

The Evaluation of Peer Support Group in Navigating Friendship Challenges among Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the social challenges undergraduate students face in forming and sustaining friendships and evaluates the effectiveness of a peer support group intervention designed to address these issues. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines qualitative need analysis through semi-structured interviews with quantitative outcome assessments. Eight undergraduate participants took part in three structured intervention sessions that emphasised intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, including emotional validation, perspective-taking, and effective communication. The intervention drew on Positive Psychology principles. Quantitative data, collected using the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale, showed that 75 per cent of participants reported increased friendship satisfaction after the intervention. Qualitative feedback further highlighted gains in empathy, emotional awareness, and communication skills. The findings underscore the potential of peer support group interventions as a practical way to enhance social connectedness and mitigate relational difficulties among university students.

Keywords: *friendship challenges, undergraduate students, peer support group*

INTRODUCTION

A sense of belonging and connection within the university environment is vital for students' adjustment to university life (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Meaningful friendships help students navigate the social and academic challenges of university. Sima and Singh (2017) defined friendship as the cooperative, supportive, and caring interactions shared between two or more individuals. This companionship contributes significantly to a student's overall well-being by providing both academic and emotional support (McCabe, 2023; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Sima & Singh, 2017). This support system strengthens resilience and motivation, helping individuals pursue personal growth and academic success. According to McCabe (2023), friends can support students academically in various ways, such as studying together, encouraging academic engagement, or modelling it.

Despite the importance of friendships in helping students cope with university hurdles, forming and sustaining meaningful friendships is challenging. A study by Sima and Singh (2017) reported that approximately 49.5 per cent of college students did not always engage in

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social interactions, such as joking with friends and sharing life experiences, suggesting potential challenges in forming or maintaining close friendships. If individuals fail to develop connections with those around them, they may experience heightened stress, loneliness, and emotional difficulties (Diab et al., 2013; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). In addition, Mattanah et al. (2012) found that students who did not join social support group programmes felt less connected to peers, struggled to build relationships, and showed poorer academic performance, with a higher risk of leaving university. Therefore, these outcomes indicate a critical need for intervention to address friendship challenges among students.

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap through tailored peer support group sessions guided by the following research questions and objectives:

Research Questions:

- i. What are the factors contributing to challenges in friendship challenges among undergraduate university students?
- ii. What coping strategies do undergraduate university students employ in managing these friendship challenges?
- iii. What is the effectiveness of the developed Positive Psychology-based modules in enhancing social and emotional competencies through peer support group sessions?

Research Objectives:

- i. To identify the factors that contribute to friendship-related challenges among undergraduate university students.
- ii. To examine the coping strategies employed by undergraduate university students in managing friendship challenges.
- iii. To evaluate the effectiveness of the developed Positive Psychology-based modules in enhancing social and emotional competencies through peer support group sessions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of structured psychosocial interventions in enhancing peer relationships and social competencies across various developmental stages. Öztürk and Kutlu (2017) investigated the impact of a Friendship Skills Psycho-Education (FSE) programme on improving friendship quality among children aged 9 to 12. Utilising a mixed 3x2 factorial design, twenty-seven participants with low friendship quality scores were allocated into experimental, control, and placebo groups. The experimental group completed an 11-session FSE programme targeting core competencies such as communication and conflict resolution. Pre- and post-test assessments using the Friendship Quality Questionnaire revealed significant improvements in friendship quality for the experimental group, affirming the programme's efficacy in fostering positive peer interactions.

In a related study, Venter and Uys (2018) examined the role of group therapy in addressing peer relational difficulties among early adolescent girls in a rural South African context. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and facilitated group therapy sessions with seven girls aged 11 to 14. Post-intervention focus group discussions highlighted increased emotional sharing, trust, and improved communication and conflict-resolution skills, suggesting that group therapy can meaningfully reduce relational conflicts and strengthen friendship bonds.

Expanding the scope to children exposed to trauma, Diab et al. (2013) evaluated the Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT) psychosocial intervention among war-affected Palestinian children aged 10 to 13. This large-scale study involved 428 participants and focused on building coping strategies, emotional regulation, and trauma-processing skills. Assessments at baseline, post-intervention, and the six-month follow-up showed significant reductions in loneliness and improved peer relationships, particularly among boys, highlighting the intervention's relevance in post-conflict settings.

Banat et al. (2020) further demonstrated the potential of group-based psychosocial interventions through a quasi-experimental study with academically talented Jordanian students in grades seven to ten. Over nine sessions, the experimental group engaged in activities that promoted self-awareness and friendship-building skills, including conflict management and empathy. Post-intervention analyses using the Friendship Formation Scale revealed significant and sustained improvements in the experimental group compared with controls, persisting for up to three weeks after the intervention.

