

Psychological maladaptation of youth: A continuum-based approach**Iryna Varis***

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Abstract. The study is determined by the growing manifestations of psychological instability among young people during the transition to adulthood and the fragmented nature of contemporary scholarly approaches to explaining psychological maladaptation in this age period. Increased variability in psychological functioning under conditions of intensive developmental changes, social uncertainty, digital transformation of interpersonal interaction, and rising social expectations highlights the need for an integrative conceptual approach capable of combining individual and contextual determinants. The purpose of the article was to refine the concept of psychological maladaptation in youth and to substantiate a continuum approach to its understanding. The study was based on a theoretical and conceptual design involving systematic analysis, comparison, and synthesis of contemporary interpretations of maladaptation, as well as interpretation of empirical findings concerning psychological functioning in early adulthood. A conceptual synthesis of perspectives on the interaction between individual-dispositional characteristics, self-regulation resources, and socio-psychological contexts was conducted. An authorial definition of youth psychological maladaptation has been formulated as a processual, non-clinical, and gradational phenomenon arising from a mismatch between developmental challenges and available personal resources together with supportive environmental conditions. The continuum of psychological functioning “adaptation – strained adaptation – maladaptation” has been substantiated, allowing avoidance of both pathologising normative age-related difficulties and underestimating their significance. Theoretical approaches to explaining maladaptation have been systematised and their specificity in youth has been clarified. The practical value of the study lies in providing a theoretical basis for operationalising criteria of the psychological functioning continuum, developing tools for early identification of strained adaptation, and designing preventive psychological support programmes for youth under conditions of social instability

Keywords: strained adaptation; emerging adulthood; individual-dispositional factors; socio-contextual determinants; self-regulation; psychological well-being in youth

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Introduction

The transition to adulthood is one of the most psychologically demanding periods in human development. Young people increasingly face an unprecedented combination of challenges: accelerating social change, digitalisation of interpersonal communication, economic uncertainty, and mounting social expectations regarding professional and personal achievement. These conditions collectively heighten the risk of psychological maladaptation among youth – a phenomenon that, despite its growing prevalence, remains insufficiently understood due to the fragmented nature of existing theoretical frameworks. Addressing this gap requires an integrative conceptual approach that captures both individual and contextual determinants of maladaptation within a unified explanatory model.

J. Wirkner & E.-L. Brakemeier (2024) documented rising rates of emotional instability, anxiety, difficulties in self-regulation, and uncertainty regarding life trajectories among individuals in the emerging adulthood age group. This developmental period is marked by intensive personal and social transformations that place considerable demands on adaptive capacities (Lancôt & Poulin, 2024). At the same time, B.J. Clarke (2024) demonstrated that the development of self-compassion and social support substantially shapes life satisfaction and psychological well-being among young adults. Contemporary research indicates that psychological difficulties in youth cannot be attributed solely to situational factors. W. Bleidorn *et al.* (2021) drew attention to individual-dispositional characteristics, particularly the stability and change of personality traits during early adulthood. A decade-long review of identity development conducted by S. Branje *et al.* (2021) further confirmed that this period is associated with heightened variability in self-concept and emotional regulation. Additionally, A. Mushtaq *et al.* (2022) found that psychological maladaptation may mediate the relationship between personality characteristics and subjective well-being in young adults.

An additional dimension of the problem emerges from the digital environment, which has become an integral part of young people's socialisation. A.M. Khalaf *et al.* (2023), in a systematic review, revealed a complex and inconsistent relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes. Furthermore, L. Fassi *et al.* (2025), drawing on large-scale samples, showed that the impact of digital platforms varies depending on the presence of psychoemotional difficulties and is not universally negative. These findings reinforce the need to understand maladaptation as the product of an interaction between individual and socio-contextual factors. The educational and regulatory context of young people's lives warrants particular attention. K. Elizondo *et al.* (2023) found that self-regulation difficulties, procrastination, and motivational control deficits correlate with indicators of psychological

instability among university students. Thus, adaptive difficulties manifest not only in emotional well-being but also in academic and professional functioning. Within contemporary Ukrainian psychological scholarship, N. Prorok *et al.* (2021) emphasised the importance of terminological precision, distinguishing between adaptation as a process, maladaptation as a state, and clinical adjustment disorders. I. Orlenko (2023) highlighted social maladaptation as a multi-component phenomenon shaped by both internal and external factors. V. Sodolevska (2025), in a randomised controlled trial conducted in Ukraine, demonstrated that targeted psychological interventions aimed at strengthening resilience effectively reduced maladaptive symptoms among war-exposed young adults. However, a review of the existing literature reveals that, despite a substantial body of empirical research, the integration of diverse theoretical approaches to explaining psychological maladaptation, particularly among young people, remains insufficiently conceptualised.

