although loneliness has conventionally been viewed as a concern of older adulthood, recent research suggests that declining social stability and interpersonal stress regarding social relationships have made loneliness increasingly prevalent among young adults (Seo & Kang, 2025).

A key psychological factor linked to the issues is perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP), the tendency to conceal personal flaws and project an idealized self-image to gain approval from others (Hewitt et al., 2003). Individuals with this tendency seek recognition and acceptance in interpersonal contexts but remain highly sensitive to criticism or rejection. The resulting gap between their effort to appear flawless and others' actual perceptions can paradoxically heighten social alienation and loneliness (Lee & Kim, 2024).

The widespread use of social networking services (SNSs) further complicates this dynamic by making it easier to satisfy social needs. However, using SNSs has been associated with depression, anxiety, and social maladjustment, which ultimately lead to loneliness (Yoon & Kwon, 2025). Because SNS interactions occur within virtual communities with an unspecified audience, young adults with strong perfectionistic tendencies often become over-immersed, selectively disclosing content to maintain an idealized image while concealing perceived flaws (Kang & Han, 2020). This pattern suggests that SNS addiction tendency may serve as an intermediary mechanism linking PSP to loneliness.

According to the perfectionism social disconnection model, loneliness—often described as a “modern epidemic” of the 21st century—arises from interpersonal patterns associated with perfectionism. Although this model highlights social risk factors, the Holistic Model emphasizes that spirituality can function as an integrative resource that promotes self-acceptance and connectedness beyond social validation (Yoo,

2008). In the context of social work, spirituality is increasingly recognized as a strengths-based construct that allows individuals to draw upon inner resilience and meaning, thereby improving psychological well-being.

Consequently, spirituality may moderate the mediating pathway from PSP to loneliness through SNS addiction tendency. Higher levels of spirituality may serve as a protective factor that buffers the negative emotional consequences of PSP and mitigates the compulsive use of SNSs as a coping strategy (Kim, 2024; Park et al., 2016).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the urgent need to examine loneliness among young adults in contemporary society. Guided by the perfectionism social disconnection model, this study posits that efforts to maintain a perfect self-image can increase SNS addiction tendency, leading to heightened loneliness. However, the strength of this indirect effect may vary according to one's level of spirituality. Therefore, this study seeks to

1. Investigate the mediating role of SNS addiction tendency in the relation between PSP and loneliness; and
2. Examine whether spirituality moderates this mediating effect.

The findings are expected to provide foundational insights for reducing loneliness among young adults in what has been termed the “era of loneliness.”

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Loneliness in Young Adults

Traditionally, young adulthood has been associated with achieving residential and financial independence from one's family of origin, being recognized as a generation responsible for the future, and embodying social ideals of innovation and change (Kwon, 2020). However, in contemporary society, rapid social and economic transitions have extended educational pathways, delayed entry into stable employment, and increased the average age of first marriage. These developments have thus prolonged the life cycle and made it more difficult for young adults to establish a secure sense of identity (Willoughby et al., 2021).

Difficulties in interpersonal relationships have become particularly pronounced. According to social needs theory, loneliness arises when individuals fail to satisfy their fundamental need for meaningful connection, leading to emotional deprivation and frustration (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). From a cognitive perspective, loneliness results from a mismatch between an individual's relational expectations and the extent to which these expectations are fulfilled.

Comparative research conducted both domestically and internationally has shown that South Korean young adults report higher levels of loneliness than other age groups (Choi & Song, 2023; Shovestul et al., 2020), underscoring the global importance of addressing loneliness among the youth. Experiencing loneliness during this developmental stage increases vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Vanhal et al., 2012), impairs self-regulation and cognitive functioning, and diminishes task performance (Quan et al., 2014). Furthermore, loneliness hinders self-acceptance and heightened rejection sensitivity, ultimately marginalizing individuals in their social relationships (Kim & Lee, 2022). Given its psychological, social, and cognitive consequences, developing preventive and intervention strategies to mitigate loneliness among young adults is essential.

## **2.2. Relations among PSP, SNS Addiction Tendency, Loneliness, and Spirituality**

The emergence of PSP is shaped by both personality traits and relational experiences. Young adults who score high in PSP tend to conceal their mistakes, feel discomfort with external evaluation, and prioritize maintaining a flawless image (Flett et al., 2014). Such tendencies restrict authentic social interaction and heighten vulnerability to psychological distress, especially in societies where perfectionism is socially rewarded or expected (Joo & Bae, 2020).