Complementing these findings, Tillman and Prazak (2019) evaluated a 12-week social skills curriculum delivered to elementary-aged children in the United States. Using a sample of 34 participants aged 6 to 12, the curriculum addressed key social competencies, including active listening, conflict resolution, and managing teasing. Pre- and post-intervention assessments, incorporating feedback from students, parents, and teachers, documented substantial gains in social skills, underscoring the curriculum's effectiveness in fostering positive peer interactions.

Collectively, these studies underscore the efficacy of structured interventions in cultivating friendship quality and essential social skills. However, the existing research predominantly targets children and early adolescents, with limited attention to older populations. This highlights a critical gap in addressing the nuanced social challenges university students face as they navigate more complex interpersonal dynamics in emerging adulthood.

Peer Support Interventions and Services in Higher Education

Recent research shows that positive psychology interventions (PPIs) are appropriate and effective for undergraduate populations, strongly supporting the use of structured, skills-based modules in higher education. Group-based PPIs delivered through university counselling centres have been shown to significantly enhance positive emotions, resilience, and overall psychological well-being among university students, as shown in Kounenou et al.'s (2022) controlled trial. Similar benefits have been found in online and curriculum-integrated interventions. For instance, Yurayat and Seechaliao (2021) reported sustained improvements in psychological well-being after an online PPI with undergraduates, while Tarrats-Pons et al. (2025) showed that a 15-week PPI embedded in a university course increased optimism and reduced depressive symptoms. Collectively, these studies confirm that PPIs are developmentally appropriate for young adults and can be delivered through a variety of formats that align well with university life.

In parallel, the evidence base for peer support interventions in higher education has grown substantially, showing that students perceive peer-delivered support as accessible, non-stigmatising, and beneficial for managing emotional challenges. Evaluations of student-led peer support services, such as Suresh et al. (2021), highlight students' strong endorsement of peer support as a helpful resource for navigating academic and interpersonal stressors.

Similarly, structured peer-led group programmes, such as Byrom's (2018) six-session peer-led intervention for mild depression, have produced measurable improvements in mental well-being among university students, demonstrating that peers can effectively facilitate manualised content. A recent systematic review by Pointon-Haas et al. (2023) further affirms that peer learning, peer mentoring, and peer-led support groups are widely implemented in universities, offering promising though methodologically varied evidence for improving student well-being.

Taken together, these findings indicate that undergraduate students benefit from structured PPIs and engage strongly with peer-delivered support models. This literature clearly justifies integrating positive-psychology-based modules within a peer support group format to address relational and social-emotional challenges among undergraduates. It also highlights a methodological gap: few studies combine positive psychology content with targeted interpersonal skill-building in peer-led settings. The present study therefore contributes by evaluating a theoretically grounded, peer-facilitated intervention designed to help undergraduates navigate friendship challenges while enhancing social and emotional competencies.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study used both qualitative and quantitative designs, indicating a mixed-methods research design. The first part of the study employed a qualitative design, in which an interview session was conducted with the participants to determine their suitability for the sessions.

Meanwhile, for the second part of the study, a quantitative design was employed. Participants completed a pre-test before the first session and a post-test after the final session, both administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of items adapted from the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale (FNSS) developed by Kaufman et al. (2021). The scale measures the degree of satisfaction individuals experience within their friendship networks. In general, the questionnaire included statements assessing emotional closeness, relational support, shared activities, social engagement and overall interaction frequency with friends. Participants rated each item on a Likert scale to indicate how well the statements reflected their experiences. Higher scores represented greater satisfaction with their friendship networks. This structure allowed for systematic comparison of participants' friendship satisfaction before and after the intervention.

Participants

Eight undergraduate students, consisting of one male and seven females, from a public university in Malaysia participated in the peer support group. Participants were in their early to mid-twenties and represented several academic disciplines across the university, including education, architecture and environmental design, and human and social sciences. Participants were at different stages of their undergraduate studies, ranging from second year to final-year students.

The study used purposive sampling. Participants were purposively selected based on criteria directly aligned with the aims of the study: (a) experiencing challenges in friendships, (b) ability to commit to the full series of sessions, and (c) voluntary willingness to participate. The group size of eight was appropriate and deliberate, as it ensured a manageable and safe

environment where each member could engage meaningfully while allowing facilitators to provide focused support. Because the participants were chosen based on the criteria stated above, this provided sufficient information power; a less extensive sample is needed when participants have characteristics highly specific to the study aim, compared with a sample of participants with sparse specificity (Malterud et al., 2016).

Importantly, the primary aim of the present study was not to achieve statistical generalisation, but to generate an in-depth understanding of students' friendship challenges and their experiences within a structured peer support setting. As such, the study is fundamentally qualitative, with the quantitative component serving a supplementary, descriptive function (e.g., frequencies, profiles of challenges). This sample size is consistent with established recommendations for small, process-oriented peer groups, where intimacy, psychological safety, and active participation are essential for meaningful exploration. In line with qualitative research principles, the study prioritised depth of insight, authenticity of experience, and richness of interaction over numerical representation.