A fragmentation of approaches thus characterises the field as of the mid-2020s. Some studies focus on personal determinants, others on social or digital contexts, yet an integrative model accounting for the interaction of these factors within a continuum-based understanding of maladaptation remains underdeveloped. The purpose of this article was to refine the concept of psychological maladaptation in youth and to construct an integrative conceptual model of its explanation, incorporating individual-dispositional and socio-contextual factors within a continuum-based approach. To achieve this aim, the study systematically analyses contemporary theoretical approaches, compares empirical findings on psychological functioning during emerging adulthood, and synthesises these perspectives into an integrative explanatory framework.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a theoretical and conceptual design, aiming to refine the concept of psychological maladaptation in youth and to construct an integrative explanatory model within a continuum-based framework. The study involved no primary empirical data collection; instead, it drew on scholarly publications in personality psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, and mental health psychology. The literature search employed the following academic databases: PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar, as well as open-access scholarly resources. Publications from 2000 to 2025 were considered, with priority given to works published between 2014 and 2025. Classical foundational works published before this period were included, where they established the conceptual basis for contemporary theoretical frameworks. The search was conducted using the following keywords in both Ukrainian and English: psychological maladaptation,

emerging adulthood, dimensional approach, mental health, social context, digital environment, identity development. The analysis incorporated peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and conceptual works relevant to the research problem. Source selection criteria included relevance to the research problem of psychological maladaptation and development during emerging adulthood, a clearly described methodology for empirical studies, publication in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, and conceptual significance for the construction of the integrative model.

The study comprised four interrelated stages, each building upon the findings of the preceding one. The first stage involved a theoretical analysis and systematisation of existing approaches to interpreting psychological maladaptation, encompassing the stress-adaptive, developmental, socio-contextual, and personality-dispositional perspectives. Through theoretical analysis and comparison, the explanatory priorities and conceptual limitations of each approach were identified. This systematisation established the analytical framework for the subsequent stage by defining the key dimensions – individual-dispositional and socio-contextual – along which empirical evidence would be examined. The second stage entailed a comparative study of current empirical data on the characteristics of psychological functioning during emerging adulthood. Drawing on the theoretical framework developed in the first stage, the method of interpretation of scholarly data was applied to examine how contemporary research reflects the identified dimensions of maladaptation. This stage clarified empirical trends, confirmed the multi-determined nature of maladaptation in youth, and provided the evidential basis for moving toward an integrative synthesis. The third stage involved a conceptual synthesis of the findings accumulated across the preceding stages. Using the method of generalisation and conceptual modelling, a generalised model of the interaction between individual and socio-contextual factors of maladaptation was constructed (Table 1; Figure 1). The logic of this transition was grounded in the recognition that neither individual-dispositional nor socio-contextual approaches alone were sufficient to account for the full range of maladaptive manifestations in youth, thereby necessitating their integrative combination within a continuum-based framework. The concluding stage employed theoretical synthesis to develop an original definition of youth psychological maladaptation and to substantiate its continuum-based nature. This definition was formulated based on the conceptual positions analysed across all preceding stages and in direct response to the identified gap in existing frameworks.

The chosen methodological strategy ensured transparency in the analytical procedure. It allowed the study's logic to be reproduced, enabling other researchers to replicate the selection and interpretation

of sources under analogous conditions. The present study acknowledges certain limitations. Its theoretical nature does not permit definitive conclusions regarding the mechanisms of interaction between individual and social factors. Several aspects require empirical verification: the boundaries between stages of the continuum, the validity of the proposed maladaptation criteria for Ukrainian youth, and the role of protective factors, including self-compassion, social support, and digital literacy.