Empirical studies have confirmed that PSP contributes to loneliness among Korean young adults. For instance, Lee and Kim (2024) examined cognitive and behavioral mechanisms linking PSP to loneliness and found that higher levels of PSP predicted greater loneliness. The discrepancy between idealized self-presentation and actual interpersonal feedback creates a cycle of frustration, prompting coping and further emotional isolation. Consistent with the perfectionism social disconnection model (Hewitt et al., 2003), this pattern reinforces interpersonal detachment. Similarly, Park and Hong (2025) demonstrated that the concealment component of PSP perpetuates a self-reinforcing cycle of disconnection, which intensifies loneliness.

Parallel to this, young adults constitute the demographic with the highest levels of SNS use. Although SNS platforms allow individuals to communicate and express themselves without the immediacy of face-to-face interaction, excessive engagement often produces outcomes such as depression, anxiety, social maladjustment, and loneliness. Yoon and Kwon (2025) empirically confirmed that PSP positively predicts SNS

addiction tendency, suggesting that such tendencies may reflect attempts to regulate self-image through digital platforms. Their findings emphasize the need for emotion regulation interventions targeting individuals with high perfectionistic tendencies.

Similarly, Kang and Han (2020) reviewed trends in SNS addiction research and noted an overemphasis on emotional factors, calling for greater attention to interpersonal variables. They found that PSP significantly increases SNS addiction tendency and that promoting self-reflection and adaptive coping strategies could prevent SNS overuse among young adults.

However, spirituality functions as a psychological resource that allows individuals to derive meaning, cope with adversity, and maintain emotional balance. It has been identified as a protective factor against existential distress and loneliness (Serafini et al., 2020). In social work practice, spirituality is emphasized as a strengths-based construct that supports resilience and adaptive problem-solving amidst rapid social change.

Kim (2024) explored the relation between spirituality and various psychological mechanisms within the Korean context, demonstrating that higher levels of spirituality correspond with lower levels of loneliness. Chronic loneliness has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including increased risks of addiction and suicide; however, existential well-being—a subdimension of spirituality—was found to significantly reduce loneliness (Park et al., 2016). This finding suggests that spirituality grounded in existential reflection, rather than in purely religious practices, plays a crucial role in mitigating loneliness among young adults.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Sampling and Data Collection**

This study utilized data partly drawn from the survey “Young People’s Perceptions of Gender Roles and Intentions Regarding Marriage and Childbirth” conducted by the S Research Institute at A University in Seoul, Korea. The data was collected via an online questionnaire employing a non-probability sampling method. The survey targeted 1,017 young people nationwide aged 19–39 years, aiming to investigate their intentions regarding marriage and childbirth, as well as factors such as parental upbringing attitudes, division of household chores, life attitudes, emotional states, and interpersonal relationships. For this study, the age range for youth was defined as up to 34 years, in accordance with the Youth Basic Act, yielding a final analytical sample

of 671 participants. Ethics approval was sought for the data collection and secured from the Institutional Review Board of the researcher's affiliated institution (IRB-A-2412-67).

### 3.2 Research Model and Hypotheses

This study examines the mediating effect of SNS addiction tendency on the relation between PSP and loneliness among young adults and determines whether spirituality mediates this moderating relation. The conceptual research model is presented in Figure 1, and the hypotheses are formulated as follows:

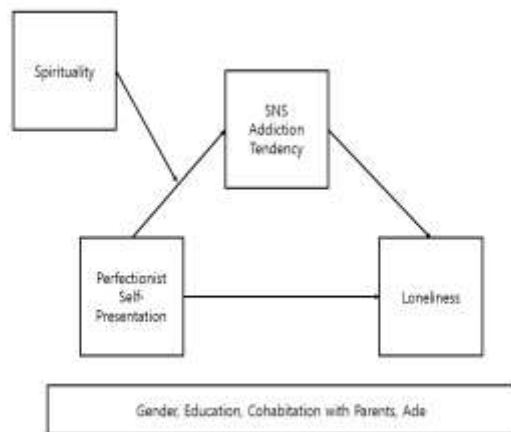


Figure 1. Research Model

**H1.** Young adults' perfectionist self-presentation has a positive effect on their SNS addiction tendencies.

**H2.** Young adults' perfectionist self-presentation has a positive effect on loneliness.

**H3.** The relation between PSP and loneliness is mediated by SNS addiction tendencies.

**H4.** Spirituality moderates the mediating effect of SNS addiction tendency on the relation between perfectionist self-presentation and loneliness.