Thus, including eight participants was methodologically appropriate for achieving the study's objectives and reflects best practices in peer support intervention research, where smaller groups are necessary to facilitate trust, disclosure, and genuine interpersonal connection.

MEASURES

Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale (FNSS) Kaufman et al. (2021)

To measure the campaign's effectiveness, the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale was used in the pre- and post-test questionnaire. This unidimensional scale consists of 14 questions that assess friendship network satisfaction by examining two factors: closeness and socialising. This scale includes questions such as "*I feel close to my friends*", "*It is hard to imagine my life without my close/best friends*" and "*When I have a problem, I can talk to my friends about it.*" The scale has a 6-point Likert Scale ranging from 0 being "*Not at all Agree*" to 5 "*Completely Agree.*" The scale's overall correlation coefficient is 0.96, indicating high reliability.

Procedures

The researcher recruited participants through poster advertisements and Google Forms (see Figure 1). Once the target number of participants (i.e., eight) was reached, the researcher interviewed each participant. Participants were asked three major questions to elicit the information needed for the needs analysis. The next step involved analysing the information through thematic analysis to develop materials for use throughout the sessions, ensuring they aligned with the main themes and issues participants highlighted regarding their friendships.

Figure 1: The Poster Advertisement for the Peer Support Group



We developed five finalised materials, each focusing on different aspects participants highlighted. In the first session of the support group, held on 6th December 2024, all participants first completed a pre-test questionnaire, the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale. In this session, I used two materials: one focused on emotional validation, and the other on attachment style and secure base mapping. The session lasted about one hour and 30 minutes, which was reasonable to keep participants engaged and prevent boredom.

I held the second and third sessions a week later, on 13th December. In the second session, I used two materials: one focused on empathy and perspective-taking in friendships, and the other on communication skills. The second session lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes, and the participant took a 15-minute break before the third session. The third session lasted approximately forty-five minutes and used the final materials for the support group, focusing on interpersonal effectiveness skills as a problem-focused coping mechanism. The entire session concluded with a sharing session and the participants' thoughts on the support group.

Lastly, to measure the support group's effectiveness, participants completed a post-test questionnaire using the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale. This was done to see whether their responses differed before and after participating in the support group. In addition, participants answered an open-ended question (i.e., How has your perspective changed after participating in these sessions?) after the intervention to gather feedback on the peer support group.

MODULE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

First Session

The peer support group intervention commenced with an introductory ice-breaking activity designed to cultivate rapport and encourage open dialogue among participants. Using ice-breaking flashcards with a range of light-hearted questions, participants engaged in reciprocal interactions that set a collaborative, supportive tone for the session.

The first module centred on emotional awareness and validation, drawing conceptually on Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). Participants engaged in reflective journaling, contextualised by viewing a selected scene from *How to Train Your Dragon 2* (YouTube Movies, 2014), in which the protagonist experiences betrayal by a close friend. This narrative served as a catalyst for perspective-taking, prompting participants to reflect on their emotional responses if placed in a similar context. Participants articulated their reflections in writing, linking the experience to personal instances of friendship conflict. To scaffold this process, participants completed a Self-Validation exercise (Figure 2), promoting the acknowledgement and acceptance of difficult emotions. Tappana (2022) emphasises that effective coping with emotional distress begins with recognising and validating one's emotional experiences.

Figure 2: Self-Validation Worksheet

Your Practice Name |

Therapist Name: Therapist Name Here

Self Validation Worksheet

Client Name: Client Name Here

Today's Date: 02/20/2022

Self validation is a DBT skill that focuses on helping you accept emotions that you are feeling. When you feel sad, angry, depressed about a situation, it's common to trigger secondary emotions in response to the handling of your initial emotions. In this worksheet, you'll learn how to self-validate so that you can better cope with difficult emotions you may be processing. Directions: Answer the following questions below:

ACKNOWLEDGING

How do you feel right now? Acknowledge your emotions and give your emotions a name.

ALLOWING

Choose a statement or multiple statements below and read them out loud. These will help you allow the process of self validation to happen. You can also add statements to this list below if you'd like to.

- ☐ Feeling the way I do now is okay.
- ☐ I am allowed to feel this emotion.
- ☐ I accept this emotion now, it will pass.
- ☐ By allowing myself to feel this emotion, it doesn't mean I am behaving according to this emotion.
- ☐ I accept that this emotion is uncomfortable, but it will not hurt me.
- ☐ Your statement here
- ☐ Your statement here
- ☐ Your statement here
- ☐ Your statement here
- ☐ Your statement here

UNDERSTANDING

Think about a specific event(s) that led you to experience this emotion. This should include facts only.