Results and Discussion

Conceptualisation of psychological maladaptation in youth: A processual and continuum-based perspective

In psychological theory and practice, the term “psychological maladaptation” refers to disturbances in personal functioning whereby an individual loses the capacity to engage productively with their environment and maintain inner stability under the pressure of external circumstances. Critically, this phenomenon extends beyond the medical paradigm: maladaptation does not equate to a psychiatric diagnosis. Instead, it constitutes a psychological state whose intensity and duration vary according to situational and individual factors. Against this background, psychology has developed a range of explanatory models that differ in their emphasis on the mechanisms underlying maladaptive states. Theoretical interpretations of maladaptation vary considerably in focus. Scholars working within the socio-psychological tradition, including J.J. Arnett *et al.* (2014), understood maladaptation as a conflict between the individual and the social environment when their interaction becomes unbalanced. B.E. Compas *et al.* (2017), by contrast, focused on deficits in emotional control and the ineffectiveness of stress-coping strategies. A third analytical direction – the personality-typological – is represented in the work of W. Bleidorn *et al.* (2021), who located explanations in stable, person-specific psychological characteristics that shape responses to challenges.

The empirical base of maladaptation research reveals its multifaceted nature. D. Raccanello *et al.* (2023), in a meta-analysis covering data on children and adolescents – early age groups in which foundational coping patterns develop – identified a clear pattern: those who actively seek problem solutions and turn to others for support adapt more successfully, whereas a tendency to avoid difficulties or passively await their resolution correlates with maladaptive states. A. Mushtaq *et al.* (2022) found that maladaptation functions as a mediator between personality characteristics and subjective life satisfaction among young adults. R.P. Rohner *et al.* (2019) found, in a cross-cultural study, that emotional rejection within the family leads to maladaptation regardless of the cultural context in which a person is raised. Ukrainian psychological scholarship has engaged with the problem of maladaptation alongside

international discourse, treating it as a multi-component phenomenon. A.M. Hrys & V.O. Holubnyuk (2016) interpreted it as the individual's response to socio-psychological tension arising from a mismatch between environmental demands and the resources available to the person. N. Prorok *et al.* (2021) emphasised terminological precision, calling for a clear distinction between adaptation as a process, maladaptation as a state, and clinical adjustment disorders. I. Orlenko (2023) examined the internal psychological mechanisms and interpersonal processes that constitute social maladaptation as a complex psychological construct.

A synthesis of the theoretical and empirical positions outlined above suggests that no single approach fully captures the phenomenon of maladaptation. Each illuminates a distinct aspect of the problem; however, explaining the specific nature of maladaptation in youth requires their integrative combination. This need formed the foundation for the original conceptualisation proposed in the present study. It is particularly relevant for a youth sample, where developmental tasks, social expectations, and individual traits frequently converge and mutually reinforce one another. Drawing on the conceptual positions analysed and on the age-specific characteristics of the group under study, the present article proposes an original definition. Youth psychological maladaptation is understood as a processual, non-clinical phenomenon arising from a mismatch between the challenges of the emerging adulthood stage and the individual-typological resources and coping strategies available to the person. This phenomenon manifests as a deterioration of psychological functioning across various life domains and displays a gradual character of expression. Understanding maladaptation as a distinctly youth-specific phenomenon is theoretically significant for several reasons. Emerging adulthood constitutes a period of heightened vulnerability precisely because developmental demands – identity formation, professional self-determination, establishment of intimate relationships – converge simultaneously, placing exceptional strain on adaptive resources that are still consolidating. Unlike other life periods, emerging adulthood combines normative instability with social expectations of autonomous functioning, creating conditions in which even moderate resource deficits may trigger maladaptive responses.

The proposed definition synthesises ideas from several theoretical traditions and highlights three key aspects. It establishes the non-clinical nature of the phenomenon, thereby precluding the erroneous

equation of normative adaptive difficulties with psychopathological states. It further reflects the dynamic relationship between age-specific developmental tasks – career path determination, formation of close relationships, and identity consolidation – and the individual's psychological profile. Crucially, it underscores the continuum-based nature of maladaptation, rejecting the view of it as a dichotomous category. The age-specific significance of this conceptualisation lies in the fact that young people are disproportionately represented at the intermediate stages of the continuum – strained adaptation – where difficulties are real and functionally impairing yet fall below clinical thresholds and therefore frequently go unrecognised and unsupported. This interpretation fundamentally reframes the way boundaries between normality and disturbance are understood. If maladaptation is processual in nature, it is more appropriately conceived not as a discrete category, but as a continuum of psychological functioning. This transition can be represented schematically as: adaptation → strained adaptation → psychological maladaptation. Such a continuum model serves a dual function: on the one hand, it guards against the unwarranted pathologisation of adaptive difficulties; on the other, it establishes a theoretical foundation for investigating risk factors, among which individual-typological characteristics assume particular significance during youth.