### 3.3 Measures

#### 3.3.1 Perfectionist Self-Presentation

The independent variable, PSP, was measured using the Perfection Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS-K) developed by Ha (2011), adapted from Hewitt et al. (2003) to reflect Korean cultural contexts. This scale comprises 19 items and uses a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger PSP tendencies. Example items include the following: "I try not to mention my shortcomings as much as possible." "It is very important to me to appear proficient in everything at all times." "I act as if I can do things I am not good at without any difficulty." The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for this study was .888, while the original scale reliability was .850. Furthermore, PSP was defined as "a

behavior where one hides one's fault in order to present a perfect image to others, but which leads to difficulties in interpersonal relationships due to psychological distress."

#### 3.3.2 Loneliness

The dependent variable, loneliness, was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Kim and Kim (1989), adapted from Russell et al. (1980) for the Korean context. The 20-item instrument employs a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores representing greater loneliness. Example items include the following: "I feel a sense of belonging within my group of friends." "My interpersonal relationships are superficial." "Although people are around me, they do not genuinely engage with me." The reliability of original scale was found to be .940. In this study reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) was .933. Furthermore, loneliness was defined as "a desire to be continuously connected with others, feeling a lack of interpersonal relationships in cognitive, behavioral, and existential aspects."

#### 3.3.3 SNS Addiction Tendencies

The mediation variable, SNS addiction tendency, was measured using the SNS Addiction Proneness Scale developed by Jung and Kim (2014). The scale comprises 24 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, where higher scores denote greater proneness to SNS addiction. Examples include statements such as "I think a lot about recent events on SNS." "I have regretted being unable to reduce my SNS usage time." "I use SNS to alleviate feelings of restlessness or anxiety." The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) was .961 in this study, while the original scale was .920. Furthermore, SNS addiction tendency was defined as "the act of continuing to use SNS excessively, leading to withdrawal and tolerance, causing physical, mental, and social problems, even without specific rewards."

#### 3.3.4 Spirituality

The moderating variable, spirituality, was measured using the Korean Version of the Spirituality Assessment Scale developed by Choi and Nam (2022), which was adapted from Howden (1992). The scale employs a 6-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger spirituality. The items include statements such as the following: "My inner strength is related to a belief in a transcendent power or an absolute being." "I feel positive about myself." "I feel a sense of belonging to the local community where I live." "All parts of my life are well connected." The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) was .941 in this study, while the original scale was .920.

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**3.3.5 Control Variable**

Control variables include participants' demographic characteristics. Gender (male = 0, female = 1) and cohabitation status with parents ("living with parents" = 0; "not living with parents" = 1) were treated as dummy-coded variables. Age and educational attainment were treated as continuous variables, with participants' self-reported values entered directly into the analysis.

**3.4 Data Analysis**

All statistical analyses were performed using jamovi version 2.6. The validity and reliability of the measurement scales were first examined. Descriptive statistics and frequency analysis were then conducted to assess data characteristics and normality. Multicollinearity was tested using correlation analysis. Finally, a moderated

mediation analysis was conducted using jamovi's GLM-Mediation module.

**4. FINDINGS**

**4.1 Characteristics of Research Subjects**

The demographic characteristics of the study participants are summarized in Table 1. The sample comprised 306 males and 365 females, with females representing a higher proportion. Regarding educational attainment, university graduates (n = 435, 64.80%) constituted the largest group, followed by college graduates (n = 191), individuals with a postgraduate degree (n = 43), and those with a high school education or below (n = 2). In items of living arrangements, 384 participants' parents, whereas 287 did not, indicating that a majority of young adults lived with their parents. The mean age of the respondents was 28.3 years (SD = 4.06).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Research Subjects

Items	Content	Frequency (n)	%
Gender	Male	306	45.6
	Female	365	54.4
Education Level	High School or below	2	0.3
	College	191	28.5
	University	435	64.8
	Graduate School	43	6.4
Cohabiting with Parents	Yes	384	57.2
	No	287	42.8
Age	Min = 20, Max = 34, Mean = 28.3(SD = 4.06)		