Note. This worksheet was given during the first session of the first module

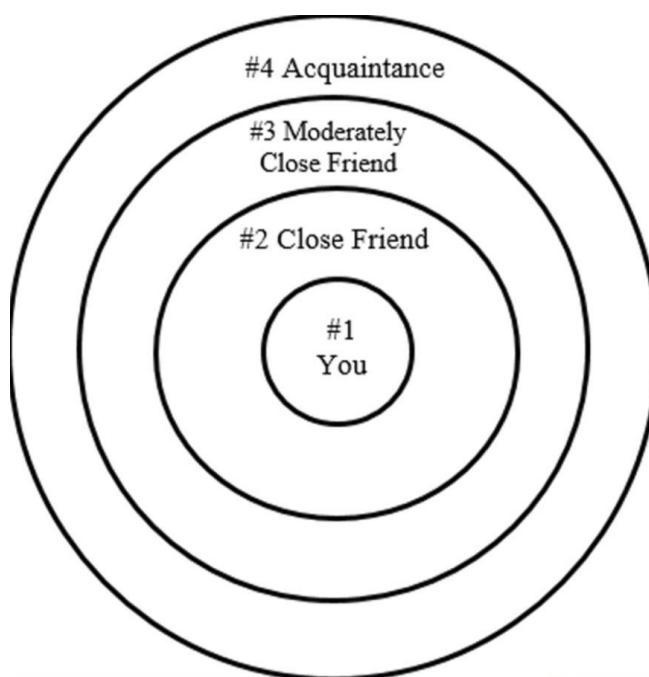
In this module, participants demonstrated heightened emotional awareness, as shown by their ability to identify and validate their feelings when prompted and link them to their personal experiences. The module activities also helped participants acknowledge difficult emotions, indicating growth in emotional regulation and self-compassion.

The second module introduced attachment styles as a framework for understanding interpersonal dynamics, grounded in Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). Through an interactive Mentimeter scenario - "You and your friend had planned to go out, but your friend cancelled at the last minute, texting, 'I'm sorry, I have other things to do'" - participants shared one-word responses reflecting their emotional reactions. The facilitator used these responses to illustrate attachment patterns, including anxious, avoidant, secure, and disorganised styles. The discussion emphasised that attachment patterns are adaptable and can evolve with

increased self-awareness and intentional relational practices. Participants were encouraged to reflect on which attachment style best fit their response, fostering empathy for diverse emotional coping strategies in friendships. This module showed that participants developed greater awareness of their internal responses, as shown by their ability to clearly identify their emotional reactions to the interpersonal scenarios. The responses and the reactions of the participants in this activity also highlight how different reactions align with various attachment styles, indicating successful application of Attachment Theory in real-life situations, specifically in friendship.

The final module introduced Secure Base Mapping, a technique rooted in Attachment Theory and commonly used in grief therapy (Wielink et al., 2021; Steers et al., 2023). Participants created personal secure base maps by drawing concentric circles to represent varying degrees of emotional closeness within their social networks. The innermost circles identified individuals who provided the greatest emotional support, such as close family members or best friends, while outer circles represented less intimate social connections. Participants then reflected on the specific supportive behaviours exhibited by these key figures and considered how they could embody similar qualities, such as dependability, non-judgmental listening, and encouragement in their own friendships (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Secure Base Mapping



Note. The link for the worksheet used during the session: <https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/the-attachment-theory-workbook-powerful-tools-to-promote-understanding-increase-stability-build-lasting-relationships/>

This exercise aimed to deepen participants' understanding of supportive relationship dynamics and to promote the intentional cultivation of secure, nurturing connections. Through this module, participants showed greater clarity in identifying individuals who make up their emotional support system, allowing them to reflect meaningfully on the relational qualities that contribute to a sense of security in their relationships. This suggests that the activity in this

module effectively facilitated both self-reflection and internalisation of key attachment principles required to maintain a healthy friendship.

During this session, participants initially appeared hesitant to share their opinions, despite receiving a clear briefing on the module. Although verbal participation was limited, they remained attentive to the facilitators and engaged with the planned activities. With gentle prompting and encouragement from the facilitator, some participants gradually opened. During the reflective tasks, participants identified their emotions in response to the hypothetical situation presented, and they felt more comfortable expressing their feelings anonymously through Mentimeter than speaking aloud. As the session progressed, participants became more responsive to the facilitators' prompts and more willing to contribute to the group discussion. Collectively, this initial session addressed both intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges identified in the preliminary needs analysis. Through reflective exercises and guided discussions, participants developed foundational skills in emotional validation, relational awareness, and secure relationship-building. These activities laid the groundwork for enhanced self-awareness, empathy, and practical strategies to strengthen their peer relationships in subsequent sessions.

Second Session

The second session of the peer support group intervention was designed to equip participants with practical skills for managing emotions and fostering perspective-taking in interpersonal contexts. This session emphasised empathy and constructive communication as essential tools for navigating conflict in friendships. Drawing on the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998) and Emotional Intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 1995), the session underscored how cultivating empathy and gratitude can broaden cognitive-emotional flexibility, reduce defensiveness, and promote adaptive conflict-resolution strategies.