Systematisation of theoretical approaches to psychological maladaptation:

Stress, development, context, and personality

Conceptualising maladaptation as a processual, situationally conditioned, and multidimensional construct calls for a systematic review of the theoretical models that explain its genesis and dynamics. Contemporary psychological thought has moved away from the search for a single universal explanatory principle, instead offering a plurality of conceptual frameworks, each focusing on a particular cluster of determinants underlying disrupted adaptive functioning. These determinants span a broad spectrum – from stress load and normative developmental crises to the influence of the social environment and stable personality traits. The present study systematises theoretical perspectives on maladaptation according to their explanatory priorities. For analytical clarity, the study organises the approaches by their dominant explanatory factor: stress-adaptive, developmental, socio-contextual, and dispositional. Table 1 presents the results of this systematisation.

Table 1. Conceptual approaches to interpreting psychological maladaptation

Conceptual approach	Central constructs	Understanding of maladaptation mechanisms
Stress-Adaptive	Stress factors, coping strategies, self-regulatory capacities	Maladaptation emerges as a result of the breakdown of adaptive processes under conditions of chronic or intensive stress, leading to a weakening of coping strategy effectiveness and emotional regulation mechanisms

Table 1. Continued

Conceptual approach	Central constructs	Understanding of maladaptation mechanisms
Developmental	Normative crises, identity formation, age-related transformations	Maladaptive phenomena are interpreted as complications of normative ontogenesis, associated with identity destabilisation, transformation of social roles, and increasing emotional demands during particular life periods
Socio-Contextual	Social environment, interpersonal processes	Maladaptation is understood as a consequence of the disruption of equilibrium between the individual and the social environment, manifesting through conflictual interaction, alienation, and insufficient social support
Personality-Dispositional	Character traits, behavioural styles	Maladaptive states are linked to stable individual-psychological characteristics, typical response patterns, and personality traits that elevate the risk of disrupted adaptive functioning

Source: synthesised from the works of K. Lewin (1951), E.H. Erikson (1968), U. Bronfenbrenner (1979), R. Lazarus & S. Folkman (1984), P.T. Costa & R.R. McCrae (1992), H. Eysenck (1998), J.J. Arnett (2000), W. Bleidorn *et al.* (2021)

Within the stress-adaptive approach, maladaptation is understood as the breakdown of adaptive processes under chronic or intense stress. According to the transactional model of stress developed by R. Lazarus & S. Folkman (1984), adaptive disruption occurs when the individual's subjective perception of environmental demands exceeds their available coping capacities, resulting in a weakening of coping strategy effectiveness. Building on this logic, B.E. Compas *et al.* (2017) demonstrated that inflexible or ineffective coping strategies under prolonged stress can consolidate into stable maladaptive patterns – a tendency particularly pronounced in young people. From the perspective of the developmental approach, maladaptive phenomena are complications of normative ontogenesis that arise as individuals navigate developmental crises and transitions between life stages. E.H. Erikson (1968) regarded maladaptive states as the product of unresolved identity crises, while J.J. Arnett *et al.* (2014) identified a particular vulnerability during the emerging adulthood stage, characterised by the destabilisation of social roles, value ambivalence, and increasing emotional demands. Within this framework, maladaptation is not interpreted as a pathological condition but as a situational response to the complexities of developmental processes.

Within the socio-contextual approach, primary attention is directed to the role of the social environment in shaping psychological maladaptation. Drawing on K. Lewin's (1951) field theory and U. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of development, maladaptation arises from disharmony between the individual and the social contexts in which they function. R.P. Rohner *et al.* (2019) empirically confirmed that a deficit of emotional support, interpersonal conflict, and experiences of social alienation substantially elevate the risk of maladaptive psychological states, particularly during youth and early adulthood. For young people specifically, the socio-contextual approach reveals how the simultaneous convergence of family expectations, peer group dynamics, and institutional demands creates a particularly dense field of potential maladaptive

triggers at a developmental stage when individual regulatory capacities are still consolidating. The absence or insufficiency of social support at this stage does not merely complicate adaptation – it may fundamentally alter the trajectory of personality development.

The personality-dispositional approach centres on individual psychological characteristics as factors predisposing individuals to maladaptation. Within this framework, stable personality traits, typical response patterns, and ways of making sense of experience are treated as central determinants of adaptive outcomes. The classical typological models of H.J. Eysenck (1998), together with the empirical findings of P.T. Costa & R.R. McCrae (1992), indicate that high neuroticism, impulsive behaviour, and emotional instability correlate with an elevated risk of maladaptation. These conclusions are supported by the work of W. Bleidorn *et al.* (2021), who demonstrated that the developmental trajectories of personality traits in young people substantially determine their resilience or susceptibility to maladaptive states.