**4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis**

Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for the key study variables are presented in Table 2. The independent variable, PSP, had a mean score of 4.65 (SD = .815). The mediating variable, SNS addiction tendency, recorded a mean of 1.73 (SD = .618), whereas the dependent variable, loneliness, averaged 1.99 (SD = .542). The moderating variable, spirituality, showed an average score of 3.62 (SD = .781). Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within +1, confirming the assumption of normality. The results of the correlation analysis were as follows: PSP was significantly and

positively correlated with SNS addiction tendency (r = .188, p < .001). Loneliness showed a significant positive correlation with SNS addiction tendency (r = .144, p < .001). Although spirituality was positively correlated with PSP, this relation was not statistically significant (r = .063, p > .05). SNS addiction tendency demonstrated a significant negative correlation with spirituality (r = -.420, p < .001) and a significant positive correlation with loneliness (r = .227, p < .001). Finally, loneliness and spirituality were positively correlated (r = .156, p < .001).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
PSP	4.65	.815	1			
SNS	1.73	.618	.188***	1		
Loneliness	1.99	.542	.144***	-.420***	1	
Spirituality	3.62	.781	.063	.227***	.156***	1
Skewness	-.271~.650					
Kurtosis	-.535~.639					

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### 4.3 Results of the Moderated Mediation Model

The results of the path analysis conducted to examine the study's hypotheses are summarized in Table 3. First, when analyzing the predictors of the mediating variable (SNS addiction tendency), PSP exerted a significant positive effect ( $\beta = .149$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. Among the control variables, gender ( $\beta = .093$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and age ( $\beta = -.167$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were also significant, indicating that women showed higher levels of SNS addiction tendencies than men, and that SNS addiction tendency decreases with age.

Second, in examining predictors of the dependent variable (loneliness), both PSP ( $\beta = .123$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and SNS addiction tendency ( $\beta = .260$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant. This indicates that loneliness increases with higher levels of PSP and SNS addiction tendency, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. Among control variables, age was

significant ( $\beta = .094$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that loneliness slightly increased with age.

Third, testing the mediating effect of SNS addiction tendency in the relation between PSP and loneliness revealed a significant positive indirect effect ( $\beta = .038$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results demonstrate that young adults' PSP not only directly increases loneliness but also indirectly does so through higher SNS addiction tendency, supporting Hypothesis 3.

Finally, when spirituality was introduced as a moderating variable in the mediating pathway, it was found to attenuate the effect of PSP on SNS addiction tendency ( $\beta = .102$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding supports Hypothesis 4, suggesting that spirituality—an internal protective factor among young adults—buffers the impact of PSP and SNS addiction tendency on loneliness. In other words, higher spirituality weakens the link between PSP and SNS use, thereby mitigating loneliness.

**Table 3.** Moderated Mediation Model

Path		B	SE	t	$\beta$	p
Gender	SNS Addiction Tendency	.115	.046	2.509	.093	<.05
Age		-.025	.007	-3.700	-.167	<.001
Education		-.019	.046	-.407	-.017	.684
Cohabiting		.014	.049	.276	.011	.782
PSP		.113	.028	3.968	.149	<.001
Gender	Loneliness	-.033	.035	-.939	-.031	.348
Age		.012	.005	2.328	.094	<.05
Education		-.037	.036	-1.027	-.038	.304
Cohabiting		-.031	.038	-.825	-.029	.409
PSP		.081	.022	3.641	.123	<.001
SNS		.226	.030	7.630	.260	<.001
PSP → SNS → Loneliness		.025	.007	3.520	.038	<.001
PSP*Spirituality → SNS → Loneliness		.083	.030	2.718	.102	<.01

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to verify the mediating effect of SNS addiction tendencies on the relation between PSP and loneliness, based on the social disconnection model, which emphasizes relationality. It also sought to examine the moderated mediating effect of spirituality within this overall model to foster interventions in alleviating loneliness among young adults. To this end, data from 671 young adults in Korea were analyzed, and the results can be summarized as follows. First, PSP among young adults was found to increase tendencies toward social media addiction. Second, PSP was confirmed to increase loneliness. Third, SNS addiction tendencies partially mediated the relation between PSP and loneliness. Fourth, spirituality moderated the

relation between PSP, SNS addiction tendencies, and loneliness.

From a theoretical perspective, several points merit discussion. First, young adults with high levels of PSP exhibited increased tendencies toward SNS addiction. As young adulthood is a period marked by the pursuit of psychological, social, and emotional independence, individuals often rely on SNS as a vital tool for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. However, many young adults tend to conceal aspects of themselves they perceive as insecure to project a favorable image to others (Hewitt et al., 2003). Such concealment often arises from fear of rejection, and the expression of negative emotions may be perceived as a sign of instability. These irrational beliefs contribute to psychological distress and may drive compulsive SNS use in

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pursuit of external approval (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Consequently, the desire to maintain a positive impression for the sake of “healthy” relationships paradoxically becomes a source of psychological burden, resulting in excessive SNS engagement. Therefore, counselling and therapeutic intervention are necessary to reduce the self-concept inconsistency that emerges within such relationships and to relieve individuals from the perceived pressure to appear perfect. These findings align with those of previous research (Kang & Han, 2020; Yoon & Kwon, 2025).