The first module focused on enhancing empathy through guided perspective-taking. Participants began by reflecting individually on a recent or ongoing friendship conflict. Using reflective prompts, such as "If I were in their shoes, I would feel..." and "If I were them, I would communicate like this..." participants were encouraged to shift their viewpoint to their friend's, fostering cognitive empathy. This written reflection exercise was followed by paired role-play in which one participant shared their conflict experience while the other practised active listening. The active listener was guided to attend to both verbal content and non-verbal cues, promoting attuned and empathetic communication. The facilitator emphasised that perspective-taking does not imply excusing another's behaviour but rather seeking to understand it, thereby reducing misinterpretations and emotional reactivity. Through these exercises, participants deepened their empathy and emotional intelligence, gaining insight into managing interpersonal conflict through reflective dialogue rather than reactive confrontation. Participants reported that active listening fostered feelings of being heard and understood, diffusing tensions and facilitating more meaningful peer connections. This suggests that the module not only strengthens participants' capacity for empathetic engagement but also enhances their ability to manage or navigate conflicts with greater relational sensitivity and emotional regulation.

The second module addressed communication challenges by introducing the "I-Message" technique, a communication strategy developed by Thomas Gordon (Suk & Taek, 2012). Rooted in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and aligned with the Broaden-and-Build perspective, the module emphasised the role of autonomy-supportive and emotionally

intelligent communication in maintaining healthy friendships.

The session began with a discussion on the importance of assertive, non-blaming communication in preserving relationship quality. Participants were introduced to the structure of I-Messages, which express personal emotions and needs without assigning blame. A comparative discussion of “You” statements (e.g., “You never listen to me!”) versus “I” statements (e.g., “I feel unheard when our conversations are interrupted”) illustrated how the latter approach reduces defensiveness and fosters openness. See Table 1.

Table 1: Situations for the Roleplay during I-Statement Module

No.	Situation
1.	You feel left out because your friend always takes the lead without asking for input.
2.	Your friend consistently takes hours or days to reply to messages, leaving you feeling unimportant.
3.	Your friend jokes about you about something personal in front of others, causing embarrassment.
4.	You feel hurt when you find out that your friend attended a party or went out without inviting you.
5.	Your friend borrows something (e.g., a book or jacket) and forgets to return it, frustrating over it.
6.	Your friend cancels plans at the last-minute multiple times, leaving you feeling unprioritised.
7.	Your friend frequently interrupts during conversations, making you feel unheard.
8.	You are always initiating plans and the other doesn't reciprocate, creating resentment.
9.	You heard that your friend has shared something personal about you that you asked to be kept private.
10.	You feel undermined when your friend repeatedly boasts about their academic achievements in the conversations.

Note. The table lists situations given to participants to initiate the roleplay using I-Message techniques, generated using ChatGPT and further refined. These situations were tailored specifically to conflicts that university students might face in their friendships.

Participants then applied this technique through practical exercises using scenario cards depicting common friendship conflicts (e.g., “A friend cancels plans without notice”). Working in pairs, they constructed I-Messages and engaged in role-play scenarios, receiving constructive feedback from their partners. The session concluded with a group discussion reflecting on how these skills apply in real-life contexts. To reinforce learning, facilitators distributed a handout outlining the I-Message framework, complemented by the “Wheel of Emotions” tool to support emotional articulation during the exercises (Figure 4). Participants reported that using I-Messages helped them express their feelings more constructively and reduced the likelihood of conflict escalation. This therefore suggests that the module significantly improves their ability to communicate assertively yet compassionately, promoting a healthier and more resilient friendship.

Figure 4: I-Message / I-Statement Module Handout



Note. All participants were given this handout for the hands-on activity.

During this session, some participants initially struggled to apply the perspective-taking exercise and use the “I-message” technique with their assigned listeners. With guidance and gentle encouragement, listeners helped them explore alternative perspectives and improve the way they framed their statements. Despite these challenges, participants remained highly engaged with their partners and made consistent efforts to practice empathy and understanding within the conflict scenario. They were also very proactive in seeking advice on how to phrase their sentences more effectively. Compared to the previous session, this session emphasised partnership and collaborative practice, which made participants appear more comfortable sharing their opinions and practising the skills within their small groups.

Third Session

The third session of the peer support group intervention focused on developing coping strategies by introducing Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills, a core component of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) (DBT Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills, 2016). These skills help individuals navigate interpersonal situations more constructively, assert their needs respectfully, and maintain healthy relational boundaries. By incorporating these techniques, the session aimed to promote problem-focused coping as a more adaptive approach to interpersonal challenges, rather than avoidance or suppression, which often exacerbate relational difficulties.

To illustrate this principle, the facilitator introduced an analogy comparing unresolved interpersonal issues to attempting to submerge a buoyant ball in water: the harder one tries to push the ball down without addressing its natural resistance, the stronger it rebounds. This metaphor emphasised the futility of ignoring relational conflicts and highlighted the importance of addressing issues directly and skilfully.