A synthesis of the approaches presented in Table 1 allows psychological maladaptation to be conceptualised as a multi-determined phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual and environmental factors. This perspective establishes a theoretical foundation for further analysis of personality characteristics as risk factors for psychological maladaptation, providing a natural transition to the following section of the study. Despite differences in explanatory emphasis, the approaches converge in acknowledging the situational and age-related conditionality of maladaptive states. It is therefore appropriate to proceed to an analysis of the characteristic manifestations of psychological maladaptation, specifically in youth. Young people display a heightened susceptibility to psychological maladaptation, driven by the convergence of developmental tasks, dynamic personality transformations, and mounting pressure from social expectations. Early adulthood requires individuals to define themselves across professional, interpersonal, and values-related domains, thereby intensifying adaptive strain. J.J. Ar-

nett *et al.* (2014) emphasised that the fluctuation of life trajectories and the instability of role repertoires characteristic of this developmental phase create fertile ground for maladaptive responses when internal or external supportive resources are insufficient. A central precondition for psychological maladaptation in youth is identity instability, manifesting through fluctuations in self-esteem, ambivalence regarding one's own potential, and uncertainty about life direction. S. Branje *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that identity formation during adolescence and early adulthood follows a non-linear dynamic and includes phases of temporary destabilisation, which can complicate psychological adaptation to shifting social demands.

A characteristic feature of maladaptive manifestations in young people is emotional instability combined with heightened sensitivity to social evaluation. Young adults display intense reactions to acceptance or rejection by significant others, giving rise to anxiety, emotional tension, and states of frustration. These patterns reflect age-related reorganisation of emotional reactivity and regulation systems, as highlighted by both L. Steinberg (2008) and L.H. Somerville (2013), who examined risk-taking behaviour in youth through a social neuroscience perspective, as well as by the synthesis of coping research offered by D. Raccanello *et al.* (2023), who drew attention to young people's vulnerability to emotional exhaustion under conditions of chronic stress. In the domain of interpersonal interaction, maladaptation may manifest as difficulties forming trusting relationships, instability in emotional attachments, oscillation between social withdrawal and excessive dependence on significant others, and the use of indirect or manipulative communication strategies. R.P. Rohner *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that psychological maladaptation functions as a mediator between early experiences of emotional rejection and subsequent social functioning and feelings of loneliness in adulthood.

In the academic and professional domain, maladaptive manifestations in young people are frequently associated with reduced organisational effectiveness,

difficulties in strategic planning, procrastination, and fluctuations in professional motivation. K. Elizondo *et al.* (2023) interpreted such phenomena as behavioural markers of strained adaptation or maladaptation in the context of growing autonomy and responsibility within the student environment. Crucially, maladaptive manifestations in youth often carry a latent quality, concealing themselves beneath normative age-related difficulties and thereby hindering their timely identification and correction. For this reason, the analysis of psychological maladaptation in young people requires integrating a developmental perspective with due consideration of individual-typological parameters and available social support resources.

The interaction of socio-psychological factors and personal resources in the formation of psychological maladaptation in youth

The maladaptive manifestations identified in young people do not arise in isolation, nor can they be reduced exclusively to individual developmental characteristics. Their genesis unfolds within a specific social environment in which the young person pursues personality development, professional self-determination, and the construction of interpersonal relationships. Psychological maladaptation takes shape not only under the influence of individual characteristics, but also as the product of a complex interaction between the person and their social context. In youth, this interaction reaches particular intensity, as social environments simultaneously serve as sources of support, bearers of demands, and potential stressors. Contemporary socio-psychological frameworks interpret maladaptation as a consequence of imbalance between the needs of the social environment and the individual's adaptive potential – a position consistent with K. Lewin's (1951) theoretical account of the interdependence of person and situation, as well as with U. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of development. Figure 1 presents a schematic representation of the interaction between key socio-psychological factors and individual personal resources in the formation of psychological maladaptation.