Second, higher levels of PSP were associated with greater perceived loneliness among young adults. Loneliness during this stage of life can be understood as a negative outcome stemming from difficulties in forming a positive self-identity (Kim & Jeong, 2019). At the socio-economic level, instability caused by the failure to fully achieve developmental milestones can undermine mental health, making young adults more vulnerable to loneliness (Refaeli & Achdut, 2020). Given that relationality is especially valued during this period, PSP may be more prevalent as individuals strive to be viewed positively by others. However, such perfectionism can lead to unstable relationships, as individuals fear that unexpected circumstances may expose perceived inadequacies (Sherry et al., 2007). This fear contributes to a diminished sense of social connection and, ultimately, to heightened loneliness (Ben-Ze'ev, 2001). Furthermore, individuals with strong PSP tendencies tend to base their sense of worth on external validation rather than internal values, hindering the development of a stable self-concept. As a result, they may regard themselves as inadequate even when others hold them in high esteem (Hewitt et al., 2017). Thus, perfectionistic self-presenters not only experience difficulties in maintaining interpersonal relationships but also struggle with self-acceptance, which deepens their sense of loneliness. These findings are consistent with previous researches (Park & Hong, 2025; Rnic et al., 2021).

Third, SNS addiction tendencies were found to partially mediate the relation between PSP and loneliness. This indicates that PSP influences loneliness both directly and indirectly through SNS addiction tendencies. According to the social disconnection model, socially imposed perfectionism disrupts genuine relational networks, resulting in psychological distress. Individuals experiencing this dissatisfaction often develop negative self-perceptions and feelings of dissatisfaction or deprivation within relationships (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Low self-esteem

exacerbates loneliness, and these two factors tend to reinforce one another in a self-perpetuating cycle. Perfectionistic self-presenters may thus become excessively absorbed in SNS, where interactions can be more easily managed and controlled than in offline contexts. The gratification derived from receiving attention or affirmation online can be reinforcing, potentially fostering addictive behavior. Consequently, interventions addressing young adults' loneliness should prioritize enhancing the quality of relationships rather than merely expanding their number.

Fourth, spirituality was found to moderate the relation between PSP and loneliness mediated by SNS addiction tendencies. This suggests that higher levels of spirituality can reduce the influence of SNS addiction tendencies, thereby alleviating loneliness. In social work practice, spirituality is increasingly recognized as a vital resource for improving quality of life, particularly by addressing the existential dimensions of meaning and purpose that are often overlooked in modern welfare (Yoo, 2008). When integrated into practice, a spiritual perspective promotes inner healing and fosters holistic development, encompassing physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual (Derezotes, 2006). Through such integration, individuals can cultivate a sense of existential independence and establish more harmonious relationships with others (Canda & Furman, 1999). As spirituality plays a key role in mitigating psychological distress among young adults (Kasapoğlu, 2020), practical measures to enhance spiritual well-being warrant further exploration.

In conclusion, this study supports the social disconnection model by confirming the partial mediating effect of SNS addiction tendencies on the relation between PSP and loneliness. It also demonstrates that spirituality moderates this relation, highlighting the importance of fostering spiritual well-being as a means to reduce loneliness in young adulthood, an age increasingly characterized as the “age of loneliness.” Based on these findings, social welfare practitioners and relevant institutions should provide opportunities for young adults to develop more meaningful and authentic connections. Initiatives such as Youth Week could be leveraged to encourage deeper relational engagement beyond superficial networking. Additionally, educational institutions might consider integrating spirituality and holistic development into curricula, moving away from systems focused solely on employment or

academic outcomes, to cultivate broader sensitivity and self-awareness among youth.

Finally, several recommendations are offered for future studies. First, although this study examined loneliness from a relational perspective, it did not incorporate wider social and structural factors. Future studies should address these contextual elements to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Second, social work studies should further explore ways of

operationalizing spirituality in practice, emphasizing its existential and humanistic dimensions for enhancing mental health and social connectedness among young adults.

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MEDIATION EFFECT OF SPIRITUALITY IN KOREAN YOUNG ADULTS**

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