During the session, participants paired up and role-played real or hypothetical interpersonal conflicts. They practised applying the DBT interpersonal effectiveness frameworks: DEARMAN (Describe, Express, Assert, Reinforce, Mindful, Appear confident, Negotiate), GIVE (Gentle, Interested, Validate, Easy manner), and FAST (Fair, Apologies not overused, Stick to values, Truthful) (Table 2). Through these structured role-plays, participants learned to articulate their needs clearly while maintaining respect and empathy toward others.

Table 2: Definition for the acronym DEARMAN. GIVE. FAST

1. DEARMAN	2. GIVE	3. FAST
Describe the situation	Gentle.	Be Fair.
Express your feelings	Act Interested	Avoid apologizing excessively
Assert your needs	Validate	Stick to your values
Reinforce positive outcomes	Easy manner	Be Truthful
Stay Mindful		
Appear confident		
Negotiate		

Note. This is the module used during session three

This module therefore contributed to participants' development of more adaptive and proactive interpersonal coping strategies, particularly in navigating conflicts and asserting personal needs. Furthermore, based on participants' engagement and responses, they demonstrated increased confidence in communicating while remaining empathetic and considerate towards others. Throughout the session, participants worked in pairs, practising how to construct sentences addressing personal conflicts using the DEARMAN, GIVE, and FAST frameworks. Initially, some participants struggled to apply the frameworks correctly, particularly when forming their sentences. However, with continued practice alongside their partners, they were able to express their feelings, propose ways to resolve the situation, and stay true to their emotions rather than dismissing them, which may contribute to more complex relational difficulties. Overall, this session strengthened participants' ability to navigate interpersonal challenges constructively by fostering assertiveness and emotional regulation,

enabling them to uphold both their relational goals and personal integrity while preserving the quality of their friendships.

RESULTS

Need Analysis

A needs analysis was conducted before the sessions to identify and elicit participants' needs through an interview. Table 3 presents the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant	Gender	Kulliyyah/Department
Safiyyah	Female	AHAS KIRKHS
Uthman	Male	AHAS KIRKHS
Aminah	Female	AHAS KIRKHS
Asma'	Female	KAED
Maryam	Female	KOED
Sumayyah	Female	AHAS KIRKHS
Ruqayyah	Female	AHAS KIRKHS
Asiah	Female	KOED

Note. AHAS KIRKHS = AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences; KAED = Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design; KOED = Kulliyyah of Education.

The questions were adapted from The Friendship Questionnaire (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2003) (See Table 4).

Table 4: Adapted Questions from the Friendship Questionnaire (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2003)

No.	Questions
1	What are the challenges that you faced/are facing in your friendship?
2	Based on your experiences, what do you consider important to maintain a friendship?
3	How do you cope when dealing with the struggles in your friendship?

After the interview, the researchers conducted thematic analysis to group participants' responses into several themes (Table 5) and then used the finalised themes as a guideline to develop suitable modules for use throughout the sessions.

Table 5: Themes, Subthemes, and Quotations of the Need Analysis

Themes/Subthemes	Quotation
Theme 1: Factors of the Challenges	"I will prioritise myself more... no matter how important that person is to me."

Intrapersonal Issue	"If let's say I want to go for a jog at a certain time, I will just go for a jog on my own."
	"Maybe that is how I am... I wonder if I am problematic because I don't think my friends are problematic."
Interpersonal Issue	"I never go in-depth and then be vulnerable and share my deepest emotions with them."
	"If I spend time with that person for two days... I get tired and will maybe meet up after a week or two weeks."
Theme 2: Coping mechanisms	"Even if I say that I'm uncomfortable about it or I do not like certain things, they just think that I'm joking. I don't know, people just don't take me seriously."
	"Personally, I like to write more, so if I have anything to, but if you have a feeling that you want to let out. So I usually only write it instead of talking"
Emotion-focused Coping	"I prefer being with strangers rather than my close friends... I always like the idea of a one-off meeting."
	"Sometimes when I am sad, I'm crying. Okay, sometimes when I can't journal anymore I will cry until I'm asleep."

Peer Support Group Module Development

Table 6 indicates the module development for the peer support group used in all sessions and the duration for each session.

Table 6: Summary of the Modules Used in All Sessions

Module	Activities	Duration
Interpersonal Issue	Exploring Attachment Style	10 minutes
	Secure Base Mapping	10 minutes
	I-Message Technique	40 minutes
Intrapersonal Issue	Emotional Validation Journaling	30 minutes
	Perspective-Taking	30 minutes
Coping	DEAR MAN, GIVE & FAST	40 minutes

MODULE EVALUATION

Pre-test and Post-test Scores from the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale

The tables below display the raw pre-test and post-test scores for each participant. 75 per cent of participants had higher post-test scores than pre-test scores. Only 25 per cent of participants saw a decrease in their post-test scores. To calculate each participant's percentage increase, subtract the post-test percentage from the pre-test percentage. According to this table, most participants reported an increase in their scores. The largest increase was 25 per cent, while the smallest was 4 per cent. Furthermore, two participants' scores dropped by 9 per cent

and 6 per cent, respectively. This shows that participants' pre-test scores were higher than their post-test scores, with a drop in scores following the sessions indicating no improvement. Tables 7 and 8 summarise the data.