Socio-Psychological factors	Interaction with the individual	Individual resources	Adaptive outcome
• family environment • educational context • social expectations • digital environment • social instability	• subjective perception of demands • available adaptive resources • level of social support	• self-regulation • response styles • coping strategies	• psychological adaptation • strained adaptation • psychological maladaptation

Figure 1. Interaction of socio-psychological factors and individual resources in the formation of psychological maladaptation

Source: compiled by the authors based on K. Lewin (1951), U. Bronfenbrenner (1979), R.P. Rohner *et al.* (2019), A. Mushtaq *et al.* (2022)

The model operates on the principle that socio-psychological factors – including family environment, educational context, social expectations, and the digital environment – do not directly determine maladaptive outcomes. Instead, their influence is mediated by the individual's available resources: self-regulation capacities, coping strategies, and personal resilience. When environmental demands exceed these resources, the individual moves along the continuum from adaptation toward strained adaptation and, potentially, toward more pronounced maladaptive states. Conversely, adequate personal resources can buffer the impact of adverse socio-contextual conditions, sustaining adaptive functioning even under significant external pressure. The interaction between these two dimensions is dynamic and bidirectional: personal resources shape how socio-contextual pressures are perceived and processed. At the same time, the quality of the social environment simultaneously influences the development and consolidation of those very resources.

To illustrate how this interaction operates in practice: a young person facing high academic pressure – a socio-contextual factor – may either develop effective time-management and help-seeking strategies, thereby maintaining adaptive functioning, or, in the absence of sufficient self-regulatory resources and social support, progressively move toward strained adaptation characterised by emotional exhaustion, procrastination, and motivational decline. Similarly, experiences of emotional rejection within the family environment may lead to maladaptive interpersonal patterns in adulthood when not buffered by the individual's capacity for self-compassion or access to alternative sources of support. These examples illustrate the conditional, resource-dependent nature of socio-contextual influences and underscore the explanatory value of the integrative model proposed in the present study.

Among the family determinants of psychological maladaptation in youth, parenting strategies, the quality of emotional contact, and the trajectory of support or rejection experiences play a central role. R.P. Rohner *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that a lack of emotional acceptance in the family environment correlates with elevated psychological maladaptation, which subsequently affects interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being. At the same time, N. Prorok *et al.* (2021) noted that family conditions do not exert a straightforward, deterministic influence, as the young person's adaptive resources substantially moderate their effects. The educational environment plays a significant role in the genesis of maladaptive manifestations, serving as a space for many young people of heightened expectations, competitive pressure, and social comparison. Academic overload, uncertainty about professional prospects, and the gap between expectations and actual capacities can lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and a decline in motivation. S.D. Maksymenko (2016)

emphasised that it is the subjective interpretation of educational demands, rather than their objective intensity, that determines whether they function as a catalyst for development or for maladaptation.

Equally significant are the social expectations surrounding the necessity of achieving “success”, autonomy, and professional self-realisation within compressed timeframes. J.J. Arnett *et al.* (2014) noted that during early adulthood, social standards are frequently contradictory and unstable, which intensifies internal tension and complicates adaptive processes. Under conditions of uncertainty, young people are compelled to construct their own life trajectories independently, a circumstance that, in the absence of support, may facilitate maladaptive responses. The influence of the digital environment warrants separate consideration, as it has become an integral component of contemporary youth socialisation. Digital communication simultaneously expands opportunities for social interaction while heightening the risks of social comparison, identity fragmentation, and information overload. E. Kross *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that intensive social media use may be associated with elevated anxiety and reduced psychological well-being; however, these effects are not universal and are substantially shaped by individual strategies for using digital resources.

In the broader social context, psychological maladaptation among youth is exacerbated by social turbulence, economic uncertainty, and rapid societal transformation. S.D. Maksymenko (2016) emphasised that prolonged exposure to social instability elevates levels of existential anxiety and hinders the consolidation of a sense of life direction among young people. At the same time, even under identical external conditions, young people display heterogeneous adaptive trajectories. Critically, socio-psychological factors do not operate in isolation; the individual-typological parameters of the person mediate their influence on psychological maladaptation. Identical family, educational, or social conditions may produce either adaptation and personal growth or the formation of maladaptive states, depending on the individual's self-regulation capacities, response styles, and personal resources. It is precisely this interaction between social context and individual characteristics that establishes the theoretical foundation for further empirical investigation of psychological maladaptation in youth.

Comparison of the continuum model of psychological maladaptation in youth with contemporary empirical research: Risks and protective mechanisms

The interaction between individual and socio-contextual factors outlined above calls for examination alongside current empirical data on psychological functioning during emerging adulthood, particularly evidence bearing on continuum-based models and age-specific

risks and resources. A central theoretical question concerns the nature of maladaptation – whether it should be understood as a subclinical condition or as a form of variability within normative functioning. The present study adopts a continuum-based approach, which partially aligns with contemporary dimensional models of psychopathology. C. Monaghan & B. Bizumic (2023) highlighted the advantages of a continuum-based measurement of personality disorders over categorical approaches, emphasising its greater sensitivity to individual differences. This position directly supports the conceptual framework proposed in the present study. Like Monaghan & Bizumic (2023), it was argued that discrete categorical boundaries fail to capture the graduated nature of adaptive disruption, and that a spectrum model offers superior explanatory adequacy for youth populations specifically. Applying this logic to youth psychological maladaptation allows it to be described as a spectrum of states, ranging from relatively stable adaptation to strained functioning to more pronounced maladaptive manifestations. This approach guards against both the excessive pathologisation of age-related difficulties and their underestimation.

Accepting the continuum-based nature of psychological functioning naturally raises the question of how this continuum manifests during emerging adulthood. Current empirical research provides grounds for identifying heightened vulnerability in this particular age group. J. Wirkner & E.-L. Brakemeier (2024), in a longitudinal study, demonstrated that even in the absence of clinical diagnoses, a considerable proportion of young adults experience persistent symptoms of anxiety and depression, which may be interpreted as manifestations of strained adaptation. The trajectory of indicators across multiple waves of the study indicates instability in psychological well-being during this developmental period, confirming the processual nature of maladaptation. These findings are consistent with the present study's conceptualisation of strained adaptation as a distinct, functionally significant stage of the continuum – one that is empirically detectable yet falls below clinical thresholds. The longitudinal instability documented by J. Wirkner & E.-L. Brakemeier (2024) corroborates theoretical claim that maladaptation in youth is a process rather than a static state.

Emerging adulthood cannot, however, be regarded as a period of heightened risk in any straightforward sense. J. Lanctôt & F. Poulin (2024), examining cumulative life transitions, revealed their ambivalent nature: multiple changes may simultaneously intensify psychological burden and stimulate the development of autonomy and adaptability. This ambivalence aligns with and further refines the present model: the proposed continuum is not unidirectional, and movement toward strained adaptation does not inevitably progress toward maladaptation. Lanctôt & Poulin's (2024) findings support the emphasis on the resource-dependent

nature of adaptive outcomes, reinforcing the theoretical centrality of protective factors within the proposed framework. In this context, B.J. Clarke's (2024) findings are particularly significant: self-compassion and social support buffer the impact of psychological distress on life satisfaction. B.J. Clarke's (2024) results converge with the present study's theoretical position that socio-contextual resources – particularly social support – function not merely as correlates of well-being but as active moderators of maladaptive trajectories. The picture, therefore, concerns not only the presence of risks, but equally the potential of protective mechanisms.

Conditions of social unrest – most notably the ongoing war in Ukraine – may substantially reshape the structure of risks and resources available to young people, making empirical validation of the proposed model in the Ukrainian context both necessary and urgent. The role of the digital environment warrants separate analysis. A.M. Khalaf *et al.* (2023), in a systematic review, identified a link between social media use and indicators of depression and anxiety in young people, yet emphasised its heterogeneous nature. L. Fassi *et al.* (2025), in a larger-scale study, demonstrated that the relationship between social media activity and mental health depends substantially on individual differences and prior psychological state. Both findings are consonant with the integrative logic of the present study: rather than treating the digital environment as an independent causal factor, the proposed model positions it as a moderating context whose effects are contingent on the individual's dispositional resources and prior psychological state. This interpretation diverges from simpler causal accounts of social media harm and aligns with the interactionist framework developed throughout the present article. The digital environment thus functions more as a moderator or catalyst of pre-existing vulnerabilities than as an independent cause of maladaptation. The issue of maladaptation becomes particularly salient in the context of stressful events and crisis-driven change. D. Raccaello *et al.* (2023), in a meta-analytic study, demonstrated that the effectiveness of coping strategies is directly associated with the level of psychological adaptation. In contrast, avoidance and passive responses correlate with maladaptive states. In this regard, C. Monaghan & B. Bizumic (2023) argued against rigid distinctions between normality and pathology, instead proposing a continuum-based approach to understanding psychological functioning.

The findings of the present study, taken together, point to several interconnected theoretical conclusions. Psychological maladaptation in youth is best understood not as a discrete clinical category but as a graduated, processual phenomenon shaped by the dynamic interaction of individual-dispositional characteristics and socio-contextual conditions. The continuum model – adaptation → strained adaptation → maladaptation – provides a theoretically coherent and empirically

grounded framework for capturing this gradation, avoiding both the pathologisation of normative developmental difficulties and their dismissal. The systematisation of stress-adaptive, developmental, socio-contextual, and personality-dispositional approaches demonstrates that no single theoretical perspective suffices to account for the full complexity of maladaptive phenomena in this age group; an integrative framework is therefore both justified and necessary. The practical implications of these conclusions extend to the operationalisation of continuum criteria, the development of early identification tools for strained adaptation, and the design of preventive psychological support programmes tailored to the specific conditions of social instability facing Ukrainian youth.