Results and Analysis from the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale

Table 7: Participants' Pre-test and Post-test Raw Scores

Participant	Pre-test Scores	Post-test Scores
Safiyyah**	61	64
Uthman*	36	53
Aminah*	59	70
Asma'***	36	41
Maryam**	50	55
Sumayyah**	56	68
Ruqayyah*	63	57
Asiah**	55	51

Note. N=8, *participant who attended two sessions, **participant who attended all sessions.

Table 8: Comparison of Percentage Differences

Participant	Pre-Test Percentage (%)	Post-Test Percentage (%)	Increment (%)
Safiyyah**	87.0	91.0	4.0
Uthman*	51.0	76.0	25.0
Aminah*	84.0	100.0	16.0
Asma'***	51.0	59.0	8.0
Maryam**	71.0	79.0	8.0
Sumayyah**	80.0	97.0	17.0
Ruqayyah*	90.0	81.0	-9.0
Asiah**	79.0	73.0	-6.0

Note. *Participant who attended two sessions, **participant who attended all sessions.

Finally, the Friendship Network Scale results show that some participants improved through positive changes. However, a few participants' overall scores dropped, as shown by lower post-test results.

Participants' Feedback

All participants provided feedback in the form of open-ended questions about how they felt about the support group sessions. A few participants said they felt significantly better after the session. For example, *"I feel more comfortable to share my feelings and thoughts."* These support group sessions also introduced some participants to new information, and participants also shared lessons they learned about friendship. As quoted, *"Hearing others share their challenges and ups and downs in mending broken bonds has made me more empathetic and reflective about my own actions and assumptions."* Following the sessions, some participants stated that they felt heard and understood about friendship; as quoted, *"I feel very enlightened and happy to see that I am not alone feeling some type of way to my friends, and I feel relieved*

knowing that I am allowed to feel certain things, while also being responsible for my actions.”
The remaining participant feedback is shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Participants’ Feedback

No.	Feedback
1.	“After joining the sessions, I feel more comfortable to share my feelings and thoughts with my loved ones. That way I will be able to have better emotional support.”
2.	“Participating in these peer sessions has profoundly shifted my perspective on friendship and the power of open communication. I’ve come to realize that friendships, like any relationship, require effort, understanding, and vulnerability to thrive. Hearing others share their challenges and ups and downs in mending broken bonds has made me more empathetic and reflective about my own actions and assumptions. I feel more hopeful and empowered, knowing that it's possible to repair and strengthen connections when we approach conflicts with honesty, patience, and a willingness to grow. This experience has deepened my appreciation for the value of authentic, supportive friendships.”
3.	“Feeling much better as I know how to tackle my emotions and thoughts more better than before”
4.	“I feel like my perspectives have changed in the sense that I now understand more about how other people perceive friendships to be. how versatile and wide the experiences are and how we hold different standards of what a friend should do/be. I feel very enlightened and happy to see that I am not alone feeling some type of way to my friends and I feel relieved knowing that I am allowed to feel certain things, while also being responsible for my actions.”
5.	“I feel way better in communicating feelings”
6.	“I really like meeting new people. Hearing them talking about their problems is nice especially when I can relate it to myself. I like that the session invites us to reflect on ourselves and it really widen my perspectives about how friendship works. My favourite part is that I talk and looking from other perspective. I like that we tried putting ourselves on someone else's shoes. I also like the emotions wheel”

DISCUSSION

This study examined the underlying factors behind friendship challenges among undergraduate students and the coping strategies they employed to address them. The qualitative needs analysis identified both interpersonal and intrapersonal factors as key contributors to friendship struggles. Emotion-focused coping strategies were the predominant approach among participants, reflecting a tendency to manage emotional discomfort without directly addressing the root causes of interpersonal conflicts. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting young adults' reliance on emotional regulation rather than problem-solving in social contexts (Banat et al., 2020; Tillman & Prazak, 2019; Venter & Uys, 2018). The absence of problem-focused coping among participants underscores the persistence of unresolved friendship issues when underlying causes remain unaddressed.

To address these gaps, the intervention modules were designed to equip participants

with intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, aligning with frameworks used in previous peer support and psychoeducational interventions (Banat et al., 2020; Tillman & Prazak, 2019; Venter & Uys, 2018). Evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness indicated that participation in the peer support group improved understanding of friendship challenges and fostered the use of both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies. These findings align with prior studies (Banat et al., 2020; Diab et al., 2013; Öztürk & Kutlu, 2017; Tillman & Prazak, 2019; Venter & Uys, 2018), which likewise reported gains in emotional awareness, social competencies, and perspective-taking following structured psychosocial interventions.