Conclusions

The theoretical and conceptual study conducted has allowed for refining the concept of youth psychological maladaptation and delineating its place within contemporary scholarly discourse. The findings demonstrate that maladaptation defies reduction to a clinical disorder or an isolated personal deficit. It emerges as a multidimensional, processual phenomenon shaped by the interaction between individual dispositional characteristics and socio-contextual developmental conditions. An analysis of current empirical research reveals that the period of emerging adulthood displays heightened variability in psychological functioning. Identity instability, the intensity of social expectations, the cumulative nature of life transitions, and the influence of the digital environment create conditions for both personal growth and strained adaptation or maladaptive states. Maladaptation in this context represents not a universal consequence of age-related transformations, but rather the outcome of a convergence of risk factors and a deficit of adaptive resources. The continuum-based approach to understanding psychological

maladaptation has been theoretically substantiated. The proposed model – adaptation → strained adaptation → maladaptation – allows for avoiding both the excessive pathologisation of normative age-related difficulties and their dismissal. The continuum-based logic aligns with contemporary dimensional approaches in personality and mental health psychology, opening the possibility of a more flexible interpretation of the boundaries between normality and disturbance.

The study has produced an integrative conceptual model of the interaction between individual and socio-psychological factors of youth maladaptation, bringing together the stress-adaptive, developmental, socio-contextual, and personality-dispositional approaches. This synthesis establishes a theoretical foundation for further empirical analysis of the mechanisms of maladaptation and their specific manifestations within the contemporary Ukrainian socio-cultural context. The proposed integrative framework thus offers both a theoretically grounded reconceptualisation of youth psychological maladaptation and a foundation for evidence-based preventive practice. Future research should focus on the empirical validation of the proposed model on samples of Ukrainian youth, the operationalisation of continuum criteria, and the development of practically oriented psychological support programmes that account for the specific features of the contemporary Ukrainian socio-cultural context.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Психологічна дезадаптація молоді: континуальний підхід

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Анотація. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена зростанням проявів психологічної нестабільності у молоді в період становлення дорослості та фрагментарністю сучасних наукових підходів до пояснення психологічної дезадаптації в цьому віці. Підвищена варіативність психологічного функціонування в умовах інтенсивних розиткових змін, соціальної невизначеності, цифровізації міжособистісної взаємодії та зростання соціальних очікувань актуалізує потребу в інтегративному концептуальному підході, здатному поєднати індивідуальні й контекстуальні чинники. Метою статті було уточнення змісту поняття психологічної дезадаптації молоді та обґрунтування континуального підходу до її розуміння. Методологічною основою дослідження виступив теоретико-концептуальний дизайн, що передбачав системний аналіз, порівняння й узагальнення сучасних підходів до інтерпретації дезадаптації, а також інтерпретацію емпіричних даних щодо особливостей психологічного функціонування у період ранньої дорослості. Здійснено концептуальний синтез уявлень про взаємодію індивідуально-диспозиційних характеристик, ресурсів саморегуляції та соціально-психологічних контекстів. У результаті сформульовано авторське визначення психологічної дезадаптації молоді як процесуального, неклінічного та градуального явища, що виникає внаслідок невідповідності між розвитковими викликами й наявними особистісними ресурсами та підтримувальними можливостями середовища. Обґрунтовано континуум психологічного функціонування «адаптація – напружена адаптація – дезадаптація», який дозволяє уникнути як патологізації нормативних вікових труднощів, так і їх знецінення. Систематизовано теоретичні підходи до пояснення дезадаптації та конкретизовано їх специфіку у молодіжному віці. Практична цінність дослідження полягає у створенні теоретичного підґрунтя для операціоналізації критеріїв континууму психологічного функціонування, розроблення інструментів ранньої діагностики напруженої адаптації та проєктування програм превентивної психологічної підтримки молоді в умовах соціальної нестабільності

Ключові слова: напружена адаптація; становлення дорослості; індивідуально-диспозиційні чинники; соціально-контекстуальні детермінанти; саморегуляція; психологічне благополуччя молоді