A key strength of the peer support format was its ability to foster openness, perspective-taking, and vicarious learning, enabling participants to appreciate diverse viewpoints and navigate relational expectations more constructively (Banat et al., 2020; Diab et al., 2013; Venter & Uys, 2018). However, some participants showed a decline in post-test scores, indicating variability in how individuals adapt to and internalise intervention content. This divergence contrasts with the consistently positive outcomes reported in earlier studies and may reflect individual differences in readiness for change, discomfort with unfamiliar group dynamics, or unmet personal expectations. Time constraints and limited practice opportunities may also have influenced these outcomes. Consistent with Cooper et al. (2024), these findings highlight the importance of adequate facilitator training and supervision to maximise the effectiveness of peer-based interventions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size (N=8) and gender imbalance (7 females, 1 male) limit the diversity of participant experiences and reduce the generalisability of the findings. Small samples are particularly vulnerable to low statistical power, especially when detecting medium or small effect sizes (Bradley & Brand, 2013). Future research would benefit from recruiting larger, more demographically balanced samples to strengthen the robustness and applicability of the results.

Second, the brief intervention delivered over only three sessions may not have given participants enough time to internalise and apply the newly learned skills in real-life friendship contexts. Montiel et al. (2022) note that time-limited interventions often leave participants feeling rushed and inadequately prepared, which may hinder meaningful change. Extending the programme duration and adding follow-up sessions may support better skill consolidation and sustained interpersonal growth.

Lastly, this study relied primarily on self-report measures, specifically the Friendship Network Satisfaction Scale, to assess intervention outcomes. While self-report instruments offer valuable subjective insights, they are susceptible to biases such as social desirability and under-reporting (Latkin et al., 2017). Adding measures such as social desirability scales (Adong et al., 2019) or observational assessments would provide a more comprehensive and accurate evaluation of intervention effects.

A notable finding was the variability in participants' post-test scores, with some showing decreases. Rather than signalling intervention ineffectiveness, this variation reflects the complexity of relational change. Peer-based interventions often yield heterogeneous outcomes, shaped by factors such as readiness for change, comfort with group dynamics, and prior interpersonal experiences (Pointon-Haas et al., 2023). Given the highly personal nature of friendship challenges, it is plausible that confronting relational patterns initially heightens discomfort before improvements are internalised. This interpretation aligns with qualitative evidence rather than purely quantitative assumptions, highlighting the importance of analysing *process* and *experience*, not only numerical trends.

The small sample size ($N = 8$) is a recognised limitation; however, it suits the study's qualitative and formative aims. Early-stage PPIs with undergraduates often use small samples, sometimes fewer than 20, particularly when interventions occur in group formats that require conversational depth and psychological safety (Yurayat & Seechaliao, 2021; Byrom, 2018). The current study adheres to this methodological tradition by prioritising experiential richness, reflective dialogue, and the relational cohesion necessary for peer-led work. Nonetheless, future studies would benefit from larger and more diverse samples to enhance transferability.

The brief three-session structure may have constrained participants' opportunities to consolidate skills, echoing concerns raised in the intervention literature that time-limited programmes can limit behavioural change (Montiel et al., 2022). Extending the intervention and including structured follow-up may support deeper learning and more sustained relational growth.

Self-report measures, while practical, remain susceptible to bias. This challenge is well documented in mental health intervention research, including peer support settings (Latkin et al., 2017). Future research could incorporate triangulated assessments, such as behavioural observations, peer nominations, or digital interaction diaries, to strengthen construct validity.

In sum, this study contributes to the limited body of research on peer support interventions for addressing friendship challenges among university students. The findings highlight the potential of Positive Psychology-informed peer support programmes to cultivate emotional awareness, interpersonal effectiveness, and coping flexibility. By contrast, these findings highlight relational well-being as a critical component of the undergraduate experience, underscoring the need for interventions that address the nuanced emotional and interpersonal dimensions of student life. Future research should build on these findings by using more robust methodological designs, extending intervention duration, and improving measurement strategies to clarify the mechanisms through which peer support facilitates relational well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study explored factors contributing to friendship issues and evaluated the effectiveness of a peer support group in addressing these issues among university students. A thorough needs analysis informed the development of modules tailored to participants and grounded in a range of Positive Psychology theories. These modules drew on evidence-based interventions focused on emotional validation, attachment styles, perspective-taking, and interpersonal dimensions. Results showed improvements in post-test scores on Friendship Network Satisfaction Scales in 75 per cent of participants, along with feedback highlighting enhanced empathy, communication, and self-awareness. Nonetheless, limitations such as small, gender-imbalanced samples, brief intervention duration, and reliance on self-reported data may limit the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, future research should address these limitations to develop more robust interventions.

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